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The Absurd Workplace

How Absurdity is Normalized in Contemporary Society and the Workplace

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Chapter 8: Absurdity of the Climate Transition that Never Happened

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Abstract
This chapter discusses the absurdity of the climate transition that never happened. After briefly reviewing the history of awareness of climate change and the historical movements that have emerged and raised attention to the necessity of climate action (e.g., Club of Rome), the chapter follows with a more recent overview of the various societal dynamics that underpin the inertia towards climate action. Climate inertia can be understood as another form of absurdity whereby the current status quo is normalized (e.g., that governments and companies are doing enough to address climate change; that climate action should not interfere with economic rationale). By discussing climate inertia as hypernormalized absurdity, new insights are generated into the perpetuation of the status quo. Moreover, new ways out of the hypernormalized situation can be constructed through the process of problematization, resistance, imagining, and transformation.

In March 1972, the Club of Rome released the now world famous report "The Limits to Growth". In the very opening of the report, the authors write (Meadows et al., 1972, p.17):

> "*Many people believe that the future course of human society, perhaps even the survival of human society, depends on the speed and effectiveness with which the world responds to these issues. And yet only a small fraction of the world's population is actively concerned with understanding these problems or seeking their solutions.*"

These *issues* referred to the 'arms race, environmental deterioration, population explosion, and economic stagnation'. Later on in the report, it is expected that somewhere over the next hundred years the limits to growth on this planet will have been reached. At the time of writing, it is 2022, precisely 50 years after the publication of the report, and, as stated by the report, we are halfway the hundred years left to remedy these 'issues'. It is notable how population explosion was included to be one of the primary issues that the report addressed (being the topic of the first chapter in the report as well, which was on exponential growth – including growth of populations across the world). Fifty years later, the 'arms race' may not be that pronounced as during the Cold War, but nonetheless remains a global challenge (especially in the context of the integration of the global weapon industry within neoliberal capitalism whereby it constitutes one of the most profitable industries to invest in). It is also interesting to observe how economic stagnation was perceived as a major problem in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while today economic growth is also perceived as the cause of many societal problems, rather than something that should be 'fixed'. Moreover, population explosion remains within the sphere of taboo today – even though the Club of Rome report quoted The Great Gatsby in mentioning that 'the rich get richer, the poor get children' (p.42). Finally, and the primary objective of the current chapter, the report mentions environmental deterioration as a source of major concern. While on the one hand, the report points to the rise in carbon emissions, on the other hand, the report refers to global warming as causing 'serious climatic effects' (p.73). Furthermore, it is interesting to read how nuclear power (despite production of nuclear waste) was discussed as a potential alternative to fossil fuels, a discussion that continues to this day (e.g., Helm, 2012). It is striking how the 'mythical' notion of nuclear power has such long tradition, presenting a fantasy of hypernormalization without any real cost. Yet, before getting into the absurdities and hypernormalization around climate change, it is important to postulate the main question that will be dealt with in this chapter: why, if already the Club of Rome report raises these issues 50 years ago, is it that nothing has been done over the last 50 years to *truly* deal with the destructive effects of the economic growth imperative for our existence on this planet? Why did the climate transition never actually happen?

While there are many responses that can be provided to these questions, climate inertia or climate greenwashing can be theorized within the framework of absurdity and hypernormalization. In so doing, I hope to provide new insights into the question of why the climate transition did and does not happen. In fact, since the publication of the Club of Rome report, global emissions have (at least) doubled (EPA, 2022). There is little indication that carbon emissions, which is one of the most important indicators of pollution, climate change, and global warming, are substantially reduced (globally). Hence, it is not just a matter of the global inability to address climate change, but in contrast, it is the case that the planet is on course to self-destruction through an almost irreversible path of carbon emission growth that is currently making life on the planet increasingly unsustainable, with extreme weather conditions becoming a norm throughout the world – from extreme droughts and wildfires to storms, extreme rainfall, and erosion of the planet. In the face of the complexity of our

predicament, there are a variety of explanations including the sheer grand scale of the issue: while a form of universal government is needed to address this global issue, there is decreasing hope of the possibility of such effective global response (for instance through the United Nations). In other words, while there is rising awareness of the need to 'tackle' climate change at a global scale, at the same time, inertia dictates global responses, and with the rise of (temporary) authoritarian regimes across the globe, radical climate action seems further away than ever. It is not difficult to postulate the absurdity of this situation – as described in the first chapter, the ultimate impossible paradox of the destruction of the planet for economic profit and survival constitutes the very basis for the understanding of the current chapter. After all, the absurdity of climate inertia is readily discernable: the world's inertia vis-à-vis its self-constructed destruction of the planet is not just illogical, inappropriate, and out-of-tune, but also indicated through an active denial of the seriousness of it all (even when governmental and business leaders raise the issue of global warming). In this sense, climate change is being hypernormalized as something that is taken for granted, part of contemporary reality, and outside the cause-effect relationship of carbon emission-global warming. Underpinning this hypernormalization is perhaps an existential anxiety, one of a complete breakdown of ontological security, and a disintegration of the self in the face of changes that are no longer under control of and beyond the reach of humanity. However, this absurdity does not only concern the individual, as it also contains the tragic and dangerous nature inherent to absurd social practice in our contemporary world: climate change does already affect people's lives profoundly, and through hypernormalizing the absurdity of climate inertia, the tragic nature becomes amplified into something beyond, that what is referred to as evil (Boym, 2008). When its tragic nature is fully revealed, it is difficult to speak of mere absurdity, and it is more appropriate to refer to climate inertia as an act of evil practice – the active denial and unwillingness to radically alter the ways of living and organizing global society. However, before such conclusions can be drawn, it is relevant to ascertain how climate action and/or inertia unfold at the individual level. Any social practice is internalized at the individual level, and while absurdity manifests through the interaction between a human being and one's environment, this chapter adds understanding through the analysis of the fantasmatic involvement into climate inertia.

Ultimately the question is about why humanity seems to be unable to deal with the consequences of its own destructive behavior, and find ways to constructively shape effective responses to mitigate against these consequences. On the one hand, we are faced with the absurdity of climate inertia or climate *in*action (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Munck af Rosenschöld et al., 2014). While the destruction of our planet for the artificial gains of economic profit could be portrayed as an inherent absurdity, whereby short-term gains (for a privileged few) are prioritized at the expense of long-term planetary survival, it is striking that the responses to such tainted past and present, are inherently absurd as well. The absurdity of the unwillingness of political leaders to engage in radical action to 'save our planet' has been now more widely acknowledged. Hence, it seems we are confronted with a doubling up of absurdity, a process that seems unstoppable, such as indicated by the continued growth of carbon emissions globally over the last 50 years. In sum, the much needed climate transition from a fossil-fuel economy and society towards a sustainable 'green' economy and society constitutes an absurdity: inertia dictates current political, economic, and societal responses to this proclaimed need for the climate transition.
  However, at the same time, a counter-argument holds that there is a lot of climate action taking place across various levels: the United Nations has organized its 26th Climate Conference in 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland (COP26), it has developed the Sustainable Development Goals to articulate the necessary changes that need to take place in various areas

of society to make the climate transition happen, and the IPCC has conducted and summarized the latest scientific knowledge about the necessary steps to 'manage' global warming and how to do so (IPCC, 2022). Moreover, similar pro-climate attitudes can be ascertained throughout global society and even among business leaders. Hence, in theoretical terms, we are witnessing a more nuanced form of hypernormalization of climate inertia, which is in need of greater understanding. In other words, the acknowledgement of climate change profoundly impacting our planet and life on our planet is now shared more widely across society, and has also been confirmed by the more conservative, mainstream groups in society. Doing nothing is no longer an option, and therefore, it can be observed how new forms of hypernormalization unfold.

This more complex situation that we have entered could be explained well on the basis of the famous dictum from Tomasi Di Lampedusa's novel 'The Leopard': "Everything must change for everything to remain the same". Hence, on the one hand, society, governments, organizations, and individuals are all aware of the need to engage in climate action, and to take necessary steps to reduce carbon emissions and lead and participate in the transition towards a green society. The notion of the necessity of the climate transition has now been normalized across many countries globally. It has also been through advertising that large organizations, including fossil-fuel companies, have actively contributed to this normalization of climate action. For instance, it is no longer surprising to see large fossil fuel companies, which have profited tremendously from selling oil for decades, proclaiming a 'genuine' commitment to combatting climate change and contribute to the transition to a sustainable economy. Moreover, individuals are being called upon to play their part by for instance insulating their houses, recycling their waste, and reducing their own carbon footprint. Too often, such discourse is strengthened through government campaigns, advertising and scientific evidence that points to the role of individual behavior in the climate transition. In sum, this all belongs to Lampedusa's first part: we are now all aware of the need for 'everything to change'. On the other hand, however, the second part should not be forgotten and underestimated. This points to the necessary question of whether everything that has been done so far has had any substantial effect on the climate transition. On the larger and global scale, it could be assessed that there is a positive correlation between UN-organized COP-meetings (i.e., global climate conferences to discuss the necessary steps towards the climate transition) and global carbon emissions. In other words, since the Club of Rome report, we have witnessed a number of global initiatives to discuss the necessary steps towards the climate transition, but without any substantial effect: in fact, global emissions have only increased over the last 50 years (EPA, 2022). In this sense, the imperative of economic growth and profit have prevailed, and continue to do so. Lampedusa's dictum proves (again) to describe the process of absurdity and hypernormalization accurately: while governments and organizations call for the need of everything to change towards a sustainable society and economy, everything also ought to remain the same. As articulated across various chapters in this book, it is the dominant neoliberal capitalist hypernormal that also explains climate inertia.

Hegemonic actors in society understood too well the core functioning of this process: while attention can be drawn to the need to transform society towards a sustainable one, all the necessary action and steps should remain within the sphere of neoliberal capitalism (Brown, 2016). Hence, everything had/has to change, but all will remain the same. It is here that we are confronted with the functioning of hypernormalization of climate inertia: a perception or feeling has to be transmitted that society as such, and actors within society, are genuinely engaged in meaningful activity towards combatting climate change. This points to the very meaning of actions such as recycling one's waste, and the introduction of sustainable or green labels to consumption goods. Such action has direct meaning in the context of

greening society, but is not nearly radical enough (Žižek, 2018), as it does not question in any way the underlying socio-political economic structures that have contributed greatly to the destruction of the planet (i.e., the notion of economic utility trumping everything else). Engaging in such mundane action dissociates from the need of questioning such structures, through which all can remain the same. It is here that hypernormalization is effective. We are not merely speaking about the normalization of climate action, but the hypernormalization of climate inertia, which is disavowed psychologically through pseudo-action – the feeling one is contributing to a better environment, even though at a larger scale individual efforts pale in contrast to the continued rise of global pollution.

This shows how hypernormalization is hybrid to social circumstances: even when a particular societal fact does not seem deniable anymore (such as climate change, and thus the need for climate action), and as such cannot be 'hypernormalized' away from societal debate and public discourse, it can still be dissociated from its necessary implications (i.e., the need for radical societal change towards a sustainable society). Hence, we are still witnessing a gap between authoritative discourse (i.e., governmental and organizational 'commitment' to climate action) and really-existing practices (i.e., continued investment in exploitative neoliberal capitalism and ever-rising global carbon emissions). This very gap is continuously being hypernormalized, and denied to exist as such. Powerful actors in society, therefore, continue to portray genuine commitment to climate action, in order to maintain the status-quo. Thus, when Shell proclaims its commitment to renewable energy (Shell, 2022), it is not merely incompatible with its continued investment in destructive fossil fuels, but it also functions to legitimize the status-quo. While the discussion whether fossil-fuel companies have a role to play in a sustainable economy is not being held, these very companies go to extreme lengths to protect their interests. Again, we are confronted with the absurdity of the climate transition that is being hijacked by the very actors in society that caused and contributed greatly to climate change itself.

The notion that those who have caused the problems cannot be the ones who also profit from 'solving' these problems, remains a rather ignored societal debate. Instead, these powerful actors in society are the ones who currently benefit from the incorporation of the climate transition into the hegemonic neoliberal capitalist system. That is, the transformation towards a sustainable society, including the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, can be neatly integrated into the capitalist framework: renewable energy becomes just another profitable industry. Meanwhile, the old fossil fuel companies are given all the possibilities to exploit the trade in fossil fuels for decades to come (without any proper restriction or regulation from government), and are given priority access to the transition to a green economy: these companies which have profited tremendously from the destruction of the planet are given decades to transition to companies that build their profit basis on other forms of energy, such as renewable energy (e.g., solar, wind, nuclear). Too often, such transition process also comes with the benefits of government subsidizing, lobbied for by these companies themselves, and thus paid for by the citizens through their taxes. The status-quo remains perpetuated and hypernormalized, and meanwhile the failings of global government in the neoliberal era are fully exposed: in a free-market society, governments seem more and more unable to control the companies that run their business on the basis of ever-growing carbon emissions. Furthermore, these companies have a global reach and act across borders, making them almost invulnerable to national regulation, as their reach stretches globally, enabling them to escape national regulation. Interestingly, the ways through which such organizational behavior is hypernormalized requires a profound engagement with the hypernormalization of this absurdity itself: the mind of the individual has to be 'colonized' in order to close the gap between that what can be now readily discernable as the absurdity of the contemporary economic structuring that prioritizes economic profit over the exploitation

and destruction of the planet, and the continued 'trust' of the individual in the institutions of power in contemporary society. It is here that we observe a deliberate, ongoing and indoctrinating process of hypernormalization, of capturing the mind of the individual through repeated exposure to greenwashing which has a numbing effect on the mind. While a skeptical reader or observer of authoritative discourse may dismiss its message and point to the absurdist nature of its very meaning, at the same time, it may hypernormalize the status quo in its very process of repeated exposure, which makes critical reflection not just a taxing exercise, but an increasingly impossible endeavor in the face of the continuous propaganda in which governmental communication becomes strikingly similar to that of corporate greenwashing. In the Netherlands, the following two campaigns show such similarity, that of the integration of governmental and corporate hypernormalization of incremental climate inertia.

Governmental Hypernormalization of Climate Inertia

In 2019, the Dutch government started the campaign 'Everyone does *something*' [Iedereen doet *wat*] (Rijksoverheid, 2019). The campaign aimed to show individual citizens a variety of ways through which they can contribute themselves to a more sustainable society, and offers 'practical tips', such as about insulating one's house and using the bicycle more frequently instead of a car. On the official website the *wat* [something] is italicized and underlined, which has a double meaning in Dutch. On the one hand, and most likely intended by the governmental PR machine, it refers to the notion that everyone can make a contribution to the sustainable transformation, and that this transformation can be aided by individual behavior. In this sense, it points to the idea that everyone would be able to contribute their (little) part to the sustainable transformation. However, on the other hand, a darker perspective emerges in another meaning of the campaign slogan. In this meaning, everyone does something refers to the rather incremental nature of *wat* [i.e., something], underpinning the rather marginal meaning of these behaviors in the context of the necessary climate transition, which can only be approached as a transformative, radical project of large, substantial societal change. With the campaign, it is implicitly acknowledged that such large-scale change is not aimed for by the government, rather staying with the incrementality of individual action. So, instead of the need to change *everything*, the government aims to do *something*. Finally, this notion is amplified through the messages on the website's homepage: for instance, insulating one's house is postulated to be financially beneficial as insulation saves money through lower energy bills. Such instrumentalization of climate action towards financial benefit for the individual exemplifies the core notion: that any type of climate action needs to be integrated into the dominant neoliberal ideology. Climate action is something that needs to have appeal to the individual because of its instrumental outcomes, where a moral appeal to engage in climate action lacks in conviction. In other words, the governmental campaign itself is based on the impotence of the ethical argument for climate action: citizens have to be seduced to contribute to climate action.

At the same time, it is noticeable that there is no counterpoint to such campaign: the 'everyone' refers not only to individuals, but also to 'benevolent' corporations and other powerful actors in society. Meanwhile, implicitly the campaign (and government) assume these actors to be equally influential and capable to reduce their fair share of carbon emissions, while the role of corporations in the destruction of the planet is entirely ignored. In contrast, climate action is communicated to citizens (see Figure 8.1) as an individual responsibility, that may also come with financial benefit. In this way, government shapes authoritative discourse, and disavows the crucial role of business and corporations in the destruction of the planet and their continued attempts to deny their true responsibility, while greenwashing their reputation and hypernormalizing the status-quo.

Figure 8.1: 'Everyone Does Something' Campaign Dutch Government (from https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/09/09/klimaatcampagne-iedereen-doet-wat-van-start).

Corporate Hypernormalization of Climate Inertia

However, it is not only government that engages in such incremental, hypernormalizing approach to climate action. Corporations are the driving force behind such incrementalization of climate action (see for instance Klein's, 2014, analysis of how big business campaigned against climate action). A clothing brand in the Netherlands has one of their locations in the shopping mall near the central train station in Utrecht in the center of the country. Conveniently located next to the train station, the redecorated shopping mall (which was originally built in the 1960s concrete-heavy style) has been redesigned in a way that resembles the American shopping mall, with bright lights, high ceilings and solely inhabited by chain stores. Entering the shopping mall gives a alienating experience, where one is immediately disorientated through the lack of windows or authentic street signs. Jointly, entry to the shopping mall presents an experience of entering a cathedral of consumerism, and it is here where one is confronted with the corporate side to climate inertia. Figure 8.2 shows the greenwashing of the clothing store, whose latest slogan has become #wear the change, using a green background. In the middle, one can observe a woman with a child (supposedly a mother with her child), added with the statement 'met liefde gemaakt' [made with love]. While this picture represents a mere example of greenwashing by companies (in this case greenwashing by the clothing industry), it also represents the hypernormalization within consumer society: the absurdity of the clothing industry (with cheap and fast fashion, making use of globally polluting production processes and supply chains, and the exploitation of workers throughout the globe) is denied in the hypernormalization of cheap clothing. The greenwashing campaign by this clothing store ignores its role in perpetuating exploitation and destruction of the planet for the production of cheap fashion. For instance, the clothing brand was one the many clothing brands that had their clothing being produced in Rana Plaza (of which the 2013 disaster remains a fresh memory), but even though carrying responsibility for this, actively lobbies against stricter safety regulation in the clothing factories (De Wereld Morgen, 2021). Meanwhile, the very message of the new slogan intends to convey to consumers that the company is genuinely committed to a wide range of corporate responsible behavior, including climate action and protection of workers' rights. And such greenwashing proves to be effective: through such slogans, individuals can continue to consume, while doing so, avoid

possible feelings of guilt by buying in into the greenwashing of an empty statement such as 'wear the change'. Akin to the previous example, citizens can therefore disavow their responsibility to engage in radical action towards a sustainable society, and meanwhile continue their lifestyles, as dictated through neoliberal ideology (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Yngfalk, 2016). In this way, corporations have at least a double offering to the consumer: it provides the materialist desire for consumption (and was the meaning of the Covid pandemic to be found not primarily within the disruption of consumerism, both as a way out of neoliberal consumerism and an anxiety of consumption-free loneliness?), and it provides a soothing mechanism in consumption itself, a mechanism that in the secular state was no longer provided by the church. Figure 8.2 points to this very semi-religious meaning in the addition of 'made with love' – this is not merely an 'empty statement' with no real meaning, but it constitutes the cynical disavowal par excellence. While at first glance it offers an inconsistency between the text and the picture, between how the clothing is made (with 'love') and for whom it is intended (i.e., the clothing should be worn by mothers and children), the combination of both reveals the intended message. The clothing store reconciles here the inconsistency between production and consumption, and unifies the love of the mother for her child with the love that the clothing is apparently made with. Love is therefore within the product itself, and through buying the product, love is bought in equal measure. The catch, however, is within the cynical element of the (minimal) narrative: the love of a mother for her child is not merely a white European middle-class phenomenon, as pictured in Figure 8.2, but extends in equal measure to the women working in the clothing factories producing these clothes 'with love'. However, love here is not mysteriously added within the product, but subtracted from the workers, in the raw exploitation taking place in these peripheral sites of production – as the destruction of lives in the Rana Plaza disaster showed, but also the environmental destruction caused in the production process (Sakamoto et al., 2019). Hence, the slogan 'made with love' should be read in a precise way: it is not meant in an additive but in a subtractive way, whereby the factory workers earn their salary while paying for the clothing with their love. The neo-colonial implications are present yet obfuscated in the absurdity of the greenwashing attempt, and thus hypernormalized. In sum, the analysis of one particular example within the clothing industry shows how corporations engage in hypernormalization of climate inertia: there is never merely an explicit denial of the seriousness of climate change, but authoritative discourse is shaped in a refined way. This means that corporations do not just greenwash their products (i.e., pretending that their products are made sustainably, without causing environmental or human harm), but there is always another layer, such as the 'made with love' statement in the picture. Such additional layer speaks to the internalization of ideology through fantasmatic involvement, and therefore always refers to the fantasy underpinning commodity fetishism: the product is never merely a product for consumption, but something special, something made with 'love'.

Figure 8.2: Wear the change campaign (picture taken by author).

A Psychology of Climate Inertia

While climate inaction can be attributed to the hypernormalization of the status-quo by governments and corporations as explained above, this represents only part of the story. While there is tendency, especially among the political left, to attribute blame of societal malfunctioning and evil on the elite, the powerful actors in society, such process can only unfold through the internalization of ideology into the core beliefs of people about the functioning of society and the economy. Akin the naked emperor, it is only because the emperor is regarded as such by the people that the emperor is able to hold on to one's position. Hence, there is a mutual interaction between hegemonic actors in society and 'the people'. Climate inertia is not only maintained through the authoritative discourse shaped by governments and business elites, but also through the internalization in people's minds. Hence, in addition to the discussion above about the societal hypernormalization of climate inaction, we are also in need of an understanding of the psychology of climate inertia.

At the individual level, we can observe a tendency to rely on and place one's trust in these very existing institutions that have contributed to the problems themselves. While there is a growing sense of awareness of the need to drastically alter our ways of living in order to survive the devastating effects of climate change (even be it at the level of climate adaptation), a process of hypernormalization is also present, as described above. This plays out not just at the collective level, but through the internalization of a fantasy of normality. In this fantasy, the individual is able to psychologically manage the destructive effects of climate change through a range of coping mechanisms. First, there is the fantasy that the climate has always been changing, and for instance that the extinction of the dinosaurs was the very effect of the climate changing (due to a 'natural' change of the climate, or an external intruder, such

as a comet). Accordingly, the fantasy holds that the current changing climate is also due to 'natural' causes, and that the impact of human behavior (and human's produced carbon emissions) on climate change is rather negligible. In this fantasy, the reality of climate change is not necessarily denied, but the role of humanity in it disavowed, which results in a rather fatalistic attitude about the possible role humanity can play in mitigating the impact of climate change. Instrumental in this process is the role of authoritative discourse, which continues to convey the 'genuine' commitment of governments and business towards climate action, through which the individual is able to strengthen the fantasy of normality. In other words, one is able to incorporate incremental, status-quo driven, climate action by governments and business into a belief that necessary action is taken to address climate change, while at the same time, the necessity of radical, structural change is denied. In this way, authoritative discourse, notwithstanding the absurdity of its impotence to describe 'really existing practices', is believed by individuals, and thus uncritically accepted into a perspective of reality. At the same time, authoritative discourse 'colonizes the mind', numbing people through repeated exposure, decreasing possibilities for critical reflection to a point of quiet acquiescence. As described in Chapter 3, the absurdity of climate inertia is internalized as a fantasy of normality, in which the absurdity is outright denied to sustain a perception of effective action against climate change, or in other words a fantasy of the sustainable transition which initiation has been put in place by government. However, this individual-level hypernormalization process does not unfold as merely a self-protection strategy – it conceals a darker and more traumatic experience of climate inertia.

As the functioning of the fantasy of normality not only aims to protect the ontological security of the individual, there is also a darker side to the fantasy itself. In this functioning of the fantasy, there is also the concealment of the more traumatic nature of climate change, something which has received increasing attention in the literature (e.g., Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Massazza et al., 2022; Woodbury, 2019). The meaning of these literatures concern the impact of climate change and the destructive effects on the livelihoods of people across the world as constituting a profound individual and collective trauma, through which people may cope by fantasizing. In this case, the absurdity of climate inertia points to the Lacanian Real, or the traumatic kernel or void that cannot be captured through authoritative discourse. This traumatic kernel of climate change does not only concern the existential crisis that unfolds as a result of climate change (Woodbury, 2019), but also the breakdown of life and society as such. The implications of climate change are simply too much to process, such a stressful crisis that the self-protective measures to ensure ontological security include the clinging on to the fantasy of normality and disavowal of absurdity in the face of the unspeakable and unforeseeable impact that is bestowed upon humanity. It is therefore not surprising to observe a process of mainstreaming climate change, whereby the status-quo can be effectively maintained and the traumatic aspects of climate inertia are disavowed. In this mainstreaming, consumerist capitalism offers not only a way out of the trauma of climate change, but also a way to hypernormalize inertia itself. On the one hand, the individual can maintain one's lifestyle, production (i.e., working) and consumption patterns, without having to make necessary choices about altering one's behavior towards a greater balance between oneself and the environment. On the other hand, by living an eco-hedonist lifestyle, one no longer has to feel guilty for consuming: consumption can now be ecofriendly, with a green label. If one feels the pressing impact of climate change, the current capitalist lifestyles offer new choices: the old petrol car can be exchanged for an electric car without compromising on the luxury of modern forms of transportation. The electric car therefore exemplifies this very notion of what could be referred to as eco-capitalism (Guttmann, 2018): the possibility for the individual not having to compromise on any of one's preferred, luxurious lifestyle choices, to maintain one's fundamental belief in personal and material growth (Bal & Dóci, 2018), and

continuing to engage in the capitalist system, but then in a way that it also saves the planet. This is similar to the notion of 'have your (vegan) cake and eat it': the individual is able to have *both*: ideological investment into neoliberal capitalism with all the material, self-centered growth and utility maximization, *and* effective responses to climate change through (responsible) consumption. It is not surprising to observe that such inconsistent duality can only function as a fantasy: after all, it is about the conjunction of two inherently paradoxical elements into one. Nevertheless, such inconsistency has been the very promise of liberal democracy for many decades: to have the raw capitalism with the celebration of the market economy, without its externalities, and the costs that had to be carried by the planet, the Global South and all those on the receiving end of exploitative practices.

Notions such as 'green growth' or 'sustainable growth' (Hickel & Kallis, 2020) therefore remain firmly rooted in the notion of fantasmatic involvement into ideology, which offers individuals an escape from the traumatic Real of climate change/inertia. The notion that humanity is collectively failing to adequately respond to climate change, through which the impact of climate change will be much worse than when a form of global government would have found ways to radically decrease carbon emissions, has such a profoundly traumatic connotation that hypernormalization of climate inertia seems to be the most effective individual mechanism or response at the moment. It is therefore that fantasy offers a productive and effective coping mechanism in the face of environmental destruction. Fantasy, therefore, is not an escape from the reality of climate change, but forms an ideological anchoring point through which reality itself is constructed. For many individuals, this remains the only viable way to survive, to live one's life, and to find some individual meaning in life. Nonetheless, the limitations of fantasy are always omnipresent – when fantasy falls apart, the void or the cracks in the system may be revealed to the individual. It is therefore that fantasy and hypernormalization are effective only to a certain extent, as there is always the possibility of absurdity to emerge through hypernormalization, where the hidden is revealed, and no longer invisible. Even though hypernormalization may exert an even stronger impact on absurdity concealment when an individual catches a glimpse of the absurd, it is no longer guaranteed that the absurdity remains hidden. In sum, internalization, fantasy and disavowal always remain functional to a certain extent, and may be so for many people. However, similar to the Soviet Union state of hypernormalization, 'everything seemed forever, until it was no more' (Yurchak, 2005), the point in global society is being reached, whereby the certainties of the status-quo become increasingly *overtly* absurd. This is also evident in scientific research, which has for instance shown a generational gap in climate change awareness (i.e., younger generations are more aware of climate change than older generations), but at the same time a general increase over time across generations (Milfont et al., 2021). It is indeed among younger generations that climate change awareness carries a more traumatic kernel, as it is these generations who will be affected profoundly by the lack of constructive climate behavior of their parents and grandparents. It is therefore not surprising to observe more maladaptive responses to climate change awareness.

The Absurd Climate Moment
As Camus (1942) described, a moment of revelation may be necessary to identify the absurdity of one's predicament. This 'absurd moment' may be experienced more often, especially among the younger generations (Milfont et al., 2021), who have been raised in a rather unique period of climate change normalization, or the notion that the impact of climate change looms large over the lives of millions of young people worldwide. In response, it is not surprising to observe a rise in depression, mental health problems, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder in relation to climate change (Massazza et al., 2022). This is where the edifice falls apart, where a breakdown of ontological security unfolds into despair, and

young generations may be especially prone to it, a process which was amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic (Wu et al., 2021), a pandemic which underscored the broken system of neoliberal capitalism. Yet, these symptoms such as despair and depression should be understood in the context of the larger systemic issues in which they have been generated. Ultimately, they constitute the responses to the absurd moment, the moment when one realizes the gravity of climate change and inertia. Fundamentally, this refers to the notion of climate change becoming *too* traumatic for the individual to sustain oneself in relation to the world, a maladaptive response little discussed by the original theorists on absurdity. While suicide was discussed (e.g., Camus, 1942) as a rather rational response to the absurdity of life, Camus also recognized that suicide rarely results from such experience of absurdity and can often be attributed to other causes. In contrast, we observe the absurdity of climate inertia to be corresponding with a range of symptoms of ill health. For instance, recent work has been conducted to understand recent climate-related social phenomena, such as eco-anxiety (Hickman, 2020; Panu, 2020), and eco-grief (Ágoston et al., 2022), the latter being a state of grief about the loss of environment and species, and the anticipation of future losses. This signals the disintegration of hypernormalization: younger generations have lost their faith, and some start blaming parents and society for hypernormalizing climate inertia. The interesting study by Hickman (2020) among children's experiences of climate anxiety reveals the naked emperor: it is children who are able to openly confront themselves with the more traumatic aspects of climate change and inertia, and at the same time see how the 'adult world' is failing them. Again, it is the children who expose absurdity and hypernormalization and offer a glimpse into unmasking the absurd.

While eco-anxiety, guilt and grief may be on the rise, and especially among younger generations, it can also be observed how younger generations put such emotion into action: climate protests and demonstrations are on the rise as well, demanding governments, business and citizens to take real action against climate change (Hayes & O'Neill, 2021). This is where the conceptual model of absurdity and hypernormalization meet its current limitations – perhaps climate change reaches its 'Fall of the Wall' moment, its unexpected moment from 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and signified the end of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain. This constituted a period of transition, of the disintegration of established patterns of hypernormalization, and where new forms emerge, and where new forms of authoritative discourse develop. Such 'new' authoritative discourse entails the acknowledgement that climate change has profound impacts, and that it is government's duty to address climate change. However, it remains speculation whether this discourse will relate meaningfully to newly developed really existing practices, and whether the rising climate protest movements will be able to affect governmental decision making. In other words, the question remains: what is to be done?

A Way out of Hypernormalizing Climate Inertia

Given the societal hypernormalization of climate inertia and the individual-level internalization of fantasies of normality and disavowal of the impact of climate change are reaching their limits, the question is what the future will hold, and how absurdity and hypernormalization dynamics will unfold. The new climate protest movements, such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, have initiated new perspectives on the climate debate, opening up the debate on the hypernormalization of climate inertia and the ineffective responses provided by governments and business to climate change and the need to reduce pollution. While the subsequent chapter will address a more strategic and stepwise approach to 'escaping' hypernormalization, the current discussion aims to explore the variety of techniques used in these movements to spur debate and initiate action.

Generally, such protest movements are usually met with resistance from established elites, but also from more mainstream, silent majority, populations. Some examples, however, are relevant and interesting to highlight, in order to show how such dynamics unfold and how they fit within a framework of absurdity and hypernormalization (and resistance to it). For instance, the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement openly declares that 'governments have failed to act' (Extinction Rebellion, 2022). Hence, the very notion of the XR movement is based on an unmasking of the hypernormalization of governmental inertia towards climate change. However, it is frequently emphasized that the movement is about action rather than words only. On the website it states that "Traditional strategies like petitioning, lobbying, voting and protest have not worked due to the rooted interests of political and economic forces. Our approach is therefore one of non-violent, disruptive civil disobedience – a rebellion to bring about change, since all other means have failed" (Extinction Rebellion, 2022). At various points on the website, this action is mentioned to be nonviolent, yet disruptive. It is nonviolent as it claims to be most effective when refraining from violence and damaging property, while understanding that violence at times may be necessary (but not undertaken by XR). Yet, the movement aims to be disruptive, which could be witnessed in the events on 17 October 2019, when XR protesters disrupted the metro in London during rush hour, by for instance climbing on the roofs of the trains and gluing themselves to the doors of the trains (The Guardian, 2019). Commuters did not respond well to these actions, and angry travelers started fights with the protesters, who had to be rescued by the London Underground staff. After these events XR issued some apologies, stating that while the intentions of their actions were aimed at disrupting daily life, it should not lead to violence (such as was the case with angry commuters starting to fight with the protesters).

Similar events have been witnessed with the UK-based group 'Insulate Britain', a protest movement which more specifically aims to draw attention to the need to insulate British homes, in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. On 13 September 2021 and following days, Insulate Britain protesters blocked various motorways around London to raise awareness among the British population of the need to better insulate British homes, as fuel poverty forces "hundreds of thousands of families to choose between heating or eating" (Insulate Britain, 2022). Protesters glued themselves to the motorway, and caused disruptions. After many of the protesters had been arrested, various government figures, including prime ministers Boris Johnson, condemned the actions, and promised tougher penalties for those protesters disrupting infrastructure.

Both of these examples illuminate clearly the dynamics of absurdity and hypernormalization in the contemporary climate change debate, and how protests expose such absurdities. Both protest movements aim to disrupt the process of hypernormalization, or that what is taken for granted in society. Especially infrastructure as determining the fossil-fuel dominated landscapes offers the possibilities for problematization of the very notion of hypernormalization: these protest movements draw the attention to that what can be considered the invisible structures of absurdity in our societies. In this sense, infrastructure is continuously hypernormalized as entirely 'normal', taken for granted, and accepted. In the UK, where these protest movement are also active, the infrastructure shows the dominance of the fossil-fuel based society: roads meant for cars are prioritized above anything else, public transport has been struggling under decades of austerity, and cycling is generally considered to be one of the more dangerous means of transportation. It is therefore not surprising to observe that the targets of the protest movements have been aimed at disruption of the infrastructure. It is precisely these taken for granted aspects of society where insights are generated into hypernormalization when exposed. Transportation is one of the areas where a reduction of carbon emissions is strongly needed, but at the same time, it remains a sector purely driven by neoliberal doctrine (e.g., prioritization of global trade, production in 'cheap'

countries in the Global South, tourism as economic driver). Therefore, both protest movements combine their goals (i.e., awareness of climate change and the need to insulate houses) with the more problematic areas in society that affect pollution.

While critiques have been uttered against both movements, these critiques have been primarily been aimed at the disruptive effects on commuters in public transport (XR) vs. disruption of car-based traffic. While the latter was directly targeted at those people who are driving cars, and therefore directly contribute to carbon emissions, this should not be automatically favored vis-à-vis disrupting public transport: after all, it does not matter which people are targeted, as *everyone* is just as involved in hypernormalizing climate inertia, and as such, there is no better or worse audience to protest for/against. Nonetheless, the response from both law enforcement (usually arresting protesters for disruption of the efficient and smooth functioning of neoliberal society) and government constitutes direct resistance from the elite members of society against exposing absurdity: it once again shows the *dangerous* nature of absurdity, as exposing it will be directly met with legal implications. It also shows how the law functions: the law has little in common with environmental justice and as such is there primarily to protect the interests of the elite, and therefore to sustain hypernormalization.

The ways of contemporary climate protesting through disruption show support for the model presented in this book: such disruptions are threatening the ontological security of those who are affected by it: a situation of a traffic jam caused by climate protesters cause grave emotions among those in it: there are accounts of anger, frustration, violence, shouting and so on. Such moments of conflict confront those affected with the absurdities of climate inertia, but they might or will disavow such confrontation: because it is too threatening, too much ontologically insecure, anger and denial take over to escape the more traumatic conclusion that the protesters unmask: that climate action is more strongly needed than one's very behavior in the moment. Hence, violent disavowal surfaces in those affected by the disruptions: it touches upon the traumatic aspects of our predicament, and the violent rejection serves to deny the very acknowledgement of this trauma.

Ultimately, climate action is more important than going to work, doing one's shopping or visiting relatives or friends. Questions of effectiveness of such protests are irrelevant, as the denial of the relevance of a particular action is in the denial of the very goals of the movement: there is not a 'better strategy' that would not interrupt daily life of 'ordinary citizens', but would be smoothly integrated, not being disruptive, and thereby to be safely and easily ignored. The disruption of one's very routine or plan for the day *is* the very necessary means through which their goals (e.g., climate awareness) are achieved. The governmental and law enforcement response to such protests indicate the functioning of hypernormalization, and thus that against which the protests are aimed. When governmental leaders condemn these protests, it also shows the emptiness of authoritative discourse, as the exposure of the gap between such discourse and really existing practices, is by definition met with resistance. These protests also show a possible way out of hypernormalization, by taking discourse literally: the infiltration of XR's members into the head quarters of oil company Shell followed a statement by the UN General Secretary Guterres that fossil fuel pollution should end (Guterres, 2022). This represents a case of taking authoritative discourse literally, and filling it with bottom up generated meanings (Yurchak, 2005). This way, authoritative discourse (such as by the UN General Secretary) does not remain empty in hypernormalizing the status-quo while fantasizing about genuine commitment, but is used by these protest movements to generate change within society. If fossil fuel pollution should be ended, as argued here by the highest UN representative, it means there is no place for companies such as Shell which are too strongly invested in maintaining the status-quo, while making billions of fossil fuel profit annually.

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter argued that climate inertia is being hypernormalized, and that, even though authoritative discourse is filled with 'genuine commitment' towards combatting climate change, global emissions are only on the rise, presenting little indication of a real change in carbon emissions. The absurdity of the destruction of the planet for economic profit extends to the devastating impacts of climate change which is currently unfolding across the world. It is also evident that global responses have been *too little, too late*. Framing climate inertia within a model of absurdity and hypernormalization helps to understand why the status-quo is being normalized and perpetuated. Because climate change is already too traumatic, it is not strange to observe fantasy playing an important role in sustaining belief that commitment of our leaders is genuine, and that appropriate action is being taken. Moreover, fantasy helps to deal with the more difficult questions around radically changing our ways of living, and acknowledging that perpetual growth is the problem rather than a solution. Fantasy helps to sustain beliefs in notions such as green growth, or the idea that it is possible to maintain one's lifestyle without having to compromise (e.g., use less energy, switching to vegan diets, stop flying). Ultimately, climate change poses a deeply traumatic process, from which many people, especially younger, are already suffering, including experiences of eco-anxiety and eco-grief. Easy ways out are not possible, and the resistance work of protest movements such as XR and Insulate Britain, and political parties such as the Green Party in the UK, and the Party for the Animals in the Netherlands, show that there are ways to engage in meaningful action and political work towards climate action and developing new, collective eco-friendly lifestyles. Nonetheless, there is little reason for hope, and it is perhaps time and there should be space to find courage in hopelessness (Žižek, 2018).

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