Escaping Wonderland

ephemera: theory and politics in organization

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ephemera is an independent journal, founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

theory
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics
ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization
Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.

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Escaping Wonderland

Emil Husted, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zając and Yousra Rahmouni Elidrissi

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Fact fiction

In Lewis Caroll's celebrated 1871 novel, *Through the looking-glass* (TLG), which is the sequel to his beloved *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* (AIW) from 1865, the protagonist Alice encounters the so-called White Queen in a dark and lonely forest. The queen is one of the governors of the 'Looking-glass world'; a world much akin to Wonderland but shaped like a giant chessboard. Both worlds are characterized by profound absurdity. Nothing seems to make sense for Alice who, relying on real-world logic, continuously struggles to comprehend the nonsensical nature of what is unfolding before her eyes. The inhabitants of Wonderland and the Looking-glass world, however, seem absolutely content with the apparent lack of reason. The following exchange between Alice and the queen is telling in this regard:

> 'Let's consider your age to begin with – how old are you?' [the Queen said]. 'I'm seven and a half, exactly'. 'You need not say "exactually"', the Queen remarked. 'I can believe it without that. Now I'll give *you* something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day'. I ca'n't believe *that!*' said Alice. 'Ca'n't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath and shut your eyes'. Alice laughed. 'There's no use in trying', she said: 'one ca'n't believe impossible things'. 'I daresay you haven't had much practice', said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as much as six impossible things before breakfast'. (TLG: 174)

Diligent students of organization and management are likely to repeat what they learn from textbooks, namely that it is simply impossible to believe impossible things. We are supposed to show *facts* and dispassionate expertise (De Cock and Land, 2006) and venture as far away from *fiction* as possible. But this distinction between fact and fiction splinters, for instance, with the recognition that we dwell in storytelling organizations (Boje, 2008) where the ongoing performance and interpretation of stories glues together individual sensemaking and collective memory, and where we fill in the missing details and re-interpret narratives to stabilize certain story lines and (actively) forget others. Or, if you happen to work at a business school and have not practiced believing impossible things eagerly enough, you may start to think that business schools manufacture a version of reality, in which they represent professionalism and prepare their alumni to lead with a high dose of certainty, while simultaneously carefully avoiding discussing morals (Anteby, 2013).

From Morgan's (1986) *Images of the organization* onward, there has been an outburst of organization and management studies that engage with fiction. De Cock and Land (2006) offer a comprehensive overview, illustrating three modes of engaging with fiction in organization and management scholarship. One mode employs literary criticism to organization theory, encouraging reflexivity about authors' use of literary devices in constructing (persuasive) research accounts. The second uses literary modes of representation to capture organizational knowledge. The third treats fiction as a resource (teaching or research material) to better understand problems of management and organization. Yet these modes, the authors observe, still conceive literature and organization studies as fundamentally separate, with the latter borrowing (or appropriating) methods from other disciplines as it sees fit. Oswick et al. (2002) suggest these approaches still represent orthodoxy and urge us to leave the 'cognitive comfort zone' they produce. Engaging with anomaly, paradox, and irony, they suggest, is a point of departure for more fruitful knowledge generation.

Sensing nonsense

Against the myth of rationality, stability, and efficiency, contemporary organizations are often rather experienced as a site of uncertainty, absurdity, and irrationality. In some instances, organizational members belonging to different 'interest groups', from frontline employees to managers and executives, see themselves and others acting according to different forms of rationality. In other instances, individuals experience their professional lives turning ridiculous, with so-called rational decisions leading to irrational actions. In much of the mainstream management literature however, it simply doesn't make sense according to a rational model of organizations that values order, predictability, and manageability. When instrumental rationality shapes the way we conceptualize and practice organizational activity (Alvesson, 1984), it is easy to dismiss or disregard the ambiguous, paradoxical, stupid, chaotic, and interpret such ocurances as deficiencies, shortcomings, or temporary failures of organizations.

Yet, critiques of the rational model (e.g. Ashforth and Fried, 1988; Kets de Vries, 1980; March, 1996) have long attempted to question and redefine how we (make) sense (of) the nonsensical. Shedding light on this so called 'shadow side' (Nord and Jermier, 1994: 398), scholars have advanced a more complex understanding of organizations: one where systems are designed by 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1957), decisions are also informed by the 'emotionality of rationality' (Mumby and Putnam, 1992), and where 'intentions and actions' are 'loosely coupled' (Weick, 1976) in the everyday life of organizations. Challenging the orthodox scientific logic of thinking organizations in our field, McCabe (2016) invites us to draw on Caroll's (1865) novel *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* in order to make sense of the other phenomena reflecting the complexity of organizations.

The story of the young Alice starts when she falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world full of illogical events. It is in this underground world that she encounters and experiences the apparently nonsensical dimensions of life after she decides to chase the rabbit. Undergoing changes in size and shape, finding herself surrounded by irrational and sometimes threatening characters, her own sense of identity becomes threatened, as exemplified in her meeting with the Caterpillar who asks 'Who are you?':

> 'I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.' 'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. 'Explain yourself!' 'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.' (AIW: 41)

Driven by confusion, surprise, and a sense of curiosity, her journey is one of losing certainties and opening herself up to the unfolding of increasingly absurd events. Ultimately, Wonderland turns out dystopian (Roelofs, 2015) and while Alice's desire to live in a world that make sense grows, readers are confronted with 'the terrifying vision of the void that underlies the comfortable structures of the rational world' (Kelly, 2011: 26).

In his sequel, *Through the looking-glass,* Caroll (1871) situates Alice in another fantastical world, which she enters by climbing on the other side of a mirror's reflection. There she finds everything is reversed and logic is turned upside down: one needs to run in order to remain stationary, and it is only by walking away from something that one moves towards it; flowers can speak, and chess pieces have come to life. When she meets the Red Queen, Alice is told that the entire countryside is laid out in squares, like a gigantic chessboard:

> 'When you say hill', the Queen interrupted, '*I* could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley'. 'No, I shouldn't', said Alice, surprised into contradicting her at last: 'a hill *ca'n't* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense'. The Red Queen shook her head. 'You may call it "nonsense" if you like, she said, 'but *I've* heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary'. (TLG: 140)

The change in perception of the world around her calls into question 'the essence' of time and space (Kelly, 2011: 37) – as much as longitude and latitude, size, and growth – considered as structural features crucial for 'rational' sensemaking. It also brings to the forefront the contradictory dimensions resulting from this change: how can a hill ever be (called) a valley? Nonsense.

In McCabe's (2016) essay, the Wonderland metaphor opens avenues for making sense of the nonsensical. It does so by first acknowledging the contradictory – but also ridiculous, irrational, disordered, unpredictable, uncertain, unexpected, stupid, silly – as constitutive dimensions of organizational life. In other words, it serves to surface those phenomena,

which speak to the 'strangeness' of organizations while simultaneously questioning our rational understanding of it. Rather than trying to manage or escape those, we are invited to appreciate the limits of our knowledge of the 'worlds' we aim to investigate, to explore the uncertainties, ambiguities, and misunderstandings that shape these, as well the non-linear temporality and complex and deep structures that affect their becoming. In recent years, both novels have become popular among organizational scholars and practitioners concerned with strategic and cultural change (e.g., Forbes, 2013), having been used as a lens to better understand failures in processes of change (e.g., Heracleous and Bartunek, 2021).

With this editorial, we wish to reconnect with the debate on fiction and organization studies, recognizing that the call for leaving the 'cognitive comfort zone' now extends beyond the suggested distinction between paradox or irony. We wish to draw the attention to the entire *Wonderland* of absurdity, unpredictability, irrationality, contradictions, confusion, and ambiguity that we are all inextricably caught-up in but nonetheless trying hard to escape in contemporary society and organizations. The contributions to this issue all speak to various facets of Wonderland. Here, we group them into two sections. The first is called 'Knowing Wonderland' and contains contributions that engage with the 'hypernormalization' of absurdity in and around organizations. The second section is called 'Escaping Wonderland' and contains contributions that theorize the various strategies of resisting absurdity in contemporary society. Before we introduce the contributions, however, we wish to delve into Wonderland as a gateway into sensing nonsense.

The contributions, part 1: Knowing Wonderland

Although only one contribution in this open issue deals explicitly with absurdity, they all somehow concern aspects of contemporary (work)life that could be considered absurd in one way or another. In each case, we relate the contributions to central episodes in Lewis Carroll's novels *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*. We begin by outlining and discussing those contributions that concern the foundations of work in 'Wonderland' and then move on to those contributions that address the

question of how to resist the absurdity of contemporary society in all its shapes and colors.

Working through absurdity

One of the most beloved characters in Wonderland is the Hatter (often referred to as the 'Mad' Hatter). Alice first encounters him when she decides to visit the so-called March Hare in his fur-covered house with ear-shaped chimneys. In front of the house, beneath a tree, the March Hare is having tea at a large table with a dormouse and the Hatter. While the dormouse is fast asleep at the table, the Hatter is very much awake but initially not particularly welcoming toward Alice. The Hatter and the March Hare spontaneously cry 'no room!' as Alice approaches the table, although plenty of seats are empty. The reader later learns that the reason for this somewhat hostile outburst is that the tea party must constantly move around the table, as they never have time to clean the dishes, since it is always teatime in Wonderland. Time is apparently stuck at 6 pm, which leaves the Hatter and the March Hare with little choice but to always have tea. Eventually, Alice finds a seat in an armchair at the end of the table. This leads the March Hare to offer Alice some wine, but since there is no wine on the table, she must do without. At this point, the Hatter enters the conversation:

> 'Your hair wants cutting', said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech. 'You should learn not to make personal remarks', Alice said with some severity: 'it's very rude'. The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?' 'Come, we shall have some fun now!' thought Alice. 'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles – I believe I can guess that', she added aloud. (…). 'Have you guessed the riddle yet?' the Hatter said, turning to Alice again. 'No, I give up', Alice replied. 'What's the answer?' 'I haven't the slightest idea', said the Hatter. 'Nor I', said the March Hare. Alice sighed wearily. 'I think you might do something better with the time', she said, 'than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers'. 'If you knew Time as well as I do', said the Hatter, 'you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's *him*'. 'I don't know what you mean', said Alice. 'Of course you don't!' the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. 'I dare say you never even spoke to Time!' (AIW: 60-63)

Since the publication of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, much has been made of this nonsensical riddle. It has even appeared in *ephemera* once, with Mark de Rond (2018) using the riddle to illustrate his own confused reading of

Damien O'Doherty's (2017) *Reconstructing organization*. While many observers have suggested possible solutions to the riddle – 'the higher the fewer, of course!' – it was apparently never intended to have an answer (Haughton, 1998). As such, the Hatter has in many ways become the symbol of Wonderland's absurdity, so much so that he appears as the only character (portrayed by Johnny Depp) on the cover of Tim Burton's 2010 cinematic remake of the story. In everyday language, absurdity is usually understood as 'the quality of being ridiculous or wildly unreasonable' (Oxford Languages, 2023), but it is usually given a more complex meaning in academic writing. For instance, for Camus (1942: 6), absurdity represents the fact that life has no higher purpose and that we therefore constantly must deal with the 'absence of any profound reason for living'. As opposed to this existentialist conception, Dogherty (1994) defines absurdity as something that contradicts formal logic, challenges common sense as well as commonly held values, and is linked to foolishness. Similarly, Loacker and Peters (2015: 625) understand the absurd as 'not solely about lack of meaning and order, but about *other* orders and logics of ordering'.

Framing absurdity as concerned with 'otherness' allows us to appreciate the value of Caroll's novels, for they are precisely not meaningless, although they clearly are both foolish and deprived of common sense. They allow us to enter a foreign world where things gradually become 'curiouser and curiouser', as Alice puts it, in order to gain enough critical distance to view our own world in a new light. For instance, when joining the supposedly 'mad' tea party, Alice is forced to challenge her own reasoning about temporality. In Wonderland, *Time* is a living being; that is, someone to be recognized and respected. So, when the Hatter asks Alice if she knows time, and she replies that she knows how to 'beat time' at her music lessons, the Hatter responds: 'Ah, that accounts for it (…) he won't stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock' (AIW: 63). Unlike our world of almost rhythmic optimization, Time in Wonderland is not something to be beaten, nor something that obediently follows a predetermined beat. Time is something – or, rather, someone – who requires attention and has his own idiosyncratic rhythm. Thinking about temporality in this way forces us to contemplate our own attitude toward time and

critically assess our constant attempt to 'beat it' at work as well as in life in general[1].

The short research note by Dunne and Pedersen called 'Refusing busyness' concerns this exact issue. Taking their cue from recent statements by self-proclaimed 'lean' entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk and Micha Kaufman, who publicly celebrate overwork and optimization, the authors discuss the notion of 'busyness' as a central aspect of contemporary worklives, which is clearly systemic but frequently framed as individual. Although many skilled workers today are caught in a career 'hamster wheel' that forces them to always improve their resumés in order to stay competitive at the global job market, and while most members of the precariat have little choice but to toil for a penny at two or even three jobs at a time, most people nonetheless seem to believe that the choice to remain in a constant state of busyness is actually theirs to make. This leads the authors to conclude that collective resistance against busyness (as seen in experiments with four-day work weeks) represents an unlikely scenario, since it 'is both a possibility which the professional worker will not pursue and a luxury which the precarious worker cannot afford' (Dunne and Pedersen, 2023: 221).

Similar concerns about the surreal (and high-paced) nature of contemporary worklives figure prominently in the article by Bal, Brookes, Hack-Polay, Kordowicz, and Mendy, entitled 'The absurd workplace: How absurdity is hypernormalized in contemporary society and organizations'. Drawing on Nagel (1971) in particular, the authors characterize organizational practices as absurd when they appear illogical and inappropriate, and when there is a clear discrepancy between official values and real-life practices. Contemporary organizations are replete with such discrepancies. One example, highlighted by the authors, is university teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, many teachers were forced to continue on-campus teaching, despite warnings from health authorities, thereby exposing themselves and the students to the risk of contamination. Ironically, many

[1] There are, obviously, two meanings to the notion of 'beating time'. While one represents the act of finishing something quickly, the other signifies the ability to keep a rhythm. In the novel, Caroll uses this equivocation intentionally by making a reference to Alice's music lessons.

lessons, supervision sessions, and exams were later spontaneously converted to online formats because either teachers or students contracted the virus during classroom teaching, which effectively prevented teachers from preparing educational content that was fit for online interactions. In this example, absurdity resides in the fact that the solution to the problems posed by the pandemic ended up contradicting both the ambition of protecting the health of students as well as teachers *and* the goal of providing the best possible learning experiences.

The authors couple their interest in absurdity with the concept of 'hypernormalization', in order to understand how illogical and inconsistent practices have become a part of everyday life in many contemporary organizations (and in society as a whole), and how 'the absurd is taken for granted, perpetuated, and projected upon people as the norm' (Bal et al., 2023: 37). According to the authors, hypernormalization works because it fulfills a number of crucial functions for people in a particular social space. For instance, it creates stability and predictability in the face of otherwise stultifying complexity, and it helps maintain the fantasy of rational organization regardless of the apparent lack of consistent and meaningful rationales. Hence, the concept of hypernormalization allows the authors to explain why members of contemporary organizations provide so relatively little resistance toward genuinely absurd practices. Recalling the note by Dunne and Pedersen, one might argue that busyness has been hypernormalized in contemporary society despite its absurd and inconsistent logic of overwork and superficiality.

As seen in the example above, one type of workplace that is frequently charged with absurdity, and where absurd practices have become thoroughly normalized, is the university. In fact, several scholars have written about the 'McUniversity' and its instrumental (il)logic of standardization (e.g., Parker and Jay, 1995), and others have compared management education to the 'theater of the absurd' (Starkey et al., 2019). While most of these studies have focused exclusively on the Western world, the article 'Neoliberalism in a socialist state: Political economy of higher education in Vietnam' by Lê moves that debate to post-socialist Asia. Building on first-hand experience as well as numerous reports on university teaching in Vietnam, Lê discusses the neoliberalization and Englishization of the Vietnamese university system and

its impact on the quality of education and student well-being. One of the paper's main claims is that the neoliberal paradigm in higher education, with its constant focus on transforming students into human capital for corporations, matches and even accentuates the Confucian undercurrents of Vietnamese society in a way that effectively undermines the egalitarian principles of the official socialist ideology. This, Lê argues, creates a profound discrepancy between the official values and the real-life practices of the university system that can easily be interpreted as absurd in Bal and colleagues' sense of the term. Nonetheless, 'resistance is rare', as Lê (2023: 139) discouragingly concludes. Since people have become socialized into the current system and lack knowledge of its fundamental dynamics, and because the problematic aspects of neoliberalism are masked by the state's official commitment to socialist ideology, reforms are highly unlikely. This, once again, testifies to the hypernormalized character of absurdity in different corners of contemporary society.

Another explanation for how potentially absurd social structures are created and upheld is offered by De Filippi and Santolini in their article 'Extitutional theory: Modeling structured social dynamics beyond institutions'. The main purpose of the article is to direct scholarly attention to those ephemeral and interpersonal relationships that somehow contradict established institutions. While the authors understand *institutions* as declarative and explicit codes of conduct, *extitutions* are conceived as implicit and emergent rules for how to behave in a particular context. Whereas the former is based on rules and roles (e.g., legal statutes and professional contracts), the latter is based on identities and relationships. An example of an extitution, highlighted by the authors, might be the behavioral patterns that emerge from a CEO's secret and perhaps inappropriate relationship with a subordinate. Such patterns, the authors claim, govern life in and around organizations as much as proper institutional arrangements. On the one hand, extitutions are responsible for the gradual emergence of problematic or even absurd institutions, but they could also be seen as pockets of freedom where resistance toward absurdity can be enacted in the absence of codified rules and norms.

In Wonderland, everything seems conditioned exclusively by extitutions. It is virtually impossible for Alice to familiarize herself with the rules and norms that govern life at the end of the rabbit hole: 'How queer everything is to-day',

as she notes (AIW: 17). Moreover, the events that unfold appear to be almost exclusively determined by the whims of the curious characters that inhabit Wonderland. The following section departs from one such instance, in which the whims of an otherwise benign monarch challenges Alice's (and the readers) commonsensical understanding of employment and remuneration.

The promise of jam

In *Through the looking-glass*, Alice unexpectedly encounters the White Queen on her way through a dark forest. Not to be confused with the Red Queen (or the ill-tempered Queen of Hearts who rules Wonderland), the White Queen appears confused and looks somewhat untidy (this may have something to do with the fact that she is living backwards). Her shawl keeps falling off, despite being pinned both 'here' and 'there', and her hair is so tremendously tousled that a hairbrush has become entangled in it. Alice picks up the shawl, pins it down, and helps the Queen release the brush from her uncombed hair. In an attempt to provide a long-term solution for the disoriented majesty, Alice suggests that the White Queen gets her own personal 'lady's-maid'. Much to her surprise, the White Queen finds Alice a promising candidate:

> 'I'm sure I'll take *you* with pleasure! The Queen said. 'Twopence a week, and jam every other day'. Alice couldn't help laughing, as she said 'I don't want you to hire *me* – and I don't care for jam'. 'It's very good jam', the Queen said. 'Well, I don't want any *to-day*, at any rate'. 'You couldn't have it if you *did* want it', the Queen said. 'The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday – but never jam *to-day*'. 'It *must* come sometimes to "jam to-day"', Alice objected. 'No, it ca'n't', said the Queen. 'It's jam every *other* day: to-day isn't any *other day*, you know'. (TLG: 171)

This is one of the more well-known passages from Caroll's books, and the phrases 'never jam today' or simply 'jam tomorrow' have even become sayings of their own, often referring to promises that are never fulfilled. Mark White (2010) interprets the passage as a metaphor for situations where the whole appears to be more valuable than the sum of its parts. For instance, the individual members of a rock band may seem fairly ordinary on their own, but when they join forces on stage, they transform into something extraordinary. Similarly, people may describe their worklives as meaningful and stimulating on the whole but find each individual workday both dull and pointless. In other words, one might look back on previous experiences or forward on

future opportunities and find 'jam' in both situations, but still live through each individual workday in a state of perpetual jamlessness.

These two meanings of 'never jam today' are both reflected in the article by Swailes and Lever, entitled 'Becoming and staying talented: A figurational analysis of organization, power and control', although the authors focus predominantly on the former. The article develops a framework for understanding the type of power and (self)management that exists within so-called 'talent pools' (i.e., groups of employees that management views as particularly promising). Many contemporary businesses work actively to identify and isolate talents that may, in time, become the stars of the enterprise: they scout for potential, supervise, monitor, promote, evaluate, and socialize promising candidates into a mode of being that is deemed consistent with the interests of the corporation. Talent management programs are, however, not restricted to the private sector. Public sector organizations such as universities are equally preoccupied with identifying employees that appear capable of outperforming their colleagues according to a number of vaguely defined KPIs. This prevalent practice clearly has a disciplining effect on those aspiring to become part of the talent pool as well as the selected few on the inside. As the authors note: 'For the talented, this comes at a price – and the price is the constant need to perform and be observed' (Swailes and Lever, 2023: 74).

While some employees arguably benefit from being part of talent programs, the practice of separating the 'wheat from the chaff' is just as much a strategy that allows management to control their workers by 'playing them off against each other' (ibid: 76), thereby ensuring that everyone maintains a high level of performance by means of fierce self-discipline. There may not be any 'jam today' for those aspiring to become part of the talent programs, but the promise of 'jam tomorrow' is clearly present. Similarly, although there were 'jam yesterday' for those already included in the programs – and despite the fact that the whole talent management idea is predicated on 'jam tomorrow' – the prospect of 'jam today' remains equally bleak for those in the pool. Nonetheless, if one were to ask employees who have been part of organizations that engage with talent management programs (the editors of this issue included), a considerable part would probably say that there was plenty of jam on the whole.

In some ways, the note by Burø called 'Recycled youths, or, the reproduction of ecology of culture' likewise tackles issues pertaining to the cultivation of talent. In the note, Burø follows a young person called MJ who has been doing cultural work in Denmark for more than 10 years. Burø's main claim is that, during those 10 years, MJ has been 'groomed' into becoming a cultural laborer through numerous short-term stints in various cultural organizations (festivals, theaters, community centers, publishing houses, etc.). Although the notion of 'grooming' is usually associated with (sexual) abuse, Burø uses it to conceptualize the ways in which MJ has been 'spotted, motivated, recruited, engaged, and integrated into the strategic efforts of culture organizations' (Burø, 2023: 226), through a process that is surprisingly similar to the type of talent management schemes that Swailes and Lever analyze in their article. Having been 'recycled' and 'circulated' by cultural organizations, MJ now knows how to 'do culture', despite having left the cultural industry to study political science. In some ways, being groomed has taught MJ a valuable craft, and she has thus become a valuable (human) resource, but she has also been exploited and exposed to unacceptably precarious working conditions. As such, MJ's story can also be interpreted as a 'never jam today' experience, and Burø therefore calls for more critical reflexivity on the part of both culture professionals and people like MJ who are part of the culture precariat. While the former should acknowledge the power they wield and teach young culture laborers the rules of the game (both institutions and extitutions), the latter should organize collectively and demand more humane – and perhaps less absurd – working conditions.

Being socialized into a particular mode of being – whether a 'talented' or 'cultured' or any other mode of being – requires knowledge; that is, knowledge of who you are and who you are *not*. Having arrived in Wonderland, Alice is forced to confront this very issue after eating a magic cake (with the words 'EAT ME!' written on it), which makes some parts of her body grow disproportionately. This makes Alice feel that she no longer knows herself, and she begins to wonder if she has changed overnight:

> 'Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is "Who in the world am I?" Ah, *that's* the great puzzle'. (AIW: 17)

Alice later finds out that she is, in fact, herself (and not her friend Mable), but it requires much deliberation on her part to reach that conclusion in the absence of meaningful information (e.g., recognizing her own body). In a sense, this part of Alice's adventures underground speaks to the research note by Herian called 'Your data is s**t'.

What data to use and to discard, what data to buy and sell?, Herian asks. In digital capitalism, data has become a 'raw material', an asset class, and this vision excludes messiness (or simply: 'shit') – rather, the dominant narratives tend to reinforce an incontestable value of well-organized data to organizations. Meanwhile, he engages with 'shit data': the petabytes of digital excrement that our actions generate on a daily basis, which is kept for its *potential* value. But that potential seems to largely escape human cognitive abilities and limited work hours; escape the corporate C-suites, which have failed to mine them to see the avenues of novel profits for the shareholders; escape the medical scientists who are not using the massive streams of data from wearables to develop new drugs or public health advice, and so on. His data gloom is a form of knowing the digital capitalism's Wonderland: not so different from the traditional capitalism, in which run-away consumption generates immeasurable piles of garbage, digital excrement exacerbates the consumption of labor, energy, and rare-earth minerals, and brings us ever closer to climate catastrophe.

The contributions described above all articulate how the absurdity of our organized lives is reproduced, albeit in ever shifting forms, which may make us believe that we are in control, or that we are moving (forward or upward and onward) while actually drowning. Alice's adventures are marked by several (narrow) escapes, and it is some of these escape tactics that we turn to now.

The contributions, part 2: Escaping Wonderland

Several of the contributions to this open issue address questions of resistance. They do so by probing how actors in various organizations and industries challenge the powers that be and escape their often-absurd modes of operation. Alice also engages in different forms of resistance when the

absurdity of Wonderland becomes too overwhelming or when its rulers become too unreasonable. In fact, the story of Alice's adventures in Wonderland may help us identify a number of archetypical 'lines of flight' or 'escape tactics' that can be used in contemporary organizations to resist nonsensical dynamics and unreasonable conditions[2]. We will label these tactics: *Refusal*, *protest*, and *commoning*. Coincidentally (or not!), all three tactics can likewise be found in contributions to the present issue. Juxtaposing the fictional narrative of Alice with real-life cases may help us observe things that we might not otherwise see and throw new light on key aspects of our own world as well as Wonderland.

Refusal: I'm quite content to stay here

In *Through the looking-glass*, Alice encounters the Red Queen in a garden of anthropomorphic flowers. Unlike her counterpart (the confused but benign White Queen) the Red Queen is cool, calm, and collected. She even takes the time to carefully explain to Alice the rules of the chess game that they are all playing, especially in relation to the concept of 'promotion'; that is, the move where a player is allowed to replace a pawn (such as Alice) with a queen. Regardless of the fact that Alice is actually on the *White* Queen's team, the *Red* Queen has enough confidence to walk her through the moves that are required to rise from pawn to queen. The task for Alice is to arrive at the 'Eighth Square', but to get there, she has to move inconceivably fast. Seeing that Alice is merely a child and therefore not capable of running fast enough, the Red Queen decides to escort her some of the way, and they therefore start to run hand in hand:

> Alice never could quite make out, in thinking it over afterwards, how it was that they began: all she remembers is that they were running hand in hand, and that the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep up with her: and still the Queen kept crying 'Faster! Faster!', but Alice felt she *could not* go fast, though she had no breath left to say so. (…). 'Now! Now!' cried the Queen. 'Faster! Faster!' And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the

[2] Gilles Deleuze (1990), the coiner of the term 'lines of flight', actually offered his own interpretation of Caroll's work, in which he argues that the 'sense' of the real world always haunts the 'nonsense' of Wonderland.

> ground breathless and giddy. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly: 'You may rest a little now'. Alice looked around her in great surprise. 'Why, I do believe we've been under this tree the whole time! Everything's just as it was!' 'Of course it is', said the Queen. 'What would you have it?' 'Well, in *our* country', said Alice, still panting a little, 'you'd generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time as we've been doing'. 'A slow sort of country!' said the Queen. 'Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!' 'I'd rather not try, please!' said Alice. 'I'm quite content to stay here – only I *am* so hot and thirsty'. (TLG: 141-143)

There are several instances in Caroll's two books where Alice works up the courage to simply refuse. It usually happens when she is either too exhausted to tag along or confronted with circumstances that are too unreasonable to handle. In the example above, she refuses to keep running (in order to get nowhere!), but during the Hatter's tea party, she likewise refuses to take part in the apparent nonsense and rudeness of that particular event. As an escape tactic, Alice typically employs 'refusal' in the first part of both *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*. If the novels are interpreted as coming-of-age narratives, as they frequently are (e.g., Empson, 1935), refusal seems to be understood by Caroll as a slightly immature way of resisting the ways of the world, compared to some of the other tactics that we will consider here. Refusal, for Caroll, is about resignation and frustration. It is an active choice, but one that really does not change anything: The Red Queen preserves her authority, the Hatter maintains his madness, and Alice remains a pawn in the grand chess game that is Life itself.

Perhaps this is why Dunne and Pedersen have little faith in the ability of ordinary people to 'refuse busyness'. As they say, professional workers have little interest in challenging the dominant view of busyness as a virtue, and members of the precariat simply cannot afford to do so. In fact, the incident where Alice and the Red Queen run hand in hand without getting anywhere has an uncanny resemblance with contemporary worklife. Many people today feel precisely like Alice: They chase the Promised Land by constantly trying to be 'doers' who get things done at a surreal pace, but they never seem to reach their final destination. This may lead some to refuse (e.g., through quiet quitting), but it seems unlikely that such acts of refusal will seriously improve the current state of affairs for members of the working class. Dunne and

Pedersen, as well as Burø, argue that changing things for the better will require more active modes of resistance.

Protest: I'll shake you into a kitten

As Alice grows, mentally as well as physically (recall that the magic cake makes her body grow disproportionally), she starts to get a hold of things in Wonderland. Not only does she familiarize herself with the institutions – and extitutions – of life underground, she also learns how to object to things that in her view are unreasonable or unfair. For instance, toward the end of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, she openly challenges the Queen of Hearts' authority during a game of croquet. The game is played with an ever-changing set of rules and, instead of mallets and balls, participants use live flamingos and hedgehogs. Moreover, the queen's soldiers assume the role of arches that conveniently move in directions that are favorable to the feisty monarch, who spontaneously shouts 'off with his head' or 'off with her head' whenever the other participants behave in ways that displeases her (which is approximately once in a minute). Alice finds the game 'provoking' and 'very difficult', and she begins to feel uneasy about the whole situation (AIW: 74). In the end, the Queen decides to execute the so-called Cheshire-Cat, even though only the cat's head (and occasionally only his smile) is visible. Alice objects to this type of unfair treatment by claiming that the cat belongs to the so-called Duchess of Wonderland, and that it would be reasonable to consult her before beheading the poor cat.

However, the most remarkable display of protest occurs at the very end of *Through the looking-glass*. At this point, Alice has finally been promoted from pawn to queen, and she finds herself at a fancy dinner table with a large gathering of characters. The Red Queen and the White Queen are present, and they both start out by correcting her dining manners, which causes some frustration in Alice. The Queens then decide to toast Alice, who is sitting at the head of the table, and Alice stands up to thank the guests. Suddenly, everything erupts into chaos: Candles rise to the ceiling, bottles begin to fly (using plates as wings and forks as legs), and the White Queen falls into the soup-tureen. The sudden chaos triggers Alice to finally take matters into own hands:

> 'I ca'n't stand this any longer!' she cried, as she jumped up and seized the tablecloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor. 'And as for *you*', she went on, turning fiercely upon the Red Queen, whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief – but the Queen was no longer at her side – she had suddenly dwindled down to the size of a little doll, and was now on the table, merrily running round and round after her own shawl, which was trailing behind her. At any other time, Alice would have felt surprised at this, but she was far too much excited to be surprised at anything *now*. 'As for *you*', she repeated, catching hold of the little creature in the very act of jumping over a bottle which had just lighted upon the table, 'I'll shake you into a kitten, that I will' (TLG: 233-234).

This is the moment where Alice wakes up from her dream and discovers that the Red Queen is actually her own kitten Kitty, and that the White Queen is her other kitten Snowdrop. Some observers have interpreted this final scene as representing Alice's sexual awakening (think of the erecting candles). This may be an over-interpretation, but the episode is at least easily understood as a moment of maturation; that is, a point where Alice stops reacting to the absurdity of her surroundings and starts molding it in her own vision. Instead of being corrected all the time (most notable by the two Queens), she now assumes a position of authority herself and corrects the incumbents of Wonderland for being absolutely absurd.

The contribution by Humphery, Jordan, and Lekakis is likewise concerned with protest as an escape tactic. More specifically, they trace what happens when consumer activism moves to the digital realm. The authors investigate digitally-mediated consumer agency through the lens of three types of activist campaigns. They unveil how different forms of online consumer activism rely on the mainstream digital economy. For instance, this includes the marketing know-how in managing them, the publicly available tools and technological expertise, which allows consumers to identify the brands that should be avoided (in that case: Trump-related companies), and the mobilization of consumers by the biggest platforms themselves. In contrast, so-called '#delete storms' such as *#deleteuber* are reactive to highly-publicized events and decentralized. Both types rely on and further fuel the use of social media, the authors note. From a political economy perspective, the latter seem to work like connected vessels: whatever Uber loses, Twitter (now X) gains over the course of these 'storm' events. A third scenario is based on 'buycotts', or

endorsing the purchase of particular products or services, which has resulted in advocating for alternative spaces of provisioning such as farmers' markets. Like the two other scenarios, buycotts rely on the notion of the individual consumer's power. And they are also inescapably entangled in the digital economy at large – for instance, through the use of ethical consumption apps, which fuel novel, commodifiable consumer data. Among the different facets of consumer agency that these cases illustrate, it becomes apparent that consumers cannot escape the realms of mainstream digital economy, driven primarily by profit concerns, rather than other ethical norms and social goals, which they are striving to support.

Present day consumers easily compare to Alice. Both inhabit a world far too complex to fully comprehend and both are, consequently, forced to respond passively to the often-absurd dictates of the powers that be (e.g., unrestrained monarchs or corporate interests). But wisdom is power, as the saying goes. Once Alice starts to understand the (il)logic of Wonderland, she works up the confidence to challenge and eventually rebel against the establishment, shaking the story's main antagonist 'into a kitten'. Similarly, consumers are incapable of resisting unethical corporate conduct, unless they are provided with the tools and knowledge to engage in meaningful political activism. However, with serious political engagement comes the risk of cooptation (Dahlman et al., 2022). While Alice ends up as a monarch herself, the consumers in Humphrey and colleagues' article are forced to rely on privately-owned technological platforms to raise awareness, coordinate events, and mobilize support. As Humphrey et al. (2023: 94) note: 'What might digitally aid a consumer to take effective choices in supporting, for example, living wages for laborers, will at the same time generate information valuable to data brokers and digital platforms dedicated to private profit'. This observation points to a serious problem for contemporary activists, and it leads us straight to the final escape tactic.

Commoning: You're nothing but a pack of cards

As mentioned, Caroll's two novels have been interpreted in multiple ways: as a coming-of-age story, as a tale of sexual maturation, as a feminist critique of patriarchy, and as an expression of pure nonsense. One of the rarer interpretations focuses on Alice as an anti-capitalist; or, rather, as someone

who learns how to be an anti-capitalist in the nineteenth century (to paraphrase a well-known book by Erik Olin Wright). This particular interpretation is typically associated with Nancy Armstrong's (1990) essay 'The occidental Alice', in which she argues that a central aspect of Alice's journey from childhood to adolescence concerns her ability to discipline her own desire, including her desire for commodities. The very first scene of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* features our protagonist sitting on a riverbank next to her older sister (who is reading a book 'without pictures or conversations') while observing a white rabbit with pink eyes running past her (AIW: 9). The rabbit is apparently late for an appointment and therefore pulls '*a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*' and looks at it (this part is italicized by Caroll to emphasize the weird but nonetheless compelling nature of the observation). This brings Alice to her feet – 'burning with curiosity' – and she begins to chase the rabbit down the rabbit hole, which famously leads her to Wonderland. Armstrong interprets Alice's reaction as an expression of the child-like fascination with all things new and unattainable, which essentially is what drives the process of commodification in late capitalism (see also Zizek, 1989). As Tarr (2018: 26) notes: 'The commodity, the fuel of capitalism's runaway train, is as much a fantasy as the Bandersnatch and the Jabberwocky'[3].

However, as Alice matures, she learns how to temper her own fantasmatic attraction to the curious creatures of Wonderland. Not only does she learn how to protest their unreasonable and unjust rationales, as we saw above, she also understands how to question their sublime character. The perhaps best example of this occurs in the final chapter of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. The chapter centers on a grotesque legal trial, at which the Knave of Hearts is accused of stealing the Queen of Hearts' tarts. As the trial proceeds, Alice is constantly provoked by the meaninglessness of the event: the judge (the King of Hearts) is wildly unreasonable, the Queen of Hearts constantly interferes with the proceedings, the jurors seem unable to remember anything at all, and witnesses (e.g., the Mad Hatter) continuously prove utterly incapable of providing any kind of clarity as to what happened to the tarts. Eventually, the White Rabbit (who acts as a courtroom clerk) calls the final witness, which

[3] The Bandersnatch and the Jabberwocky are both creatures in the 'Looking-glass world'.

happens to be Alice. In a matter of minutes, Alice grows to enormous size and rises to the occasion.

> At this moment the King, who had been for some time busily writing in his note-book, cackled out 'Silence!' and read out from his book, 'Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court*.' Everybody looked at Alice. '*I'm* not a mile high', said Alice. 'You are', said the King. 'Nearly two miles high', added the Queen. 'Well, I sha'n't go, at any rate', said Alice: 'besides, that's not a regular rule: you invented it just now'. 'It's the oldest rule in the book', said the King. 'Then it ought to be Number One', said Alice. The King turned pale, and shut his note-book hastily. (AIW: 106)

> 'Let the jury consider their verdict', the King said, for about the twentieth time that day. 'No, no!' said the Queen. 'Sentence first – verdict afterwards.' 'Stuff and nonsense!' said Alice loudly. 'The idea of having the sentence first!' 'Hold your tongue!' said the Queen, turning purple. 'I won't!' said Alice. 'Off with her head!' the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved. 'Who cares for you?' said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!' At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her: she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face. 'Wake up, Alice dear!' said her sister; 'Why, what a long sleep you've had!' (AIW: 107-108)

This final scene is easily interpreted as a representation of Alice waking up to the new reality of adolescence, in which things that once seemed magical now appear as they truly are: nothing but a pack of cards. As mentioned, *Through the looking-glass* ends in a similar fashion, with Alice shaking the Red Queen into its true shape (a kitten). Hence, it seems that, for Caroll, adolescence (or, at least adulthood) is associated with a loss of innocence and an elimination of the enchantment of the world. However, the episode can also be interpreted as containing an anti-capitalist kernel. At the trial, Alice learns how to question the 'reification' of things; that is, she learns to appreciate things for what they truly are and how they are made (as products of human labor), instead of seeing them as commodities that in and off themselves contain a magical ability to satisfy our deepest desires. As Tarr (2018: 36) observes: 'Wonderland features several fascinating performances of reification, in which social relationships are defined by the interaction between things, with the result that subjects are objectified and objects acquire human properties'.

Eventually, however, Alice reclaims her agency vis-à-vis the anthropomorphic objects of Wonderland. She does so by penetrating the world's fantasmatic superstructure and calling things by their right name. According to Caroll, this is – for better and for worse – a central part of what it means to be an adult; according to Armstrong (1990) and Tarr (2018), this is a central part of what it means to be an anti-capitalist. Perhaps this is why the progressive British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood entitled her introduction to the 150th anniversary edition of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* 'End capitalism' and included a 'climate map' that shows 'the area of land that will become uninhabitable if the earth's temperature rises by 5 degrees Celsius' (Constable-Maxwell, 2015: np).

Finding ways of curbing the process of commodification is clearly central to the anti-capitalist agenda, but Caroll's novels leaves us with little ammunition in terms of envisioning the social structures that could replace, or at least supplement, market-based society. Fortunately, the article by Lanzi in this issue addresses that particular issue. Diego Lanzi invites us to revisit the commons as a strategy to escape absurdity. His emphasis is on management and preservation of the commons without relying on market institutions. He engages with Sen's notion of capabilities, or the freedoms that individuals can choose to develop to realize their wellbeing. Building on Marx, he emphasizes that commodities cannot be the pillars of socioeconomic development. Rather, echoing Sen, Lanzi highlights the deprivation in capabilities as *caused* by capitalism. Drawing on Ostrom, he creates practical design principles for enduring self-governing, post-capitalist institutions, which replenish and extend capabilities through inclusion rather than by creating artificial scarcities.

Conclusion

So, what might we learn from reading Caroll's two nonsensical novels alongside the present issue of *ephemera*? Some might argue that there's little to be gained from relating nine essentially unrelated pieces of scholarly writing to a story that was never intended to hold any kind of higher meaning. This is a fair assertion. Others, however, might contend that fiction helps us escape the straitjacket of what is commonly perceived as reasonable and

provides us with an other-worldly and non-reasonable point of view, from which to view matters of concern in a new light. By turning real-world logic on its head, we are able to see more clearly the arbitrary and sometimes absurd nature of our current condition. Who says we have to speed through life at a surreal pace in order to get nowhere? Who says that we always have to turn our 'talents' and 'capabilities' into human capital and trade them at the 'free' market? Who says that we should engage in a constant quest to quantify ourselves and each other, thereby producing endless amounts of fundamentally useless data? And who says that we should not take matters into our own hands, call things by their right name, and shake the powers that be into cute little kittens?

But enough has been said about sense and nonsense, about pawns and queens, and about the process of escaping Wonderland. It is time to follow the Gryphon's suggestion when Alice starts to explain the meaning of what she has so far experienced: 'No, no! Adventures first (…) explanations take such a dreadful time' (AIW: 91). So, let's indeed get on with it.

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The absurd workplace: How absurdity is hypernormalized in contemporary society and organizations

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abstract

This paper examines absurdities in contemporary society and workplaces. Absurdity arises from the absence of rationality, where observed human practices paradoxically veer away from official discourse and institutional rhetoric. Absurdity does not exist in a vacuum but is penetrated by and hypernormalized through internalized societal ideologies. Hypernormalization, or the normalization of absurdity, was originally coined by Russian-born anthropologist Yurchak (2003, 2005) to understand the split between ideological, authoritative discourse and practice in the last decades of the Soviet Union. We extend the understanding of hypernormalization to describe how contemporary absurdities are normalized both in society and organizations. Moreover, we explain how hypernormalization unfolds at collective and individual levels through ideological fantasy and internalization. Fantasmatic investment and internalization enable individuals to manage the absurdities arising from the perpetual gap between authoritative discourse (e.g., companies' commitment to climate action) and actual day-to-day practices (e.g., companies' continued investment in fossil fuels). We finish by presenting three interrelated steps through which resistance, as a mechanism to deal with hypernormalization, emerges: problematization, resistance and imagination. We contribute to the literature by showing how these three ways may offer a way out of hypernormalization in society and workplaces.

Introduction

A psychiatrist who has a 30-minute appointment with a patient, needs another 20-25 minutes to process all paperwork attached to the meeting (Spaans, 2017). There is now so much bureaucracy involved in health care provision, that the time that health care providers spend on their actual jobs is substantially reduced, seriously impeding the quality of care because of the very procedures meant to ensure quality of care. The bureaucracy that needs to be processed to deliver effective healthcare to patients has led to the number one cause of burnout among health care providers (Gunderman and Lynch, 2018), evidenced by the absurdity of healthcare becoming one of the sectors with the highest prevalence of mental ill-health

Meanwhile, in Germany, those from overseas with no legal right to work are forced to work in the abattoirs of the meatpacking industry to earn an income, where they live and work in subpar conditions (Reuters, 2020). Hence, while being one of the wealthiest countries worldwide, Germany fails to become civilized enough to be able to ensure that the basic needs of people (i.e., food production) are fulfilled in a dignified way, without exploiting and abusing vulnerable people (i.e., 'illegal immigrants' who have been used for exploitation). It is therefore absurd to witness the gap between the overall wealth of a country and the way it treats the most vulnerable and deprived people in society.

Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers in universities across many countries have been forced to continue to teach their students face-to-face, while exposing themselves and the students to the risks of getting Covid-19. Ironically, teaching sessions were often forced to take place online because teachers and students had to self-isolate after having been exposed to Covid-19 positive students in the classroom. While the health of staff and students were put at risk when universities wanted to continue face-to-face teaching, absurdity exposed itself as both options were *worse*: face-to-face teaching exposed teachers and students to the risks of contracting Covid-19, while online teaching increased loneliness to such an extent that many students and some reported tutors were struggling with their mental health and personal wellbeing.

These are just some examples of absurdities that people face in contemporary society and workplaces, and are exemplary of the current era, where absurd practices are being normalized, and accepted by society, organizations, and individuals. Absurdities are widespread across society and workplaces, and their ubiquitous nature and scale point to a strong connection to the notion of the normalization of absurdity. In this paper, we define a social practice as absurd when it is perceived to be illogical and inappropriate, *and* when reality is fundamentally dissociated from its publicly and organizationally-officially proclaimed stance. While there is no strictly 'objective' assessment of a social practice to be considered as absurd, the absurdity always resides in and is construed in the 'eye of the beholder'. While we define absurdity and describe how social practices can be recognized as absurd, such perception is always socially constructed. Therefore, perceptions of absurdity can be individual or collectively shared, but at the same time, denied by others and treated as entirely normal or banal. Hence, while perceptions of absurdity are subjective, they can be disavowed and hypernormalized into something that is rather 'normal', taken for granted and even mundane. Therefore, absurdity and hypernormalization represent two sides of the same coin which are continuously interactive and mutative (Bal et al., 2023). In the remainder of this paper, we will speak of absurd practices with the inherent assumption that their absurdity is perceived as such by a group of people.

Absurdity may have profound consequences for the well-being and functioning of individuals and societies. Despite some earlier sparing efforts to address absurdity in society, thus far, the literature has largely refrained from discussing absurdities in contemporary work and organizations, and thus neglecting the possibility to understand how absurd practices emerge, function, are normalized and maintained, and are contested (see for exceptions Loacker and Peters, 2015; McCabe, 2016).

To do so, the current paper explores the concepts of absurdity and hypernormalization (Yurchak, 2003, 2005) to explain how the absurd becomes normalized not only in its original context of society but more specifically

within its underexplored context of contemporary work and workplaces.[12] Hypernormalization was coined by the Russian-born anthropologist Alexei Yurchak to describe the late Soviet era (1950s till the fall of the Iron Curtain). In particular, the complex relationship between official enunciation and 'unofficial' ideological rule in the late Soviet era was understood by Yurchak (2005) through the hypernormalization of language. The split between these two (i.e., between what is publicly proclaimed and its actual manifestation) was maintained to such a degree that official enunciation became absurd and an end in itself (Yurchak, 2005). Hypernormalization, therefore, served an important ideological function, along with serving the maintenance of oligarchical power and authority (Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 2018). The lenses of absurdity and hypernormalization have the potential to advance our understanding of the banalization of absurdities in contemporary work and workplaces, and therefore how absurdities are normalized through the creation of a fantasy of normality (Žižek, 1989). However, so far, there has been very little research on absurdity and hypernormalization in workplaces.

This paper offers several contributions. First, absurdity has been rather absent from work, workplace and organizational literature (see e.g., Loacker and Peters, 2015; McCabe, 2016; Starkey et al., 2019 for exceptions). This paper enhances understanding of the dynamics underpinning absurdity at work. It explains how workplace practices which are perceived to be absurd become normalized, legitimized and a seemingly essential feature of social functioning. Second, using the concept of hypernormalization, the processes through which the absurd emerges, functions and is maintained and contested can be explored. Hypernormalization can be understood to fulfil two main functions: it serves those in power by the maintenance and acceleration of an uncontested status quo through pretense that an organizational practice has become socially legitimized as normal and

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1 Author names appear in alphabetical order.

2 This paper was written at the same time the authors wrote a book on the absurd workplace and its hypernormalization (Bal et al., 2023). The authors were careful in avoiding textual overlap between the paper and the book. While the book and the paper share the same intellectual basis, the book can be seen as an extension of the ideas presented in this paper and includes a variety of case studies on absurd workplaces.

unchallenged rather than as absurd. Moreover, hypernormalization performs an ideological-fantasmatic function through which society can be shaped in specific ways that serve goals of dominance and control (Seeck et al., 2020; Žižek, 1989). A better understanding of how and why people accept the absurd as normal also elucidates the ways through which the absurd can be de-normalized and therefore contested. In this paper, we use the theory of Žižek around ideology-as-fantasy-construction (1989, 2001; Freeden, 2003; Seeck et al., 2020) to understand the functioning and dynamics of absurdity and hypernormalization, thereby elucidating the collective and individual psychological mechanisms that underpin the very processes that serve to maintain the absurd. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of hypernormalization may shed light on possible ways out of hypernormalization, thereby not merely offering a theoretical contribution, but also offering more practical ways for individuals and collectives to overcome the detrimental effects of the normalization of the absurd in their daily and organizational lives. In particular, we address three interrelated aspects through which hypernormalization may be overcome: problematization, resistance, and imagination (Bal, 2017; Pfaller, 2012).

Absurdity in work and organizations

The Oxford Dictionary (2019) defines ‘absurd’ as ‘wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate’. The term originally stems from the Latin ‘absurdus’, or ‘out of tune’. A social practice, such as bureaucracy, is perceived to be absurd when it conflicts with reason and logic, *and* when it is inappropriate (Arias-Bolzmann et al., 2000). Absurd practices transcend formal logic or reason (Loacker and Peters, 2015) *and* tend to be harmful, as they undermine the dignity of people (Bal et al., 2023). Absurdity may also assume a co-existence of multiple logics which jointly become paradoxical, and where the result is no longer rational but where logic itself falls apart. For instance, in bureaucracy, although organizational rules and procedures are designed and enacted to provide consistency and fairness, such official enactments may conflict with the professional autonomy of employees. This state of affairs results in absurdity when employees spend their majority of time on filling forms such that they are unable to effectively conduct their core tasks, and consequently burn out due to high work pressure.

A second dimension of absurdity pertains to the discrepancy between pretense and reality (Mintoff, 2008; Nagel, 1971). Absurdity arises out of the discrepancy between officially propagated public discourse (De Cleen et al., 2021) and everyday practice experienced by people. It is important to clarify our use of these terms. *Discourse* refers to formulations of the symbolic network in which social bonds can be expressed (Žižek, 1989), and as such represent the totality of public speech, cultural symbols and enunciation present and observable in society and workplaces. *Reality*, in contrast, refers to the individuals' experiences of the symbols and the process of their signification: reality is therefore inherently linked with discourse, but may either be perceived as aligned with discourse (i.e., when people experience social practices to be signified by public, official discourse), or as fundamentally misaligned, which gives rise to a social practice to be perceived as absurd in the inability of discourse to describe people's actual, everyday lived experiences. Therefore, in the remainder of this paper, when we refer to absurd social practices, this absurdity is signified through perceptions of individual(-s) of such practices as being absurd.

The discrepancy between discourse and perceived reality does not have to be perceived as irrational and illogical, and thereby opens the space for deliberate management of absurdity by those in power (Žižek, 1989, 2001). In contemporary workplaces, people may perceive a variety of forms of absurdity. For instance, the inaction of organizations and some nations towards climate change may be perceived as absurd, as it manifests through an ever-growing gap between public, authoritative, discourse (i.e., the need to tackle climate change), and perceived practices (the continued overinvestment in fossil fuels; Ambrose and Jolly, 2020). Consequently, public discourse becomes more and more impotent even as radical calls for opposing the inaction increase.

There is a wide literature on paradoxes and contradictions (e.g., Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017), which is informative for our understanding of absurdity. For instance, Lewis (2000) referred to the absurd nature of paradoxes. Paradox, contradiction, and absurdity share similarities, yet are different from each other. While paradox and contradiction denote an inconsistency or tension between elements of social practices, not all paradoxes or contradictions are absurd. For instance, Lewis (2011) talks about the 'learning

paradox' as a struggle between the comfort of the past and the uncertainty of the future whilst Smith and Lewis (2011) highlight contradictory tensions between organizing, learning, performing and belonging in contemporary, competitive organizations. While such paradoxes may indicate tensions and contradictions, they do not have to be 'out of tune' or inappropriate. Absurdity transcends such forms of inappropriateness and indicates a deeper, and fundamental discrepancy of how social practice becomes enacted and is normalized. While paradox and contradiction remain in the space of competing logics, absurdity denotes the dissolution of logic altogether into a profound form of inappropriateness (Bal et al., 2023). For instance, the global inability to effectively address climate change is no longer a case of competing logics (i.e., retaining business as usual vs. reducing carbon emissions), but an example of the dissolution of the logic of climate inertia in light of the destruction of the planet and the subsistence livelihoods of the most deprived in certain parts of the world. Absurdity, therefore, always includes a tragic and depriving potential in the impotence of really existing practices to reflect enunciation or public, official discourse. Paradoxes, however, neither have to be tragic, nor have to be about the gap between pretense and reality.

When the absurd arises out of this gap (cf. Loacker and Peters, 2015; Nagel, 1971), it is authoritative discourse itself that creates the emergence of absurdity. As authoritative discourse aims for absolutism and all-encompassing visions on perceived reality, by definition, it will fail to capture everything within the workplace. Hence, a gap between discourse and reality is inherent to authoritative discourse, and thus the emergence of absurdity. Over time, this gap may only grow wider (see Fisher, 2009; Marin and Jameson, 1976; Žižek, 1994), and absurdity arises because of this perpetual distinction. It is therefore apt to ask why such gaps are perceived as *absurd*. One explanation may be focused on the inherent nature of the absurd as illogical. While modern neoliberal-capitalist society is built on principles of Enlightenment, reason, and the *homo economicus* (Bal and Dóci, 2018; McCabe, 2016), the existing gaps between reason and experienced reality violate this very principle. In the absence of rationality, absurdity exposes the fundamental contradictions in the current system.

While we will later explain absurdity normalization building based on the analysis of the late Soviet Union era (Yurchak, 2005), we first emphasize the

contemporary nature of absurdities in Western, neoliberal society (e.g., the rise of populist leaders and the planetary destruction due to the neoliberal capitalist economic system; Cederström and Fleming, 2012). However, in line with Albert Camus, we contend that absurdity is inherent to human life, and therefore can be observed across time and space. There are also other literatures that have touched upon absurdities, such as the literature on paradox (Lewis, 2000; Vince et al., 2018), Graeber's work on 'bullshit' jobs (2018), Cederström and Fleming's work around 'strange capitalism' (2012), all of which elucidate the absurd nature of contemporary work and workplaces. Yet, while informative they do not directly engage with the meaning and manifestation of absurdity, and how absurdity is normalized in contemporary work and workplaces.

Manifestation of absurdity

While absurdity has been mainly discussed in philosophy and literature, it is unclear how absurdity manifests, both individually and collectively. On the one hand, absurdity can express itself individually, such as Nagel's (1971) example of an individual who is knighted and whose pants fall. Graeber's (2018) analysis of 'bullshit' jobs also reveals the absurdities that individuals experience because of the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of their work. Absurdity manifests itself here within an individual, but it can be also experienced collectively. For instance, officialdom/bureaucracy is not absurd because of individual experience, but because of a collective expression, where the functioning of entire organizations or sectors is stifled. Therefore, absurdity can be experienced both individually and collectively. An individual may experience a social practice as absurd, but this does not necessarily have to be shared and can be contested by others. When absurdity remains limited to individual experience, it does not need to be normalized as it is *only* a collective experience of absurdity that spurs a process of hypernormalization. In other words, when absurdity becomes systemic, a pressure towards normalization and banalization may unfold.

Theoretical background of hypernormalization

Starkey and colleagues (2019) have argued that absurdity calls for a process of finding meaning in meaninglessness. Finding such meaning in absurdity also

involves a rupture from the notion of the rational human being and rational structures and institutions. In contrast, due to the tragic potential of absurdity, it always risks disrupting individual's ontological security, or the human necessity of perceiving oneself as a whole and undivided member of society (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological security offers stability, identity, and self-esteem, and absurdity has the potential to precisely undermine those feelings. It is therefore that absurdity provokes a process of normalization to retain ontological security, whereby absurdity is taken for granted, disavowed, and perceived as a norm that is neutral. This process is described by Yurchak (2005) as hypernormalization.

Yurchak (2003; 2005) investigated the paradoxes in Soviet society that contributed to the sudden collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s (ibid), and in particular, the paradox of eternity and stagnation which was central to maintaining the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Soviet Union seemed to exhibit eternal existence, while on the other hand, quality of life and the system itself were stagnating. The death of Stalin in 1953 had created a discursive vacuum, ceasing the existence of the supreme Master who could authorize public discourse. In response, the ruling elite decided to stick to the discourse allowed during the Stalin era as a way of not only managing the continuity of the state but also the perpetuation of people's purported ontological security. Consequently, ideological representations (such as media expressions, rituals and formal structures) were perfectly replicated over time (Yurchack, 2003). The effect of this ideological reproduction of texts and cultural symbols was that their literal meaning became increasingly dissociated from their 'real' constative meaning. This reproduction of form became the way Soviet society and practices were maintained, and as such ideological enunciation represented 'objective truths' (Yurchack, 2005: 10). However, these ideological texts and symbols became an end in themselves and increasingly 'frozen' (ibid: 26).

The rising discrepancy between authoritative discourse and really existing practices led to a hypernormalization of language: texts and symbols became absurd in their inability to describe perceived reality but were yet treated as entirely 'normal' in society (see Žižek, 1994). Moreover, as ideological enunciation was incapable of describing experienced social reality, it became increasingly separated from ideological rule (Yurchak, 2005). In other words,

the post-Stalin Soviet regime was constantly dealing with the crisis of legitimacy, as ideological representations (e.g., liberation of the individual, critical thinking) were dissociated from everyday experience. Yet, this hypernormalization of language and cultural symbols provided uniformity, predictability and banality, hence engendering ontological security for state and citizens (Croft, 2012; Mitzen, 2006). This notion of ontological security explains a fundamental human need 'to experience oneself as a whole [...] to realize a sense of agency' (Mitzen, 2006: 342), and thereby provides stability, identity and a sense of oneself, which was imperative in the uncertain times of the Soviet system. Yet, this clinging on to ontological security also created a new vacuum of meaning, in which language could never be understood properly, and always entailed a multitude of possible constative meanings, exploited by the Soviet Communist Party for the perpetuation of its power and hegemony.

As any deviation from the existing permitted discourse could potentially form a threat to the system, it became frozen and fixed to what Stalin had approved of during his reign. However, while reality develops, this frozen discourse became less and less able to capture, regulate and dominate the reality of what was happening in society. This spurred absurd effects, whereby official discourse became more and more detached from perceived reality, and whereby individuals had to find pragmatic ways to deal with this gap (i.e., understand that official discourse was not to be taken literally, and that underneath it, unwritten rules dictated how social practice was regulated). Yet, this frozen discourse provided the ruling elites almost 40 years (of a perception) of control over their gigantic Soviet empire ('until it was no more'; Yurchak, 2005). To survive in post-Stalin Soviet Union, an individual needed a level of pragmatism to be able to understand the performative nature of ideological messages and the space which was open for a variation of constative and contestable meanings of ideology. Yurchak's research (2003, 2005) shows that a binary split between public ideological display and private beliefs was too simplistic. In reality, they were continuously intertwined, and people were both engaged in the performative and constative dimension of ideology. This meant that people did not privately disengage from Communist ideals, while being involved in the performative dimension of the reproduction of form. In contrast, because ideological enunciation became

increasingly empty (Žižek, 1989), it also opened space for new meanings. Hence, individuals were actively looking for creative reinterpretation of Communist ideals (such as liberation, social welfare and collectivity of belonging) into new meanings that were 'not limited to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse' (Yurchak, 2005: 115). This often involved an explicit un-anchoring of the constative dimension of authoritative and hegemonic discourse, whilst filling this with new bottom-up generated meanings (see Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020). Thereby, people often maintained their beliefs, and they found pragmatic ways of translating and applying ideology to their everyday contexts (Yurchak, 2003).

Hypernormalization of absurdity in contemporary workplaces

It has been argued that hypernormalization was not just a feature of the Soviet Union but is also manifest in contemporary society (Bal, 2017; Nicholls, 2017). Our analysis aims not to generalize or compare across different geo-political ideologies, but to use Yurchak's key insights into hypernormalization in the Soviet Union to understand contemporary social practices and how their manifestations in work and workplaces that can be perceived as absurd. Hypernormalization concerns the normalization of the absurd, and thus the process by which the absurd is taken for granted, perpetuated, and projected upon people as the norm (May and Finch, 2009). It is a process that may be orchestrated and deliberately managed, but also unfolds spontaneously. The absurd becomes hypernormal when illogical, inappropriate, and irrational societal or organizational practices are treated as entirely normal to the extent that they become banal. Absurdity is therefore continuously concealed, as its normalization renders a practice as something that is merely part of the fabric of society. This hypernormal is not only staged by powerful actors striving for dominance and control but is also internalized by individuals. Therefore, hypernormalization is functional when social practice is internalized to such an extent that people no longer recognize a practice as being absurd, but as something that is inherently part of society or workplaces. Practices are therefore not perceived to be absurd, and once recognition of a practice as absurd has been generated, it constitutes a first step out of hypernormalization. Through such recognition, debate can take place around the practice itself, its effects, and potential alternatives.

Hypernormalization fulfils multiple functions, such as predictability and stability, even when its detrimental effects become increasingly clear to those exposed to it (Žižek, 2018). While absurdity reveals the complexity of human existence, hypernormalization offers stability in the face of the chaos of absurdity. Hypernormalization also maintains the myth of the rational organization and of the individual who can be managed effectively for organizational benefit (Bal and Dóci, 2018; McCabe, 2016). However, despite a process of hypernormalization, it may not be the case that people are collectively unaware of absurdities surrounding them. For instance, a growing group of people now problematize work-related racism and white supremacy, exposing their inherent absurdity (Arciniega, 2021; Shor, 2020). The question, therefore, is why hypernormalization is effective, even when the inherent absurdity is exposed. The work of Slavoj Žižek (1989, 1994, 2001) provides insights into the effectiveness of hypernormalization through ideology.

The complexities and dynamics underpinning normalization of the absurd do not only play an essential part in the translation of ideology into practice, but also have detrimental effects for individuals and society at large. Normalization of absurdity obscures the harm that actually results from absurd practice or discourse and discourages individuals and organizations to change their practices to ensure greater dignity of people and the planet (Bal, 2017). For instance, it has been well-documented how in the face of the absurdity of planetary destruction, necessary climate action is not being taken and fossil-fuel companies continue to generate enormous profits (Blühdorn, 2017). In other words, while absurdity produces systemic suffering and marginalization of vulnerable people and the planet, hypernormalization of fossil fuel burning delegitimizes claims of the systemic causes of suffering. It is therefore needed to understand how hypernormalization functions, and how it can be contested.

Dynamics of hypernormalization

Hypernormalization, or the process of how absurdity becomes normalized, emerges either spontaneously in response to societal pressures, or is orchestrated by powerful groups in search of societal dominance (Yurchak, 2003, 2005). Mostly, however, it is the combination of factors that explains the emergence of hypernormalization, whereby absurdity results from

illogical practices or dissolvement of logic altogether. Such absurdity may turn out to be functional and inherent to society. The motivation behind initiating hypernormalization may be a need for predictability and ontological security, even though it may unfold spontaneously (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002; Mitzen, 2006).

In contemporary workplaces, 'official discourse' is much less directly regulated as was the case in the Soviet Union, yet, at the same time performs an important function. Discourse has an important symbolic and performative role, and may function as a fantasy for people to disavow perceived existing practices (Žižek, 1989, 1994, 2001). Hence, people may cling on to such official discourse, or imaginary fantasies, to retain their beliefs in the current system, and to move away from a realization that reality on the ground may be more and more opposed to ideological discourse (see Fisher, 2009; Vince et al., 2018). If the latter would prevail, it would be associated with a dissonance, or a perception that action is needed to close this gap between the impotence of discourse to describe reality, through either changing discourse, or to engage in collective action towards societal ideals (e.g., in Western society), to actually provide people with the chance to experience freedom and personal growth (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

In contrast, Žižek (2018: 205) argues that this dissonance between official discourse and practice has positive aspects. Žižek argues that the gap makes ideology 'livable', and therefore constitutes an actual conditioning for its functioning. Without this gap, and thus in the hypothetical existence of the perfect overlap between discourse and reality, people would not be able to attribute personal failing to the system itself, but only to themselves. The cure then would be moral improvement of the individual (Žižek, 2018). Hence, the functional aspect of absurdity in the sense of a widening gap between enunciation and practice includes a way out of the necessity to exclusively blame the individual for failure, and instead opens the way for systemic critique and a reinterpretation of hypernormalization. However, at the same time, when this gap between pretense and practice is widening, it may lead to increasing absurdity when enunciation becomes more and more impotent in the face of an increase in hypernormalized absurdity for general societal ontological security, and consequently, may have detrimental effects for people and the planet. For instance, the ever-widening gap between

proclaimed climate commitment and climate inertia in organizations, leads to an ever-escalating process of environmental destruction, which is not effectively contested due to the increasing emphasis of hegemonic actors in society (e.g., MNC's, politicians) on official discourse for the need for 'cheaper', 'subsidized' and 'affordable' energy, and the pretense that there is 'genuine' climate action being taken. The question is then, how individuals cope with hypernormalization. We discuss three interrelated processes: ideological fantasmatic investment, internalization and disavowal.

These explain how individuals are gripped by absurdities and deny absurdity to exist whilst faced with counterevidence of its harmful nature. For instance, while ever-rising income inequalities become absurd over time, where a smaller number of people (e.g., CEOs) earn and control global wealth while a rising number of people live in poverty (World Economic Forum, 2019), it is insufficient to merely raise awareness about such income inequalities. As absurdity does not concern itself with truth claims per se, rational arguments about the (un-)truthfulness of absurdity do not effectively address the issue (Bal, 2017). This is because of ideological fantasy about hypernormalization and the possibility for ontological security within absurdity (Mitzen, 2006). While absurdity poses a threat to stability, it is actually the explicit acknowledgement and conscious separation from absurdity that causes ontological *in*security (Croft, 2012), as it entails a conscious (and risky) breach from the established and enunciated order. Hence, while absurdity perceptions arise from the gap between reason and the illogical, between proclamation and reality, it is this gap which provides the ontological foundation for ideological fantasy and maintenance of hypernormalization (Žižek, 2018).

In this perspective, hypernormalization is maintained ideologically, and particularly the development of a fantasy of normality in absurdity. We use ideology in the conceptualization of philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a 'fantasy construction which serves as a support for reality itself' (Žižek, 1989: 45). Hence, fantasy which underpins ideology is not disconnected from reality, but offers reality itself. Therefore, ideological enunciation, such as Communist ideals within Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2005), or meritocratic ideals in liberal capitalism (Su, 2015), have an important fantasmatic logic (Glynos, 2008) in constituting and maintaining beliefs among individuals that what is

proclaimed can not only be achieved, but also structures reality itself. For instance, a fantasy of meritocracy may not bear a strong relationship with existing practices in organizations (Littler, 2013; Van Dijk et al., 2020), but may form an ideological reference that structures organizations as if it does exist.

Absurdity also functions as ideological fantasy, as its underlying social practice is not judged based on rationality or the possibility of actual manifestation, but on the fantasmatic appeal it provides. For instance, the absurdity of income inequalities is not effectively contested as meritocracy still functions as an ideological reference and as a fantasy that structures reality (within neoliberal states). It thereby allows people to experience absurdity as normal and attribute success of the rich to hard work, while blaming the poor for their failure to be enterprising and 'successful'. Individuals deny the existence of and maintain their beliefs in absurdity through fantasizing how social reality is formed through the fantasy itself. Thereby, the fantasy becomes performative, and people act as if the absurdity is entirely normal *and* banal, complying with hypernormalization. Such fantasies may also include a desire for a *retrotopia* (Bauman, 2017), a nostalgic longing for an imagined past that was never there, which provides even stronger fantasmatic investment into absurdity. This idealized past is presented as the 'natural order' that needs to be resurrected (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2018), but which nonetheless merely presents another escape *into* absurdity and offers no real solution. For instance, in the case of persisting gender inequality, those fighting for greater gender equality are facing a conservative backlash, including a fantasmatic investment into the natural order of gender hierarchies and the primacy of men over women. The absurdity of gender inequality in the workplace is thereby effectively hypernormalized and banalized.

As a result, absurdity itself is denied, and rationalized through the adaptation of perceptions of what valid norms are (Haack and Siewecke, 2018). Yet, the fantasmatic logic does not fully explain the dynamics underpinning individual responses to hypernormalization. Therefore, internalization and disavowal (Žižek, 1989, 2001) explain how individuals in modern society are gripped by hypernormalization, and why individuals continue to fantasize about and invest in hypernormalization. If a critical mass would recognize the absurdity

of their predicament, why do they not resist, such that this gap between proclaimed ideals (e.g., authoritative discourse) and reality is decreased? While Žižek (1989, 2018) points to the very problematic nature of the official ideology itself and the impossibility of transforming empty, ideological signifiers into practices (e.g., brotherhood, equality and meritocracy), people also maintain their individual psychological belief and investment in absurdity. In other words, akin to the Soviet Union, there is no binary split between ideology and existing practices, as individuals are engaged both in the performative and constative dimension of modern ideology, thereby continuing to internalize and normalize absurdity.

In line with Žižek (1989: 12), this attitude can be explained on the basis of cynical disavowal: 'I know very well that social practices are absurd, but I will still treat them as entirely normal'. This plays out largely unconsciously as a fantasy, and influences behavior. Yet, people may be unaware or perhaps acknowledge absurdity only when they are explicitly confronted, and even then, may deny a practice to be absurd. In other words, absurdity is currently upfront, and no longer merely hidden from the public eye and thereby fully integrated into public discourse (e.g., rising inequality is now acknowledged by the very institutions responsible for its creation - see World Economic Forum, 2019). While it may become harder to deny that absurdity exists, people have also become cynical about it, and disavow absurdity to be part of the fabric of institutions.

In hypernormalization, perceptions of lack of alternative are central, and this further sustains feelings of powerlessness or even hopelessness. When people feel powerless and may not be hopeful to make any real changes, they are more likely to legitimize the system and be cynical and inert (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Van der Toorn et al., 2015). When people feel unable to influence their own situation, they will be more likely to bridge the gap between enunciation and reality through cynicism. At the same time, disavowal is generated through the internalization of ideology into people's core fantasies about themselves and their work (Bal and Dóci, 2018). Hence, ideological enunciation becomes internalized as fantasies that actually support reality (Fisher, 2009). Such beliefs are not about universal truths, but about personal truths. In other words, people actively search for support for their fantasies in themselves and others in their vicinity (either in real life or online), so that

their fantasies can remain intact, and the absurdity is denied as either non-existent or irrelevant. Internalization of ideological fantasies (Glynos, 2008) renders ideological enunciation as truth-statements (e.g., that everyone has a fair chance to success and social mobility), which closes the gap with reality, thereby blaming individuals for their failure to be on the receiving end of the unequal distribution of resources and success in society (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

Through the internalization of absurdity into one's core beliefs about the structure of society, people fantasize that there is *no* gap between enunciation and reality, and therefore they feel as if they do not have to engage in performative rituals but are merely engaged in the constative dimension of authoritative discourse. For instance, the absurdity of proclaimed commitment of large fossil-fuel companies to sustainability and climate action vis-à-vis the real environmental destruction by these companies and their role in climate disaster is disavowed (Brown, 2016). Such a situation perpetuates and sustains the fantasy of genuine commitment to the climate. In this fantasy, absurdity is still denied, and people fantasize about how they engage in the constative dimensions of climate action when they recycle their waste, even though recycling does not significantly address any of the issues around climate change (Blühdorn, 2017; Brown, 2016). This also indicates that individuals are pragmatic translators of authoritative discourse; while practice may not be meaningfully related to discourse, people continue to act as if it does, and may thereby maintain their beliefs in the system in the pretense of obtaining ontological security.

In sum, hypernormalization unfolds in similar ways as described in Yurchak's (2003, 2005) analysis of the late Soviet Union. While contemporary authoritative discourse is controlled to a lesser extent by governments in Western society than in Soviet Union, it has become increasingly frozen in describing neoliberal-capitalist fantasies about society and workplaces (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Glynos, 2008). The absurdities arising from the discrepancies between discourse and really existing practices have been normalized and maintained at collective and individual level through ideological fantasy and internalization. While hypernormalization offers stability and predictability, the continuing need for individuals to pragmatically deal with the effects of the gap between the performative and constative dimension of authoritative discourse, has also spurred a crisis of legitimacy (**cf.** Yurchak, 2005). For

instance, more and more people perceive climate inertia, societal inequalities, and racism as contemporary absurdities, and, in response, a rising number of protests have emerged.

A way out of hypernormalization?

Owing to its inherent ideological dimension (Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 2018), there is no mere stepping out of hypernormalization (Freeden, 2003). It is likely that awareness of absurdity creates ontological insecurity or a loss of sense of self (Kinvall, 2004). Ideology provides a structure and maintenance of fantasy, and thereby the comfort of stability and predictability (Jost et al., 2017). Awareness of hypernormalization is uncomfortable, as it involves a dramatic rupture with one's existing convictions and beliefs about the world (i.e., the recognition of a practice as absurd). Therefore, there is no straightforward way out of hypernormalization, not merely because it concerns a social phenomenon that has grave personal-psychological dimensions, but because it always involves a radical breach from one's ontological security. We present three interrelated ways through which hypernormalization can be challenged in society: problematization, resistance, and imagination.

Problematization

A first necessary but insufficient step towards effectively challenging hypernormalization is problematization. A key to understanding the potential ways out of hypernormalization involves estrangement, or the recognition of the strangeness of a certain practice (Pfaller, 2012). Through such recognition, previously held assertions about the self-evident nature of certain practices in society and workplace are transformed from evidence into a question. This can be done through exposing absurdity, in its illogical and inappropriate nature, and in its separation of reality from ideological inscription causing humans to suffer. Problematization of absurdity therefore helps people to recognize its strangeness. The very act of doing this constitutes the first step towards liberation from hypernormalization. One crucial difference between the Soviet Union and contemporary Western society concerns freedom of speech, as problematization of the absurd can be conducted more openly, and thereby exposed more widely to people.

Estrangement of absurdity can also be achieved through acceptance of absurdity itself. While absurdity does not concern itself with truth-statements (Foroughi et al., 2019), it is therefore insufficient to expose the untruthful nature of absurdity. However, absurdity can be exposed through taking it one step further, by, for instance a 'naïve', literal reading of authoritative discourse (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). This classical approach was used often in the Soviet Union by authors like Voinovich (through his protagonist Ivan Chonkin). Through a literal reading of authoritative discourse and the staging of naïve protagonists who internalize this discourse, the system is exposed in its absurd manifestation. Such literatures have also been published outside of the Soviet era, such as by Hašek about WWI (through the protagonist Soldier Švejk), indicating a more pervasive nature of absurdity and hypernormalization preceding the Soviet Union. Another form of such problematization is offered by Agamben (2007), through his notion of *profanation*. Profanation, or the de-sacralization of the sacred through ridiculing or play, can expose inherent absurdities, and unmask and problematize absurd features of social practices (see also Śliwa et al. 2012's analysis of the profanation of leadership). Profanation can therefore play an important role in problematizing, as through de-sacralizing, absurdities may be revealed and contested, while power is neutralized (ibid). In finding new uses through profanation, one could even imagine new ways to live with absurdity, and thus finding even more extensive impacts of profanation. Therefore, profanation's impact may extend beyond problematizing, towards an understanding of how absurd practices may be resisted.

Yet, problematization is insufficient to change hypernormalized practices in organizations and society. For instance, it is even the privileged elites from the World Economic Forum (2019), who are now problematizing income inequalities. This is partly because absurdity risks being hijacked by those who have invested in retaining hypernormalization as it benefits those in power. While awareness of absurdity can be remediated through cynical disavowal and ideological internalization, it is therefore needed that problematization is linked to resistance.

Resistance

A second necessary, yet insufficient, strategy, concerns the role of resistance against absurdity. While hypernormalization should be problematized through recognition of its strangeness (e.g., through exposing its detrimental effects on people and the planet), people's active resistance against such practices is also needed. Recent academic literature has revalued the role of resistance in bringing about social change (Contu, 2018; Derber, 2017; Weinberg and Banks, 2019). Resistance is necessary as problematization, in itself, is unlikely to change social and organizational reality; it is needed to actively resist against hegemonic ideology which facilitates absurdity to manifest and perpetuate. Contu (2018) speaks in this context of 'parrhesiastic' activism, or the notion of speaking truth to power. Resistance can manifest both individually and collectively, and hidden and public (Mumby et al., 2017), and aims to address the use of power to subordination. Within Soviet hypernormalization, resistance appeared through creative interpretation of the constative dimension of authoritative discourse (such as a revaluing of collectivity in one's community), whilst engaging in the performative rituals of the Communist system. Similarly, performativity is often enforced in Western society, whereby individuals must comply, such as in the case with bureaucracy in organizations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Hence, it is either within such constraints that resistance can be generated, or through more collective forms, where groups in society protest the destructive nature of hypernormalization.

Another form of resistance against absurdity is through entire withdrawal, as Sloterdijk's *kynic* (1987) shows. The kynic resists absurdity through disengaging with discourse entirely and defecates on authoritative discourse. It is a withdrawal *from* discourse, and by disengaging entirely, the kynic shows the impotence of discourse, and perhaps the inability to expose absurdity through rationality itself - because absurdity does not follow logic or rationality itself. Therefore, unmasking absurdity can best be achieved outside the domain of rationality itself. The kynic is therefore a prime example of absurdity resistance through taking it to the extreme, not just achieving estrangement (Pfaller, 2012), but withdrawal from absurdity altogether (see also Śliwa et al., 2012).

Yet again, resistance is insufficient to address and change hypernormalized practices. For instance, the Gilet Jaunes (Yellow Vest) Movement in France

originated in 2018 as a protest against rising fuel prices (which caused many liberal environmentalists not to sympathize with the movement), and led to resistance across Europe (Masquelier, 2021). However, while this resistance movement initially was directed at rising fuel prices, a lack of problematization underpinned the movement. These protests concerned a resistance against the hegemonic order, but without a clear problematization of the hypernormalization that caused the unrest and frustration. Absurdity exposed itself here, as the French neoliberal government imposed so-called environment taxes which would affect the most vulnerable people. This led people to protest (a rather incremental form of) climate action. Absurdity emerged here in the impossible choice for people between climate action and economic survival, thereby pretending that the two were unrelated to each other. At the same time, the French government responded with military intervention, delegitimizing a debate on the link between environmentalism and emancipatory economics (for the marginalized poor). Nonetheless, the lack of success of the movement can be partly attributed to the lack of problem identification, as well as a lack of alternatives that are necessary to successfully counter hypernormalization.

Imagination

Lack of an alternative is a strong driver behind hypernormalization dynamics. It also explains the persistent nature of hypernormalization; whereas people in the former Soviet Union dreamed of Western life (Yurchak, 2005), contemporary society lacks such a comparative perspective, contributing to inertia and compliance (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). In addition to problematization and resistance, imagination is therefore needed to bring about change. Kilroy (2019) advocated a parallax view, which entails the formulation of *radical* alternatives. This means to fundamentally break away from absurdity, and not by merely trying to expose the falsehood of absurdity. Exposing absurdity as 'post-truth' (Foroughi et al., 2019) would implicitly assume that there is a 'rational' opposite of absurdity which is intrinsically appealing (e.g., a fantasy of a return to purposeful, efficient bureaucracy in organizations). It is therefore needed to formulate alternative visions of reality that may provide a way out, or a way for people to construct a more 'livable' position (Žižek, 2018) that protects the dignity of people and the planet (Bal, 2017). This includes the formulation and provision of new forms

of ontological security (Kinvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006). As problematization and resistance without imagination of alternatives only create or enhance ontological *in*security, it is imperative that a more fruitful way out of hypernormalization is to create new visions for identity-formulation and collective solidarity, and thus new forms of ontological security for people in workplaces.

In this context, Žižek (1989, 2001), argues for a traversing of the fantasy (underpinning hypernormalization). Žižek argues that traversing the fantasy is not about a politics that aims to realize an impossible dream, but one that confronts social antagonisms, that becomes aware of one's fantasy structuring the ego, through which an individual can gain a healthy sense of oneself. It is about recognizing the horror, gaps and incompleteness in all things and between oneself and the social world. However, this could only be the starting point of living with absurdity as an individual coping strategy, while more collective forms of resistance, imagination and social action are to be theorized following the traversing of fantasy. In other words, our identified need for imagination should build on this notion of traversing the fantasy, while articulating new ways of organizing and engaging in social and organizational practice.

Hence, imagination involves the creation of 'new fantasies', as absurdity is ultimately about a fantasy about social order. For instance, bureaucracy entails a fantasy of the smoothly functioning and efficient organization, which may become absurd when its destructive potential is normalized, whereby individuals suffer because of bureaucratic procedures. In response, imagination involves the dreaming of responsible alternatives, and counter-narratives of how authoritative discourse in society could obtain new constative meanings, providing new forms of ontological security to individuals and collectives.

One more mundane way through which ontological security may be protected is through engagement into the performative dimension of an ideology of absurdity (e.g., through participation in bureaucracy), while at the same time, finding creative ways of reinterpreting hegemonic discourse into more meaningful action. Such dual engagement is alike practices of individuals in the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2003, 2005), and may have greater importance

than initially recognized. Key to such endeavors is the combination of problematization, resistance and imagination, as they may jointly form the antidote to reproduction of form and a way to which creative reinterpretations of constative dimensions become materialized. Through these strategies, individuals may experience disalienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020), or a regained sense of connectedness with oneself, others and the world.

Experimentation may play a central role, whereby engagement in the performative dimension is conducted at the minimum level of necessity and in a way that authoritative discourse becomes meaningless. For instance, in an organizational bureaucracy where employees continuously must fill in forms, these forms can be provided with the same reproduced, meaningless content that act as empty signifiers that nonetheless fulfill the bureaucratic desire for content. At the same time, individuals may experiment with new ways of organizing and collaborating *beyond* bureaucracy, through informal organizations within the formal structures (see e.g., Parker et al., 2014). Such experimentation may provide meaning locally but may also give rise to more collective forms of solidarity, meaning-making and collective action to spur change in society and workplaces.

Discussion

This paper conceptualized absurdity and hypernormalization in the context of work and society. Based on an understanding of contemporary workplaces as 'absurd', this paper analyzed how such absurdities are normalized and maintained. The analysis commenced with a clarification of the concept of absurdity. There is a lack of understanding of absurdity in the workplace, and this paper builds on previous work (e.g., Loacker and Peters, 2015; Starkey et al., 2019) to provide better understandings of how absurdity emerges and how it is maintained through hypernormalization. Hypernormalization was also used to refer to the split between authoritative discourse and really existing practices in the last decades of the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2003, 2005). Particularly, the concept of reproduction of form after Stalin's death ensured that discourse was reproduced repeatedly, such that it gradually lost its meaning and relationship to reality, contributing to this absurd relationship between ideology and practice.

This paper explained how the normalization of absurdity is present throughout socio-organizational and geo-political contexts, as the ideological functioning is similar, even though it applies to capitalist countries (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fisher, 2009). Two elements are central to the translation of hypernormalization in the contemporary context. Firstly, the split between official discourse and really existing practices is not just the result of ideology, but also an important element of the functioning of ideology over time (Žižek, 2018). This can be observed in how practices become more absurd, as the split between what is maintained in public discourse (e.g., commitment to combat climate change) and actual manifestation (e.g., the continued overinvestment in the economy in contrast with the protection of the environment; Blühdorn, 2017) is only growing. However, this split enables the status quo, and the normalization of the gap ensures that ideology lacks effective contestation (Žižek, 1994). Secondly, the role of reproduction of form in contemporary society underpins hypernormalization, whereby discourse is reproduced to such an extent that such phrases have become dissociated from reality and the possibility of describing the predicament of individuals. It thereby becomes meaningless, and acting as empty signifiers; it produces an ambiguous meaning that may actually be counterproductive in terms of its proclaimed goal (Kilroy, 2019).

However, such a split does not sufficiently describe hypernormalization, as it misses the inappropriate and illogical elements of absurdity. Absurdity leads to suffering when it is 'inappropriate', or when hypernormalization allows for a resurfacing of racism, misogyny, and dignity violations (Bal, 2017). The study of absurdity and hypernormalization is therefore needed - as these present themselves as essential elements of contemporary ideology and societal and organizational functioning - in order to expose their potential destructive nature for people, animals and the planet.

Theoretical implications

We have conceptually identified absurdity and hypernormalization in this paper. Yet, there has been no research focusing on the absurdities in contemporary workplaces, despite some scholarly investigations on a variety of concepts and juxtapositions which can be understood as absurd (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; McCabe, 2016). It is relevant that the roles of

ideology and internalization are explored in more detail, as they underpin the maintenance of hypernormalization over time. In ideological terms, there are both spontaneous elements of emergence and ideological investment into hypernormalization, as well as of deliberate management of hypernormalization processes. For instance, the absurdity of increasing bureaucratization in organizational life, unfolds to a large extent through spontaneous development, largely contributed to by deliberate management (in-)action although its rise is not entirely explainable (Clegg et al., 2016). It is therefore needed to untangle both processes of ideological investment into the strengthening of hypernormalization. One such process may involve the internalization of absurdity into one's core beliefs about the state of the world and its functioning, through which the absurdity is either disavowed, or not recognized as such.

It can therefore be stated, that hypernormalization has a strong psychological component, as it touches upon individuals' core beliefs and attitudes about the world (Mitzen, 2006). Unconscious and conscious efforts to deny or rationalize the emergence and maintenance of absurdity pertain to psychological dynamics and thereby provide ontological security. This makes the 'stepping out' of hypernormalization not merely a conscious process of detachment from absurdity, but a deeply emotional and painful process through which individuals must disengage from the very core functioning of contemporary (Western, neoliberal) ideology. It is not surprising that Žižek (1989, 2001) has drawn attention to the role of disavowal, as this provides the way through which some of the key values of the Western world (e.g., democracy, freedom of speech and press) are actively negated (see also Huber et al., 1997). This also shows that problematization only serves as a conditional securitization activity, but insufficient for (radical) social change.

Future research directions

With the novelty of scientific interest in absurdity and hypernormalization, a range of research questions can guide future endeavors to enrich understanding. A first possible question pertains to how absurdity can be assessed. On the one hand, individual and collective perceptions of absurdity and hypernormalization may be relevant and interesting to ascertain and investigate to assess the extent to which they manifest and are maintained.

On the other hand, such an approach assumes that absurdity and hypernormalization can be assessed at the conscious level of the individual and/or groups in society, which may only be partially true. Therefore, discourse analysis or conceptual work may shed more light upon the nature and manifestation of hypernormalization (e.g., Bal and Dóci, 2018; De Cleen et al., 2021).

A relevant question for future research is to what extent the three strategies to escape the circularity of hypernormalization are valid empirically. While we identified problematization, resistance and imagination as three interrelated and necessary steps out of hypernormalization, they are yet insufficient on their own. As we only briefly discussed the three strategies, further research may investigate in more depth the potential of the three as jointly explaining the ways through which more sustainable futures from a state of hypernormalized absurdity can be imagined. While there is literature on each of the separate strategies (e.g., Contu, 2018; Mumby et al., 2017), it would be informative to investigate attempts where each of the three strategies are conducted to ascertain what they could each contribute to sustaining individual and collective well-being in society and organizations.

In sum, our paper on hypernormalization of absurdity offers a new lens to study contemporary workplaces, thereby elucidating the dynamics and processes that underpin the emergence of absurdity, its maintenance, and why individuals and collectives are hesitant to address hypernormalization openly. The lens of absurdity helps to understand wider phenomena, including inequality and marginalization, and climate inertia. Once it has been established that such phenomena can be perceived as absurd, it allows for an understanding of fantasmatic investment into the status quo or into an imagined past or a retrotopia (Bauman, 2017), but also the deliberate management of hypernormalization. We can observe the absurdity of the dissociation between the literatures on corporate social responsibility and the proclaimed commitment of companies towards combatting climate change, and the realities of climate change (Blühdorn, 2017). A hypernormalization lens may offer insights into the deliberate management of this gap, as it protects organizational interests in short-term profitability and the status quo. However, absurdity exposes itself in the destructive effects of climate change worldwide, and the continued destruction of nature, such as in the

Brazilian Amazon (Casado and Londoño, 2019). Understanding and addressing the ideological investment and internalization into hypernormalization will be the first step towards positive change.

Conclusion

It has been argued for a long time that life is absurd in its futility and inevitability of death (Nagel, 1971). Yurchak (2003; 2005) showed that such a gap between meaninglessness and real life is filled with various constative meanings. Hence, absurdity may have positive effects as well, as it constitutes the fabric of society, or how ideology is actually translated into practice or how people create some semblance of meaningfulness out of a hypernormalized absurd situation or how people can imagine new visions of self, collective identities as alternatives to ontological *in*securities. Nonetheless, the split between ideological meaninglessness and real practices may ultimately be harmful and may have detrimental effects for individuals and societies. It is therefore apparent that an understanding of hypernormalization may contribute to positive social change, through problematization, resistance, and imagination.

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Becoming and staying talented: A figurational analysis of organization, power and control

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abstract

Despite long traditions of management and leadership development it is only recently that organizations have become attracted to the notion of 'talent', to talent's apparent impact on organizational performance, and to the best ways of finding and deploying talent. In the context of organizational talent management, this article illustrates how the processes and politics of becoming and staying talented can be understood using insights from figurational sociology. We first discuss the features of talent status that figurational sociology helps to illuminate. Second, we apply figurational analysis to two aspects of exclusive talent management: maintaining organizational order and control, and being seen as talented. This is followed by a discussion of how figurational analysis can be used to explain individual performance in exclusive talent programs, and how talent programs can be treated as a means by which the holders of elite power can thwart dissent in order to maintain 'civilized' organizational order and control.

Introduction

Although organizations have long traditions of management and leadership development (Cappelli and Keller, 2017), it is only in the past 25 years that they have become attracted to the specific idea of 'talent', to talent's presumed impact on organizational performance, and to the best ways of

finding and deploying talent (Swailes, 2016). The upsurge of organizational interest in the notion of talent is often attributed to the 'war for talent' leitmotif (Michaels et al., 2001), and can be interpreted as a reaction to changing social, economic, and labour market conditions (Cappelli and Keller, 2017), particularly the rise of elite power (Picketty, 2014). The increasing focus on managing talent can thus be seen as a logical response to increasingly complex forms of organizing, and to the changing interdependencies between management, investors, labour and (to some extent) the State, which can be aligned very closely to the concerns of figurational sociology (Elias, 1983; 2012).

In organizational contexts, talent is a slippery concept with multiple meanings, ranging from a catch-all phrase covering the employees (and sometimes would-be employees) in an organization to the properties (talents) that people possess (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). In addition, and of primary interest to this paper, is the widespread use of 'talent' to represent a minority of employees who, through a series of organizational processes, are identified as having the potential to make a substantial contribution to the future of the organization. Where this happens in organizations, the small groups of 'talented' employees are typically subject to some sort of talent management system.

Although different approaches to talent management exist reflecting the number of people that an organization includes in a talent program (Swailes et al., 2014), for the purposes of this article we draw attention to what are often referred to as exclusive or elite talent management programs, which focus on identifying and developing a small percentage of high performing, high potential employees who are deemed to be more talented than the rest of the workforce. In particular, we treat talent management as the systematic identification of key positions, identifying pools of high performing and high potential individuals, and giving these individuals the differentiated development experiences needed for success in key organizational positions (Collings et al., 2017). This widely used definition, with its emphasis on the separation of groups of individuals with distinctive characteristics, clearly distinguishes talent management from human resource management and human resource development (Swailes, 2013).

Exclusive approaches dominate organizational practice partly because it is easier for organizations to focus attention across small groups of people and because it allows management elites to control their particular approach to organizing (Swailes, 2022). They also rely on processes of workforce differentiation (Collings, 2017) that distinguish between employees (and jobs) based on past, present and future contributions to organizing. The dominant theoretical justification for exclusive talent management draws on the resource-based view of the firm (Collings et al., 2019). The key argument here is that the rare skills that derive from the social relationships among groups of people can, if efficiently organized in ways that competing organizations struggle to imitate, act as a unique resource that provides a competitive advantage. Although this assumption lies at the heart of many organizational talent programs, the processes of becoming (seen as) talented and staying (recognized as) talented have received relatively little attention. While there is ample advice on *how* to identify high potential employees based on assessments of performance and potential (e.g., see Church et al., 2021; Silzer and Church, 2010), it usually underplays the influence of politics and power in decisions surrounding the identification of talent (Song and Wan, 2019; Zesik, 2020). Furthermore, the ways in which talent pools are experienced by participants, and potentially used by senior managers to consolidate their own positions, are less well understood.

What is lacking in the talent literature is a clearer understanding of the social processes that surround talent identification and the maintenance of talent status. Although studies of talent pool dynamics are now starting to appear (Clarke and Scurry, 2020; De Boeck et al., 2018; Zesik, 2020), empirical research typically explores individual reactions after the event. The experiences of individuals while they are in, or on the fringes of, talent pools have received little attention in the literature, and McDonnell et al. (2017: 86) have called for the use of 'more nuanced methodological perspectives'. This article responds to this call by drawing on insights from figurational sociology (also known as process sociology) (Elias 1983; 2012), which, through its focus on institutional and organizational processes, provides a framework through which the dynamics of talent recognition, individual behaviour in talent pools, and retaining talent status, can be conceptualised and studied. Because figurational sociology grew out of detailed analysis of changes in human

behaviour over time, it is ideally suited to comprehend the processes involved in explaining decisions that surround the behaviour of actors in particular talent contexts, and the ways in which different strategies help to preserve the order and control on which 'civilized' forms of organizing stand (van Iterson et al., 2002).

Also missing from the talent literature is a comprehensive framework that can explain the behaviour of the various actors (the talented, the line managers, the executives, the HR managers) who are linked by the rules and norms of talent programs within particular organizational contexts or figurations (van Iterson et al., 2002). For Elias (2012), figurations can be likened to the idea of social dances; those dancing at the start are unlikely to be dancing at the end; the music changes, people come and go, but the dance goes on. Figurations are thus constituted, Elias argues, by networks of relational interdependence that bind individuals together in conflict and cooperation (i.e., nations, communities, and organizations), and which exist independently *of,* but not without, the individuals and groups that comprise them. On this account, individual interests, intentions, actions, political power, and economic organization are entangled in complex and overlapping figurations of all sizes, thus bridging the agency-structure divide and other aspects of dualistic thinking by linking the behaviour of individuals more closely to organizational structures and processes.

The aim of this paper, and its primary point of departure from existing talent literature, is to apply figurational sociology (Elias, 1983; 2012; Baur and Ernst, 2011; Lever, 2011) to better understand the processes of becoming and staying talented, and in so doing provide a comprehensive framework for appreciating how and why individuals must regulate themselves if they are to stand any chance of success in competitive talent pools. Figurational sociology stresses the fact that people exist in relation to others and, in relation to talent status, it therefore provides a powerful lens for understanding how individual employees are located in fluctuating networks of interdependence (Stokvis, 2002) underpinned by asymmetrical power relations between individuals and groups within diverse forms of organization. A figurational approach thus connects related constructs in talent recognition processes (power, control, access to resources, and identity) that lie at the heart of talent management. As used in this article, it also provides a robust investigative framework that

facilitates a compelling explanation of the social and psychological constitution of talent identification and status in contemporary organizations (Elias, 2012; van Iterson et al., 2001).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we make connections between exclusive talent management and figurations to reveal the organizational developments that have led to the appearance of the talented as a distinct form of organizational subjectivity or *habitus* (van Krieken, 2018). Figurational ideas are then applied to talent identification, to the ways that talent management sustains order, and to staying talented. What is often seen as a rational response to performance-driven strategic human resource management and the new organizational forms brought about by the rise of free market economics can alternatively be seen, we argue, as the holders of elite power controlling powerful groups and thwarting dissent before it threatens their established position of power.

Talent in a figurational context

A typical starting point for organizations that seek to identify elite talent is to use some sort of systematic and objectified performance appraisal system. This may be supported by succession planning devices such as performance/promotability matrices in which individuals are judged on three levels of performance and promotability, which is itself a somewhat problematic concept (Jooss et al., 2021). In structured talent systems, reviews involving HR partners, line managers and executives are conducted to aggregate performance/promotability evaluations across divisions, regions and/or the organization in order to create agreed lists of employees deserving of differential investment. The differentiated development that the talented subsequently receive as members of talent pools typically involves experiences such as greater exposure to senior managers, involvement in higher-level strategic discussions, mentoring, structured development programs and working with talented *others* on high status projects. The elevated status of the talented is sometimes reflected in the use of labels such as Stars, A-players, B-players and super-keepers (Groysberg and Lee, 2010), all of which draws attention to the ways in which interdependent people are bound together in particular organizational figurations.

Within specific talent figurations, participants transition through several stages related to the development of individual organizational identity, with each stage revealing the importance of 'regulated behaviour' (Tansley and Tietze, 2013: 1813). Dries (2013) considered identity to be one of several conceptualisations of talent, while Debebe (2017: 420) suggested that social identity 'can thwart the course of an individual's talent development'. Linked to identity construction (Kamoche and Leigh, 2022) are the pressures that suppress the authenticity of the talented while simultaneously compelling them to conform to the expectations of others, all of which are required to be successful. This has been labelled a curse of talent management (Peteriglieri and Peteriglieri, 2017) and as an identity struggle (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Given the competitive and differentiating nature of talent identification (Taipale and Lindström, 2018) it is surprising that research on talent management is predominantly normative (Thunnissen et al., 2013); rarely questioning the assumption that it is beneficial, and rarely questioning the ability of organizations to identify talent in anything other than fair and equitable ways. This happens despite considerable evidence that points to biasing factors in the assessment of performance and potential such as impression management (Amaral et al., 2019), upwards influence (Martinescu et al., 2019), personal attractiveness (Dossinger et al., 2019) and gendered leadership (Johnson et al., 2008). This leaves little doubt that the conceptualisation of talent cannot be separated from its context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and van Arensbergen, 2015).

Although there is mounting evidence that some employees contribute much more to organizations than others (Aguinis and O'Boyle, 2014), a figurational approach is concerned less with objectifying talent and the accuracy of talent assessments, and more with understanding the processes by which people are judged to possess talent (to a greater or lesser extent) and the means by which talent comes to be recognized and/or de-recognized. We now turn to explore how figurational sociology provides a more nuanced understanding of the roles and posturing of the various actors engaged in talent recognition, and how talent pools can be interpreted as a way of controlling a potentially powerful stakeholder group, the talented. In doing so, we depart from much of the literature on organizational talent identification by problematizing the

idea that talent is something that can be objectified and identified in a consistently reliable way.

The civilizing impact of court society

Elias's (1983) study of court society is based on a comparison of the rationality of the aristocratic court elite and the professional bourgeois at the French court in the 17th century. Although both groups prioritised the long-term over momentary affects, the rationality of the professional bourgeois was more concerned with financial gain (economic capital) than the status and prestige claims (symbolic capital) privileged by the Aristocracy (van Krieken, 1998). The forms of behaviour regarded as irrational by the Protestant bourgeois (Weber, 1978) were highly regarded in court society, Elias argues, because it was important to exhibit one's status in order to retain one's position at court. Affective outbursts were thus extremely problematical, not only because they exposed a person's inner state, but because they broke the etiquette on which court society stood.

While the identity of courtiers was highly representational, power relations were also profoundly relational and an individual's power was likely to disappear just as quickly as their status and recognition. While the nobility needed the king to maintain their position within the wider courtly figuration, so the king needed the nobility, and his position of superiority lay solely in his ability to develop a strategy 'governed by the peculiar structure of court society in the narrow sense and more broadly by society at large' (Elias, 1983: 3). On one hand, the king needed the nobility as a basis for a collective culture, while on the other hand he needed them to act as a buffer between himself and the rest of the population. Though it may have been possible, at least in theory, for the nobility to collectively out-manoeuvre the king, the inherent competition of court life effectively undermined this possibility to a large extent – a situation the king played to his own advantage as and when needed. We suggest that analogies can be made here between the king and senior managers, and between the court and elite talent pools, whereby competition among the talented protects senior managers, and the talented act as a useful buffer zone between senior managers and the rest of the workforce.

In *The civilizing process,* Elias (2012) shows how the civilized code of behaviour that emerged at the court became ever more widely adopted through processes of state formation, where the increasing density of social relations had a profound impact on the psychological and emotional make-up of the individual. Individuals enmeshed in social and economic relations of ever-increasing complexity were, Elias (2012) argues, increasingly compelled to attune their behaviour to the demands of more and more other people or face the consequences of their (in)action – and it was this, Elias argues, that drove the civilizing process forward by pushing unacceptable behaviour behind the scenes of everyday life. As these processes advanced, van Vrieken (2012: 22) shows that courtiers became 'differentiated into a number of differentiated social types – the public servant, the politician's advisor, the manager, but also the celebrity, the witty, beautiful and talented focus of public scrutiny and attention with access to power'. These processes surrounding competition and opportunities for advancement are still evident today, and they are therefore useful, we contend, in understanding the complex forms of organizing revolving around exclusive talent management, in particular the identification and behaviour of the talented.

Contemporary organizational forms

Lever (2011) demonstrates the persistence of these organizational forms and their constituent rationalities over time in an analysis of cross-sector partnership working under New Labour governments in the UK during the 1990s. Much like regional courts in an earlier age, Lever argues that regional networks of community and citywide partnerships allowed successive New Labour administrations to pursue their own political ends by implementing management strategies that pitted individual partnership managers (and hence partnerships) against each other on a regular basis. It was only when the community-based forms of organization involved played the partnership game in ways that were closely aligned with dominant policy concerns (emanating from central government) that the resources to proceed, and ultimately succeed, were received. This often came about when individual managers learned that their success, and ultimately their partnership's success, depended on playing the partnership game in the required way, often to detriment of the concerns of other (less compliant) community-based forms of organization. Lever's wider argument is that this approach, much as

it did at the court, *paralyses rebellion* (de Swaan, 1990) from within by pitting individuals and groups against each other on a regular basis.

We argue that high potential employees who are organized into talent pools for development purposes can be seen as a distinctive stakeholder group (Swailes, 2013) in much the same way. In this account, individuals within the community from which talent is drawn will only start to receive recognition, and hence resources, when they align their needs (and hence talents) with the organization's wider agenda as espoused by senior management. Employees that play the dominant organizational game and respond to this agenda are thus far more likely to attract attention than those who do not; the non-talented are those who do not perform in the right way. Gameplaying of this type requires Weberian notions of self-observation and emotional suppression (Weber, 1989) and it follows that people who can observe and suppress their emotions in ways that match the rules of the game will have a greater chance of success (i.e., better outcomes) than those who do not. However, unlike Weber's rational individualism and its inherent focus on *ideal types*, figurational sociology allows us to examine and understand that the contemporary social processes associated with talent management are *real types* linked to long term historical trends revolving around organization, power and control (van Krieken, 2006).

What is particularly striking for our analysis is the persistence of these organizational forms and managerial subjectivities within talent pools. As individuals enter exclusive talent programs they are observed and encouraged to develop individual strategies that drive internal organizational stability and success in line with the concerns of elite discourses and powerful groups. This form of organizational control has emerged and become dominant, we argue, because it protects senior management and powerful elites from collective strategies from below that may threaten their position of power. Figurational analysis is significant in this sense, not least because it demonstrates how: 'Ceremonies and etiquette became essential instruments in the distribution of power' (Sofer, 2013: 28).

Figurations and talent recognition

Largely absent in the organizational talent literature is any sense of talent recognition as an on-going process in which decisions about today's talent are mired in past events and will inevitably be influenced by events to come. In much the same way that Louis XIV protected himself from his imaginative and ambitious courtiers by creating organizational arenas in which they could develop competing strategies (Elias, 1983; van Krieken, 2018), we argue that by grouping 'stars' together, leaders (who are always vulnerable) can alleviate threats to themselves in a similar way through management strategies that *paralyse rebellion* from within (de Swaan, 1990; Lever, 2011).

In *The civilizing process,* Elias (2012) shows that people are intensely sensitive to saying or doing things that would have them seen as unpredictable or signal that they are out of control; and the more people become aware of this, the greater their sensitivity to shame becomes. Fear of causing offence and of shame thus forces people to 'bottle' their emotional responses, but this also makes them more vulnerable to control stemming from those who spread stories about what is right and proper (Smith, 2002). This 'celebrity gossip' (van Krieken, 2012: 87) can emanate from senior managers, for example, through their views on what is important, on performance standards and the behaviour that receives favour in a particular work context. This is not to say that people who are not in talent pools feel ashamed not to be in them, but it serves to show how they become vulnerable to control and suppression because they would feel reluctant to risk shame by challenging the championed vision of what it means to be a high performer in a particular work setting.

Talent pools, where they are open and visible, provide everyone with an incentive to check the criteria against which they would be judged and to adjust as they see fit. Where they are less visible, practice may be more ambiguous, and it may be more difficult to maintain civilized forms of organizing (van Iterson et al., 2002). This issue of talent pool visibility deserves further consideration since not all talent pools are transparent (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). In a figurational sense, pools in which participants know they have been earmarked as talent, but which are largely hidden from view, can be viewed as part of a process of compartmentalization (de Swaan,

2001) through which a pool is separated from the wider organizational context by a 'wall of invisibility' (Lever and Milbourne, 2015: 308). In a talent context, the level of visibility can be expected to influence the behaviour of people in a pool, and the behaviour of senior managers towards it. The less visible and more hidden a pool is, the less pressure senior managers may be able to exert order and control over participants to foster 'civilized' organizational relations.

Another discipline of talent pools, and development programs more widely, is that membership exposes employees to the risk of shame by relegation, of being cast out of a pool to join a lower status group with little if any prospect re-joining the elite. Even if this happens discretely, a signal is nonetheless sent to others that continued high performance in a particular way is essential to remain in the pool. Talent pools also function as an organizational response to those (and there may be many) who see themselves as organizational underdogs – effectively discriminated against by virtue of their roles and/or their character. Publicising a vision of the behaviour and competences that the organization values, for example, in competence frameworks, acts to quell dissent that might threaten the established order. Talent criteria at least give an illusion that opportunities exist – employees just have to perform in the right way – while meanwhile acting to keep the bulk of a workforce in its place. Dignity is preserved, managers do not have to tell people that they do not make the grade, at least for now; self-assessment against a competence framework and against the people chosen to be in talent programs will do it for them.

Much like social relations at court, this competitive element maintains organizational differentiation. The behavioural norms and forms of organizational subjectivity that emerge in exclusive talent pools form social and spatial boundaries that normally only become visible if some transgression of etiquette and behavioural codes occurs. Talent, much like power, is a property of the connections a person has with other individuals in the wider organizational figuration. An employee connected to high performing and/or celebrified others is thus much more likely to be seen as one to watch than an employee who is not. Employees fortunate enough to be in a talent pool increase their connections within the wider figuration and therefore improve their chances of power and success, an effect observed with

management team members with CEO status (Graffin et al., 2008). Talent pools also act as reference points for others showing what one has to do to be liked and to get ahead and 'foreground oneself in relation to vast, anonymous business and government organizations seemingly beyond any individual's control' (van Krieken, 2012: 126). The contacts and the networks provided by structured, long-term talent programs provide the sustenance for establishing and growing the minor celebrity status of their participants, at least minor celebrities in the eyes of the managerial elite. Talent pools provide a production pipeline for future (even if short-lived) organizational celebrities by opening-up contacts and by providing opportunities for self-promotion and self-representation to others within and without the social spaces created by a talent pool.

Even minor celebrity status brings economic benefits consistent with the 'Matthew effect' (Merton, 1988). People who are well known attract more attention and resources for work comparable in quality to that produced by others who are less well known. In a world full of information, 'what is in short supply is the means to discriminate between what is on offer, and the capacity to attract attention' (van Krieken, 2012: 55). Organizing a small fraction of a workforce into talent pools creates a means by which attention can be allocated in a seemingly more efficient way. Individuals in talent pools take the risk that comes with exposing themselves to far greater scrutiny from senior managers, but the potential payoffs are large both economically (economic capital) and in terms of the even greater celebrity status (symbolic capital) on offer. Over and above any real managerial talent and capital that individuals have, being talented, we contend, cannot be separated from these processes.

For the talented, this comes at a price – and the price is the constant need to perform and be observed. Within contemporary organizational forms the self thus becomes increasingly performative and subject to ever-changing norms and forms of competition that blur the boundary between public and private life (van Iterson et al., 2002). As in court society, the talented must exhibit their status if they are to maintain it *and* their position in the organization. Their identity is thus highly representational and the power relations underpinning their position are likely to change just as quickly as their status and recognition when things go wrong. To maintain and cement their

position, the talented must therefore build alliances within the organization; any challenge to the established order, as in court society, is usually followed by a fall from grace (Elias, 1983).

Discussion and conclusions

As part of changing institutional figurations, the importance of searching for talent can be seen as an example of an idea that has spread through some fields (more than others) because it has become a legitimate part of the external environment that forms part of the organization's 'outer identity' (Hernes, 2004: 35). This identity acts to reassure individuals and groups that have an interest in the organization. As the popularity of reality TV demonstrates, these ideas are at work within and outside organizations across wider society, where the identification of small groups of people as celebrities (talent) 'helps to reduce social complexity and provides dense bundles of symbolic and cultural capital around which social life can be organized' (van Krieken, 2012: 8). In the same way that management innovations and models of organization spread as rationalized myths, and not necessarily because they are best suited to performance improvement (Greenwood et al., 2017), talent management has diffused through certain organizational fields to become part of the recipe for organizing in common with certain grander structural forms. This diffusion is assisted by the subjectivity of talent management (Swailes, 2016), since subjectivity is a key driver of isomorphic behaviour among firms in the same field (van Krieken, 2006).

Despite the large and growing literature on talent management, we know little about the mechanisms of the core processes of becoming and staying recognized as talented beyond the problematic and normative assumptions of fair and accurate performance appraisal. The analogy with court behaviour reveals the civilizing impact of talent programs within organizations, while raising questions about the underlying long-term trends. From a figurational perspective, talent programs allow different forms of organizing to control individual subjects by observing their performance in rituals where particular forms of etiquette are required. The talented are only provided with fleeting access to their organizational superiors at these rituals, and they must

perform and develop their own individual strategies on a regular and ongoing basis to further and to maintain their access.

Much as kings and queens in earlier periods adopted strategies to control their courtiers and noblemen by playing them off against each other at court (Elias, 1983), so talent programs, we contend, help to keep the ambitions of the talented in check, thus allowing those holding organizational power to pursue agendas consistent with dominant and powerful elite discourses. While the talented need the CEO and senior managers to maintain their position within the talent figuration, so the CEO and senior managers need the talented, and their position of superiority lies solely in their ability to develop strategies that can manage fluctuating tensions within specific organizational contexts; arguably by *paralysing rebellion* from within by pitting talented individuals and groups against each other (de Swaan, 1990; Lever, 2011). Using Elias's (2012) metaphor of social dances, an exclusive talent program can thus be seen as an organizational dance implemented to keep the talented busy and suppress internal organizational tension and dissent.

At a broad level, talent management employs a range of theoretical perspectives (see Dries, 2013; Glaister et al., 2018). However, despite a steady stream of papers in the past 25 years, there has been little critical examination of the core, central processes of becoming and staying talented, an omission that we have attempted to address. Throughout this paper we have shown how figurational analysis provides a way of visualising the processes surrounding the recognition and behaviour of talented employees, as well as the events that shape their reactions across time (King, 2016). Self-regulation is an important component of the behaviour that figurational conditions affect to a greater or lesser extent, and questions therefore arise about how particular spatial and organizational conditions compel individuals to act out more or less civilized forms of behaviour (Clegg and van Iterson, 2013; Lever, 2011). While talent recognition is ostensibly based on assessments of performance and potential, there is also a substantial role played by cultural distances between individual actors, individual positions in networks, homophily between participants (Mäkelä et al., 2010; Wheelan et al., 2010) and proximity to strong colleagues (Claussen et al., 2014).

Figurational sociology is well-suited to understanding how these effects work in specific organizational contexts, and we have explained why some individuals (more than others) come to be recognized as talented in terms of their ability to participate in, and successfully negotiate, a path through a talent pool or program. Moreover, our analysis illustrates how talent programs help to facilitate organizational differentiation in an upwards and a downwards direction by identifying individuals with the psychological orientation and disposition (or *habitus*) (van Krieken, 2018) to identify with the needs of their superiors and subordinates simultaneously. Elias's (1983) ideas about performativity, theatricality and competing power bases in the 'strategic projection of symbolically constituted identity' (van Krieken, 2012: 16) thus provide, we conclude, key insights into contemporary organizational forms, and the role of talent programs in identifying individuals who can fulfill this role.

Contribution to the talent literature

The figurational approach that we have outlined contributes to our understanding of talent management by drawing attention to fluctuating interdependencies between people. It reveals how certain processes (may) work and how self-regulation and self-awareness are interlinked, such that awareness of one's position and the social capital of others influence the extent to which a person regulates their behaviour in a constantly shifting figuration of sub-ordinates, peers and organizational superiors. It also explains how individuals in talent development programs are alert and attuned to their specific and unique contexts, and how their potential and achievements are in turn limited by those contexts.

Our figurational analysis also addresses the core assumption that development is a function of both a person's innate qualities and the development opportunities that are open to them. In particular, it helps to explain why development interventions may have small effects on some people and larger effects on others; success is proportional to a person's standing in a figuration and their ability to move successfully within it. This mobility is to some extent a feature of an individual's connections, and of their ability to leverage those connections. Figurational approaches provide a way of examining how the particular dynamics of talent identification, and

the development strategies used in an organization, influence the behaviour of participants and others affected by them, and how this affects individual and organizational outcomes. This is an important step since understanding how individual-level outcomes aggregate into organizational-level outcomes remains an underdeveloped area (Garavan et al., 2015).

Viewing talent management through a figurational lens also helps to appreciate *how* management interventions connect to performance and explain why development programs do not deliver reproducible results. The events that arise in a particular program differ from any other program, sometimes beneficial sometimes not, and appreciating how individuals interpret and respond to controlling forces, how they align with dominant power sources, and how others use power to favour their own situations is critical to understanding the effectiveness of talent programs and of people development more widely. The present article shows how the core components of a figurational approach provide a way of understanding behaviour in talent pools and shows why they can be effective for some people and less effective for others.

Implications for talent research

Our analysis opens new research avenues around the 'circuits of power' (van Krieken, 2012: 8) that produce talent, and how the talented cope with contrasting emotions and changing self-esteem in diverse forms of organization. Indeed, being recognised as talented and admitted to a talent pool arguably puts the talented in a *double-bind* (Elias, 2007), a situation within which they must show initiative and imagination whilst also recognizing that they are under pressure to continually align their talents with the organization's agenda. These insights suggest three broad research questions: 1) to what extent is a person's authenticity suppressed in light of the expectations of others in and around talent programs? 2) How do people adjust their demeanour to stay in the talent spotlight? 3) To what extent does the visibility of a talent pool impact on the suppression of authenticity and the ability to retain talent status?

As figurations are never static and always in a state of 'tensile equilibrium' (Elias, 1978: 131), research methods must be capable of capturing the human

interdependencies being studied. In studying the figurations surrounding talent it is necessary to identify the conditions in which they were created and how they developed out of previous organizational figurations. Exploring the asymmetrical nature of power within the figuration and the inequalities that are present between established insiders (with prestige, power, esteem) and outsiders is also central. This would reveal the 'shape' of a talent figuration, at least for a time, and how those involved use and display their symbols of power, for example, by controlling discussion topics and making judgements about what is right for the organization, and hence the talented, to focus on. Focussing on displays of power and status among established groups reveals, on this account, how resources and dominant agendas are operationalized, as well as the ways in which power develops and shifts in pools through the ascendancy or decline of individuals.

As we have demonstrated, the inception, operation and evolution of exclusive talent systems constitute a very complex set of asymmetrical social interactions. Figurational analysis has the potential to provide realistic (what Elias refers to as reality congruent) and detailed accounts of how and why organizations become attracted to the idea of talent, how figurations form around it, how its functions change across time and, perhaps, how attraction to talent loses its meaning and functionality only to be superseded by a functionality of a different sort. Figurational models, however, are never an end point as they are always changing and in flux. As such, figurational studies usually require detailed mapping of the interdependencies that enable some organizational members and constrain others (Castrén and Ketokivi, 2015) and research methods that are better suited to unravelling the extent of perceived pressure on individuals and the specific emotions and behaviours that people self-regulate. They are also suited to exploring the subjective experiences of self-regulation and to unravelling the devices that individuals use to cope with masking authenticity. This will further an understanding of how feelings are experienced and how they are managed, and of what is meaningful to individual actors in terms of how they perceive and protect themselves from threats and challenges.

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Digital consumer activism: Agency and commodification in the digital economy

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abstract

Consumer activism has been reshaped as it has moved increasingly into the digital realm, and yet relevant theorisations have been slow to emerge. This paper presents an innovative approach to digital consumer politics by examining and connecting key scholarship in digital activism and the digital economy. Through a discussion of three case studies (*#grabyourwallet*, *#deleteuber* and *#deletetwitter*, and Connecting Good or CoGo), we analyse digitally mediated agency, and the transformation of consumption meanings and practices in the digital economy. We argue that digital consumer activism offers both new forms of campaigning and presents familiar problems. Our case studies demonstrate the complexity of engendering agency when consumer activism enters the digital realm. Equally, the case studies illustrate contradictions in the ways in which consumer politics contests the capitalist economy offline, but leaves it substantially uncontested online due to a reliance on digital platforms dedicated to private profit.

Introduction

From protecting consumer rights to promoting environmental justice, consumer activism has become an important source of protest. Consumer activism[1] here does not so much speak of a specific, organised movement, but

[1] We recognise a subtle difference in theorisations of 'consumer activism' and'consumption activism'. The majority of scholarship focuses on the first term

of consumption practices as a locus of struggles for environmental sustainability and global equity (Boström et al., 2019; Forno and Graziano, 2014; Humphery, 2010; Littler, 2009; Lekakis, 2022). Consumption practices are also often invoked as a vehicle for addressing intersectional political concerns, such as racism and patriarchy, and as a means of targeting specific political figures and policies. Furthermore, like many political and economic processes, consumer and consumption activism has been reshaped as the digital realm has grown. Since the early 1990s, web pages have been deployed for various consumer activism campaigns and, more recently, 'apps' enabling sustainable and fair consumer choices have emerged. At the same time, changing modes of consumption related to the rise of a 'digital economy' – and the possible impact this has on ethical consumption campaigns – remain under-researched. Indeed, analysis of these developments has been relatively slow to emerge, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of grappling with a terrain that speaks both to the history of consumer politics and to theorisations of digital activism and economy.

In responding to this relative absence of analysis, this article focuses on the *intersection* of digitally mediated agency and consumption practices in the digital economy. This focus draws together critical reflection on ethical consumption and social movement studies with analysis of digital economy and politics. While this gives our approach wide purchase, it also risks a lack of singular focus – yet, we argue, it is precisely this diffuse intersection of ethical consumer activity and digital economy which illuminates the tensions we examine here in relation to agency and commodification. In short, it is only on the emerging terrain between consumption practices and digital

to emphasize or criticise the idea of the consumer or 'citizen-consumer' as a potential agent of social change. The latter term, on the other hand, may be used to focus on consumption as action, practice and economic logic as much, if not more so, as on the figure of the consumer (Humphery, 2010). There is, nevertheless, overlapping political meaning across this terminology and we use the term 'consumer activism' in this article to connect with theories of political consumerism and consumer agency. While we acknowledge there is complexity here, it is important to connect these literatures to understand the phenomena we are investigating. Given we also need to address digital economy literature this places restrictions on the extent to which we can address the full complexity of the background literature, while asserting that we have examined enough to support our arguments.

economic practices that we are able to better conceptualise digital consumer activism. In what follows, we first review key literature in consumer and digital politics. We then present three case studies of digital consumer activism that advocate two boycotts and one buycott. Through these case studies, we draw out dynamics in the complex concept of 'agency' relating to consumer activism in digital contexts, while also drawing attention to the digital economy's production of consumers and its commodification of consumer politics.

The politics of consumption and the turn to the digital

The politics of consumption has typically been explored through the prism of political consumerism (Boström et al., 2019; Micheletti, 2003) and, within that, only a few contributions have explored it as increasingly digitally mediated. While some scholarship focuses on quantitative measures of activist use of digital media, other emergent scholarship speaks to the intersection of consumption and digital practices and, in doing so, has attempted to directly connect notions of media practice to those of consumer activism (Heldman, 2017; Lekakis, 2022; Treré and Yu, 2021; Ward and Vreese, 2011; Yu, 2021). Following this lead, we variously draw here on scholarship relating to digital media activism, political consumerism and digital economy. Moreover, we follow Sassatelli (2007) and others in treating consumption as a series of practices. By emphasising consumer practices, which we integrate below into ideas of activism and agency, we draw attention to the dynamic interplay of actions in consumption contexts; contexts which are themselves a complex intersection of production, distribution, packaging, marketing, retailing, financing, purchase, ethics, and so on. Here, we thus conceptually invoke and build on the way consumerism necessarily involves individual moments of consumption which accumulate into patterned practices that are, in turn, the main focus of activist responses to consumption in capitalist economies (Boström et al., 2019; Humphery and Jordan, 2018; Lekakis, 2022; Micheletti, 2003).

Digital media activism scholarship has explored the social dynamics of online consumer activism at the level of collective action. Parigi and Gong (2014) focus on the ways social media networks create shared identities and

relationships between consumer activists. Digitally enabled sociality ('digital ties'), they argue, strengthens the outcomes of digital consumer activism, as seen, for example, in Minocher's (2019) analysis of online petition site Change.org. Yet, these kinds of social media practices are often criticised by other scholars for fostering short-term, armchair-based activism, termed 'slacktivism' (Christensen, 2012; Penney, 2014). While this debate is an important one, what is notable is that such digital media scholarship rarely explores the nature of the consumer activist agency implied in its analyses. In this paper, we move to do so, and we begin by positing agency – in a digital activist context – as the capacity to take sustained action geared towards collective prosperity, based on socio-technical affordances and able to contest pressures from commercial ideologies and interests.

Such approaches to political agency are exemplified well by Campbell's (2005) conceptualisation of agency as communal and participatory, material and symbolic, and inherently ambiguous. In their conceptualisation of political agency at a digital crossroads, Kaun and colleagues (2016: 2) understand it 'as constituted through the use of knowledge and resources, themselves embedded within structural contexts; at the same time, agency is transformative of the structures within which it is embedded by making use of knowledge and resources in creative and often radical ways'. Similarly, some consumption studies scholars have also recognised such ambiguity and been cautious in overplaying the ability of online connection to build substantive political agency, while nevertheless not abandoning the possibility of such online agency altogether. Analysing the politics enabled and disabled by ethical consumption, for example, Lekakis (2013) argues that digital engagement both leads to involvement in a broader politics of consumption and that these digital platforms increasingly privilege a narrative of lifestyle over one of solidarity. While we recognise that agency is a contested and ambiguous concept when it comes to consumers engaging with political discourses and practices, our research suggests it is worth further attention in the context of digital consumer politics.

Where, then, does ambiguity reside in relation to agency in digital consumer activism? In many respects, this concerns the critique posed by theories of 'slacktivism' which argue that online media is an ineffective avenue for politics and raises the question of whether a complex agential activism is even

possible in such a context. Exploring agency in digital consumer activism is important in questioning, for instance, whether the action of clicking an online boycott petition offers moral reassurance while in effect doing little of political import or whether online communication supports consumers to connect their consumption to a more substantive offline activism. Furthermore, any such analysis needs to also consider, as we do here, the range of actors involved; from individual citizens as consumers engaged in consumption practices, to leaders/influencers, to political collectives and businesses acting as 'market activists' and so on (Lekakis, 2022). To this, non-human actors must be added, most notably in algorithmically enabled digital interaction (Jordan, 2015). Indeed, this sense of critical caution is evident in studies of the rapidly growing number of 'ethical consumption apps' that seek to engage consumers in sustainable and ethical purchasing or in broader forms of consumer activism (Eli et al., 2016; Humphery and Jordan, 2018; Fuentes and Sörum, 2019; Hawkins and Horst, 2020). It is in these complicated contexts that the agency of actors within both broad consumption practices and digital consumption activism can be understood.

As digital consumer activism has emerged, so too has an understanding of how the 'digital economy' shifts the nature of consumption itself – and we complete our analytic focus in what follows by connecting such ideas to the discussion of agency and consumption. There are several ways the digital economy has been conceptualised. Some authors have proclaimed new stages of capitalism revolving around digital technologies. Srnicek (2016) argues for a 'platform capitalism', while Zuboff (2019) sees the kind of information gathering which underpins firms like Google as a new age of 'surveillance capitalism'. Other authors examine the specificities of the digital economy within a wider market context, rather than reaching for definitions of economic epochs. Elder-Vass (2016) explores the intertwining of both freely given goods and of profit extracted from such gift economies. Jordan (2020) examines the digital economy as one sector among other economic sectors, exploring how consumption is shifting in relation to freely given goods and related novel forms of monetisation. Within this context, agency is understood as moulded to a new economic modus operandi, developed through technological affordances such as data tracking of consumption

preferences, which has proven powerful in managing the activities and practices of consumers and, consequently, of activist responses.

A focus of such discussion is on the way consumption has become integrated into the digital economy through both consuming information goods and by producing information that is itself a key input for the digital economy (Dean, 2012). Here, the focus is on how agency and consumption practices are themselves being altered in the digital economy. Such reinforcing behaviour has now been demonstrated to include algorithmically driven inequalities that embed racial, gender and economic disparities within software (Noble, 2016). This lends a new twist to a core dilemma of consumer politics, which has always faced the ambiguity of utilising 'responsible' consumer choice to contest consumerism. This ambiguity is intensified in the digital realm; where the digital consumer is drawn, through consumption, simultaneously into the production of information that is then utilised by companies to fuel further consumption. In such an economic context, it appears possible for all activities by consumers, even ostensibly oppositional actions, to become digital information that simply further creates and embeds a digital economy within capitalism.

Digital consumer activism can thus be productively examined by connecting these two axes; first, changes to agency in consumer politics in a digital age, and second, the changed practices of consumption brought about by the rise of the digital economy. Analytically, our focus here is on this intersection of what we call 'digital consumer activism'. This focus develops existing analysis, such as the one on slacktivism discussed above, and addresses how consumption within the digital economy may affect and be affected by frameworks of ethical consumption. We will now pursue these connections through three case studies, aiming to use our empirical material to draw out and re-examine these conceptual dimensions.

Before we turn, however, to our evidence and conclusions, we note that our research utilises a mixed methodology. Given the complexity of our analytic strategy in locating our questions at the intersection of already complex literatures, it was important that our evidence reach a similarly broad scope. We therefore use a number of methods – both quantitative and qualitative – in exploring three case studies; that were themselves chosen both on the basis

of their reliance on digital media to practice consumer activism and on their political reach within affluent capitalist societies. Our case studies are: the boycott campaign *#grabyourwallet*, arising in 2016; the digital deletion campaigns (*#deleteuber* and *#deletefacebook*) primarily active in 2016-2018; and the buycott organisation 'Connecting Good', operating since 2015. While we acknowledge this range of case studies (and the evidence they give rise to) comes at a cost of depth, this serves the conceptual purpose of our study. Our methods all involve broad case study methodology in using existing evidence and develop the following original material. The first case study of *#grabyourwallet* uses a semi-structured interview of a key actor, supported by textual analysis of the study website and of media analytics. For the second case study of online deletion campaigns, digital empirical analysis examining Twitter (now known as X but in this article referred to by its name at the time of research), inspired by Rogers' (2013: 154) 'postdemographic' methods, is used. For the third case study of Connecting Good, textual analysis of available sources, including company reports, is utilised. Any particularities of these methods are noted at the appropriate point in the following case studies (Thomas, 2011; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Finally, we recognise that we are discussing only a segment of the global economy, though these are areas that are strongly involved with consumer activism in market-based democracies.

Digitising the boycott: The case of *#grabyourwallet*

The hashtag campaign *#grabyourwallet* appeared on Twitter in October 2016, calling for a boycott of Donald Trump-related brands and businesses. The *#grabyourwallet* campaign is part of a broader movement of economic dissent in relation to Trump (including after his presidential term ended), highlighting issues around sexism, racism and environmental injustice (Fisher, 2019). This boycott hashtag campaign was launched by San Francisco-based marketing professional Shannon Coulter, who found her experience in creating social media content for brands useful when it came to speaking

against gender discrimination[2]. Coulter first started the Twitter campaign *#fashionnotfascism* that promoted a boycott of Ivanka Trump's clothing brand, when Ivanka Trump failed to distance herself from her father's sexist statements. This hashtag was later followed by the more sensational *#grabyourwallet*, which, hinting at Trump's vulgar comments from the leaked Access Hollywood tape, gained strong traction among social media publics.

In 2021, the website of the campaign included thorough documentation of press coverage of the boycott, as well as of the impact of the movement (such as impressions gained on Twitter and businesses dropping Trump-related brands). An aspect of being a marketplace-oriented boycott is that it directly addresses its economic target. The aim of the campaign is to distance consumers from Trump's business organisation, by listing and commenting on these companies and brands. Retailers targeted for stocking Trump brands included Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Lord & Taylor, Overstock.com, Zappos, and Amazon, golf courses and wineries, as well as Celebrity Apprentice advertisers (where Donald Trump was executive producer).

Boycotts are complex and can variously focus on influencing the marketplace activity of consumers, on utilising media to raise awareness, or on directly targeting companies or individuals (or their proxies) (Stolle and Micheletti, 2015). This is encapsulated by Friedman's (1999) differentiation between marketplace-oriented boycotts and media-oriented boycotts, as well as that between non-surrogate and surrogate boycotts. The *#grabyourwallet* boycott is both a media-oriented and marketplace-oriented boycott. Its instigator, Coulter, stated that 'the biggest lever was press' in turning concerns into a popular movement of economic withdrawal; suggesting the importance of publicity to the campaign. There were other parameters at play as well. In relation to media, the boycott benefited from Coulter's background of working in digital marketing, and her experience in interacting with journalists. For example, Coulter stated that professionals who were willing to talk to the press about why they were participating in *#grabyourwallet* was key for credibility and momentum. In addition, the discursive activism that

[2] All references like this to Coulter's views, quotes from Coulter or information from Coulter are from interviews conducted as part of this research into digital consumption activism.

the hashtag campaign mobilised supported the 'online telling and connecting of personal stories' which is characteristic of the rise of hashtag feminism (Clark, 2016: 769). In this sense, *#grabyourwallet* is about enabling connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) through the sharing of personal stories that offer reasons for refusing to purchase Trump-related goods and services.

The outcomes of the #grabyourwallet campaign include gaining considerable media attention, as well as having notable marketplace impact. In the first ten days of the hashtag, it was reported that 'more than a million people have viewed her [Coulter's] posts … and she is receiving 200 direct replies on Twitter per day and hundreds of retweets' (Walters, 2016). Reportedly, the campaign's website was receiving about two million unique visitors per month soon after its launch (Kramer, 2017). Indeed, the social media analytics company Captiv8, reported that, by 2017, there had been more than 496,000 'engagements' (likes, retweets, and so on) on Twitter or Instagram posts that include #grabyourwallet. Captiv8 found that a significant share of those posts originated in California or New York, suggesting the campaign had gained particularly strong traction in those areas (Halzack, 2017). This attention has translated into market impact, with the target most prominently affected being Ivanka Trump's line of clothing and footwear. For example, while the department store Nordstorm initially reported that they had no 'plans to stop offering [Ivanka Trumps] collection' ten days after the *#grabyourwallet* campaign started, they moved to drop Ivanka Trump's brand (Abrams, 2017; Walters, 2016).

In terms of political agency, participation in the hashtag activism of *#grabyourwallet* did not necessarily result in strong digital ties, but it was not a case of slacktivism either. Contrary to the idea of slacktivism as 'political activities that serve to increase the feel–good factor of the participants but have no impact on real–life political outcomes' (Christensen, 2012: 3), the tactics employed by the *#grabyourwallet* digital campaign resulted in considerable negative publicity for some Trump brands, as well as some successful economic divestment. The strong leadership figure of Coulter is a significant factor in this context. Behind this campaign, there is a specific named organiser who provides charismatic leadership that utilises the creative capital possessed by her as a marketing professional to leverage digital technologies for visibility of a cause. In the case of *#grabyourwallet*,

leadership and publicity facilitated its visibility, as the campaign shifted over time from hashtag activism to creating a not-for-profit organisation that, in Coulter's words, 'turns consumer power into a more just, inclusive world'. Agency, in this case, was mobilised through both consumer action (boycotting) and the discursive sharing of personal stories, and as such it was geared towards collective prosperity, enabled by socio-technical affordances and independent of commercial ideologies and interests. Those participating in the #grabyourwallet campaign did not need to engage repeatedly with the campaign, but the transformation of *#grabyourwallet* into an organisation illustrates the potential sustainability of this type of campaign.

Moving from questions of agency to digital economy, the *#grabyourwallet* campaign also worked creatively with elements of the digital economy, but in ways that fuel as well as utilise information markets. Drawing on both publicly available tools and technological expertise, the #grabyourwallet campaign initially called for a boycott of businesses listed in a meticulous Google spreadsheet but, as the movement gained traction, Google's cap of 50 visitors per spreadsheet limited its growth. Coulter then employed others to turn her starter spreadsheet into a website. In addition, a Chrome Plugin later became available, enabling pop-up messages about Trump connections when entering the website of a business on the boycott list. What this case also suggests is that while the action called for by *#grabyourwallet* is one of marketplace activism through rejecting Trump brands, this activism itself relied, in part, on the 'big players' of the digital economy to mobilise consumers. There is thus a tension here between 'resisting' the consumer market through responsible consumer choice while also working with and through digital platforms that are intent on the commodification of information.

Deletion and the case of *#deleteuber* and *#deletefacebook*

Deleting social media apps is a type of boycott based on refusing specific ways that digital and internet technologies mediate social relations. Our second case study looks at two relevant examples through the Twitter hashtag campaigns *#deleteuber* and *#deletefacebook*. These accounts are not comprehensive, but they identify some common characteristics. In early 2017, then President Trump issued an executive order banning refugees and

immigrants from seven mainly Muslim countries from entering the USA. Protests followed, and in support a taxi union in New York City called on its members to stop offering cab rides for the day from New York's Kennedy airport. It later became clear that cab service Uber had, during this strike time, not only continued offering rides but had also used 'surge pricing' to raise the prices of rides as a way of coping with high demand. What seemed to be profiteering from the cab strike was revealed when Uber announced it had suspended surge pricing. Soon after, a hashtag *#deleteuber* appeared on Twitter (Cresci, 2017; Isaac, 2017). This also seemed a low-cost, perhaps slacktivist, protest as there was an almost direct rival, Lyft, that people could use. A further burst of activity followed the news that then Uber CEO Travis Kalanick was on an official economic advisory committee appointed by Trump, which led to Kalanick resigning from that committee (Won, 2017). Later, further scandals at Uber at times revived the hashtag.

While analysing tweets retrospectively is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, some tweets from a hashtag can be retrospectively collected through the weblink Twitter provides.[3] Despite significant limitations of this data, the dates of tweets using the hashtag #deleteuber were extractable, providing a timeline of such tweets. The results suggest a passing Twitter storm; with the first use of the hashtag in 2011, but no more than once or twice on any day for the subsequent 6 years until tweets using the hashtag reached 61 in our sample on the day of the taxi protest. The day after the

[3] The data set used in this article for *#deleteuber* and *#deletefacebook* analysis was collected from tweets retrieved from the source https://twitter.com/hashtag/deleteuber and https://twitter.com/hashtag/deletefacebook, both viewed in February 2018. This data has the advantage of being able to retrospectively collect tweets and was employed for that reason. Though sampling from the twitter app is preferable in many contexts, retrospective analysis requires additional methods. There are significant limitations to this data which should be noted. First, the initial collection in February 2018 found tweets back to 2011; however, an attempt to repeat collection two months later only found tweets back to February 2017. Second, the data is in an extremely messy form, making it difficult to extract reliable data, meaning that dates of tweets became the baseline of reliable data from this method. Third, it is not clear what proportion of the total tweets with a particular hashtag are available and for how long. Accordingly, results should be treated with caution and only the most significant results from both data collections have been used in this article.

protest tweets reached 490, then immediately dropped back to 157 the following day until, by the second week of February 2017, tweets were back to only a few a day.

These are indicators of a classic twitter storm (Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). There is a steep and sudden take off in attention followed by an almost as swift drop-off in tweets. Tweeting here is meant to be an amplification of the substance of the protest, which was consumers deleting their Uber accounts. But the twitter storm also raises the question of whether tweeting becomes a protest in-itself, creating a form of clicktivism which satisfies moral qualms without having to do anything more substantial (Halupka, 2014; White, 2010). Here, individual digital consumption actions (sending and reading tweets and retweets) are called for to promote those actions becoming digital consumption practices; that is, where enough people taking similar actions (deleting an app) makes a pattern that, in turn, makes an activist intervention. There have been claims about the loss of users to Uber in this period being significant, with the figure of 200,000 deleted accounts following the campaign's peak periods reported based on a leak from Uber staff (Stat, 2017). However, Uber's revenue rose in the last quarter of 2017, following the early year protest (though it is hard to tell if this is from increased rides or changes in revenue gathering mechanisms). At the time of the protests, Uber was a loss-making company but large financial losses for Uber were true for it prior to (and after) the protests (Lashinsky, 2018; Le Febvre and Armstrong, 2018).

In 2017, a second deletion campaign occurred as a scandal broke over then Facebook (now Meta) around the use of its data by the firm Cambridge Analytica to influence a USA Presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum. This widely reported scandal made clear the extent of personal information being kept on users and how that information was being both used by Facebook and being sold to a range of companies (Anon, 2018). As with Uber, a hashtag (*#deletefacebook*) became popular as the scandal spread and deepened. Tweets were collected, though it was only possible to do so from just after the campaign started (March 31, 2018) and a peak was already evident. The subsequent picture is similar to the *#deleteuber* campaign with a peak of tweets followed by a rapid drop-off, such that by the end of April tweets were minimal. There were occasional repeated smaller spikes, usually related to later stories of Facebook and privacy.

One market research report suggested that over 50% of UK Facebook users had changed their privacy settings as a result of the scandal (though it is impossible to know if the *#deletefacebook* campaign contributed to such changes) and 5% had deleted their Facebook accounts altogether (Tan, 2018). However, by the end of 2017, Facebook was reporting a worldwide 14% increase in daily active users to 1.4 billion and a 14% increase in monthly active users to 2.13 billion (Facebook, 2018). In addition, leaving Facebook is more complex than leaving Uber, as some obvious replacements – such as Instagram – are owned by Facebook (Hern, 2019). Evidence, then, is at best ambiguous over whether this campaign led to significant numbers of deletions and probably suggests little effect.

#deletefacebook seems another classic Twitter storm. Similar to *#deleteuber*, and unlike *#grabyourwallet*, there is no clear evidence of leaders or a group of contributors who focused the protest. Rather, in both *#deletion* campaigns, the impetus came from the events surrounding the beleaguered companies and the communicative abilities of twitter users to easily mobilise by creating a hashtag. Both campaigns appear also to be reactive and decentralised.

Reactive here simply means these are boycott's responding to specific events. The events trigger the possibility of a boycott by drawing on a flurry of publicity across media. Even if we now confer the idea of a campaign on these #delete storms, it seems that these were more closely related to events than to ongoing pressure. There are websites with advice on alternatives to Uber and Facebook and instructions on how to delete the apps and accounts, there are sometimes also celebrities or individuals with significant numbers of followers who use the hashtag; however, there appears to be no ongoing organising. Decentralisation accordingly appears to be both real and to be more evanescent and 'storm-like' than events that might lead to ongoing relations between activists that build a campaign. In this sense, both #delete campaigns relied on a particular form of digital agency.

These two points of being reactive to events and being decentralised also relate to the way these campaigns, by their nature, rely on and incite further use of social media, similar to the way *#grabyourwallet* provides informational fuel for some digital companies. The partial implication of these two campaigns is, then, that whatever Uber or Facebook lost (and the evidence for

loss is at best thin) was Twitter's gain. This gain was a fuelling of further information consumption that drives the digital economy, particularly the practice of harvesting data from users' activities to feed monetisation through ads. In this sense, the #delete campaigns examined here may appear to be consumer boycotts, but they also unintentionally promote consumption of digital commodities.

Digitalising the buycott: The case of Connecting Good

Having explored boycotts so far, buycotts need a brief explanation (Hilton, 2003). Buycotts consist of endorsing the purchase of particular products, services or enterprises. For the most part, this has translated into advocating the use of alternative economic spaces (the farmers' market as opposed to the supermarket) or alternative product types (fair trade as opposed to mainstream). In doing so, the buycott, like the boycott, draws on tropes of consumer power. The buycott works with a calculative logic of the 'good' or at least the 'better', identifying which products and businesses are deserving of consumer spend according to how those products conform to values such as environmental sustainability, fair trade, worker rights, animal rights and so on.

Digital technologies, especially the app and social media, have proven valuable for buycott tactics. One of the most prominent of consumer activist apps, Buycott, lists hundreds of ethical consumption campaigns, providing information to users on products to be avoided or purchased based on crowd-sourced information about the record of each company. Indeed, Buycott has already been the subject of considerable analysis, because the app speaks of both the digitally mediated possibilities of political organising while re-asserting a capitalist logic of values-driven consumer choice (Eli et al., 2016; Hawkins and Horst, 2020; Humphery and Jordan, 2018).

In our third case study, we draw attention to a somewhat different, digitally enabled buycott strategy in the New Zealand-based group CoGo (Connecting Good). Drawing on models of social and environmental accreditation, developed within areas such as organics and fair trade, CoGo was established as a registered charity in 2010 (under the banner of Conscious Consumers) for

the purpose of identifying and accrediting ethical traders in the New Zealand hospitality industry. CoGo continues to be an accrediting body, by 2022 operating across various market sectors, including hospitality, food retail, fashion and transport (nz.cogo.co/our-accreditation). Like other ethical consumption accrediting schemes, CoGo has awarded symbols or 'badges' (aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) to both businesses and products that meet or are working towards a 'respect for people, planet and animals' (CoGo, 2020). By 2013, this focus on accreditation was supported by the launch of the Conscious Consumer (CoGo) App, which provides consumers with information on hundreds of CoGo registered businesses.

All this is by no means novel. Similar smart interfaces supporting ethical consumption have been developed, but the CoGo team markets itself as having a certain edge. Not only does the CoGo App boast a polished interface, the CoGo group combines business accreditation with app-based consumer membership as a basis for its evolving commercial model of information and data brokerage. The CoGo App registers individual consumers and the values they prioritise, such as waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, responsible investment and so on. In doing so, the CoGo app acts as a hub that connects ethical businesses and buyers in a 'feedback loop' (nz.cogo.co/impact-framework). Through the CoGo App, businesses can directly promote their trade to a targeted set of ethical consumers. Conversely, these consumers can 'vote' for certain businesses and the values they represent not simply by frequenting a particular enterprise, but by having their patronage recorded by linking their payments to their CoGo membership. Each time the CoGo App user makes a purchase at a registered business, they contribute to CoGo's consumer database. This data is then mined to provide reports to businesses on the spending and values profile of their customers, while also providing broader aggregate information on the market activity of all CoGo members.

In effect, this is a hybrid model of both commercialised activist agency and triple bottom line business innovation. The focus is on the construction of an ethical market, forged through the 'responsibilisation' of business as much as the consumer. Income to CoGo is generated through registering, accrediting and supplying businesses with consumer data. Importantly, all data supplied is anonymous, collective and aggregate in nature, and CoGo App users are

under no obligation to link their payments to membership. Nevertheless, the brokerage of consumer data is central to the CoGo model, as is their emphasis on 'changing business to change the world'. The latter aim is undergirded by CoGo's 'impact framework' through which businesses are advised on meeting social and environmental sustainability measures and awarded further 'badges' as they make 'practice improvements'. This approach initially proved successful, and CoGo went global. A UK branch and UK-based app was launched in 2018, at the same time that the group re-branded in both the UK and New Zealand under the Connecting Good (CoGo) banner. As an accredited 'benefit corporation', informed by a philosophy of caring capitalism, CoGo works unashamedly with a purely consumer and business-oriented model of change. Downloading the app is referred to as 'joining the movement' and is promoted through slogans such 'ethical living made easy'.

CoGo thus sits at the least contestatory end of consumer activism, seemingly reducing a social movement to shopping in the right places and relinquishing one's spending data. Political agency here is little more than an amorphous ethics of market choice. This delimitation connects in some respects to the nature of the buycott itself. As Kelm and Dohle (2018) have argued, the consumer boycott tends to be a more outwardly collective activity than the buycott. Indeed, it might be said that where the boycott constitutes consumer choice as organised protest, the buycott speaks of a less dramatic and far more diffuse affirmation of products and businesses. More broadly, as Eli and colleagues (2016) have noted, digitally-based invocations of a vote-with-your-wallet consumer power work through a binary construction of political action as consumption or non-consumption that both continue to be framed within capitalist consumerism. While this reiterates a well-worn critique of ethical consumption, the CoGo app stands as a particularly clear example of commodity-centric activism. This is reinforced by notable limits in the functionality of the app itself; which provides app users with little input into app design and content and does not enable communication between CoGo 'members', further limiting political agency. Here, of all our case studies, we see perhaps the most vigorous use of the digital to render political consumerism as atomised agency and yet, CoGo, unlike the delete campaigns examined above, overcomes an agential evanescence by drawing consumers into an ongoing relationship to CoGo campaigns.

CoGo can be further problematised by its recalibration of consumption agency as data and this dovetails with our second analytical axis that emphasises the way the digital economy produces the consumer through commodification of information. This strategy certainly offers CoGo a connection to digital economy companies that are thirsty for data. The data trace of ethical activities becomes a kind of informational activism and CoGo's claim of enabling the consumer to shape business ethics is not without foundation. Moreover, CoGo can be seen as moralising conventional practices of corporate data brokerage; an enormously powerful industry based on the massive monitoring and selling of consumer information (Crain, 2018). CoGo, in contrast, brokers with a commitment to consent, privacy and transparency in relation to the collection and distribution of data, while also refraining from personalising consumer information. But what CoGo, and CoGo members, cannot escape is the commodification of this data itself. Ironically, CoGo App users render themselves as another commodity in the chains of both ethical consumption and of the digital economy. This is the inescapable consequence of monetizing CoGo data and is hardly a challenge to the commercialisation of identity brought by the digital realm. As Crain (2018: 98) notes the '...commodification of personal information has become one of the Internet's foremost business models'.

Like other ethical consumption applications, the CoGo app involves contradictions. It effectively leverages a form of consumer politics that speaks to what Ward and Vreese (2011) have called socially conscious consumption that is particularly appealing to digitally active citizens. But more significantly, the CoGo app shifts the gaze of ethical consumption to the realm of commerce as much as to the agency of the ethical consumer. This is important, since it potentially displaces the primacy of the consumer in discourses of ethical consumption and re-frames this discourse as an ethics of social justice and sustainability that is about distributive and retail practices as much as purchases (Humphery, 2017). The CoGo App continually re-centres 'consumer choice' as political agency while feeding a growing digital economy based on information brokerage.

Discussion

Our three case studies examine the complexity of agency when consumer activism enters the digital realm. Across the Twitter-based hashtag campaigns examined above, we saw an agential evanescence in which the ease of tweeting a hashtag led to intense bursts of activity but also uncertainty in both the aftermath and longevity of a consumer-centred campaign. Indeed, the critical account provided by theories of slacktivism seems confirmed in our account of the *#delete* campaigns. Against this, both the *#grabyourwallet* and CoGo cases produced more sustained campaigns and platforms for consumer agency mobilisation, though they did so precisely by not relying on social media alone and by generating formal organisations. We will explore these points briefly.

First, against the slacktivism critique, we suggest that analysis of digital consumer activism needs to look more widely than events like twitter storms – because, though these events may indeed merely constitute morally reassuring and politically inconsequential action, they must also be connected to a broader activist context to be fully understood. Our work suggests that digital media can only ever be integrated within ethical consumption campaigns as one of a range of techniques and strategies and any attempt to implement activism solely through apps or social media campaigns is likely to produce at best passing moments of publicity. The two campaigns of *#grabyourwallet* and CoGo avoided agential evanescence primarily because both are more than social media events and have some form of leadership and campaign format using a range of activist tactics, thus establishing ongoing forms of agency. Indeed, *#grabyourwallet* was developed by a practitioner skilled in social media but has extended to a range of activist resources. CoGo offers a business-based and institutionalised approach, which nevertheless ensures that it is an ongoing resource for digital consumer activism, however circumscribed this is by an ideology of consumer choice. Our argument, here, should not be read as a claim for the efficacy of hierarchical organisation but as a reassertion of the continuing need for a consumption politics forged through structured, diverse and ongoing campaigning, rather than through a sole reliance on digital media. Our examples reflect known tensions in the creation of agency through activism; tensions over forms of leadership, organisation, inclusivity and collective

decision-making – and our findings argue that digital resources do not overcome such complexities.

The second area of complexity that we have explored concerns the dilemma of using digital industries to protest forms of ethically dubious consumption while being drawn, at the same time, into fuelling digital forms of consumption that are themselves ethically questionable. In all the case studies above, we foreground that different kinds of digital actions, from hashtags to apps, generate information of the kind that is central to the capitalist digital economy. CoGo extends this to its logical conclusion, by institutionalising the sale of information generated from ethical consumers. What might digitally aid a consumer to take effective choices in supporting, for example, living wages for labourers, will at the same time generate information valuable to data brokers and digital platforms dedicated to private profit. Here, the complexity of agency within consumption practices is foregrounded, because ethical agency in using, for example, ethical apps to identify and buy ethical goods, is linked to semi-hidden digital consumption practices that can redirect such ethical agency toward profit-oriented advertising and other aspects of the digital economy that are ungoverned by ethics beyond profit. This contradiction is the playing-out in a digital form of the longstanding ambiguity within ethical consumption and consumer activism campaigns that advocate a politics opposing particular forms and levels of consumption by promoting other 'ethical' forms of exchange that may leave a capitalist market logic of consumption largely uncontested. Within our case studies, consumer activism is foregrounded in *#grabyourwallet* and CoGo while the logics of accumulation of the digital economy are either left hidden or are treated as a tactic to be taken advantage of. In neither case are the ethical problems produced by the digital economy addressed. Locating our analysis at the intersection of the digital economy and ethical consumption in the digital realm allows us to identify how a longstanding issue within ethical consumption—how can consumption be contested by consuming differently? – has reappeared in a new form particular to digital contexts.

Conclusion

As we argue, analysing the digitisation of consumer activism exists within, and points to, shifting political dynamics. Through three case studies, this article has examined the connection between digital media activism and the politics of consumption in two key ways; first, by drawing out issues relating to the nature of agency in consumer activism in digital contexts and, second, by drawing attention to the digital economy's production of consumers and the meaning of this for consumer activism in the digital realm. By locating our analysis at the intersection of digital media activism and the digital economy, we identify this conjunction of agency and consumer identity as key to understanding the emerging dynamics of a digital consumer politics.

Digital consumer activism is currently expanding. There are an increasing number of apps supporting and reporting on ethical consumption; and now also there are digitally native forms, such as Sleeping Giants and Stop Funding Hate that mobilise for divestment against digital advertising practices that promote hate speech. Our analysis has focused on digitally-mediated boycott and buycott campaigns – as well as on forms of data brokerage – that change participation in consumption activism and transform the ways in which consumer power operates. As we experience more ways in which the digital transforms consumption and consumer activism, we have outlined key areas of conceptualisation and concern in relation to digital media activism and the digital economy.

We also argue for a media practice approach that asserts the importance of the complex concept of agency when examining the politics of consumption – as the very point of this consumer activism, however successful or unsuccessful, is to engender agencies through which alternative forms of consumption can address issues of environmental sustainability, labour rights, global inequality, and social and cultural justice. The digitisation of consumer activism has resulted in a reconfiguration of, rather than escape from, familiar political fault lines. Digital consumer activism amplifies rather than evades complex questions of political agency. Moreover, such digital activism signals a developing intersection of consumer politics and the digital economy that simultaneously speaks of political possibilities and of private profit. This is not to suggest that digital media should be abandoned for

political activism simply because that may simultaneously produce profit for digital corporations. Rather, our analysis points to the need to grasp and explore such complexities both in research and in activism, and thereby to create an effective digital consumption politics through commonly used forms of media. Overall, we are witnessing a new, digitally inflected, intersection of consumer activism and capitalism that both enables and limits protest and change.

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Neoliberalism in a socialist state: Political economy of higher education in Vietnam

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abstract

Over the last three decades, Vietnam has experienced significant economic growth, with millions lifted out of extreme poverty through economic reforms and global economic integration. However, assumptions within this dominant discourse have largely gone unchallenged. This study aims to use a neoliberalism lens and critical theory approach to develop an alternative view of the current developmental trend in Vietnam. The analysis consists of three interconnected themes: political economy, higher education, and subjectivity. I argue that neoliberalism – as an economic paradigm – leads to the emergence of rent-seekers and a crony capitalist economy despite being under a socialist state. The dual impact of the rent-seeking economy and neoliberal globalization has promoted higher education neoliberalization, featuring financial autonomy, privatization, marketization, and Englishization. This transition also creates certain vulnerabilities that manifest through education commodification, ideological domination, and hegemony. Under such a system, educated youths exhibit characteristics of neoliberal subjectivity and experience a range of mental illnesses, disproportionately more than the general population. The study ends with a discussion on the tensions (or lack thereof) between socialism and neoliberalism.

Introduction

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a one-party state, with the ruling party – the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) – having no opposition parties that

are legally tolerated. Although the economy has undoubtedly been liberalized, the state remains a soft authoritarian regime (Thayer, 2010). Vietnam is a lower middle-income country with 97 million people. Social-culturally, the country is shaped by internal conflicts and a long history of struggle against Chinese domination, revolutionary wars against French colonial rule, and American neocolonial control. The intertwinement of historical matriarchy, Confucian patriarchy, and Western ideologies has also influenced Vietnamese society deeply (Do and Brennan, 2015). Vietnam has been experiencing political stability and high socio-economic growth and development over the past three decades. Higher education is a top priority to build a workforce for globalization and sustained economic growth, contributing to the legitimacy of CPV and overall political stability (Phuong and Chai, 2018; Thayer, 2010).

The current stage of capitalism, known as neoliberalism, upholds capitalist realism – the perception that capitalism is not only the only viable political and economic system, but that an alternative to capitalism is unimaginable (Brown, 2015; Fisher, 2009). The neoliberal project was established by capitalist elites in response to a crisis of profitability in developed economies in the late 1970s after three decades of Keynesian economic policies (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Wright, 2019). Neoliberalism is not a unified project because there is no such thing as pure neoliberalism, and the term is subjected to misunderstanding and abuse (Birch and Springer, 2019). As Fletcher (2019: 537) suggested, neoliberalism can be understood as a multidimensional process that manifests diversely in various contexts with a framework 'comprising an overarching philosophy, a set of general principles through which this philosophy is expressed, the specific policies via which these principles are implemented and the forms of subjectivity all of this seeks to cultivate.'

Birch and Springer (2019: 473) noted a common criticism of neoliberalism: 'why not just critique capitalism instead?' Concerning Vietnam, the socialist state label and the communist party are dependent on the propaganda that capitalism was historically banished. Implying that capitalism still exists in Vietnam can be considered anti-progressive (To et al., 2019). Such a direct challenge to the CPV's legitimacy can potentially face censorship issues. Furthermore, the discourse of global market integration proliferates while

compatibility between capitalism and market socialism remains considerably overlooked (Thayer, 2010). Thus, neoliberalism is useful as an alternative politico-economic critique of capitalism in Vietnam. For this paper, neoliberalism is treated as an economic paradigm with neoliberal principles, consisting of the promotion of free markets and free trade, business activity de/reregulation, commodification, privatization of public enterprises, and marketization (Fletcher, 2019; Harvey, 2005; Reinsberg et al., 2021).

There are growing bodies of scholarship on market-oriented Vietnam and its higher education (Warren, 2020), most of which assume that the current developmental trend is good. This development, however, warrants more critical scrutiny (Pham, 2020). The purpose of this study is to challenge the dominant discourse by putting forward three main arguments. Firstly, I problematize the developmental trend by positing that a neoliberal economic paradigm has been incrementally implemented in Vietnam despite being under a socialist structure. Secondly, with a critical theory approach, I claim that the neoliberal economic paradigm has allowed socialist higher education to be neoliberalized. Higher education simultaneously promotes and legitimizes neoliberalism under socialism. Forms of subjectivity are essential to Fletcher's (2019) multidimensional framework. So lastly, I explore and develop the concepts of *neoliberal student* and *neoliberal other* as subjectivities produced by the neoliberal educational system. The terms university and higher education are somewhat interchangeable throughout the paper.

Neoliberalism in Vietnam

Neoliberalism and inequality go hand in hand, and many recent socio-economic studies show growing inequality worldwide caused by the capitalist market economy (Brown, 2015; Stańczyk, 2021). Inequality in Vietnam is also growing along with the economy (Nguyễn, 2017). According to Oxfam's calculations, the wealthiest people in Vietnam earn more in a day than the poorest do in 10 years (ibid.). In theory, a socialist state should be more egalitarian. Such glaring economic inequality in Vietnam suggests that elements of neoliberalism are at work under the socialist state. Gainsborough (2010) assessed that neoliberalism has little impact on the political realm in Vietnam. Conversely, I claim that neoliberalism exists in Vietnam as an

economic paradigm. Along with political corruption, economic neoliberalization has facilitated the rise of rent-seekers, resulting in a crony capitalist economy and rising inequality.

Neoliberal practices are apparent in recent reforms by the Vietnamese government (Ngo, 2020). In 1986, the CPV initiated *Đổi Mới* (meaning innovate or renovate) reforms to transform Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. The reforms aimed to address a severe economic crisis, with inflation soaring over 700 percent (Thoburn, 2013). Since then, the Vietnamese government has extensively engaged with neoliberal institutions to expedite its economic reforms. First, through conditional lending, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank put pressure on the government to restructure the economy and liberate the market based on neoliberal principles (Evans and Hai, 2005). Second, the country's key donors – the United States and Japan, which have been criticized for heavily relying on neoliberal economic policy – also advise Vietnam on its structural adjustment (Bix, 2013; Evans and Hai, 2005). Third, in 2007, Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), a neoliberal economic enforcer for the world economy (Slobodian, 2018; Walsh et al., 2021). Vietnam continues to integrate itself into the global economy through different free trade agreements with the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2018, and with the European Union in 2019.

Crony capitalism (or rentier capitalism) is a negative inclination by rent-seekers within capitalist systems (Sayer, 2020; Shammas, 2018). Rent-seekers seek to acquire unearned or undeserved revenue through close connections with bureaucrats and government manipulation (Ngo and Tarko, 2018; Sayer, 2020; Shammas, 2018). Reinsberg et al. (2021) found that the structural reforms authorized by the IMF facilitate corruption and give rise to crony capitalism by enabling collusion between rent-seekers and bureaucrats. Vuving (2010) suggested that the politics of Vietnam can be imagined as a game between three key players in the central government: regime conservatives – who are more likely to choose closed-door and party-first policies; modernizers – who prefer openness and the development of the country as a whole; and rent-seekers – who do whatever brings them the most money and benefits by extracting wealth from society. Rent-seekers have been using money to gain access to the CPV and utilizing that political

monopoly to collect hyperprofit (Vuving, 2010; 2019). China is another influential player due to its proximity and powerful influence (Vuving, 2010). China, which has been described as having 'neoliberalism with distinctly Chinese characteristics,' has indirectly contributed to the rise of rent-seekers in Vietnam (Harvey, 2005: 157; Vuving, 2019). Corruption in Vietnam is believed to be endemic, and elite rent-seeking is likely to remain prevalent (Gregory, 2016). Therefore, the case of neoliberalism in Vietnam is not only recognizable by Vietnam's integration into the global capitalist economy through economic neoliberalization, but the phenomenon can also be observed from the signs of corruption and rent-seeking facilitated by such neoliberalization.

Evans and Hai (2005) documented the early stages of the 'equitization'[1] of state-owned enterprises, which played a central role in the neoliberal economic reforms. They found that, during the equitization process, the rights of Vietnamese workers (e.g., social welfare, permanent contract, etc.) were largely neglected. Progressive labor laws and state-sponsored unions are being weakened to accommodate external capitalist actors, causing labor unrest in recent years (Tran, 2013). To et al. (2019) found that corruption and collusion are evident in the case of land accumulation and concentration, predominantly by foreign firms. The authors also noticed a shift to the neoliberal logic of privatization, with land leases being non-tradable in 1988 to the current trend of land commercialization and large-scale land concentration. Provincial bureaucrats can enrich themselves by seeking rent from foreign direct investment influx (Kim, 2019). Ngo and Tarko (2018) found that three major industries – textile-garment, telecommunications, and motorcycle – operate under the rent-seeking regime and involve different foreign actors. Most notably, the motorcycle industry involves a trilateral rent-seeking relationship between three countries – Vietnam, Japan, and China. As the economy continues to grow, the middle class will likely stay politically conservative and generally satisfied, and rent-seekers will continue to consolidate their power and maximize profitability (Gregory, 2016; Ngo and Tarko, 2018). The Vietnamese economy is now crony capitalist due to its rent-seeking tendency.

[1] A Vietnamese-English term for privatization.

Socialism developments are vulnerable to pressure from external capitalist actors (Domingues, 2022). ʻAfter three decades of reforms, despite the label *Socialist* in its official name, Vietnam has become largely similar to capitalist countries in the world, except for a state-owned sector that is ineffective and irresistibly diminishing' (Lap, 2020: 128, emphasis in original). The economic paradigm prescribed by the neoliberal institutions (IMF, World Bank, and WTO) and the free trade agreements have facilitated Vietnam's integration into the globalized capitalist economy. The neoliberal economic reforms were effective in establishing genuine markets and liberating the economy from state control, as indicated by high growth rates and significant poverty reduction (Ngo and Tarko, 2018; Thayer, 2010). Schwenkel and Leshkowich (2012) claim that it is good for Vietnam to have turned to neoliberalism. At the same time, neoliberalism has also given rise to crony capitalism, with a new governing elite of rent-seekers, focusing on extracting profits from society. The rhetoric of the communist revolution and socialism becomes nothing more than empty propaganda for the *red capitalists* (Davies, 2015) or, in this case, red rent-seekers. Vietnamese neoliberalism is approached pragmatically rather than ideologically (Evans and Hai, 2005). If being a part of the global capitalist economy enables sustained growth, Vietnam's governing elite is likely to remain committed to economic neoliberalization.

Neoliberal university

Universities operate under a form of contract with society (Brown, 2014). For a certain degree of autonomy and financial privilege, universities, in return, perform important functions of discovering, authenticating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge (Brown, 2014; Giroux, 2020). However, affordable and accessible higher education has gradually been dismantled by neoliberal policies (Brown, 2014; Brown, 2015). Most problems in higher education are likely related to a lack of public funding (Giroux, 2020). According to neoliberal logic, any institution in a free-market economy should be privatized rather than nationalized (Wright, 2019). Following this logic, it would be beneficial for educational institutions if the state cut public funding and relinquished control. Universities would become more competitive in the free market as private capital would be permitted to flow into higher education. In other words, problems with higher education can be solved by

policies that diminish financial privileges and expose institutions to market mechanism and private funding. Higher education neoliberalization affects both the natural and social sciences: widespread influence of pharmaceutical corporations in medical schools (Glauser, 2013); corporate propaganda in economic education and practices (Collison, 2003); a decline of the humanities as perceived to be risky majors to find jobs (Shumway, 2017), to name a few. Neoliberal universities no longer serve as an independent source of information about society or play a role in the betterment of humankind (Brown, 2014; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020), thus breaching the contract with society.

Since the role has changed from public good to private interest (Giroux, 2020), universities must reorganize to accommodate the new role. The neoliberal university, which can be depicted as an *edufactory*, resembles a profit-driven business, operated by neoliberal managers (Aureli, 2015; Giroux, 2020; Peetz, 2019). Public education is gradually privatized, while not-for-profit private education increasingly seeks more profits and higher market competitiveness (Shumway, 2017). As neoliberal organizations, universities rely on strict centralized hierarchical management and bureaucratic processes, reduce departmental autonomy, and focus on productivity through hypercompetition (Martin, 2016; Verhaeghe, 2014). Teaching, learning, and research are driven by assessment and performance targets, leading to escalating pressures to secure grants, publish in top journals, and win awards (Martin, 2016; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020). Universities are also in tune with the needs of businesses to provide the skills, knowledge, and qualifications to build the workforce (Giroux, 2020). The terms educational consumers, human capital, knowledge workers, and so on are good indicators of neoliberal universities (Verhaeghe, 2014). In short, power in neoliberal universities is structurally shifted away from academics, management culture is corporatized, and the universities operate like factories to produce ever more graduates and research publications.

Making a case against neoliberalizing higher education in Vietnam

Neoliberalism's influence continues to pervade Vietnamese socialist higher education, whereas the Soviet higher education model[2] has gradually been renounced (Lap, 2020; Ngo, 2020). Policies under the neoliberal economic paradigm have particularly pressured public sector organizations like universities to restructure to become more neoliberal or market-oriented (Peetz, 2019). Examining laws and regulations might thus provide insight into how the Vietnamese government institutionalizes the neoliberal logic. A few noteworthy examples are №16/2015/NĐ-CP[1] on the *Autonomy of public education units* and №127/2018/NĐ-CP [2] on *The responsibility for state management of education*. These (de)regulations seek to implement institutional autonomy and accountability based more on market mechanisms and less on state control. Institutional autonomy is praised as one of the greatest achievements of Vietnamese higher education (Salmi and Pham, 2019). Proponents of institutional autonomy claim that, with financial autonomy and the ability to set tuition fees, Vietnamese universities would be more competitive, and the quality of education would be improved through market mechanisms (Chau, 2020; Parajuli et al., 2020; Pham, 2020). This claim has largely been criticized in the extant literature on the neoliberal university (Giroux, 2020; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020). Institutional autonomy can be interpreted as an introduction to the neoliberal concept of efficiency (Brüsemeister, 2002). Marketization and financialization of higher education facilitate the domination of capital (Hall and Bowles, 2016) rather than improving education quality.

Salmi and Pham (2019) assessed that marketization and privatization happen slowly but irreversibly. Since the early 1990s, 'socialization'[3] has consistently turned into privatization through mergers and acquisitions, with higher education being treated as a commodity to be traded by the private sector

[2] A highly centralized system in which all institutions were public, aiming to produce socialist citizens for socialism development (Lap, 2020).

[3] A Vietnamese-English term for nationalization. The term was originally associated with communism, referring to the collectivization of assets and resources; however, its current meaning is contested, and the process often involves private actors (M.T.N. Nguyen, 2018).

(Pham, 2020). As a result, despite the decrease in the number of Vietnamese universities, the number of non-public institutions increased between 2015 and 2017 (Truong, 2020). Privatization alone does not signify neoliberalization. Combined with the predominant theme of financial autonomy and profit-driven issues, these aspects become central to the neoliberal logic that is prevalent in higher education contexts (Phan and Dang, 2020). Favorable conditions enabled by the state government have allowed higher education to follow the neoliberal logic of marketization and privatization, resulting in university neoliberalization.

Nguyen et al. (2010) documented one of the first accounts of neoliberalized universities in Vietnam with the case study of the Vietnam National University in Hanoi. Their findings suggest that neoliberalization has been permitted and applied thoroughly at the university, even under a socialist political framework. One of the main themes that the authors identified is institutional autonomy, which pressured the university to become financially self-reliant. The downside of financial self-reliance is that academics and administrators have 'become increasingly subjected to the kinds of values that drive an intense pursuit of private profit' (Pham, 2020: 183). Other features of neoliberalization that were exhibited at the university include university-industry partnerships, adoption of corporate culture, and cost-effective operations (Nguyen et al., 2010). The most significant feature is the income diversification strategies through increased tuition fees and student enrollment, commercialization of academic research, and consulting services. The factor that allows the neoliberalization process to happen seamlessly is that academics and scholars are unaware of or unfamiliar with the ideas of neoliberalism (ibid.).

The change at Vietnam National University is not a rogue case but a leading model of the neoliberalization of Vietnamese higher education. Three decades under the neoliberal economic paradigm, education 'has witnessed a trend towards greater autonomy and openness, less state control and more marketization' (Salmi and Pham, 2019: 114). Universities must employ different strategies and practices (Lap, 2020) to cope with the change. An increasingly common practice is to offer more courses and programs with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) (Vu, 2020). English is not a neutral skill, and the rise of EMI in universities is not ideology-free. English is

believed to be a manifestation of neoliberalism (Manan and Hajar, 2022). In English-as-a-foreign-language countries, English is loaded with neoliberal spirits of marketability, competition, and economic success (Choi, 2021; Kubota, 2011; Manan and Hajar, 2022). Not only because English allows universities to internationalize, but it also allows them to advertise the promise of success with English proficiency. Consequently, the gradual adoption of EMI is another indicator of university neoliberalization. Another salient strategy is copying education models, curricula, and textbooks from the West (Lap, 2020). Moreover, students are regarded as consumers, and their demand for strong academia-industry partnerships is being met (Nguyen et al., 2010; Rizvi, 2020).

Another important manifestation is the revised *Higher education law* №08/2012/QH13 [3]. The law states that the primary role of higher education is to create a workforce for socialist development and to integrate the country into the global economy. The changes in the higher education environment can be seen as subtle compliance with capitalist ideology (Trần et al., 2014). Universities prioritize teaching market-based skills due to their role as the primary workforce providers for economic development (Phuong and Chai, 2018; Truong, 2020). Students also demand these skills for competitiveness in the job market (Giroux, 2020). This development parallels the global trend in the role of universities in educating a competitive workforce for globalization (Hall and Bowles, 2016). Unlike features of the global trend, Vietnamese university neoliberalization is still in its early stages and has different characteristics. Elements like curriculum design, leadership appointment, faculty recruitment, and pedagogy have been largely disregarded in the process (Chau, 2020). The features of university neoliberalization in Vietnam are the emergence of private universities, financial autonomy, internationalization through EMI, industry partnerships, and teaching globalized market-based skills.

Despite the burgeoning and explosive changes in higher education, there has been only a limited number of academic research on higher education in Vietnam (Warren, 2020). Among them is the book *Higher education in market-oriented socialist Vietnam*, edited by Phan Le Ha and Doan Ba Ngoc (2020), which provides most of the evidence for my argument about Vietnamese university neoliberalization. The research focuses primarily on reporting and

critiquing the organizational changes and new pressures on academics. For instance, switching from Vietnamese to EMI is an extremely complex process that requires training and development (Vu, 2020). Faculty members are frequently assigned targets that are intimately associated with financial outcomes (Pham, 2020). The critiques, however, place more of an emphasis on methods and practices than on justice and ideologies. It cannot be denied that neoliberalization has increased the number of people attending higher education from under four percent to 30 percent in just a few decades (Rizvi, 2020). I argue that such discussion of pedagogy vis-à-vis economic growth and global capitalist economy integration overlooks student perspectives and issues with socialism and coloniality specific to Vietnam. The analysis also predominantly focuses on practice and outcomes rather than ideology (de)construction and subjectivity. Furthermore, utilizing the logic of marketization and privatization as an attempt to improve education downplays the interrelated complexities of the dual influence of the rent-seeking economy and neoliberal globalization.

To dissect the complexities of neoliberalism in higher education in Vietnam from a fresh perspective, I use critical theory to analyze the existing empirical evidence in the aforementioned research. Critical perspectives are largely ignored, whereas the functionalist paradigm, which primarily explores practices or outcomes, is preferred for research in and on Vietnamese higher education. Grounded in Marxism, the critical theory approach to education research, as proposed by Strunk and Betties (2019), is a powerful tool for tracing power, domination, and exploitation. Critical theory can also unpack ideological construction, inequalities, and injustice through education (ibid). This approach is particularly useful because neoliberal higher education in a socialist state implies ideological friction and contradictions between capitalism and socialism. Another advantage of applying critical theory to research is that it allows researchers to focus on systems as opposed to individuals (Giroux, 2020; Strunk and Betties, 2019) in a way that can offer a critical overview of Vietnamese higher education. My analysis follows the framework put forth by Strunk and Betties (2019), which includes the commodification of education, ideological domination, and hidden curriculum.

Commodification of education through privatization

In this section, I focus specifically on the tuition fees at private universities as a central aspect of neoliberal privatization. Vietnamese universities have been bought and sold by an increasingly wealthy group of investors since 2013 (Pham, 2020). It can thus be assumed that private universities are profitable businesses. Higher education is commodified in the sense that universities are being traded. These privatized universities have also been enjoying the privileges of less state control, more autonomy, and a flexible ceiling on tuition fees and enrollment quotas (Lap, 2020; Salmi and Pham, 2019). Institutional autonomy of higher education means that universities are expected to be financially self-supporting through partial or total reliance on tuition fees (Pham, 2020). Tuition fees at private universities tend to be two to three times higher than their public counterparts (Hayden and Le-Nguyen, 2020), and much higher at foreign-owned higher education institutions such as RMIT University Vietnam or British University Vietnam. More middle-class students consider private or foreign-owned universities as their top choices (Chau, 2020; Truong, 2020).

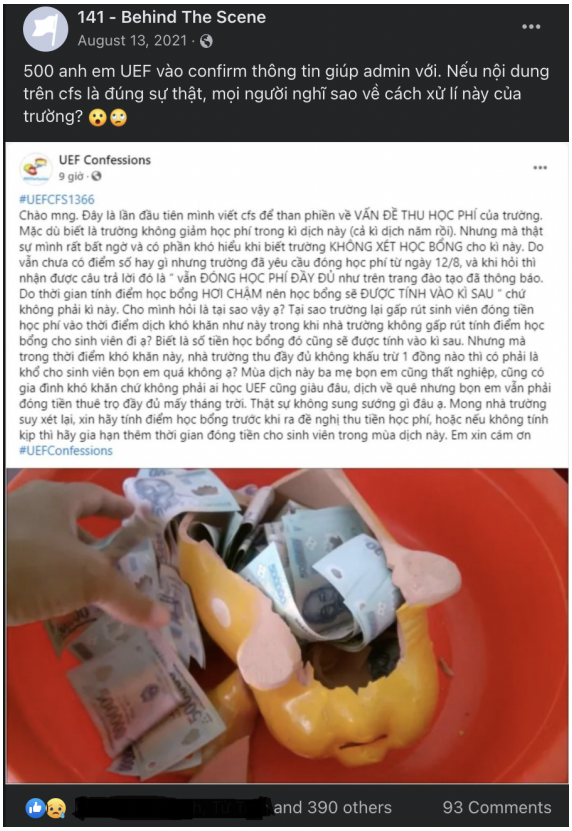

Figure 1: A screenshot of a Facebook post sharing a student's complaint about high tuition fees at UEF and how the student's parents were unable to pay the fees.

The logic of the market holds that competition encourages universities to maintain accessible and affordable tuition fees. Yet, tuition fees continue to rise at most Vietnamese universities due to the reliance on the fees. Tuitions have become a heavy burden for many parents due to the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Minh Giang, 2021a). The Ministry of Education and Training responded by recommending that higher education institutions refrain from raising tuition fees for the upcoming academic year (ibid.). Some universities were still determined to increase tuition. Two prominent examples are the University of Economics and Finance (UEF) and HUTECH University, both privately owned by HUTECH Education and located in Ho Chi Minh City. The universities stated that tuition fees could not be

reduced because online teaching costs more than the traditional mode of teaching and learning (Minh Giang, 2021b). This claim is unsubstantiated. Online mode tends to be cheaper than institution-based learning due to lower overall costs (Dhawan, 2020). Private universities rely on tuition fees for profitability (Pham, 2020). This for-profit drive has led to the commodification of education (Strunk and Betties, 2019). Those in power are incentivized to maintain the commodified educational system (often through oppression) to maintain their power and wealth (Strunk and Betties, 2019; Marx, 2013). The two overtly profit-driven universities came under fire from the student bodies for being exploitative, which led to protests against the institutions. The protests operate primarily online on social media. Figure 1 shows a Facebook post from one of the pages that protest UEF. The pages collect and disseminate information related to the education and service quality of the universities. A Facebook page even crowdfunds online advertisements to discourage high school students and their parents from applying to those universities.

Capitalist ideological domination under a socialist structure

Ngo (2020) claimed that higher education in Vietnam is still strongly attached to the socialist ideology because (1) the CPV governs the structure of the education system, (2) higher education contributes to the transition from a centrally-planned economy to market socialism, and (3) compulsory teachings of Marxist-Leninist philosophy and Ho Chi Minh thought. However, all three arguments can be dismissed. First, the state is relinquishing control of the system to facilitate the neoliberalization process of higher education, resulting in widely-celebrated institutional autonomy (Salmi and Pham, 2019). Second, Vietnam is now socialist only in name, but in practice, its economy is crony capitalist. Higher education, therefore, does not contribute to market socialism but to capitalism. Third, Marxism-Leninism and philosophy are consolidated into a single compulsory course in higher education (Salomon and Vu, 2007), delivered via transmissive lectures, and assessed with standardized tests. Education on socialism and communism is thus rendered decorative. Like Giroux's (2002) observation, courses that cannot be immediately converted to market value are either eliminated or technicized.

Alternatively, I argue that, even under a socialist structure, neoliberal capitalist ideology quickly takes hold and dominates higher education. Vietnam has been exposed to socialist and communist ideology in less than 100 years, whereas the culture and society were heavily 'sinicized'[4] by more than 1,000 years of Chinese occupation. Consequently, Confucianism influences Vietnamese education robustly (Ly, 2015). While neoliberalism and socialism dogmatically oppose each other, neoliberalism and Confucianism show compatibility in some respects (Ngo, 2020). First, both neoliberal logic and Confucian utilitarianism see education as a private investment and a tool for private gain. Second, Ngo (ibid.) argued that educational inequality produced by neoliberalism conflicts with the essential Confucian value of egalitarianism. However, the supposed Confucian value of egalitarianism did not exist, especially in higher education. The system of Confucian higher education was designed exclusively for men of the upper classes, while women and people of the lower classes were not able to access formal education (Ly, 2015). Both neoliberal and Confucian education sustain inequality. For these reasons, socialism does not shape higher education as much as neoliberal capitalism does due to its compatibility with Confucianism.

Neoliberalized Vietnamese universities are primarily concerned with economic development, human capital, workforce development, and global market integration by embracing vocational and technical education (DeJaeghere et al., 2021; Truong, 2020). This means reducing all levels of education to job training, prioritizing instrumental knowledge over substantive knowledge, and prioritizing workers over thinkers (Giroux, 2020). Gramsci (1971) suggested that such vocationalization seeks to produce working classes rather than ruling classes. Confucian higher education in Vietnam was criticized because it produced useless bureaucrats during the feudal era (Ly, 2015). Neoliberalized universities, rather than educating students to think critically and govern public life, transform students into human capital (or workers) for businesses and corporations. Ideological domination justifies oppressive activities and inequitable consequences as legitimate and fair by reifying the domination as a part of common sense (Strunk and Betties, 2019). Student-turned-workers and their role in

[4] A process through which non-Chinese societies are subjugated to Chinese culture.

economic development belong to this realm of common sense. Subtly imparted capitalist ideology remains unchallenged in socialist Vietnam.

Curriculum and pedagogy of hidden hegemony

As opposed to the visible yet ineffective method of teaching socialism or communism, capitalist ideology is effectively disseminated because it 'is taught in ways that are often subtle, even invisible' through hidden assumptions in curricula (Strunk and Betties, 2019: 74). A hidden curriculum is a set of lessons – including norms, values, and beliefs – that are taught in the classroom and learned during socialization processes in a way that is not openly intended (Apple, 2019). Hidden curricula function as a key tool for manufacturing consent and maintaining the hegemony of dominant groups (Apple, 2019; Gramsci, 1971, 1995). More universities in Vietnam are starting to teach market-oriented and competency-based skills, intending to create a workforce for a globalized knowledge economy (DeJaeghere et al., 2021; Phuong and Chai, 2018). The higher education sector does not yet have a strategic plan for curriculum improvement to achieve such a goal (Trần et al., 2014). The most popular approach is the wholesale borrowing of curricula, textbooks, and educational models from Western English-speaking countries (Lap, 2020). Education in English-speaking countries tends to reinforce global corporate propaganda and neoliberal ethics (Collison, 2003; Lakes, 2008). Furthermore, the dominant Western knowledge, texts, and social practices in curricula are still influenced by the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and privilege (Giroux, 1992a, 1992b). The wholesale borrowing of Western curricula and textbooks not only furthers capitalist ideological domination, but Vietnamese universities also risk engaging in a collective unremembering of the history of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism.

Englishization of the curriculum has enjoyed immense popularity in countries where English is a foreign language (Choi, 2021; Dang, 2021; Kubota, 2011). English as a language has long been understood both as a symbol of the opportunity for national success in the world economy and as a capital for individual success and private wealth through future employability (Choi, 2021; Dang, 2021). In South Korea, English is an increasingly recognized symbol of social reproduction and a mechanism for expressing class-based privileges (Choi, 2021). EMI has been fast adopted by Vietnamese universities

to internationalize and improve education quality (Dang, 2021; Vu, 2020). However, it was found that the primary driving force for EMI in Vietnamese universities is social status (Pham and Doan, 2020). EMI courses and programs are relatively more expensive than those taught in Vietnamese. The advantages of English proficiency are thus reserved for the financially privileged. Neoliberalized universities are also obliged to follow the logic of neocolonialism that 'undermine[s] local and indigenous forms of knowledge, as well as theoretical and critical forms of knowing' (Gyamera and Burke, 2018: 462). And educators are impartial providers of decontextualized information (Saunders, 2007). When it is taught that 'some ways of knowing, establishing knowledges, or representing knowledges as *better* than others, they also teach that the ideology aligned with those *better* ways is superior' (Strunk and Betties, 2019: 75, emphasis in original). When English as a language is used as an indicator of quality education, class privileges, and status, the Vietnamese language is reflexively assumed to be inferior (Dang, 2021). Yet, this kind of pedagogy with hidden values and ideologies is practiced unsuspectedly.

In all mechanisms of oppression, an alternative to brute force and open repression is the ability of the dominant group to obtain the consent of the oppressed (Gramsci, 1971; Pyke, 2010). Hegemony is the dominance of one group over others through systems of reality construction, ideological reproduction, and knowledge circulation throughout society (Apple, 2019; Gramsci, 1971). This hegemony is legitimized by education that informs social norms, organizational practices, bureaucratic procedures, and common sense (Apple, 2019; Foucault, 2008; Pyke, 2010). Using critical theory, I have identified three themes within the ongoing neoliberalization process of Vietnamese higher education: (1) privatization has allowed education to be commodified and traded, resulting in high tuition fees; (2) capitalist ideology is subtly taught in a socialist environment; and (3) hegemony of the West and superiority of the English language. As long as its contribution to economic growth still holds, the power of neoliberal higher education and the Western capitalist hegemony it perpetuates remain uncontested. But a question remains: who are the kinds of people this education system produces?

Neoliberal students and student others

> Today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. Twenty-first century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society. (Han, 2015: 8)

In such an achievement society mediated by neoliberal governmentality, the people are no longer obedience-subjects but achievement-subjects – or neoliberal subjects (Han, 2017; Kiersey, 2009). The great ingenuity of capitalism, according to Marx (2013), is not only that relative surplus (in the form of profit) from production by wage workers goes to capitalist classes, but also the constant reproduction of the wage workers as wage workers. However, as Han (2015) noted, the differentiation between workers and capitalists in the Marxist sense no longer holds in a neoliberal society. The neoliberal subject sees themself not as a worker, but as an entrepreneur (Han, 2017). This subject is capable of unlimited self-production and has unbounded freedom for improving human capital (Foucault et al., 2008; Han, 2017; Kiersey, 2009). By synthesizing Foucauldian discourse-truth-power and the dialectics of critical theory, it is possible to claim the neoliberal subject is dialectically shaped by and responsible for the (re)production of neoliberal governmentality (Kiersey, 2009; Strunk and Betties, 2019).

Forms of subjectivity need to be examined, as they constitute an important part of Fletcher's (2019) multidimensional neoliberalization framework. Paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir's statement, Houghton (2019: 626, emphasis added) proclaimed '[n]o one is born a *neoliberal subject***,** but rather may become one.' Education is an integral part of hegemony, and universities are gears in the wider mechanisms of domination (Foucault et al., 2008; Gramsci, 1995). Learning is fundamentally related to processes of identity and value formation (Desjardins, 2015). And becoming a neoliberal subject requires educational investments and ideological learning (Houghton, 2019; Strunk and Betties, 2019). As a precursor to the neoliberal subject, the concept of *neoliberal student* will be developed in line with critical theory. Kiersey (2009) wondered if neoliberal subjectivity is a ubiquitous and global

phenomenon. Thus, I seek to develop the *neoliberal student* in the Vietnamese context and against the backdrop of the neoliberal subject on a global scale.

First, neoliberal students must learn to assume personal responsibility for creating their identities because neoliberal society significantly reduces the scope of collective responsibility (Brown, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2014). Identity construction processes are dependent on education and socialization (Houghton, 2019; Strunk and Betties, 2019). Despite the collectivist culture in Vietnam, education is fiercely competitive (Ngo, 2020; D. Nguyen, 2018). Competition within higher education urges students to think of themselves in economically competitive ways (Houghton, 2019). Students can obtain more competitive advantages through self-help workshops, motivational conferences, mental training, and networking events (Cho, 2015; Han, 2017). They also use a variety of techniques to appear competent and positive (Nguyen et al., 2020). As a result, overeducated students tend to construct adaptable identities (Besley, 2012; Cho, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2014). Neoliberal students with flexible identities learn to become neoliberal subjects not to belong to a community (Besley, 2012), but to compete with others.

Second, neoliberalism turns everyone into consumers, interested primarily in what is beneficial and brings instantaneous satisfaction (Han, 2017; Matković, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2014). It is extremely difficult not to get caught up in a consumerist world with omnipresent advertising that promises to solve all problems (Bauer et al., 2012; Dittmar, 2008; Matković, 2015). Vietnamese students are likely to reject the communist identity and avoid political and civic engagement despite the purported socialist education (King et al., 2008; Nguyen et al., 2017; Salomon and Vu, 2007). Vietnamese acquire higher education primarily for professional and career aspirations and in pursuit of a consumerist lifestyle (King et al., 2008). Consumerist identity is viewed as the means of individualization and self-actualization (Nguyen et al. 2017). From being consumers of universities, neoliberal students further learn to construct consumerist identities to realize themselves.

Third, contract cheating has become a widespread phenomenon that thrives in neoliberalized higher education. Contract cheating is outsourcing student academic work to third parties (Lancaster and Clarke, 2016). Contract

cheating is particularly pervasive in Vietnam. Disguised as educational support services, contract cheating businesses openly advertise to students (Hai Van, 2021). The work is guaranteed to be written by graduates who have earned degrees from prestigious universities or even by academics. The prices as advertised can vary: 800 thousand đồng (32 euros) for an essay; one to three million đồng (37 to 112 euros) for a bachelor's thesis; and a master's thesis costs substantially more, ranging from 10 to 20 million đồng (356 to 791 euros) (ibid.). It costs more for works written in English. For reference, the average monthly wage in urban Vietnam in 2020 was 7.26 million đồng (288 euros) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2022). Financially privileged students can resort to paying for assignments, degrees, qualifications[5], or other appearances of success to become neoliberal subjects.

Fourth, as a direct consequence of the long history of colonialism, colonial mentality lingers. Colonial mentality is the perception of ethnic and cultural inferiority when one values the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the colonizers over one's own (David and Okazaki, 2006). Under the Confucian education system, Vietnamese scholars often developed an inferiority complex toward the Chinese (Ly, 2015). In postcolonial Vietnam, many Vietnamese suffer from the colonial mentality, believing that white people and Western cultures are superior (Alneng, 2002; Phan, 2004). This is marked by a perception that non-whites are not as capable of teaching English as white teachers (Bright and Phan, 2011; Omar, 2013). The superiority is also reflected in the perceived hierarchies of linguistic imperialism, in which some languages are seen as better than others (Manan and Hajar, 2022; Phillipson, 2007). Universities tend to place greater value on EMI, Western curricula, and English-language textbooks than on the Vietnamese language and knowledge (Dang, 2021). At best, these practices erase the history of anti-colonial struggles; at worst, they tacitly endorse colonialism and imperialism. Students are denied a chance to critically reflect on the whiteness and coloniality of the neoliberal higher education system.

Fifth, what about students who cannot afford such an educational investment? This is the case for more and more students as tuition fees continue to rise

[5] It is also worth mentioning that buying fake degrees is also a widespread and problematic phenomenon.

(Desjardins, 2015). For those students excluded from neoliberal education, Houghton (2019) termed them as *student others*. Student others find themselves unable to compete in a globalized market, having to engage in low-paid labor with no possibility for upward mobility. Student others are to become neoliberal others – sweatshop workers, manual laborers, precarious workers, or long-term unemployed (Wright, 2019). Students who can afford to participate in neoliberal higher education do so not because of higher learning (Giroux, 2002). Higher education has become a means for neoliberal students to distance themselves from other (undesirable) subjectivities (Giroux, 2002; Houghton, 2019). Neoliberal students are to become professionals, managers, self-employed, or bureaucrats (Wright, 2019).

Lastly, it is important to include mental health in this analysis of neoliberal subjectivity because, as Priestley (2019: 191) argued, student mental health problems can be conceptualized as 'conditions that are, in part, (re)defined by, produced by, and (re)produce neoliberalism.' In addition, neoliberalism has caused a broad array of psychological distress among academics and students in universities (Hall and Bowles, 2016). Research on mental health in Vietnam is still limited, and awareness has only now been raised during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study of the general population during a nationwide partial lockdown in Vietnam found that there is a low prevalence of reported depression (4.9%), anxiety (7.0%), and stress (3.4%) (Le et al., 2020). Research on mental health among students tells another story: mild to moderate depression was 24.2% and major depression was 20.7% among university students (Tuyen et al., 2019); nearly 25% of higher education students exhibited signs of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tran et al., 2021); and, even before the pandemic, approximately 90% of university students suffered from either stress, anxiety, or depression (Ly and Vo, 2018). Vietnamese youths with mental health problems have increased in recent years at an alarming rate (UNICEF, 2018). Students, like anybody else, increasingly suffer from mental illness due to policies of neoliberal hegemony (Priestley, 2019; Saunders, 2007; Zeira, 2022). The case of Vietnam shows that, unlike anybody else, students are disproportionately affected by mental health problems.

The studies partially attribute the causes of mental illness to individual student behaviors or attributes, such as study plan, internet usage (Ly and Vo,

2018), drinking, smoking, household income (Tuyen et al., 2019), and lack of essential skills (Tran et al., 2021). Saunders (2007) warns against focusing on individuals, which will only be treating the symptoms of a larger problem. Using critical theory, the focus should be turned away from individual students and onto the systems, namely Confucianism and neoliberalism. Traditional Confucian values and contemporary neoliberal society both value achievement (Slobodian, 2018; UNICEF, 2018; Zeira, 2022). Pressure to achieve and compete can lead to compulsive self-exploitation, and in the long run, mental illnesses like stress, anxiety, and depression (Becker et al., 2021; Han, 2015; Zeira, 2022). In turn, anxiety and depression, according to the insidious logic of neoliberalism, maximize productivity (Han, 2018). Hypercompetitiveness and lack of connection further increase their feeling of loneliness (Becker et al., 2021). One can arguably assume that neoliberalism plays a decisive role in the current crisis of students' psychosocial wellbeing.

Discussion and conclusions

The dual influence of the rent-seeking economy and neoliberal globalization has facilitated neoliberalization in Vietnamese higher education. The main features include financial autonomy, privatization, Englishization and internationalization, industry partnership, and prioritization of market-based skills. Higher education neoliberalization is widely accepted and celebrated as it produces a competent workforce for development, modernity, and integration. However, certain vulnerabilities are made apparent when the development is critically examined. Education is commodified and traded in the sense that universities start to resemble for-profit businesses with increasingly higher tuition fees. The history of struggle, anti-colonialism, and socialist traditions is either erased or technicized. Western-, capitalism-centric curricula are borrowed and taught. English as a language is considered superior to Vietnamese. Despite the socialist education to justify the communist rule, the covert teaching of neoliberal ideology indoctrinates students with merit-based achievement, market-mediated ethics, and a value-free system (Apple, 2019; Salomon and Vu, 2007; Verhaeghe, 2014). Neoliberalization comes not only from corporate and state actors but is also aided and abetted by academics due to the perceived benefits (e.g., pay rise).

Higher education is no longer primarily about higher learning (Giroux, 2002), but rather about preserving neoliberal capitalist hegemony.

In a competitive world of efficiency, productivity, profitability, and moral ambiguity (Lakes, 2008; Slobodian, 2018), the neoliberal student-subject learns to develop a flexible identity – highly educated, English proficient, consumerist, positive, and perpetually self-optimizing. The neoliberal persona can have immense psychological tolls on the student-subject. Neoliberal students suffer from a range of mental illnesses – stress, anxiety, and depression – disproportionately more than the general population. Students are not given opportunities to critically reflect on the assumptions of the hegemonic systems. The financially privileged can pay to play in these systems and, if they so choose, can pay to win essays, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and even doctorates. Meanwhile, the underprivileged who cannot access neoliberal education find themselves taking low-paying jobs. Neoliberal higher education thus further polarizes inequality.

Neoliberalism started in the West and now pervades globally. In Confucian Asia, neoliberal globalization manifests itself diversely. Rent-seekers in Thailand and South Korea exploited the ideological and organizational weaknesses of their respective states in pursuit of profits (Kim and Im, 2001). Japan relied heavily on a neoliberal economic policy, leading to a bubble economy based on inflated real estate and stock prices that eventually collapsed (Bix, 2013). South Korea's abrupt and violent neoliberal transformation has resulted in a crisis of biosocial reproduction among young people (Choi, 2015). Neoliberalism-mediated consequences in Vietnam are catching up to these countries. As Thi (2020: 226) observed, Vietnam is 'neither fully authoritarian, nor democratic; neither a communist or socialist state, nor is it a purely capitalist project.' The marriage between authoritarian socialism and neoliberal capitalism is slowly being institutionalized, but how long can the honeymoon last?

Although it is undeniable that neoliberalism has been a favorable force for economic growth in Vietnam (Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012), this neoliberal project has had an (un)intended consequence – the rise of rent-seekers and cronyism. For a formerly colonized country that celebrates the triumph of communists over capitalism and imperialism (Davies, 2015; Yu,

2020), the contemporary Vietnamese economy is paradoxically crony capitalist. The new elite of rent-seekers is gradually gaining influence in the CPV, aiming to solidify the neoliberal economic paradigm to reap hyperprofits. The paradigm creates glaring inequality, conflicting with socialist values for an egalitarian society. But how do the contradictions between socialism and neoliberalism result in a relatively stable system? How is it that neoliberalism is seemingly invisible in a socialist state? And that friction and resistance are virtually absent? There are a few explanations that I have identified throughout the study.

- Neoliberalism is treated as an economic paradigm rather than a philosophy of capitalism, which makes it easier to be implemented in a socialist structure without an overt clash between the two ideologies.

- Marxism-Leninism has lost its prominence, and socialist values are reduced to mere propaganda (Davies, 2015; Thayer, 2010). Sustained economic growth is now the main source of legitimization for the communist party. Pragmatism prevails over substantive socialism and communism.

- Policy programs have provided conditions and pressure for universities to reorganize to become more neoliberal. Higher education simultaneously promotes and legitimizes neoliberalism by upholding capitalist hegemony.

- Contradictions and frictions between neoliberalism and socialism in education are smoothened by the prolonged cultural influence of Confucianism – an ideology that shows high compatibility with neoliberalism.

- The discussion of global integration and economic growth proliferates, while the meanings and effects of neoliberalism are either largely ignored or not well understood, resulting in the lack of substantial discourse and criticism.

- Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the system in which it is produced.

Adapting Davis' (1971) formula, one can thus claim that what seems to be socialism, or what is accepted as socialism, is actually crony capitalism.

As some scholars have remarked, the market economy and market-oriented higher education have been good for Vietnam (Salmi and Pham, 2019; Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012). Conceptualizing the development as neoliberalization or universities as neoliberal universities can seem to undercut the achievements of Vietnamese higher education in the past decades. Another significant limitation of this paper is that it is full of critiques and lacks an optimistic outlook or solutions.

Profit-driven universities have been met with resistance. The above-mentioned students' online protest is a great example. But such resistance is rare, and I doubt that any meaningful reform can be achieved. The greater the power, the quieter it works (Han, 2017). Neoliberalism influences Vietnam diversely and, arguably, deeply because it works quietly, even academics know relatively little about it. Resistance cannot be forged without an understanding of how oppression is internalized and reproduced (Pyke, 2010). Emancipatory knowledge can be the beginning of a solution, and thus resistance. Curbing rent-seeking has been a major concern of the CPV (Vuving, 2010; 2019). But little has been done structurally, so the results are mixed at best (Vuving, 2019). Knowledge of neoliberalism can enable policymakers to be critical of neoliberal programs that have facilitated the rise of rent-seekers and cronyism. This says nothing about the fact that rent-seeking can exacerbate ecological crises, threatening our collective existence (Sayer, 2020). Being an official socialist state ruled by a communist party, Vietnamese academics are in a unique position to legitimately resist neoliberalism, restore higher education to the commons, and critically contribute to socialism beyond the empty label. Mental health issues are often disregarded as a generational weakness in Vietnam. Educators can play the role of healers for young people blighted by neoliberalism and foster hope and resistance (Desai et al., 2019).

Looking at neoliberalism as an economic paradigm provides meaningful insights into its pervasiveness under a socialist system. In particular, the critical theory approach has illuminated different interplaying facets of neoliberal capitalism in a socialist state, university neoliberalization,

ideological construction, hegemony, and subjectivities. Two signs that may be useful for future research have come to my attention during this research. First, paralleling the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s is the emergence of neo-imperialism – marked by the defeat of US imperialism in the Vietnam War in 1973 (Harvey, 2003; 2005; Yu, 2020). The theme of coloniality appears sporadically throughout this paper, associated with the pervasiveness of international institutions and foreign-owned enterprises. Decolonial epistemology is useful as it allows researchers to examine issues related to the production and validation of knowledge in the Global South (Couto et al., 2021). Decoloniality also provides a juxtaposition to the Global North and its superiority and universality of managerial perspectives and organizational practices (Couto et al., 2021; Girei and Natukunda, 2021). Second, Neckel (2020) suggested the use of Habermas' concept of refeudalization as an analytical lens. Refeudalization involves a process of paradoxical counter-movement that generates inequality with the re-emergence of unfree labor and super-rich oligarchies (ibid.). In the same vein, Dworkin (2015: 158) observed that 'feudalism has returned in the form of crony capitalism.' One can identify some resemblances in this study. The Vietnamese communist revolution was supposed to bring about socialism but instead brought rising inequality, cronyism, and rent-seekers. In my view, decolonial epistemology and refeudalization can complement critical studies of neoliberalism for future organization studies.

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Extitutional theory: Modelling structured social dynamics beyond institutions

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abstract

This paper introduces an integrated ontological framework to analyse the interplay between formalised social structures composed of impersonal, codified roles and rules which are commonly described as 'institutions', and the more latent interpersonal relationships that shape and animate these institutions–putting forward the notion of 'extitutions' to describe the latter. The main contribution of this paper is to provide an analytical grid for advancing the formalisation of both institutional and extitutional dynamics and how they affect or influence each other over time, from a multi-faceted and multi-layered network standpoint. This new grid of analysis can be used to characterise the reciprocal interactions between the extitutional and institutional aspects of social groups, explicitly disentangling their respective influences. This makes it possible to prescribe novel configurations of collective action that benefit from a balanced equilibrium between extitutional and institutional dynamics.

Introduction

Several theoretical frameworks have been developed to understand how individuals organise themselves into larger social structures and how these social structures in turn contribute to shaping individual attitudes, behaviours, ideas and beliefs. The concept of institutions is particularly central to most theoretical frameworks in the field of organisational and governance theory. Yet, while most of these frameworks do recognize the

interplay that subsists between the structural elements and the cultural components of these social groups, they often assimilate both of these components into a monolithic framework of analysis–thereby limiting the opportunity to distinguish between the different logics that animate each of these components.

The paper introduces a new ontological framework for the analysis of social dynamics –which we refer to as 'extitutional theory'– that constitutes an alternative lens to the institutional lens, to help us observe, describe, analyse, but also influence the way in which people interact with one another in a variety of settings.

The paper[1] is organised as follows. First, it presents an overview of the current understanding of institutions in scholarly literature. Second, it introduces a distinction between institutions and extitutions, to subsequently highlight the interplay and reciprocal influence between the two. The paper then provides an illustrated formalisation of the dynamics that emerge within and across the institutional and extitutional layers. It does so by formalising and illustrating the processes of upward and downward causation that exists between institutions and extitutions: on the one hand, the process of institutionalisation that enables the formalisation and the crystallisation of specific extitutional dynamics, on the other hand, the process of extitutionalisation that creates new habits that ultimately may trigger an evolution of institutional structures. The paper concludes with future

[1] This work benefited from multiple insights and discussions during the extitutional workshops held at the Feÿ Extitute of Research. We thank in particular Jessy Kate Schingler, Tony Lai, Anika Saigal, and Fatemeh Fannizadeh for significant contributions in early stages of the formulation of the framework. We also thank Emmanuel Lazega, Alejandro Alviles, Noé Curtz, Enric Senabre Hidalgo, Olivier Irrman, Matthieu Leventis, Eric Alston, Larry Backer and Robert Ward for their comments and suggestions. We are especially grateful to the Feÿ Extitute of Research for supporting our work, both at the intellectual and operational level. Thanks to the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation long term partnership, this work was partly supported by the LPI Research Fellowship to Marc Santolini. In addition, this work was partly supported by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR), under grant agreement ANR-21-CE38-0002-01. This research was also funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreements No. 865856).

perspectives for further research, highlighting the need for a strong interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to accommodate insights from a variety of different disciplines and integrate them into a common theoretical framework.

Preliminary overview of institutional theory

What is an institution?

The concept of institutions is perhaps one of the most elusive in social sciences. Originally introduced to describe the specific structure of organisations, institutions soon became a catch-all for a large variety of structured social phenomena. A few definitions have been proposed in the literature, as an attempt to describe the role and function of institutions. Weber (1910) advocated for a broad and encompassing definition of institutions, arguing that the term 'society' should be replaced with the terms 'social relations' and 'social institutions' – where institutions represent the 'rules of the game' (*Spielregeln*) that inform human behaviour (Nau, 2005).

Other authors focused more on the shared practices, customs and behavioural patterns that constitute an institution. For instance, Hamilton (1932) described institutions as a permanent and recognizable 'way of thought or action [...] embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of people' (84), whereas Foster (1981) defined institutions as 'prescribed patterns of correlated behaviour' (908). Similarly, behavioural approaches in organisation theory (Griffin and Moorhead, 2011; Newstrom, Davis and Davis, 1993; Robbins and Judge, 2015) have been exploring the link between the structural elements of an institution and the way people act within that institution. These works are anchored in the field of management and business administration, focusing mostly on the practical and operational matters on how to run an organisation. These approaches have, however, been somewhat criticised (Lawson, 2003: 189-194) for putting too much stress on the behavioural aspects of institutions, and not enough attention on the formal rules and constraints that shape these behaviours.

More formalistic definitions of institutions have been provided by other scholars, such as Knight (1992), who describes institutions as any 'system of

rules that structure social interactions' (*ibid.*: 2). These definitions have however been criticised for being excessively broad (Hodgson, 2006), in that they comprise a wide range of social and cultural artefacts of very different nature – such as language, money, law, social norms, governments and firms. Knight's definition is also limited to the extent that it only focuses on the structural ruleset that constitutes an institution, with little account for the role of individual preferences and dispositions in shaping and putting these rules into practice.

Today, while there is no single nor widely established definition of institutions, they are commonly accepted as encompassing both explicit rules (*formal* or *informal*) and the tacit attitudes or social norms that represent the embodiment of these rules. Indeed, 'institutions both constrain and enable behaviour' (Hodgson, 2006: 2). Specific rules and constraints are established in order to guide, promote and support specific actions or behaviours that would be difficult – perhaps even impossible – to achieve otherwise. For instance, language enables us to communicate more easily with one another, money enables us to trade more effectively, law enables us to act more freely based on expectations of mutual respect, and governments enable us to pool resources together and act in a more coordinated manner. At the same time, the ongoing use and acceptance of these rules contribute to their tacit adoption and assimilation within the social fabric of an organisation. This reduces their need for enforcement as they are no longer perceived as behavioural constraints, but rather as behavioural habits.

In other words, institutions can be described as a combination of rules that generate relatively stable equilibria of social behaviours which persist over time (Aoki, 2001; Crawford and Ostrom, 1995). These rules reinforce themselves – by acquiring more normative weight – as they are recognized, accepted, internalised and replicated through the behaviours of individual actors (Hodgson, 2006). Such a dynamic understanding of institutions enables us to better grasp the interplay between individuals and institutions, focusing on how individuals simultaneously shape and are being shaped by the institutions they create. It is this continuous back and forth between the establishment of normative rules and the assimilation of these rules by individuals that determines the long-term sustainability of institutions.

How do institutions evolve?

Among the multiple theories of institutional change (see Kingston and Caballero, 2009, for a comparative analysis), some focus on the deliberate attempts at creating new institutional forms in order to better serve a particular purpose or satisfy specific needs and desires. These theories understand institutional change as a result of deliberate intervention by political or economic actors (Alexander, 2005). They investigate the design choices stemming from these particular sets of actors, whose evolving preferences, knowledge and beliefs generate progressive variations in institutional forms.

Institutions do not, however, exist in a vacuum; they subsist in a particular social, political and economic context, which they must attune to. As the context in which they operate becomes more complex, institutions need to adapt to their changing environment by either modifying their institutional structure or by extending beyond their original organisational boundaries, so as to better connect and communicate with a wider variety of social systems (Andersen, 2001; Andersen and Born, 2007).[2] Some scholars have theorised institutions from an evolutionary perspective, investigating the process of institutional formation as a spontaneous phenomenon triggered by changes in the larger ecosystem. Specifically, evolutionary theories of institutional change analyse variations in institutional forms through the application of Darwinism (Lewis and Steinmo, 2012), whereby different institutional forms compete with one another for survival. According to these theories, institutions are regarded as social structures, whose attributes and characteristics progressively evolve as a result of external pressures and environmental stimuli (Potts, 2007). Those that best accommodate existing social, economic, and political arrangements will have higher chances to survive – spreading through a process of imitation or replication – whereas those that are the least fit for their environment will eventually fade into extinction.

[2] According to Andersen (2001), *polyphonic organisations* are connected to several systems, coupling previously separate concepts, e.g., political organisations, market-oriented political parties, ethical investment firms.

Beyond external or environmental pressures, institutions may also evolve as a result of internal social pressures, as a response to the individual expectations of its constitutive members. As such, while in an ideal-typical Weberian bureaucracy, organisations are 'designed to function independently of the collective actions which can be mobilised through interpersonal networks [...], when turnover is low, relations take on additional contents of an expressive and personal sort which may ultimately transform the network and change the directions of the organisation' (Lincoln, 1982: 26). Conversely, substantial company turnover could equally trigger significant changes in the structure of an institution, as different directors or employees may have different ideas or expectations on how the company should effectively be run.

There are, however, situations when the individual elements of social groups will experience substantial variations, without triggering an actual change in the institutional formation. For instance, replacing a company's CEO will most likely have a significant impact on the network of interpersonal relations that had previously been established within the company. Yet, none of these changes will be reflected within the institutional structure of the company, which remains essentially the same: the role of the CEO has simply been assigned to a new individual, but the set of rules and functions associated with that role has not been affected by it. Similarly, the coming and going volunteers of a non-profit organisation remain invisible from an institutional perspective, since volunteers are not officially part of the institutional fabric. Yet, the involvement of volunteers is essential to the success of many non-profit organisations, and the departure of key volunteers could trigger a significant drop in the involvement and participation for other volunteers. Hence, even if not formally or explicitly reflected in the organisation structure, changes in the social fabric of an organisation could have drastic consequences on the operations of that organisation.[3]

[3] In the words of Granovetter (1985: 502), 'it hardly needs repeating that observers who assume firms to be structured in fact by the official organisation chart are sociological babes in the woods.'

The multiple facets of institutions

These examples show that there are important factors affecting social dynamics which do not only refer to the institutional but also to the relational aspects of social groups or organisations. Indeed, every social organisation exhibits both institutional and non-institutional forces that together contribute to shaping the social dynamics of all those involved in such organisation. Specific typologies of social organisations (e.g., companies or governments) have strong institutional components that govern the large majority of social dynamics, with a view to influence social behaviour towards the achievement of a particular objective or mission. Yet, there exist many other types of social organisations, which prioritise interpersonal relationships and personalised social dynamics over institutionalised ones. This is the case of many informal groups, self-organised communities, but also large-scale organisations which account for both the structural and relational forces affecting social dynamics (Laloux, 2014).

To be sure, many of the structural components of an institution are intended to support or constrain specific social dynamics, which are to be either encouraged (e.g., promoting emotional care and positive work relationships) or discouraged (e.g., avoiding corruption, conflict of interest, etc). To properly do so, however, these structural components need to account for the interpersonal relationships occurring within these social structures, and the impact these have on the broader social dynamics. This requires distinguishing between the impersonal components of institutions, defined by a particular set of roles and rules, with the more personalised and relational components thereof. This distinction is helpful to analyse the interplay, and the generative process of coevolution that exists between these different yet interrelated aspects of a social group: the codified (normative) rules that prescribe social behaviour, and the personalised network of relationships that subsist among the group.

The relationship between institutions, social norms and individual behaviours has already been analysed by scholars from a variety of disciplines, including economics (Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Bowles, 2004; Dal Bó, Foster and Putterman, 2010; Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales, 2015; Tabellini, 2008, 2010), political sciences (Bednar and Page, 2018; Hofstede, 2001; Jackman and

Miller, 2004), anthropology (Bennett, 1996; Billig, 2000; Wright, 2004) and even biology (Bowles, Choi and Hopfensitz, 2003). Most relevant for the purpose of this paper is the work in structural sociology of Granovetter (1985), which builds upon the notion of 'embeddedness' as previously developed by Polanyi (1944) to argue that market economies, and the social dynamics that emerge within them, are intrinsically embedded within a much broader social and cultural context than traditional economic theories would suggest. Granovetter believes that neoclassical economics prescribes an 'under-socialised' and atomized account of human behaviour that is excessively separated from culture and society. At the same time, he claims (albeit contentiously) that Polanyi's substantivist approach prescribes an 'over-socialized'[4] view of economic actors, minimising the role of rational choice over human behaviour. In his account, 'most behaviour is closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations', a view that avoids 'the extremes of under- and oversocialized views of human action' (Granovetter, 1985: 504).[5] However, Granovetter limited his field of observation to market societies, with little account for how his neo-substantive theory of embeddedness could apply to nonmarket social organisations more generally.

Another relevant body of literature is the work of Lazega (1992, 2020, 2021), who analyses the phenomenon of collegiality, as an alternative organisational logic to the bureaucratic logic (Lazega, 2001, 2020). Lazega considers that most social organisations are complex multilevel organisations that combine these two contrasting logics – *bureaucracy* and *collegiality* – to support and enable collective action amongst a variety of (often rival) actors. He distinguishes between 'networks of impersonal interactions, often analysed by identifying predefined groups of members based on ex ante attributes

[4] This view is shared by James Duesenberry who believes that 'economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about how they don't have any choices to make' (Duesenberry, 1960: 233).

[5] This intermediate position is also reflected in parallel works by Burt (1982). As stated by Grannovetter, 'There are many parallels between what are referred to here as the "undersocialized" and "oversocialized" views of action and what Burt calls the "atomistic" and "normative" approaches. Similarly, the embeddedness approach proposed here as a middle ground between under- and oversocialized views has an obvious family resemblance to Burt's "structural" approach to action.'

derived from formal hierarchy' and 'networks of personalised relationships, with inductively defined clusters of members based on a combination of dyadic, triadic and higher-order relational substructures' (Lazega, 2020). According to Lazega, understanding the interplay between both of these networks is necessary to understand the behaviour of any social organisation.[6] Yet, as recognized by Lazega himself, more research is needed to formalise and analyse the underlying dynamics that animate these different networks, and to understand how they affect or influence each other over time. Such a formalisation is of particular importance if one wants to prescribe novel configurations of collective action that benefit from a balanced equilibrium between the multiple levels at play. This is the gap that extitutional theory aims to bridge.

Extitutional theory proposes an integrated approach to the analysis of structured social dynamics aimed at reconciling these different aspects within a common theoretical framework. It provides an alternative and complementary framework to theorise and conceptualise the emergence, sustenance and evolution of structured social dynamics, by focusing not only on the roles and rules that shape and influence social norms and behaviours, but also on the individual relationships that emerge within these structures, and that equally contribute to the establishment or the reinforcement of specific social dynamics. As such, extitutional theory contributes to the existing literature by providing a new vocabulary and ontological framework to support the description and analysis of some of the non-institutional aspects of social organisations.

The term 'extitution' has already been used to describe aspects of social life that cannot be subsumed into existing institutional frameworks, in that they have not (yet) taken on a form that is recognisable from an institutional standpoint (Spicer, 2010). Building upon that work, we provide a formalised account of the interplay between extitutions and institutions, which regards extitutions as the personal and relational counterpart of institutionalised

[6] 'The main issue is not interplay between formal and informal structures in organisations, but the interplay of two organisational logics, each with its formal and informal dimensions, when they are activated together in everyday collective agency' (Lazega, 2020: 16).

social structures, which are traditionally more rigid and impersonal. In particular, this paper leverages Grannoveter's neo-substantive approach to 'embeddedness', Lazega's neo-structural sociological approach to bureaucracy and collegiality, combined within a network approach to represent the internal dynamics and operations of extitutions, as well as to help map the interplay between institutions and extitutions in an interdependent framework.

The contribution of extitutional theory is twofold: *conceptual* and *analytical*, on the one hand, and *normative* and *prescriptive*, on the other hand. To begin with, extitutional theory provides a new vocabulary and conceptual toolkit that will help put the focus on the extitutional aspects of existing and established institutional structures, in order to better describe and understand the social dynamics at play within existing organisations. In addition, extitutional theory also has a prescriptive or normative function, in that it can help us shape existing institutions and design new organisational structures capable of better accommodating a larger variety of social dynamics, and in particular the extitutional dynamics that one wants to promote, with a proper balance of impersonal rules and personalised relationships.

A typology of institutions and extitutions

Social groups are constituted by individuals and the interactions between them. When observing these groups, we can apply different theoretical frameworks to understand the underlying social dynamics that drive these interactions. In this section, we distinguish between the *institutional framework,* focused on the overarching normative and codified structure created to affect and influence these social dynamics, and the *extitutional framework,* focused on the emerging network of relationships associated with the different identities within these social groups.

The distinction between institutional and extitutional dynamics is not based on the *formal* vs. *informal* dichotomy. Indeed, while institutional frameworks are often more formal than their extitutional counterparts, one cannot simply assume that anything that is informal is always and necessarily extitutional.

As noted by Hogdson (2016), a formalised set of rules is not a prerequisite for the establishment of institutions, which are often made of a combination of both formal and informal components. The discriminating factor is rather based on the distinction between *explicit* and *declarative* vs. *implicit* and *emergent* rules. As such, we distinguish between explicitly declared rules and conventions, codified into a particular set of *enforceable* rules, which we refer to as *institutions*; and tacitly *inferred* patterns of behaviours, established through habits and shared values embodied by specific individuals, which we refer to as *extitutions*. In other words, institutions are the forces responsible for the establishment and development of new rules and roles, either *ex-nihilo,* in a declarative manner, or *ex-materia,* resulting from the observation and codification of existing practices to ensure their retention over time. Extitutions are the underlying forces that contribute to both the emergence and embodiment of these social practices, incarnating the roles and performing the rules in a process of constant and on-going experimentation. The distinction between *'enforceable'* rules and *'inferred'* patterns is therefore important, because it highlights one of the main differences between institutions, whose codified rules generally also stipulate the way in which they should be enforced, and extitutions, whose customs and practices are mainly inferential, and do typically not comprise a codified enforcement mechanism.

We present here a typology of institutional and extitutional dynamics, highlighting their core characteristics and distinctive features. Indeed, while both institutional and extitutional aspects contribute to the emergence and evolution of structured social dynamics, they differ with regard to their nature and modus operandi: their different constitutive elements operate according to distinct logics. Hence, it is important to understand their distinctive characteristics in order to better analyse the manner in which they can each influence the overall social structure to which they refer.

We examine below the distinction between institutional and extitutional dynamics with regard to (1) their *basic constituents*, *i.e.* their key defining factors and components; (2) their *formation* mechanisms, *i.e.* the mechanisms that enable them to come into being and to be recognized as such by other individuals and collectives; (3) the *types of expectations* they engender with regard to social behaviours and interactions; (4) the *evaluation criteri*a by

which they can be assessed and evaluated; (5) the means by which they operate and perpetuate themselves over time; (6) their *reaction to change, i.e.* the way they handle changes or deviations from the expected behaviours; and (6) the *lubricants* that fuel and reinforce social dynamics.

The goal of this exercise is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the distinctive characteristics and ordering logics of both institutions and extitutions, but rather to illustrate the features of an extitution by contrasting them with those of an institution. Ultimately, our aim is to decouple the notion of institutions and extitutions, delineating their boundaries and dynamics, in order to facilitate the analysis of how their interplay shapes social dynamics.

	Institutional lens	**Extitutional lens**
Basic constituents	Roles & Rules	Identities & Relationships
Formation	Declarative	Constitutive
Expectations	Normative	Inferential
Evaluation	Objective	Subjective
Perpetuation	Codified behaviours	Integrated habits
Reaction to change	Enforcement	Recalibration
Lubricant	Confidence	Trust

Table 1: Characteristic features of the institutional and extitutional lenses of analysis

Basic constituents

Institutions are defined by *roles* and *rules* – which, combined, represent the basic constituents or the DNA of an institution (Weber, 1920).[7] This means that the institution changes whenever its roles and its rules change, independently of the persons assuming these roles. Roles and rules create basic expectations as to how individuals are expected to behave in specific circumstances, when acting within the framework of the institution. As such, institutions are typically characterised by routine tasks and impersonal interactions driven by formal rules (Lazega, 2020). Roles are a particular subset of rules, which are assigned to individuals who match a particular role description, and who will automatically inherit the rights and obligations associated with that role, as defined through the institutional rules. Specifically, the rules of an institution define the realm of activities that shall or shall not be undertaken by a particular role, as well as the various ways in which different roles might interact with one another. For instance, the CEO of a company is responsible for managing the operations and ensuring the economic viability and success of the company. As such, the CEO resides at the top of the operational decision-making and is endowed with specific powers with regard to day-to-day business operations and the management of employees. At the same time, the CEO is obliged towards the Board of Directors to implement strategic decisions and promote the company's long-term goals, as well as to protect the investor's interests. Sometimes, roles can be associated with specific titles that represent a recognition given by a figure of authority, such as the *advisors* of a company, or the *ambassadors* of an organisation. These individuals acquire specific privileges as a result of their role, but are also bound by a duty of care to act in such a way as to promote the interests of the organisation. The particularity of the institutional fabric is that, regardless of the role they assume within a given institution, individuals are generally regarded as fungible and are expected to act as mere *role-takers*. The individual acting as the CEO of a company only has influence because of her role within the company. Were the CEO title to be transferred

[7] As elaborated by Weber (1920: 956) (Chapter XI of Vol. II) when describing 'bureaucratic organisations', these are characterised, *inter alia*, by (1) the definition of rules ordering activities in jurisdictional areas, and (2) principles of office hierarchy establishing a system of subordination and supervision.

to another individual, such influence will immediately be assigned to whoever has become the new CEO.

Extitutions are defined by *identities*[8] and *relationships*. This means that the extitution changes as soon as the people that constitute it change, or as soon as their individual relationship evolves. This makes extitutions much more malleable and dynamic than institutions. For instance, while the CEO of a company needs to comply with the rules associated with a particular role-description, the CEO might also establish personal relationships with some of her employee, such as a friendship or romantic relationships, that will influence the way in which these people interact with one another, regardless of the expectations set up by their respective roles. As such, individuals within an extitutions assume specific identities that do not fit into any institutional role description, but rather assume a variety of roles out of their own whims (i.e., they act as *role-makers*). Relationships between identities are not determined *ex-ante*, as in the case of institutional roles and rules, but rather emerge organically, as a result of repeated interactions (Lazega, 2020) – and are constantly evolving over time, with every new interaction, or lack thereof. These relationships are a complex combination of *social interdependencies* and *relational scaffoldings* (Lazega, 2020): a *relational infrastructure* that informs individual interactions. Relationships vary in terms of quality and intensity. The nature of a relationship depends on the amount and the type of these interactions, as well as the medium (or context) in which these interactions take place. Individual relationships within the extitution determine the extent to which and the manner in which individuals can participate in the activities of the extitutions: those who are the most intensively or qualitatively connected will bear more influence than those that are at the margin.

[8] *Identity* is a multi-faceted concept. In this paper, we build on Goffman's identity typology (Goffman, 1963), referring to the notion of 'identity' as the constructed image of the self that an individual either directly identifies with (personal identity), or indirectly has been associated with by third parties, as a result of its affiliation to a particular culture or subculture (social identity). As such, for the purpose of this paper, the identity does not represent the internal representation of the individual person (ego identity), but rather its representation in the cognitive space of social relations.

Formation

An institution is a *normative infrastructure* established (*formally* or *informally*) through a process of codification, and which is recognized as such by all members of the institutions, and often by other institutions as well. The formation of an institution is generally done in a *declarative* manner, via the stipulation of a particular set of roles and rules, which determines the degrees of freedom within which the institution can act and evolve over time (e.g., rules for changing the rules). This also typically involves a stipulation of the enforcement mechanisms that come with these rules, *i.e.*, who is responsible for enforcing the rules against whom, and what such enforcement looks like.

Different combinations of roles and rules will lead to different types of organisations. For instance, bureaucratic organisations are often described as being very rigid and process-oriented (Weber, 1920), trapping individuals into an 'iron cage' of rationalised procedures and control. Conversely, holacratic organisations that rely on self-organising architectures require less intermediate levels of checks and balances, and allow for larger degrees of freedom for innovative individual actions (Laloux, 2014).

Because they can only be created in a *declarative* (as opposed to constitutive) manner, institutions must be recognized by an *authoritative figure* which acts as a single source of truth.[9] For instance, a company is created by registering the organisation in a particular jurisdiction, and complying with all formalities necessary to bring the company into being. Sometimes an institution can be established through a minimum set of formalities, e.g., in most jurisdictions, there are no formal filing or registration requirements needed to create a general partnership. To the extent that it is recognized as such by an authoritative figure (e.g., the state), it will also be recognized by all those who fall within the jurisdiction of such figure.

[9] Some authors recognize informal and uncodified conventions, like language, as institutions (see, e.g., Hogdson 2016). Yet, we believe that language can itself be decoupled into its institutional (e.g., for the French language: the *Academie de la langue française*, the *Larousse* dictionary) and extitutional components (e.g., the *verlan* slang and other oral dialects, neologisms which are not yet officially recognized, etc.)

As opposed to institutions which can be established in a declarative manner, extitutions can only be created in a *constitutive* manner. An extitution is a *relational infrastructure* that emerges through a process of experiential induction and mutual recognition by a set of individuals that collectively agree (either implicitly or explicitly) to identify themselves as a group, and to act as a group – therefore enabling others to recognize them as such. For instance, many communities are initiated by a small group of friends or acquaintances that begin to interact with one another in a recurrent manner, often with a common purpose in mind. These recurrent interactions contribute to creating a social bond amongst the group, with a series of habits or rituals emerging over time, and a progressive alignment of values within the members of the group. At some point, the group might begin to be recognized as an entity in its own right (e.g., a collective or a community), either from the inside (by the group members themselves) or from the outside (by people external from the group). This is when the extitutional dynamics emerge, as the individual members no longer regard themselves as separate actors acting out of their own individual interest, but as members of a collective acting in concert to further the interests of the whole. As such, an extitution depends upon and directly contributes to shaping the culture of a social group. Culture consists of shared beliefs, values and social norms held by a social group (Lazega, 2020). As opposed to rules – whose declaration comprises not only the rights and obligations associated with specific roles, but also the enforcement mechanisms that come with them – social norms do not include a stipulation of their own enforcement mechanisms. This means that social norms may or may not be enforced, by different people, and the modalities of enforcement will ultimately depend on the people who chose to enforce these norms. Hence, in contrast to institutions, which subsist in the institutional fabric of society, an extitution is a cognitive entity that is not declared or codified in an *exogenous* fashion, but is recorded *endogenously* in the mind of all actors involved within it.

Expectations

The normative infrastructure of an institution is made of a codified set of roles and rules that provide affordances and constraints to the members of the institution: they determine the privileges that an individual enjoys when assigned a particular role, and the duties that the same individual must fulfil

with regard to that role. From an institutional standpoint, roles and rules assume a normative function: they stipulate what can or cannot be done in a particular context, independently of what was done before. Indeed, because of their declarative nature, institutions are not constrained to the codification of existing behaviours, they can introduce new roles and rules out of thin air, both in order to promote desirable behaviours that did not exist before, or in order to discourage detrimental behaviours presently occurring within an organisation. By merely looking at the rules and roles of an institution, one can thus understand the expectations with regard to the appropriate behaviour in a particular institution.

Relationships between individuals also create expectations as to how an individual may behave with respect to another individual or the community at large. These expectations are, however, not of a *normative* kind, but rather of an *inferential* and *predictive* kind: they emerge from the repeated observation of existing social behaviours, and are then used to build predictive models regarding the behaviour of specific identities in any given circumstance. For instance, if the CEO of a company is married to one of her employees, others might expect that this employee would receive preferential treatment even if this might go counter to the institutional rule-set of the company. Because of their constitutive nature, these particular types of expectations cannot be established by simply looking at the rules and roles of an institutional framework; they must be discovered and inferred as a result of a large number of social interactions – and every new interaction will thus provide valuable information necessary to revise and refine the predictions. Hence, these expectations are never set in stone, they are constantly evolving over time by means of a statistical and inferential model.

Evaluation

To be regarded as successful, an institution must deliver upon its stipulated objectives and mission. Roles within an institution are always associated with a particular set of deliverables or tasks. While the performance of these deliverables or tasks remains ultimately subjective, their scope is objectively defined (*via* associated rules) and can thus be evaluated ex-post through specific performance indicators (e.g., KPIs), based on global metrics of

efficacy and efficiency which have been agreed upon by the institution as a whole.

Conversely, the successful operation of an extitution is not objectively verifiable. It is determined by the strength and cohesion of its social fabric, which cannot be assessed via objective metrics or KPIs. Extitutions must be evaluated via subjective indicators, such as culture, trust, sense of belonging, individual participation, harmony, self-actualization, or other metrics of enhanced human potential (Maslow, 1943), which are inherently localised in nature (i.e., specific to a particular group or individual).

Perpetuation

The roles and rules of an institution are aimed at codifying individual behaviours, in such a way as to ensure the continuity of the institution over time, independently of whether it incurs a change in its constituents. Hence, the recording of these rules and roles must be done in an external medium (*i.e.*, beyond the human brain) to allow for the creation of an institutional memory that survives the renewal of individual members.[10] Codification can take many different forms, depending on the type of institution at hand: e.g., the laws and regulations of a nation-state; the bylaws of an organisation; the grammar rules of a language, etc.

Conversely, an extitution perpetuates itself through the establishment of integrated habits of thought and action (Dewey, 1922; Kilpinen, 2000). These habits are not recorded on any external medium, but rather integrated within the individuals themselves. The purpose of these integrated habits is twofold. On the one hand, they create new dispositions for people to engage in previously adopted or acquired behaviour or thoughts, given a particular context or stimulus (Hodgson, 2006). On the other hand, these habits also facilitate the collective synchronisation process that reinforces the extitution as a shared cognitive entity. This back-and-forth process was modelled by Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) who elaborated an agent-based model exhibiting a continuous feedback process between the individual and the

[10] Weber (1920: 67) specifically states that 'management by written documents' in bureaucratic organisations is important to separate the bureau from the official's private domicile.

collective levels as a mechanism underlying the evolution of a traffic convention, with habit formation causing individual preferences of agents to change (Hodgson and Knudsen, 2004). Accordingly, integrated habits are both shaped by the extitutional fabric and are, in turn, responsible for reinforcing or influencing it.

Reaction to change

In an institutional framework, roles and rules are of a declarative nature, meaning that they do not need to reflect the current state of affairs. New rules can be enacted to change an existing state of affairs, by either modifying existing habits and routines, or enforcing the emergence of new behaviours that did not exist before. Institutional rules are also normative claims, which must be respected and fulfilled by everyone subject to these rules. Deviance from the rules is not acceptable, as any mismatch between the roles and rules which define the institution, and the actual behaviours of its members might bring the perennity of the institution into jeopardy. There is, therefore, a predictable expectation that, if individuals are caught violating or infringing these rules, they will eventually be punished or sanctioned for such a violation. Indeed, instead of reformulating its rules in order to match actual behaviours (which might require a change in the institutional fabric), the institution will instead focus on enforcing its own rules in order to modify people's behaviours. In most institutions, roles and rules are enforced (or at least enforceable) by one or more identified authorities – e.g., the managers of a company, the school teachers, or even the police force.

In an extitutional setting, there are no rules dictating the behaviours of a particular identity. The culture of an extitution shapes individuals' perceptions and behaviours, helping them make sense of, stabilise, or destabilise existing structures (Lazega, 2020). At the same time, ongoing interactions constantly influence the extitutional culture by strengthening, weakening, or modifying it. These two mechanisms together constitute an ongoing process of reconstitutive downward and upward causation where emergent layers of extitutional culture both influence and are influenced by individuals' behaviours (Granovetter, 1985; Hodgson, 2006), thereby guiding and affecting their behaviour as a collective. Yet, despite the lack of precise rules and roles, expectations exist nonetheless. If someone were to act

differently from what is expected the consequence will not be an enforcement of the expected behaviours – as in the case of institutions – but rather a recalibration of the inferential model in order to account for such unexpected behaviours, and thereby improve the accuracy of future predictions. Sometimes, however, social expectations are strong enough to spur to the establishment of shared beliefs and collective responsibilities, which can be enforced through a (more or less coordinated) process of peer influence. For instance, if the culture of a company has developed a strong stigma against smoking, employees might peer-pressure each other for not smoking near the office, even if smoking is not strictly-speaking prohibited. Yet, given that there is no predefined entity responsible for such enforcement (and thus no guarantee of enforcement), pressure can only be exerted in a distributed manner by any of the actors involved in the extitution, in proportion to their realm of influence within the group.

Lubricant

Interactions within the same social groups can be motivated by two separate mechanisms. Some –mostly personal – interactions are built upon trust, others – less personal – are grounded upon confidence. The distinction between trust and confidence, and how they relate to expectations, has been clearly delineated by Luhmann (2000). Trust is defined as the belief by one party (the *trustor*) that another party (the *trustee*) will act in such a way as to further the trustor's interests, even where the trustor is unable to monitor or enforce such a course of action (Gambetta, 1988).[11] Hence, in a situation of trust, there is a perceived risk that one's expectations will be disappointed, but one freely chooses to trust anyway, thus making oneself vulnerable. Conversely, a situation of confidence is characterised by the lack of perceived risk and vulnerability. The person is confident that their expectations will not be disappointed (even if they could actually be).

Institutions and extitutions exhibit a radically different relationship to trust and confidence. Institutions facilitate coordination amongst a group of

[11] For Gambetta (1998: 217), trust is the 'subjective probability with which one agent assesses that another agent [...] will perform a particular action [...] independently of his capacity to monitor it, in a context that affects his own action.'

individuals by promoting confidence and predictability in the way they may or may not interact with one another. The rules of an institution are intended to create stable equilibria of predictable behaviours that will persist over time. For instance, many companies implement a series of rules and procedures to prevent or to reduce the likelihood of conflicts of interests, by creating oversight structures and sanctions for those violating these rules. Because rules are enforced by the institutions, people do not need to trust each other when they interact with one another, they can be confident that people will act as expected. Cooperation is thus achieved through assured reliance, by limiting, constraining, guiding or informing the realm of action available to individuals.

Because extitutions mostly rely on personal relationships, they require trust to operate. Since there are no rules to prevent conflict of interests, there can be no confidence of equitable action. Participants must trust each other that none of them will attempt to leverage their personal relationships for personal gains. Yet, extitutions also promote cooperation amongst a group of people by reinforcing the relationships of trust within that group (Govier, 1997; Granovetter, 1985). As such, trust enables individuals to rely on each other, even in situations of uncertainty, because it reduces the sense of risk and vulnerability inherent in every relationship of (inter)dependence (Luhmann, 2000), while increasing the perceived probability of having individual expectations met. Hence, trust facilitates cooperation within a group by fostering a shared belief that others will act in the best interest of the group.[12]

[12] The role of trust for cooperation is analysed by Granovetter (1985: 490), who looked at how 'individuals in a burning theater panic and stampede to the door.' While this might be seen as 'prototypically irrational behavior, [...] each stampeder is actually being quite rational given the absence of a guarantee that anyone else will walk out calmly, even though all would be better off if everyone did so.' He notes, however, that in the case of burning houses 'we never hear that [...] family members trampled one another. In the family, there is no Prisoner's Dilemma because each is confident that the others can be counted on.'

Interplay between institutions and extitutions

Having described the distinctive features of institutions and extitutions, we can now investigate the interplay that subsists amongst them. In this section, we outline the process by which institutional and extitutional dynamics interact and influence each other, leading to a constant process of coevolution where the extitutions require and inform the development of the institutions, and the institutions determine the operations and evolutionary aspects of the extitutions.

Indeed, as illustrated above, social interactions do not operate in a vacuum; they are shaped by a multiplicity of social bonds and cultural forces, and by a series of endogenous or exogenous influences that determine an individual's freedom of action. It is only by combining both the *institutional lens*, characterised by codified rules and roles, and the *extitutional lens*, characterised by the *relational infrastructure* of a particular social group, that it becomes possible to understand the multiplicity of interactions at play within that group. Together, these forces contribute to shaping the environment in which individuals can express their *agenc*y – defined as the set of actions informed from the recognition, mobilisation and combination of both the culture and the structure of a social group (Lazega, 2020).

Institutions and extitutions are in a process of constant interaction and co-determination. The roles and rules of an institution evolve as a result of extitutional forces that require or encourage the institution to modify its own structural components to better accommodate, support, or – conversely – counteract some of these external dynamics. At the same time, the relational infrastructure of an extitution is constantly affected by the institutional rules and roles that directly or indirectly affect the individuals concerned. It is through a process of constant negotiation between institutional and extitutional dynamics that social structures establish and constantly reformulate their stable equilibrium (Hodgson, 2006). We analyse below the interplay between institutional and extitutional dynamics, with a view to better understand how their combined forces affect individual agency.

Schematic representation of the interplay between social dynamics viewed under the institutional and extitutional lenses. Individuals are linked through

multiple types of interactions (link colours) represented by a multiplex network, and associated with a variety of *roles* (related to specific rules) and *identities*. Roles and rules constitute the normatively codified institutional framework, while identities and the relationships that emerge from and contain them (see Figure 2) constitute the experientially induced extitutional infrastructure.

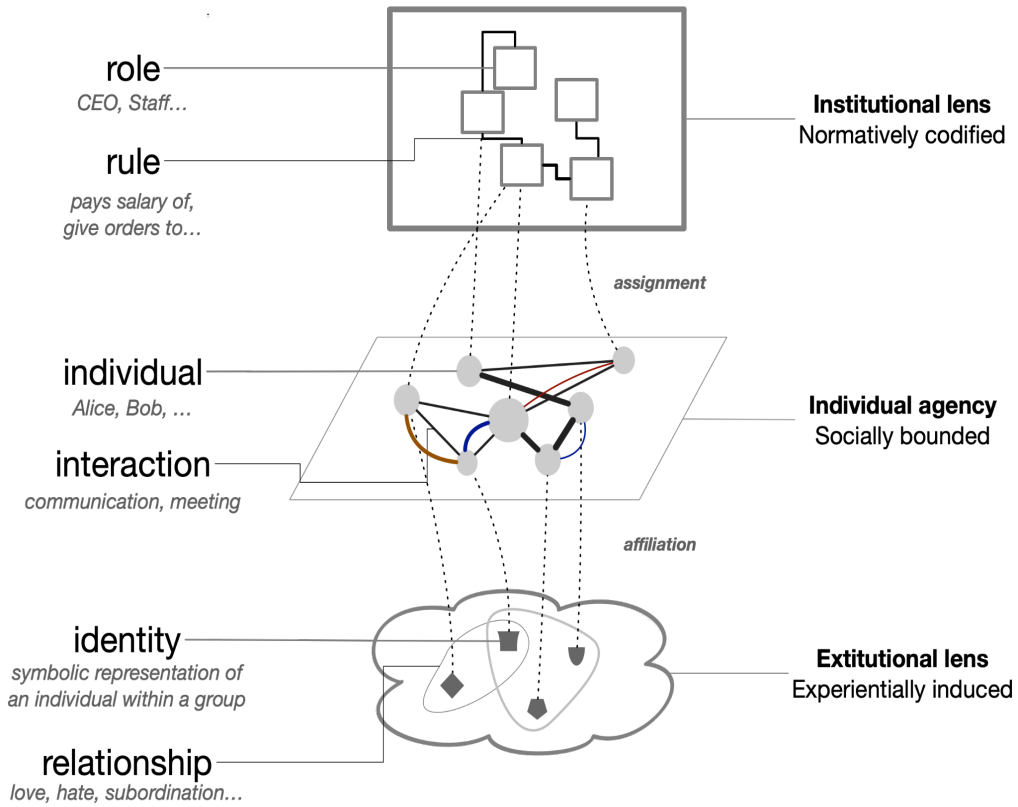

Figure 1: Social structures as multilayer institutional and extitutional networks.

Institutions affecting extitutions

Institutions are designed as a framework to support, guide, influence, limit or constrain social dynamics, by shaping the extitutions that influence them. There are three different levers available to institutions to affect and account

for the underlying extitutional dynamics: changing roles, changing rules, and/or changing the individuals associated with existing roles.

First, institutions can influence the operations of an extitution, by creating roles or rules that will modify the nature or intensity of specific relationships, generating new expectations that will potentially affect extitutional dynamics. For instance, an institution with strong rules against sexual harassment can contribute to both maintaining a safe space within the work environment, and discouraging the expression or establishment of intimate relationships between individuals. Second, institutions can generate new or support existing relationships to promote or reinforce specific extitutional dynamics. For instance, an institution might decide to establish a policy requiring people to come to the office during working hours, in order to encourage individuals to meet and network. Finally, institutions can establish rules or roles intended to mitigate the impact or prevent the emergence of undesirable extitutional dynamics. For instance, institutions often implement a formalised separation of powers to avoid abuse of dominant position by overly influential actors, transparency requirements to avoid corruption, etc.

Extitutions affecting institutions

In turn, the extitutional fabric of a social group can also impact its institutional scaffold. Most of the time, the activities of an extitution occur outside the institutional ruleset, and are therefore unlikely to modify the institutional structure. For example, the act of taking a coffee with a colleague does not impact nor depart from the institutional rules of a company. However, in some cases, extitutional activities might either explicitly violate institutional rules, and therefore push towards the *degeneration* of these rules (e.g., if employees always arrive late at work, the institution might delay the starting time of meetings), or they will push towards the *generation* of a new rule if they do not violate any existing institutional rule (e.g., if too many employees smoke inside the facilities even if it's not forbidden, it might trigger the establishment of a new rule against smoking). As a result, extitutions might impact the structure of an institution in three different ways:

First, some extitutional dynamics might lead to a change in the roles assigned to specific individuals. For instance, the emergence of strong relationships between individuals might lead to 'nepotism', where certain types of relationships promote privileged access to a particular role, or 'discrimination', where other types of relationships prevent access to that role.

Second, strong and repeated extitutional dynamics will eventually be recognized by the institution, which may adapt to accommodate these dynamics through the establishment of new rules or roles. This includes changing a company's organigram, shifting people's roles, or introducing new rules to endorse extitutional rituals. At the same time, undesirable extitutional dynamics might also trigger a process of further institutionalisation in order to prevent or reduce the force of these dynamics. For instance, to mitigate nepotism, an institution might introduce a 'hiring committee' replacing the single HR manager.

Finally, some extitutional dynamics might influence the extent to which existing roles and rules will be enforced. For example, by establishing a good relationship with an influential individual within a group, one might expect more lenience on the enforcement of the rules and roles attributed to that individual.

Formalisation of the proposed theoretical framework

Network analyses can help identify relational infrastructures to better understand collective agency among peers (Lazega, 2001). As pointed out by Lazega (2020), coupling group-level interactions (at the institutional or extitutional level) with individual relationships in the study of organised collective action requires using *multiplex* and *multilevel* network analyses. In addition, Lazega (*ibid.*) distinguishes between the *ex-ante* normative nature of impersonal (institutional) structures, and the *ex-post* inductive nature of personal (extitutional) relationships:

Networks of impersonal interactions are often analyzed by identifying predefined groups of members based on ex ante attributes derived from formal hierarchy or division of work and working on their global attitudes

towards each other. Networks of personalized relationships tend to start with inductively defined clusters of members based on a combination of dyadic, triadic and higher-order relational substructures, until the analysis reaches relational infrastructures at the morphological level [...] which are then ex post interpreted in terms of attributes. (Lazega 2020: 20)

Following these insights, we formalise the interplay between institutions and extitutions as a means to understand the social dynamics within a social group (Figure 1). In this framework, we first identify a particular group of individuals and their interactions, which constitute the network of observable social dynamics (*middle layer*). The institutional layer (*upper layer*) and extitutional layer *(lower layer)* are two *cognitive representations* that simultaneously stem from and impact these social dynamics.

The *institutional layer* comprises roles, associated to individuals, and rules dictating the interaction between these individuals. It is not a perfect representation of actual social dynamics (*i.e.,* individual interactions), but rather a codification of behaviour through the establishment of a particular set of affordances and constraints which are intended to affect social dynamics within the social group. The *extitutional layer* comprises identities (*i.e.*, symbolic representations of individuals within a group) and their relationships, embedded within the experientially induced culture of the extitution. It constitutes the relational infrastructure of the social group, supporting certain types of interactions amongst individuals by virtue of shared mental models and cultural affiliations. Yet, just like the institutional layer, the extitutional layer is not a direct description of individual interactions, but rather a symbolic representation of a particular set of relationships that are cognitively established and assessed, in an on-going manner, by all the individuals involved in the social group. *As such, both the institutional and extitutional layer are not merely descriptive models, they also have a normative and performative function.*

This multi-layered representation provides a series of advantages to study the institutional and extitutional forces responsible for the evolution of social dynamics within a group. These are, *inter alia*: (1) a *new vocabulary* to describe the underlying forces underpinning the establishment and evolution of social dynamics beyond the individual and institutional level; (2) a disentangled yet

tightly coupled representation of social dynamics, relying on a *multi-layer network formalisation* that renders more explicit the interplay between the institutional structure and extitutional culture of a social group (Figure 1); (3) a *dynamic modelling of institution evolution*, accounting for the continuous feedback loop manifested in the upward and downward causation occurring within a particular relational infrastructure (Figure 2).

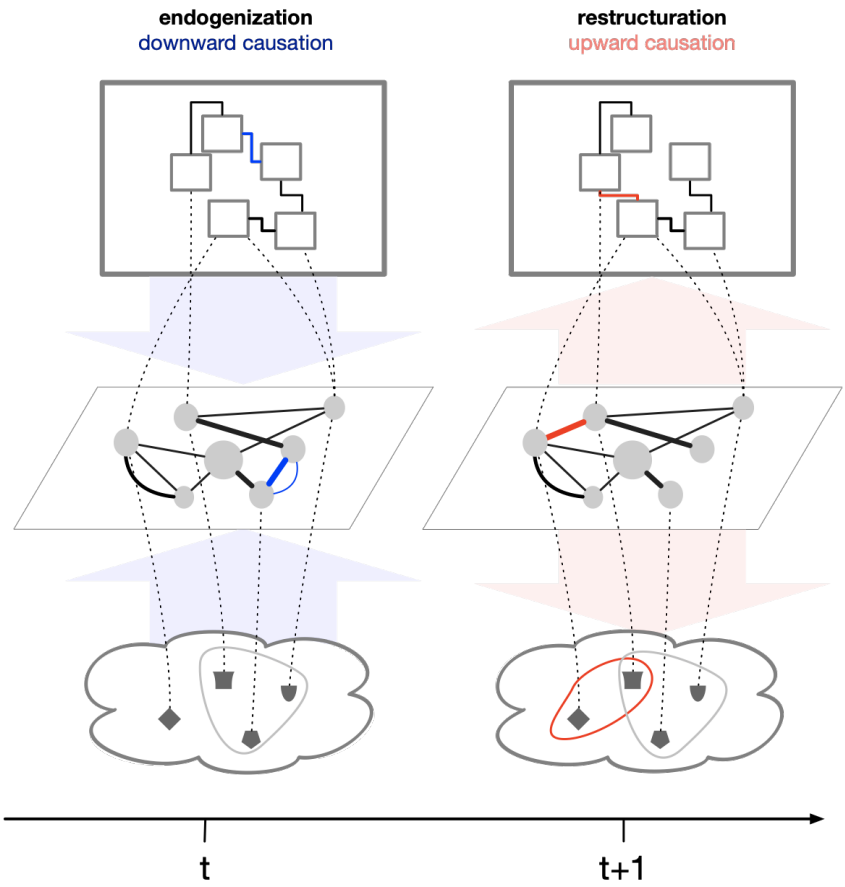

Figure 2: Social structured dynamics through downward and upward causation.

Schematic representation of the *downward* process, whereby new social interactions (*blue links*) are triggered by the establishment of new rules within the institutional structure or the emergence of new social relationships at the

extitutional layer; and the *upward* process, whereby repeated interactions in a social group (*red links*) may generate new rules at the institutional level, and new relationships at the extitutional layer.

With regard to vocabulary, the extitutional framework encompasses a broad variety of concepts and notions from multiple disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, cognitive sciences, business management, etc. We aim to bring these different conceptualisations together under a unique and comprehensive theoretical framework aimed towards the formalisation of the relational infrastructure underpinning structured social interactions. By decoupling and distinguishing the driving forces associated with institutional structure from those associated with the more relational and cultural aspects of social dynamics, it becomes possible to more explicitly focus on one rather than the other. We hope that the focus on the extitutional lens will foster more research and data collection to support the analysis of extitutional dynamics underpinning social interactions – an endeavour which is in line with the current developments in the field of neo-structural sociology, as illustrated by the work of Lazega on *bureaucracy* and *collegiality* (2020). In the words of Lazega:

The difference between bureaucracy and collegiality is important for a sociological understanding of interactional and relational infrastructures that are necessary for organized collective action and management of this cooperation. To capture the difference between the two ideal types requires developing the toolkit of organizational sociology – in particular, multilevel social network analysis focusing on networks of impersonal interactions in bureaucracy and networks of personalized relationships in collegiality, and the socially organized mix of both. (Lazega 2020: 29)

Disentangling the institutional and extitutional dynamics of social groups enables us to engage into a deeper analysis of the interplay between institutional and extitutional forces, as the driver of social organisations. Adopting a dynamic approach enables us to underline the continuous feedback loop that characterises the evolution of social organisations. While institutions cannot directly affect extitutions, and vice versa, changes in the institutional or extitutional structure of a social group will likely influence the social interactions between the individuals in the group, through a process of

downward causation (Hodgson, 2006). Over time, these changes in social interactions will likely trigger a restructuring of both the institutional and extitutional layers through a mechanism of upward causation (Figure 2).

Such a dual framework is useful to the extent that it enables us to describe, understand, and guide the evolution of social dynamics, by manipulating layer-specific variables (such as encouraging trust-building relationships, or creating confidence-setting rules) to observe whether, and how these affect the attributes of the other layer. This provides a new grid of analysis to investigate the consequences of institutional changes on the extitutional fabric (or vice versa), by separating the repercussions derived from changes in the institutional structure (e.g., modification of a role or rule) with changes related to the personalised relationships (e.g. employee's turnover). Leveraging layer-specific variables quantifying the incidences of extitutional and institutional dynamics (such as the number of nodes, density of links or other structural measures within each layer) one could then situate any given social structure within a topological space representing degrees of extitutionality and institutionality (Figure 3). Assuming a certain degree of nonlinearity (as commonly observed in the physics of collective systems undergoing phase transitions), one could then distinguish quadrants (limit cases) delineated by particular transitions. The extitutional axis is marked by a transition from embryonic to communal groups characterised by an increasing density of relationships and a few, if any, roles and rules. The institutional axis, on the other hand, is marked by an increasing density of roles and rules in the institutional layer. Depending on the level of extitutionality that comes along with it, such structures can be overly bureaucratic (low extitutionality) or integrated (high extitutionality). The evolution of social organisations is then viewed as a trajectory in this topological space, allowing for longitudinal studies of the organisational development and the impact of possible interventions.

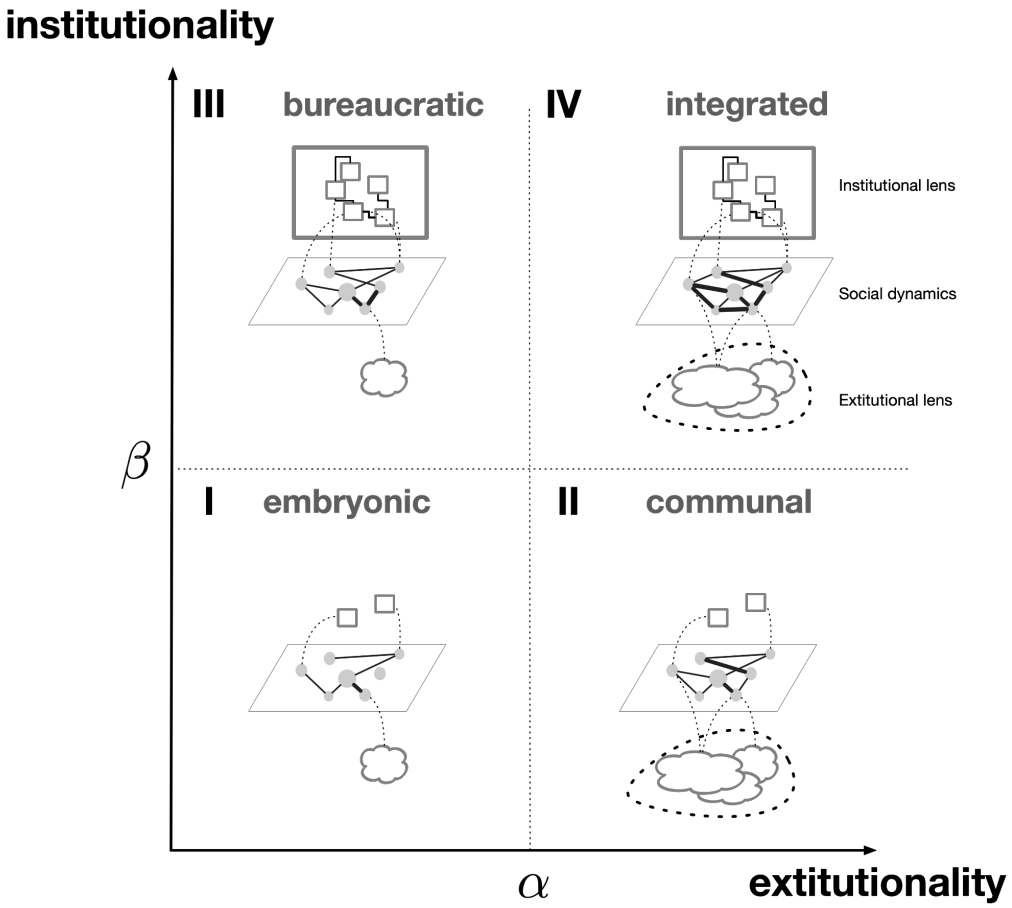

Figure 3: Mapping the space of social structures.

Schematic representation of the space of possible social structures constructed with layer-specific variables that quantify extitutional and institutional forces.

Conclusion and future perspectives

In his 2010 paper, Spicer introduced the notion of 'extitution' as comprising all these elements that exceed, transcend, escape or even destabilise

institutions. He provides the example of the 'gay' who challenges the institution of marriage, or the 'refugee' who does not fit within the boundaries of any nation state. According to Spicer, institutions seek to capture these extitutional elements, by either trying to confine and domesticate them, or by trying to harness them to further their own institutional interests (Spicer, 2010).

This paper takes a slightly different take, reframing the notion of 'extitution' to refer not to a set of elements that exist beyond the institution, and are therefore 'invisible' to them, but rather as an alternative lens through which social dynamics can be analysed and understood. Hence, the same social group can be analysed through both an institutional and extitutional lens, depending on the focus of analysis. The institutional lens will put more attention on the roles, the rules, and the overall structure that guide or support specific social dynamics, whereas the extitutional lens will focus more on the relationships that emerge between individuals, and the culture that characterises these social interactions.

Extitutional theory provides an integrated theoretical framework and conceptual toolkit to investigate the interplay that subsists between the institutional and extitutional facets of a same social group, disentangling the two in order to support the analysis of their distinctive characteristics and their corresponding influences on social dynamics. The goal is to define a social structure in a dualistic approach, separating its constitutive elements according to the ordering dynamics that animate them, so as to shed more clarity on the specificities of each and the interactions between the two.

Building upon Hogdson's definition of 'institution' as integrating both rules and habits (Hodgson, 2006), Granovetter's socio-economic network theory of embeddedness of social actors in market organisations (Granovetter, 1985), and the more recent neo-structural sociology promoting network-based studies of the interplay between bureaucracy and collegiality underlying collective agency (Lazega, 2021), we elaborate an ontological framework that formalises the reciprocal interactions between institutions and extitutions.

Specifically, extitutional theory leverages insights from social sciences and combines them with a variety of concepts studied and analysed in the field of

institutional theory, in order to build an ontological framework that specifically accounts for and distinguishes between the personal (*extitutional*) and impersonal (*institutional*) aspects of social dynamics that can be observed in any social group. First and foremost, it builds on Lazega's work on bureaucracy and collegiality (2020) that distinguishes between the set of impersonal interactions which are often found in *bureaucracies* and the network of personalised relationships which are found in many *collegial groups*. Yet, the scope of extitutional theory is ultimately broader: while bureaucracy and collegiality are mainly focused on collective action and decision-making to manage shared resources and responsibilities, typically in the context of work relationships, extitutional theory is intended to apply to any organised set of social dynamics – of which bureaucratic organisations and the associated collegial pockets are only a subset. This includes, *inter alia*, family groups, clubs, intentional communities, but also language, money, etc. In addition, drawing from Hogdson (2016), extitutional theory does not draw the line between institutions and extitutions based on the *formal* versus *informal* distinction, but rather on the distinction between *codified* rules and *inferred* patterns of behaviour, and the ensuing *normative* versus *inferential* expectations. Regardless of their degree of formalisation, institutional rules will be enforced according to precise procedures, whereas deviation from any extitutional pattern of behaviour will result in the recalibration of the cognitive model based on which such pattern had been inferred.

This new ontological framework plays both a *descriptive* and *normative* function. On the one hand, from a descriptive perspective, by distinguishing between *institutional* and *extitutional* dynamics, extitutional theory proposes a new grid of analysis that highlights specific facets of social interactions which are usually combined into a single analytical framework. Extitutional theory thus allows us to focus more specifically on the different mechanisms at play within each of these two ordering logics, with a view to provide a richer and more in-depth description of their corresponding motives and idiosyncrasies. Most importantly, extitutional theory also provides a set of conceptual tools to analyse the coupling between institutional and extitutional dynamics, in order to develop a better understanding of the interplay that subsists between these two ordering logics, and analyse the way they interact with one another and influence each other. This enables us to

achieve a more comprehensive understanding of social organisations from a dynamic, multi-faceted and multi-layered standpoint. On the other hand, from a normative stance, the ontological framework of extitutional theory can be leveraged to conceptualise and design new institutional frameworks that better support and accommodate collective action. It does so by providing a new conceptual toolkit that supports and facilitates the process of *extitutionalisation (*in contrast to the process of *institutionalisation*), along with a new analytical toolkit to evaluate how these two processes can support and complement each other, rather than undermine one another. Indeed, we believe that it is through a better understanding of the ways in which institutional and extitutional dynamics affect each other (and are affected by one another) that we will be able to define and develop more balanced institutional frameworks, and prescribe novel configurations of collective action that benefit from a balanced equilibrium between extitutional and institutional forces.

Extitutional theory remains an emergent field of scholarship, which is still in an embryonic state. More research is necessary in order to further explore the distinctive characteristics of extitutional dynamics and their relationship with institutional forms. In particular, this work can be of interest, and nurtured by insights from a number of adjacent disciplines with similar intents yet different vocabularies. As such, it is important to draw from previous literature from different disciplinary backgrounds (including business management, complex networks, biology, anthropology, etc.) to integrate and ideally reconcile the insights of scholars who have been studying extitutional dynamics in other fields of endeavours.

For example, in the field of economics and political sciences, game theoretical models have been elaborated to map the co-dependence between culture (civic capacity) and institutions (Bednar and Page, 2018). At a smaller, micro-scale, team science as a field has probed social interaction mechanisms and role composition structure that facilitates teamwork (Guimerà et al., 2005; Mukherjee et al., 2019) and enhances collective intelligence (Woolley et al., 2010), with a view to maximise group performance into completing complex collective tasks (Hotaling and Bagrow, 2020; Klug and Bagrow, 2016). Beyond the traditional format of well-defined social groups with predetermined goals, the open-source, open science, or digital communities more generally offer

examples of agile, self-organised communities with limited institutionalisation. Examples include participatory open science (Benchoufi et al., 2018; Franzoni and Sauermann, 2014; Kokshagina, 2021; Landrain et al., 2013; Masselot et al., 2022), collaborative knowledge production on Wikipedia (Klein, Maillart and Chuang, 2015), open-source software contributions (Klug and Bagrow, 2016; Sornette, Maillart and Ghezzi, 2014), as well as large-scale social media datasets that offer experimental windows into 'para-institutions' (Peña-López, Congosto and Aragón, 2014). On the socio-technological side, network studies of the collective operations underlying large-scale construction projects offer insights into highly bureaucratic, predetermined rule-based activity networks and the role of structural properties in the overall performance (Ellinas, 2019; Santolini, Ellinas and Nicolaides, 2021).

In addition to these empirical studies, network science has also been used to model social dynamics, in order to formalise social dynamics into predictive models. For instance, network science has been used to relate social network structure with complex group problem solving (Barkoczi and Galesic, 2016), as well as to provide multi-level social network insights into the collaborations and reputation systems of researchers within a research institution network (Wang et al., 2013). Beyond human systems, ecological models have provided an established toolkit to describe the stability, vulnerability, and dynamics of animal ecosystems using network approaches (Flack, 2012; Suweis et al., 2013) with applications in collective problem solving (Flack, 2013) as well as the structural evolution of firm networks (Saavedra, Reed-Tsochas and Uzzi, 2009).

Overall, the field of exitutional theory attempts to collect insights from all of these disciplines and integrate them into a common ontological framework. Future work is needed to validate this framework by means of empirical research and case studies. This includes mapping the lifecycle of social structures, and their evolution from mere informal groups to early extitutions, more formalised institutions, and eventually to full-fledged bureaucratic organisations. In addition, future studies should address the process of simplifying overly bureaucratic institutions in order to carve out more space for extitutional dynamics. For example, practitioners from the software development industry, accustomed to the agile development method

and Minimum Viable Products, have introduced the concept of 'Minimum Viable Bureaucracy' as a simple institutional scaffold optimising for both efficiency and creativity within an organisation (Rose, 2016; van Ommeren et al., 2016). Similarly, conceptualising and designing Minimum Viable Institutions could help balance extitutional agility and self-organisation, while allowing for long-term sustainability at the institutional level. An example of such institutions are the 'Middle Ground' structures in urban centres that help connect top-down city management with bottom-up citizen engagement processes, thereby catalysing the dialogue between the institutional and extitutional facets of cities (Irrman, 2022; Kirwan, 2015). Last but not least, future work should also address the possible drift of extitutions, when not properly constrained by institutional scaffoldings, and their evolution into excessively homogeneous groups or cults dominated by a few powerful or charismatic individuals. Eventually, strategies could be developed to combine institutional structures and institutional elements within a social group in order to support and promote desirable social dynamics, while limiting undesirable ones, with significant consequences for organisational design and governance.

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Commonism and capabilities

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abstract

The paper discusses how to address commons management and preservation issues without relying on market institutions. In doing so, we adopt a Marxian viewpoint and endorse a contemporary political theory known as *commonism*. Firstly, we explain why commons are not commodities and introduce commonism's main pillars. Secondly, we outline the main influences of Marx's thought on Amartya Sen's *capability approach* and discuss why Sen's theory can be useful for refining some theoretical aspects of commonism.

Introduction

In recent times, there has been a growing debate on common-pool resources, *the commons*, and on the design of institutions aimed at governing and managing them. Well-known examples of commons are: groundwater basins, forests, ocean fisheries, clean air, mainframe computers, software code, planetary climate control, international political institutions and settlements, immaterial collective infrastructures and the Internet; the kind of unitary resource individuals derive from commons can vary from air and water to information bits or budget allocations (Blomqvist and Ostrom, 1985).

Among the motivations for such an increasing interest is the attempt to solve a classic problem of commons provision and use: the Hardin *tragedy* (Hardin, 1968). Like in Prisoner's Dilemma game situations, collectively-optimal

individual decisions about the use of commons contrast with individual rationality dictates. Individual optimal choices are socially-harmful and lead to over-usage and impoverishment of common-pool resources[1].

Since individuals are trapped in dilemma-like settings, public authorities have to introduce institutions for solving management problems. These institutions can include top-down, governmental regulation, private property and markets, or everything in between. For sure, Ostrom's seminal works clearly point out that, given the distinctive features of commons, self-organized, bottom-up governance systems are largely superior to other institutional solutions[2].

Market sceptics like Dyer-Witheford (2007: 1), thereby, point out that:

> ecological disaster is the revenge of the markets so-called negative externalities; social development is based on market operations, 'intensifying inequality, with immiseration amidst plenitude'; and networks are, the market's inability to accommodate its own positive externalities, that is, to allow the full benefits of innovations when they overflow market price mechanisms.

These market failures in managing and preserving commons can be explained, *inter alia*, by using some concepts of Karl Marx's political economy. More precisely, Marx's definition of what commodities are, and his notion of circuit of capital. As we shall see, commons are not commodities, and the circuit of capital cannot operate properly in managing and governing them.

In what follows, therefore, we approach commons management and preservation issues without using ideas of market, marginal returns and relative prices. Conversely, we adopt a Marxian viewpoint and endorse a contemporary political theory known as *commonism*. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, commonism's perspective is consistent with the principle of self-governance of common-pool resources strongly defended by Ostrom and others scholars; on the other hand, commonism requires that collectivities, groups and associations have the capacity of affect and direct social change

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1 For a seminal discussion on common-pool resources and game theory see Dasgupta (1982).

2 See, among others, Ostrom (1990) and (2000).

(Fournier, 2013) and here, again, the term capacity reminds some classic Marxian ideas recombined by Amartya Sen to create his *Capability Approach*[3]. Our main aim, therefore, is to intersect elements of the above mentioned theories (e.g. Ostrom's institutional theory, commonism and the Capability Approach) in order to suggest a starting point for public discussion about how to deal with commons in a post-capitalist social order.

The organization of the essay is the following. In the next Section, we discuss why commons are not commodities and introduce commonism's main pillars. Some conditions for commonism to be a possible alternative to capitalism, as a mode of social organization, are emphasized as well. Secondly, in Section 3, we briefly out-sketch main influences of Marx's thought on Amartya Sen's *Capability Approach*, and why Sen's theory can be useful for refining some theoretical aspects of commonism. Then, in Section 4, in order to define some capabilities for commons, we intertwine Ostrom's design principles for self-governance institutions with capabilitarianism. Last but not least, the concluding section discusses how the common has been articulated as an alternative to capitalism in the scholarly literature.

Commodities and commons

Scholars' proposals for managing commons beyond market-based systems can be viewed in the context of conceptualizing alternatives to capitalism. In this debate, Bollier (2015: 1) points out that the common:

> is less a noun than a verb because it is primarily about the social practices of commoning; acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication and experimentation that are needed to create systems to manage shared resources.

As a social process, the common organizes and institutionalizes the political practice of commoning (Hosseini, 2021). Considering social-relational aspects of the common also allows the issue of togetherness and collective governance to be raised (Ostrom, 2015).

[3] Original Sen's contributions on the Capability Approach are Sen (1980), (1985) and (1987). For classic surveys on the approach see Roybens (2005) and (2016).

From this post-capitalist perspective, markets and relative price systems' inability to manage common-pool resources can be explained by comparing commons to Marx's notion of *commodity*. As Marx (1977: 243) wrote:

> if commodities could speak, they would say this: our use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value…we relate to each other merely as exchange values.

This statement emphasizes what happens when commodities exchange values (e.g. relative prices) *merely* differ from their total/social values as a result of externalities and/or intrinsic value components that cannot be quantified in terms of price, just as in the case of commons. Following Marx (1981), along the '*circuit of capital'* commodities are exchanged for money, money purchases as commodities labor, materials, machinery etc., and industrial capital produces new commodities by means of commodities. The former are sold for more money in an auto-catalytic, self-reinforcing process.

The cell forms of capitalist accumulation are commodities which must be private goods having only instrumental value and reliable relative prices. If last conditions do not hold, and exchange values do not coincide with social ones, capitalistic profit accumulation through the above circuit generates important social costs for populations, collectives and communities.

Given that commons are not commodities, from a radical political economy standpoint, some scholars have not only stressed that markets and relative price systems will never offer proper solutions to common-pool resource governance issues, but that, in order to properly manage the common, the whole capitalistic system has to be subverted. For example, Dyer-Witheford (2006, 2007) and de Pauter and Dyer-Witheford (2010) suggest the intriguing idea of *commonism*. As Dyer-Witheford (2007: 2) points out:

> if the cell form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of a society beyond capital is the common. A commodity is a good produced for sale, a common is a good produced, or conserved, to be shared. The notion of a commodity, a good produced for sale, presupposes private owners between whom the exchange occurs. The notions of the common presupposes collectivities – associations and assemblies – within which sharing is organized. If capitalism presents itself as an immense heap of commodities, commonism is a multiplication of commons.

Accordingly to commonism, three different levels of common resources characterize the so-called '*circuit of the common'*: (*i*) *ecological commons*, i.e., global public goods, or global ecosystem services, which determine the ecology of the planet and of all species living on it (among the others: the biosphere, planetary climate control, fishery reserves, watersheds and freshwater basins, epidemiological care provision or the regulation of the food supply); (*ii*) *networked digital commons*, i.e., non-rival, common pool, digital technologies that overflow intellectual property regimes (like, for instance, creative commons, open-source systems or peer-to-peer networks); and (*iii*) *social commons*, i.e., commons for socially-sustainable productive and reproductive work (for example: re-distributive social institutions granting equal opportunities, collectively-managed forms of production like cooperatives, or universal basic income programs).[4]

Now, the Marxist circuit works differently for commons: collectivities use shared resources for productive and reproductive activities which create more commons, and these new commons give rise to new forms of possible peer-to-peer, bottom-up associations. This process builds '*the circuit of the common'*. Alternative provision networks, or groups, are created as a result of interactions between the above levels of the common in a way that is both 'aggressive and expansive: proliferating, self-strengthening and diversifying' (Dyer-Witheford, 2007).[5]

As a result of social experiments created in resistance to capitalism, the circuit of the common will emerge (de Pauter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010) *only if* human beings and populations have 'the capacity to affect change in their collective development'(Dyer-Witheford, 2006). Such a capacity is defined as 'a *constitutive power*, a bootstrapped, self-reinforcing loop of social co-operation, techno-scientific competencies and conscious awareness' (*ibid.*) that makes possible for members of collectivities to invent new modes of

[4] For a discussion on the new commonwealth of commons see Neary and Winn (2012).

[5] Gibson-Graham calls this process the circuit of 'generative commons'. See Gibson-Graham (2006).

production and reproduction outside the orbit of commodities. Thus, following Marx and Engels (1970: 92), commonism requires that individuals:

> appropriate the existing totality of productive forces and the appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of individual capacities corresponding to material instruments of production. The appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is, for this reason, the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves.

In order for commonism to achieve its aim of replacing commodity-based capitalism, the importance of *capabilities for commons* is evident and self-sustaining. But what are these capabilities for commons, and how can they be developed and organized? Are they individual or collective capabilities, or both? And again, could these capabilities be developed to enable collectives to self-govern the common?

Unfortunately, neither analytical Marxism nor radical Marxism offer to commonism's thinkers conceptual categories, and tools, to deal with capacity development, something on which Sen's Capability Approach has a lot to say. Hence, in what follows, in order to address above issues, we shall use Sen's approach to define what capabilities for commons are, and how they can be developed consistently with Ostrom's principles for self-governing the common (Ostrom, 2015). These principles depict individual and collective capabilities that are necessary to manage the circuit of the common.

On Marx, Sen and commonism

Throughout his long career, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has worked on poverty, inequality, social justice, and human development issues. Economic inequality and its consequences, as well as the lack of freedom that undermines human flourishing, have been the focus of his research. Sen himself has publicly acknowledged his debt to Marx's ideas, notably:

> for teaching us that the most terrible inequalities may be hidden behind an illusion of normality and justice. (Sen, 2006: 81)

Therefore, it is not surprising that many of his contributions to economics, social sciences or development studies have different roots in classic Marxian works[6].

Firstly, it is true that Marx did not use the term capabilities, and did not interpret individual capacities as freedoms, but he was a strong believer that human flourishing needs capacity development and freedom, exactly what Sen suggests. Sen himself quotes, as a basic reference, Marx at the very beginning of his seminal book, 'Commodities and capabilities' (1985). Both Sen and Marx place human well-being at the core of their reasonings, and interpret human empowerment as the main force of liberation against inequality, poverty and under-development.

Secondly, Marx and Sen have repeatedly emphasized that commodities accumulation must not be the pillar of economic and social development. They have widely argued against 'commodity fetishism' and stressed that some value elements cannot be *commodified* like, for example, human dignity and freedom, or the right to creatively organize productive and re-productive activities.

Finally, Marx and Sen are two important thinkers of the egalitarian tradition of social and political thought. They have largely discussed existing tensions between economic incentives and social justice, and emphasized market institutions' inabilities to solve them.[7]

Nevertheless, Sen believes that public action can correct social inequalities and eliminate deprivations of capabilities. He did not advocate transcending capitalism and market institutions for achieving social justice, as Marx did, and he did not invoke social struggles for ending domination, exploitation, and capitalism. For this reason, Sen has in mind a 'diluted Marx' (Fraser, 2016): the politically-correct social thinker appropriated by the analytical Marxism tradition.[8]

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6 On Marx and Sen see Qizilbash (2016).

7 On this point see Papaioannou (2016) and Fraser (2016).

8 See Roemer (1989).

In a radical perspective, more drastic measures are required to combat capitalism's injustices and failures than those admitted by Sen and others. This does not mean, however, that Sen's Capability Approach cannot offer interesting conceptual tools and categories for investigating which capabilities collectivities, communities and groups need to organize the circuit of the common. According to commonism, for instance, Marx's thought suggests to value commodities in terms of their immaterial value for abstract labor, i.e., the production of ideas. Such an assessment, *inter alia*, requires that individuals can control means of intellectual production, can share and feed living, social knowledge, and exercise autonomous institutionality. Indeed, these are collective capabilities. Thereby, a relevant issue for commonism is whether communities, collectivities, groups and the like, have developed capabilities for managing, evolving and preserving commons. Exactly those capacities emphasized in Marx's quote cited in the second Section of this essay (Marx and Engels, 1970: 92).

Furthermore, for self-governing the circuit of the common, social production, open education, collective ownership, self-valorization, shared-knowledge and autonomous institutions are all needed, and Sen's approach can tell us how to identify and assess capabilities for self-governance. For this sake, as we shall argue in the next Section, capabilities development must be designed consistently with Ostrom's principles for long-enduring, self-governance institutions for the common.

Capabilities and commons

For self-governing the circuit of the common, collectivities need, *inter alia*, education, trust, cohesion, full consciousness, complex skills and public reasoning. Hence, from a Capability Approach's perspective, we have to reason in terms of both *individual* and *collective* capabilities.[9] Furthermore, we

[9] In what follows, I apply taxonomies for individual and collective capabilities I used in Lanzi (2007) and (2011). See those contributions for details and full references. For a new, comprehensive introduction to the Capability Approach see Chiappero-Martinetti et al. (2020).

need to specify how capabilities for commons can be developed consistently with self-governance principles.

Our discussion in this Section is thus organized as follows: first, a simple taxonomy of capabilities to function is briefly outlined to deal with common resources governance issues; second, some domains for capabilities development are proposed based on Ostrom's work.

Some definitions

In Sen's Capability Approach, the capability set is the set of all feasible functionings vectors an individual can achieve (and choose among) in order to realize his/her well-being. Capabilities are freedoms, or causal powers (Martens, 2006), and they have both individual and collective dimensions.

Furthermore, capabilities are fuzzy entities. They refer, above all, to a person's abilities, concrete skills and knowledge (*S-caps*). Individuals who lack these capabilities face shortfalls in their ability to exploit legal rights, public policies, or external and social conditions to achieve their goals. Moreover, *S-caps* are affected by attained functionings, i.e., doing routine jobs might reduce cognitive skills or learning abilities as well as achieving self-esteem could make effective abilities closer to potential ones.

Indeed, individual opportunities to attain well-being are not simply determined by individual skills or abilities. Public policies, economic entitlements, informal household rules and civic institutions and organizations also shape individual opportunities. Hence, given some *S-caps*, the set of attainable life-paths is heavily influenced by external factors and rules which are often beyond the individual's control (Nussbaum, 2000). These external capabilities (*E-caps*) are shaped by formal rights, or rules, as well as by informal norms of behavior or ascribed social roles, and they may change according to race, gender or social condition. In addition, *E-caps* can be radically influenced by achieved functionings and by *S-caps* because better education and widespread knowledge can lead to cultural changes, or better awareness of (and proactive adaptation to) social norms and inequalities (such as sex discrimination).

Finally, *E-caps* may directly determine *S-caps* if knowledge and skill acquisition are tacit processes based on multilateral information sharing. Taken together, external and innate capabilities describe individual options in terms of functioning achievements (the so-called option capabilities, or *O-caps*). *E-caps* are also social capabilities in both possible meanings of the expression, that are: *collective capabilities,* i.e., capabilities which can only be exploited by individuals as parts of groups, teams or collectivities; and *socially-dependent capabilities*, i.e., capabilities which are embedded in social structures and can only be exploited through social interaction.

Nevertheless, as stressed by Gasper (2002), human freedom is not simply defined by what a person does or could do, but also by how much what he/she does is consistent with what he/she believes is right and worth doing. Individuals define and debate which values and goals are relevant and valuable to them through discussion and dialogue about what capabilities are essential. In order to do this, agents need moral capabilities (*M-caps*) which enable them to interact, to form purposes and identities, to internalize ethical principles and to rate different life-paths. Additionally, M-caps are crucial for discussing social modes of production, reproduction, and common resource management, and for generating new kinds of behavior or models of development (*social change*). Finally, without well-nourished *M-caps*, skills could be wrongly oriented, larger option sets could cause confusion and weaknesses of will, and social norms and constraints could be automatically internalized with no criticisms or reactions. Some of these *M-caps* depend on individual traits, beliefs and attitudes; some others are genuinely social. Moreover, Begon (2017) emphasizes that if *M-caps* are taken seriously, capabilities won't just be only the possibility of achieving a particular functioning, but the substantive freedom to do so in any domain we find meaningful (*capabilities to control*).

Various types of capabilities do not necessarily have clear boundaries. They interact with each other and with respect to their achieved functionings: it is a matter of local politics to describe how. Indeed, such a fuzziness is explained by socially-embedded conversion processes of resources, entitlements and rights into freedom or well-being. Individuals belong to different local communities with diverse norms of behavior and group loyalties, and they assume, within collectivities or groups, different social roles. Individuals and

communities are required to develop multi-fold capabilities at any stage of the circuit of the common in order to appropriate productive forces. Let us discuss why.

First of all, communities, social groups and collectivities must have the freedom to form associations for creatively managing and preserving commons but, for doing this, they need open education, sufficient resources and time for public debate and public reasoning. Furthermore, legal rights and institutional rules should foster bottom-up, self-governance organizations based on collective ownership and democratic decision making. These emergent associations of individuals and communities would engage an open, informed and multi-disciplinary discussion about how to organize shared resources into productive/re-productive units and, in doing this, they would be entitled to introduce innovative goods, services or technologies with viral and non-proprietary licenses.

Secondly, once collective organizations and institutions for managing commons are designed and established, members of collectivities need proper skills and entitlements for exploiting common-pool resources, moral awareness on preservation and/or expansion needs and relational abilities for managing conflicts and disputes.

Thirdly, if sharing a common-pool resource generates new production possibilities in terms of derived goods or services, democratic and not-profit-oriented production units (like cooperatives) would be free to operate in a clear, and reliable, normative framework trough which to organize social production and peer-to-peer exchanges without markets or hierarchies.

Finally, to organize rules that specify rights and duties of social producers and to invest in new modes of production and usage creates a second-order common good that supports the birth of new forms of association for sharing more resources.

But, thence, if internal, external, collective, moral capabilities are all necessary for self-governing the common, how can we restrict our reasoning and identify some relevant capabilities from which to start from?

Capabilities for commons

In her scientific contributions, Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom has extensively investigated how to design long-lasting institutions that manage common resources, and the conditions under which self-governance organizations can successfully manage common resources. Take, for instance, the following list of design principles for long enduring, self-governance institutions (Ostrom, 1990):

> define clear group boundaries;
>
> match rules governing the use of commons to local needs and conditions;
>
> ensure that those affected by rules can participate in modifying the rules;
>
> make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities;
>
> develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members behavior;
>
> use graduated sanctions for rules violators;
>
> provide dispute resolution mechanisms that are accessible and low-cost;
>
> respect the right to organize of groups and communities;
>
> build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

Straightforwardly, individuals, households or collectivities need a large array of capabilities in order to organize and manage their common resources through self-governing institutions. Without being exhaustive, we mention: internal, individual, *S-caps* for being able to assess relevant group boundaries and their modifications with respect to time and usage; collective, *S-caps* for building a credible, long-enduring rights system based on well-specified criteria of local justice; collective *O-caps* that makes possible for any social group to have voice in the process of rights and entitlements creation; *S-caps*, both individualistically and collectively conceived, which support the development of socially-accountable, costs-benefits analysis frameworks; collective *S-caps* for settling collective decision agreements, and *M-caps* for granting that collectivities can understand the moral consequences of any

collective choice rule. Socially-dependent capabilities are also necessary in collective monitoring activities, conflicts resolution and sanctions enforcement as well as multi-folded, democratic social interaction would ensure to all groups sufficient *O-caps* for being politically autonomous and not challenged by external governmental authorities.

As a final point, the above capabilities are specific to the type of common-pool resource we are dealing with, dynamic, and harder to develop in large, heterogeneous groups than in small, cohesive ones. Cultivating humanity for the common suffers, therefore, of both over-specification and under-specification problems. On the one hand, a general, exhaustive panel of capabilities for commons would contain as many entries as needed to empower individuals and groups in a post-capitalist order in which the common has subverted the capital. Surely, a very long list. On the other hand, many of these capabilities could be difficult to see before the circuit of the common is unfolded.

In order to deal with the circuit of the common, some capabilities must be developed; if they are not, we will have difficulty dealing with it. Let's provide some examples.

First, a common always implies a community. There is no common without a community holding it as such, without a community creating the common and using it. Such a community is a complex social system in which individuals and groups must be able to work collaboratively and cooperatively (Fournier, 2013). Being able to cooperate and to think collectively will make it easier to define group boundaries, to find feasible conflict-resolution mechanisms or collective decision rules. These *capabilities to act cooperatively* are influenced by individual skills, cultural contexts and moral traits.

Second, commons can be intangible, like knowledge, language, or culture. In these cases, their use is not rival along the lines of '*the more we share, the more we have.'* Consistently, new modes of co-production, ownership, exchange and benefits provision must be identified in a non-rival and non-competitive way. Being able to operate according to a non-profit, non-individualistic philosophy can ease the building of responsibility for governing common resources as well as the acknowledgment of multiple rights to organize new

management solutions. These *capabilities to think collectively* will be crucial to avoid the curse of commodification.

Third, as Linebaugh (2007: 279) emphasizes:

> the common is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive.

Accordingly, the process through which commons are produced and maintained gives shape to the community, or '*in-forms*' the community (Euler, 2018). Due to this, it can be difficult to comprehend which new social practices have to support the reproduction of the commons if we are not able to adopt a creative and open political approach to social change. Adequate *capabilities to imagine social change* will support the matching between rules governing the use of commons and local conditions, and will foster direct participation of those affected by these rules to their definition.

Fourth, the 'commoning' can be defined as an institutionalized, legal and infrastructural arrangement for a practice in which we collaboratively organize and take responsibility for the use, maintenance and production of common resources (Acksel et al., 2015). When a group engages in a commoning practice, it assumes some form of equality of participation, at least some sort of congruence between costs and benefits between its members. Hence, the exercise of commoning creates a sort of *relational good* based on *identity*, *motivations* and *simultaneity*, i.e., the good is co-produced and co-consumed, at the same time, by the actors involved (Gui and Sugden, 2005). Collectively being capable of developing notions of community, commons, and commoning is crucial along this creation process (Shariff, 2018). Without these *capabilities to conceive the common*, only private, market-oriented systems for governing common-pool resources will be possible.

Finally, any definition of the common must consider the diversity of uses of common resources (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013). The social meaning of a common is not fixed, but it changes according to how a society evolves. The diversity of legitimate uses reveals the cultural and political nature of commons. The collective meaning given to commons, from which legitimate uses are defined, is, therefore, a political statement that requires collectivities

able to manage and exploit diversity. These *capabilities to enhance diversity* are both moral and option-oriented, and they are useful to establish proper uses and fair sanctions for malevolent behaviour.

Concluding remarks

This paper addresses the development of post-capitalistic solutions to issues of commons management and preservation based on some capabilities for commons. Individuals participating in and sharing commons sustain social change. When an individual joins a group, and acts collectively for the benefit of the common, he/she generates changing and diverse stimulations which create changing and diverse actions/reactions in other group members. In this way, sharing commons, and working with others for such a result, can yield some important modifications in the way we define and develop our social self and perceive the common. Moreover, individuals actively involved in commons management and preservation focus their everyday activities on achieving the productive/re-productive conditions such that commons can satisfy some collective needs. In doing so, individuals develop their agency by participating in the social creation of living conditions. Productive results are freely accessible to all, and the organization of operating activities is carried out by participants themselves, i.e., participants determine rules of cooperation, decision-making procedures and conflict management mechanisms. Within the circuit of the common, continuous movements are organized to contrast attempts to commodify and capitalize on social invention, integration, mutuality and creative and cooperative forms of social organization (Hoedemækers et al., 2012).

Hence, the common can be seen as a new paradigm for societal reproduction. Commonism argues that needs-based exchanges take place before production, not *ex post* as with commodities. Before productive activities are implemented, different wishes and requirements of participants, as well as social conditions and priorities, are communicated, discussed and reconciled using democratic methods. Further, interpersonal relationships of reciprocity along the circuit of the common are usually *unconditional* (no conditional linking of taking to giving), *peer-to-peer* and *inclusive*. Self-selection of voluntary activities ensures truly motivated actions, while cooperation and

reciprocity facilitate general relations of inclusion (Neumüller and Meretz, 2019). Our paper suggests that these inclusive relations are more likely to cease if common capabilities are granted and developed along the circuit of the common at different levels.

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Refusing busyness

Stephen Dunne and Michael Pedersen

> There are easier places to work, but nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week. But if you love what you do, it (mostly) doesn't feel like work.
>
> Elon Musk, November 26th, 2018[1]

On the 9th of January 2017, Micha Kaufman – the CEO and co-founder of the online gig-economy facilitator Fiverr – announced their 'In Doers We Trust' campaign. Brash in tone and boastful almost beyond belief, Kaufman's (2017) auto-eulogy held forth on the virtues of 'the age of the lean-entrepreneur' which his organisation both enables and celebrates. Fiverr matches your capacities to a buyer by translating human endeavours into tangible commodities and Kaufman's blog post is both a manifesto and an audit. The headline's polemical 'from an ideal to a movement' (*ibid.*) becomes a quantification of what their doers have done:

> In the nearly seven years since Fiverr was launched, we've built something special: A community of millions spread across 190 countries, posting over 10 million Gigs, and buying over 30 million services. (*ibid.*)

[1] https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1067173497909141504

Next, he clumsily mentions Fiverr's 'countless' beneficiaries. After this comes the tautological 'doers are at their best when they're doing', the world-alienated 'cities you call home' and the closing promise, from which thoughts of laxatives and nursing homes can hardly stray: 'Wake up every day to get shit done. We'll help you do it.' (*ibid.*). Kaufman's is not a well-written text. But we should resist the temptation to dismiss it as bullshit (see Frankfurt, 2005; Graeber, 2019; Spicer, 2017) and instead entertain the possibility that such talk matters. Not for what it literally says – because see above – but for what it shows us about how busyness is now experienced and embraced. Throughout their campaign copy 'dreamers' are ordered to 'step aside', 'ideas' are said to be merely 'cute' and, as their most controversial poster affirms:

> YOU EAT A COFFEE FOR LUNCH. YOU FOLLOW THROUGH ON YOUR FOLLOW THROUGH. SLEEP DEPRIVATION IS YOUR DRUG OF CHOICE. YOU MIGHT BE A DOER.

The perverse appeal of such rhetoric consists in its obviously bleak but seemingly honest diagnosis of modern existence. Understand yourself as a competitive economic agent, as a possessor of human capital and as a vehicle of the entrepreneurial spirit, or else! According to Jia Tolentino (2017), it exemplifies

> the American obsession with self-reliance, which makes it more acceptable to applaud an individual for working himself to death than to argue that an individual working himself to death is evidence of a flawed economic system.

Fiverr's celebration of individual autonomy is a commodification of the precarious doer's lack of options. They are not suggesting new ways of thinking and being to their audiences. They are instead normalising that audience's own overworking of itself (see also Bloom, 2013; Cederström and Grassman, 2008). In this, they offer both a *window* onto the realities of lean entrepreneurship and a *mirror* for those busying themselves within that world. So we see here a structural imposition masquerading as an individual disposition. Doers, for their part, find their experiences mirrored by Fiverr's discourse not because they want to but because they have to. Instead of castigating Doers as dupes, we should instead recognise them as desperate.

And yet, if it troubles you to contemplate numerous 'Doers' working themselves onto illness and/or death, all you need to do is recognise their own

choices as their own faults and, as such, as their own problems. Sympathising, you may well wish they would make better decisions – you might even seek to persuade them accordingly – but we should neither physically coerce nor legally oblige them into doing so. Such is the libertarian's tough love. Such is the state of solidarity in the age of lean entrepreneurship.

It isn't only precarious labour that now finds itself eating a coffee for lunch (Haider, 2018; Muhr et al., 2012; Read, 2014), of course. One of the upshots of the 500 interviews Laura Empson (2017) conducted for *Leading professionals* is that if you want to succeed as a professional of any kind, you will need to work. A lot. Empson's study neither celebrates nor condemns busyness. Hers is rather an empirical investigation into the culture of overwork's historical development and social-psychological reinforcement (see also Hochschild, 1997; Schor, 1991; Weeks, 2011). Empson (2018: 4) writes:

> Paradoxically, the professionals I studied still believe that they have autonomy and that they are overworking by choice. They do not blame their organizations, which after all have invested in work-life balance initiatives and wellness programs. Instead, they blame themselves for being inadequate (…). If they suffer burnout, they think it is their fault. Their organization and its leadership are absolved of responsibility, so nothing fundamental changes.

The bosses were not commanding Empson's respondents to work 70-hour plus weeks. They were rather obliging themselves to graft so hard. But why? They know very well that they do not have to work so much. They also know that doing so is detrimental to their own health, and to their domestic responsibilities (Bittman, 2004; Darrah, 2007; Gershuny, 2005). And yet they do it anyway, even coming to believe that this lamentable condition is nobody's fault but their own. A few weeks after *Harvard Business Review* published Empson's piece Jack Ma, the founder of the Alibaba Group, announced that he expected '996' levels of commitment from his employees (Paul, 2019). A few months after that, the Cambridge classicist Mary Beard tweeted:

> Can I ask academics of any level of seniority how many hours a week they reckon they work. My current estimate is over 100. I am a mug. But what is the norm in real life?[2]

Ma speaks from the position of a be-like-me billionaire while Beard's lament is that of a worriedly self-mugging don. Despite such differences the message throughout is clear: if you want to succeed as a professional, as a professor, or as a whatever-Jack-Ma-is, you must expect super-normal efforts from yourself. According to Bellezza et al. (2017), we should understand such conspicuous displays of busyness as knowing signals, as performative displays, as public humblebrags. Being seen to work excessive hours, they argue, today amounts to a status symbol, a tactical manoeuvre, an instance of self-promotion. Whereas Thorstein Veblen (2009) demonstrated the strong historical association that has existed between the occupation with leisure and the cultivation of virtue, these authors suggest that, today, busyness has become honorific. This might explain why people *say* they work excessive hours but it leaves us wondering why they actually *do* so.

The explanation provided by Lashewicz at al. (2020) is much less theatrical. For them, professional over-exertion emerges within a vicious circle throughout which we take cues from our peers about how busy we should be. These observations create feelings of guilt and anxiety whenever our own behaviours do not match them and, particularly in the case of men, these feelings of guilt and anxiety become compounded by a reluctance to share feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. Again, nothing changes: the 996-ers prioritise their callings, the professionals take their cues from one another and the professors blame themselves.

Whereas lean entrepreneurship seduces the precarious worker into the process of its own destruction, the asceticism of professional over-exertion involves a heightened degree of agency. The Doer, that is to say, is largely a product of working conditions that they have not chosen while the overworked professional is, at least partially, a product of its own volition. Neither position is particularly enviable but the predicament of the latter is clearly preferable. For in it resides the possibility of refusing the ongoing

[2] https://twitter.com/wmarybeard/status/1198351088832962560

imposition of busyness, if only we were willing to get out of our own ways. Experiments in systematic work reduction such as the Four Day Work Week (e.g., Abildgaard, 2020; Barnes, 2020; Coote et al., 2020; Gomes, 2021; Grosse, 2018) might be seen as collective instances of such refusal. But even these, as Clare Holdsworth (2021: 155) recognises, 'will not work for everyone (and those for whom it does work are likely to be in more secure employment situations)'. The refusal of busyness, it seems, is both a possibility which the professional worker will not pursue and a luxury which the precarious worker cannot afford.

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Recycled youths, or, the reproduction of ecology of culture

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abstract

The note is a case study of youth recruitment to cultural labour. The main protagonist is MJ, a young woman who has been engaged in doing culture for more than 10 years. The note traces her path from early participation in a local writer's school for young people to serving as senior editor of a national major cultural magazine. MJ's path is entangled in numerous ways with cultural institutions, festivals, temporary projects, local cultural leaders, and she thinks of herself as a youth 'recycled' by local cultural institutions. The note applies ecology of culture as a conceptual framework to explore and describe a mechanism of cultural reproduction. The note contributes to the study of ecology of culture by describing in detail how youths are groomed for entrepreneurial, cultural labour, and by conceptualising how the work of cultural reproduction effectively transcends singular cultural organisations as youths move between organisations.

Introduction

I suggest you read this note as an exploration of how ecologies of culture reproduce cultural labour. The main protagonist is MJ, a young woman who has been engaged in doing culture for more than 10 years. I have traced her career path and paid attention to some things that she learned to do along the way. As I will explain later, I claim that the set of thresholds she passed during her learning process should be understood as a mechanism that conditioned

and prepared MJ for cultural labour. I use the singular case of MJ's experiences with cultural organisations to highlight this particular ecological mechanism which I call 'grooming'. Some readers may find the term uncomfortable, perhaps inappropriate, given the term's close association with sexual abuse. However, I hope to demonstrate that it is a concept that may help us understand a supple and subtle mechanism of cultural reproduction. We begin on a bright September day, in a sleepy provincial Danish town.

Recycled youth

'The same young people are recycled by the culture organisations', MJ remarked. She spoke wryly, reflecting on her experience and mocking those culture organisations that had 'recycled' her. I have known MJ for years and collaborated with her on a handful of projects: a literature event, some festivals, and a learning program on cultural entrepreneurship. Her remark occurred during an ethnographic interview in 2019 when I, as part of my fieldwork for my PhD dissertation, was mapping her experiences with the cultural organisations in the rural province where she lived (Burø, 2020). We had explored the ways she had used and produced culture, described the ways she had participated in creating culture. She quickly discerned the pattern. MJ interpreted herself as an example of a young person who had been spotted, motivated, recruited, engaged, and integrated into the strategic efforts of culture organisations looking to connect with young people. The cycle had begun when she was 13 years old. At 22 years, she could look back at ten years of productive relationships with theatres, festivals, community centres, concerts, refugee asylum centres, and a publishing organisation. During this time, to honour her local efforts as a cultural entrepreneur, she received the annual 'culture award'. She also published a debate post on culture in a national newspaper, and she became editor in chief of a youth culture magazine. She never expressed resentment towards the culture organisations she had engaged with, even if she used the term 'recycled youth' in a critical tone. It is neither my intention nor my right to second guess MJ's interpretation. Instead, I intend to explore the idea that when the ecology of culture recycled her, she was *groomed for generalised cultural labour*. The verb *to groom* is ambiguous. It means to make pretty, to fashion up, like brushing one's hair, and it means to prepare someone for something, like taking over

leadership. It also means preparing someone for abuse, particularly sexual abuse. I use the term in the sense of preparing someone for something. I do not mean to imply that the ecology of culture is inherently *abusive*, even if it exploits labourers and is ripe with precarious working conditions (and, certainly, cases of abuse). We shall return to grooming later on.

Ecology of culture

Given that the word 'culture' is somewhat overdetermined, it is at the risk of failure that I define *ecology of culture* as a set of 'complex interdependencies that shape the production of and demand for cultural offerings' (Markusen et al., 2011: 8). An ecology of culture is composed of relationships of co-function that condition cultural offerings for use within a given place such as theatre, music, cinema, writing classes, et cetera. Whatever counts as a cultural offering. Culture, understood through the lens of ecology, is a set of diverse organised practices of aesthetic expression and ways of making sense of life. Some of these practices have attained highly institutional forms and are embedded in specific organisations (e.g., theatre, music, cinema, literature, etc.) while other practices lean towards informal organising and do-it-yourself ethics (e.g., skate, parkour, folk music). However, when this heterogeneous set is thought of as an ecology, we can appreciate that they compose a complex system of cultural production, use, and circulation of a variety of resources. According to John Holden (2015: 3):

> An ecological approach concentrates on relationships and patterns within the overall system, showing how careers develop, ideas transfer, money flows, and product and content move, to and fro, around and between the funded, homemade and commercial subsectors.

Seen from the level of ecology, culture is composed of so many 'ways of life' (cf. Williams, 1960), each one using and producing cultural offerings, that mesh in the form of complex patterns that transcend the barriers between the domains of commercial, publicly funded, and homemade culture. Seen from the perspective of an individual person, culture as **a** way of life involves using and producing a variety of aesthetic goods as a part of the 'practice of ordinary life' (cf. de Certeau, 1984): reading a newspaper, listening to music while commuting to work, watching a tv series, doing a sport, attending live music, cooking, playing tabletop games, knitting. The list goes on. Each person is

engaged in using and producing culture. Individual behaviour may be analytically sub-ordered to generalised types of 'consumer culture.' However, ecological thought appreciates that behaviour at the level of individuals may have consequences at the level of the ecology (Morton, 2019), just as the major patterns of an ecology conditions as much as it enables the 'production of and demand for cultural offerings' (Markusen et al., 2011: 8). One particularly interesting system property is what Reckwitz (2018) calls the *creativity dispositif*, that is, a demand and desire for creativity that plays out at the level of individuals, institutions, and ecology. What the individual experiences as inducement to being and doing creativity, the ecology of culture contains as an immanent rationality that supports and drives organising for creativity, and fosters new ways of enabling individual, collective and systemic creativity. In other words, an ecology of culture has the properties of a complex adaptive system, and has, as such, the capacity to maintain and develop the conditions for the unfolding of cultural life (Holden, 2015; Holden, 2016; Koefoed, 2016; Kagan, 2011). One such condition is the demand for creativity, and, consequently, its continued renewal and reproduction.

Ecological studies of culture emerged in the beginning of the 21st century, spearheaded by Holden's (2015) report 'The ecology of culture'. Some precursors should be mentioned: already in 1972, Hope (1979) suggested applying ecology of culture as a framework for empirical inquiry. Later, others called for conceptualising culture as ecology or ecosystems (Bachmann et al., 2012; Barnhill, 2002; Gallasch, 2004; Gollmitzer and Murray, 2008). Also, the philosophy and sociology of the arts paved the way for ecology of culture as a mode of thought (Danto, 1964; Passmore, 1976; Albrecht et al., 1970). Becker's (1974; 1982) classic inquiry of art as collective action corresponds with ecology style inquiry, though not articulating itself as ecological. Thus, thinking about arts and culture in ecological terms was not entirely alien and it did resonate with more than 100 years of ecological thinking in the social sciences (Burø, 2020). Ecological thinking provided a novel framework to explain what makes culture possible, as it enabled culture researchers to understand arts and culture as complex socio-material systems and to engage with the problem of cultural sustainability (Mijatović et al., 2017). Proper ecological studies of culture emerged fully in the second decade of the 21st

century (Barker, 2020; Blackstone et al., 2016; Borin, 2015; Borin and Donato, 2015; Courtney, 2018; Crossick and Kaszynska, 2014; Dovey et al., 2016; Getz and Anderson, 2016; Jamieson, 2016; Stern and Seifert, 2013). These studies have in common that they analyse and conceptualise culture in transdisciplinary ways that place it in contrast to studies of culture as experience economies, creative industries, tourist destinations, and so on (cf. Bakhshi et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2008; Gibson, 2012; Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

In previous work, I have applied cultural mapping to study ecologies of culture, youth culture, and the ecological mechanisms for cultural reproduction (Burø, 2020; Burø and Koefoed, 2021; Koefoed and Burø, 2022). Cultural mapping is a qualitative method for studying the tangible and intangible elements of a culture (Duxbury et al., 2015). Ecological researchers have often employed forms of mapping (Kreidler and Eng, 2005; Owens, 2012; Palmer, 1928) and cultural mapping is an eminent method of ecological inquiry that describes the multiple layers of meaning and matter in a particular setting (Steward, 2010). The method increases the ability to discern and appreciate a given ecology of culture's diverse ontology and the dynamics of its complexity. Building upon insights from prior fieldwork, a particular question keeps emerging: *How do cultural labourers learn to labour?* This is where MJ's case becomes interesting. I use the singular case of her learning to do culture as indicative qualitative research, that is, to explore the idea of ecological reproduction. I am interested in how cultural labourers are trained for generic, generalisable organisational skills that make it easier for them to circulate (and easier for organisations to replace), to accept, and cope with precarity as they seek and take up work where they can organise and manage the diverse creative flow of others. Specifically, how do culture labourers enter the ecology of culture, that is, what happens *before* they take up formalised training as a culture professional or before they enter the ranks of the 'grassroots'?

We know from Bourdieu and Willis' well-known research how some kinds of cultural reproduction work. Bourdieu studied how the dominant economic and cultural classes of mid-20th century France reproduced themselves via the education system (Bourdieu, 2018). Willis suggested rooting the study of reproduction in ethnographic accounts of how a given class at a given time

produces its specific culture, in this case, working class in the UK (Willis, 1981). To both, cultural reproduction ties to the problem of how class power and privilege transfers between generations. At the same time, being ethnographers, they understood that a one-size-fits-all theory of cultural reproduction would be abstract to the point of having next to little explanatory power. Instead, as Geertz phrased it, theory would have to 'stay rather close to the ground' (Geertz, 1993: 24). Theory should describe how concrete people create actual culture to understand how systems of culture organise their own future. Cultural ecologists Wilson et al. (2017) argue that when people acquire skills to do 'everyday' culture as well as become engaged with culture as a profession, they become culturally 'capable'. Children and young people learn to do culture in formalised teaching programs, like learning the piano, or informally, like listening to live music and watching others play (Wilson and Gross, 2017). We may call learning, or 'enculturation', a mechanism of cultural reproduction (Patterson, 2010: 140). Existing values, discourse, practices, and skills are transmitted from existing members to potential new members of the ecology. This is supported by Poprawski (2016), who argues that transmitting cultural values between generations is necessary to sustain ecologies of culture. In field studies of small Polish communities, Poprawski (2016: 7) finds that

> … cultural activities with an intergenerational dimension were numerous…Co-creative activities facilitate shared experience between generations, which in turn cultivates collective memory, of places, people, facts, processes…

Learning to do culture is a mechanism of cultural reproduction of a system that oscillates between introduction of the new and repetition of the same.

I use the concept 'grooming' to conceive of how a particular kind of labour force is reproduced, how it 'learns to labour' (Willis, 1978) before it takes up formal training. As shown in the below, there is a difference between professional artists and cultural labourers. The latter is engaged in *generalised cultural labour* such as facilitating creative processes, event organising, project management, fundraising, communication and marketing, economics, and so on –generic skills that can all be applied to organise any form of aesthetic production. Their competencies are useful and necessary whenever a process of aesthetic production needs staff to handle the

organisational tasks of making art. The labour force's skillset cannot be too specialised and tied to a singular art form, but must be generalisable within the ecology of culture. This requirement is reflected in MJ's learning progression and enabling experiences. It is not a single experience that grooms; on its own a singular experience provides a distinct skill at best. Grooming is an emergent effect of multiple engagements with cultural production which makes it a supple and subtle mechanism that works because of its vagueness. The individual that follows such learning progression is merely prepared. She is neither *determined* by, *induced* by, or *conditioned* by her engaged experience with the ecology of culture, nor is she *selected for succession.* If she decides to labour within the ecology of culture, she has been prepared for what that means; she has already learned to do the labour before becoming a professional labourer. Let us return to MJ.

Tiny footprints on a map of culture

In the 6th grade, a teacher had suggested MJ might enjoy joining the local writer's school for young people. She gave it a shot. She thought the other students were weird. One girl had blue hair. The first session took place at the main library in the region. The class was taught by a charismatic local author. After two years of attending the school, it had grown on her. She liked writing, she liked their classes, she and the blue haired one had become friends. The class had taken part in a local literature festival at a folk high school. They had authored the script and helped stage a musical in collaboration with a youth theatre association. This introduced MJ to the theatre, to the youth culture centre, and to cultural consultants from the municipality. Her experiences with culture then motivated her to change school from the public primary school she hated to a private school with more liberal, creative values and people. Her new friends were into music, writing, theatre, and events. At the age of 14, she was invited to participate in a project on cultural entrepreneurship and mentoring. The project was a collaboration between a folk high school, a culture festival, the youth culture centre, a theatre, and the municipal department of culture. A small group of young people learned project management, creative processes, teamwork, and as their apprenticeship test they should produce a public event. They founded the creative collective *Poïesis* and went to work. Producing the event was fun and

a process of learning: set design, booking, organising, PR. The whole shebang. A half dozen people working in and across various cultural organisations knew her name now. A festival hired her to hand out festival programs and to present the program to people. Then, a year of boarding school. When MJ returned, she started studying business economics and got involved in cultural projects: she volunteered to work with Syrian refugee children in the local Red Cross centre; she took part in the operations of a youth council; and she was involved in a project to create a film school in the region. Personal ambitions unhinged, she felt other young people needed to participate in culture and in the making of their own life, their town, their place. She formed the creative collective dB RUCKUS, intent on sharing her experience with cultural participation to other young people. The collective operated independently of organisational backup and support, created events and reached out to other young people. By then, she was a well-known and respected character among local culture organisations. Then, off to folk high school and then off to Copenhagen where she became managing editor of a magazine for youth culture. Last I heard from her, she had enrolled at university, intent on studying political science (and jokingly, 'becoming the next minister of culture, since someone's gotta do it!').

Thresholds, career path, and integration

Some things are striking. First, MJ passed a set of thresholds. According to Varela et al. (1991) an organism must be able to pass thresholds of survival in order to be a member of and thrive in an ecological system. There are things they must be able to do. At the heart of the popular notion of 'survival of the fittest' is the idea that species are *optimised* (they are made fit) by the environment. This is false. A species is not optimised by, but rather adapts to surviving and living, in the specificities of an ecological setting. We may understand thresholds as mechanisms that regulate entry and membership. The kind reviewer of this text pointed out that the suggested causal link between passing thresholds and learning process can easily be read as Darwinist survival of the fittest. This is a valid reservation. Particularly since MJ's case is neither about survival nor about being the fittest, but about acquiring capacities to do culture in a fitting manner. If the concept of regulatory thresholds is transferred from natural systems and applied to the study of ecology of culture, then a set of thresholds is interesting. MJ's first

threshold: she learned to thrive in the school for young authors. She interacted with people like the blue haired girl, writers, theatre people, musicians, and she learned to participate in events. She learned to *thrive in a group organised for creative expression*, facilitated by cultural professionals. Passing this threshold also enabled her to learn to thrive in other groups organised for creative expression. MJ passed the next threshold when she learned to *be part of a self-organised collective* and she learned to *assume responsibility for her cultural activity*. She learned that she could receive offers to participate in culture, paid and unpaid; she learned to accept those offers even without knowing exactly what they implied. In other words, she passed a threshold of *being able to thrive with uncertainty*. Then, a threshold of autonomy: she learned to thrive with *independently seeking out projects* and with *doing culture on her own accord*. Finally, MJ passed a threshold when she learned to thrive with *managing a culture organisation*. In sum: she passed thresholds that taught her how to thrive in groups, to self-organise, to assume responsibility, to cope with uncertainty, to act autonomously, and to manage.

Second, regarded as a career path, she started as a volunteer newbie writer and ended as managing editor. With each project she took on, the level of difficulty increased, and she learned new skills. The path from member, via organiser, to manager meant she would navigate increasing complexity, increasing uncertainty, and increasing demands for autonomous decision competence.

Third, regarded as increased integration into the ecology of culture, her various projects increased her degree of connectivity. She was connected to members of publicly funded, market driven, and grassroots culture organisations, and to a series of other 'entrepreneurial' young people. In other words, she learned to connect with the ecological longitude and the organisational latitude. When she founded dB RUCKUS, she had become a person who connected other people, and she knew people who connected. A threshold, perhaps, in its own right: the passage from being connected to learning to *act as a connector***.** Gaining the ability to connect is conditioned by two factors: she herself is well connected, and she has become well connected because she has circulated within the ecology of culture, in contrast to developing skills within the limits of one organisation and one aesthetic form only. MJ started with literature, then moved to theatre, to music, to

community organising, and then to publishing. She circulated through various organisations, both those founded to work with young people and those that were not. With an increase in connectivity came exposure to complexity. Even if her own projects were not necessarily complex in nature, then she had been exposed sufficiently to the ecology of culture to know it was made up of people and organisations connecting in multiple ways. MJ learned that culture was made of producers who connected. In MJ's case, adapting meant learning to create, produce, organise, and manage as practices and as experiential modes of being. This raises a question: did the lived experience with doing culture organised in time limited projects teach MJ to expect, accept, and cope with the precariousness of working temporary jobs in culture?

Labouring artists and cultural labourers

We should distinguish between those pathways that lead to becoming a labouring artist and those that lead to doing culture. Studies have analysed how attending visual art, theatre, music, film, design, architecture and literature schools relate to making a life and living off doing particular kinds of aesthetic work (Alper and Wassall, 2006; Blackwell and Harvey, 1999). We know that art students often struggle at the beginning of their career to make a living out of art labour (Throsby and Hollister, 2003), their social networks often become their professional network (Wittel, 2001), they often rely on 'day jobs' (Lloyd, 2006) and often labour without pay to get their career started (Terranova, 2000). We also know that arts institutions and universities form systems that circulate talented students and graduates (Salazar-Porzio, 2015). Formalised training provides the art student with the credentials to make a jurisdictional claim to the status as 'professional artist' (Abbott, 2014), and the formal and informal relationships between schools, art institutions, and culture industry provide the students with opportunity for passage and integration. In other words, this part of the ecology of culture trains young people for professional labour within a particular aesthetic genre with well-defined competencies: actor, writer, dancer, film, production designer, illustrator, etc. For cultural labourers, it is different. There are formalised programs for event management and creative, entrepreneurial work, and these are also part of the 'food chains' and passageways between

organisations (Oakley, 2007). Students learn to manage creative processes; they learn to ideate, conceptualise, fund, manage, produce, and evaluate. Aesthetic specialists and organisational generalists: both groups face precarious work life with low wages, temporary positions, and dependince on diversified personal and professional networks for paid work (Abbing, 2008; Bille, 2011; Mangset et al., 2018; Oakley, 2009). Same same, but still different.

In MJ's case, had she opted for formalised training in event management, or, say, *art history* at the University of Copenhagen, *experience economy* at University of Aarhus, *performance design* at Roskilde University, *creative business processes* at Copenhagen Business School, or any other cultural analytical university bachelor's program, a nice argument could be made for how her experiences conditioned and determined her choice of career. But her pathway did not lead to formalised training as a culture professional. A distinction between levels of analysis: what the individual person experiences by participating in art and culture is, at the level of ecology, a supple and subtle mechanism for reproducing its labour force. Having participatory experiences integrated MJ into the ecology of culture, but it did not determine her future choices. The ecological system is not conscious, mechanisms and functions are not intentional in nature. There are no master plans or strategies, only ecological level effects at work, emerging as a result of multiple singular events. To be sure, one young person's participation in culture is not a general pattern. I have treated MJ's case as indicative of a possible pattern of a set of young persons participating in culture. I claim that the function of youth participation in culture is to prepare young people for cultural labour, that is, the function is to *groom*. Perhaps they will use this experience with culture to do everyday creativity better. However, if young people desire to pursue 'doing culture' as a trained and paid professional or as a hard ass grassroots volunteer, then they have been *prepared*. It is by virtue of this grooming mechanism that cultural labourers early in their career learn to accept the working conditions of the cultural sector. Grooming for precarious labour enables heightened exposure to exploitation, harm, and abuse, and teaches novices that it 'comes with the territory'.

Cultural participation is cultural reproduction

Ecologies are complex adaptive systems characterised by functional autonomy of the parts and macro-determinations of the whole (Laszlo, 1996). Ecological analysis should study both what takes place at the level of the individual person and what takes place at the level of the entire ecology (Burø, 2020). The organising efforts of singular cultural organisations function as opportunities for young people to participate in culture. At the level of the whole, then the general function of the pattern of grooming is to reproduce the ecology of culture. The ecology of culture is challenged with reproducing the population of producers and users of culture, not singular individuals. Cultural participation translates to cultural reproduction. Why is that, and MJ's case, even remotely interesting? The answer has to do with the kinds of conceptual imaginaries we have at hand. If we study organisations as social and cultural systems, then we study how their power relations, practices, politics, structures, ideas, sense-makings, and so on are meaningful to people. If we study organisations as functional systems, then we study how they work, how their mechanisms make elements cofunction. In one analytical imaginary we think with the concept of *meaning*, in another we think with *function*. To study meaning as well as function is valid to an ecologically sensitised analytical imaginary, but one needs to be careful to not reduce one to the other. Rather, relative to the level of analysis the same element changes conceptual status. The meaningfulness of cultural participation is also the functionality of cultural reproduction.

Grooming, or, learning to do culture

I do not have the right nor the wish to contest MJ's interpretation of having been a youth 'recycled' by culture organisations. MJ's interpretation resonates with what she experienced. However, there is more to the story. Interpreted from the macro level of the ecological system, I would suggest a distinction between *recycling* and *circulation*. Recycled elements are used elements brought back into a system of usage to be reused or repurposed; circulated elements continuously shift position in the system and are themselves altered in the process. Circulating elements develop as they enter relations of co-functioning with other elements. A recycled element changes being, a circulating element develops functionality. Murray Bookchin argued that

within the context of ecological thinking it is appropriate to conceive of 'development' in contrast to 'change' (Bookchin, 1978). Growth and learning do not happen overnight, it takes time. Recycled youths are reused, but they also circulate and develop along the way. From the perspective of singular organisations, young people are literally recycled for the immediate benefit of the organisation's concrete interests and needs. Positioned as a functional element in a larger ecology of culture, these youths are developed, integrated and prepared, ultimately serving the need of the ecology to reproduce itself. Reproduction is a tricky thing: since ecological resilience is conditioned by the ability to adapt (Holling, 1973), then reproduction means both repetition of the same and differentiation. As new members do new stuff, the system is reproduced through transformation.

MJ studies political science now. She learned to do culture. This was a process of grooming, not by singular individuals nor by a single experience, but by a series of enabling experiences. I started by claiming that MJ is the protagonist of this story. If there is an antagonist, then grooming for accepting exploitation would be its name. MJ has effectively faced the system level property of reproduction of exploitable, precarious labour every time she engaged with a well-meaning culture professional (like myself). She had learned that 'doing culture' is both a matter of producing aesthetic goods and a matter of organising the process of production. She learned to write and to stage theatre. But she also learned to organise the frames of other people's aesthetic labour. These are distinct kinds of labour, involving different 'bundles of work' (Hughes, 1971) that MJ learned by instruction; by watching professionals and non-professionals do culture; and by doing herself. She could have used that as a steppingstone to making a life as a labouring artist; instead, she used it to organise cultural production. In her path, the earliest observable point of bifurcation between artist and organiser was when she learned to form an event collective, that is, when she experienced the tasks involved in organising events. Her learning progression from there on groomed her for cultural labour as an organiser. Whether she used, uses, and will use that capability to do culture as a 'professional' or as 'everyday creativity' (Wilson et al., 2017) is at the level of the ecology less relevant because both are producing culture, and because in the end, cultural labourers typically circulate between the public, commercial, and homemade culture

domains (Jackson et al., 2006). Grooming for cultural labour reproduces the capability of ecological members to do culture. The difference between mechanisms that reproduce institutions, structures, and singular organisations, and mechanisms that reproduce cultural labourers reveals something peculiar about the ecology of culture. At the level of social groups and classes, the cultivation of taste creates social distinctions (Bourdieu, 1987). At the level of ecology, the cultivated qualitative differences between cultural productions leads to specialisation and diversity that enhance system resilience. Likewise, at the level of ecology, grooming individuals for cultural labour is a mechanism for reproducing a specific resource: organisers, those who make the patterns of creativity connect.

Finally, the implied ethical point is not to argue for avoiding or minimising grooming, but to advocate for *critical reflexivity*. The conceptualisation of the ecological function of grooming youths for cultural labour leads to a normative two-fold implication: 1) the professionals that scout, recruit, integrate, and teach youths should also teach them the politics of cultural labour as part of the practical curriculum of learning. Individual practitioners are de facto functionaries of the cultural ecology, so they should consider themselves the best to *reflexively* groom youths on how to navigate the system of neoliberal cultural production. This obviously implies that well-meaning culture professionals should calibrate their moral compass and revise the values they operate by and under; 2) experienced and novice cultural labourers should develop class consciousness, organise accordingly, and learn to avoid reproducing in youths' tolerance, acceptance of, and respect for labour conditions that should be considered intolerable and unacceptable. As long as individual cultural labourers remain individual, the system of cultural production will continue to exploit labour undeterred and unchecked. Organisation could take any form from unionisation to affinity groups, all aimed at enabling mutual support, mobilising resistance, and organise direct action against precarious, stressful, unsustainable, and abusive labour conditions.

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Your data is s**t*

Robert Herian

abstract

Personal data is the chief commercial and informatic industrial raw material of the last forty years. But as an almost universal daily excretion composed of body with environment (personal with non-personal data), so much personal data is shit. This note addresses a data metaphor that seeks to explain and situate personal data and the data subject socially, politically, economically, and legally. Data models do not want messiness (shit) or inefficiency, only simple and logical input/output risk defiant certainties concerning population types and cohorts. But tending to the growing hot heaps of data involves an expanding complex of systems, networks, frameworks, rules, mechanisms, policies, and ideologies of governance and governmentality, both on- and offline. I call this complex a shitshow. Strategies for individuals, organizations, and economies are of paramount interest and concern as each attempt to navigate the shitshow. Echoing the work of Dominique Laporte, I consider how the shitshow leads to data hygiene practices for managing storage, cleansing, and refinement of shit data, and, increasingly, to extract profit from it.

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Welcome to the shitshow

In examining new ways for understanding the contemporary data subject, I believe the metaphor of shit is useful. It reminds us that data is a daily excretion composed of body with environment (personal with non-personal data). Like sludge (refined sewage), data excretions provoke, what I refer to here as, hygiene processes to manage storage, cleansing, and refinement, and increasingly realise inherent value (Hope, 2016). As a result, like common or garden compost heaps, data servers radiate more heat as the storage of petabytes of personal data 'piles-up'.[1]

As a seemingly unargumentative source of value, personal data has become the chief commercial and informatic industrial raw material of the last forty years. An asset class par excellence, personal data proliferation due to rapidly increasing levels of computer use (including, notably, mobile devices) has been a boon in recent years for domestic and international data brokage (see, for example, Sherman, 2021). I want to continue the discussion I started in Data: New trajectories in law (Herian, 2021) on data metaphors that help explain and situate personal data and the data subject socially, politically, economically, and legally.

Today, tending to the growing hot heaps of data involves an expanding complex of systems, networks, frameworks, rules, mechanisms, policies, and

[1] I recognise linkages to Donna Haraway's (2016) use of the term 'compost' here, or at least a benefit that may derive to my refinement of the concept of shit data from reading it back through Haraway's work. Haraway's own preference for the notion of compost over or in critical contradistinction to the term 'post-human' is certainly noteworthy. As Haraway mentions in an interview with Sarah Franklin (2017: 51-52):

> I like the word "compost" because it includes living and dying. If you're in compost, the questions of finitude and mortality are prominent, not in some kind of depressive or tragic way, but those who will return our flesh to the Earth are in the making of compost. I can't work my compost pile without being in the midst of the question of how to inherit the multiple histories and the multiple formations that allow this compost pile to be cooking badly in my yard, you know. They are provocations to becoming more historical, in the sense of bringing what you inherit into the present so as to somehow become more able to respond.

ideologies of governance and governmentality, both on- and offline. Spanning commercial and non-commercial sectors, the hot heaps of data excite, enthral, occupy, and burden private and public bodies and individuals (i.e., data subjects) simultaneously ignorant and interpolated in vertical and horizontal domains of organization. Despite legislative and regulatory interventions, notably but not only Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), it is not always clear where boundaries of authority and responsibility lie regarding the giving and receiving of personal data or its subsequent conveyance, use, and exploitation. Therefore, we might rightfully and, on terms I rely on here, also accurately call the situation data subjects find themselves in today a shitshow.

My previous interest in rethinking data was to understand data autonomy as data which excuses, alludes, or exceeds human need, demand, and desire. Data without need of a subject, and, we might argue, therefore utterly without use, value, or purpose where it cannot register either in human perception or via the tools and technologies built to enhance human perception. Data models do not want messiness (the shit) or inefficiency, only simple and logical input/output risk defiant certainties concerning population types and cohorts. Hence, corresponding data rhetoric and narratives able to explain to individuals, organizations, and economies more broadly, the incontestable value of data are of paramount interest and concern.

Rhetoric of techno hygiene

Your data is shit: this expression contains many ways of understanding humanity's relationship with petabytes of data produced in the present technological moment. For instance, your data is shit because you, as an individual, provide little or no value to medical science despite the constant streams of data produced by your wearable tech; your data is shit because you, as an entrepreneur, cannot leverage insights for maximum commercial benefit from the app you built and the data it captures; your data is shit because you, as a corporation, have failed to see profitable returns for shareholders on a series of advertising campaigns for your latest product. These interpretations speak to data's value rooted squarely in a discourse of innovation and progress. More than that, however, we must understand data

narratives as a product of neoliberal stakeholders and the markets they aim to birth (or leverage) at every opportunity. Shit data is seemingly of little use or obvious profit, yet commercial and non-commercial stakeholders routinely gather and keep it, often with a feverish endeavour.

Techno-hygienists today surveil and collate humanity's mass digital excretions and extrusions, capturing them more pervasively and with ever greater levels of sensitivity, machinic power and sophistication. Treatment and processing of informatic ordure along with techniques of purification, filters out value. This is important because, as Cox et al. (2012: 75) explain, 'like the tradition of examining feces to determine the health of the organism [a practice given additional urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic], the health of the economy can be judged by the way it manages its waste.'

Describing the hygienic revolution undertaken over several centuries across Western capitalist societies, Laporte (2002: 118-119) considers the perception of the hygienist as a hero when it was 'no longer enough to eliminate and separate shit into solid and liquid components, to flush and disinfect it. [S]hit', Laporte argues, had 'to become profitable' The hygienists achieved this end, the realising of value from shit, with heroic endeavour.

Today, we find this continuing rhetoric of hygiene enables markets around technologies for and techniques of data self-care, prompting unending rituals, practices, and performances of data hygiene that construe every individual a hero worthy of endowment and reward when they manage data effectively, efficiently, and profitably. Importantly, information capitalism increasingly promotes a role or perhaps even an ethical duty for consumers, *as* data subjects, to take control (and ownership) of 'their' data, to 'get their shit together' so to speak and monetize it whenever and wherever possible, notably by submitting to tailor-made advertising (see, for example, https://gener8ads.com/).

'Some shit is incontestably good,' Laporte (2002: 111) claims,

> … not just because it has been purified, but because it is that which purifies. It purifies because it is spirit and soul – a volatilization of the flesh that retains an attachment to the body from which it has been severed. Shit never stops being a fragment of God.

Questions of the extent of the retention of data from the 'body from which has been severed' underpin much of the developing contemporary regulatory and legislative emphasis on privacy, data, and consumer rights and protections. But these legal interventions have not stopped the flow. There is no sign of data constipation among global populations. Quite the opposite. The known global internet population continues to grow year on year to over 4.5 billion in 2020 and streams of data flowing into what Julie Cohen (2019) calls the biopolitical public domain intensifies. YouTube boasts the addition of 500 hours of new content per minute, WhatsApp over 42 million messages in the same timeframe, to name just two predominate sites of normative data practice and performance today (www.domo.com, 2020). Also, legal frameworks, or regulatory reluctance to interfere with innovation, ultimately support intensification of data flows. 'The data flows extracted from people play an increasingly important role as *raw material* in the political economy of informational capitalism', argues Cohen (2019: 48). Continuing,

> … personal data processing has become the newest form of bioprospecting, as entities of all sizes – including most notably both platforms and businesses known as data brokers – compete to discover new patterns and extract their marketplace value. Understood as processes of resource extraction, the activities of collecting and processing personal data require an enabling legal construct. (*ibid.*: 48)
>
> Cultivated and extracted data enter an industrial production process during which they are refined to generate data doubles – information templates for generating patterns and predictions that can be used to optimize both online and physical environments around desired patterns of attention and behaviour […] the participants in the data economy trade in people the way one might trade in commodity or currency futures. (*ibid.*: 64)

Producing data/shit

As the amount of shit produced by internet users increases, the so-called 'market for eyeballs' thrives, underscored by internet platform business models reliant on capturing and extending user attention and engagement on behalf of advertisers.[2] These models are far from ephemeral. Instead, each

[2] Personal financial data has more of a role to play in such models. For instance, the possible advent of Central bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), cryptocurrency aimed at supplementing or superseding fiat money, notably cash, will probably end up

relies on high levels of data input, through-flow, and storage to prevent loss and maximise benefit for businesses over the medium and long term. 'For the hygienists', Laporte (2002: 124) suggests,

> … shit was the site of irredeemable, even incommensurable loss, which they were obstinately bent on denying. They were caught in a tenacious thwarting of loss that sustained their delirious claim to matter, their heroic compulsion to retain. Their discourse, although synchronous with capitalism, is not the discourse of capitalism, but its symptom.

Again, despite constraints created by the likes of GDPR in Europe and California's Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), the compulsion for internet users to engage with platforms and open themselves to being sourced (as sources of data) remains strong. Platforms are the products of contemporary hygienists, designed to give users clear (if not always hospitable) social interfaces. As increasingly indispensable points of intermediation, platforms attract huge numbers of users and, as a result, harvest tremendous amounts of data, with approximately half the global population, 3.5 billion people, use social networks alone (www.statista.com, 2022).

All data is shit and to produce, as Laporte (2002: 131) says, 'is literally to shit'. Global data storage adds to what the International Data Corporation (IDC) calls the 'global DataSphere' (www.blogs.idc.com, 2019). This seemingly unrestrained global data production is facilitated by sensors in billions of interconnected devices and filtered and processed by increasingly rapid forms of machine learning and automation. As a result, in today's data rich environments – more than 79.4ZB of data created by 2025

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linking with individual bank accounts rather than maintaining the anonymity many people favour with the various decentralized cryptocurrencies we see today. As Izabella Kaminska (2021) in the *Financial Times* suggests,

> 'if money is to be identity-based rather than token-based and fungible, this introduces a whole new set of ethical dilemmas and social questions, which aren't really being asked at the moment on a wide enough social level. The conversations we should be having relate to who do we as a society really entrust with our personal data? The current choice includes private companies like Facebook, highly regulated private institutions like banks, "independent" central banks, government-directed central banks, a bit of everyone or nobody at all.'

(www.blogs.idc.com, 2019) – data as a by- or waste product, spin-off, or data exhaust, and so-called 'dark data' are influential ideas that account for a desire and need for ensuring more and better commercial use and value from the excess, hot (composting) heaps of personal data.

Wasteful relations

Jane Bennett provides two important arguments for thinking about humanity's relationship with waste products, of which we must now surely include data. The first concerns the force exerted by thingly-power as 'vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them' (Bennett, 2010: 5), and the second concerns the agency of things that 'always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces' (*ibid*.: 21). Bennett's account of things exceeding humanity's perception of or interest in them, or as Bennett (*ibid*.: 4) puts it, things 'in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects', is key to understanding the 'afterlife' of things, discarded or used-up by humanity. This is, for Bennett, a sign not of where the being of things ends but where it arguably becomes most prominent, and its vitality begins. Things that humanity no longer has a use for or sensory interest in (to see, hear, smell, or touch, etc.), do not make them cease to exist in the world. Instead, they continue as their own particular and peculiar manifestation of non-organic life and being.

Human-made categorisations distinguishes between things once considered within human perception to be what we might call 'useful', and those things that don't – what we routinely called 'waste', 'junk', or 'refuse' and may also add the concept of shit data to – as a source of meaning and reality. But it is not reality. It is quite the opposite, in fact: we predicate categorization solely on a guarantee of human perceptive authority and power, which is granted to humanity by itself. Hence, for Bennett (2010: 6) 'a vital materiality can never really be thrown "away", for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity'. This idea does, albeit tangentially, correspond with mathematician David Hand's (2019) view of dark data as classifications of data given meaning by how we collect them.

The human conclusion as to and categorisation of waste (debris, trash, litter, etc.) is important to Bennett's (2010: 5) exposition of things as 'vibratory – at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire'. And, I suggest, this offers us a way to frame an understanding not only of human data production(s), but of the systematic and systemic ways in which to conceptualise and actualise production. Now, it seems, we were wrong to ignore shit data. 'If we are clever enough', argues David Hand (2019: 5), 'we can sometimes take advantage of dark data. Curious and paradoxical though that may seem, we can make use of ignorance and the dark data perspective to enable better decisions and take better actions. In practical terms,' Hand (2019: 5) concludes, 'this means we can lead healthier lives, make more money, and take lower risks by judicious use of the unknown'. Referring to data that describe humans as administrative data, able to 'tell you *what people do*' and 'get you nearer to social reality than exercises involving asking people what they did or how they behave', Hand (2019: 31) explains databases full of personal or administrative data 'represent a great resource, a veritable gold mine of potential value enabling all sorts of insights to be gained into human behaviour'.

The data subject is at once an individual bringer and giver of data and receiver of rights and protections of and over the stuff called 'personal data', where lawmakers attribute such data to them as set out within legislation. But the data subject is also one who is often in ignorance, one for whom the status and nature of personal data is at once mysterious and burdensome. Whilst increasingly intimately associated with technologies like smartphones and the technological know-how that accompanies them, data subjects vary in awareness as to their status as sources of personal data or understanding of its value or fate as it circulates within global capitalist economies. Data subject awareness of their productive value within informational capitalism, although arguably related to labour processes, differs from an assumption made about workers elsewhere in capitalism, that they have a good awareness of their working conditions and their exploitation within capitalism must, therefore, take indirect forms, notably pricing (Chibber, 2022).

Pricing is a method yet to act *en masse* against the beneficial interests of data subjects who are, by and large, still producing the volumes of shit techno-

hygienists crave on daily basis, and at very low cost. This concerns not only the data subject's reliance upon the intermediatory services provided by platforms in the 'management' of the subject's data (the basis of the adage attributed to the American artist Richard Serra 'if something is free, you are the product'), but a powerful belief in the legitimacy of data sovereignty and of capturing a dimension of data labouring experience able to fend off a lack of personal discipline and the risk of squandering the value of the subject's shit data. 'Shit is productive only insofar as it is human', Laporte (2002: 120) reminds us, 'of all the other manures known to nature, none is equal to human fertilizer'. In personal data today, we find the productivity of human shit elevated to new and transcendental levels, body with environment, material in virtual.

The shitshow continues (a conclusion)

And this brings me back to those who seek to control personal data; to cultivate, extract, and exploit data systemically for value with increasing precision and sophistication – what I have referred to throughout as techno-hygienists, echoing Dominique Laporte's history of shit. Laporte (2002: 133) describes the terms upon which State norms established expectations on the subject to manage their shit, claiming that:

> Shit is the precious object par excellence, the object that must not be squandered at any cost. But it is equally that which the subject must renounce, "religiously collect," and deliver to the State under a double burden: on one hand, the promise of an end to lack and, on the other, the threat of hardship, given a lack of discipline.

For me, Laporte could just as easily be talking about the bargain struck by the data subject not just with the State (of course, this bargain depends on the State in question), but with platforms and other stakeholders of the commercial Internet whose uniformity of purpose is arguably more clear-cut than the State: to know your shit.

And, finally, lest we forget the abundant associations between our on- and offline worlds, despite obvious gaps between the two, those slippages purveyors of the 'metaverse', would have us enjoy in the face of climate catastrophe, Brian Thill (2015: 26-27), like Jane Bennett, reminds us that

'digital waste is not freed from the realities of material existence. Just like the coffee we drink, its ongoing production consumes immense energy, labor, resources, time, and space, just as all the proliferating garbage of the pre-digital ages did and continues to do.'

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Worshipping work in Silicon Valley

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review of

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'[S]ubtly but unmistakably, work is replacing religion' [4]. This is the assertion at the heart of Carolyn Chen's new book *Work pray code*. The book's choice of setting is striking: The heart of the American tech industry in Silicon Valley, California. Scholars of media, organization, or work are quick to point out both the potential value of accessing this field site, and often just as quick to point out that it is difficult if not impossible (e.g., Flyverbom, 2019: 2; Jarrett, 2022: 32; Peters, 2015: 337). However, Chen's claim is not that the tech sector is in any way exceptional in its emphasis on work as a central source of meaning for its workers, but rather that it is emblematic of many broader trends in American working life.

The book is based on a five-year field study in which the author interviewed over a hundred employees across various sites in the Valley. Chen's interviewees are a mixture of tech professionals and the 'service providers who make them "whole," including human resources professionals, executive coaches, meditation and mindfulness teachers, yoga instructors, dharma teachers, Buddhist priests, and masseuses' [195]. In contrast to other ethnographic studies of Silicon Valley or the tech sector (e.g., Meehan and

Turner, 2021; Turco, 2016), this author comes from a background in – and leverages her knowledge of – the sociology of religion (Chen, 2014). The book thus offers up an empirically informed description and critique of broader tendencies in working life from the novel vantage point of looking at religion, or rather, what religion has been supplanted by. In addition, Chen coins a handful of new phrases useful for describing the working culture of Silicon Valley and its entwinement with secularized religion, including 'Bottom-Line Buddhism', 'techtopia' and most strikingly 'corporate maternalism', which I will discuss in more detail below.

If the reader – like me – does not know their Theravāda Buddhism from their Mahāyāna Buddhism, or indeed the American social ranking of Christianity's increasingly 'less demanding [yet] higher prestige denominations' (apparently the ladder goes: Pentecostals to Baptists to Methodists to Episcopalians [16]), this is not any significant barrier to entry in reading. However, readers more familiar with the social and political sciences may rest assured that Chen cites liberally from researchers in these traditions as well. This includes Robert Putnam's (2000) work on the decline in community participation, Whyte's work on the ideal known as 'the Organization Man' (1956/2013) and thinkers like Kathi Weeks (2011) and Arlie Hochschild (1997) who discuss how work has become a primary source of meaning and belonging for many people, at the expense of other relations in life. Here, Chen's specific contribution lies in emphasizing how religion and religious communities specifically are deprioritized to make room for work.

Previous authors' descriptions of life in Silicon Valley will mainly invoke religion in a somewhat flippant way, by for instance claiming off-handedly that belief in the technological singularity is 'the closest thing Silicon Valley has to an official religion' (Pein, 2018: 201), or by noting of the way 'The Internet' is discussed in the tech sector that 'If it sounds like a religion, it's because it is' (Morozov, 2013: 23). In contrast, Chen spends little to no time discussing such off-handed applications of the term 'religion'. Instead, her approach appears much more methodical and conceptually well-founded. Chen readily admits that looking for godliness in the ostensibly secular setting of Silicon Valley might seem incongruous at first, not to mention quite difficult. In the book's appendix, she squares this circle by relying on Émile Durkheim's (1912/2008) idea of studying 'the sacred', that for which people

sacrifice other aspects of their lives. In Silicon Valley, the interviewees 'paid homage to [work] by chronically depriving their bodies of rest and exercise and their families of time and attention' [214]. Thus, work is an object of devotion, and hence sacred.

Through a series of chapters focusing on separate themes, the book presents a convincing argument that while fewer Americans (and tech workers) may be participating in organized religion, 'they are still engaging in religious practices, largely Asian ones, through secular sources' [16]. Here, Chen is referring mainly to mindfulness and meditation, practices which are seemingly ubiquitous in Silicon Valley. Despite their Asian origins, they are mostly performed by White instructors and participants [167]. Chen attributes this racial makeup to the fact that these practices have been detached from their religious institutions and commodified for the well-educated and affluent (White) Westerners 'who can afford the classes, workshops, and retreats' [17]. Rather than religious worship as such, these practices become unveiled as part of 'worshipped work' [214].

The body of the book is divided into five chapters, which I will here discuss in overview before centering on the central contributions of chapters two and three. In the first chapter, Chen emphasizes descriptions of people travelling to Silicon Valley for work and losing their religious affiliations and communities in the process. In the second chapter, Chen discusses what she calls the 'corporate maternalism' intended to nurture the body and soul of Silicon Valley workers. In chapter three, Chen describes how the 'management of souls' has become a primary concern of Silicon Valley human resources, even if the word 'spirituality' is best avoided. In chapter four, 'The Dharma according to Google', we encounter a vivid typology of how Asian religious practices have been appropriated for productivity, rather than spirituality. Finally, chapter five lets Chen emphasize the perspectives of meditation instructors – or rather '*meditation entrepreneurs*' [154, emphasis in original] – in Silicon Valley, who have had to modify their practices to meet the needs of the tech sector. These meditation entrepreneurs are presented as just one subset of a larger group of long-time California residents who have had to rethink and rework their businesses to (sometimes just barely) keep a roof over their heads (see also: Meehan and Turner, 2021). Chen lays out the ways in which these entrepreneurs have had to commodify their religious

practice in a punchy five-fold taxonomy of different types of Silicon Valley Buddhism. These are (1) 'Hidden Buddhism' (denying the fact that meditation practices have anything to with Buddhism at all), (2) 'Whitened Buddhism' (an erasure of the 'ethnic' and religious connotations of Buddhism to service White Americans), (3) 'Scientific Buddhism' (trying to explain Buddhist practices in positivist scientific terms), (4) 'Bottom-Line Buddhism' (where Buddhism becomes equated with increased productivity), and (5) 'On-the-Go Buddhism' (the 'ultimate desacralization' [188] of Buddhism – reducing it to something accessible via a meditation app). The first two are means of making these practices appealing to White, elite, and ostensibly secular Silicon Valley workers, while the latter two are means of convincing corporate decision-makers to make these practices part of everyday business. The idea of 'Scientific Buddhism' straddles this line. While each of these five phenomena are clearly documented, the distinctions between the five types were not always clear-cut to me as a reader, and Chen does have to resort to calling some these types 'close cousin[s]' [188].

In my opinion, the most memorable and valuable theoretical and analytical contribution of the book is the notion of 'corporate maternalism', which, perhaps ironically, is the least overtly religious concept in the book. This term encompasses how Silicon Valley 'monetizes the nonproductive parts of life that the busy tech worker otherwise has no time for—eating, exercising, rest, hobbies, spirituality, and friendships—and makes them a part of work' [60]. It has been a standing joke for many years that many Silicon Valley inventions are merely technologically mediated answers to the question 'What things isn't my mom doing for me anymore [*sic!*]' (Daub, 2020: 34). Chen takes this insight seriously and brings it to bear in a reading of Silicon Valley companies themselves. Here she draws out how her interviewees themselves describe how human resources workers 'kind of become mom' to them [62]. Chen further argues that companies like Google and Facebook (not yet renamed Meta in the book) offer 'holistic provisions' [13] for their employees. Chen argues that this covers not only the material needs of the employees, but also *spiritual* needs. Humans do not live on bread (or unlimited cantina buffets) alone. However, gender roles structure and influence this process, and Chen is quick to remark that women, even though they are definite minority in tech work, do most of the work required for this corporate maternalism [60].

'Corporate maternalism' is consciously framed as a reply to the better-known concept of 'industrial paternalism' (Tone, 2018). This corporate strategy presents employees with 'lunchrooms, recreational facilities, theaters, and [even] housing' (62) just as corporate maternalism does. However, industrial paternalism also emphases racial assimilation and the promotion of 'clean living' habits, which the maternal counterpart does not. In Chens' account, industrial paternalism is 'coercive', whereas corporate maternalism is marked by 'the holistic therapeutic approach of California mind-body-spirit' (63). This also leads Chen to coin another term: the principle that 'the personal is professional', which is her description of how Silicon Valley companies view their employees as 'whole persons', and how it therefore pays to optimize the personal dimensions of workers' lives.

While Chen's book offers a satisfying and well-rounded study with plenty of new and convincing concepts, I found myself wondering about Chen's claim that the experiences of Silicon Valley's tech workers are non-exceptional. Specifically, I believe two aspects are ripe for further study, which are to an extent interrelated. The first is the fickleness or mobility which corporate maternalism is a response to. The second is the role of digital technology not merely as a product of labor, but as a fact of life for workers in- and outside the tech sector.

Firstly, Chen readily acknowledges both the alleged fickleness of American churchgoers (discussed above) and the well-documented tendency for frequent job shifts among tech workers (Saxenian, 2006) to which corporate maternalism is a deliberate response. However, I found myself wondering how this can be squared with the broader tendencies of looser employment in the labor market (Standing, 2011) and of how other companies and industries allegedly offer up senses of belonging and love, which may in turn mask the threat of *abandonment* (Fleming, 2015). Chen's tech workers are apparently caught up in a series of what they perceive to be 'flings' which are facilitated and made fun by corporate maternalism [127], but is this a metaphor recognizable to even other high-skilled knowledge workers? In contrast, recent writers have emphasized that work is nothing like a romantic relationship (Jaffee, 2021). If it were, 'it would be the kind that our mothers quite rightly warned us to avoid at all costs' (Fleming, 2015: 47). To be clear, the book's conclusion leaves little doubt of the accuracy of Chen's view that

work is edging out religion and religious communities. Chen's criticism is largely aimed at the tech sector's tendency to privatize what might otherwise be considered public goods. 'Tech companies', she says, 'have monopolized the services of meditation teachers, nurses, and ministers into making their tech workers "whole," but who is tending the bodies, minds, and souls of the rest of society?' [206], and indeed who tends to the spiritual needs of all the non-tech workers at Silicon Valley companies [205]? She ends with a normative call to 'energize non-workplaces' [209] to limit the totalizing power which the domain of work has seemingly achieved. While tech workers and Silicon Valley companies have been lauded both as an aspirational ideal and an ideal microcosm for study (e.g., Kunda, 2006), Chen's work reaffirms that we must look elsewhere for inklings of how the epidemic of overwork can be overcome.

This brings me to my second point. The book contains plenty of accounts of how whatever tech product is being worked upon is worth all the effort and hours put in by the hard-working tech employees. However, there is less focus on what role technology plays in the tech workers' *own* lives. Aside from the discussion of meditation apps under 'On-the-Go Buddhism', there is little consideration how such technologies may aid or hinder a sculpting of the boundaries between the personal and the professional, or the integration of the two. This is in stark contrast to the emphasis on communications technologies in recent studies of workers outside the tech sector (Beckmann and Mazmanian, 2020; Gregg, 2011). Here such tools are viewed as both means of self-betterment and efficiency, as well as something which troubles the distinction between the personal and the professional (Gregg, 2018; Lomborg, 2022). What other studies have discussed extensively is the role new media technologies play in exacerbating the reshaping of the job market as such – often through gig economy technologies which spring from Silicon Valley (Scholz, 2017; Srnicek, 2017), but also via more mundane technologies such as social media (Bagger, 2021; Bishop, 2022). In contrast, Silicon Valley meditation entrepreneurs and corporate mothers tend to the needs of select few workers via relatively traditional understandings of firms and organizations, at least as described by Chen. The reshapings of work *via* the technologies of Silicon Valley and other epicenters of tech – often by exchanging employment relations for app- and gig-based interactions under

the banner of 'automation' (Andrejevic, 2019; Kelly, 2022) - are not evident within Chen's material. As far as I can tell from reading Chen, it is seemingly *outside* Silicon Valley these relations of labor and care are increasingly mediated by Silicon Valley products, although I suspect further research might complicate this understanding.

While I emphasize the exceptionality of Chen's field sites more than she herself does, this is mainly to underline the value of this exceptionality and hence of the book itself. Certainly, I find Chen's book to be readable, thorough, and insightful. I merely highlight these broader considerations to demonstrate some of the many valuable ongoing conversations about the shifting nature of work – and shifting world of workers – which Chen's work is poised to inform. While I cannot speak to its contributions to the sociology of religion, it would be a shame for scholars of creative industries, organizations, technology, and working life – or merely readers interested in descriptions on-the-ground life in Silicon Valley – to miss out on this book. The concept of 'corporate maternalism' alone should, in my opinion, be worth reading the book for, and will hopefully inform much future research (and popular) discussions.

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This means war: A review of Maurizio Lazzarato's treatise *Capital hates everyone*

Felix Diefenhardt

review of

Maurizio Lazzarato (2021) *Capital hates everyone: Fascism or revolution,* trans. Robert Hurley. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) (PB, pp. 248, $15.95, ISBN 9781635901382)

Maurizio Lazzarato's polemical essay *Capital hates everyone: Fascism or revolution* is the latest in a series of prescient engagements by the militant theorist best known for his early work on post-Fordist production and immaterial labor. It comes courtesy of the semiotext(e) intervention series, which last published his riveting analysis of indebtedness developed during the 2008 financial and debt-crisis (Lazzarato, 2012). What makes Lazzarato's interventions so interesting is that he is both a tried and true militant in the Italian Operaist tradition and one of the most faithful and thorough scholars of authors such as Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault. In his books, the often opaque and difficult concepts developed by these thinkers find the concrete, timely and politically charged application that has become scarce after decades of sterile academic writing on 'French theory'.

Given how closely Lazzarato's theoretical trajectory has been tied to the direct engagement with current political events it is problematic that in the field of critical management studies in general and on the pages of *ephemera* in

particular, his name has so far been largely associated with his early essay on 'immaterial labor' (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Hearn, 2010; Mastrangelo, 2020). Given this anachronistic tendency in the reception of Lazzarato's work, some readers may be surprised to find among the targets of his recent polemics representatives of post-Operaismo, as well as key Foucauldian concepts that are closely associated with the trajectory of this movement. Thus, a brief recapitulation of the development and reception of post-Operaismo, its Foucauldian edge and Lazzarato's own engagement with these ideas seems in order. It should be noted that these remarks are to a considerable extend constricted by the limited translation of Lazzarato's work into English and my equally limited knowledge of French.

From immaterial labor to the limits of governmentality

Lazzarato's foundational essay on 'immaterial labor' is one of the key texts of post-Operaismo: an unholy or useful (depending on who you ask) union of French post-structuralism and Italian Operaismo. The latter is a Marxist heresy that seeks to build a new revolutionary theory starting from the immediate experiences and struggles of workers and capital's responding counter-strategies of discipline (Nunes, 2007). As the Fordist model of industrialist production gave way to post-Fordism, Operaist theorists established an influential dialogue with French post-structuralism. This included an emphatic reception of Foucault's notions of bio-politics and governmentality, both of which are primarily developed in Foucault's analysis of German and American (neo-)liberalism (Foucault, 2008). These concepts were to help analyze what is often referred to as (bio-)cognitive capitalism (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010): a regime of accumulation that depends on the capture of the very life and mind – the bio-cognitive – of its subjects (Lazzarato, 2004). Under this condition, Lazzarato's influential essay argued, 'immaterial labor', the labor productive of the informational and cultural content of commodities, becomes hegemonic (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000). These new affective and cognitive labor capacities are not susceptible to capture and control by the tried and true panoptic surveillance-apparatus installed by Fordist and Taylorist management systems. Instead, novel forms of neoliberal control are said to operate cunningly at a distance by subjectifying workers as precarious entrepreneurs of themselves, units of

human capital, thus making them responsible *for* themselves and turning them into managers and control-centers *of* themselves. Here, Foucault's notion of governmentality and bio-politics provided a conceptual vocabulary for the subtle 'pivoting' (Fleming, 2022) of formally free entrepreneurial subjects in the increasingly open and uncertain environment associated with neoliberalism and post-Fordism. It seems obvious, why the thesis of immaterial labor and especially its intimate link to Foucauldian notions of bio-politics and governmentality would lend itself for critical research on the post-Fordist labor processes and its novel, ever more cunning and elusive forms of control. It allowed for a critical analysis of the new styles of decentralized, 'liberatory' (Peters, 1996) management and corresponding forms of precarious and entrepreneurial work as governmental techniques for capturing and controlling immaterial labor (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Fleming, 2009). However, in his more recent work, Lazzarato subjects these theories and especially their use of Foucauldian concepts to a consequential critique.

According to Lazzarato, the understanding of (neo-)liberal governmentality as an art of frugal governance adequate to post-Fordist modes of production, in which the subjectivation of workers as entrepreneurial units replaces the need to direct state-enforced discipline, turned out be a misjudgment during the debt-crisis of the 2010s when states' enforcement of austerity was *all but frugal* (Lazzarato, 2013). Foucault's analysis of frugal governance, Lazzarato argues, paints a pacified picture of neoliberal power that risks 'obscuring, through the concept of governmentality, the violence that neoliberalism directly exerts on persons and things' (Lazzarato, 2021: 82). To counter this tendency, Lazzarato, in his recent work urges for a return to earlier versions of Foucault's analysis of power, which relied more on notions of direct confrontation and, ultimately, war (Alliez and Lazzarato, 2016; Lazzarato, 2021). For Lazzarato, analyses of the cunning governmental techniques of pivoting entrepreneurial subjects that figure so prominently in critical management scholars' accounts of neoliberalism (Walsh, 2018; Walker, Fleming and Berti, 2021; Fleming, 2022), proceed after the fact of direct and often violent confrontation between the state-capital nexus and its subjects. He reminds us that Chile became a laboratory for neoliberal techniques of governance only after and thanks to the establishment of a violently repressive military dictatorship. Moreover, he quite clearly conducts his

writing and research in France, which has experienced an intensifying back and forth between neoliberal reforms, public resistance and its increasingly violent repression. Emphasizing the importance of direct, repressive and violent power in Pinochet's Chile, Macron's France and the US' carceral state, Lazzarato in *Capital hates everyone* cautions that any analysis of neoliberalism and post-Fordism that proceeds from the notion of governmentality is necessarily incomplete since it cannot take into account the constituent and conservative function of these more direct confrontational forms of power.

Capitalism through the prism of war

Taking these as a starting point, Lazzarato suggests that it is necessary to look at capitalism through the prism of war. This perspective leads him to propose the hypothesis that war, along with the state and the financial system, is a constituent, even ontological, force in capitalist societies. What Lazzarato calls 'strategic confrontations' thus lie at the heart of the socio-ontological condition of the capitalist socius. As such, Lazzarato designates these confrontations as situations of direct and asymmetric confrontation between antagonists in which one party will necessarily win and the other lose. Drawing on earlier, more conflict oriented works of Foucault (2003), Lazzarato argues that these asymmetric strategic confrontations precede and underpin all relations of power in capitalist societies. If such a relation stabilizes itself in any arrangement resembling pacification, this means that one side of the strategic confrontation has emerged victorious. Critical accounts that proceed from this pacified situation, for Lazzarato, can only tell half the story. Accordingly, Lazzarato's challenges us to look beyond the metropolis in the capitalist core. Here in the center, the association of neoliberalism with creative precarity, bio-political production and self-entrepreneurship, which pervade the field of critical management studies, might be self-evident. However, integrated world capitalism relies just as much on direct violent material appropriation and suppression at the periphery, as it does on the glossy offices and tech companies that some management scholars still take to be the primordial face of contemporary capitalism.

From critical to revolutionary theory

As the title of *Capital hates everyone* already suggests, his theoretical moves have an explicit political motivation. According to Lazzarato, the leftist intelligentsia has wallowed far too long and too deep in critical theories of the supposed abstract, depersonalized and cunning nature of contemporary power. Against these accounts, Lazzarato calls for 'revolutionary' theories capable of identifying the concrete strategies employed by what he calls capital's war machine and providing emancipatory counter-strategies. Unfortunately, by the end of the essay, Lazzarato still owes the readers any suggestions on what such counter strategies might look like. Answers to this question might be found in a recently published book titled *The intolerable present, the urgency of revolution.*

In lieu of such strategic suggestions, Lazzarato spends much of his essay painting a desolate picture of our current predicament: Neoliberalism reigns supreme and represses every counter-insurgent force with violence and its seemingly all-powerful financial machine. Simultaneously, the defeated and humiliated subjectivities of the western bourgeoisie give rise to fascist political movements. These descriptions and their analysis through the prism of war are formulated in a rather declarative manner. Lazzarato is not out to convince anyone who is still hopeful in the prospects of technocratic or social-democratic solutions to our current malaise. He declares his polemic theses with ultimate certainty. For the reader it is a take it or leave it situation. Unfortunately, Lazzarato's polemics tend to paint a sometimes-oversimplified picture of our current predicament: On one side, you have violent repressive technocratic neoliberalism and on the other, violent repressive neo-fascist neoliberalism and in the background lurks an unfulfilled potential for rupture and revolution that Lazzarato presents as our only hope. On the one hand, this account might serve as a productive shake up for critical management scholars since it emphasizes the constitutive role of direct, strategic and violent confrontation in capitalist societies, which we tend to overlook. On the other hand, this conceptual framework has no room for the more progressive, 'enlightened' left wing of capital which we encounter at the contemporary business school: socially progressive, environmentally concerned and determined to square social and ecological sustainability with entrepreneurial activity. From Lazzarato's point of view,

such a discourse can only appear as a hollow humanist façade for violent repressive technocratic neoliberalism. Those laboring critically within this discourse might reasonably ask if it is really that simple. We should probably look elsewhere to answer this question. However, amongst Lazzarato's dire declarations of apocalyptic times, at the very heart of his essay readers will find a rich and thought-provoking sketch of a theory of technology – one that might be of profound interest for researchers interested in the field of critical management and studies.

Towards a conflict theory of technology

Lazzarato articulates his theory of technology in a lengthy chapter, which forms the centerpiece of his treatise and is, by comparison with the rest of the text, surprisingly argumentative in tone and structure. He takes as his starting point Deleuze's programmatic dictum, that the 'machines are always social before being technical' (Deleuze, 2006: 39). Connecting this sentiment with the thought of modern philosophers of technology, such as Gilbert Simondon, Lazzarato makes the case for the ontological indeterminacy of technological machines. Any technological machine, Lazzarato argues in typical Deleuzo-Guattarian jargon, is constituted by its interconnection with the social machine. Similarly, the subject itself is constituted through certain assemblages of 'enunciation', in which technical components play an increasingly important role. 'Man and machine', Lazzarato concludes 'are an assemblage [agencement], hence a field of possibilities, of virtualities as much as constituted elements (mechanical parts, software programs, algorithms), but all of that must be framed in relation to the possibilities and constituted elements of the war machine.' [162]. In my reading, the term 'war machine' in this context seems to refer to the capitalist socius, which, according to Lazzarato, is inherently warlike.

Thus, Lazzarato affirms the ontological indeterminacy of technical machines against critical theories that suspect modern machinery of holding a tendency towards either emancipation or repression. Within the former camp, Lazzarato groups leftist accelerationists who, he claims, see in the development of the means of production the skeleton key for a post-capitalist future. The main currents of post-Operaismo, with which Lazzarato is most

commonly identified in the critical management literature and on the pages of *ephemera* are lumped into this tendency as well.

Lazzarato's theory of technology is in line with his general argument, namely that contemporary critical theory has overemphasized the pacified governmentality of capitalist domination to the detriment of a coherent analysis of direct, strategic confrontations. If we understand a technological machine to be a field of virtualities that actualize themselves only in connection with the social machine, and if we understand the capitalist social machine to be premised on strategic confrontation and, thus, inherently warlike, then, Lazzarato argues, any analysis of technology has to take its conflictual strategic employment as a starting point. What Lazzarato seems to propose, therefore, is a socio-political determinism of technology in the last instance. Since Lazzarato posits war as a socio-ontological condition, it might be adequate to call Lazzarato's perspective a conflict theory of technology. This moves Lazzarato in close proximity with theories of early Operaismo and Labor Process Theory, which understands technology as a weapon in class struggle mobilized to secure capitalist domination (Panzieri, 1980; Noble, 2011). However, Lazzarato's account of the development of contemporary technology and the way it is shaped by conflict goes beyond class conflict to include geopolitical and (de-)colonial confrontations. Interestingly for critical management scholarship, Lazzarato also discusses organizational techniques, such as interdisciplinary teamwork in his analysis, showing how the Second World War necessitated and gave rise to modes of organization we today mostly associate with the creative and software industries. Creative destruction indeed. Turning to actual technical machines, Lazzarato gives us uncharacteristically detailed case-studies to demonstrate his conflict theory of technology. The most convincing and illustrative of these cases will be elaborated upon now.

The conflictual shaping of technology, or how the radio got its noise

Lazzarato gives an account of the strategic employment of the radio during the anti-colonial struggles in Algeria. Drawing primarily on Fanon's descriptions of the matter, he demonstrates how the very form and content of

the medium, its messages and the subjectivities of its users, were shaped by the conflictual social relationship between colonizer and colonized. At first, Lazzarato explains, radio in Algeria was a top-down propaganda tool employed by the French colonial state. However, during the anti-colonial struggle Algerians set up alternative, revolutionary broadcasts. This revolutionary employment of the medium gave it a completely different form. Not only did it turn the former top-down propaganda tool into a mode of revolutionary communication. It also reshaped the subjectivities of its recipients, since the highly patriarchal Algerian households gathered, regardless of gender, in front of the radio, becoming witnesses to and part of a process of politicization that traversed traditional gender and age hierarchies. Lazzarato goes so far as to claim that radio-jamming perpetrated by the French colonizers contributed to the conflictual shaping of the very medium and its reception. The constant interruptions of noise through jamming practices became part and parcel with revolutionary radio broadcasts, in turn triggering new, more attentive listening practices, and again, reshaping the subjectivities of those attached to this revolutionary socio-technological machine. Lazzarato's retelling of this period in revolutionary media-usage is highly suggestive and serves a convincing illustration for Lazzarato's view of both man and machine as assemblages of becoming that are enframed by social conflicts. What Lazzarato's argument underemphasizes, however, is the particular formal and historical logic of the broadcast medium, which enables certain revolutionary and counter-revolutionary styles of usage, while limiting the feasibility of others (Baudrillard, 2019), or to use the terms closer to contemporary organization studies: Its formal and material affordances and constraints.

Technology in the contemporary labor process

Thus, Lazzarato's conflict theory of technology is highly provocative and suggestive. It portrays technological machines as ontologically open and undetermined assemblages and sensitizes the reader to the particular styles of usage through which a machine is individuated and actualized. Furthermore, it shows how the subjectivities of the users themselves are shaped both by the constituted technological elements of the machine and the way these are enacted in an inherently conflictual social setting.

It thus serves as an effective antidote to popular narratives about the either emancipatory or catastrophic consequences of seemingly independent technological developments. Similarly, it can serve as a counterweight to critical discourses about the way contemporary technological developments depersonalize and reify power relations by way of algorithmization and automation. In the field of critical management and organization studies, Lazzarato's arguments could be put into a productive dialogue with currently fashionable theories of socio-materialism which similarly underscore the relative indeterminacy of technologies and the constitutive role of intra-active assemblages of human and nonhuman elements (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). One possible contribution Lazzarato's theory could make here is positioning these intra-actions in a particular socio-historical formation: capitalism. And since, for Lazzarato, capitalism is inherently conflictual, a further development of his lines of arguments in *Capital hates everyone* might even enable a reevaluation of the relationship between socio-material and historical material approaches such as Labor Process Theory. Lazzarato himself gives a rough sketch of how his theory could be applied to the labor context through his analysis of the recent work of French sociologist Marie-Anne Dujarier.

He employs Dujarier's research to argue that technological abstraction is not a means to the end of automating managerial decision-processes but rather of centralizing decision making power and moving it up organizational hierarchies. If, for example, an algorithmic project management tool is implemented into a labor process, this does not simply mean that certain mid-level decisions are automated, but that the decision-making power is centralized among those who set the algorithmic parameters of the tool. Cue TIQQUN: 'In each apparatus, there is a hidden decision' (TIQQUN, 2011: 154). Thus, organizations are still based on (managerial) decisions. Any study of algorithmic decision making in organizations should, therefore, hone in on the decisions *behind* the algorithm. 'The automatic machine' Lazzarato writes 'centralizes decision making even further: instead of abolishing it it exalts it' [175]. True to his focus on antagonistic strategies, Lazzarato suspects a strategy of secession behind this development. This would allow capitalists and their functional elites to separate themselves from the workers on the shop floor and in the home office, a strategy that, as we can clearly see in the

case of platform labor, also enables capitalists to shed any responsibilities formerly enshrined in the Fordist capital-labor compromise. Thus, Lazzarato's analysis seems to come down on the side of those observing a Taylorism 2.0 at work in contemporary labor processes. The big difference between old and new Taylorisms being that the Taylorists of the past still had to visit the shop floor to carry out their measurements, while the new Taylorists are entirely separated from the concrete labor process, instead acting upon an 'abstraction' [181].

Conclusion

For those unfamiliar with Lazzarato's intellectual trajectory in recent years, the theoretical positions in 'Capital Hates Everyone' might come as a surprise. Given the fact that aside from his work on debt and indebtedness, Lazzarato is still often cited within critical management studies as a proponent of post-Operaismo's main currents, a reevaluation of his latest work should be in order. Unfortunately, his most recent texts are not ideal places to start such a reevaluation. His collaboration with Eric Alliez is mostly concerned with an analysis of the role of war in capitalist modernity. As such, it is highly relevant given our current geopolitical climate. However, it rarely touches the fields of interest of critical management scholars. For readers within this discipline, *Capital hates everyone* might serve first and foremost as a stark illumination of the manifold differences between Lazzarato's most recent works and texts such as 'Immaterial labor' (1996). In part, this is due to the text's highly polemic and agitating style. This very style might deter some readers, who do not share Lazzarato's theoretical and political sentiments. However, those not deterred by these issues might just discover the outlines of a provocative and highly fruitful analysis of the role of strategic confrontation in neoliberalism as well as the political and antagonistic facets of technology and its employment in contemporary labor processes. We can only hope that some of these ideas will be fleshed out further in future texts. A new book, twice the size of *Capital hates everyone* was just published, again through the semiotext(e) intervention series (for a review see Diefenhardt, 2023).

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