ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS:

MIASMA, TOXICITY AND VIOLATION

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“If the immediate and direct purpose of life is not suffering then our existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world: for it is absurd to suppose that the endless affliction of which the world is everywhere full, and which arises out of the need and distress pertaining essentially to life, should be purposeless and purely accidental. Each individual misfortune, to be sure, seems an exceptional occurrence; but misfortune in general is the rule.” (Schopenhauer, 1970)

Why psychoanalysis? There was a time when this question did not arise – the time, shortly after Freud’s death, when, in the words of W. H. Auden’s famous phrase, Freud “is no more a person now, but a whole climate of opinion under whom we conduct our different lives”. Today, the climate of
opinion has changed and many people view psychoanalysis as a dubious doctrine, with a somewhat old-fashioned if not discredited approach to therapy. Why then use psychoanalysis as the basis of understanding the dynamics of organizations today?

It is my contention that psychoanalysis opens valuable windows into the world of organizations and management, offering insights that are startlingly original; it has extensive explanatory powers and can find ample practical implementations. It is also my contention that as scholars of management and organizations move beyond the standard platform of organizational theory, centered on rationality, hierarchy and authority and become more interested in symbolic, irrational, emotional, and discursive dimensions of organizational life, the insights of psychoanalysis may become more mainstream to the field and its applications more wide-spread. Furthermore, it seems to me that psychoanalysis is uniquely helpful in studies of organizational change which is frequently planned as orderly, rational and controlled and turns out to be unpredictable, disorderly and uncontrollable. In such circumstances, emotional as well as political forces are unleashed, which psychoanalysis is well-equipped, if not to tame, at least to understand.

Finally, psychoanalysis offers an intellectual tradition from which critical management studies can draw. Psychoanalysis eschews the idea of an integrated self or personality. Almost unique among the human sciences it neither lionizes consciousness, nor does it accept unproblematically human experience and behaviour. As Foucault has argued:

Whereas all human sciences advance towards the unconscious only with their back to it, waiting for it to unveil itself as fast as consciousness is analysed, as it were backwards, psychoanalysis, on the other hand, points directly towards it, with a deliberate purpose – not towards that which must be rendered gradually more explicit by the progressive illumination of the implicit, but towards what is there and yet is hidden. (Foucault, 1966/1970, p. 374)
The distinguishing feature of psychoanalysis is the assumption of an unconscious dimension to social and individual life, one in which both ideas and emotions may operate (Freud, 1940/1986). The unconscious is not just part of a psychic reality which happens to be concealed from consciousness. It works both as a mental territory in which dangerous and painful ideas are consigned through repression and other defensive mechanisms, and also as a source of resistances to specific ideas and emotions which present threats to mental functioning (Freud, 1933/1988). Unconscious ideas, desires and emotions will often reach consciousness in highly distorted, camouflaged or abstruse ways, requiring interpretation (Freud, 1915/1984). One of the commonest manifestations of the unconscious are fantasies – mental representations which express unconscious wishes and desires as if they were already realized, yet often in a disguised and indirect manner. Fantasies are equally important in understanding the actions people in and out of organizations -- day-dreaming consumers, ambitious leaders, bullied employees, budding entrepreneurs, disaffected voters and so forth, are as liable to be guided and driven by their fantasies as by rational considerations of ends and means.

Nor is the unconscious a marginal or pathological terrain into which we occasionally venture. Psychoanalysis views a substantial part of human motivation and action as unconsciously driven. Even where plausible conscious reasons and explanations are given for an action, a desire or a thought, psychoanalysis will examine the possibility that unconscious factors are at play. Fantasy is a vital entity in our lives – our sleeping lives are almost entirely dedicated to it, and our waking times not much less.

All people have an unconscious and all of us repress unpleasant and disturbing thoughts and emotions. All of us suffer from the consequences of these repressions. All of us experience mental conflict, ambivalence, anxiety and behavioural symptoms which we find ourselves unable to tame or control. Some of us suffer from unusually severe and debilitating versions of these effects. A key task of psychoanalytic interventions is to restore to us some of
the contents of their unconscious mind by undoing the effect of repressions and other defense mechanisms. This is especially the case if these mechanisms are dysfunctional, if, in other words, the anxiety, inhibition and pain which they cause outweigh the comfort and protection which they afford. Psychoanalytic interpretation is the process whereby the hidden meanings of actions, desires and emotions are gradually brought to light, by viewing conscious phenomena as the distorted expressions of unconscious ones. The analyst seeks, in this way, to find the meaning of phenomena such as neurotic symptoms and physical twitches and tics, dreams, instances of forgetting or idées-fixes, jokes, insults, fantasies, powerful emotions, compulsions and so forth. This is a difficult and time-consuming process, since the unconscious raises resistances against attempts to reveal its content. It is only when interpretations of many different phenomena across a considerable period of time lead to a coherent and consistent picture that they begin to acquire credence and may become part of a process of recovery.

If the first defining feature of psychoanalysis is its emphasis on unconscious process, its second feature is its insistence that conflict is inevitable in social life – living in society brings individuals into conflict with other individuals, whose desires and wishes oppose their own; it also brings each individual into conflict with himself or herself. As Brown argues:

"The essence of society is the repression of the individual and the essence of the individual is the repression of himself." (Brown, 1959) p. 4

Or as Rieff argues,

"Freud conceives of the self not as an abstract entity, uniting experience and cognition, but as the subject of a struggle between two objective forces -- unregenerate instincts and overbearing culture. Between these two forces there may be compromise but no resolution. Since the individual can neither extirpate his instincts
nor wholly reject the demands of society, his character expresses
the way in which he organizes and appeases the conflict between
the two." (Rieff, 1959) p. 29.

In place of integrated the mental personalities favoured by other psychological
discourses, psychoanalysis approaches the individual as the terrain of conflict,
conflict between powerful desires and constraining social and moral forces. The result is a perennially fragmented self, torn apart by different mental
forces, one that under the guidance of the ego may hold on to a precarious
integrity, yet who can easily fall to pieces. The very idea of a self is a wish-
fulfilling fantasy, expressing the unconscious desire, always unrealizable, of
control, integrity and wholeness.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Where does psychoanalysis come into the study of organizations? What are
the distinct insights and qualities that it brings to the study of organizations?

Some foundational psychoanalytic insights on organizations

1. People in and out of organizations are emotional beings, beings with
personal and family histories

Viewing people as emotional beings neither denies nor underestimates the
importance of reason and rationality in human affairs. Even rational acts,
however, such as the pursuit of profit or career, the avoidance of waste or
danger, the punishment of offenders and so forth, are often underwritten by an
emotional agenda, such as ambition, excitement, anger, fear, nostalgia and so
forth. These emotions provide the fuel behind seemingly rational or
reasonable acts. Moreover, many of these emotions are expressions of
unconscious desires, wishes and fantasies which were shaped by people's
early life experiences, in their encounters with parents and other important figures, when they started to develop their identities.

Of course, identities are dynamic – they change throughout life. But, like trees whose development may be affected by different conditions of nature and nurture but may not re-root themselves in different spots or grow branches where none exist, people's identities cannot discard or disregard early experiences (happy or painful), including experiences related to their gender, position in siblings order and so forth. In this sense, then, their histories follow them throughout life. Histories are both conscious, in the form of reminiscences and recollections, but also unconscious, in the form of flashbacks, irrational urges and desires, fantasies and emotions.

The key psychoanalytic idea which links people's histories to their experiences in organizations is *transference*, a process whereby feelings (e.g. admiration, fear, resentment) and images (e.g. omnipotence, mystery, beauty) once attached to parental figures become transferred onto figures who come to occupy similar unconscious locations in later life. This is especially important in the analyst-patient relation, but is also a feature of relations with leaders, peers and subordinates in organizational set-ups. Such figures may become objects with whom others *identify* or objects which are *idealized*, i.e. endowed with the perfections once attributed to the parents. Alternatively, such figures may become vilified and resented as the causes of all troubles and large amounts of aggression may be directed against them. In all of these instances, there is a lack of proportion between the strength of feeling directed against others, and any rational explanation of such feelings through the others' actions. (Baum, 1987; Diamond, 1988; Gabriel, 1999b; Oglensky, 1995; Schwartz, 1989)

In short then, a psychoanalytic approach to organizations looks at people in organizations, not as rational agents, as passive functionaries, as economic beings or as cogs on a machine, but as distinct individuals, with emotional and fantasy lives, with histories and pasts, diverse emotions and developing identities.
2. Through work, people seek to fulfil deeper unconscious desires

In contrast to 'motivation theories' ritually taught in management schools, psychoanalytic approaches recognize the complexity and dynamic quality of human motivation. Motivation is not a question of finding the right button and pressing it, but recognizing that, through work, people pursue many different conscious and unconscious aims. Some people 'sublimate' or channel into work most of their physical and emotional energies. As a highly productive individual, Freud approached work in the first instance as a creative activity, exemplified in the work of the artist. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argued:

One gains the most if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of physical and intellectual work. When that is so, fate can do little against one. A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist's joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist's in solving problems or discovering truth, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterize in metapsychological terms. (1930a: 267)

This type of creative work is beyond the means of most people who must work to support themselves and their families or to meet other desires or needs. For many people work is simply a necessity, earning a living. For others, it represents an attempt to placate a critical super-ego which inherited the parent's "You don't try hard enough". Yet others work hard to build their self-esteem, to earn the respect of others or ostentatiously to display commitment to their organization. (Baum, 1987; Obholzer, 1999; Smelser, 1998c) Some may work non-stop as workaholics to outperform their rivals (often acting like children seeking a special affection the heart of a parent) or, equally, to dodge domestic obligations towards spouses, children and other 'loved ones'. Some
may even work as a means of overcoming their fear of death, seeking immortality in the legacy which they may leave. (Sievers, 1986)

In all of these instances then, work is a range of activities driven by complex motives, which may express both instrumental rationality and hidden unconscious desires (or the latter masquerading as the former).

3. Organizations, as parts of society, become sites where broader social and cultural dynamics are enacted

Lest it be thought from the earlier two insights that the psychoanalysis of organizations can be 'reduced' to the psychology of individuals, it is important to recognize that individuals do not exist outside the prevailing social and cultural conditions. Social and cultural phenomena, such as religious ideas, political conflicts and economic interests, become part of every individual's psyche through the influence of identification with role models and even through the different uses of language. In this connection, the term 'psychostructure' is used to describe the ways that language functions to 'embed' such social and cultural features into the individual psyche. (Carr, 1993; Maccoby, 1976)

Organizations then become arenas where wider social dynamics, for instance those relating to class, race, gender and forth are acted out. Different organizations may had different psychostructures, for instance different configurations allow different displays of emotion, different manifestations of disagreement and conflict, different outlets for aggression and solidarity. These are expressed in different cultural and social artifacts that organizations use to express their identity, including buildings, logos, offices, language uses, communication devices and so forth. All of these may then be interpreted to yield insights into shared conscious or unconscious fantasies among organizational members. In this way, a massive building may stand as a symbol of omnipotence or, alternatively, as a manifestation of arrogance and hubris.
Wider cultural trends, such as authoritarianism or narcissism, therefore weave themselves into the psychostructures of organizations, affecting organizational phenomena, including leadership, communication and group relations. (Lasch, 1980)

4. Organizations offer certain defences against anxieties which they provoke

One of the most important insights into the functioning of organizations concerns the causes and consequences of anxiety. Anxiety is seen as an incapacitating emotion which individuals defend themselves against through the mechanisms of defence. Organizations are undoubtedly systematic generators of anxiety. They breed anxiety in many forms by making unyielding demands on individuals -- that they should control their spontaneity and emotion; that they should work with people they do not necessarily like, doing tasks which they do not necessarily enjoy, often being treated in an impersonal and cold way they do not particularly appreciate; that they should display loyalty and commitment towards an entity that may casually dismiss 'redundant employees'; that they should do tasks for which they do not feel adequately prepared or clearly briefed, that are psychological demanding and, sometimes, physically dangerous. In addition, they exacerbate anxieties which individuals may carry with them, over their self-worth, their competence and their ability to get on with others.

The containment such anxieties within organizations has been the focus of numerous widely accepted theories developed by Elliott Jaques (Jaques, 1952, 1955), Isabel Menzies-Lythe (Menzies, 1960; Menzies Lyth, 1988), Eric Trist (Trist & Bamforth, 1951), Eric Miller (Miller, 1976) and other theorists associated with the Tavistock Institute in London. Drawing from the work of Melanie Klein, Tavistock research has studied how individuals in large bureaucratic organizations, faced with uncertainty and anxiety, set up psychological boundaries through projections and introjections which seriously
distort organizational rationality and task. Many defenses against anxiety may be furnished by organizations themselves, such as hierarchies, rules, boundaries and so forth.

The downside of these organizational or social defenses against anxiety was well appreciated in the early work of Jaques and Menzies-Lythe, who noted that in containing anxieties organizations often resort to dysfunctional routines which stunt creativity, block the expression of emotion or conflict, and, above all, undermine the organization's rational and effective functioning. Just as individual defenses immerse the individual in a world of neurotic make-belief detached from reality, so too do organizational defenses immerse their members in collective delusions, in which they pursue chimerical projects or run blindly away from non-existent threats, while disregarding real problems and opportunities. Like the individual neurotic, the organization may then find itself at the centre of a vicious circle. Just as neurotic's personal self-delusions deepen the sufferings for which they ostensibly offer consolation, likewise corporate delusions merely re-inforce the malaise of the organization.

It is now generally agreed that the management of anxiety is a core task in every organization – excessive anxiety leads to highly dysfunctional defensive routines, while inadequate anxiety breeds complacency, inertia and gradual decay. (Baum, 1987; French & Vince, 1999b; Gould, Ebers, & Clinchy, 1999; Hirschhorn, 1988; Stacey, 1992; Stein, 2000) The extent to which organizational consultants may help contain the anxieties is subject to much debate. Certainly part of such consultants' role is to identify and distinguish those defenses which bolster the organization's ability to cope with uncertainty and danger, to build solidarity and to organize its tasks effectively from those that merely act as causes of the vicious circles noted above.
5. Organizations do not act merely as causes of discontent and anxiety; they also open up possibilities of realizing collective visions and stimulating contentment and creativity

While organizations make considerable demands on individual's mental functioning, they also offer a variety of compensations and possibilities. Think of the instant boost to a person's sense of self-esteem when they hear that they have been offered a place by a respected university or a prestigious company and it is immediately apparent that such organizations rapidly enter an individual's self-image, lending them their prowess and glamour. Think of the long-standing loyalty of alumni to their institutions or of many employees to their organizations and it is clear that such organizations become part of individual's identities, sustaining their self-esteem and offering them opportunities to socialize with people in the same position. For some, organizations offer creative outlets, for others opportunities to develop and exercise leadership qualities or other technical and social skills.

The concept of organizational ideal (Baum, 1989; Carr, 1998a, b; Gabriel, 1993, 1999b; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1989; Hofstede, 1990; Schwartz, 1987, 1989) is particularly useful in this connection – an idealized image of the organization which is endowed with numerous desirable qualities, power, success, efficiency and even immortality, which they lend to their members. The organizational ideal can then become part of the ego-ideal of many members, enhancing their sense of achievement and worth, enabling them to handle adversity and misfortune and drawing qualities of dedication, imagination, hard work and even self-sacrifice out of them. To be sure, there are times when an over-inflated organizational ideal can be a course of delusions and pathologies, like those noted earlier, though without these props many people would feel deracinated and lost. In spite of the demands made on their members, organizations can bolster their narcissism, offering them a sense of meaning and purpose as well as a partial protection against the vagaries of life.
All in all then, the contribution of psychoanalytic study of organizations seeks to extend the insights of organizational theory and the tasks of management, by exploring unconscious dimensions of organizational life, uncovering hidden aspects of the relationships between individuals and groups, and highlighting the importance of emotion and fantasy in organizational life.

Two contrasting approaches:

“Studying organizations psychoanalytically” VERSUS “Psychoanalysing organizations”

In general it can be observed that those who have adopted these psychoanalytic insights in their engagement with organizations have done so from one of two directions (Gabriel & Carr, 2002). One approach has been to study organizations as dominant features of Western society and culture, examining their demands on individuals, their influence on interpersonal relations in and out of work, their effects on people's emotional lives, the manner in which they feature in people's fantasies and dreams. A whole range of organizational phenomena can be approached in this manner, including leadership and authority relations, group behaviour and cohesion, insults and jokes, creativity and destructiveness, psychological contracts and obedience, and so forth. Such phenomena are shown to entail unconscious dimensions – so, for instance, leaders can acquire massive influence on their followers by placing themselves in the unconscious location once occupied by powerful parent images.

This approach recognizes that organizations can be both a source of creativity and excitement for individuals, but also a deep cause of anxiety, discontent and illusion. They interfere in the constant dynamics between each individual's ego and other mental agencies noted above, and can penetrate people's unconscious lives very deeply. People's dreams, anxieties, fears, impulses, emotions, fantasies are rooted in their experiences as members of organizations. Their sense of worth and self-esteem, their willingness to form
relations with others, their ability to perform useful work, their interests and outlooks are profoundly moulded by such experiences. Thus, for example, we would expect a person who has worked for the same organization for a long number of years to display a different psychological orientation and unconscious set of needs and desires from one regularly moving from job to job, not altogether unlike an individual who spends a whole life with the same partner as against a person who regularly changes sexual partners. For the sake of clarity, we shall refer to this approach as **Approach A** and can be summed up as "studying organizations psychoanalytically". This approach is consistent with a wider range of others which have sought to study social and cultural phenomena, using psychoanalytic insights, a tradition pioneered by Wilhelm Reich (Reich, 1970), Erich Fromm (Fromm, 1941/1966), Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse, 1955), Theodor Adorno (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and their colleagues in the Frankfurt School and developed by cultural critics like Philip Rieff (Rieff, 1966), Norman O. Brown (Brown, 1959), Christopher Lasch (Lasch, 1980), Richard Sennett (Sennett, 1998) and others. In the area of organizations. Important contributors to this approach include Sievers, Carr, Gabriel etc. (Sievers, 1986; Sievers, 1994, 1999), Schwartz (Schwartz, 1987, 1990) (Carr, 1993, 1998a; Gabriel, 1998b, 1999b).

**Approach B** on the other hand, has started from a more pragmatic and interventionist concern. If psychoanalysis is a method of psychological intervention, however flawed and problematic, which seeks to return a patient to normal functioning, could it not be used as a *method of organizational intervention* seeking to enhance organizational functioning? Individual analysis seeks to help the patient conquer his/her anxieties and compulsions by gradually making him/her aware of the contents of his/her unconscious and bringing about a reconciliation with these contents. Would it not then be possible to attempt a similar intervention in organizations, identifying repressed unconscious forces, such as rivalries, fears of failure, anger over betrayals, disappointments and frustrations, all unacknowledged and often repressed, which systematically inhibit collaboration, creativity, harmony and organizational performance? This type of work was pioneered in two places.
In the United Kingdom, a number of researchers associated with the Tavistock Institute (including Jaques (Jaques, 1952), Menzies (Menzies Lyth, 1988), Trist (Trist et al., 1951), Miller (Miller, 1976), and others) who have been inspired by the work of Klein and Bion, in particular, developed a series of interventions aimed at dealing with group processes at the interface of the social and the technological systems. In the United States, Levinson (Levinson, 1968/1981; Levinson, 1972; Levinson, 1976) and Zaleznick (Zaleznik, 1977, 1989), in different ways developed a number of psychoanalytic interventions aimed at helping leaders diagnose and address organizational dysfunctions caused by their relations with their followers. In the last twenty years, these two traditions have come together in the work of several theorists/consultants including those associated with the William Alanson White Institute (founded by Eric Fromm and Karen Horney) under the direction of Lawrence Gould (Gould, 1993; Gould et al., 1999) who have pioneered new modes of psychoanalytic interventions in organizations. Notable contributions to Approach B have been made by Krantz (Krantz, 1989, 1990), Hirschhorn (Hirschhorn, 1988, 1999; Hirschhorn & Barnett, 1993), Diamond (Diamond, 1993, 1998), Stein (Stein, 1998, 2001) and Gilmore (Hirschhorn et al., 1989), in the United States, Lawrence (Lawrence, 1991, 1999; Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996), French, Vince (French & Simpson, 1999a; French et al., 1999b), Obholzer (Obholzer, 1999; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994) and colleagues at the Tavistock Clinic in London, Bain (Bain, 1998) and Long (Long, 1999) in Australia and numerous others.

Approach B can go further still in the direction of "psychoanalysing organizations". Often it diagnoses certain pathological processes in organizations, such as paranoia, megalomania, self-delusion and anxiety, which directly mirror similar processes among individuals, so that, in a certain way, it can be said that the entire organization becomes afflicted by neurosis. Such a neurotic organization, in turn, infects everyone who comes into contact with it, as an employee, as a stakeholder or even as a leader. Some exponents of Approach B go a step further and view organizations as mirroring the individual psyche and, in particular, the psyche of their leader (Kets de Vries, 1991; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). They are thus endowed
with an organizational unconscious, an executive organizational ego, an organizational super-ego and so forth, whose dynamics, compromises and dysfunctions mirror those of individual people. This particular approach has been carried forward in the works of Kets de Vries and others.

As we shall see presently, some authors have made contributions to both Approach A and Approach B. It nevertheless remains a fact that while Approach A is theoretical and abstract, Approach B is hands-on and interventionist, while Approach A is concerned with rigour and generalizability, Approach B is pragmatically concerned with results and effectiveness. Possibly the biggest difference between the two approaches concerns the nature of conflict, both psychic and organizational conflict. While Approach A, following the works of Freud, Marcuse and the Critical Theorists, views many of the conflicts and their attendant neurotic symptoms, anxieties and dysfunctions, as virtually unavoidable within the present organization of society, Approach B views many of these conflicts themselves as the results of dysfunctions – as evidence that certain managerial processes are failing and may, therefore, be put right. Advocates of Approach B would regard individual as well as organizational neuroses as avoidable and curable, whereas advocates of Approach A are much more sceptical on that count, taking their cue from Freud:

> the expectation that every neurotic phenomenon can be cured may, I suspect, be derived from the layman’s belief that the neuroses are something quite unnecessary which have no right to exist. (1933a: 189)

In some cases, advocates of Approach A have argued that organizations can function quite effectively, even if many of their members are unhappy, anxious or properly neurotic. Several neuroses (including workaholism, compulsiveness, paranoia and others) may under some circumstances be quite beneficial for organizations.
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Approach A is readily concordant with many widely rehearsed arguments in Critical Management Studies. As part of the same critical tradition, it generally shares, for instance, the three core assumptions of CMS identified by Fournier and Grey (Fournier & Grey, 2000). It is firmly anti-performative, it is profoundly sceptical of things as they appear and hence anti-naturalistic and it is reflexive in the prototypical sense of constantly questioning its own intentions, assumptions and successes. Where this approach is at variance with some post-modern theorizing is in asserting the reality of human desire, human emotion and human drive outside discourse. All the same, it takes discourse very seriously, whether it assumes official or unofficial expressions, and it offers its own variant of interpretation as a means of engaging with it.

Approach B is more difficult to reconcile with the intent and ethos of CMS. It can easily parodied as a sub-genre of consultancy discourses. It is deeply performative, even if some would see its effectiveness as more akin to that found in a safety blanket for over-anxious clients than in offering ‘real’ solutions to their problems. It may also be accused of being essentialist and uncritical. Crucial among its core concepts are those of organizational pathologies and dysfunctions. Thus, leadership, group behaviour, culture, change and so forth are all liable to become sites of dysfunctional and/or pathological processes. It is then argued that both individuals and organizations lapse into delusion, discontent and failure. In situations like this, the consultant may offer himself or herself as an organizational therapist who may, under certain circumstances, restore the organization and its members to health. The assumption here is that there is a state of normality and health, when people in organizations can be creative and relatively happy and which, almost automatically, makes organizations successful. By contrast, in pathological states individual suffering and delusion coincide with organizational failure.
The equation of individual health and even happiness with organizational success is problematic and I have long argued against this view. It is all too common to find organizations that are successful on the back of massive unhappiness that they inflict on their members, and equally, relatively happy organizations that fail. “Fat and happy” has now become a widely-used term of disparagement in describing organizations. The concepts of dysfunction and pathology cannot easily withstand the scrutiny of a Critical Management Studies perspective. What is dysfunctional for one person may be functional to another (‘your sacking, my pay rise’). What is dysfunctional in one set of circumstances may be functional in another – for instance, extensive paranoia may be quite functional in circumstances of looming dangers.

ORGANIZATIONAL MIASMA

In spite of all these reservations, I would like to develop the view that there are organizations that reach great depths of delusion, toxicity and suffering. Such organizations may or may not be competitive or effective; they may rarely seek to escape from their predicament. Advocates of Approach B will readily recognize such organizations and numerous detailed descriptions for them exist. What is new here are two things. First, the suggestion that the condition of these organizations can be captured by the concept of miasma. This is offered not as another organizational metaphor, a prism through which to view particular organizations. Instead, I will seek to delineate the fundamentals of organizational miasma, as a theoretical concept describing and explaining numerous processes of certain organizations. Second, I will suggest that the concept of miasma entails a destructive and paralysing form of critical and self-critical attitude that warns against lionizing critique and criticism.

I will put my cards directly on the table – I first experienced organizational miasma not as an organizational researcher or consultant but as an employee. I once found myself working for an organization that went through a protracted period of painful change in leadership, culture, structure and governance. Over two thirds of the core workforce left in the course of
eighteen months. For much of this period, I found myself having feelings, fantasies and ideas that I had not experienced before. I kept extensive notes about that period, observing particularly closely the departmental leader as well as my colleagues, both academics and support staff. I had numerous conversations with them, some of which were highly confessional. I also carefully monitored my own responses, feelings and fantasies. It was during that period that the word ‘miasma’ installed itself in my thinking processes, helping me, I believe, to make sense of what I was living through and, to a certain degree, coming to terms with it.

Three features of this organization stood out. First, the extensive ‘objectification’ of people, who were treated as pawns on a chess-board, arranged and re-arranged, deployed, redeployed and discarded with no regard to any desires or values of their own. Within this objectification, many organizational members came to view themselves as objects, of no intrinsic value but merely as resources adding or failing to add value. A common way of expressing this was by saying that people were treated without respect. Second, a very pernicious critical ethos installed itself in the organization, one that affected every person and every activity, and whose core message was “X is not good enough”, where X could stand for a person, an activity, a department, groups of customers, suppliers etc. Such criticism was rarely rationally driven – for example, unsuccessful projects may have evaded criticism and become ‘no go areas’ of discussion; yet, many routine and successful activities came to be criticized as flawed and ineffective. Third, a widely felt depression afflicted many participants and was apparent but not generally discussed. People rarely smiled and rarely joked. Occasionally black jokes surfaced lacking the rebellious and original qualities of real humour. Even among the higher leadership echelons, feelings of doom and gloom regularly prevailed, often associated with the futility of fighting the wider organizational bureaucracy or the competitors’ ability to succeed in projects in which this organization was failing.

These symptoms match Freud’s discussion in his well-known article on “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917e) and involved profound sense of dejection
and loss of self-esteem, a lowered level of energy and interest with corresponding inhibition of activity, and in a continuous expectation of punishment. What was remarkable was the sudden and complete transformation of people who had been competent, outgoing and active into self-doubting, inward-looking and almost paralysed by self-doubt and self-criticism. While the term ‘burn-out’ may have been used to describe some of these symptoms, there is one circumstance that mitigates against its use – many of the individuals afflicted by it, made very complete recoveries as soon as they left the organization and moved to other jobs. This is something that I had numerous opportunities to observe – their recovery was almost as sudden and complete as their collapse.

Looking at that organization now, it is difficult to resist the temptation to describe it as ‘dysfunctional’ and, in spite of my reservations, I have come to view literature on dysfunctional organizations with different eyes. Some of this literature deals with organizational violence, in diverse forms, or organizational toxicity. A substantial amount of this literature was inspired by the extensive round of downsizing and dislocation undergone by many industrial societies in the 1990s. One theorist who has made a great contribution to the psychological and social damage caused by these phenomena has been Howard F. Stein, a psychoanalytic anthropologist who carried out research in numerous organizations undergoing downsizing. In Euphemism, spin, and the crisis in organizational life, Stein (1998) argued that the very terms used to denote the phenomena under investigation are euphemisms that represent not a ‘social construction of reality’ but a systematic assault on meaning. Terms such as ‘downsizing’, ‘rightsizing’, ‘RIF’ (or reduction in force), ‘managed health’, ‘re-engineering’ and so forth are not merely attempts to conceal the bleak and brutal realities of many American workplaces, but defile the human spirit, by forcing on it a seemingly unanswerable logic of markets, economic necessity and bottom lines.

In the follow-up, Nothing personal, just business: A guided journey into organizational darkness, Stein (2001) argues that the workplace has become a place of darkness, where emotional brutality is commonplace and different
forms of psychological violence, dehumanization, including degradation, humiliation and intimidation, have become the norm. Behind calls for flexibility among the employees, Stein sees the rise of a fundamentalist religion of the bottom line, one which is oblivious of all human values and blind to all suffering. The core if unacknowledged euphemism which inspires the title of Stein's book is that of 'collateral damage', the view that no suffering, no lie and no savagery is too great, so long as it is justified by the bottom line. People become dispensable pawns, resources to be used, exploited and discarded. Today's exploiter becomes tomorrow's discarded pawn, since the religion of the bottom line acknowledges no permanent authority, no human is too important to be dispensed with when his/her usefulness is over. This creates an ethos of survivalism – a constant anxiety over each individual's and each organization's ability to survive in what is construed as an environment of endless terrors and turbulence. A small drop in profits is instantly seen as an omen of a cosmic force boding disaster and calling for sacrifices. Immediately, the eye is cast to spot the suitable sacrificial lamb, the next candidate for downsizing and 'RIFing'.

There is a fair literature on different forms of organizational oppression, bullying and humiliation (Czarniawska, 2002; Diamond, 1997; Fineman, 2003; Fortado, 1998; Frost & Robinson, 1999; Gabriel, 1998a; Martin, 2000; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001; Sims, 2003). What makes Stein's contribution especially interesting is the link that he offers between public humiliation and private emotional experience of being worthless and feeling guilty. He argues that the religion of the bottom-line (like most religions) grows on the systematic dissemination of the belief that no-one is good enough – no employee is good enough, no venture is good enough, no action is good enough (Bunting, 2004) (Gabriel, 2005) Of course all organizations inflict blows to our narcissism (Gabriel, 1999b), but what we have here is a sequence of blows to our entire personhood, the product of a principle of managed social and organizational change whose model, Stein insists, is nothing short of the holocaust. Images from the holocaust saturate Stein's observations of corporate America, which he documents in a sequence of
hugely impressive case studies. The core equation for Stein is an experiential and emotional one:

"Organizational darkness is not the fact of the 'symbolic' equation of the American workplace and the Holocaust, but the emotional experience of the workplace that makes the metaphor – and certain recurrent others – plausible and, for many, emotionally apt and 'right.'" (p. 15, emphasis in the original).

Stein offers much evidence of a symbolic equation between 'corporate cleansing' [cf miasma later] and 'ethnic cleansing', both of which view the survival of the whole (the organization, the society) as depending on 'the expulsion of unwanted parts' (p. 69). Stein views the grotesque lament of Hans Frank, the odious Governor General of Poland under the Nazis, as emblematic of modern management: "My only wish of the Jews is that they should disappear." [Jews as the miasma] What today's manager wants is that the weak, the ineffectual, the recalcitrant, the ones who fail the excellence test and do not add value, should simply disappear. And, seeing as nobody is good enough, this ineluctable logic, will eventually target each and every person, turning them into the victim of organizational cleansing. Thus, this 'expulsion of the unwanted parts' noted by Stein becomes part of a phantasy of permanent renewal and eternal life (if only we could get rid of the dead wood, all our problems would be solved).

Stein argues that today’s religion of the bottom line is associated with leaders who cast themselves as prophets of this religion and go about it with ruthlessness and determination. Such leaders, often referred to explicitly as axemen, executioners, and the like, [cf Jack Welch etc.] and as Fineman puts it “By their blunt, fear-inducing, approach, [they] generate toxicity, energy-sapping emotions that can spread, miasma-like, throughout the organization.” (Fineman, 2003, p. 87). Fineman’s choice of the word ‘miasma’ is especially revealing in this context. Miasma is a word that goes further than toxicity. It is a Greek term meaning polluted or unclean. Attempts to ‘cleanse’ the
organization by getting rid of the ‘dead wood’ may then be seen as attempts to lift the miasma. But such attempts are entirely vain. Miasma goes beyond physical or even moral uncleanliness, indicating an affliction that is enduring, that is contagious and that cannot be washed away, although certain actions can be taken to overcome it. One of its main features is that it is capable of afflicting everyone, or as Dodds eloquently puts it, it operates "with the same ruthless indifference to motive as a typhoid germ." (Dodds, 1968, p. 36)

Miasma goes beyond mere toxicity, indicating a state of moral and spiritual decay, a corruption of all values and human relations of trust, love and community.

The concept of organizational miasma begins to offer insights into three important and at times puzzling features of particular organizations like the one described above. First, in contrast to the main thread of CMS theorizing, organizations in a miasmatic state involve relatively little employee resistance. It is as if the employees fighting spirit is paralysed, as they internalize their status as unwanted, unsuccessful and unclean and lapse into depression and symptoms. External violations and threats may be resisted or fought against, but the same can hardly be said against inner violations and decay. Second, miasma entailing constant criticism and self-criticism and the experience of never being ‘good enough’ is highly contagious. Survivor’s guilt may amplify the gloom and depression of those who escape early rounds of downsizing, sapping the desire to fight. As for the cleansers themselves, they are very aware that today’s cleansers easily become tomorrow’s deadwood and candidates for cleansing. Treating other people as objects, has a remarkably deflating impact on oneself as a subject. Third, the blame for this state of affairs is almost invariably placed on the leader, who readily comes to be seen as the bringer of the miasma. This is compounded if the leader is rarely seen or heard in public and only the results of his/her actions are visible. A silent killer, like a silent virus, treating people as objects, selecting, deciding and dismissing. At such times, a nostalgia for the organization’s past and its previous leaders may offer some solace, yet miasma often affects the past as well as the present.
What then exactly is the meaning of miasma, and how can it help us explain the organizational phenomena that we have been drawing out? The Greeks believed that miasma occurs when sacred spaces are invaded or desecrated. It "also occurs whenever a sacred vow is broken, human blood is spilled, and ritual laws not respected. It is a sin that goes beyond the ordinary legal and moral limits and brings divine vengeance on the head of the guilty person, spreading out to affect the whole community ... and passing inexorably from one generation to the next. The idea of miasma probably has a concrete origin, representing the filthy, soiled state of someone who lives outside the standards of his or her community. In its most powerful sense, it refers to the bloodstained hands of the murderer or the sores of someone who might be seen as the victim of divine punishment." (Vegetti, 1995, p. 260)

What are the causes of miasma? Parker (Parker, 1983), a classicist who has carried out the major theoretical work on miasma, argues that, although often a particular individual (e.g. Oedipus or Orestes) are seen as the carriers of miasma, it does not fall neatly into a single explanatory principle. Relying on the classic work of van Gennep (1960) and Douglas (Douglas, 1966, 1975), Parker argues that miasma is a state of pollution that is likely to happen in periods of sudden and severe transition from one state to another. Thus, the numerous rituals that accompany birth, death and marriage are intended to prevent the possibility of pollution, which in Douglas’s (Douglas, 1966) terms is a general property of “the betwixt and between”. Of particular interest in connection with miasma are the funerary rituals, aimed at removing a dead person from the world of the living and consigning him/her to the world of the dead. Mourning, argues Parker, is a period when the living enter the same ‘between’ land as the dead before burial or cremation. “During the period of mourning, a two-way transition occurs; the dead man moves from the land of the living to that of the spirits, while the survivors return from death to life. The last rites finally incorporate the dead and the living in their respective communities.” (Parker, 1983, p. 60) During mourning, familiar pursuits, eating, clothing etc. become forbidden or heavily regulated. Unless surrounded by such rituals, persons in transitional positions (corpses before burial, newly born babies before they have been named) as well as those who
come into contact with them become dangerous and potential causes of miasma for all others.

The presence in an organization of people who are ‘betwixt and between’, for example, doomed but not yet departed represents a similar source of miasma, in the absence of the traditional rituals that accompany people’s arrivals to and departure from organizations. Stein has emphasized that absence of mourning is a regular feature of organizational downsizing, a feature also commented upon by Frost and Robinson (1999). In general, during periods of sudden organizational change, rituals of separation and incorporation become neglected, allowing contact with ‘walking corpses’. But what exacerbates the miasma is the presence of a ‘murderer’ or ‘murderers’ whose hands are dirty with human blood, irrespective of their motives or rationalizations (remember, the archetypal miasma, Oedipus, had no idea of the nature of his actions). As Parker argues, miasma "is dangerous, and this danger is not of familiar secular origin. Two typical sources of such a condition are contact with a corpse, or a murderer" (Parker, 1983, p. 4).

Scapegoating is inextricably linked to miasma – Oedipus was expelled from the city of Thebes to rid her of the pollution he had caused. More generally, the Greek ritual of ‘pharmakos’ is a close parallel to Hebrew scapegoating, only it requirement the banishment of one of a community’s marginalized members as the price of purification for the rest. Or as Smelser has argued “Scapegoating of others seems an inevitable concomitant of the bereavement-loss syndrome.” (Smelser, 1998a, p. 231) In organizations, we have a double scapegoating taking place – the [new] leader scapegoats the old leadership along with the dead wood that it has bequeathed them, viewing the downsizing as the necessary purification ritual which will augur in a new beginning. However, the downsizing is itself experienced by many organizational members as a miasma in its own right, with the leadership being responsible for it.

Organizations in a state of miasma then operate as polluted spaces where people are either murderers or corpses or become polluted through contact
with murderers and corpses. All relations and activities become thus contaminated. Unlike other instances of organizational brutalisation, miasma cannot does not invite resistance, fight and retribution. Instead, it undermines people from within; people lose their confidence and self-esteem, moral integrity evaporates and a moral and psychological corruption sets in. Guilt, shame, inadequacy and anxiety become endemic, spreading into people home and family lives. In this sense, miasma becomes the source of contagious, carried in the air as was believed in a widely held Victorian theory on the sources of infectious diseases (Halliday, 2001). Individuals may complain of breathing difficulties, headaches, and other physical symptoms, felt to be caused by the hot and stagnant air of what is widely known as the ‘sick building syndrome’.

As noted earlier, the individual symptoms of organizational miasma are remarkably similar to those of the ‘melancholic’ or depressed person as described by Freud.

"The distinguishing features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.” (Freud, 1917e, p. 252)

Freud compares melancholia (depression) with mourning and observes many similarities. There is, however, a key difference. In mourning all emotional attachments have to be withdrawn from a lost object that no longer exists. This is done with the help the rituals but above all requires a great deal of psychological work that leaves the mourner exhausted and drained. Melancholia, like mourning, is a response to a loss or a separation, but one where the subject does not know what it is that has been lost. Even when the sufferer is aware of the loss, Freud suggests, "he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. ... In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient
represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished." (Freud, 1917e, p. 254)

These symptoms as described by Freud are very similar to those we examined above as part of organizational miasma. Freud’s argument led him to argue that in melancholia a split take place in the ego, where “one part of the ego sets itself against the other, judges it critically, and as it were, takes it as its object [of criticism].” (Freud, 1917e #3006, p. 256) This argument is especially interesting in a conference where ‘criticism’ provides the unifying theme, assuming the standing of an unquestioned value.

While Freud observed the similarities between mourning and depression, he did not explicitly see them as alternatives. This is now fairly widely accepted -- melancholia is seen as setting in when for any number of reasons, mourning has not been accomplished. Following Lindemann’s (1944) pioneering work, many psychologists (e.g. (Smelser, 1998b)) have noted how when a public disaster takes place (Lindemann studied the survivors of a nightclub fire in Boston during WW2) a sequence of phases of bereavement takes place Survivors go through various standard phases, notably, 1. Denial of the event and the loss, 2. A period of idealization of the lost ones, 3. anger at their disappearance, 4. guilt, self-accusation and blame for 'not having done enough', 5. Scapegoating others. Eventually, once the proper mourning rituals have been followed, most people are able to overcome their grief and resume their lives, re-aligning their social and emotional attachments, and forming new routines and new attachments. Similar processes have been observed in other community disasters. In Smelser’s view these phases are also characteristic of many different separations that we experience in life, including divorce, estrangement, moving jobs and houses and so forth.

Now, in the instance of organizational miasma, many conditions conspire to prevent mourning and even to disallow and dis-‘honor’ it. (Meyerson, 2000) The ‘old’ organization, far from being idealized, is routinely vilified as old-fashioned, inefficient, sclerotic etc. Feelings of loss and grief for the
organization that has been changed by an ‘irreversible discontinuity’ are
disavowed and repressed. Likewise, old colleagues, leaders, practices and so
forth are denigrated as dead wood, behind the times or burnt out. We may
hypothesize that organizations especially susceptible to miasma are those
undergoing rapid transformation, caught in Douglas’s ‘betwixt and between’.
These may include organizations caught in a shift from a public service ethos
to a market-driven one or from product-based to customer-based values.
However, the crucial factor triggering miasma would be the unseemly
dmissals of visible members of staff and the perception of the leadership as
having blood in its hands. In the absence of proper mourning, we would
expect the scapegoating and ruthlessly self-critical processes identified by
Freud take over, leading to a generalized climate of depression, self-reproach,
mistrust and suspicion.

And this brings us to the dark side of critique, a concept that Critical
Management Studies risks elevating itself above criticism. The values and
virtues of critique are too well rehearsed to require further elaboration here.
(Alvesson & Willmott, 1992a, b; Antonacopoulou, 1999; Gabriel, 1999a; Grey,
1999; Parker, 1995; Willmott, 1987) Critique, as most participants at this
conference would agree, opens up what seemed closed, illuminates what was
dark and exposes what is false or fraudulent. But psychoanalysis teaches us
of a darker aspect to critique. Critique is a mental function that acts as
society’s fifth column in the individual. Critique is first experienced in the
admonishments of a parent, a teacher or an elder sibling. Later, critique is
experienced in the hands of peer groups. In adult working life, critique
becomes institutionalised in performance appraisals (Austrin, 1994; Grey,
1994; Townley, 1993) and other forms of measurements, rankings and lists. In
a narcissistic culture, critique is a powerful driver of consumption. “Am I good
enough?” “Am I pretty enough?” “Am I strong enough”, these become sources
of deep discomfort and insecurity. Even in the realm of ideas, critique has a
darker side – it can kill an as yet untested but original idea, it can induce
conformism and timidity and can destroy talent and self-confidence.
One of the most original psychoanalytic ideas (and one that can hardly be contested) is the view that the super-ego is that part of the ego that sets itself apart and criticizes, controls and punishes. The super-ego’s strength is formidable, since it inherits the severity of parental and especially paternal admonishments in early life. In his later work, Freud argued that the super-ego handles the destructive energy – the death instinct – which it defuses by turning it against an individual’s ego in the form of constant self-criticism, guilt, shame and remorse. It would not be an exaggeration to say that organizational miasma represents a collective form of the super-ego, one that redirects destructive energies against an organization’s own members, paralysing their independent thinking, with the crushing “You are not good enough” which becomes “I am not good enough”. One could like this to institutional suicide, where elimination of the dead wood destroys the living.

This then is the conclusion of this talk. Critique should itself be a subject of critique. Not all critique is liberating, emancipating or indeed healthy. Instances of organizational miasma show all too clearly how critique can turn on itself becoming the source of surplus organizational suffering and extra discontents.


Carr, A. 1993. The psychostructure of work: Bend me, shape me, anyway you want me, as long as you love me it's alright. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 8(6): 2-6.


