Article

Organization Studies
1–22

DOI: 10.1177/01708406231185959
www.egosnet.org/os

Uncanny Organization and the Immanence of Crisis: The public sector, neoliberalism and Covid-19

Kevin Orr
University of St Andrews, UK and University of California, Berkeley, USA

Abstract

This paper uses the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny to develop a new perspective on crisis, one that challenges its associations with turning points and opportunities. The study highlights the immanence of crisis in organizational life. Crises under consideration include the historic Covid-19 global pandemic, and examples of crisis in public sector organizations shaped by neoliberalism. Engaging with the work of Julia Kristeva, the uncanny is explored as an integral part of our subjectivities, one which disrupts our social stabilities and patterns of organizing. A montage of autoethnographic vignettes is assembled to illustrate the eruption of the uncanny unconscious, a dynamic that unsettles our routine impositions of order and control. Examining crisis through the lens of the uncanny brings to the fore the elusive and affective aspects of socio-political and organizational life. This perspective draws us away from an understanding of crisis as a passing phenomenon or as an opening that can be instrumentalized for cunning managerial purposes. Instead, it suggests the more radical insight that crisis is a condition of organizing.

Keywords

affect, Covid-19, crisis, ethnography, juxtaposition, montage, neoliberalism, psychoanalytic, public sector, uncanny

December 1996, City of Sleet council offices

Cold breath visible in the dark morning air, the kind of day when it never really gets light. I arrive to deliver a management development day with the council's senior managers. On month-to-month contracts at the university, I am green and out of my depth, and not in a position to say no to the 'great opportunity' that my boss tells me will be so straightforward and fun. To my mounting horror I discover we will be using the council chamber. It is a dark semi-circular forum, with a well in the centre and banked seating all around. A gallery of appraising eyes, a sceptical gaze. A high ceiling which drains your voice of volume. The overhead projector is ten paces away from where you need to stand if you want to make yourself heard. I am not sure I really do. I want a cuddle from

Corresponding author:
Kevin Orr, School of Management, University of St Andrews, The Gateway, North Haugh, St Andrews, KY16 9RJ, UK.
Email: kmo2@st-andrews.ac.uk

my mum and a day off school. I try to begin with some light-hearted (major air quotes) remarks. Midway through the first sentence one of the participants interrupts to say he cannot hear me, speak up. The chances of finding a foothold are gone. The session is on 'strategy-led budgeting'. The managers get stuck into the organization. There is a funding crisis. It is death by a thousand cuts. There is no rationale for what to protect. The budgetary process is incremental and determined by who shouts loudest. The council lacks leadership. There is no strategy. They are laying off staff, closing facilities. In the afternoon, a newcomer arrives and takes his seat at the back of the room. He polishes his spectacles and has a watchful manner. I feel a ripple but think nothing of it. I am too busy developing neck crick such is the steepness of the galleried benches. I begin by recapping on the main themes of the morning's discussion. 'Yes, the starting point for the budget is our corporate strategy,' announces one participant. That very guy had been saying the opposite all morning. 'Yes, we have very clear communication lines here,' someone agrees. 'We are able to be very collegiate,' says the education director. 'And systematic,' joins in another. 'Things are challenging financially, but we have good experience and togetherness.' I am struggling to catch my breath. What was up is now down. Red has become green. They resist and recast the morning's narratives. I cannot meet their eyes, struggling to stay afloat. What is going on? Are these different people? The tell-it-like-it-is frankness, the searing criticism of their organization. The suggestions of things on the brink. All of what was familiar from the morning has been upended, re-covered, masked by an alternative story about corporate capacity, good judgement, sound processes. Despite the 'challenging' financial climate this is an exemplary organization. It takes a word at the tea-break to reveal that the latecomer is the chief executive. Too late for me, upended, the group has established a new familiar to describe the organization. The session now plays a different tune, like a creepy music box. Whirr. Plink. Plink. Some years later, a chief executive will say to me of the crisis playing out due to austerity: 'Everyone's walking in a circle round the chairs. They've been taking chairs away for a long time, but the music's just kept playing, and now it's stopped, and there aren't enough chairs left.'

Introduction: How to Train Your Crisis

In classical Greece the term crisis was important in politics and law, as it referred to decision making, or arriving at a judgement (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). The medical concept of crisis originated in the Hippocratic Corpus and signified both the observable illness and the judgement about the prospects of the patient. Crisis thus comes from the lexicon of pathology referring to a 'turning point' in an illness (Habermas, 1973; Ricœur, 1988). The concept signifies fateful alternatives about what restores health or ushers in death. Since 16th-century humanism, the concept of crisis has drawn connections between the human body and the social or political body. Grounding crisis in medicine and the body generates the quest for prevention and the search for remedies. A narrative of pathology and remedy provides a cogent organizational (or political) discourse (Healy, 2016). The medical language conveys credibility and legitimacy, naturalizing whatever diagnosis and course of action is outlined. Furthermore, the focus on pathologies implies cure – that the physical blight can be banished. In this way, as Habermas (1973) puts it, 'When the crisis is resolved, the trapped subject is liberated' (p. 644).

These assumptions of turning points, resolution and recovery have followed the transposition of the concept into the business and management field. Several main ideas can be drawn from the crisis management literature. First, crises bring a threat to organizational survival (Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller, & Miclani, 1988; Yu, Sengul, & Lester, 2008). Second, organizational crises are characterized by unexpectedness. They are 'low-probability, high-impact events' (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Third, crises are preventable (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Pearson

& Mitroff, 1993). Fourth, resolving organizational crises can be conducive to improvement (Lee, Lampel, & Shapira, 2020; Nonaka, 1988; Perrow, 1984), even if the scope for learning is constrained by political behaviours (Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2014).

Finally, don't waste a good crisis. Despite the strange adjective embedded there, that truism is known to every canny manager. It is backed by mainstream business school advice, practitioner stories and highly cited papers. In their classic article, Starbuck, Greve and Hedberg (1978, p. 135) explain: 'The Chinese symbol for crisis combines two simpler symbols, the symbol for danger and the one for opportunity. Crises are times of danger, but they are also times of opportunity.' Wan and Yiu (2009) consider the Asian economic crisis as an opportunity for corporations seeking acquisitions. Examining the case of Hyundai, Kim (1998) argues that 'crisis construction is an evocative and galvanizing device in the personal repertoires of proactive top managers' (p. 506). Labelling something as a crisis, agree Boin, 't Hart, Stern and Sundelius (2017), 'increases leaders' political room for manoeuvring' (p. 88), and 'Leaders must therefore build on their crisis performance and surf the wave it provides for them' (p. 159). For Spector (2019), 'Crises aren't things at all, but constructions made by leaders' (p. xi). The idea of crisis as a resource to be harnessed is framed in a *Harvard Business Review* article, in which managers were encouraged to create a 'burning platform' to force through otherwise-difficult changes (Anthony, 2012). Its imagery comes from a staff memo written by a Nokia executive who imagined an oilrig worker facing a choice between fiery death or plunging into icy depths. The crisis metaphor of burning platform appears to provide both a motivating device and a spectator sport. In these ways, 'crisis equals opportunity' has become an insight to be rolled out as a badge of experience, of having been around the block and having learned a thing or two along the way – the better to deal with the slings and arrows of misfortune; in fact, all the better to repurpose them into the weapons of transformative change and turnaround leadership. The skilful manager stands outside of emotion and, clear-eyed and full of agency, cleverly exploits a crisis for instrumental purposes. Instead of assuming resolution, decisive turning points and liberation, this article develops a concept of crisis which highlights how a feeling of crisis is always in the air.

This paper uses the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny to develop a new perspective on crisis, one that challenges its association with turning points and opportunities. The uncanny is understood as an integral part of our subjectivities, one which disrupts our social stabilities and patterns of organizing. Attending to the uncanny highlights the immanence of crisis in organizational life. Crises under consideration include the historic Covid-19 global pandemic, and examples of crisis in public sector organizations shaped by neoliberalism. Rather than framing crisis as an interruption to otherwise stable settings, the uncanny accentuates the constancy of fears that we try to repress. The study engages with Julia Kristeva's work on the ethical importance of paying attention to the uncanny, and how that disturbing feeling of something strangely familiar can sensitize us to the possibility for alternatives. Using a montage of autoethnographic vignettes, the study discusses the eruption of the uncanny unconscious, a dynamic that unsettles our routine impositions of order and control. Examining crisis through the lens of the uncanny brings to the fore the elusive, slippery and affective aspects of socio-political and organizational life. This perspective draws us away from an understanding of crisis as a passing phenomenon or as an opportunity that can be instrumentalized for cunning managerial purposes. Instead, it suggests the more radical insight that crisis is a condition of organizing. The paper concludes by articulating the potential for uncanny moments to offer a basis for the search for alternative ways of organizing the public realm in the face of neoliberalism.

The article unfolds as follows. Beginning with a review of organizational literature on crisis, I then introduce the concept of the uncanny, giving particular attention to the work of Julia Kristeva, and discuss its use in organization studies. Following this, I explain the two empirical backcloths

for the study – the Covid-19 pandemic and the neoliberal evisceration of the public sector. I then set out the study's methods, before presenting a series of autoethnographic vignettes. Through these I interrogate the uncanny affects of crisis. The vignettes highlight our struggles to repress feelings of decay and annihilation, efforts which are not wholly successful. The limits of these endeavours indicate the persistent nature of crisis in ourselves, and in our organizational projects. Finally, I propose a new theoretical appreciation of crisis, challenging its conceptualization as a turning point. Instead, I emphasize its immanent properties and propose that crisis is a condition of our attempts at organizing.

The Uncanny

The theoretical location for this study is in psychoanalysis-inflected organization studies. Psychoanalysis has provided a critical theory with great explanatory power for understanding organizational practices (Fotaki, Long, & Schwartz, 2012). A psychoanalytical view highlights that our own becoming is rooted in the unconscious, with all its repressed content. It provides a means for appreciating human subjectivity, complexity and the unconscious. This paper aligns with a psychoanalytical approach interested in exploring how we are embedded within wider social and political structures (Froggett, 2002; Hoggett, 2006; Kenny, 2010; Stavrakakis, 2008; Taylor, 2011).

As part of this turn, there has been a particular interest in the work of Julia Kristeva (for example, Fotaki, 2010a, 2013; Gatrell, 2019; Höpfl, 2000; Kenny, 2010, 2012, 2016; Phillips & Rippin, 2010; Rizq, 2013). Kristeva's work on abjection has been used to analyse harrowing aspects of organizational life. One focus has been on how both individuals and whole groups can be rendered abject. For example, Fotaki (2013) uses abjection to highlight the marginalization and devaluation of women in universities. Gatrell (2019) develops a theory of 'abjection as practice' to show how breastfeeding workers are treated as abject within organizations, caught between being 'proper' mothers and 'good' employees. Kenny (2016) shows the discursive construction of industrial school children as abject subjects, enabling systemic violence against them. Mavin and Grandy (2016) examine how judgements about personal appearance can be a basis for abjection in the workplace. A second focus has been on traumatic change. Sørensen (2014) explores abjection in organizational memory, highlighting how unpalatable events become expunged from organizations' accounts of their history. Rizq (2013) utilizes the concept to analyse organizational defences against anxiety, using the case of new public management in United Kingdom mental health services. In organization studies abjection is appreciated as casting out and emphasizes the idea of containment. Abjection is shown to buttress institutional structures and conventions.

In this study I turn instead to that concept's haunting sibling, the uncanny, and engage with the analytical power of Kristeva's treatment of uncanny strangeness to examine crisis. In particular, the discussion advances the idea that the uncanny offers a basis for searching for socio-political alternatives. The uncanny is a lesser used concept in organization studies, but there is a developing interest in its potential. Three aspects of such work inform this paper's focus. The first is the concern with affective forces in organizational settings. Beyes and Steyaert's (2013) work positions the uncanny as a 'strategic' concept that can help understand the 'white spaces' of organization and their affective dynamics. Beyes (2019) discusses how organizational space is conceptually and affectively uncanny. He calls for 'more openness towards invisibilities and spectres, towards the familiar made strange and the strange made familiar' (p. 189). A second appeal is an interest in the unsettling encounters with the Other. Kelly and Riach (2020) utilize the uncanny to explore the commercialization of horror, through an examination of the retail of Halloween costumes and representations of mental health. Muhr (2011) employs the uncanny and the metaphor of the cyborg to explore the way in which a senior female manager pursues gender equality by adopting 'masculine strategies' (p. 338).

For Gilmore and Harding (2022) the uncanny illuminates the ambivalent process of socialization in organizations, where newcomers can never ultimately become kin. The third connection is how the uncanny can focus our attention on organizational disruption. Pors (2016) examines affective moments in the Danish education sector using the uncanny to problematize linear orderings implied by corporate strategy documents. Pors, Olaison and Otto (2019) frame the discussion of the uncanny to show how 'every organizing process is imbued with intangible, unintelligible and affective issues' (p. 13) that upset our plans and strategies.

Freud's (1919/2003) work provides the starting point for most discussions of the uncanny. He contributed a reading of the uncanny as involving an aesthetic element, relating to 'the quality of feeling' (p. 123). Freud's essay contains a journey through etymology of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. He highlights the multiple and contradictory meanings of *heimlich*. It can refer to home in a domestic (and familiar) sense; but *heimlich* can also mean concealed or clandestine. Etymologically, Freud establishes how *heimlich* collapsed into its antonym, *unheimlich*, emerging as co-constitutive. Freud arrives at the definition that: 'Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open' (Freud, 1919/2003, p. 132). The uncanny arises through the return of that which has been repressed. It can involve the re-emergence of thoughts that have persisted despite rational impulses to explain them away. It entails making sense of circumstances through frames which have become disjointed. As Royle (2003) explains, it involves 'a crisis of the proper and natural' (p. 2). However, the concept of the uncanny eludes strict classificatory control. The post-structuralist readings of Cixous (1976) and Derrida (1994) enlist the uncanny as means of problematizing the idea of fixed meanings and significations. It is often regarded as an 'unconcept' (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013; Davis, 2007; Jay, 1998; Masschelein, 2011). For Cixous (1976), Freud's text is 'less a discourse than a strange theoretical novel' (p. 525), and the uncanny has 'an elastic designation. . .without any nucleus' (p. 528).

Kristeva's work provides a compelling theoretical basis for exploring the uncanny. She reads Freud's idea of the uncanny as emerging from the strangeness of our unconscious, which is always and inevitably uncanny for us. Kristeva (1991) contributes the idea that we are strangers to ourselves. One of her key insights is that the unknowability of our unconscious means that we are never at home with ourselves. We experience the constant thrum of self-estrangement. Various 'others' remind us of our repressed fears, which reinforces this feeling of the strangeness in ourselves. In this way, Kristeva (1991) identifies the immanence of the strange within the familiar: the familiar is 'potentially tainted with strangeness' (p. 183). As for Freud, uncanny strangeness belongs to a 'class of the frightening' and leads back to the long familiar. It stems from something repressed which recurs and is a 'paroxystic metaphor of the psychic functioning itself' (Kristeva, 1991, p. 184). Our most deep-seated fear is of death and annihilation, a dread that we cannot fully suppress. Our insistent fear of death provokes an ambivalence: 'We imagine ourselves surviving (religions promise immortality), but death just the same remains the survivor's enemy' (Kristeva, 1991, p. 185). Death is not for me. It's only for the likes of me. Images and intimations of death unsettle us because they are reminders of 'what I permanently thrust aside in order to live' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). Repressing the unconscious, and its uncanny strangeness, is integral to going on in the world and, therefore, necessary for participation in organizational life.

Finally, Kristeva's insights about the uncanny point to ethical commitments and the potential for social and political change. Writing in a political lineage that she traces to Freud (Fotaki, 2019), Kristeva explains that through self-reflexivity we can appreciate our relations with wider social and political structures. For Kristeva (1991) uncanny strangeness 'sets the difference between us in its most bewildering shape and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being *with* others' (p. 192). Engaging with our unconscious carries a liberating potential. Kristeva tells us that the unconscious can be transformed from a fearful site of repression to a basis for thinking through

alternatives that may be open to us. We should acknowledge our disintegrated selves and welcome others to 'that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours' (Kristeva, 1991, p. 191).

Both abjection and the uncanny are threshold concepts, involving disturbances at the boundaries. The abject is 'what is radically excluded' (Kristeva & Lechte, 1982). It involves a discernible state: a cordoning off, when 'forces that threaten stable identities come again to be contained' (Bronfen, 2016, p. 1). It is a more definitive condition in which, unlike the uncanny, 'nothing is familiar to it, not even a shadow of memories' (Kristeva & Lechte, 1982, p. 129). Kristeva and Lechte (1982) emphasize the menace and violence involved in abjection: it 'pulverises the subject' (p. 128) and 'finishes by devouring us' (p. 127). It sets us at our very limits as a living being. Though sometimes the abject can revolt, the subject remains anchored to that which menaces it. Relations are clear, and clearly brutal.

In comparison, the uncanny is perhaps not as clarifying, and offers a less fixed sense of things. The uncanny insinuates itself in the form of affective anxiety and a blurry feeling of the strange and the familiar. It is harder to discern the state we are in. It is a concept that 'draws attention to the real yet immaterial presence of what is repressed and forgotten' (Masschelein, 2016, p. 699). This paper analyses the dynamics and limits of repression and shows how uncanny moments arise when the immanent presence of crisis is felt.

Empirical Backcloths and Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy of this paper is to use psychoanalytic conceptions of the uncanny to highlight the immanence of crisis in ourselves and our attempts at organizing. To explain the crisis-prone aspects of organization life, the discussion will examine examples of uncanny affect during Covid-19, and during more mundane periods where instabilities and expressions of organizational ill health are easier to miss. By offering vignettes of the isolating days where friends become strangers and we were aware of the strangeness of our own selves, alongside vignettes set in public sector organizations, the paper explores the power of the uncanny for alerting us to the fault lines and fissures in our circuits of being in the world, and of organizing. It will conclude by offering a new perspective on crisis which challenges the idea of turning points and resolution and instead suggests the persistence of crisis.

In arguing that crisis should be understood as an existential and ever-present phenomenon, it might seem strange to focus on Covid-19, which is difficult at first to see as anything but a disruptive, temporary event. Indeed, from the outset Covid was dismissed, by many political leaders if not by scientists, as a short-term event, a fleeting interruption. Washing our hands while singing Happy Birthday and keeping calm and carrying on would see to that. While some countries were quick to lock down, in others there was a pronounced 'it'll be over by Christmas' vibe. Four days before the first national lockdown in March 2020, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: 'I think, looking at it all, that we can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks and I'm absolutely confident that we can send coronavirus packing in this country.' Instead, continuing to pass through several mutations, Covid-19 remained a major health issue. The virus refused to stop finding newer versions of itself: the return of the familiar, but unfamiliar enough to sidestep our protections. Despite expectations, Covid-19 did not seem keen to leave the building.

We were familiar with viruses, pandemics less so. However, infectious diseases have killed more people throughout history than any other factor including war. At least initially, to many the idea of a pandemic seemed out of time, as vanishingly relevant as the Great Influenza of 1918 (death toll 50–100 million) and carrying as much danger as a nursery rhyme about a ring of roses. And anyway, didn't we succeed in finding a cure for smallpox (300 million deaths in the 20th century)? With our science and complacency maybe we came to think of pandemics as

belonging to an antique domain or the safe thrills of Friday night movies and their schlocky contagions. But even if it did not immediately appear so, Covid-19 was the return of a familiar human vulnerability.

The pandemic brought to the fore a sense of crisis in the public realm. It showed, albeit in an ambivalent light, issues that were often previously in the shadows, such as the neoliberal takeover of the public domain or the decay of public services in the guise of efficiency, improvement and sound management. Attention to the uncanny can bring an understanding of these traumatic dynamics to the foreground and help us appreciate the immanence of crisis.

Backcloth 1: The pandemic and the uncanny – 2020 visions

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. Though the virus seemed indiscriminate and could give rise to the sense that we were all in this together, the capacity to soften its impacts were not spread equally, either between or within countries. In the first six months of 2020, Covid-19 affected eight million people around the world. By the turn of the year, the figure was 88 million, and by December 2021 it had risen to 263,563,622 confirmed cases, including 5,232,562 deaths. The death toll by autumn 2022 stood at more than 6.5 million people (WHO, 2022). The pandemic produced immense health, social and economic challenges. Most people in the world experienced some form of lockdown as part of strategies of containment. More vulnerable regions, and deprived urban areas, saw higher infection and mortality rates than others (OECD, 2020). Covid-19 strained healthcare systems. But the effects were felt across every sphere of organizing. For much of 2020, countries closed their borders and ordered their citizens to stay at home. Sporting events were cancelled, restaurants, bars, cinemas and gathering places closed. Employees in some sectors were able to work remotely from home. Other workers were furloughed or laid off. Most countries were ill prepared for the pandemic, underestimating the level of risk, while many countries lacked crisis plans for pandemics, and had no stockpiles of essential equipment (OECD, 2020). After a period of easing of restrictions, and a vaccine breakthrough, the virus reasserted itself in late 2020, when a new more virulent strain arrived. The return of strict lockdowns at that point brought an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu. This pattern was repeated when infections rose again, and a new strain, Omicron, was identified in late November 2021.

The time of Covid-19 was an age of the uncanny. The aesthetics of the uncanny during the pandemic were writ large in the viral photographs of empty streets, and intimate in the confines of our stay-at-home lives. As countries locked down, media became saturated with images of deserted landmarks, showing us spaces that had become void of people, sites rendered both familiar and strange, places which we fondly recognized yet were seats of danger and infection. Photojournalists documented bare supermarket shelves, with echoes of Soviet queues, and of depopulated streets which conjured popular culture imagery of apocalypse, and provided ‘allusion markers’ (Brown, 2012) of the uncanny. Expelled from the pavements, workplaces and meeting spots we once took for granted, the familiar places of our lives provoked the feeling that all this cannot be real somehow: phantasmagorias in which we are present and yet absent. These manifestations of the pandemic showed numerous features of crisis: a reducing of our agency, the rupturing of borders, the vulnerability of our existence and an insistent uncanny strangeness. We became exiled from the world – at home and yet not at home.

The prospect of threat to the integrity of our bodies wrought by a pandemic or related crisis imperils our capacity and our modes of organizing to sustain security, familiarity and our feeling of being at home in the world. A pandemic brings imminent threat to our bodily being in the world, and the shadow of the *Unheimliche*. Crises such as Covid-19 are apt focal points for exploring

Kristeva's (1982, 1991, 2018) interest in the uncanny boundaries of inside-outside. As she explains in an interview conducted in the early weeks of the pandemic:

> The acceleration of our civilization had already arrived at a viral stage, and today this metaphor overwhelms us and enters into the real, because it is an internal as well as an external menace – perhaps we do not have strong enough immune defences and the danger is therefore also inside of us. Some have the virus maybe without even knowing it, but will survive, while others will die. This allows us to ask ourselves questions about the world in which we live, its failings and about that which we do not succeed in thinking. (Kristeva, 2020)

Much commentary was produced saying that the pandemic clarified how things are (e.g. Kennedy, 2020; Roy, 2020). However, any revelations have been intermingled with the ambivalence of uncanny strangeness. The picture has been slow to resolve, quick to shift, and often has something lurking outside the frame. The images of empty streets after all were followed later by photographs of crowded parks and beaches, complicating our sense of whether we were maintaining a dutiful solidarity or unreliable rule breakers. Posts of sourdough bread creations could provoke warm admiration as well as the familiar despond of personal inadequacy. Alongside examples of stoicism and even of flourishing were stories, perhaps our own, of mental health crises. The pandemic was said to hold a mirror to our face. But doing so has been akin to Freud catching his reflection in the window of the wagonlit. Who is that old stranger and what are they doing in my compartment? Whose is that smug carrot cake and how did it get in my camera roll? In the UK we clapped for carers but expected new waves of austerity. We were drained by the lockdown but uplifted by the solidarity. We took security from our masks yet the sight of them made us feel the fear more acutely. We came together yet were drawn to judging and moralizing about others' behaviour. The periodic easing of restrictions did not expunge the anticipation of deaths to come. Rather than providing neat clarity, the pandemic meant losing a sense of a world that appeared familiar.

Backcloth 2: Crisis in the public sector – the uncanny and neoliberal governmentality

The second setting for the arguments developed in this paper is the UK public sector. State organizations have been long understood by theorists to be prone to crises (Habermas, 1973; Jessop, 2016; Offe, 1998). Recent critical scholarship on the public sector emphasizes the failure of neoliberalism, and in particular the culpability of its discourses and practices in normalizing savage spending cuts (Davies & Thompson, 2016; Fotaki, 2010b; Newman, 2014). Neoliberalism represents the return of 19th-century ideas about free market capitalism. Precepts of small government and the steadying hand of market forces were later codified by economists such as Hayek and Friedman, and adopted by figures such as Reagan and Thatcher, ghosts who live on in contemporary political leadership discourse. Brown (2019) observes that, 'Neoliberalism – the ideas, institutions, the policies, the political rationality – has, along with its spawn, financialization, likely shaped recent world history as profoundly as any other nameable phenomenon in the same period' (p. 17). Organization studies scholars have provided insights into how the public sector is in the grip of neoliberalism (Lopdrup-Hjorth & du Gay, 2020; Robinson & Bristow, 2020; Zanoni, Contu, Healy, & Mir, 2017). Public sector organizations have undertaken decades of institutional change driven by neoliberal ideas, including the marketization of services; efficiency targets; and the rise of managerialism in unrelenting expressions of new public management (du Gay, 2003; Hood, 1991; Spicer & Fleming, 2007). Neoliberalism has driven the privatization of public services, the

retrenchment of the social state, the deregulation of capital and the erosion of political institutions (Brown, 2019; du Gay & Morgan, 2013; Holck & Muhr, 2017).

The neoliberal discourse of new public management (NPM) conceals the contradictions and impossibilities of public management. It amplifies individual responsibilities and the primacy of markets, while disguising the ethical questions at stake in the retrenchment of the public sector. It installs new disciplinary technologies which involve 'fantasies of the impossible' (Fotaki, 2010b, p. 711), or 'institutional illogics' (Vince, 2019, p. 953), and yet shape the subjectivities of staff (Rizq, 2013). In these senses, NPM may be seen as one of the ideological codes 'on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 209).

This paper positions neoliberalism as a bridging framework that links the case of the Covid-19 pandemic and the example of public sector degeneration. The two backcloths are ostensibly different, but they are interlinked, not least in that neoliberalism exacerbates the conditions for crisis and the circumstances in which pandemic responses are made. Further, as this paper explores, in both settings uncanny intimations of death, decay and annihilation are repressed.

Methodology

The methodology is situated in post-qualitative and affective methodologies, pursuing a humanistic approach to theorizing (Cunliffe, 2022). Post-qualitative inquiry adopts a philosophy of immanence, having a focus on 'becomings' rather than an empiricist charting of what *is* (Beavan, 2021, p. 1841). It encourages exploring connections between concepts on 'a new plane of thought' (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 7) to achieve a reorientation of thinking. It embraces experimental approaches to writing and aims to produce a compelling sense of 'what might be and what is coming into being' (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 4). This study also engages with the affective turn in social science (Ahmed, 2004; Brennan, 2004; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008; Wetherell, 2013) to advance theoretical engagement with the uncanny as a means of understanding crises. The turn to affect in organization studies has taken shape through the exciting contributions of scholars working at this frontier (for example, Beyes & Steyaert, 2013; Borch, 2010; Fotaki, Kenny, & Vachhani, 2017; Gherardi, 2019; Kenny, 2012; Kenny & Fotaki, 2014; Kenny, Haugh, & Fotaki, 2020; Pors, 2016).

The turn brings methodological challenges to researchers interested in empirical inquiry (Blackman, 2015; Knudsen & Stage, 2015). The very fleetingness of affect, its ephemeral and bodily expressions, means that its traces can be so subtle as to be misinterpreted, misconstrued, or missed altogether. Specifically, the research style is located in affective organization ethnography (Gherardi, 2019). It draws on an epistemology of '"being with," "being in-between," and "becoming-with," leaving behind any pretension to a fixed truth' (Beavan, 2021, p. 7). It involves an approach to knowledge that bears in mind that 'From the perspective of ordinary affects, thought is patchy and material' (Stewart, 2007, p. 5).

The approach here draws on the insights of academics who have prepared the methodological foundations for affective research (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; Law, 2004; Lury & Wakeford, 2012). These writers developed methodological possibilities for investigating the contingencies and ongoingness of contemporary social settings. The starting point embraces the idea that the distinctive anxiety and subtle atmosphere of disquiet that are markers of the uncanny are 'affectively compelling' (Trigg, 2020). The task is to recover and understand affective traces and the undertaking involves 'thinking outside the box in terms of generating and analyzing material in new ways' (Knudsen & Stage, 2015, p. 2).

In particular, this article adopts two of the meta-strategies for exploring affect suggested by Knudsen and Stage, specifically (1) the creation of inventive milieus and (2) the rethinking of traditional fieldwork techniques such as ethnographic approaches. These are realized here

as autoethnographic vignettes created from notes made during Covid-19, and by drawing upon reflections on a longstanding professional (research and teaching) engagement with public managers in the UK, a setting in the shadow of crisis.

Organizational autoethnography is a means of connecting everyday organizational life with wider strategic and political currents (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Kostera & Harding, 2021). Vignettes are particularly useful for communicating the feel of self-ethnographic data (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016). A vignette is an evocative description of an episode that presents findings that are resonant and readable (Reay, Zafar, Monteiro, & Glaser, 2019). It can 'convey social complexities' (Bryer, 2020), including their dynamic character and emotional details. Vignettes have been used in this journal in powerful ways in relation to discussions of embodiment, performativity and affect (e.g. Beavan, 2021; Beyes, 2017; Harding, Gilmore, & Ford, 2022; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016; Stowell & Warren, 2018).

An early formulation of the study (phase 1) sought to connect crisis and the uncanny utilizing a data set of interviews with public managers. The crisis theme was overtaken by the arrival of the pandemic. Covid-19 seemed an urgent topic to engage with (phase 2). This development led me to generate an alternative basis for engaging with rich moments of affect, especially during the weeks and months of life during the pandemic which felt so permeated by feelings of displacement and the uncanny. The personal diary, as opposed to more structured field notes, is a valuable source of knowledge when considering the emotional dimensions of fieldwork (Punch, 2012). By paying attention to such empirical sources, emotion and affect become more approachable as analytical objects. Using personal diaries is also a basis for challenging 'the idea of history as simply a series of event-driven, dramatic interruptions to normality' (Moran, 2004, p. 57) and of attending to the uncanny aspects of everyday life. Moran (2004) argues that attention to the uncanny can show 'the concealed extraordinariness of the ordinary' and how memories of daily life are imbricated in wider social practices and routines (p. 58). I undertook further periods of writing (phase 3) where I revisited painful or debilitating encounters with the public sector. The methodology involved returning to moments not narrated at the time and bringing them into language that can be analysed (Harding et al., 2022), a form of writing that 'brings the half forgotten back to life' (Samuel, 1994, p. x). I made rough notes spilling out memories of episodes that I had tried to move on from. The process involved a reorientation to moments of personal haunting (Blackman, 2015). The writing process brought out conscious and unconscious impressions, feelings and recollections, which were given shape through producing the vignettes. I explored whether revisiting my intensive experiences of working with public sector managers at a formative stage of my working life would offer any insights into the repression of crisis and the organizational uncanny. These memories started to flow like muddy water from a groaning tap, in stops and starts, but with some power sometimes. Writing them down enabled glimpses of the unconscious. Specifically, I looked back for points of recoil, of memories of interactions with public sector professionals where I had not felt at home with myself. This process required revisiting painful and buried encounters that in some cases occurred many years ago, yet which are still keenly felt. These were episodes in which I masked my felt emotions to project that everything was in order and things were as they should be. I reworked these into some initial vignettes which I shared with two trusted critical readers to assess their sense and resonance. More contemporary diary entries, and scribbled notes in pads or at the side of to-do lists, were assembled into a new iteration of the article (phase 4) which was resubmitted to this journal. The review process generated invaluable opportunities (May–November 2021 and May–September 2022) to undertake deep engagement with the profoundly developmental reviewer and editorial comments on the main iteration of this paper (phase 5). I was helped to situate the method in relation to some of the methodology's pioneers. During that process of revising and rewriting I also felt the pull of more recent diary entries which I combined and synthesized

to generate further vignettes (phase 6) and examined how they speak to the previous selection and emerging thesis. The most recent vignettes that make the cut, taking place deep into the pandemic, are not offered by way of a full stop, or an attempt to seek 'magical closure' (Stewart, 2007, p. 5) but as an authentic way of representing continuing encounters with uncanny moments of affect during the production of the paper. It involved working with an 'unfolding archive' (Puar, 2007, p. xix), and is one last way of attending to 'the pull of the ordinary' (Stewart, 2007, p. 29), albeit during strange times.

Affective moments can be found by dwelling reflectively in smaller fragments of data sets where the goal is not saturation but rather being attentive to moments when we see the glimmer and glow of the data (MacLure, 2013); or when we feel the burn. Analysis was an iterative, recursive, abductive process moving between theory, literatures on crisis and on the uncanny, and the emergent vignettes, during which I was engaging in acts of reinterpretation of data and theory (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017).

In her work on diffraction as methodology, Barad (2010) highlighted the 'uncanny' (p. 252) nature of time and told us, 'Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another' (p. 240). In a modest and imperfect way, the presentation of the vignettes aims to represent uncanny entanglements through an experiment in 'montaged association' (Beyes & Holt, 2020, p. 17). Like the method of juxtaposition (Sørensen, 2010, 2014) the technique plays with time periods. But here the montage generates echoes and affinities across the vignettes, the better to suggest the many returns of the uncanny. In presenting the final selection, I was informed by Kristeva's (1991) reading of Freud which focuses on the analytical categories of *anxiety*, *double*, *repetition* and *unconscious*. The vignettes are accounts which evoke affective states of being in particular places and time, conjuring moments when 'mortality and vulnerability hover as the velvet uncanny of the situation' (Berlant, 2011, p. 266). They are offered as texts which can be a basis for 'mutual imagining' (Takolander, 2021, p. 141).

Vignettes of Crisis and the Uncanny

May 2020, A Lidl means a lot

Sitting protected in the car, for just a few moments longer. In the supermarket car park, steeling myself for my first shopping excursion. It's now June and the infection rates are in retreat. It's strange to be out of the house, and I'm feeling sluggish and disorientated. A masked man exits the store. For a flash: A robber? Or: He must be ill, like dad was, just out of hospital. Until – a quarter of a beat later – I realize, of course, it's standard Covid. Shoppers getting out their cars mask up. No matter how often I will encounter this scene there is still the split second of confusion, the sense that I am looking at fugitives, or convalescents. The Covid explanation slides sharply into place, quickly followed by an unsettling fear. The masks communicate the strangeness of times and signal that there is danger in the air. On the radio a commentator explains that some people feel that Covid masks symbolize their sense of voicelessness. The vox pop with anti-maskers tells of 'face nappies', 'nose bags' and 'muzzles', and a discourse of sovereignty, the latter familiar from the doublespeak of the Brexit campaign. Yes, masks do cover the mouth, the nose; there is a removal of organs. They convey a fixed breathlessness. One that indicates 'I mean no harm.' I find I like the sense of disguise. At some distant level I recall the cowboy neckerchief I wore on Saturday mornings to watch *Champion the Wonder Horse*. Perhaps I'll just hold up the store and live a life on the run from the Sheriff. Take out my six-shooter and rob every bank I can see. Go full carnival. I am appreciative of people wearing the masks, and in awe of the shop workers who are in the line of fire for not much money so that I can buy toothpaste and tomatoes. And yet, waiting there, still

tightly gripping the steering wheel, I feel a blurring of solidarity and estrangement. Meanwhile, the radio broadcasts to a netherworld.

'It was okay It was a dark, black mask. I think I looked okay, I looked like the Lone Ranger' – President Trump (New York Times, 2 October 2020).

Spring 1999, The sky was all purple

Once it would have been a hotel, now it's held in a school gym hall. Squeaky floorboards, layers of orange varnish. Turns out the cracks are not where the light gets in. Just ooze, sweat and bad memories. It's the final day of the programme. To close proceedings, the health board's director of strategy arrives to provide a bit of a look ahead and just sort of paint a picture of what's coming down the line and how we make sure that is a managed process for the benefit of taxpayers and for patients who at the end of the day are our customers here if you like. The director is an open kind of guy who likes to connect. Unstructured grey sports jacket in a loose-knit wool. All steepled fingers and stripy socks. The desks are in a horseshoe. He moves his chair closer to the assembly. I'm half expecting him to turn it 180 degrees and straddle it. I have become stranded, set back from the conversation. The view of the photographer at the rear of the stage, framing the performance from behind. He leans forward and starts to read from a photocopied booklet. It's a pamphlet by Prime Minister Tony Blair channelling Anthony Giddens. Globalization means limited agency for government. New ways of doing things, a third way. I suppress a shudder and feel my mind wandering. As soon as I'm out of here I'll be visiting dad. Victorian hospital, six flights up the spiral stairs, a large Nightingale ward. Hollow-eyed patients wandering around in states of confusion. Regular cries. Dad, excruciatingly stoical, keeping the conversation light. Bone-weary staff running out of buckets to bail the water that's sinking the ship. I drift back. Rights and responsibilities. Financial prudence. Values of the past, innovations of the future. New Labour. A new dawn has broken has it not. The discourse shifts. The dial sticks.

October 2020, Zooming in and zooming out

Pictured on news sites, students appear at windows of their accommodation telling of how they have been incarcerated, lured by universities on a false prospectus. I read that half the world's population remains offline. I gaze again at my own screen with a heightened sense of privilege but an unshakeable feeling of dislocation. I pre-record my first lecture using Panopto. There are no students to see. Instead, I see me, a double of me. I am looking at me, looking at me. Why is that my living room in the background? I should have tidied up this ghost house better. And all the time this droning voice. On and on and on and on. As if the students have not been suffering enough.

November 2021, Dread and circuses

Pieces shift in the kaleidoscope. . .Football fans have returned to full stadiums. Chanting into the frosty air. . .It appears the discipline of markets, the improving qualities of outsourcing, have borne contracts for cronies selling unusable PPE equipment. Revelations recall footage of hospital staff creating protective clothing out of bin bags. . .Now a minister explains that capacity had not allowed for the testing of patients before they were discharged into care homes at the start of the pandemic. A deadly 'protective ring'. In the past 18 months the equivalent of one fifth of the NHS budget was given to big consultancy firms to provide a 'world-beating' test and trace scheme. It failed on its main objectives, concludes a parliamentary committee. . .The government, still with its emetic display of rainbow drawings ('Thank you NHS') in Downing Street windows, has

proposed a 1% pay raise for nurses. The familiar refrain of affordability. You could cut the bad faith with a wooden spoon. . .Remembering joining neighbours at the roadside to clap for keyworkers. Like spectators gathering for the Tour de France, banging pots for a ghost peloton.

December 2008, Guilty feet ain't got no rhythm

Another training course. It's another set of banked seats with a stage and a lectern and a giant screen. The chief executive is of the town clerk model, or maybe an ex headteacher, favouring the dark serge pinstripe, steel framed glasses, crimped side parting and a whiff of hair oil. He embodies formality and hierarchy. He reads aloud a scene-setting, state of the nation address. The fiscal picture following the economic crash means that times will be tough, but we have the best people. Change is unavoidable but we will make it measured and strategic. We will plan and consult. Services here are excellent and we will maintain that. Some people will need to apply for their jobs but that will bring new energy. Enjoy the week he says. I walk to the lectern, game face affixed. Just then, sotto voce, more voce than sotto, someone says, 'Aye, and if he believes all that, we really are in trouble.' A wave of laughter passes through the room. Its power makes me clench. The floor tilts.

July 2022, Where the rivers freeze and summer ends

I'm the one mopping mum's brow now, trying to make it all better. The hospital is in the local news for staffing levels putting patients at risk. A combination of pandemic, exodus of nurses and post-Brexit recruitment 'challenges'. The consultant remarks that they are basically firefighting. The nurse says that Covid is rife in the team. In a blazing summer, the latest Covid variant defies reassuring predictions that the virus would settle into manageable seasonal patterns. Staff are doing incredible work but it is evident they are at the end of their rope. At the handover, a nurse says to their colleague to have a good shift. Thanks, I'll try not to cry, they reply. I get my own first full taste of Covid, grateful to be two vaccines deep. Coughing up sheets of phlegm, the colour of lemon lollipops. Back on the ward again, something in the air means that anxious family members are viewed warily as walking complaint forms. Junior doctors learn to quicken their stride as they slip past mum's door, staring into the middle distance. I used to pull the same moves, late for class, ducking past teachers' windows. We're all trying to do our best with the 'coproduction' of care. Advocacy can only get so far against the immoveable object of under-resourced, fearful and exhausted staff. Performance regimes drive wedges. The familiar sensation of having to walk on eggshells around figures of authority. Their potential to do good or harm suffuses each interaction. Rushes of appreciation for acts of attentiveness, constant anxiety about what is dropping between the cracks. Mum rallies but a series of infections follow. She needs more specialized care. You've probably heard this one before, but no beds are available. Déjà vu is a killer. Decompressing in the hospital lobby, the silent giant television unspools its rolling news, all urgency, banners of primary colour and blank-eyed presenters reading looped scripts. War in Europe. Fuel and heating prices soar. The gap between incomes and the cost of living grows cavernous. Between holidays, Boris Johnson makes occasional excursions from Number 10 to dress up as a fighter pilot or a soldier, legacy-minded photo opportunities which won't remove the stain of contracts for cronies and law-breaking. The candidates to succeed him, neoliberal true believers, conjure the ghost of Thatcher, in feverish competition to talk tough about shrinking the state, the urgency of tax cuts, the impossibility of windfall levies. Usual spiels about sunlit uplands. The death of language moves a step closer. The Opposition leader bans colleagues from picket lines and rehashes New Labour. The old sick feeling returns.

Discussion

Presenting a montage of vignettes involves 'craft arrangements' (Law, 2004, p. 143). The vignettes aim to conjure the 'dragging undertow' (Stewart, 2007, p. 1) of uncanny strangeness. In considering these vignettes the task is not to trap their meaning in a jar, but to attune ourselves to these moments of affect, and to consider 'where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance' (Stewart, 2007, p. 3).

Appropriate to an exploration of crisis, the portraits of the uncanny are a way of paying close attention to the unresolved and discordant affects of organizational life. The montage draws analytical attention to workaday struggles to repress the feeling of crisis. It illustrates the idea of crisis as omnipresent, and portrays uncanny moments where subjectivity is undone and our routine commitments are defamiliarized and suspect. The uncanny entails making sense of circumstances through frames which have become disjointed, and amplifies the shifting (un)familiarities of organizations. It involves a 'leading back' to rhymes and doubles, resonances and returns. The vignettes dwell upon uncanny moments, zooming in on disturbing echoes and strange prefigurements, depicting the re-emergence of thoughts that have persisted despite rational impulses to explain them away. Together they support the articulation of several interrelated themes.

The montage conveys the idea of the immanence of crisis due to (1) our existential predicament and (2) the nature of organizing which, particularly for public organizations in neoliberal regimes, is constantly threatened by chaos. In relation to the first, the vignettes depict quotidian visits from the strange unconscious. A masked shopper triggers the fantasies of Saturday morning children's TV. A difficult professional encounter summons cosy memories of a blanket on the couch and a day off school. The fear of punishment is later echoed by the feeling of walking on eggshells around health professionals who exude such power over life and death and yet who seem so hollowed out. In relation to (2) the public sector vignettes portray the routine repression of crisis, as well as uncanny interruptions which disturb a sense of order and safety. They suggest the immanence of crisis by showing organizations to be uneasy, nervous places, troubled by something in the air. Their attention to the influence of NPM discourses illustrates how political values are decisive in shaping the social and organizational arrangements which mediate our response to crises such as the pandemic. The montage provides glimpses of neoliberalism's role in exacerbating the conditions for crisis, as it is at the heart of NPM and the context of the pandemic response, and underscores how political choices can induce or ameliorate crisis.

Second, the vignettes express that the uncanny is a constitutive aspect of our subjectivities, posing a constant threat of the dissolution of our social order and organizing. In the Covid vignettes our strange fragility is exemplified by the social rules established to guard against the pandemic, the refracted intimacy and distancing of screen time, or the weird simulations of lockdown lectures. The public sector vignettes demonstrate collusive dances in which managers shore up their organizations. Management's reflexes are to re-invoke feelings and discourses of order and control. This tendency is seen for example in the health manager keen to sell his colleagues on the curative power of strategy, or reciting third way messages straight from the pamphlet. Some managers admit that the organization is not the flourishing space implied by the corporate narratives. However, they are primed and ready to re-inhabit roles and discourses that ensure a sense of organizational security, as when listing the many great attributes of the organization for the approving ear of the chief executive. The lure of the familiar is enough to bring us under again. In these moments NPM is reinforced, making the organization safe for neoliberal logics. A local discourse of critique is silenced, as though of its own volition. The public sector episodes show how being versed in the dark arts of NPM is a badge of maturity and helps banish childish, organizationally primitive anxieties about decline and danger.

Third, if the business of going on in organizations is dependent on repressing thoughts of decay and annihilation, then it is the uncanny that disturbs symbolic attempts to block the return of feelings of decline. Just as we repress thoughts of death, we repress the very idea of crisis. However, our efforts at doing so are never wholly successful. The vignettes sketch how the dynamics of the uncanny and the repression of crisis are 'reproduced in subjects themselves' (Fotaki, 2013, p. 1255). This tension is seen, for example, in the nervous laughter of the group when the chief executive has left the room. Or, as when listening to the strategic manager, the mind wanders to a scene of illness and death, triggered by noticing the clash between the message of the need for fiscal prudence and the decaying state of basic infrastructure. The sense of safety, of being part of a routine professional gathering, gives way to a closer assignation with the realities of illness and death. It alerts us to vulnerability when we are all doing our best to deny it. We become practised at repressing decay in our public discourse. But not in our psyche. The vignettes represent how uncanny moments open up other ways of apprehending the world. They highlight how neoliberal discourses offer security but are also oppressive, and how the uncanny can point to an escape route from their totalizing tendencies.

Finally, the vignettes suggest how the stifling of crisis discourse by NPM hinders the development of alternative perspectives on the material and ethical base of the public realm. In disturbing the logics and precincts of neoliberalism the uncanny can make us wonder about the possibilities for more progressive choices. The strangeness of our gatherings to clap for the NHS provided a collective sight of a socio-political alternative. But this was soon overtaken by the re-assertion of political discourse about pocketbook economics and public sector workers as a drain on the economy. Even still deep in the pandemic, government ministers started to invoke affordability as justification for wretched pay offers for NHS staff. (Later, nurses taking industrial action for the first time would be vilified as an enemy within, playing into Putin's hands.) Alarming images escaped the political discourse. Bin bags as makeshift protection, the epic failure of test and trace, and the deadliness of the 'protective ring' around care homes, juxtaposed with the public display of cheery drawings by hopeful children. The 'ghost peloton' appears as an eerie motif for those who died while we clapped, and government contracts were quietly dished out. The uncanny fastens its grip just long enough to unsettle us and, through this unnerving, throw some guttering light on our situation.

Because of the power of the uncanny to destabilize patterns, it can conjure the potential for socio-political change. However, the uncanny is a difficult feeling to decode. It has a certain excess which is hard to neatly contain or harness as a point of revelation or learning. But in disconcerting us, it loosens our subjectivities and enables the possibilities for alternatives, whether the ethics of organizing or how we mobilize in support of the public good.

Concluding Remarks

This paper advances the critical potential of the uncanny for theorizing crisis and for understanding organizational responses to crisis. It adds to work in organization studies which engages with the pandemic (Burke, Omidivar, Spanellis, & Pyrko, 2023; Riad, 2023; Rouleau, 2023). It also constitutes one response to the invitation in this journal to provide 'new problematizations in the crisis management literature' (Kornberger, Leixnering, & Meyer, 2019, p. 261). The transposition of crisis into management discourse shifted the concept from something that once connected social science to dialectics and contradictions to a term which signifies events which, though at first highly unexpected and unwelcome, are ultimately manageable and even sources of improvement and learning. Crises are to be tamed, confected even, by canny managers and exploited for all their bounty. This paper offers an alternative perspective, showing how contemporary crises – whether Covid-19 or the public sector under neoliberalism – intersect with the uncanny framed by

psychoanalysis. It problematizes the idea of crisis as opportunity or turning point, and instead highlights the immanence of crisis and the extent to which we more often routinely engage in its repression, privately and publicly.

The study adds to psychoanalytic studies of organizations which explore managers' embeddedness in socio-political issues and flows of power. It builds on the affective turn in organization studies by using the uncanny as a basis for understanding the politics of everyday repressions and the possibilities for alternatives. In doing so it joins conversations in organization studies that examine how wider social structures are internalized and become part of our own actions (Fotaki, 2013; Fotaki, Long, & Schwartz, 2012; Kenny, 2012, 2016; Rizq, 2013, 2014; Vince, 2019). Aided by the growing interest in affective methodologies (Leclair, 2023; Otto & Strauß, 2019; Özdemir Kaya & Fotaki, 2022), it offers one expression of the critical potential of techniques of montage and juxtaposition (Beyes & Holt, 2020; Sørensen, 2010, 2014) for developing an analytical sense of uncanny disturbances.

Some practical organizational implications are suggested for how managers think about crisis. The study shows how crisis is inscribed in the everyday due to the uncanny strangeness of our unconscious. This is seen both in our routine organizational encounters and amid big-H historical events such as the pandemic. A recognition of our own and others' unsettled unconscious seems especially pressing at a point where we are rethinking borders between home and work and coming to terms with the loss we experienced during the pandemic. The radical appreciation of crisis at the heart of our organizational projects stands as a critique of the conceitedness, even hubris, involved in concocting crises as part of strategic instrumentalities. Such an understanding also invites an ethical appreciation of our roles in incubating crisis and encourages critical thought about what is lost through our reflexive repression of alternatives.

Four contributions follow from this work. First, attention to the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny enables a theoretical appreciation of crisis as an immanent property of organizing. The uncanny invites a radical revisiting of the concept of organization, revealing crisis at its centre. Rather than disruptive and temporary, crisis is omnipresent. Theorizing crisis in this way offers a reminder that our myriad crises do not lie outside our organizational projects but erupt from within them. They are expressions of immanence brought forth. Crisis is routinely repressed or ushered to the threshold, but it stubbornly remains, a shadowy figure in the fireside chair. Its immanence is felt most keenly at moments of the uncanny. As Beyes (2019) reminds us, appreciating the uncanny is to accept the contingent nature of the homely. Feeling at home always contains the underlying possibility of rupture. It is the lurking presence of crisis – the disintegration of the everyday – that is necessary for the comforting feeling of being at home to be achieved in the first place. In this analysis, crisis emerges as a condition of organizing.

Second, the paper problematizes the idea of remedies and cure that have become so naturalized in the management discourse. The tendency to talk about crisis using a medical language generates a strict classification of the scope and roots of problems and then governs the interventions and treatments that should follow. In this way, NPM freights the subjectivities of managers with the idea that they contributed to the ill health of the organization and now carry the responsibility for its recovery. Such logic further implicates managers in processes of appraisal and regulation, expelling pathogens and recording progress. Engaging with the uncanny brings in critical attention to the psychodynamics of organizational life and opens up the theorization of crisis unharnessed from an empiricism which privileges rationalist and realist epistemologies (Fotaki, 2010b; Rizq, 2013).

The third contribution is to add to the momentum behind theorizing organizations as haunted and troubled spaces (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016), and to elaborate on the idea of the organizational uncanny. Extending inquiry to include multiple sites over time and space,

including the great uncanny of the pandemic, the study finds uncanny echoes and rhymes that make themselves heard amid crisis-infused settings. The organizational uncanny is revealed to involve not just fleeting moments of perturbance, deftly and permanently smoothed away, but in ways which mirror the idea of doubles and repetitions described by Freud, a strangeness felt again and anew. It concerns affective reprises, both strange and familiar, amid the breaths, mists and spasms of organizational life.

Finally, putting the uncanny and crisis into theoretical interplay connects us with a 'politics of immanence' (De Coster & Zanoni, 2023, p. 2). The everyday work of repressing crisis diminishes the chances for breaking with the hegemony of business as usual. The uncanny brings ambivalence, but it transmits a strange summons to agency, to apprehend the potential for things being otherwise. This reading adds the insight that the uncanny concerns not just the return of the past – organizational ghosts (Orr, 2014) or the disturbance of time (Pors, 2016) – but an inkling of new possibilities based on the insufficiency of current modes. The uncanny carries an insinuation of choices to come, even if these are not neatly prefigured and fall short of having the status of turning points. Neoliberalism, which has such a bearing on crisis and our exposures, is but one basis for organizing the public realm. Uncanny moments disclose a potential to motivate a more sustained collective pursuit of social arrangements which go further in ameliorating the consequences of crises. The uncanny provides a feeling of disquiet that is necessary, if not sufficient, for the exploration of alternatives. If disturbed innerness becomes a 'compost' (Kristeva, 1991, p. 190) then the uncanny discussed in this study might suggest its germinating potential for making seemingly strange ideas – like adequately resourced health care, mobilizing for public good, and organizing based on social solidarities – less unfamiliar.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Marianna Fotaki for truly inspirational, and patient, editorial advice. The three incredible reviewers were as encouraging as they were insightful. I am deeply appreciative of all this work, especially during such strange times.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Adams, Tony E., Holman Jones, Stacy L., & Ellis, Carolyn (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ahmed, Sara (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text*, *22*, 117–139.

Alvesson, Mats, & Sköldberg, Kaj (2017). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Anthony, Scott D. (2012, February 11). How to anticipate a burning platform. *Harvard Business Review*.

Antonacopoulou, Elena P., & Sheaffer, Zachary (2014). Learning *in* crisis: Rethinking the relationship between organizational learning and crisis management. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *23*, 5–21.

Barad, Karen (2010). Quantum entanglements and hauntological relations of inheritance: Dis/continuities, spacetime enfoldings, and justice-to-come. *Derrida Today*, *3*, 240–268.

Beavan, Katie (2021). Becoming visible: Uncovering hidden entanglements of power, performativity and becoming subjectivities in a global bank. *Organization Studies*, *42*, 1839–1862.

Berlant, Lauren (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Beyes, Timon (2017). Colour and organization studies. *Organization Studies*, *38*, 1467–1482.

Beyes, Timon (2019). Uncanny matters: Kafka's burrow, the unhomely and the study of organizational space. *Ephemera*, *19*, 179–192.

Beyes, Timon, & Holt, Robin (2020). The topographical imagination: Space and organization theory. *Organization Theory*, *1*(2), 263178772091388.

Beyes, Timon, & Steyaert, Chris (2013). Strangely familiar: The uncanny and unsiting organizational analysis. *Organization Studies*, *34*, 1445–1465.

Blackman, Lisa (2015). Researching affect and embodied hauntologies: Exploring an analytics of experimentation. In Britta T. Knudsen & Carsten Stage (Eds.), *Affective methodologies* (pp. 25–47). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boin, Arjen, 't Hart, Paul, Stern, Eric, & Sundelius, Bengt (2017). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Borch, Christian (2010). Organizational atmospheres: Foam, affect and architecture. *Organization*, *17*, 223–241.

Brennan, Teresa (2004). *The transmission of affect*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bronfen, Elisabeth (2016). Abjection. In David Punter, William Hughes, & Andrew Smith (Eds.), *The encyclopaedia of the gothic* (pp. 1–4). Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Brown, Sarah Annes (2012). *A familiar compound ghost: Allusion and the uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Brown, Wendy (2019). *In the ruins of neoliberalism: The rise of antidemocratic politics in the West*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Bryer, Alice (2020). Making organizations more inclusive: The work of belonging. *Organization Studies*, *41*, 641–660.

Burke, Gary T., Omidvar, Omid, Spanellis, Agnessa, & Pyrko, Igor (2023). Making space for garbage cans: How emergent groups organize social media spaces to orchestrate widescale helping in a crisis. *Organization Studies*, *44*, 569–592.

Cixous, Hélène (1976). Fiction and its phantoms: A reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "uncanny"). *New Literary History*, *7*, 525–548.

Coleman, Rebecca, & Ringrose, Jessica (Eds.) (2013). *Deleuze and research methodologies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Cunliffe, Ann L. (2022). Must I grow a pair of balls to theorize about theory in organization and management studies? *Organization Theory*, *3*(3), 263178772211092.

Davies, Jonathan S., & Thompson, Ed (2016). *Austerity realism and the governance of Leicester*. London: Routledge.

Davis, Colin (2007). *Haunted subjects: Deconstruction, psychoanalysis and the return of the dead*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

De Coster, Marjan, & Zanoni, Patrizia (2023). More than prefigurative politics? Redefining institutional frames to reduce precarity under neoliberal capitalism. *Organization Studies*, *44*, 939–960.

Derrida, Jacques (1994). *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge.

du Gay, Paul (2003). The tyranny of the epochal: Change, epochalism and organizational reform. *Organization*, *10*, 663–684.

du Gay, Paul, & Morgan, Glenn (2013). *Understanding capitalism: Crises, legitimacy, and change through the prism of the new spirit of capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dutton, Jane E., & Jackson, Susan E. (1987). Categorizing strategic issues: Links to organizational action. *Academy of Management Review*, *12*, 76–90.

Fotaki, Marianna (2010a). The sublime object of desire (for knowledge): Sexuality at work in business and management schools in England. *British Journal of Management*, *22*, 42–53.

Fotaki, Marianna (2010b). Why do public policies fail so often? Exploring health policy making as an imaginary/symbolic construction. *Organization*, *17*, 703–720.

Fotaki, Marianna (2013). No woman is like a man (in academia): The masculine symbolic order and the unwanted female body. *Organization Studies*, *34*, 1251–1275.

Fotaki, Marianna (2019). Julia Kristeva. In Robert McMurray & Alison Pullen (Eds.), *Gender, embodiment and fluidity in organization and management* (pp. 42–58). London: Routledge.

Fotaki, Marianna, Kenny, Kate, & Vachhani, Sheena J. (2017). Thinking critically about affect in organization studies: Why it matters. *Organization*, *24*, 3–17.

Fotaki, Marianna, Long, Susan, & Schwartz, Howard S. (2012). What can psychoanalysis offer organization studies today? Taking stock of current developments and thinking about future directions. *Organization Studies*, *33*, 1105–1120.
Freud, Sigmund (1919/2003). *The uncanny*. London: Penguin.
Froggett, Lynn (2002). *Love, hate and welfare*. Bristol: Polity Press.
Gatrell, Caroline (2019). Boundary creatures? Employed, breastfeeding mothers and 'abjection as practice'. *Organization Studies*, *40*, 421–442.
Gherardi, Silvia (2019). Theorizing affective ethnography for organization studies. *Organization*, *26*, 741–760.
Gilmore, Sara, & Harding, Nancy (2022). Organizational socialization as kin-work: A psychoanalytic model of settling into a new job. *Human Relations*, *75*, 583–605.
Gregg, Melissa, & Seigworth, Gregory J. (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (1973). What does a crisis mean today? *Social Research*, *40*, 643–667.
Harding, Nancy, Gilmore, Sarah, & Ford, Jackie (2022). Matter that embodies: Agentive flesh and working bodies/selves. *Organization Studies*, *43*, 649–668.
Healy, Margaret (2016). Medicine, metaphor, and "crisis" in the early modern social body. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, *46*, 117–139.
Hoggett, Paul (2006). Conflict, ambivalence and the contested purpose of public organizations. *Human Relations*, *59*, 175–194.
Holck, Lotte, & Muhr, Sara L. (2017). Unequal solidarity? Towards a norm-critical approach to welfare logics. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *33*, 1–11.
Höpfl, Heather (2000). The suffering mother and the miserable son: Organizing women and organizing women's writing. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *7*, 98–105.
Hood, Christopher (1991). A public management for all seasons. *Public Administration*, *69*, 3–19.
Jay, Martin (1998). The uncanny nineties. In Martin Jay (Ed.), *Cultural semantics: Keywords of our time* (pp. 157–164). London: Athlone Press.
Jessop, Bob (2016). *The state: Past, present, future*. Bristol: Polity Press.
Kelly, Simon, & Riach, Kathleen (2020). Halloween, organization, and the ethics of uncanny celebration. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *161*, 103–114.
Kennedy, A. L. (2020). To be learned, to be remembered. *Penguin Perspectives*. https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/05/a-l-kennedy-coronavirus-essay
Kenny, Kate (2010). Beyond ourselves: Passion and the dark side of identification in an ethical organization. *Human Relations*, *63*, 857–873.
Kenny, Kate (2012). 'Someone big and important': Identification and affect in an international development organization. *Organization Studies*, *33*, 1175–1193.
Kenny, Kate (2016). Organizations and violence: The child as abject-boundary in Ireland's industrial schools. *Organization Studies*, *37*, 939–961.
Kenny, Kate, & Fotaki, Marianna (2014). *The psychosocial and organization studies: Affect at work*. London: Palgrave.
Kenny, Kate, Haugh, Helen, & Fotaki, Marianna (2020). Organizational form and pro-social fantasy in social enterprise creation. *Human Relations*, *73*, 94–123.
Kim, Linsu (1998). Crisis construction and organizational learning: Capability building in catching-up at Hyundai Motor. *Organization Science*, *9*, 506–521.
Knudsen, Britta T., & Stage, Carsten (Eds.) (2015). *Affective methodologies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Kornberger, Martin, Leixnering, Stephan, & Meyer, Renate E. (2019). The logic of tact: How decisions happen in situations of crisis. *Organization Studies*, *40*, 239–266.
Koselleck, Reinhart, & Richter, Michaela W. (2006). Crisis. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *67*, 357–400.
Kostera, Monika, & Harding, Nancy (2021). *Organizational ethnography*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
Kristeva, Julia (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (Leon S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Kristeva, Julia (1991). *Strangers to ourselves* (Leon S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia (2018). The psychic life: A life in time: Psychoanalysis and culture. *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, *XXVI*(2), 81–90.
Kristeva, Julia (2020, March 29). Humanity is rediscovering existential solitude, the meaning of limits, and mortality. *Corriere della Sera*. http://www.kristeva.fr/corriere-della-sera-29-03-2020_en.html
Kristeva, Julia, & Lechte, John (1982). Approaching abjection. *Oxford Literary Review*, *5*(1/2), 125–149.
Law, John (2004). *After method*. London: Routledge.
Leclair, Margot (2023). The atmospherics of creativity: Affective and spatial materiality in a designer's studio. *Organization Studies*, *44*, 807–829.
Lee, Gwendoline K., Lampel, Joseph, & Shapira, Zur (2020). After the storm has passed: Translating crisis experience into useful knowledge. *Organization Science*, *31*, 1037–1051.
Lopdrup-Hjorth, Thomas, & du Gay, Paul (2020). Speaking truth to power? Anti-bureaucratic romanticism from critical organizational theorizing to the White House. *Organization*, *27*, 441–453.
Lury, Celia, & Wakeford, Nina (2012). *Inventive methods: The happening of the social*. London: Routledge.
MacLure, Maggie (2013). Classification or wonder? Coding as an analytic practice in qualitative research. In Rebecca Coleman & Jessica Ringrose (Eds.), *Deleuze and research methodologies* (pp. 164–182). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Masschelein, Anneleen (2011). *The unconcept: The Freudian uncanny in late-twentieth- century theory*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
Masschelein, Anneleen (2016). The uncanny. In David Punter, William Hughes, & Andrew Smith (Eds.), *The encyclopaedia of the gothic* (pp. 699–703). Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
Massumi, Brian (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Mavin, Sharon, & Grandy, Gina (2016). A theory of abject appearance: Women elite leaders' intra-gender 'management' of bodies and appearance. *Human Relations*, *69*, 1095–1120.
Moran, Joe (2004). History, memory and the everyday. *Rethinking History*, *8*, 51–68.
Muhr, Sara L. (2011). Caught in the gendered machine: On the masculine and feminine in cyborg leadership. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *18*, 337–357.
Newman, Janet (2014). Landscapes of antagonism: Local governance, neoliberalism and austerity. *Urban Studies*, *51*, 3290–3305.
Nonaka, Imai (1988). Creating organizational order out of chaos: Self-renewal in Japanese firms. *California Management Review*, *30*, 57–73.
OECD. (2020). *The territorial impact of COVID-19: Managing the crisis across levels of government*. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). Paris: OECD.
Offe, Claus (1998). *Contradictions of the welfare state*. London: Routledge.
Otto, Birke D., & Strauß, Anke (2019). The novel as affective site: Uncertain work as impasse in wait until spring, Bandini. *Organization Studies*, *40*, 1805–1822.
Orr, Kevin (2014). Local government chief executives' everyday hauntings: Towards a theory of organizational ghosts. *Organization Studies*, *35*, 1041–1061.
Özdemir Kaya, D. Dera, & Fotaki, Marianna (2022). 'He pours love and you eat it': A psychoanalytic study of human contact and love in affective labour. *Organization Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406221099693
Pauchant, Thierry C., & Mitroff, Ian (1992). *Transforming the crisis-prone organization: Preventing individual, organizational and environmental tragedies*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Pearson, Christine M., & Mitroff, Ian (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared: A framework for crisis management. *Academy of Management Executive*, *7*, 48–59.
Pearson, Christin M., & Clair, Judith A. (1998). Reframing crisis management. *Academy of Management Review*, *23*, 59–76.
Perrow, Charles (1984). *Normal accidents: Living with high-risk technologies*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
Phillips, Mary, & Rippin, Ann (2010). Howard and the mermaid: Abjection and the Starbucks' Foundation memoir. *Organization*, *17*, 481–499.
Pors, Justine G. (2016). 'It sends a cold shiver down my spine': Ghostly interruptions to strategy implementation. *Organization Studies*, *37*, 1641–1659.

Pors, Justine G., Olaison, Lena, & Otto, Birke (2019). Ghostly matters in organizing. *Ephemera*, *19*, 1–29.
Puar, Jasbir K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Punch, Samantha (2012). Hidden struggles of fieldwork: Exploring the role and use of field diaries. *Emotion, Space and Society*, *5*, 86–93.
Reay, Trish, Zafar, Asma, Monteiro, Pedro, & Glaser, Vern (2019). Presenting findings from qualitative research: One size does not fit all! In Tammar B. Zilber, John M. Amis, & Johanna Mair (Eds.), *The production of managerial knowledge and organizational theory: New approaches to writing, producing and consuming theory* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 59) (pp. 201–216). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
Reedy, Patrick, King, Daniel, & Coupland, Christine (2016). Organizing for individuation: Alternative organizing, politics and new identities. *Organization Studies*, *37*, 1553–1573.
Riad, Sally (2023). The virus and organization studies: A changing episteme. *Organization Studies*, *44*, 1003–1020.
Ricœur, Paul (1988). La crise: Un phénomène spécifiquement moderne? *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, *120*, 1–19.
Rizq, Rosemary (2013). States of abjection. *Organization Studies*, *34*, 1277–1297.
Rizq, Rosemary (2014). Perversion, neoliberalism and therapy: The audit culture in mental health services. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, *19*, 209–218.
Robinson, Sarah, & Bristow, Alexandra (2020). Riding populist storms: Brexit, Trumpism and beyond. *Organization*, *27*, 359–369.
Rouleau, Linda (2023). 'Does our work matter?' The role of organizational researchers in extreme (war) times. *Organization Studies*, *44*, 323–326.
Roy, Arundhati (2020, April 3). The pandemic is a portal. *Financial Times*.
Royle, Nicholas (2003). *The uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Samuel, Raphael (1994). *Theatres of memory, volume 1: Past and present in contemporary culture*. London: Verso.
Shrivastava, Paul, Mitroff, Ian I., Miller, Danny, & Miclani, Anil (1988). Understanding industrial crises. *Journal of Management Studies*, *25*, 285–303.
Sørensen, Bent M. (2010). St Paul's conversion: The aesthetic organization of labour. *Organization Studies*, *31*, 307–326.
Sørensen, Bent M. (2014). Changing the memory of suffering: An organizational aesthetics of the dark side. *Organization Studies*, *35*, 279–302.
Spector, Bert (2019). *Constructing crisis: Leaders, crises and claims of urgency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Spicer, André, & Fleming, Peter (2007). Intervening in the inevitable: Globalization discourse in a public broadcaster. *Organization*, *14*, 517–541.
St. Pierre, Elizabeth A. (2021). Why post qualitative inquiry? *Qualitative Inquiry*, *27*, 163–166.
Starbuck, William H., Greve, Arent, & Hedberg, Bo (1978). Responding to crises. *Journal of Business Administration*, *9*, 111–137.
Stavrakakis, Yannis (2008). Peripheral vision. Subjectivity and the organized other: Between symbolic authority and fantasmatic enjoyment. *Organization Studies*, *29*, 1037–1059.
Stewart, Kathleen (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press.
Stowell, Alison F., & Warren, Samantha (2018). The institutionalization of suffering: Embodied inhabitation and the maintenance of health and safety in e-waste recycling. *Organization Studies*, *39*, 785–809.
Takolander, Maria (2021). The uncanny mask and the fiction writer. *New Writing*, *18*, 136–148.
Taylor, David (2011). Wellbeing and welfare: A psychosocial analysis of being well and doing well enough. *Journal of Social Policy*, *40*, 777–794.
The New York Times. (2020, October 2). *In his own words, Trump on the coronavirus and masks*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-masks.html
Thrift, Nigel J. (2008). *Non-representational theory: Space, politics, affect*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Trigg, Dylan (2020). The uncanny. In Thomas Szanto & Hilge Landweer (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of phenomenology of emotion* (pp. 450–480). London: Routledge.
Vince, Russ (2019). Institutional illogics: The unconscious and institutional analysis. *Organization Studies*, *40*, 953–973.
Wan, William P., & Yiu, Daphne W. (2009). From crisis to opportunity: Environmental jolt, corporate acquisitions, and firm performance. *Strategic Management Journal*, *30*, 791–801.
Wetherell, Margaret (2013). Affect and discourse – What's the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice. *Subjectivity*, *6*, 349–368.
WHO. (2022). *World Health Organization coronavirus (Covid-19) dashboard*. Retrieved September 24, 2022, from https://covid19.who.int
Yu, Tieying, Sengul, Metin, & Lester, Richard H. (2008). Misery loves company: The spread of negative impacts resulting from an organizational crisis. *Academy of Management Review*, *33*, 452–472.
Zanoni, Patrizia, Contu, Alessia, Healy, Stephen, & Mir, Raza (2017). Post-capitalistic politics in the making: The imaginary and praxis of alternative economies. *Organization*, *24*, 575–588.

Author biography

Kevin Orr is professor of leadership and governance at the School of Management, University of St Andrews, and senior fellow at UC Berkeley, Institute of European Studies. His research focuses on aspects of managing and organizing in public sector and political settings, and he has a particular interest in the idea of organizations as haunted spaces. He has published widely in established international journals, including *Organization Studies*, *Organization*, *Public Administration* and *Public Administration Review*.