

ORGANIZATIONAL TOTALITARIANISM AND THE VOICES OF DISSENT

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Abstract This paper undertakes a psychodynamically-informed cultural study of organizational totalitarianism in the contemporary United States. It proposes a distinctive national style to totalitarianism, one bound up with unbridled competitive capitalism and the sanctity of “the bottom line” as the highest and only good. It explores universal psychodynamics of totalitarianism, wherein an ideology is created and embraced that radically simplifies the world, repudiates if not destroys all opposing views, and is intolerant of all doubt. Examples from American popular culture, literature, and organizational narrative are used to illustrate these processes.

Keywords ■ organizational psychodynamics ■ totalitarian discourse ■ leadership
■ narrative

Corporate executives—no less than national leaders—use language in an effort to manage (which most commonly means to control) dissent. Their tactics include denying, constraining, subverting, transforming, quashing, and discrediting challenges that oppose orthodox ideologies and policies. Dissent management by leaders, and in turn by followers, is a central activity in creating and maintaining totalitarian workplace management styles. In this paper I shall argue that language does not independently stomp out dissent. Rather it is the instrument and medium of the heavy boot that tramples thinking itself.

The viewpoint I bring to my analysis of totalitarian discourses in organizations is that of a psychoanalytically-oriented anthropologist who gains insights into workplace

dynamics through day-to-day work as an ethnographer in medical and other settings, and as someone engaged in action research. In this paper I first discuss how totalitarianism finds expression in American culture. I then identify core psychological features of totalitarianism and offer three vignettes to illustrate these processes. Finally, I address issues that these vignettes raise.

Totalitarianism American-Style

Traditionally, Fascism has been viewed as a nationalist ideology. For instance, Richard Falk, Professor Emeritus of International Law and Practice at Princeton University, defines historical fascism as “the convergence of military and economic power of an ultranationalist ideology that views its enemies—internally and externally—as evil and subject to extermination or extreme punishment” (as cited in MacKinnon, 2003). Not all totalitarian forms, however, look alike ideologically, although ultimately they act alike. Just as during the Cold War communist and socialist ideologies were largely tailored by the nations in which they were adopted, the same is true of fascism. Falk articulates what I have long felt about an emerging American national style and language of totalitarianism: one must examine both the cultural *act* and the cultural *disguise*. Falk says:

In many ways, the language is very careful. No one today has the bluntness of a Hitler or a Mussolini....[I]t is important to acknowledge that if this fascist threat exists, it exists in a distinctive form both in the United States and in the world, and that it is conditioned by the American political culture—which is resistant to the language of fascism. Certainly the people who are the architects of these policies would reject my analysis, and probably sincerely so. They think they're doing something else; it will all be done in the name of democratization. It's a very deceptive and confusing style of political domination, because it pretends to be the opposite of what it is. There is an ambiguity, because this is a concealed fascism that is occurring within the framework of a constitutional democracy. (As cited in Mackinnon, 2003)

I shall argue that a cultural *ethos* pervades many kinds of social institutions within that culture (Benedict, 1934), with the result that workplace organizations are as likely to be regulated by fascist attitudes and relationships as nations are. Shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, United States President George W. Bush declared that “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001). Rationalized by relentless economic competition and globalization, countless business, corporate, and industrial leaders have uttered the same sentiment, although in reference to different enemies.

Albert Dunlap, former CEO of Scott Paper and then Sunbeam, is a case example. He called himself “Rambo in Pinstripes” (Dunlap, 1997). His tactics included loud confrontation, public humiliation, and put-downs. He earned the epithets “Chainsaw Al”

and “The Shredder” by turning around troubled companies through relentless employee firings and numerous plant closings. As these names imply, he treated people as if they were inanimate things. The only thing he cared about was increasing—temporarily inflating—shareholder value and pleasing stockholders. In 1996, he published a book titled *Mean Business: How I Save Bad Companies and Make Good Companies Great*. Indeed, he polarized the world into shareholders (the “good” people, who were to be placated) and workers (the “bad” people, who were disposable).

During his reigns from the 1970s through the 1990s, he enjoyed being cruel to those who stood in the way of his ambitions. Shareholders were his “allies” and employees were his “enemies.” Dunlap’s compatriot P. Newton White characterized Dunlap’s approach to managing subordinates as “Piss all over them and then build them up” (Byrne, 2003, p. 3). The more people he fired, the higher stock prices climbed. The more he rid the company of “them,” the more he pleased “us.”

So relentless is the search for “enemies,” that as a national culture we have made many of “us” (employees, workers) into enemies in addition to the officially designated “them” in the “war on terror” (Stein, 2005; Lotto, 1998). The once-ubiquitous “psychological contract” (Argyris, 1960; Levinson, Price, Munden, & Solley, 1962) between employer and employee has been summarily cancelled since the mid-1980s, and workers have been virtually abandoned to fend for themselves. Wave upon wave of downsizing, RIFing (reduction in force), restructuring, reengineering, outsourcing, and deskilling are heir to this cultural war against, and sacrifice of, those deemed to be threats to the reified nation or organization. Monikers are quite revealing: “Neutron” Jack Welch of General Electric, who reputedly got rid of people like a neutron bomb; and “Chainsaw” Al Dunlap of Scott Paper, who “cut” people out of organizations like a chainsaw. Seth Allcorn (2006) has also observed that the dynamics and language of totalitarianism are hardly limited to the nation’s political apparatus.

Those who study organizations are also no longer surprised to find suppressed, dominated, controlled and alienated employees. More recently (1990s through 2005) downsizing, rightsizing, reengineering, globalization, corporate scandals, government restructuring and coping with the technology driven organization have diminished the ideal of freedom, dignity and democracy in the workplace.

In American literature, Captain Ahab of the ship Pequod in Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* (1851) is perhaps the quintessential bully-leader—and American hero. Captain Ahab is the single-minded narcissistic CEO of his enterprise, seeking revenge on the great White Whale Moby Dick for amputating his foot on an earlier voyage. He intimidates his crew into wildly endorsing and fulfilling his ultimately suicidal mission and diverting themselves from their work-task: hunting whales for whale oil. Had Ahab been a corporate executive of the late 20th Century, he no doubt would have exhorted his whalers to be uncritical “team players,” not only to obey his command, but to make his obsession their own!

No amount of guile, cajoling, or public humiliation was beyond Ahab. Late in the novel, the casks of oil sprang leaks in the hold. First mate Starbuck urged Captain Ahab to change the course and have the leaks repaired. It is not the first time in the novel that Starbuck's is the voice of reason, reality, dissent, and protest, while Ahab's is the voice of obsessive pursuit. "Thou are always prating to me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience. But look ye, the only real owner of a thing is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship's keel. – On deck!" Ahab orders (1961, p. 449).

Emboldened, Starbuck presses his case further. Ahab grabs a loaded musket and points it towards Starbuck, exclaiming, "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod. – On deck!" (p. 449). As he leaves the cabin, Starbuck respectfully warns Ahab of his greatest foe—himself. "I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; Thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man" (ibid.). Ahab briefly reconsiders Starbuck's caution, then upon reaching the deck, raises his voice to the crew, ordering them to do what Starbuck had advised him—but as if it were his own idea. In the American corporate world, it is not unusual for executives to co-opt the original ideas of their subordinates, and then to demand adulation for the brilliance as if it were their own.

Much earlier on the voyage, with the entire crew assembled on deck, Ahab rages toward his men with the true purpose of the voyage: to pursue Moby Dick to his death and avenge Ahab's lost leg. "I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! To chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now! I think ye do look brave" (p. 166). Ahab is trying to shame them into colluding with him. Starbuck, again the voice of reason and realism, counters, "I came here to hunt whale, not my commander's vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettist it, Captain Ahab? It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market." Ahab is aroused: "...my vengeance will fetch a great premium *here!*...Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (pp. 166–167).

Ahab then sets out to isolate and humiliate Starbuck and rally the crew to his single-minded mission: the destruction of Moby Dick. Ahab asks: "Are they [the crew] not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale?" (p. 167). Ahab rubs it in: "Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot, Starbuck!" (p. 168). Ahab then devises a ritual to seal his victory of the crew's acquiescence. He orders the pewter, filled with alcohol, passed so that the entire crew will drink a draught of this communion.

To seal the vow, he further orders the mates to flank him in a circle with their lances, and cross lances in front of him. Ahab is now the undisputed center of the circle

of fealty. He thunders triumphantly, “Oh, my sweet cardinals! Your own condescension, that shall bend ye to it. I do not order it; ye will it” (p. 169). In a frenzy, Ahab binds them to an oath: “Drink, ye harpooners! Drink and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboat’s bow—Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!” (p. 170).

A more fitting example of what Heinz Kohut (1972) called “chronic narcissistic rage” could not be found. Forged on the anvil of intimidation, Ahab’s crew members are no longer individual, thinking beings. Now identified with Ahab and each other, they are a single unthinking will. For all the world, Ahab’s voice could have been that of Jack Welch (G.E.), Al Dunlap (Sunbeam), Joe Nacchio (Qwest), Dennis Kozlowski (Tyco), Harold Geneen (I.T.T.), or Donald Trump (dealmaker and demanding boss of the popular reality television show “The Apprentice”). If Ahab is a classical figure, he is also uncannily modern.

Slightly more than a century and a half later, American cartoonist Scott Adams depicts and evokes the intimidating corporate atmosphere of America in his long-lived newspaper comic strip “Dilbert.” Since 1989, Adams’ comic strip and his book *The DILBERT Principle* (1996) and its successors have portrayed, mocked, and caricatured the dominant management and organizational change styles in vogue. “Dilbert” as an art form can be seen as culturally symptomatic of the way of life it evokes and rebukes. Its wide appeal, measurable by newspaper syndication and book sales (not to mention its presence in photocopy form as social commentary on break-room bulletin boards and refrigerator doors), cross-cuts a wide array of organizational types, “aggressively capitalist” and “nurturantly service-oriented” alike. Adams’ genius in his characters’ words, gestures, and facial expressions is to reveal the viciousness and brutality behind supposedly inexorably good business sense. His ever-present image of the workplace “cubicle” depicts the austere, lifeless, deadening mental geography of confinement and constriction. In this world, work is prison with pay. “Dilbert” at once parades our business euphemisms before us and exposes them. The cartoonist is in fact a moralist: “Dilbert portrays corporate culture as a Kafkaesque world of bureaucracy for its own sake and office politics that stand in the way of productivity, where employees’ skills and efforts are not rewarded, and busy work praised. Much of the humor emerges as we see the characters making obviously ridiculous decisions that are natural reactions to mismanagement” (“Dilbert,” 2005).

A few examples (without full benefit of cartoon) must suffice. In a 1995 “Dilbert” comic strip, Dogbert, acting as a downsizing consultant, demonstrates how to notify employees that their jobs will be outsourced by having his consulting partner, Ratbert, bend over. At the edge of a desktop, Dogbert kicks Ratbert in the buttocks into the trash can. In the final scene, the Pointy-Haired Boss asks Dogbert, “How do I get them all stooped over?” Dogbert recommends “a program of very bad ergonomics.”

In a 1996 comic strip, Catbert, the evil Human Relations Director, advises Wally, a stressed-out worker, to start smoking cigarettes, because in that way he would “have frequent company-sanctioned breaks throughout the day.” Wally asks: “This is your strategy for downsizing, isn’t it?” In another 1996 comic strip, Catbert’s tail is twitching, which is his sign that it is time to write more evil company policies. This time the directive is: “Employees must wear shoes that are one size smaller than their feet.” Later: “This is my favorite part: ‘We must do this to be competitive.’” Finally, to the inquiry as to whether anyone has complained about the “footsizing” program, Catbert replies: “I haven’t listened to a single complaint.” The bullying and sadism are obvious as (counterproductive) “motivating” methods for achieving greater productivity and profitability.

More recently, in a 2005 “Dilbert” comic strip, the scene is a staff meeting around a table. A man says, “Our shareholders are suing us for misleading them about our financial problems.” The Pointy-Haired Boss replies, “Since when is it illegal to shaft innocent people for personal gain?” Turning to Wally, the man replies, “Don’t put that in the minutes.” The egregious misleading of shareholders and employees at Enron, WorldCom, Global Crossing, Tyco, and other large companies finds its way to cynical caricature in this cartoon.

In another comic strip of 2005, Catbert informs staff of new guidelines regarding who is permitted to fly on the same plane, because “We can’t risk losing too many key employees.” First, “The CEO and the president are not allowed to be on the same flight.” Second, “No more than three vice presidents may be on the same flight.” Asok, an intern, asks, “What are the guidelines for interns?” Catbert replies, “Infinite interns are allowed on the same flight. You are also allowed to run with scissors and put plastic bags over your heads.” Not only are employees of lower status expendable, but the sadistic HR director encourages them to harm, if not kill, themselves.

In a similar vein, another 2005 comic strip depicts yet another meeting, this time presided over by the Pointy-Haired Boss. He reads, “Management is pleased to announce that it has a plan to make your pension fund solvent.” In the next cell, the corporate building is shown, accompanied by the words, “In unrelated news, the guidelines for workplace safety have been relaxed.” In the final cell, back at the meeting table, the Pointy-Haired Boss says, “Our CEO reminds you that smoking is cool.” Here the corporate brutality is transparent and undisguised. The faltering corporate pension fund will be made solvent through the accelerated deaths of workers. It should be clear that business is about far more than rational economic decisions based on self-interest. “Dilbert,” like Captain Ahab, is uncannily current.

The success of “Dilbert,” then, is a reliable social barometer or index of mass discontent of organizational totalitarianism. It resonates with the cynicism, the mistrust, and the dread in many American workplaces. Adams’ comic strip is popular humor’s closest approximation to dissent and social protest. It is the closest our grim age comes to

satire. Because it resonates so truly and pervasively, “Dilbert” tells us as well as, if not better than, any scholarly essayist of our time that people are nonpersons, only “workers” and “producers.” They are only as good as they are useful, so long as one can exact work from them and then toss them aside as disposable, expellable waste. If the reader objects that I make too much of a mere comic strip and its creator, I can only reply that the meanings I infer are those that mass culture has created. The data of popular folklore are already there; I am only pointing them out. In a sense, American culture has created both Scott Adams and the “Dilbert” characters and scenarios in which we recognize ourselves—and pay to recognize this portrait of ourselves.

“Dilbert” speaks to, gives form to, a whole way of life that has come to be regarded as rational business-as-usual. “Dilbert” unmasks our self-deceptions and smoke screens. Adams refuses to go along with the crowd, with the officially-imposed corporate worldview. He tells us what we know but are afraid to admit directly: things are as bad as, if not worse than, they seem. Cruelty more than rationality rules many American workplaces.

“Dilbert” is testimony to the profound sense of loss that exceeds job, task, income, title, place, and self-worth. In some sense, the spirits of tens of millions of American workers have been broken, and few seem to notice and care (Uchitelle, 2006; Ehrenreich, 2006; Allcorn, Baum, Diamond, & Stein, 1996). American individualism and self-blame for failure prevent any concerted organized response. Fatalism, detached entrepreneurialism, and a frenetic pace in the workplace prevail. If the character of Dilbert is a symbol of this world, he is also a symptom.

“Dilbert” can be viewed from yet a second perspective. As David Levine writes, it is “worthwhile to consider Dilbert not only as an expression of the emotional experience of working in an organization, but [also] of the use of our workplace as a container for internalized object relations, so that the popularity of Dilbert tells us not only about organizations but [also] about ourselves” (personal communication, September 22, 2006). That is, “Dilbert” tell us about our inner representations of ourselves and of others, and how we project them onto external targets such as workplaces to manage our anxiety. In particular, we cast out of ourselves our aggression, guilt, shame, desires, and other forms of “badness,” and experience these not as (disliked, unlikable) aspects of ourselves, but as originating from the “bad” organization. Thus the “bad self” comes to be embodied (via projective identification) in the “bad (persecutory) organization.”

“Dilbert,” then, offers a *double* image of what workplace organizations feel like: the organization acting upon the self, and the (projected) self acting upon the organization. To make matters worse, we often hopelessly confuse and conflate the two, intensifying the experience of terror and punitiveness in the workplace.

Universal and Organizational Psychodynamics of Totalitarianism

Ideological systems such as “managed social change” and its related nomenclature do not stand or act on their own. Likewise popular cultural forms such as Scott Adams’ “Dilbert” cartoons continue to occupy newspaper and bookstore space because they appeal to the fantasies and fears of those who read and purchase them. They perform psychological functions vital to keep anxiety at bay and to fulfill unconscious desires. They are part of the psychological reality of American workplaces. They are part of “organizations in the mind” (Armstrong, 2005) as well as external structure. That is, “organizations and [other] groups exist...predominantly, *but not solely*, as an outcome of dynamic and changing individual and collective projections rooted in unconscious fantasies and emotions” (Diamond, Allcorn, & Stein, 2004, p. 32).

In a 2003 essay on “Fascism Resurgent” in the United States, psychoanalyst and psychohistorian David Lotto explores deep beneath the political, cultural, and ideological veneer of fascism and identifies certain universal psychodynamic features. He writes:

I suggest that fascism involves an exaggerated tendency toward the use of primitive splitting mechanisms, dividing the world into good and evil, and externalizing the evil by projecting it onto the alien enemy other while claiming exclusive possession of the good for oneself and one’s cohort. This way of looking at fascist impulses and actions allows us to see the commonality among a number of apparently disparate types of political activities. (p. 297)

Lotto situates the ideological spread of American fascist ideology in relation to the psychological as well as physical and political injury of the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001: “In times such as these, when we have been attacked and feel threatened and passions run high, there is a strong pull to respond to our narcissistic injury with narcissistic rage—to lash out against those we see as responsible for our pain” (p. 305).

One could expand this argument in space and time to include the responses of many businesses, corporations, industries, and other organizations to the now-chronic external climate of ruthless competition and the threat to organizational survival, rampant since the 1980s. Under such circumstances of psychological siege and attack, narcissistic leaders appeal to an us/them polarization, demand unquestioning loyalty, and quash all internal dissent. With their frequent invocation of threats of danger to the organization, they help induce regression and dependency upon their supposedly beneficent protection—which amounts to increased vulnerability in the guise of safety.

A process quite similar occurred in the American federal government’s immediate response to the devastating hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the late summer of 2005, and to the enormous flooding following the breaches in the levees protecting New Orleans. In a September 1, 2005, ABC “Good Morning America” interview with Diane Sawyer,

President George W. Bush declared “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees” (as cited in Froomkin, 2005). Likewise, on September 3, 2005, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff argued “That ‘perfect storm’ of a combination of catastrophes exceeded the foresight of the planners, and maybe anybody’s foresight.” He described the disaster as “breathtaking in its surprise” (“Chertoff,” 2005).

Despite the fact that the federal government had been abundantly warned about the precarious condition of the levees, federal officials insisted on their innocence, ignorance, and goodness, while vilifying the New Orleans government and the Louisiana government for a delayed and incompetent response to the disaster. “Mother” Nature, too, became labeled as the unpredictable enemy. In this national scenario, as in organizational life, leaders often resort to psychological splitting between us/them, good/bad, and count on frightened loyalty from followers.

Allcorn writes of the critical role of corporate ideology in establishing this either/or process:

Ideology aimed at destroying all opposing views to maintain the certainty of its [that is, the reified organization’s] righteousness and correctness, is a sign of simplicity triumphing over complexity and the regressive withdrawal into a primitive state of oneness and homogeneity. (2006)

Through ideology, leaders psychologically “bind” workers to the organization, whereby all opposing views are rejected and doubt is eliminated. For psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, in the fascist state of mind, “The mind ceases to be complex, achieving a simplicity held together initially by bindings around the signs of ideology” (1992, p. 201). Followers are recruited and subsequently “bound” to the ideology by the promise of alleviating intense anxiety and radically splitting the perceptual world into “good” people (us, insiders) and “bad” people (them, others).

Organizational leaders’ appeal to grave danger and their offer of a magical solution, is illustrated by the following story from Seth Allcorn:

I recall hearing of a meeting in a large teaching hospital that was called to formally announce that downsizing was about to ensue with the help of a notorious downsizing consulting group. The hospital CEO was speaking to all of upper and middle management, approximately 150 people. He explained the downsizing process this way. “You are standing on a train station platform. You have three choices. You can get on the train that is going where I want to go. You can wait just a little bit before deciding what you want to do. Or, you can get on the second train that is leaving the hospital.” Since I studied downsizing in depth as a researcher...I can bear witness to the fact that the metaphorical trains both lead to a man-made hell on earth. (1998, p. xii)

As I have described elsewhere (Stein, 1998; 2001), Nazi Holocaust-era trains are a widespread metaphor used by leaders, victims, and survivors to describe the harrowing experience of downsizing, reductions in force, rightsizing, and other forms of “managed social change.” The CEO offers Captain Ahab’s choice: follow me and you live; don’t follow me and you’re dead. The irony, of course, is that to follow Ahab is to doom oneself to death. Firm belief in the totalitarian ideology and the cause that it champions becomes more vital than life itself.

Before continuing, let me say a few words about the psychodynamics of *what is “total” in the ideology and practice of totalitarianism*. The work of a number of psychoanalytic writers converges to help us understand the psychodynamics of organizational and political totalitarianism, and hence the appeal of its ideology and its ability to mobilize people in its service. In his pioneering work on the adolescent quality of the either/or, inside/outside thinking that characterizes totalitarian ideologies, Erik Erikson distinguished between exclusivistic “totalistic” thinking and inclusivistic “wholism” in identity formation (1968, pp. 74–90). In “totalistic” thinking, an ideology is created and embraced that radically simplifies the world, repudiates if not destroys all opposing views, and is intolerant of all doubt.

Erikson described the universal process of dividing the world into what he called “pseudospecies” (pp. 41–42), by which all peoples to some degree describe themselves as *THE* human beings, and others as lesser and lower life forms. That is, there is a split in affect such that affiliative “good” feelings are associated with one’s own group, and disaffiliative “bad” feelings are associated with Others. “Inside” is idealized and “outside” is demonized. The Others “were at least useful as a screen of projection for the negative identities which were the necessary, if most uncomfortable, counterpart of the positive ones” (p. 41). Erikson continues: “The pseudospecies...is one of the more sinister aspects of all group identity” (p. 42).

This process becomes exaggerated and ossified in times of crisis, anxiety, and massive large group regression, as Vamik Volkan (1997; 2002) and Howard Stein (2004) have described. Under such circumstances, people come to rely on emergency psychological measures to protect themselves. What George Devereux (1955) called “catastrophic” thinking tends to seize the group, and the reduction of (psychotic) anxiety becomes the central obsession of the group and its leaders. Great effort is mobilized to revitalize the loss- and death-obsessed group (see La Barre, 1972). Under these simultaneously inner and outer circumstances, people come to re-experience annihilation anxiety, against which they defend themselves by the use of some of the earliest developmental defense mechanisms such as splitting, massive projective identification, and externalization. Identity rigidity replaces continuous identity development. “Total immersion in a synthetic identity” goes hand in glove with “a totally stereotyped enemy of the new identity” (Erikson, 1968, p. 89). Erikson continues:

The fear of loss of identity which fosters such indoctrination contributes significantly to that mixture of righteousness and criminality which, under

totalitarian conditions, becomes available for organized terror and for the establishment of major industries of extermination. (ibid.)

What W.R. Bion called unconscious “basic assumption”-type thinking, especially “fight-flight” vigilance and readiness to attack, tends to prevail. Likewise, what Pierre Turquet (1974) called the fourth basic assumption of group “oneness,” and what Michael Diamond and Seth Allcorn (1987) call group “homogenization,” overtake the functioning of the group. One willingly relinquishes critical faculties, and self-differentiation and integration, in the quest for absolute safety and certainty—a safety as much from one’s unconscious as from the reality one unconsciously provokes into attack. For example, under the spell of “oneness,” group “members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender self for passive participation, and thereby feel existence, well-being, and wholeness [cohesion]” (Turquet, 1974, p. 357). A transference contract is struck between charismatic, shaman-like, leader and group: the narcissistic leader promises to elevate the status of the emotionally deflated group, while the group promises to mirror and confirm the leader’s needy greatness (La Barre, 1972; Pauchant, 1991). Howard Schwartz (1987; 1990) has carefully linked the belief in organizational perfection with slavish feeding of the hierarchy’s grandiosity, and in turn with organizational totalitarianism.

The totalitarian group is paralyzed by an inability to “learn from experience” (Bion, 1962), and its reality testing capacity is impaired, because the external world is now mostly defined and inhabited by the evacuated contents of the unconscious, which is to say, the rejected parts of the self. At the individual level, the ego, impaired in its integrative function, constricts into an endless vigil of boundary maintenance to protect itself from the enemies it finds everywhere. Corporate leaders like Albert Dunlap, Jack Welch, Joseph Nacchio, and Dennis Kozlowski arrive uncannily on the cultural and corporate scene to rescue and revitalize the organization—only to debase it. The protection they offer is in fact a protection racket.

I turn now from a discussion of theoretical issues to a consideration of three vignettes taken from the corporate world. The vignettes will put flesh on the preceding literary and abstract discussion of organizational totalitarianism.

Three Illustrations of Totalitarian Discourse

Vignette 1: The Jew in Their Midst

The following vignette illustrates the operation of patently nationalistic and totalitarian thinking in ordinary workplace institutions such as businesses, corporations, and universities. It shows how mundane organizational fascism can be. The vignette entails a conflict between a unit director and a social scientist working in his unit in a large Research and Development Institute. The social scientist employee was known to

“have a mind of his own” and to often express a dissenting view in workplace meetings. The unit director (supervisor) liked to have tight control of his projects and workers, and regarded his employee/colleague as a “loose cannon.”

The supervisor was a brilliant, ambitious academic medical researcher who was building his own institute and a wide regional network. The language of their conflict points to the presence of unconscious as well as political issues fueling the strife. In the employee's narrative, the supervisor constantly degraded him and often humiliated him in private. Although the employee's ostensible job description was to serve as an applied sociologist on R & D projects, the supervisor forbade him to use the concepts of “culture” or “society” in his work because “Nobody will understand you.” He dictated the language of discourse the social scientist was permitted to use. The employee was widely published in the supervisor's field, but the supervisor often said to him:

You've published a lot, but very few people in the field can understand what you're saying....You keep asking for respect, but you don't deserve any....You've received numerous national awards for your work, but they are given by the wrong organizations. Don't you understand that they don't count around here?

Ironically, many of the ideas the employee proposed and championed, which the supervisor publicly ridiculed or harshly condemned, the supervisor later adopted as his own in projects, grant applications, and publications. When the employee would try to inquire about this mysterious appearance, the supervisor would insist that the ideas were his own, or had come from an entirely different source. He separated, dissociated himself from his colleague's influence.

On one occasion, the supervisor temporarily softened and confided in the employee:

Maybe I envy you a little. I've always wanted to be a field and stream biologist, not a hard driving researcher and administrator responsible for the production of a large group of people. I look at you and I see what I'd like to be: here's a guy who does what he likes and doesn't listen to anyone [an exaggerated characterization]. I sure would like to have the job description where I could devote 50% of my time to writing and publishing.

For a moment, the supervisor had allowed himself to identify consciously with his worker. Quickly, admiration returned to envy. What he could not have or be in himself, he had to destroy in his employee. The employee came again to embody what Erik Erikson spoke of as the “negative identity,” that is, the condensed image of everything one rejects about oneself and one's internal representations. On a later occasion, while the employee was driving the supervisor to an affiliate R & D site, the supervisor engaged in lecturing the employee as to the nature of his employee's problem. He was diagnosing his worker's problem, and then offering him help:

What is it with you Jews? You act just like the other Jews I've known. I've never been able to understand why you act as if you're so special. Look at the history of the Weimar Republic before Hitler came into power. Jews were over-represented in government, in the arts, in science, in medicine, in the media, in everything. They were in control of the whole country. Can't you understand why Germans wanted to get rid of them, to get their own country back?

It seems to me like the Jews bring persecutions upon themselves. I know it's terrible to say—and I'll deny that this conversation ever took place if you say anything about it—but the Jews push their way into everything. What happened to them was horrible, but much of it owes to their own doing. It's the same here in America. Jews have infiltrated the government, the news media, the arts, science. They want to control everything.

And you're just like them. You act as if everyone is against you, and it is not true. You get surprised when we push back. I don't know how to get you to realize that I'm on your side. You just need to downplay your writing projects in the home office. You've got to realize that few R & D specialists anywhere can read and understand your papers. Your future here in the corporation depends on your ability to be less rigid and to trust me.

In this corporate diatribe, the protection the supervisor proffered was a protection racket. The fee exacted from the employee was his independent thought and judgment. The supervisor had also touched something raw in himself. His employee had come to represent something sinister to him—that part of his own self that he had rejected in favor of the pursuit of success in the corporate world. Hypernationalist (Nazi) stereotypes and xenophobia played a central role in the supervisor's perception and experience of the workplace conflict. The supervisor's conflict with his employee was heavily colored by his own inner conflict. Organizational fascism took on an ordinary face even as it used the language of the Holocaust. The employee represented the voice of dissent which the supervisor had to co-opt or silence.

Vignette 2: Dissent and Eradication

For my second vignette, I want to focus on a single text, one that although not *statistically* representative is nonetheless *thematically* representative of the numerous workplace biographies I have heard and witnessed since the mid-1980s. A man I will call Dr. John Diamond had long been an accomplished academic physician in an urban medical center. He was consistently an outspoken critic of accepting statements from the chairman, dean, and provost without reflection or comment. His was a voice of dissent in a place that increasingly demanded lockstep thinking. In 1999 he was without warning summarily fired. In early October 2003, Dr. Diamond wrote a poignant, articulate letter to me. From an *instrumental*, that is, practical, point of view, he had found a new job after his firing—arguably a better one than he had before. From an *expressive*, that is, symbolic, viewpoint, however, he languished in a grief no one wanted to hear or

acknowledge. Kenneth Doka (1989) describes it as “disenfranchised grief”: losses that culturally do not merit acknowledgment and mourning, and are hence unsupported socially.

It is now [October 2003] more than four years since I last spoke with you. It was in late January of 1999 that I told you of my being *exiled* from my company. After telling you some of my story, you suggested that I should write about my experience. This is the first piece of writing I have done in four years.

My exile was executed in a chillingly, callous manner. The official explanation to me was that I was not a “team player.” I was told to leave the building immediately, lest the police be called. I was not allowed to gather my personal belongings, including my books, papers and photos of my family and friends. I was told my belongings would be catalogued and returned to me.

Others were told that they were forbidden to talk about me. To inquiries about me, the official response was, “Dr. Diamond no longer works here.” There would be no discussion of the circumstances of my exile. My name was not to be uttered, nor my accomplishments and contributions ever acknowledged, or even mentioned. In effect, I was “painted out” of the organization’s history. Stalin, who airbrushed Trotsky’s picture out of any official representation of the Russian Revolution, perfected this technique. As an organizational sacrifice, I was not killed. I was terminated. I had simply become a non-entity. I had metamorphosed into a “bug” [allusion to Franz Kafka’s story, “The Metamorphosis”].

Friends told me that after I left, it was as if I never existed in the land of the corporation. The person who replaced me, after asking, “What happened to Dr. Diamond?” was told, “Don’t ask.” My name was never spoken, and one person said, it was as if one day the sea parted, I fell in, and I was never to be heard from again.

I lost more than a job. My world stopped making sense. I was forever asking myself, and others, “How did this happen?”; “Why did this happen?”; “What did I do?” I simply could not explain what happened to me. My sense of unreality was fed by the silence of many around me. I was expected to “get over it,” to “deal with it,” to “get on with my life.” But if I was to “move on,” I needed to talk about what happened. Lacking an audience to hear my story, I was deprived of what Rafael Moses calls the *balm* of narcissistic injuries—acknowledgment.

My dreams mirrored my reality. Repeatedly I dreamt of being with former colleagues, people I thought of as friends, who “turned away from me” whenever I asked them what had happened to me. I found some solace when I read Primo Levi who wrote in *Survival in Auschwitz* of his own reoccurring dream, where he is telling others of his camp experience, and they are completely indifferent, as if not there. Levi asks: “Why is the pain of the

everyday translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the *unlistened-to-story*?”

I can attest to the assertion made by a variety of authors that being treated with *indifference* is the cruelest form of punishment. Indeed for me, there has been no greater pain than being ignored, rejected, unwanted, deemed insignificant and the like.

Although I did receive some support from a few people..., I often ask myself if the people who I thought were my friends ever wondered how I was, if I was surviving, if I was employed again, of even if I had committed suicide. I wonder what sort of euphemisms, rationalizations, justifications, or excuses they might make for not dropping a note or making a phone call to inquire about me and wish me well. (personal communication, October 16, 2003, all emphases in original)

Dr. Diamond’s story can be read and heard as both singularly unique and as an exemplar of narratives voiced by many victims and survivors of corporate totalitarianism’s violence. Here I will discuss several themes common to both. To begin with, there is a loss of a “world” (identity, sense of place), not merely a “job.” Moreover—and common to RIFs (reduction in force) and related disruptions—one is literally severed from the job and workplace. One is virtually thrown out (“exiled”) and abandoned with little or no warning or preparation. A third theme is the terrifying feeling of being transformed from a living human subject into a dead object, from a person to a non-person, a thing, a bug. Coupled with this is the withdrawal by others: a condemnation to the void of silence. No one is willing to listen to, validate, and give witness to one’s story. It is as if it never happened. One’s very existence is obliterated. Another theme is the evocation of Holocaust imagery and narrative as a trope with which to represent and comprehend one’s experience. There are as well other emotionally raw images and metaphors of violent attack upon oneself (e.g., Stalin’s eradication of Trotsky from official Russian Revolutionary history).

Yet another theme is the coercion one has and feels from others—superiors, colleagues, friends—to let go of the past and move on without first receiving the necessary affirmation of having been listened to. There is no bridge, only rupture. Memory itself is discounted. The story is too disturbing to be heard. Further, the story touches anyone who was in contact with the writer, a “touch” of which they anxiously try to rid themselves, lest they be “contaminated” with the same fate. They are admonished not to speak further of him, to kill him in their memories. Partly from fear of sharing his fate and from feelings of guilt and shame, they withdraw from him and from any memory of him. Personally and organizationally, he is obliterated. It no longer matters to them whether he is dead or alive.

Such is the power of projective identification and its counterpart in the victim or survivor, introjective identification. Riddance and haunting presences are the twin facets

of this organizational scapegoating and sacrifice. As if this is not enough, personal factors in one's developmental, family, and ethnic history are reawakened and played out on the stage of current workplace atrocity (cf. Terry, 1984). Still, despite the wide diversity of individual biographical experience, the narratives are strikingly similar. Further, this vignette distills the experience of American corporate *desaparecidos* (originally, Argentines who were brutally "disappeared" during the "dirty wars" of the 1980s) in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries (cf. Suarez-Orozco, 1990).

Vignette 3: I am the corporation

For my final vignette, I turn from local, individual, even private corporate experiences to a public, national, and international example of corporate totalitarianism and the suppression of dissent: the era of Leo Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco International (1976–2002). This vignette shows how the Kozlowski era at Tyco typifies and personifies corporate greed and corruption, and how corporate totalitarianism was an instrument to achieve them. For Kozlowski, people were exclusively a means to achieve personal aggrandizement. His corporate acquisitions numbered some two hundred per year. Under Kozlowski, Tyco came to include health care products, security systems, electronics, disposable diapers, and fiber-optic cables. In 2001, he fired 11,500 people and cut annual costs by \$350 million. Kozlowski was on the cover of *Business Week* in 2001, under the headline, "The Most Aggressive CEO."

As CEO of Tyco, with the help of CFO Mark Swartz, he obliterated the boundary between personal and corporate interest, manipulating Tyco's books to steal hundreds of millions of dollars, using stock options and outright grants, hiding unauthorized bonuses, and forgiving loans to himself. Reason and dissent were forbidden; only an idolatry of the leader was permitted. On the surface, Kozlowski ran a "successful lean conglomerate" (Maremont & Cohen, 2002). Behind the scenes, he "transferred massive sums of wealth to himself at the expense of shareholders" (ibid.). He sought managers who were "smart, poor, and [who] want[ed] to be rich." He made frequent reference to his working-class roots in Newark, New Jersey, and his work ethic, as though these justified his excesses.

He practiced humiliation in the service of profit. As president of Tyco's largest division, Grinnell Fire Protections Systems Company, he "cut overhead to the bone," set salaries low, and offered a bonus tied to profit—but with a twist. *BusinessWeek Online* reports that "Kozlowski held a banquet at which he presented awards not only to the best warehouse manager but also to the worst one. 'It was kind of embarrassing watching a guy go up,' says R. Jerry Conklin, a former Grinnell executive. 'It was like his death sentence.'" ("The Rise and Fall," 2002).

He claimed to be aligning the interests of management with those of the shareholders—whom he robbed. In deed if not in word, the few in management were the "us" to be looked out for, and investors, workers, and retirees were the "them" who were readily disposable. He invoked the American work ethic while secretly undermining and

mocking it. His grandiosity was bounded only by his ambition. Repeatedly he “proclaimed his desire to be remembered as the world’s greatest business executive, as a ‘combination of what Jack Welch put together at GE and Warren Buffett’s very practical ideas on how you go about creating return for shareholders.’” (ibid.).

Seventeen days before he was indicted for tax evasion, he said in a commencement speech at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire, “You will be confronted with questions every day that test your morals....Think carefully and, for your sake, do the right thing, not the easy thing” (Canabou, Germer, & Row, 2002). He accepted huge pay raises while “pronounc[ing] his distaste for runaway executive pay” (Maremont & Cohen, 2002). Declaring in 1997, “[Stock] options are a free ride” in his advocacy of a pay-for-performance program at Tyco, Kozlowski shortly thereafter received 3.3 million options. He was above the law he espoused. He extolled the virtues of austere workplaces, while building for himself palatial offices in Boca Raton, Florida. He told one visitor to Tyco’s official and simple two-story headquarters in Exeter, New Hampshire, “We don’t believe in perks, not even executive parking spots” (“The Rise and Fall,” 2002). The split between public pronouncement and private behavior, between an ethic of production and an ethic of consumption, could not be more pronounced.

The \$6,000 shower curtain for his extravagantly furnished Manhattan apartment fits well with a pattern of conspicuous consumption that included a \$15,000 umbrella stand. He held a million dollar birthday party on Sardinia for his wife, featuring a life-size ice sculpture of Michelangelo’s “David” urinating Stolichnaya vodka into cups. In interviews, he disavowed his own excess, denying, for instance, that he knew anything about the shower curtain: “People think that I’m a greedy guy; that I was overcompensated....Greed, I think, is the key word. But while I did earn enormous sums of money, which for a poor kid from Newark was spectacular, I worked my butt off and it was all based on my performance in Tyco’s long established pay-per-performance culture” (Sorkin, 2005). He went on to say, “I firmly believe that I never did or intended to do anything wrong....I never thought in my wildest imagination I or any of us did anything wrong my entire time there. I still cannot believe that they say words like larceny” (ibid.).

Because Kozlowski had fused personal interest with what he saw as corporate interest, he was certain he did no wrong. “They”—no doubt a dissociated guilty part of himself—are the ones that use words like larceny. What is more, Kozlowski could not have done his brazen deeds without collusion with lawyers, accountants, other executives, and the board of directors. Kozlowski and his inner circle engaged in secretly-run corporate totalitarianism, while believing that it was good for the company. Kozlowski publicly espoused corporate meritocracy and moderation, while secretly practicing organizational tyranny and excess.

A recent paper, “The Corrupt Organization,” by David P. Levine (2005), sheds considerable light on the widespread practices of which Kozlowski was a cultural exemplar during the heady 1980s through the early 2000s. Levine begins by saying that

...our motivation is to assure that we are good, which is to say worthy of love, rather than bad, which is to say unworthy of love. Psychically, those apparently varied things to which our greed attaches itself ‘all ultimately signify one thing. They stand as proofs to us if we get them, that we are ourselves good, and so are worthy of love, or respect and honor, in return’ (Riviere, 1964, p. 27). The language of corruption, by pointing us toward greed also points us toward moral thinking. But, it does so without acknowledging that greed can be defined within rather than in opposition to a moral world. (p. 736)

He continues by observing that the paradox between a CEO pillaging his company and professing small-town values

disappears when we bear in mind that the CEO did not conceive the company as something separate from his self, which is to say, he could not conceive a reality independent of his subjective experience and hope-invested fantasies. Since these hope-invested fantasies were fantasies about being identified with the good, they operated in a moral universe. The fantasized identification of the self with the good, or the fantasized realization of hope, meant that the personal good was the good, and what appeared from outside as self-aggrandizement was no more than the reward for being good. (p. 737)

Thus, in engaging in the practice of organizational totalitarianism, Kozlowski, like many of his contemporaries, could be terrorizing and ruining the lives of millions while being convinced that he was serving the highest good. At the cultural level, he could engage in totalitarian discourse and practice, while believing that he was living the all-American work ethic of “pay-per-performance.” Dissent was prohibited; the only voice allowed was his and echoes of his. For all the world, Kozlowski could have been Captain Ahab on the Pequod.

The Psychocultural World of the Vignettes

Certainly one cannot generalize in a quantitative sense from these three vignettes. Nevertheless, they are culturally exemplary for our times. They illustrate psychological terror in the American workplace from the perspectives of both the victims and perpetrators. Not unlike Starbuck on the Pequod, the researcher in the first vignette, and Dr. Diamond in the second vignette, are minimized, discounted, and either symbolically eliminated or threatened with elimination. And not unlike the driven Captain Ahab, Tyco’s Dennis Kozlowski relentlessly chased his symbolic whale of shareholder value, fame, and fortune—only to be brought down by the object of his obsession.

Lest we forget, even though American-style organizational totalitarianism has primarily symbolic casualties, they are casualties of terror nonetheless. One should never say that these are “only” the victims of psychological oppression. And even though most of those who have been disposed of are resilient and find other jobs (usually of lesser pay, benefits, and status), they carry the emotional scars of betrayal and of having been treated as inanimate “dead wood” or as trimmed “fat.” Once we recognize the official language of economics to be the smokescreen that it is, we have no trouble in discerning the brutality—even sadism—that it has obscured. Yiannis Gabriel (2006a; 2006b) has recently invoked the term “miasma” to characterize life in those organizations whose atmosphere is thick with loss, dread, and pollution. We have created inconsolable organizations.

In the broader view, the short-term economic surge of stock value has become our central cultural defense against death-anxiety (Becker, 1973), just as the corporation for many has become our predominant immortality symbol. Organizational totalitarianism has been the key instrument to make all the “sacrifices” necessary to keep the corporation “alive.” In this atmosphere of dire emergency, no voices of dissent are permitted.

Finally, we would do well to inquire into who, precisely, are the victims of organizational totalitarianism. The most obvious answer is that they are those who are terminated (by whatever corporate euphemism), and their families. Upon further reflection, we must add those who remain (“alive”) on the job, from line-workers to managers, because they are also victims of often brutal oppression. They are pressured to incorporate in their jobs the work that remains from those who were fired or restructured, to perform it more efficiently, and therefore to be more productive. All the while, they labor under the constant threat—and accompanying anxiety—of being made redundant (as the British call it) and disposable. Ultimately, in fact, no one is safe, from the worker on the factory floor to the CEO in the corporate penthouse, because anyone can be fired at any time, creating a breeding ground for abandonment and annihilation anxiety.

We must ask what happens internally, interpersonally, as a work group, and as an organization, to those who have been through often multiple firings and who are “waiting for the second shoe to fall”? What do the “survivors” (as they often call themselves) give up of themselves—of personal integrity, values, ethics—in order to survive? What do they become, to themselves, and to others? My sense is that many turn into virtually symbolic *Muselmann* characters, emotionally devastated if not destroyed, continuing in a kind of living death. The original *Muselmann* characterized men and women inmates in the Nazi death camps “who had been broken psychically and physically by life in the camp” (“Muselmann”). There is the quality of brokenness amid the manic pace of contemporary organizational life, and behind the mask of entrepreneurship, narrow self-interest, and steely indifference (“It’s just a job.”).

Although there is no literal blood to be found, everyone knows nonetheless that there is blood on the walls and floors (Allcorn, Baum, Diamond, & Stein, 1996).

Common expressions such as “organizational Siberia,” “career-limiting decision,” and “the walking wounded” all speak to a common emotional, if not visceral, experience under the domination of organizational totalitarianism. Under such menacing circumstances, the official and legal protection offered to “whistleblowers” offers little comfort to those who now silence themselves.

The question arises as to what legitimately may be expected from the workplace. “Legitimacy,” of course, is what is at issue, and it is heavily weighted by unconscious as well as conscious desires, fantasies, and defenses. Is it appropriate to search for and expect good-enough mothering from the American workplace? Indeed, why would people do this, since workplaces are, after all, places in which some form of labor is expected in exchange for compensation? It would seem that regressive fantasy is at play in the widespread demand for a perfect, conflict-free, and “fun” workplace. Surely part of legitimate workplace entitlement properly comes from management, the employer, and includes assessment of the quality and quantity of work, and punishment (if not dismissal) for tasks poorly performed.

Trouble and conflict arise when there is confusion in workers and employers about what a workplace *is* and what a workplace is *for*. There is commonly displacement of familial and internal object relations onto organizations, leading to the expectation that the workplace will be entirely a nurturing mother (security) and a never-demanding father (accountability). It would seem that in the least employees need to feel secure enough and taken care of enough to get work done. That is precisely the “psychological contract” the world of organizational totalitarianism has abrogated: to be treated as a person who deserves respect rather than as a thing to be mercilessly worked and discarded. The “work” of a workplace should not include degradation, intimidation, and terror.

Conclusions

In sum, this paper has offered a psychodynamically-grounded ethnographic approach to understanding and explaining the totalitarian discourses that have emerged in American workplaces since the 1980s. I have focused on the language, argumentation, and metaphors of dissent management, and have offered three vignettes that illustrate the brutality of this process. It is my hope that I have not only helped to portray and account for organizational totalitarianism, but that I have also validated the experience of readers who have been reluctant to assign so ideologically foreign a label to something now pervasive in American work life.

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