



# F\*\*k Science!? An Invitation to Humanize Organization Theory

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## Abstract

For over half a century, systems psychodynamic scholars have been ‘sexting’ organization science, in short quips and long form, with mixed reception. This article chronicles their ambivalent relationship and argues that making it closer and more overt would benefit organization theory and organizations. It begins by tracing the history of using science as a cover for an instrumental ideology in organizations and their study. It is a history, the article contends, that is repeating itself with the advance of algorithmic capitalism. The article makes the case for a systems psychodynamic stance as a form of progress and protest, a way to embrace science’s methodical pursuit of truth while countering its dehumanizing potential. Taking this stance, it argues, might lead to more humane organization studies. That is, to more meaningful accounts of, and more useful theories about, the issues facing organizations, organizing, and the organized today. Finally, the article elaborates how systems psychodynamics can help humanize three areas of scholarship – those on identities, leadership, and institutions – and concludes with a call for celebrating, rather than tolerating, subjectivity in organization theory.

## Keywords

emotions, humanization, identity, institutions, learning, organization theory, organizational learning, systems psychodynamics

The Cold War was quietly raging. The yuppies were dressing up capitalism as bold fashion. The internet was still embryonic. It would take three decades for algorithms to begin replacing bureaucracies as instruments of optimization and harbingers of alienation. It was the 1980s. At a

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prominent school of business, a doctoral defence was coming to a close. The PhD candidate had presented an action research study of the psychodynamics of one organization. The dissertation format – interpretive theorizing from personal engagement with a single case – had been central to Sigmund Freud’s articulation of psychoanalysis and remains a textured and controversial way to craft theory about organizing and the organized to this day. A faculty member on the candidate’s committee cleared their throat. ‘I find this an interesting story,’ they remarked. ‘But I wonder whether it is science.’ It was not lost on the committee chair, one of the scholars who had taken psychoanalysis from the consulting room to the workplace, that the remark was not addressed to the examinee. ‘I certainly believe it is,’ he quipped calmly looking at their colleague in the eyes. ‘But if this isn’t science, well, then. . . fuck science!’

Some version of this story, which I have anonymized at the request of those involved, has played out countless times between cognitive and psychodynamic scholars, and between positivists and interpretivists more broadly. Take the egos out of it, and it boils down to different epistemological positions about what constitutes data, how to collect or produce it, and how to turn it into a story that can legitimately be called theory (Habermas, 1972). Scholars who study the psychodynamics of social systems reject the positivist notion of selves, organizations and institutions as entities to be studied by uninvolved researchers. They regard selves, organizations and institutions instead as products of relations that can only be studied through living relationships, not detached observation (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Fitzsimons, 2012).

The psychodynamic study of organizations had enjoyed some popularity in the decades that followed its inception (Trist & Murray, 1990). By the time that dissertation defence occurred, however, economics had replaced anthropology as the main methodological and conceptual partner of sociology (Kalleberg, 1989) and the turn towards positivist approaches in organization

studies was complete (Khurana, 2007). In practice, advocates of humanistic approaches that sought to decentralize power were regarded as ‘heretics’ (Kleiner, 1996). Psychological repression, a common fate for psychodynamic insights, had given way to institutional oppression (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). No wonder a proponent blew up.

That reading is sensible and sanitizes the story’s climax. But what if we took that crude retort as a ‘sext’ of sorts, an explicit message between troubled lovers? What if we looked at it psychoanalytically, that is, as doublespeak? Nothing could be more so than a profanity in a ritual, and one that evokes sexuality to express desire and aggression. (Oedipus, the alter ego of psychoanalysis, is forever interesting and troubled because of that, a subversive attraction to the establishment.) Seen that way, the scene becomes a dramatic representation of the struggle between instinct and institution, and of a concern for both, a struggle and a concern that we must experience and examine if we aspire to humanize organization and management science.

By the time that collegial exchange occurred, systems psychodynamic scholars had been ‘sexting’ organization science for decades, challenging and courting it at once. These scholars valued rigorous scientific inquiry but rejected its defensive and oppressive use. Their aggression was aimed at a parody of purity that reassured social scientists of the solidity of their academic enterprises but made it shameful to account for conflicted subjects in complex contexts, be they researchers or researched. The reductionist, detached science that Frederick Taylor popularized and that continued to take hold, as they saw it, was a dehumanizing force in objective disguise. The science they desired was a braver and more conscious one, an embodied and embedded science that could partner openly with subjectivity and practice to maximize their contributions to the pursuit of valuable knowledge. A science that would not only predict or critique but also defy and embrace, normalizing people’s wishes to do all of those, at times at once and often at work.

That project remains worthwhile and incomplete, and I aim to advance it with this article.

## Scientific Instrumentality and Its Discontents

Few scholars have influenced organizations and their study as much as Frederick Taylor. At the turn of the 20th century, the mechanical engineer pioneered data-based approaches to study and enhance industrial efficiency (Taylor, 1911). That his theory of scientific management is also known as Taylorism shows the extent to which it soon became an influential ideology. The theory encouraged its adherents to take a methodical stance when managing and organizing in order to minimize error and waste. The ideology blinded the same adherents from the alienation that their management and organizations provoked. Scientific management, in other words, was both a solution and a justification. Casting subjectivity as a source of error, it promised to improve efficiency in large bureaucracies and provided moral justification for trapping workers in what Weber (1958) would label 'iron cages' of rational control. In the eye of the Taylorists, control was a necessity and an acceptable price. Those bureaucracies, after all, upheld a social contract in which people traded compliance for long-term employment. Although Marx (1844) firmly doubted it, accepting to be treated as cogs in dehumanizing capitalist machines might give them means to express their humanity elsewhere.

The diffusion of scientific management inspired a countermovement, whose sparks were Elton Mayo's famous Hawthorne studies. The human relations movement, as it came to be called, challenged the rationality of neglecting workers' experience and used scientific experiments to prove that employee satisfaction improved productivity (Mayo, 1933). Human relations scholars put workers back into organization theory, showing that productivity hinged on countering alienation and bolstering 'the belief of the individual in his social function and solidarity with the group' (Mayo, 1933, p. 159). Organizations might be machines, Mayo argued, but people were still people. Managers who paid

attention to their needs would channel a larger fraction of their energy towards productive work. Like Taylor's, Mayo's work soon crossed the line between theory and ideology, promising a remedy for the problem of alienation and providing a justification for a more humane, if paternalistic, approach to management.

While it critiqued scientific management, the human relations movement sought to temper rather than to oppose its instrumentality. Within its prescriptions, humanism remained subjugated to increasing efficiency and alignment. The movement advocated for a benevolent instrumentality that suited the stately aspirations of elite industrialists of the time (Mizruchi, 2013), and paved the way for the slow rise of normative control (Barker, 1993). It made what could be called, in management vernacular, the business case for padding the iron cage so as to make workers more docile and productive (Gabriel, 1999). It would take one more decade for an alternative to emerge that tried to reconcile the seemingly incompatible aims of improving organizations' productivity and freeing workers up. An alternative that challenged both the techno-utopianism of scientific management and the sedative appeasement of human relations.

That alternative - a stream of scholarship that built on the seminal work of Wilfred Bion, Kurt Lewin, Eric Trist and their associates during and after World War II (Trist & Murray, 1990) - would come to be known as systems psychodynamics (Neumann, 1999). Born out of the combination of object relations (Klein, 1959) and open system theories (Von Bertalanffy, 1950), 'systems psychodynamics' refers to a body of scholarship and a set of research methods. Its theories highlight the reciprocal influence between systems of organization and psychological dynamics in organizations, revealing the ways in which social structure and norms constrain or support individuals' inner world, and the ways in which people's inner worlds, in turn, shape the structure and norms of organizations, rendering them rigid or adaptive (for a review, see Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Its methods provide a discipline to develop

truthful, useful, and generalizable insights from a field that one is a part of (for a review, see Berg & Smith, 1985). While I draw on both, neither is my focus in this paper. What I focus on here is the systems psychodynamic *stance* and its value for organization theory.

## Liberating Insight and Organizing Freedom

I focus on stance, rather than on the epistemology, methods or style of theorizing, of systems psychodynamic scholars because stance is a metaphor that best accounts for their work as a whole, and in context. By stance, I refer to a way to ‘apprehend and appropriate experience as a subject, to grasp phenomenal experience as one’s own’ (McAdams, 1997, p. 56) and to relate to the systems in which, about which and for which one translates experience into theory. A stance is personal, practical and political. It encompasses an approach to knowledge production and the pursuit of normative ideals. A stance has history, context and consequences. Every body, even a body of work, stands in some place, some way, for something. Or it does not stand.

The scholars who first embodied the systems psychodynamic stance were drafted to study and foster organizational effectiveness, social cohesion and personal resilience among the allied forces in World War II – an existential struggle against totalitarianism in which they were personally involved (Fraher, 2004; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020; Trist & Murray, 1990). Their stance involved subjectivity and participation from the start. It advocated for the value of personal engagement (Kahn, 1990) at work, including academic work. And it regarded productive organizing and individual freedom as equally important aims. Technical efficiency at the expense of freedom was, after all, the very ethos that they had been called to stand against.

The influence of that ethos, and the need to counter it to study organizations well and help them change for the better – two endeavours that Lewin (1946) saw as inseparable – hardly ended with the war. Neither did those scholars’ loyal

defiance. It continued to animate their work. Eric Trist recalled how their scholarship demonstrated that ‘the technological imperative could be disobeyed with positive economic as well as human results’ (Trist, 1981, p. 9). Doing so required treating the structure, processes and norms of organizations and the longings, thoughts and actions of individuals as deeply intertwined (Neumann & Hirschhorn, 1999), and unearthing and upending arrangements that pit productivity against autonomy (Miller, 1999).

Psychoanalysis provided a conceptual, methodological and ideological starting point. Freud (1900) had observed that the conflict between collective demands and individual desires, or more precisely the ongoing management of that conflict, defined human subjects and shaped relationships (Gabriel, 2015; Petriglieri, 2020). He had also cast the psychoanalytic relationship as a conduit for liberating knowledge, both in the sense of producing insights about the oppressive influence of institutions, and in the sense of freeing up individuals from that oppression. Freud had faith in knowledge. Later psychoanalytic scholars would argue that relationships mattered more, recasting them not just as means for fulfilment, oppression or insight but as ends in themselves (Bion, 1961; Klein, 1959). Selves are the products of relationships, they argued, that make us feel free and real or captive and fake (Winnicott, 1960).

Systems psychodynamic scholars built on this relational turn, documenting how the management of a related conflict, between alignment and autonomy, structured organizations (Miller & Rice, 1967). They argued that the unconscious could produce more than neurotic symptoms. It could unsettle and structure institutions (Vince, 2019). Looked at and felt up close, as field researchers were bound to do, seemingly dysfunctional features of organizations – features that seemed to hamper their productivity or flexibility – served an alternative function that had to do with producing members’ emotions and identities. For this reason, such features were often resistant to data-driven and well-meaning efforts to change (French & Vince, 1999; Gabriel, 1999; Hirschhorn, 1988;

Kahn, 2012; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, 2015, 2020).

In a seminal study of a nursing unit, for example, Menzies (1960) theorized that an impersonal system of job rotations served as a ‘social defence’ against the distress of becoming too close to very ill patients. The impersonal system, Menzies found, resulted in efficient but dehumanizing care. People reviled the rotations but resisted changing the system. The reason, Menzies theorized, is that it organized professional detachment. It sustained both the provision of care and the denial of death. In a study of a consulting firm, Padavic, Ely and Reid (2019) extended Menzies’ theory documenting how social defences (re-)produce power structures. They found that the firm’s embrace of work-family conflict as the explanation for women’s stalled advancement allowed a working culture that favoured men to remain unchallenged. Furthermore, the concern that firm’s leaders expressed with the work–family conflict cast them as benevolent rather than complicit in that culture. In both studies, in order to bolster familiar identities, emotions and power structures, social defences hampered members’ efforts to think critically about the organization’s history and creatively about its future, and to initiate change.

As these studies illustrate, systems psychodynamic theories part with traditional psychoanalysis in two ways. The first is by focusing on how the nature and organization of people’s work shape subjectivity and relations, and vice versa, rather than early attachments. The second is by abandoning the detachment of the early psychoanalytic stance. Insight into history and power structures will not free us up from institutional arrangements that keep us captive, this work implies. Liberating knowledge is not enough without organizing freedom. Studying organizations in depth, then, is only the beginning. Developing productive and humane organizations is the end. And it requires finding better ways – that is, more conscious and more inclusive ways – to manage the tension between getting things done and getting people’s needs met. Better, that is, than forcing conformity and

alignment. That better way, for systems psychodynamic scholars, goes by the name of democracy (Winnicott, 1950).

Democracy is, for systems psychodynamic theories, the collective equivalent of individual mental health. A state where free associations are possible, meaningful and useful – even if they are not always coherent, realistic or pleasant. Just as the humanism of psychoanalysis is based on an ambivalent view of human nature, which requires redeeming in relationships, the humanism of systems psychodynamics is not one based on ideals of emotional or rational communitarianism, where all might agree on what is good or best. Psychoanalysis regards the unitary self with suspicion, as a product of repression. Similarly, systems psychodynamics regards the ideal of a homogeneous community as a product of oppression. A healthy self, from this perspective, is a consciously ambivalent one, able to be of two minds and to change its mind. A healthy relationship is one in which strife enriches intimacy. And a healthy social system is one that supports multiplicity and participation, allowing different voices to be represented and channelling conflicts towards learning and work. A free self, seen this way, is neither an entity to discover nor an illusion to disabuse. It is a condition of possibility, one that can only be realized in holding relationships and democratic institutions (Fitzsimons, 2012; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Winnicott, 1960). Freedom is in associations.

The intent of countering totalitarian impulses within psyches and in organizations, and fostering participation in scholarly and industrial enterprises, makes a systems psychodynamics stance deliberately subversive in institutions devoted to instrumentality. Its advocacy for the necessity of conflict for productive communion, succinctly captured in the quip ‘f\*\*k science’, if only with care, was a radical challenge to the ideas that detachment is the foundation of productive scholarship and alignment that of productive organization. The use of science in pursuit of alignment, seen this way, is a form of collusion with those totalitarian impulses. By doing so, as a scholar or as a manager, ‘one avoids having to confront painful, often political



and conflictual issues that lie within the substantive realm' (Krantz & Gilmore, 1990, p. 194).

Unlike the docile engagement of the human relations movement, the stance that early systems psychodynamic scholars took and advocated was caring and defiant. Theirs was a humanism that refused to just conform or resist and promised to be of value because it would be a strange bedfellow, not a remissive or rebellious handmaiden, for instrumentality. 'We were never going to create adequate controls over runaway technologies,' recalled Ken Benne, an associate of Kurt Lewin, 'unless we also develop[ed] people that [could] manage it with human values at the front of their mind' (quoted in Freedman, 1996, p. 336). As with other strains of 'humanist science' (Selznick, 2008), this too met with resistance. Standing for a science engaged with organizations but on the side of the organized as much as of the organizers, torn between wishes to document and intervene, dismantle and develop, made systems psychodynamics marginal in academia – a position that preserved its integrity but threatened its legitimacy (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020; see also Fotaki, Long, & Schwartz, 2012; Pratt & Crosina, 2016).

## The Past is not Dead. Google It

I indulged in a history of the tense triangle between scientific management, human relations and systems psychodynamics for two reasons – convention and intention. First, a systems psychodynamic stance calls for consideration of the personal and social ground on which principles and ideas emerge. Second, the history that gave rise to systems psychodynamic theories is in the process of repeating itself with algorithms in place of bureaucracies at the service of instrumental and maybe totalitarian powers. Zuboff (2019) has chronicled with chilling clarity the rise of 'surveillance capitalism' over the past two decades. 'A rogue force,' as she put it, 'driven by novel economic imperatives that disregard social norms and nullify the elemental rights associated to individual autonomy that are

essential to the very possibility of a democratic society' (Zuboff, 2019, p. 11). The very rights, that is, that systems psychodynamic scholars fought to preserve and embed in the industrial workplaces and societies of the 20th century.

If rational and normative controls took turns in influencing management and organization in the past century (Barley & Kunda, 1992), algorithms have made it possible to blend them in this one. Look at the Uber algorithm's power over the income of its drivers. At the algorithmic management of working conditions in an Amazon fulfilment centre. At the Facebook algorithm's influence on our social bonds and political beliefs. At the Google algorithm's subtle and indelible monitoring of our every twitch online. Read about the oppressive bias baked into all of those, and many more (Noble, 2018). Then look behind those algorithms, which neither came into existence by divine fiat nor through natural evolution. They were researched, funded and built – bringing profits and power to those who yield them. The algorithm is just an invisibility cloak for ancient instincts in novel ecosystems, where with a swipe on our smartphone we can unlock the tightest and vastest of iron cages in history.

It might be psychoanalytic to argue, as William Faulkner (1951) put it, that 'the past is never dead. It's not even past.' (Big tech platforms are ever more like the Freudian unconscious, that way. No wish or memory ever disappears. They linger, posing a vague threat, and pop back up at inopportune moments.) It is more in tune with systems psychodynamics, however, to observe how 'Everything must change so that everything can stay the same.' Those fictional words, which Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958), in *The Leopard*, put on the lips of a Sicilian aristocrat switching allegiances to a new foreign monarch to preserve his family's local influence, would not be out of place if uttered by an organizational leader or scholar today.

Looked at from a distance, industry and academia are very different than they were in the 20th century. Stable hierarchies, codified careers and long-term employment are going the way of

glaciers. The social contract between workers and employers has changed from one based on long-term loyalty to one based on short-term interest (Rousseau, 1990). Transient and looser relationships have replaced stable communities and tight social bonds (Sennett, 2006). Individuals must shoulder the risk and uncertainty of employment (Beck, 2000; Jacoby, 1999; Neff, 2012). The digital bubbles in which we float on turbulent markets bear little resemblance to the iron cages of old (Lane, 2011). The fetishization of identity – a source of anxiety, object of desire, and lucrative product – is the opposite of anomie (Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003). Work used to be suffocating (Whyte, 1956). It now leaves us utterly alone (Murthy, 2017).

Welcome to the ‘new world of work’ (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018). This is what those of us who have secure jobs in academia, ourselves a shrinking fraction of universities’ faculties, have taken to call the predicament of workers for whom such jobs have become a mirage. And we don’t get it, the consensus seems to be. In 1994, the President of the Academy of Management lamented that ‘in pursuing scientific rigor our research has become increasingly irrelevant and incestuous, mattering only to ourselves’ (Hambrick, 1994, p. 381). For a quarter century since then, a stream of exhortations has called on scholars to question old theories based on ‘petrified images of work’ that no longer exist (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 84; see also Kalleberg, 2009) and to address the ‘grand challenges’ of our times (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). Everything has changed, a sizeable literature on our academic provincialism appears to say, but we have remained the same and we don’t seem to care or matter much (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002).

‘Our images of organizations reflect our ignorance,’ Bechky (2011) wrote, ‘resulting in abstract theories that privilege structure and contradict people’s experiences’ (p. 1157). Even the future does not look bright. ‘We are on the verge of an all-you-can-eat buffet of organizational data suitable for regressionology,’ warned Davis (2015), that ‘could result in a high

volume of novel papers with sophisticated econometrics and no obvious prospect of cumulative knowledge development’ (p. 180). Those papers, he concluded, will be of little social value. Echoing Davis’s view, Barley (2016) argued that while business yields enormous power, management academia’s scientific detachment from what is happening in the world amounts to ‘a kind of existential crisis’ for organization theory (p. 3). It can be useful, when in such a crisis, for people to turn to psychoanalysis. It might be prudent for our scholarship too.

## **The Machines We Have Become**

Seen through a systems psychodynamics lens, the novelty and otherness that academia attributes to the contemporary workplace and the detachment that it claims are somewhat suspicious. When you look closely, the tempered instrumentality born from the age-old marriage of convenience between scientific management and human relations is on display at every company that embraces technological disruption while serving free kale salads to its dwindling workforce. At every business school whose curriculum offers a main course of shareholder value maximization with a side of behavioural ethics. At both when enthusiasm for the potential of ‘big data’ lives side by side with pleas for virtuous ‘leadership’.

We ignore that which we cannot forget, says psychoanalysis (Phillips, 1997). And if we can, systems psychodynamics add, we build organizations that help us keep our secrets in plain sight (Vince, 2019). Looked at this way, claims of distance from the ‘new’ world of work might be a social defence against its familiarity. If surveillance capitalism is so unprecedented that we can barely see it, let alone learn about it, as Zuboff (2019) contends, then we cannot be part of it, let alone have built it. But what if we have? What if organization studies’ lack of relevance is a cover story, and our inadequacy a way to deny responsibility for a workplace that reflects the ethos of mainstream management

science? An instrumental ethos, that is dressed in elegant scientific methods, pursued deliberately and professed systematically on the back of a quest for academic legitimacy, elite status and a share of the profits (Khurana, 2007).

Leavitt (1989) once disparaged MBA curricula heavy on analytics and light on humanity, in the way that we critique social media today, claiming that they turned students into ‘critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts and shrunken souls’ (p. 39). One might read that portrait as a form of projective identification, that is, a way to characterize a close other in ways that reveal unwanted features of ourselves (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). ‘When we, as academics, plead powerlessness in choosing what we research [. . .] because of incentive and reward systems [. . .],’ Rynes (2007) has observed, ‘we dehumanize our careers and our lives’ (p. 747), somewhat as people dedicated to the pursuit of money (Ruttan & Lucas, 2018).

Reviewing the literature on dehumanization and its dire consequences, Haslam (2006) posited two ways of demeaning others’ humanity or our own. One is a ‘mechanistic’ dehumanization, which consists of denying attributes that make humans distinct from machines, such as emotionality, individuality, depth. The other is an ‘animalistic’ one, which consists in denying attributes that make humans distinct from other animals, such as refinement, rationality and restraint. The former casts its targets as heartless automatons, the latter casts them as hotheaded brutes. Through the prism of Haslam’s framework, the history of the positivist and instrumentalist turn in organization studies (Khurana, 2007; Pfeffer, 2016) looks like a form of mechanistic self-dehumanization; the concurrent marginalization of interpretive and humanistic perspectives (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020; Selznick, 2008) as a form of animalistic dehumanization of those who did not fit the ideal of a ‘real scientist’. And their purposeful, if not conscious, estrangement sustains a split between theory and practice, knowledge and experience, research and teaching, that dampens insightfulness and defiance. As a result, one finds as little humanity left in our published work as in the modern workplace.

If they consider it at all, Pfeffer (2016) has warned, contemporary organizational scholars treat well-being and relationships as means to economic ends, rather than ends in themselves. Even when studying relationships, scholars often treat them as sequences of actions and reactions, rather than as ongoing interactions between partners (Lepisto, Crosina, & Pratt, 2015). This preoccupation for variables instead of relations might not be good science so much as bad art. It paints a flat portrait of people as ‘actors’, constantly trying to influence others and their environment, and being influenced by them in turn, seldom being and joining for its own sake. This is nowhere more visible than in leadership research (Glynn & Raffaelli, 2010) and case studies (Anteby, 2013), where ‘the role and importance of social context, including one’s upbringing, in explaining outcomes are likely to be deemphasized [and] individuals are mostly depicted as being in charge of their destiny’ (p. 141). Such portraits are void of the conflicts and contradictions that are part of leading and human living (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015).

‘A precondition for making business studies a science,’ Ghoshal (2005) argued, ‘has been the explicit denial of any role of moral or ethical consideration in the practice of management’ (p. 79) that runs counter to the experience of managing (Bolden & Gosling, 2006), or at least of the kind of management that is not dehumanized. Given the self-fulfilling nature of social theories, Ghoshal (2005) concluded, ‘social scientists carry an even greater social and moral responsibility than those who work in the physical sciences because, if they hide ideology in the pretense of science, they can cause much more harm’ (p. 87). In other words, organization science may well be both influential and meaningless. Before we worry about the machines that are coming, then, let us worry about the machines we have become.

‘Far from enhancing human knowledge,’ Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017) contend, social science ‘is creating a vacuum of meaning’ (p. 12). If that is the case, social science again mirrors the workplace, where most people claim to float in the same void (Achor, Rees, Rosen



Kellerman, & Robichaux, 2018). But what would a meaningful organization science and working life be like? They would be ones where people can be fully human in pluralistic institutions. A systems psychodynamic stance, with its dedication to whole people in democratic systems, and to an equal regard for instrumental and humanistic aims, could help craft such science and lives. No wonder this stance has witnessed an academic resurgence (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; *Organization Studies*, 2012; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2018; Padavic et al., 2019) deemed as a 'return of the oppressed' (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). When conditions are stable, statistics might suffice. When institutions fail us and leaders seem to go crazy, we must (re-)turn to psychoanalysis.

## Human Relations 2.0?

Since automation is said to be ushering a 'fourth industrial revolution' (Schwab, 2017) that looks a lot like a Taylorist reformation, it is time for a second human relations movement. If we must call it human relations 2.0, so be it, but such a movement must aim to achieve more than getting managers to pay lip service to the emotions of workers organized by algorithms. It must defy the elegant dehumanization of scholarship and workplaces, – and highlight how conflicts and contradictions may trouble yet ultimately enrich both. It must abjure the religion of efficiency and alignment to build psychological and social containers for multiplicity. Such a movement might counter not only the tyranny of automation – or more precisely, the automation of tyranny – but also the globalization of tribalism, a trend that one might see as a defensive reaction to the isolation, precariousness and fragmentation of working lives. The dehumanization of scholarship and workplaces, in fact, might be the love child of technology and tribalism. Both are prone to dehumanize, only in different ways (Haslam, 2006).

A systems psychodynamic stance is well positioned to provide the intellectual and emotional backbone to human relations 2.0. Since its inception, systems psychodynamic scholarship has been concerned with how organizations

move people and vice versa, and with how people and organizations keep each other numb and stuck. It has interrogated and challenged the use of science and technology as a cover for dehumanizing powers (Trist, 1981). If anything, a systems psychodynamic stance is apt to examine how power differences affect the division of emotional labour (Padavic et al., 2019) in institutions, so that, for example, a secluded elite might suffer from an excess of meaning, manifesting as an unshakeable belief in the power of science and technological connections, while floundering masses suffer from a void of meaning, manifesting as a sense of powerlessness and disconnection.

The reasons a systems psychodynamic stance is suited to humanize organization studies are threefold. First, it values conflict. The focus on how unconscious forces counter conscious intent provides a lens to theorize contradictions in the human experience. Its efforts to account for, and integrate, conflicting elements is an antidote to the focus on linearity and alignment. Second, it values relations. The focus on how emotions, meaning and structure emerge in relationships is an antidote to essentialism and isolation. The assumption that 'relationships are the vehicle through which the researcher comes to understand a social system' (Berg & Smith, 1985, p. 23), furthermore, humanizes scholarship. Third, it values defiance. Its intent to subvert power and resistance, and to foster participation, is suited to challenge the authority of detached leaders and docile authors whose work is dehumanizing. The assumptions that people have more than one wish, relations more than one subject, and institutions more than one aim, in short, make a systems psychodynamic stance fitting those who wish to 'f\*\*k science' with integrity and care. The result would be more human, yet no less scientific, organization studies.

## Humanizing Identities, Leadership and Institutions

Taking a systems psychodynamic stance means acknowledging, and examining, the unconscious influence of emotions and power on

subjectivity, agency and institutions. (First of all, one's own. Only then, the ones that one is hoping to research and help.) It means taking fantasies seriously, as spaces within and between us where these products of unconscious wishes tugging on conscious intent open the possibility of an alternative to conformity and resistance (Gabriel, 1999). Having taken this stance to protest the dehumanization of organizations and their study, let me now turn to how it can help progress their humanization. Below I offer some suggestions for how this stance might help humanize three burgeoning domains of research: those on identity; on the practice and development of leadership; and on the emergence, maintenance and change of institutions. In defiance of forward movement metaphors, I eschew suggestions for moving those domains forward, focusing instead on ways to surface and contain tensions that might enrich the harvest in those fields.

### *Identities: From stable and social to dynamic and existential*

Scholarly interest in identity, perhaps unsurprisingly, has grown in parallel to what I have argued is a movement towards the dehumanization of organization theories and working lives. Identity becomes more salient, and harder to secure, the more invisible we feel and the looser our connections become (Brown, 2015). Circumstances that spell the end of work identity as we once knew it – secure, ascribed, at times constraining – are where identity scholarship often begins (Baumeister, 1987; Collinson, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Swann & Bosson, 2010). A systems psychodynamic stance is well suited to account for and normalize two fundamental identity tensions – that between stability and change and that between social and existential facets of identity.

The more fluid working conditions have become, the more such scholars have urged us to get past 'snapshot images of identity' (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008, p. 340) and do justice to the multiple (Ramarajan, 2014) and dynamic (Gioia & Patvardhan 2012) nature of identities. A

systems psychodynamic stance is all for revealing how 'the appearance of stability in any given "identity" is, at best, a transient accomplishment' (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301), a tenuous narrative (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) or a fabrication (Petriglieri, 2020). At the same time, it can help us examine how fantasies of stability soothe our afflictions and claim our affiliations, making them valuable impediments. Casting stability as a valuable fantasy might help us defy the metaphor of 'construction' that confines identity scholarship, suggesting instability as potentially fatal and stability as usually desirable. That assumption does not hold in workplaces where change is the norm, portability is a valuable appellation, and being able to leave is a marker of status (Petriglieri et al., 2018).

The study of identity at work has been heavily influenced by social identity theory to date, arguably the most traditionally scientific of perspectives. Its focus on optimal distinctiveness highlights how people endeavour to position themselves in social spaces – close enough to belong but far enough to be different from groups that define them (Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). The 'new' world of work, however, has rendered affiliations looser. That shift has created the possibility and necessity to investigate the pursuit of optimal dynamism, that is, people's efforts to navigate the flow of identit(ies) so as to avoid being lost or stuck (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019). Pursuing optimal dynamism is less of a social and more of an existential endeavour, driven by anxieties about the self's continuity in motion rather than about its social position. Here too, a systems psychodynamic stance could surface and normalize the tension between existential and social layers of identity.

A concern for dynamism and integrity as well as for stability and sociability might help us grapple, for example, with the vicissitudes of identity in virtual spaces. Technology pins identity down in a granular record of permanent memories and micro predictions, while potentially offering a venue to break loose from the claims of our everyday social relations. The

study of identities technologically sustained and socially eroded might help us peek into how (or for whom) technology might contain, rather than constrain, a full experience of humanity. Those efforts might also help us keep in mind that, for all the power ascribed to it, technology remains the expression of those who have the power to inscribe it and use it to amplify their preferences, turning those preferences into norms. Another word for those people is leaders.

### *Leadership: From position and possession to story and space*

Leadership, seen through a systems psychodynamic lens, is the power to define the experience of others and the structure of institutions in a way that affirms desired identities (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). If the identities that such power is used to affirm are singular and similar to one's own, leadership is narcissistic (Maccoby, 2007). If they encompass those of a broad range of others, it is not. In the past five decades, as noted earlier, leadership scholarship has put little emphasis on leaders' inner conflicts and social context, preferring to focus on the unique skills of individuals and their influence on others. As Jennifer Petriglieri and I have argued (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015), the study, portraiture and teaching of leadership have thus become dehumanized.

Shotter and Tsoukas (2014) pointed out that the pursuit of scientific rationality has led scholars to reduce leadership to a set of treatable variables, thus severing it from the 'undifferentiated but meaningful relational totality in which actors are immersed' (p. 228). The result is a simplistic portrait of leadership that dominates contemporary management studies: the individual in a position of formal authority who uses their influence to achieve results (Alvesson & Spicer, 2010; DeRue & Myers, 2014; Glynn & Raffaelli, 2010; Mabey, 2013). This fascination with 'heroic' leaders (Raelin, 2004, 2007) and the skills that allow them to reach their goals through others (Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995) drips instrumentality. The stream of scholarship that focuses on leaders' authentic self-expression (George, Sims, McLean, &

Mayer, 2007; Kets de Vries, 1994) only tempers it. The best leaders, this work implies, are those who get their way and mean to – a description of narcissists with power.

This portrait of leadership is very different from earlier conceptualizations of leadership that emphasized its symbolic function (Burns, 1978; Freud, 1921; Selznick, 1957). The job of leaders', in these conceptualizations, was influencing and representing groups. Compared to foundational views, contemporary ones dehumanize leadership

by disembodied and disembedding it, that is by severing its ties to identity, community, and context. Doing so ignores the nature of leadership as a form of personal expression and social stewardship (Barnard, 1938; Selznick, 1957), and it denies the ambiguity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2010), emotional dilemmas (Bolden & Gosling, 2006), and relational dynamics (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) that the experience of leading entails. (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015, p. 627)

The dehumanization of leadership might not be intentional but is purposeful. The positivist, functionalist lens that most leadership studies employ makes dehumanized theories easier to publish (Glynn & Raffaelli, 2010). And their translation into practices that can be packaged makes it easier to sell (Bolden & Gosling, 2006). A systems psychodynamic stance might help protest this state of affairs and work to progress past it, by moving 'the leadership field away from a static and hierarchical conception of leadership and toward a more dynamic, social, and relational conception' as DeRue and Ashford (2010, p. 629) have advocated. This stance is well suited to challenge portraits of leadership as a position and a possession and recast it as a story that moves in a specific space. That space is often, even if not always, an institution.

### *Institutions: From emotions in institutions to emotional institutions*

Like that on identities, scholarship on institutions has been burgeoning, perhaps because both are unsettled. Only recently, however,

scholars have begun to challenge the dehumanized (and dehumanizing) view of institutions that transpires in traditional research, recasting the individual ‘actor’ from a ‘boundedly rational cognitive miser to a more integrated human being whose passions and desires are not reducible to the pursuit of rational interests’ (Voronov & Vince, 2012, p. 59). This move back to institutional theories that accounted for the importance of emotions and relations (Selznick, 1957) and towards researching ‘inhabited institutions’ (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) populated by persons with unique histories and perspectives (Suddaby, 2010; Voronov & Yorks, 2015), makes a systems psychodynamic stance valuable once more. There is renewed interest, in this domain, in the role of emotions in the forming, maintenance and undoing of institutions (Lawrence, 2017; Lok, Creed, DeJordy, & Voronov, 2017; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018; Zietsma, Toubiana, Voronov, & Roberts, 2019). ‘The potential of the unconscious as an aspect of our ability to understand institutions,’ however, notes Vince (2019, p. 954), ‘has not yet been fully explored.’ A systems psychodynamic stance, devoted to revealing the ways in which institutions serve as means for the management of members’ conflicting emotions and fantasies (Menziés, 1960; Shapiro & Carr, 1991), can help fulfil that potential and recast institutionalization as the structuring of a division of emotional labour as well as the formalization of a truce between conflicting assumptions.

To humanize institutions, and research on them, would also mean to highlight the emotional underpinning of their tensions, contradictions and paradoxes (Sadeh & Zilber, 2019), which have captured scholars’ imagination of late (for a review, see Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). A systems psychodynamic stance suggests that instead of asking when and how tensions are productive or destructive, we should ask who they benefit, and what they produce (Jarrett & Vince, 2017). Examples of work in this vein include studies of hybrid organizations such as a food cooperative (Ashforth & Reingen,

2014) and an educational institution (Petriglieri et al., 2018), where a seemingly dysfunctional organization of broader institutional tensions relieved members of their intra-psychic ambivalence, hence securing their identities. If the institution stayed troubled, the story went, one needed not be tormented. Institutional theories and systems psychodynamic ones are converging on the idea that tensions and contradictions are ubiquitous. An interesting question to ask, then, perhaps a central question for a social science of our times, is how ambivalent people can get on in conflicted institutions, rather than using each other – or the institution – to relieve themselves of conflicts. This is a useful question, because it highlights the value of holding tension even when it appears, at first sight, a waste of energy. And it is an urgent question too, at a time in which algorithms might help turn leaders’ hold into a grip, letting one side dominate the rest under the pretence of efficiency (Noble, 2018).

The research directions highlighted above, focusing on the personhood of institutional inhabitants and on the tensions within and between them, point to a larger avenue for the humanization of organization theory and organizations. That is, a focus on the bond between subjectivity and institutions. We have long known that ‘a central task’ for scholars, as Kalleberg (1989) put it, ‘is the linking of macro and micro levels of analysis, the relating of work structures and contexts to the biographies and experiences of individual workers’ (p. 591). Nevertheless, Bechky (2011) observed that despite ‘the frequent talk about the need to explore the middle range, organizational theory suffers a shortage of explorers with the tools to make this expedition’ (p. 1157). Perhaps it is not the right tools we lack, but a suitable stance. The kind of stance that, I have argued here, would humanize our work and our accounts of work.

## **Celebrating Subjectivity and Countering Polarization**

I have argued for the desirability, as well as the difficulty, of humanizing organization studies. I have suggested taking a systems psychodynamic



stance to do so, since that stance conjugates an examination of subjectivity with the rigour of the scientific method. The former can infuse organization studies with vitality when the latter provides a solid container for it. The result would be what many call for and yet few pursue – more valuable theories, more meaningful accounts of working lives, and more useful applications of both (Selznick, 2008). Theories that neither atomize individuals' psyches nor leave them at the mercy of impersonal social forces, and that support personal agency, at least in relationships. Management practice too stands to benefit from a stance that values free associations more than control (Petriglieri, 2018). It would lead to better efforts to foster the sense of wholeness and connections that come with tight cultures alongside the sense of openness and innovation that comes with looser ones (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006). Humanization will then be an antidote to the mechanization and fundamentalism that threaten the minds of scientists and leaders, respectively, and to the fragmentation and polarization that threaten the body of societies, including academic ones.

An academy split in factions advocating for the purity of their point of view will neither be able to study nor to develop whole persons and pluralistic institutions. Its prospects will be grim. To 'accept the idea of self-less research,' Berg and Smith (1985) wrote a while ago, 'is to accept mechanization of the research, alienation in research relations, and ultimately the absence of identity for the researcher' (p. 231). Humanizing organization studies begins with acknowledging that we are always pursuing a subjective science and striving to develop a scientific subjectivity. Unless those pairings cease to be oxymorons, scholars will continue to debate the value of truth and meaning when we need meaningful truths. In the opening, I used the metaphor of a 'sext' for the invitation to 'f\*\*k science', that is, to develop a more sensual relationship with science as an alternative to a mechanical or critical one. If we cannot do it, I argued, we will continue to fake science using it as a justification for algorithmic capitalism, or to fight those algorithms

with minimal results, since they only get stronger for it.

It will take a robust relationship between scientists and their science, however, for that exhortation to be a turn-on rather than a *faux pas* or a threat. To acknowledge, withstand and at times even enjoy the coexistence of desire and defiance is a mark of maturity, psychoanalysis tells us. It takes security to engage in free associations. Such freedom is only possible when there is open dialogue and low power imbalance. To reject the immaculate conception of knowledge and theory, then, and humanize organization studies ultimately means valuing freedom as much as we value productivity in our work. Once we do, we might have started a human relations movement that does not compensate but liberates both theory and people from the tyranny of technology and of a single point of view.

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