

ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS – TOWARDS A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL MIASMA

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This presentation explores some of the darker sides of organizations – miasma, toxicity and violation. Following Freud's example in works like The Future of an Illusion and Civilization and Its Discontents, the paper analyses some of the inevitable burdens that organizations place on their members but also some of the surplus privations and sufferings that many of them inflict. In particular, the paper develops a theory of organizational miasma, a concept that describes a contagious state of pollution, material, psychological and spiritual, that affects all who work in particular organizations. Miasma is offered not as another organizational metaphor, a prism through which to view particular organizations. Instead, the paper delineates the fundamentals of organizational miasma, as a theoretical concept describing and explaining numerous processes of certain organizations. These include a paralysis of resistance, an experience of pollution and uncleanness, and feelings of worthlessness and corruption. By drawing on theories of mourning and depression (including those put forward by Freud, Klein, Stein, Sievers and others), the paper examines the destructive and paralysing form of critical and self-critical attitude that is crucial to the experience of miasma and warns against lionizing critique and criticism.

The concept of organizational miasma will be used to offer insights into three important and at times puzzling features of particular organizations. First, in contrast to the main thread of theorizing, organizations in a miasmatic state involve relatively little employee resistance. It is as if the employees fighting spirit is paralysed, as they internalize their status as unwanted, unsuccessful and unclean and lapse into depression and symptoms. This leads to an inability to articulate storylines of identity – instead, the symptoms, i.e. the depression, the embarrassment and above all the silence, tell the organization's story as well as the stories of those who belong to it. External violations and threats may be resisted or fought against, but the same can hardly be said against inner violations and decay. Second, miasma entailing constant criticism and self-criticism and the experience of never being 'good enough' is highly contagious. Survivor's guilt may amplify the gloom and

depression of those who escape early rounds of downsizing, sapping the desire to fight. As for the cleansers themselves, they are very aware that today's cleansers easily become tomorrow's deadwood and candidates for cleansing. Treating other people as objects, has a remarkably deflating impact on oneself as a subject. Third, the blame for this state of affairs is almost invariably placed on the leader, who readily comes to be seen as the bringer of the miasma. This is compounded if the leader is rarely seen or heard in public and only the results of his/her actions are visible. A silent killer, like a silent virus, treating people as objects, selecting, deciding and dismissing. At such times, a nostalgia for the organization's past and its previous leaders may offer some solace, yet miasma often affects the past as well as the present. Silence is the frequent response to miasma.

The paper will use both narrative and psychoanalytic theories to provide an analysis of organizational identities afflicted by miasma, highlighting the following qualities:

1. The paralysis of critical spirit leveled at external objects and resistance to oppression or domination
2. The exaggerated experience of self-criticism and collapse of self-esteem
3. The contagious nature of these qualities that are readily communicated among different individuals in an organization
4. The detrimental effects on identity and selfhood that result.