

## Violence and Organization Studies

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### Abstract

In this paper we argue that violence is curiously both absent and present within organization studies. By violence we mean actual or potential physical harm and, building on an insight from Norbert Elias, we suggest that such violence is both 'totally familiar yet hardly perceived' in organizations. We examine how in two major traditions of organization studies, one deriving from Weber and the other from Foucault, violence figures as, respectively, an 'absent-presence' and a 'present-absence'. We then propose that a sensibility towards violence enables the recognition of 'the blood and bruises' of organizational life: something present close to home as well as faraway; here and now rather than long ago; and featuring in 'normal' organizations as well as in abnormal or exceptional circumstances.

### Key words

Violence. Physical Violence. Power. Authority. Weber. Foucault. Elias

In Honduras, when filling out a particularly large order on a tight deadline, factory managers have been reported injecting workers with amphetamines to keep them going on forty-eight-hour marathons (Klein, 2000: 216).

Violence – by which we mean actual or potential physical violence - occupies a strange and paradoxical place within organizations and the study of organizations. Our argument in this essay is that it is both absent and present; both visible and invisible; ubiquitous and yet rare. In this way, violence and organizations mirror wider issues about the place of violence within modern societies. Norbert Elias famously charted the civilizing process through which violence is gradually displaced in such societies but does not disappear, so that “a continuous, uniform pressure is exerted on individual life by the physical violence stored

behind the scenes of everyday life, a pressure totally familiar and hardly perceived” (Elias, 1978: 450).

This fugitive “behind the scenes” existence has the consequence that there are quite contradictory ways of apprehending, or not apprehending, violence within organizations and organization studies. Thus:

“There is widespread agreement among writers on organizational violence that violence in organizations is increasing and this is reflected in the growing research interest in this area” (Bishop et al., 2005: 584)

Yet:

“Studies into organizational violence have been relatively few” (Kenny, 2016: 941).

Some of this can be attributed to how narrowly or extensively violence is defined, of course, and in particular whether what is meant is literal physical violence. Equally, studies of organizational violence might encompass anything from bullying amongst workmates to the organization of military forces. We will discuss issues of definitional extensiveness later, but something else is at play here: a fundamental indeterminacy about the place and extent of violence in modern societies (Walby, 2012; Malešević, 2013; Asad, 2015; Malešević, 2017). Thus one could just as easily make the argument that violence is more prevalent than it has ever been as that it is gradually becoming rarer or, just, that it is too early to tell (Malešević, 2017).

What this indeterminacy might suggest is that asking whether violence is or is not present in society (or organizations, or organization studies) is to be asking the wrong question, or to be looking for the wrong kind of answer. Instead, if we follow the implications of Elias's formulation of something continuous but hardly perceived, we can instead ask: how is violence both present and absent in organizations and organization studies?

It is obviously beyond the scope of this essay to review the entirety of this question. Instead, we want only to propose that attention to it will recast our understanding of organizations by being alert to the violence "behind the scenes" that we may see if we look for it. For example, as Cooke (2003) shows, slavery and the "management" of slave labour have left an imprint in scientific management. Less known is the presence of violence in what appears in organization studies as the humanistic psychology of the Human Relations movement. So although this movement emphasized group norms and human needs, Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939) study at the Western Electric plant identified how "pinging the upper arm" (meaning to hit with an iron bar) was one means by which these group norms were enforced. Here violence is only hinted at, seemingly hovering in the background of what appears to be a purely psychological process. Or to take a third example, Hearn (1994: 733) argues that it is now almost forgotten that the original Tavistock School human relations research programme was "centrally concerned with violence" not least in its practical focus on the survivors of war and prison camps. Or, as a final illustration, the very deep and multiple historical interconnections between organization and management theory, on the one hand, and the military, war, and genocide on the other (see e.g. Locke, 1996; Grey, 1999; Stokes & Gabriel, 2010; Bloomfield et al., 2017). These examples all in different ways illustrate the underlying point that if we look at organizations and organization studies in a

certain way violence becomes visible and present; if we look at them in another way it becomes invisible and absent.

Thus what we want to argue is not (simply) that we can find violence in this or that place but, more expansively, for a way of approaching organizations with a certain *sensibility* towards violence. In pursuit of that, we first discuss in more detail what is meant by violence and argue that there is a case to give particular priority to actual or potential physical violence. Then, we consider the ways that violence is 'absented' within organization studies, whilst also being paradoxically present, by considering Weber and Foucault as representing two big, significant, almost field-defining theoretical traditions within the discipline (Clegg, 1994). In Weberian traditions we suggest that violence is an absent presence, lurking hidden behind the concept of authority; in Foucauldian traditions we suggest it is a present absence, lying in plain sight but decentred by the concept of disciplinary power. Finally, we consider the ways in which violence in organizations may become more visible if we adopt a sensibility of openness to its existence.

### **What constitutes violence?**

Violence can take various shapes and forms: it can range from being legitimate to illegitimate, subtle to brutal, cold to hot, physical to symbolic and structural, individual to collective, subjective to objective (Walby, 2012; Kilby, 2013). Given the complexity of the phenomenon, most researchers refrain from providing a clear definition of violence (Schinkel, 2013) and some (e.g. Hearn, 1994) prefer to speak of 'violences'. Indeed, one may argue that the very way in which violence is defined constitutes a political question, embedded in particular historical, cultural and social contexts. For instance, in defining violence as "intentional physical harm" it becomes something traceable and locatable that

can be attributed to particular individuals (Schinkel, 2013). This, however, risks leaving out more structural forms of violence:

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts (Žižek, 2008: 1)

For Galtung (1969), violence does not need to involve intentional physical force, as is the case when social inequalities lead to deaths (e.g. because of lack of access to health care systems). Here violence occurs at the structural rather than inter-personal level. Recently in the UK, a fire in a social housing tower block that caused multiple fatalities was described by some as 'social murder'. The significance of that is to recognize that violence need not be something done 'by X to Y' but can rather be embedded in social relations. Thus (as in similar cases in other countries) the tower fire reveals how marginalized communities are relegated to, and concentrated in, housing which has inadequate fire protection. Their lives are considered – not by any particular person, but as a cumulative effect of social and institutional decisions – less important or less worthy of protection. Such violence is invisible in the normal run of things but becomes visible episodically, as with the tower fire: thus we can see the violence is latent in the social relations even if it is not realised until the fire occurs.

Similarly, there is the question to what extent violence operates on the physical and/or symbolic level. Bourdieu (2000) famously refers to symbolic violence to capture how the dominant class imposes upon others their understanding of the situation, thereby naturalizing the status quo. Although Bourdieu does not exclude, and in fact is interested in, the relation between symbolic and physical violence, his analysis nevertheless remains “curiously bloodless” (Van Holdt, 2012: 127). Thus this concept of symbolic violence is readily disentangled from that which involves physical harm. Writing about organizational violence specifically, Bergin and Westwood (2003: 211) regard it as “clearly not confined” to physical harm and think it is important to recognize that even writing, editorialising and publishing are inherently violent processes.

For some purposes such a broad conception of violence is undoubtedly useful (see also Butler, 2010) but it carries the risk of not paying enough attention to what makes physical harm distinctive. Thus, we believe that in order to speak of violence and make it an analytically distinct concept, some form of physical harm needs to be present or potentially present (see also Collins, 2009) even if it also entails a symbolic dimension. The dilemma here goes to the heart of the paradox of violence as both absent and present. If we draw the definition narrowly to mean physical violence we make non-physical violence invisible. But if we draw the definition widely to include all kinds of violence, then we at least downplay, and perhaps make invisible, physical violence. If it is everywhere, it is also, in some way, nowhere.

There is a strong case for regarding physical violence as distinctive. As the German sociologist Heinrich Popitz points out, physical violence interrelates with power in the

crudest way to the extent that each human being has a body and this makes him or her inherently vulnerable: “the person can perhaps separate her-/himself from social belongings ... s/he may feel independent from her/his material possession ... but s/he can never separate her-/himself from the body” (Popitz, 1999: 45; our translation). Violence affects not only the “integrity of the body, but also inevitably the person” (ibid). As Sofsky (1996: 19; our translation) also emphasises: “physical violence is the most intense evidence of power ... no language has more convincing force than the language of violence. It does not need translation and does not leave any open questions”. This does not mean, though, that violence does not have a symbolic dimension. On the contrary, physical harm against the body deeply affects the person’s sense of worth, dignity and ultimately the self (Kilby, 2013). But this is precisely to underscore that there is something special, powerful and potentially horrific about physical violence. It is this sense of violence as physical violence or potential physical violence that we want to show is both absent and present in organization studies and organizations.

### **Absenting violence: Weber and Foucault**

#### *Weber, legitimacy and violence*

There exists a long tradition within the political theory of the sovereign state whereby the exercise of power through violence is understood to be different from the exercise of authority understood as being the legitimate right to be obeyed. Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) was arguably the first text if not to propose then at least to “clarify” this distinction (Raphael, 1977: 71). For Hobbes there are two interrelated points. On the one hand, power through violence is rather limited in its effectiveness as it is impractical constantly to

exercise it. On the other hand, power creates no obligations on the part of the ruled. So whilst the sovereign certainly can and does use violent power that is not enough in order to rule effectively. Instead, those subject to sovereign power must both accept its right to exercise force and also consent to obey it even in the absence of the exercise of force.

Weber takes over this Hobbesian distinction almost wholesale in his 1919 essay *Politics as Vocation*. Starting from an agreement with Trotsky that every state is founded on force, Weber goes on to propose that the links between the modern state and violence are “especially intimate” to the extent that, in his famous definition, the state has “the monopoly of *the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” (Weber, in Gerth & Mills, 1991: 78; emphasis original). On the question of where this legitimacy comes from, he propounds that triad of sources of authority that have now found their way into organization studies textbooks: tradition, charisma and rational legality (1991: 78-79).

It is clear from these passages that Weber did not envisage authority as something separate from violence, but that they were absolutely intertwined, not because authority came from violence but because the right to use violence came from authority. Indeed, in German the word for authority – *Gewalt* – also refers to violence. Equally clearly, what was under discussion was the authority of, specifically, the state. Richard Swedberg (1998: 55-6), a leading Weber scholar, argues that for Weber the political order rests on violence whereas the economic order does not ‘formally’ do so - and yet, since the economic order is guaranteed by the political order, violence is ultimately at its base. In this sense, the concept of rational-legal authority in Weber is inseparable from the violence which underpins the political constitution of the modern state. In this way, Weber parallels Walter Benjamin’s

later ideas in his *Critique of Violence* (Benjamin, 1921; see also Anter, 2014). Here Benjamin argues that the state is not only legitimized through violence but also may legitimize the continuous use of violence for preserving the status quo. In other words, rather than conceiving of violence, power and authority as opposites (see Arendt, 1970), Weber and Benjamin show the importance of approaching them as interrelated phenomena.

Whereas Benjamin's work on violence has received relatively little attention in organization studies, Weber's ideas have, of course, been foundational to the discipline. Yet the way in which, in particular, his conception of rational-legal authority entered the field paid little attention to this interrelation of power, authority and violence. Rather, it was in association with another part of Weber's work, namely that on bureaucracy (Cummings et al., 2017: 120; Clegg, 1994: 150). This, too, was predicated on rational-legal authority, and was very often associated with the state. However, within organization studies bureaucracy came to be understood as an ideal type of organizations of all sorts and, as the subject developed, much more as something to do with commercial corporations (i.e. the economic order, in Swedberg's terms) than with the state (i.e. the political order, in Swedberg's terms). Moreover, as has been widely discussed (e.g. Marsden & Townley, 1996: 661), the take up of Weber within organization studies had a particular character. He was co-opted as an anti-Marxist theorist and one whose ideal type of bureaucracy was not an analytical construct but a normative organizational design model (Cummings et al., 2017: 122-126; Clegg, 1994: 150). In this way, not only was Weber's critique of bureaucracy sidelined, but so too was the Marxist understanding of organizations as sites of conflict and exploitation. For example, in the influential Parsonian translation of Weber the term *Herrschaft* (domination) was rendered as "leadership" (Cummings et al., 2017: 129), thus denuding it of its forceful

character. This is emblematic of the way that Weber was co-opted by organization theory in ways which were neglectful, or forgetful, of the political sociology that characterised his work.

So there is a triple movement in how organization studies made use of Weber: violence is decoupled from authority; authority is decoupled from the state; the state is decoupled from organizations. The consequence is that violence is both present and absent in particular ways. It is present at the margins as a potential – in the end we must obey the rule of law including those things that organizations may legally ask of us and do to us. And yet it is absent from accounts of the everyday experience of organizational life to the extent that, without any invocation of violence, it is assumed that we do what organizations legally ask of us and accept what they legally do to us. Hearn and Parkin (2001: 8) hint at this in seeing Weberian organization theory as contributing to the ‘unspoken’ in organizations, in which category they include violence. And this persists both in more recent organization theories that grow in part from Weber (institutional theory being the most obvious example) and, more generically, within organization studies as a whole to the extent that it has been shaped by the legacy of Weber as the “inadvertent” founder of the field (Clegg, 1994). Thus violence in this tradition is a kind of ‘absent presence’ – not foregrounded but lurking in the background behind authority, ready to pounce.

### *Foucault, sovereign power and disciplinary power*

Of course, by no means all of organization studies sit within the shadow of Weber. In more recent times, especially, a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power has become highly influential in the field. In doing so, it largely followed Foucault’s departure from a

juridical understanding of power, where a sovereign exercises power through repression, prohibition and violence.

As with Weber, the starting point for Foucault's understanding of power can also be understood in terms of the classical themes of the political theory of the sovereign state. But whereas Weber endorsed and incorporated those themes, Foucault rejected them, most famously in his remark that "we need to cut off the King's head: in political theory that has still to be done" (Foucault, 1980: 121).

Thus in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), which Curtis (2014: 1760) argues has been his most influential text in organization studies, Foucault begins with a gruesome account of how pre-modern sovereign power is characterised by grotesque episodes of violence focused on the literal breaking of the body. His thesis in the book as a whole is that disciplinary power emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and breaks with earlier sovereign power that uses repression and violence to punish individuals. Foucault argues that disciplinary power functions in ways exemplified by the Benthamite panopticon. The power that is exercised in the panopticon is no longer in the hand of particular individuals but rather stems from the particular "distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes" (Foucault, 1977: 218). This power works through the ways in which subjects inscribe themselves in power relations. Thus in the panopticon there is no need for force, constraint and repression since, as Foucault notes, following Bentham, there were "no more bars, no more chains, no more heavy locks; all that was needed was that the separations should be clear and the openings well arranged" (Foucault, 1977: 218). This is the case because the subject "plays both roles" of the guard and the prisoner: "he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977: 219).

While Foucault did not deny the existence of sovereign power, he arguably believed that it is primarily disciplinary rather than sovereign power that characterises modern, liberal society (see also Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). As a result, he suggested that “[i]n order to conduct a concrete analysis of power relations, one would have to abandon the juridical notion of sovereignty” (Foucault, 1994: 59; see also Foucault, 2001: 74). It is for this reason that the King’s head is to be removed.

In recent years, several social theorists have criticized Foucault’s work for too easily turning a blind eye to violence. The fundamental issue, according to Walby (2012), lies in Foucault’s conception of disciplinary society as characterising today’s liberal societies. Here “[t]here is no need for arms, physical violence, [or] material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising the surveillance over, and against, himself” (Foucault cited in Dungey, 2014: 58). In focusing primarily on disciplinary power, the danger becomes that the still existing forms of violence associated with sovereign power are no longer sufficiently made visible.

This is also the point that Alford (2000) makes in his provocative essay “What would it matter if everything Foucault said about prisons were wrong?” He forcefully argues that Foucault’s conception of the panopticon and therefore disciplinary power in modern society misses the point. Echoing Elias (1978), Alford shows it is not that violence disappeared, but that it moved out of sight. He urges us to pay more attention to the tunnels underneath the panopticon that can extend to anywhere; here the “brute, physical coercion, the type

exercised in prisons, can suddenly appear anywhere. This may seem unlikely. Unless you are a black man stopped by the police in the middle of the night. Then it may not seem quite so metaphorical. Brute, physical coercion is not the last resort of the regime, any regime. It is the first, which means that it is the veiled threat behind every act of political power - that is, every act of power” (Alford, 2000: 141). Following this, disciplinary power should be understood as existing alongside the potential threat of violence – violence that can suddenly appear, yet otherwise remains behind the scenes.

Most famously, Agamben (1998) has sought to address what he regards as a shortcoming of Foucault’s work, namely its insufficient theorization of the most violent forms of power: “Foucault ... never dwelt on the exemplary places of modern biopolitics: the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century” (1998: 10; see also Plamper, 2002; Kessler, 2014). In order to account theoretically for this, Agamben argues that a notion of sovereign power based on juridico-institutional terms – one which Foucault turned away from – needs to be brought back. Drawing on Carl Schmitt’s conception of the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception”, Agamben defines the sovereign as having legal authority, being able to decide the law’s threshold vis-à-vis the nonlegal and thus the state of exception, which is both inside and outside the law (the law allows for its own suspension). In such a state of exception – for Agamben, the camp is the prime example – violence can occur, as the law is both suspended and in force. Here the sovereign has the power to decide over life and death. Importantly, Agamben’s notion of sovereign power also differs from how Foucault envisioned biopower; instead of Foucauldian biopower that works through knowledge/power regimes aimed at optimizing and enhancing life, Agamben’s power is one that uses violence, threatening and killing life.

This is not to say that Foucault argued that violence no longer plays any role in modern society (see Oksala, 2010). Yet what his work has been criticized for is that, first, the focus on disciplinary power and biopower in combination with the “decisive abandonment” (Agamben, 1998:10) of a traditional notion of sovereign power runs the risk of not sufficiently bringing to light the (potential) presence of violence. Second, how different forms of power “converge remains strangely unclear in Foucault’s work” (Agamben, 1998: 11). Put differently, there is a need to see the interrelation between power and violence, i.e. how more subtle forms of power, which produce, discipline and govern subjects, exist alongside the presence of potentially more coercive and violent forms (see also Walby, 2012; Ayyash, 2013).

This is apparent in that way that the work of Foucault has been used in organization studies so as to make violence rather invisible. His ideas have entered the field in such a way as to suggest that sovereign power and the violence associated with it is an irrelevance. Thus “Foucault’s conception of power is one that attempts to break decisively with ‘mechanistic’ and ‘sovereign’ view” (Clegg, 1994: 158). Even if not so explicitly stated, this is implicitly and *de facto* the case since Foucauldian research in organization studies rarely, if ever, discusses physical violence in organizations. It is notable that in what Curtis (2014: 1755) regards as the text that “formally introduced [Foucault] to the field of organization studies” it is held that “the disciplinary mode *replaced* the traditional in less than a century ... extremes of violence inflicted on the body speedily diminished ... but were replaced, according to Foucault, by complex, subtle forms of correction and training” (Burrell, 1988: 225, emphasis added). This may illustrate how, or even be one important reason why, Foucault has been

used in organization studies in ways that, as Raffnsøe et al. (2016) argue, over-state general periodizations at the expense of appreciating the “dispositive analytics” whereby social technologies of power are interrelated. If so, it does not negate the point that within organization studies Foucault has typically been used as we suggest. Of course, it is hard to prove a negative. But of the many papers discussing disciplinary power organizations with which we are familiar, if violence features at all it is only to the extent that it is seen as displaced by disciplinary power.

So if in the Weberian tradition of organization studies violence is an ‘absent presence’, in the Foucauldian tradition it is a ‘present absence’ – hidden but in plain sight being written in, most dramatically, right from the outset only to be crowded out by the focus on disciplinary power that follows from it. All this suggests that researchers need to develop a stronger sensibility towards their use of theoretical sources, and how this can make violence absent or present. Which prompts the question: how can we bring violence in organizations into sight?

### **The blood and bruises of organizational life**

We began this essay with a quotation above about the use of amphetamines to boost productivity. It is an example of organizational violence and moreover of a particular sort – violence woven into an everyday organizational logic, that of maximizing productivity. It’s possible to envisage that within the organizational context it occurs it is seen as no more remarkable than any other way of raising productivity and, in that context, invisible. Reported out of that context it becomes visible as violent but then, in another way, can disappear from view again as being something to do with so-called developing countries or

those with poor human rights records. Of course, it is very important to bring into focus how multinational corporations are implicated in the dispossession and deaths of whole populations, continuing the violent history of colonialism (Banerjee, 2008) and how such “corporate violence remains unchecked” (Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016) in developing countries. Yet this focus should not be used to validate an understanding of violence in organizations as something that happens only far away (from our point of view) and can therefore be held at a distance.

By contrast, we can make visible or present organizational violence by bringing it close, to show how it occurs in advanced and democratic countries. Thus Perelman (2005: 66-67) discusses various examples of companies refusing to allow workers toilet breaks – in one case being instructed to urinate in their clothes instead, leading to bladder and urinary tract infections. This company was located in California, the richest part of the most developed liberal democracy in the world. These are not isolated cases: in November 2016 Oxfam America produced a report showing that poultry workers across the United States are routinely prevented from using the toilet and many have to wear diapers in order to get through their shifts (Oxfam America, 2016).

Coming this side of the Atlantic, at Sports Direct, a UK sports equipment firm, it was revealed in 2016 that “there had been 110 ambulance call-outs to [the] main warehouse site in just over three years as workers suffered chest pains, stroke, injury, and five births or miscarriages – including one woman delivering her baby in the toilet – such was the fear, according to the union, of losing your job if you took time off under Ashley’s [Sports Direct’s boss] six-strikes-and-you’re-out regime” (Lawrence, 2016).

Violence is also made visible when it is recognized that there are links between 'far away' production and our own practices of consumption. Chan's (2013) study of suicide attempts at Foxconn in China is illustrative of this because the firm was a supplier to Apple and other companies whose products are widely familiar all around the world. The intense discipline of life on the line at Foxconn is described in chilling detail, culminating thus: "The accumulated effects of endless assembly line toil, punishing work schedules, harsh factory discipline, a friendless dormitory and, rejection from managers and administrators, compounded by the company's failure to provide her with income, and then her inability to make contact with friends and family, were the immediate circumstances of her attempted suicide. Her testimony reveals how she was overwhelmed, 'I was so desperate that my mind went blank'. At 8 a.m. on March 17, Yu jumped from the fourth floor of her dormitory building in despair. After 12 days in a coma, she awoke to find that her body had become half paralysed. She is now confined to a bed or a wheelchair" (Chan, 2013: 91).

The evident violence here is the attempted suicide, but what is also made visible by it is the violence embedded within the organizational practices that provoked it. This means that we cannot hold Yu's attempted suicide 'at a distance' as, perhaps, an individual tragedy but are forced to recognize it as embedded in an organizational violence with which we (as consumers) are also in some way involved, if not indeed complicit. And, again, this is not an isolated example to do with developing countries. Consider the spate of sixty-nine suicides at France Telecom between 2008 and 2011. These seem to have been linked – explicitly, in some of the suicide notes left – to the pressures of a change programme, which sought to 'financialise' the organization in line with an ideology of shareholder value (Chabrak et al., 2016).

As with the Foxconn case, the point here is not simply the violence of suicide, it is the way that this grows out of the violence of the organizational practices, which engendered it. The ‘abnormality’ of suicide – which is shocking – makes visible the ‘normality’ of organizational violence, which we might not otherwise notice. It would, to reprise Elias, be “totally familiar and hardly perceived”. Indeed, for this reason it is not sufficient to point to violence in “total institutions” (Goffman, 1961), which are cut off from the rest of society, such as psychiatric hospitals or prisons where “violence ... looms in the daily life” (Berkeley Journal of African American Law and Policy, 2009: 91) of the patients and inmates. The same goes for ‘camps’. These are liminal spaces, often located at the borders of societies and, indeed, emblematic of Agamben’s state of exception (Fassin, 2011; Ramadan, 2013; Darling, 2017). Here the lives and bodies of refugees are governed and managed by state authorities. Whereas camps are created as a “protective device” (Agier, 2002), the fact that they represent a state of exception means that violence can more easily emerge here. This is apparent when “refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants ... [face] a violent and repressive geography of walls, coastguard patrols, detention camps and offshore processing” (Ramadan, 2013: 65; see also Valentino & Knudsen, 1996). In primarily focusing on cases, such as prisons or camps, where violence is more visible and perhaps almost to be expected, the danger is that violence becomes equated with something that only occurs in ‘abnormal’ organizational settings – far from ‘normal’ ones. *Of course* – that is to say: as a matter of course – organizations seek to maximize productivity, to reduce costs, to reorganize so as to create shareholder value. It is only occasionally that the violence that entails or engenders comes into view and that which is absent becomes, if only briefly, present.

This points towards another aspect of the dynamic of the visibility and invisibility of organizational violence. It is not just a matter of distance (in space and time), but also one of normalization. Kenny's (2016) study of violence in Ireland's industrial schools is highly insightful in this respect. There is an obvious sense in which such violence was hidden from sight (that is, it occurred out of view, within the confines of the schools) in ways which have become all too familiar in numerous recent scandals involving physical and sexual abuse in children's homes and other institutions around the world. But Kenny makes the point that the social and organizational context meant that "there were no children worthy of protection in Ireland's industrial schools – there was only the shadowy, repulsive other that was a persistent blight on the national identity" (2016: 954). That is to say, violence was normalized because its victims were constructed not as children but as 'abject others' to whom no rights of protection were due. And, thus, the violence to which they were subjected was "hardly perceived" (as per Elias) as violence.

It is this issue of the social construction of violence within particular organizational settings which gives it its 'now you see it, now you don't' character. Bishop et al.'s (2005) study of the invisibility of violence in a job centre is illustrative of this. Whereas front line workers frequently experienced physical violence from the clients or 'customers' of the centre, this was rendered invisible because it was not acknowledged by managers or, if it was, was blamed upon the victims rather than the perpetrators (echoing the 'abject others' of Kenny's study). Moreover, to the extent that front line workers developed various ways of coping with violence they, themselves, kept it hidden from the view of managers. In a similar vein, Baines and Cunningham (2011) found that staff in non-profit care work had to frequently endure violence from customers. They argue that it "became an actual aspect of the work-

effort bargain and a problem for which solutions, other than tolerance, were not sought“ (2011: 773). As in the Bishop et al. study, workers themselves developed ways of coping with violence that, however, led to “the normalization of violence and excusing ... [violent] behaviour as ‘just part of the job’“ (2011: 769). While Baines and Cunningham (2011) point to resistance from trade union representatives in form of campaigns demanding accurate management reports of violence, the organizational culture and the “games“ (Burawoy, 1979) of workers “encouraged ... [them] to downplay and refuse to document their injuries“ (2011: 770). In other words, these studies show how workers themselves may also keep violence invisible from management and others. So, was there or was there not violence in the job centre or care work settings? Do we say that it was absent or that it was present?

The way that we answer that kind of question is crucially bound up with the sensibility we bring to bear upon it, which will in turn be reflective of political and social apprehensions of normality. For example, Hearn (1994) argues that violence is often hidden or unacknowledged because of its gendered nature: violence is bound up with men’s power. Thus, violent behaviour is often treated as an “elephant in the room“, and female workers also collude in keeping up the silence (Seymour, 2009). Perhaps with the explosive revelations about Harvey Weinstein we can see a shifting sensibility, which is de-normalizing not just sexual violence in the entertainment industry, but in organizations more generally. That is not to say that it was completely normalized before, nor that it will be completely de-normalised in the future; but it is to say that way in which violence is or is not seen as violence is highly historically contingent.

This insight should, in turn, alert us to the possibility that violence may be present in ways that we don't currently or normally notice. Stein (2001) notes that management discourse often uses euphemisms ('rightsizing', 'downsizing' etc) to refer to the destruction of jobs, and these make violence invisible. By contrast, those affected use "a language governed by imagery of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, and the images of mutilation and destruction ('dead meat', 'dead wood'...)" (Stein, 2001: 15). Similarly, Gabriel's (2012) theory of organizational miasma shows how notions around death, murder and corpses can become prevalent in situations of downsizing. Such terminology has the opposite effect of managerial euphemism: it makes violence visible or present.

These invocations of violence are not just metaphorical – they describe an experience of being violated – and downsizing is frequently accompanied by (the threat of) violence. There are numerous stories of individuals, particularly during the financial crisis, arriving one morning at work to be greeted by a security guard who allows them to pick up their personal stuff and then literally pushes them out of the building. People are suddenly confronted by the reality of a normally hidden violence: a security guard who can and if necessary will quite 'legitimately' force them out. That this use of security guards in situations of downsizing has become a common strategy is apparent in that whole websites are dedicated to the question of how to enact it:

If you are laying off multiple employees, you can notify them all at once or one at a time... When you notify employees one at a time using a face-to-face meeting, have at least two people in the meeting representing the company so you have at least one witness ... If you are concerned about theft, violence or vandalism, hire a security

guard to be present during the notification, to monitor the employee's collection of his personal things and to escort him off the premises”.

<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/security-planning-layoff-66731.html>

The role of the security guard is particularly interesting. Despite the increasing use of surveillance cameras (emblematic, perhaps, of disciplinary power) there has been a massive rise in corporate security services. The security guard constitutes, almost like a policeman, an embodiment of sovereign power. In some ways, one could say that in these kinds of organizations the potential of violence is part and parcel of the business model. Their role is precisely to keep everything in order, to serve as a deterrent to potential lawbreakers. While installed in the name of security and safety, security guards often carry signs of potential violence in terms of their boots, nightstick, or sometimes even guns. Their physicality, their bodies, are there to signal a threat to potential intruders and disturbers, and, indeed, many have a background in martial arts or, for that matter, as members of the police or the military.

So the security guard is an example of where visible and invisible violence meet. The guard is indeed visible but is also a reminder of the way that violence lurks always as a potential, even if only infrequently used – precisely the ‘discontinuous’ power of the pre-modern sovereign – which is not an alternative to but sits alongside disciplinary power (Graeber, 2015: 58). Just as the Weberian account of authority specifies the reasons why we may accept the right of others to give us orders, it also at the same time specifies that if we do not accept those orders we may rightfully be forced to do so. Individuals may both willingly construct their self in line with organizational discourse and practice, whilst also being aware

of the potential for violence – that is legal violence that confronts them as a larger force. Perhaps the recognition of such possibility would allow to us to add explanation of the kinds of resistance found (and not found) in organizations. The apparent lack of resistance, or put differently that resistance seems to be found mostly on a micro scale, covert and hidden rather than confrontational and overt may be explained not so much through the “effective” working of disciplinary power and an acceptance of authority, but more through the prevalence of potential legal violence and a recognition that little can be done to resist it.

So far, we have suggested that the threat of (potential) violence is an absent-present possibility in organizations, which becomes particularly visible at the border (e.g. when people are fired) and when the order is under threat (e.g. resistance). But violence also enters socialization processes. For example, the recruitment rituals of corporations may involve similar kinds of hazing to those prevalent in initiation rituals of college clubs (Forbes, 2014). We may also think here of the ways in which extreme sports and bootcamps that can significantly harm the body are prevalent in leadership development and teambuilding training. Perhaps most obvious is the presence of violence in training camps of military organizations. In Germany, there is a famous case of the death of a female marine officer candidate who, as part of an exercise, had to climb up the rigging of the sailing ship seven times without any security or prior experience, and despite being physically exhausted. As a result, she fell down the rigging and died (Spiegel, 2011). This is an example of organizational violence in that showing the willingness to harm one’s body in accordance with the rules and regulations of the organization is a necessary condition for acquiring membership.

To re-iterate, these examples where violence is visible may seem extreme and particular but we should not take this to mean that violence is absent from everyday organizational life. The frequency of actual violence is beside the point as the very potential of violence has performative effects. This potential is foundational to organizations for the same reasons that it is foundational to the state. The ways in which a social order is established, maintained and overthrown involves the potential for violence. That is why its potential is most visible in situations where the order is under threat or when actors are introduced to or removed from it. Whereas in such circumstances violence may reveal itself in subtle or not so subtle ways, overall organizations – management and even workers – seem to collude in the general notion that violence is absent or if not absent then exceptional or anomalous. However, this does not mean that the job of organization studies is to similarly render it invisible. And, indeed, it has not always done so. As Michel Crozier (1964) put it: “Direct coercion is still in reserve ... but it is very rarely used, and people apparently no longer have to see it operate often to retain it in their calculations” (1964: 184-5). In this observation, Crozier is consonant with Elias’s formulation with which we began this essay, of “the physical violence stored behind the scenes of everyday life, a pressure totally familiar and hardly perceived” (Elias, 1978: 450).

## **Conclusion**

Our argument in this essay has consisted of a series of steps. First, that whilst violence can be defined in relatively broad or narrow ways, and there is merit in both, a narrow definition which focusses on actual or potential physical violence has the particular merit of recognizing the distinctiveness of pain inflicted on the human body. If we take that as our

focus, then we find that it is both absent and present in organizations and within organization studies.

Second, whilst it is impossible to consider the totality of organization studies, by looking at the influential traditions deriving from Weber and Foucault we can show this absence and presence by considering how those authors get taken up and used within our field. To do that for either of those traditions (or any other) would take at least a paper in its own right. All we have done is given indications of how such an analysis would proceed: in both cases, albeit in different ways, the balance of presence and absence is tilted towards absenting violence.

Finally, we argued that we can develop a sensibility for 'seeing' or 'making present' violence. This sensibility can take many forms, which are the counterpart of the ways that violence is kept invisible or 'absented'. Thus violence becomes visible when we see it as close to our space (not just in faraway places), to our time (not just in times long ago), to our consumption (not just production) and to settings familiar to us (not just those seen as 'abnormal'). It becomes visible when we name it as such (rather than cloak it in euphemisms) and de-normalise it (rather than regard it as routine). More than anything, such a sensibility requires that we recognize that the moments at which the potential for violence becomes visible are not exceptions to the norm, but are the tips of an iceberg that permeates organizational life.

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