Repairing social thermostats collectively

Imagine yourself sitting by the campfire, surrounded by your friends, humming trees, and the starry sky. You play the guitar, sing songs, and tell stories: tales, legends, and imaginary narratives. It is a good time of togetherness and tenderness, and everyone is smiling, their eyes closed. . .

Why does this sound like an impossible and child-like utopia? As Monika Kostera observes in her book “The Imagined Organization: Spaces, Dreams, and Places”, we are haunted so much by the ideology of individual success that we simply do not pay attention to developing our imagination and sensemaking capabilities with others. Rather than making sense of complex and difficult global social problems by using what we have, to discover new possibilities collectively, we prefer to ignore these problems and carry on individual search of excellence. Neoliberal hyper-individualism naturalizes our social egoism and appropriates our imagination—we treat collective action as unnecessary to “real life,” whose governing logic is personal success.

Since neoliberal rationality prevents collective will and actions from happening, and it succeeds in individualizing collective problems, it also transforms organizational communities into serial collectives—individuals become isolated, but they are not alone (Young, 1994). Such a setting prevents people, as I have examined recently with Tommy Jensen (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020), from taking responsibility for the Other and from reporting unethical practices in organizations. The reviewed book gives us hope to restore collective responsibility and provides ways to do it.

The book has an introduction, eight chapters, a coda and an appendix with information about the narrative collage—the method used by the author to collect and analyze the stories (Kostera, 2006). In the introduction and the first three chapters (“Why organize?,” “Space, our friend,” and “Imagination”), Monika Kostera reflects on the consequences of neoliberal capitalism, and she shows the importance of recapturing imagination and turning our attention to collective ways of organizing.

Following the author’s reasoning, a psychopathic culture of excellence creates a need to constantly prove our value and to concentrate on individual achievements. Therefore, we
compulsively take care of our performance, so that we do not lose our place in the competition of perfectionism—all this to finally feel that we have become someone and that we are accepted by others. However, as Monika Kostera observes, the pressure of excellence never stops, and the desired moment of fulfillment never comes: rather, it is continuously prolonged in time. This in turn creates narcissistic attitudes, whereby people—in their never-ending road to fulfillment—are not able to give to others; they are only able to take. Following the metaphor of “gardening” developed by Bauman (1987), the author indicates that narcissus loves systematic gardening: eliminating unnecessary elements, including through segregation of humans, to yield imaginary achievements.

Because of the “medicalization of social life,” many people have lost their social thermostats, becoming “unable to warm themselves in the light of human love and compassion” (p. IX). This creates “a culture of modern Neros constantly burning Rome” (p. IX). Psychopaths holding controlling positions over others in organizations (very often managers, so-called “leaders”) have the most “burning” impact on the social relationships and well-being of employees. Under the umbrella of grandiose language of necessary changes, these leaders create anxiety, fear, and worry and develop a feeling of “not being home” (p. 17). In the consequent harmful culture, disobedience is punished and defined as an obstacle to “organizational development.” Since organizations and organizing processes provide a “network of meanings” (p. 6) to people’s lives, psychopathic behaviors destroy not only the organizational culture but also private lives and social tissues outside organizations.

As the author observes, contemporary business schools and their approaches to management education are also guilty of educating narcissistic “Neros.” This critical voice is oriented within contemporary debates about the crisis of management education and business schools (Huzzard et al., 2017). Particular ideological perspectives, such as neoliberalism, which reduce education to a market commodity, have influenced curricula content and pedagogical practice and sometimes resulted in a lack of awareness and accountability for the humanistic aspects of organizing. Curricula, in other words, are reduced to teaching students how to implement cookie-cutter models to make their enterprises or organizations more profitable instead of creating an opportunity to experience the collective dimensions of organizing, such as responsibility for others or for natural systems and solidarity in action.

We thus need to develop the collective sensemaking to restore the meaningful management processes based on connecting with the Other. The author proposes a narrative collage as a way to do that, as well as to collect stories and analyze them as deep expressions of organizing (p. 6). As Monika Kostera explains in Chapter Three, “Imagination,” the method is based on the analysis of fictional or realistic stories, which are a reflection of the imagination of the respondents. The imagination shapes social behavior, influencing ways of thinking about reality, giving sense to it and to the taken actions. In the imagination lies the potential for critical thinking and creative change of reality. It determines certain ways of giving sense to the processes of organizing—collecting and discussing stories can be a good way of developing imaginations and social interactions, not to mention accessing interesting empirical data.

In the following chapters, the author analyzes the collected stories, and she develops the plot through narrative facts defined as “trails of meaning” (p. 55). Each batch of stories usually begins with a particular phrase invented by the researcher (e.g. “Once upon a time, a monk knocked on the big front door of a corporate HQ . . .”); the task of the respondent is to finish the story and that of the researcher to analyze it within the context of a theoretical framework. Sometimes respondents can choose from several proposed openings. The stories collected in the reviewed book cover the topics of a meeting between the spiritual and corporate worlds (Chapter 4, “The meeting of two organizational worlds,” and Chapter 5, “Reverse journey”), the meaning of organizational silence.
(Chapter 6, “And then there was silence”), freedom in corporations (Chapter 7, “In search of freedom in the corporation”) and the narrative transition between ambivalent poles and impulses (Chapter 8, “In transition”). The presented stories are full of meanings, paradoxes, and ambivalent reasoning; the same is true of the interesting interpretations provided by the author. The common plot seems to be a struggle with following a collective organization to build a more responsible world, a struggle that is often, in many contexts, limited by neoliberal capitalism and managerial forces. However, the presented stories and analyzes are so full of interesting meanings that readers can easily make new interpretations.

The reviewed book makes an important contribution to the field of management learning in at least two ways. First, collecting stories through the narrative collage method is a great way for students and teachers to develop collective imagination and action together—and Monika Kostera shows us how to do this. Presenting voices on the processes of organizing offers the possibility of revealing and sharing the deepest feelings and emotions and of strengthening social relationships in the classroom, not to mention the valuable empirics collected by the teacher/researcher, which can be used in the management education research field. Second, the book itself can be used in the management classroom as a great source of material for discussions on the role of collective imagination in organizing processes. Its very accessible language and engaging cases based on the collected stories make this book an interesting reading to consider for management courses.

I agree with Monika Kostera that we live in the era of interregnum—a time when the order of the well-known world has disappeared but the new order has not yet been invented. We are witnessing a systematic erosion of public goods and collective imaginations, drained by neoliberal capitalism and the ideology of psychopathic individualism, both freezing our social thermostats. This book gives us a chance to gather by the fire again, restore the collective sensemaking about our fragile lives, and invent new worlds of organizing.

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