Introduction

This book is about conditions created by organizations for the relationship between the organization and its employees as a way to answer how the organization can continually be in the process of becoming something it is not. The book does not simply argue that the world has become more transient and turbulent. It explores what the possible implications are when the organization sees the world in this way. What does “to organize” mean when the only established premise is that everything is transient?

At the center of my investigation is the relationship between organization and employee. I look at the way in which organizations develop language, concepts and demands concerning interactions with employees. I observe how organizations create expectations of their employees based on the single premise of change, of the constant movement towards becoming something else. How is it possible for an organization to establish expectations for its employees according to which employees can self-manage when the organization expects to be continually moving in the direction of a new and unknown place? I believe that we are seeing the emergence of a problem, which may be boiled down to this: How to create expectations based on the expectation of the unexpected?

The following statements are selections from the book’s archive. These quotes reappear inside the book and become the object of a more sustained analysis. Here, I merely introduce them as a way to demonstrate the level of heterogeneity and complexity that they entail but also in order to suggest a pattern in the regiments of expectations placed on employees that I try to describe in the book:

● “Employees need to take responsibility for their own development. Each employee needs to actively relate to his or her possibilities and needs for development in order to acquire the necessary tools for embracing new challenges and requirements.”

Here, employees are expected to see themselves as projects of change and to develop based on the new challenges and demands which the employee believes to be at stake in the organization. The self-pedagogization of the employee represents the answer to a changing organization.
“Offer love and encouragement. The more you give the more you get. Make it your priority to be supportive; seek out those who need support.”

“By listening to employees’ hopes and dreams, by encouraging them to express their fears and doubts and by providing them with the possibility to present their vision for the future of the organization, employees are made to feel that the management acknowledges their concerns and remains respectful of their feelings.”

Here, employees are expected to be invested in the organization and give to the organization without the organization having to ask for it. By showing love and respect for employees and by not only incorporating their enthusiasm but also their doubts and fears, and by providing them with the opportunity to give to the organization what they believe it needs, the organization seeks to create the loving employee, who anticipates the needs of the organization. The employee relation is made more intimate as the answer to an organization which is no longer capable of expressing its needs and authoritatively representing its totality.

“To refer to oneself as ‘playing’ rather than ‘working’ immediately implies an expansion of the experience of who one is and what one is capable of. It means dedicating oneself to the realization of one’s total human potential.”

“We play around with who we are, with what we might or might not be, and through our playful engagement it becomes clear to us what we choose to do and what we need not do. Sometimes we become so consumed by playing that it results in changes in who we are. We refer to this as transformation.”

Here, employees are expected to relate to their work and themselves in a playful manner. When work is observed from the perspective of play, it becomes more important to potentialize than to realize. It becomes more important to create possibilities than to realize possibilities. And when observing oneself from the perspective of play, the focus becomes what to create oneself as. It is less a question of self-development within an existing horizon and more a question of a transformation of the horizon in order to allow for entirely new possibilities of development. Transforming oneself means to constantly shift and expand one’s potential. The playful employee represents the answer for an organization that is concerned about running out of potential and considers notions of potentiality as a scarce resource.

This book could have been about how organizations increasingly colo-
nize employees’ freedom, identity and subjectivity. As Hughes ironically states, “In short, the discourse of emotional intelligence seems to mark a continuation and intensification of well-documented processes that are said to involve the increasing corporate ‘colonization’ of employee affects and subjectivities” (Hughes 2010, p. 33). It could also have emphasized the perfection of power in contemporary management efforts. One could stress the internalization of power and the appropriation by the organization of identity and emotions. Indeed, the book does touch upon these questions, albeit with a less unambiguously normative and moral judgment. The book shows the production of entirely ambiguous and impossible expectations of employees, who as a result find themselves in various precarious positions. The expectation that the employee is to anticipate the needs of the organization even though the organization never expresses these needs creates a system in which the employee can never know whether or not she has anticipated enough needs. The employee runs the risk of finding herself in a spiral of expectation formation in which she has a feeling of never having done enough. One could always have taken on more responsibilities. The call for the employee to show independent initiative and to self-manage creates an ambiguous expectation that says, “Do as I say – be independent.” Thus, the employee never feels certain about when to act independently and when to be subordinate. The expectation that the employee relates to work in a playful way and does not abide by the boundaries of reality puts the employee in a situation in which she is at once expected to disregard reality while still being judged on her results.

However, there is another question which interests me just as much, namely, what happens to the organization as it becomes increasingly more dependent on psychic processes to which it has no access, which it cannot observe, regulate and control. I am interested in the way that modern organizations seem to be in the process of deconstructing themselves as organizations through their production of new employee relations. When organizations require of their employees that they be authentic in their organizational engagement, the organization makes itself reliant on employee self-relations in a way that both increases the organization’s irritability in relation to psychic operations while also increasing its uncontrollability. It is easy enough to glorify authenticity and realness in abstract and general terms, but it remains a fundamental impossibility to assess whether or not the statements of a specific employee are authentic. And the articulation of authenticity as something that is generated in an exchange between organization and employee multiplies the challenge. I am interested in the way that the many new employee management models create a backlash in the organization in the form of uncontrollability and organizational self-deconstruction.
These notions run together in the subtitle “Transient relationships”. How is it possible to ground an organization in which every relationship is expected to be in a process of becoming? What social forms are able to contain transience as precisely transient? The book focuses on two phenomena and their historical development: membership and contract. Their function in the book is to serve as a kind of point zero, an “outside”, which makes it possible to diagnose the conditions of possibility and impossibility of transience.

- I have chosen membership because its form is basically a constituent for any organization. Thus transience, if in play, must emerge in the transformations and tensions of the evolution of the form of membership. The book shows how formal membership is doubled and displaced and becomes the membership of self-enrollment. Self-enrollment as a form of membership allows for transience precisely by defining the concept of member as something one is becoming but can never become. Thus, self-enrollment becomes a fixed form capable of comprising transience. This form of self-enrollment is actualized when the manager interested asks the employee about her time in some exciting projects, about the larger perspectives she sees in these projects and how the manager might be helpful for her. Here self-enrollment as the preferred form is a fixed expectation, but how self-enrollment is loaded with concrete and specific meaning by the single employee in single situations is simultaneous open and volatile.

- I have chosen contract as another point zero because it is through contracts that an organization formalizes its dependency on its external environment. Contracts should not be understood in the narrow sense of the employment contract, written with the company, but wider, as the formal and informal agreements to be concluded between the undertaking and the employee. Here the book shows how employee contracts are displaced to employee partnerships. Partnerships enable transience by promising future promises. Thus, partnerships represent another form that incorporates transience. When the employee, for example, at the end of an employee development conversation promises their leader to develop their leadership potential and find a suitable project manager training course, and when the leader, on the other hand, promises to investigate the possibility that the employee can be project leader, they have mainly promised each other that they will create the possibility that it can later be incorporated into a concrete agreement on the employee’s future. They have both promised and not promised anything. The agreement is both fixed and transient.
What has been called the “post-bureaucratic” organization has not in fact abandoned bureaucracy. The post-bureaucratic organization is a fold within bureaucracy; a bureaucracy that does not wish to be recognized as such but which cannot escape its bureaucratic form. By diagnosing the organization as a “transient relation” I am not aiming to reawaken old virtues and remind the reader of the strengths of the formal bureaucracy. My objective is to show the way that the organization is unable to ever escape itself. There is never a clean break between the formally bureaucratic and the post-bureaucratic (or whatever we want to name it) organization. The formal structure sticks. Formal membership does not disappear but is folded into partnerships. I wish to diagnose “the transient organization” in all its inherent ambiguity. I want to show that the relationship between organization and employee is both radically transformed and the same. I want to describe the current organizational regime with all its combinations of totality of power and powerlessness, leadership ambitions and uncontrollability, expansion and self-deconstruction.

I hardly have to mention that this book does not provide simple advice and a promise of a brighter future. However, I have striven to take “praxis” seriously. I am not one to give advice. I aim instead at proposing a few impractical questions for “praxis” to consider, questions such as “Is it possible that what you do could be done differently?”, “Is what you do fundamentally impossible and paradoxical?”, “Doing what you do, you risk undermining these fundamental values and categories. Do you take responsibility for that?”

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 1, “Diagnostics of the present and second order observation”, develops the book’s conceptual focus and analytical apparatus.

Precisely because this book is looking for single traits in different phenomena, including previous analyses, and thus tries to draw a more comprehensive diagnosis of the present, it needs to develop criteria for this. How can we identify the “continuous movements”? How can we engage a diagnosis of the present?

Diagnosis of the present is defined as the effort to capture the creation of contemporary conditions and what is at stake in them. However, a diagnosis of the present has to have an outside, a point zero, from which a diagnosis of how something is put at stake can be established. The chapter asks how to establish an outside without subscribing to a fixed ontology. How to observe from within society where society is headed? How to define an outside from within? The chapter also explains the book’s model
of second-order observation – that is, how we can observe how organizations observe employees, their feelings, their relationships, and so on. So how do we make observations into the single object of research? I outline and differentiate four different analytical strategies, including the semantic analysis and form analysis.

Chapter 2, “Adapting to adaptability: the machine of transience”, explores transience as a unique logic which produces radical effects within organizations. I argue that this logic emerged in the 1980s with a new ideal about adapting to adaptability. I explore the logic of transience by means of the concept of decision. Decisions are perceived as communicative operations that seek to fix expectations and thus contain uncertainty. With the logic of transience, organizations begin to concern themselves with the question of whether the decision’s fixation of expectations and containment of uncertainty reduce the organization’s possibilities. The chapter addresses how the emergence of the logic of transience results in undecidability as a virtue. The result is decisions that do not want to limit possibilities, decisions that really do not want to be decisions.

Chapter 3, “From membership to self-enrollment: the production of the employee who creates herself in the organizational image”, looks at the way that membership as form changes with the emergence of the logic of transience. What form can membership take when the membership decision simultaneously desires a certain level of undecidability? How can organizations take responsibility for their members taking responsibility for their inclusion in the organization? The membership criterion becomes the self-enrolled employee. I show how self-enrollment takes place pedagogically, passionately and playfully, and describe the regime of expectations that they establish. In the discourse of pedagogy, one self-enrolls through continual self-development. One is recognized as a member because one strives to make oneself competently relevant for the emerging organization. In the discourse of passion, one self-enrolls by continually anticipating the needs of the organization. One is recognized as a member because one makes oneself lovable and has defined the organization as one’s significant other. In the discourse of play, one self-enrolls by playing with the notion of membership and one is recognized as a member because one dedicates oneself fully to playing.

Chapter 4, “Management of authentic feelings: the trembling organization”, discusses the way that organizations make themselves dependent upon the emotions of the individual employee and how this dependency affects the organization as a system. I distinguish between a semantic of emotions as concepts available to communication in the articulation of emotional content and emotions as operations in the psychic system. As psychic operations, emotions are thought operations, which are granted
a high degree of diffuseness. In the psychic system, emotions serve as a kind of immune system, which allows the psychic system to continue its operations when its continued existence is threatened by the development of internal problems. As diffuse psychic operations, emotions are incommunicable. One may speak of one’s emotions, but the very act of doing so changes the state of the psychic system, which is why the communication of emotion is always burdened by problems of authenticity. When self-enrollment becomes coded through pedagogy, passion and play, personal emotions are deemed relevant for communication, although they cannot be communicated. Chapter 4 inquires into organizations’ experiences with incommunicable emotions and development of a language for the management of that which necessarily escapes all management. I study organizational rhetoric of emotions from 1950 until today. I trace the development of one emotional language after the other, all of which do not solve the organizational problem of authentic self-enrollment. The result of this is the trembling organization, which has not simply increased its capacity to irritate individual psychic systems but which increasingly has become more sensitive to psychic irritability.

Chapter 5, “Managing interpenetration and intensity”, includes the body and biological systems as system references. I will argue that not only the employee’s feelings become constructed as an object for management, but also the interpenetrations between bodies, psychic and social systems emerge as management subjects. It becomes a target for the organization to create intensity between the body, psychic and social systems, because this intensity represents a potentiality resource for the organization. Management of potentiality is about creating a zone of intense interpenetration between the organization and psychic systems, inter-human interpenetration and the interpenetration between psyche and body.

Chapter 6, “Loving layoffs: the intimate strategies of the break-up”, explores how passionately coded self-enrollment also affects the way that a membership can be terminated by the organization. At the same time, the chapter looks at the way in which the organization’s concern with appearing sensitive to employee emotions radically affects certain types of decisions. The chapter shows that with the doubling of membership into formal membership and self-enrollment, the layoff as form is also doubled into formal layoff and loving layoff. The chapter explores the way in which love as a system has developed certain semantics concerning intimate break-ups, or divorces. The literature on divorce is analyzed for semantic strategies for the handling of break-ups. Then, I look at the semantic of layoffs over the past decade. Contemporary semantics of layoffs have inherited certain figures and questions from divorce literature. The notion of the possibility of a loving dismantling of love emerges in the semantics
of layoffs where layoffs are explicitly compared with divorces and explore loving ways to carry out layoffs.

Chapter 7, “Unbound binding: from employee contracts to partnerships”, shifts the point of observation from membership to contract. I discuss how the book’s questions change if we decide to trace employee contracts as form. The chapter explores the way that employee contracts are challenged in the regime of transience in a similar way to the challenge to membership. The challenge of employee contracts becomes how to create mutually binding expectations between independent units with the expectation that expectations are constantly changing. It becomes a question of creating a form of contractual binding that remains unbound. The chapter shows that this is handled by turning the contracts “meta”. Instead of making an agreement, one makes an agreement about making an agreement. This is what partnerships are about. Hence, what I claim is that employee contracts become folded and displaced into employee partnership and I look at the communicative effects of this shift. Moreover, Chapter 7 explores different examples of employee partnerships; the competency agreement, the self-contract, the employee development interview and the personal development plan. The chapter ends by suggesting that employee partnerships are contracts that aim towards a management-employee relationship that they can never achieve.

Chapter 8, “The organization as a nexus of partnerships”, discusses the notion that employees enter into partnerships not only with the organization but also with the organization’s environment in the form of citizens, patients, students, parents, and so on. I pursue two questions here. The first is how partnership agreements offer the organization’s audience a peculiar form of monstrous membership. When a client agrees to a citizen’s contract with the social services department, she is recognized as a partner and is granted a certain amount of influence on her diagnosis and treatment. When a student signs a contract relating to a student plan, the student is recognized as someone who is capable of taking responsibility for her own learning and is given a level of influence on teaching goals and teaching. The public becomes individualized and is given the opportunity to assume a limited performative role in the organization. The other question I pursue is about the organizational effects of such partnerships. To the extent that employees partake in multiple partnerships with the organization’s environment, the organization becomes represented by a multiplicity of general impressions produced on the interface between the organization and its environment. The chapter proposes a parallel thesis to Williamson’s (1983) notion of seeing an organization as a nexus of contracts. My thesis is that organizational unity is recreated as a nexus of
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partnerships and, as an effect, organizational management becomes the supervision of the creation of partnerships.

In the book’s conclusion, “Transient relationships – towards the intensity machine”, I discuss the book’s contribution as a diagnosis of the present compared with Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) and Peter Fleming’s *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work* (2009). I try to clarify my contribution and how I pursue a different quality of criticism than Sennett and Fleming. In conclusion, I sum up the current status of the organization/employee relation as an intensity machine, which intensifies and accelerates the interpenetration between the organization and psychic systems and provides the psychic systems with new opportunities to pursue affect in organizations.