Introduction

The way of paradoxes is the way of truth.
To test reality we must see it on the tight rope.
When the verities become acrobats, we can judge them.
(Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*)

Normal organizations run on routines. Despite their normalcy to insiders, many organizations appear as a theatre of the absurd to outsiders, a characteristic caricatured with much craft in comedies such as *Yes, Prime Minister* and *The Office*. Other organizations are deliberately ambiguous and opaque, as in the case of clandestine organizations, often making their public projection and private experience starkly dissimilar, due to secrecy, hidden governance and sustained unacknowledgement of their existence on the part of their members (Cappellaro et al., 2021; Stohl & Stohl, 2017). While the routines of the absurd may be hidden from the general public, their oaths, rituals, cyclical events and repetitions are felt even more keenly by their members as they live secret lives. Yet, as the poets know, this is the script for everyday organizational life, not just the absurd and the secretive, as we humans create routines to try and keep absurdity and equivocality at bay. Farson (1996) regards absurdity and contradictions as pervasive, universal phenomena experienced in dealings with organizations and bureaucracies. Along with Nobel laureates Beckett (1958) and Dylan (1966), we would seek to underscore the absurdity of routine and repetition as an endless beckoning (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017) that paradox disrupts.

Against the shackles of routine we will highlight the delights of disorganization (Cooper, 1986), recursivity (Hernes & Bakken, 2003; Luhmann, 1995a) and wonder (Carlsen & Sandelands, 2015; McCabe, 2016; Sandelands & Carlsen, 2013). Warren Bennis once defended the importance of aiming to create delightful organizations (Bennis, 2000). Since organizational theories have performative effects, in as much as they contribute to forming the objects of which they write (D'Adderio, Glaser, & Pollock, 2019; Garud, Gehman, & Tharchen, 2018; Marti & Gond, 2018), the creation of delightful organizations requires delightful theories (an idea also suggested by Ghoshal, 2005). Delightfulness may be assumed to be a state of great pleasure; hence a delightful theory and practice would be a pleasurable state of affairs. In terms of antinomies, delight is the antithesis of something that is displeasing or disagreeable.

Paradox theory is, we believe, a delightful theory of organizations because it challenges the disagreeably taken-for-granted idea that organizations are orderly, logical and predictable entities which, whatever else they produce, create the boredom of routine. Paradox has been an element of so-called new thinking about organizations (Tsoukas et al., 2020). Paradox disrupts the absurdity of repetition. Paradox incorporates the ambiguities of experience, generating dilemmas, tensions and contradictions, the human condition of existential being. Paradox acknowledges that leading and managing occurs in absurd worlds, marked by competing goals, contradictory interpretations and ambiguous causalities. Hence, paradoxical theories resonate with the human experience of organizing in a way that neater and more mechanistic architectonics do not.

This *Introduction to Organizational Paradox Theory* is not intended as a comprehensive compendium of the burgeoning literature on paradox that has emerged, especially in the last two decades (see Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016 for a review). Rather, it should be approached as a guide to the absurdity of dominant rational architectonics, aimed at readers who intend to venture to an unfamiliar interpretation of those destinations they must traverse each day or who, with Dylan (1966), are simply curious about how to get out of going through all those things twice and more, that they do every day, *ad infinitum*.

Travel guides are inevitably biased: they are addressed to a specific audience (adventure-seeker versus package tour holidaymakers, young tourists on a shoestring versus affluent travellers) and reflect the specific interests and idiosyncrasies of their authors. Coming across a guide to a familiar destination we are sometimes sufficiently intrigued to browse its pages to find out which features and locations have been highlighted and which have been ignored; whether those absurdities in which we rejoice made it to the page or were among the deleted drafts. In doing so we can be irritated by some choices, but also surprised by discovering something new about the place we inhabit. What we take for granted, with which we are ordinarily delighted, may be as absurd as that which we thought disagreeable.

Tour guides, while they may contain maps, are not cartographically representative. A map aims to offer a complete object representation of a specific geographical site, a result achieved (paradoxically) by removing some objects (e.g. trees) and highlighting others (e.g. roads), even by including socially constructed objects (e.g. borders) that are not intrinsic to the territory (Berti, 2017). A travel guide, with all its limitations and idiosyncrasies, stimulates the interest of its readers, even when they are familiar with the place they are being guided to, highlighting aspects that they might find more interesting, offering practical tips and advice on how to navigate the opportunities and threats implicit in the text, providing some illustrations – in the form of images

or narrative vignettes – of what can be seen and experienced once they see their destination through the lens of the guide. Our book is more of a guide than a cartographic device. A problem with guides is that they attempt to capture in a static form an everchanging reality: while information about natural features or monuments can remain current for a long time, other aspects risk becoming instantly obsolete (for instance, advice about fashionable hangouts or good restaurants, favoured plays or authors). Guides change as realities alter or are so perceived.

Organization theories are guides to organizing. As such, they are in constant evolution, with new constructs and perspectives continuously added or rejected following theoretical debates and empirical findings (Khorasani & Almasifar, 2017). Of course, guides have their historicity. When social realities change but the guides that inform action do not, increasingly absurd organizational theatrics may be performed. New guides highlight the practices of changing realities while old practices, informed by guides from the past, comfortably correspond to a sense of reality slipping ever further away from contemporary concerns. Paradoxically, the problem of repetition beckons again; the absurdity of the same old things being reimagined with new labels that may delight the younger traveller but is so familiar to those more seasoned. Once the old guides have established practices, cycle, routine and repetition will reproduce them with little variation. Hence, phenomena alerted to by newer guides may be defeated by organizational imprinting (Stinchcombe, 1965). The literature on organizational paradox is very much a contemporary concern, only blossoming emerging in the 1980s (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Luhmann, 1986; Putnam, 1986; Smith & Berg, 1987). Paradoxes had been observed before in studies of organization, but only as apparent conundrums, to be rationally explained and solved (Blau, 1954; Perrow, 1977); only a few sociologists deeply familiar with Marx engaged with the idea of organizational dialectics and paradoxes (Allen, 1975; Benson, 1977).

Contradictions persist not only because changing realities are refracted through worn-out lenses, but also because they are overlain with many new ones. For those working in the prism of Marx's bequest, one great contradiction trumps all others: the paradox of the great mass of Labour being beheld to the small elites of Capital. The paradox is even more salient since the turn of the century, considering that most democratic countries – after the post-war decades in which the most egregious social and economic inequalities have been redressed – appear to have abandoned redistributive policies and practices (Piketty, 2020).

Even if organization theory, over its illustrious career, has eschewed this fundamental contradiction, it has been alert to more contemporary ones. Where and when contemporary paradoxes arise, they constitute dualisms that demand choice of one or other horns of a dilemma, invoking new routines as

resolution of persistent problems. Persistence has its ironies, of course; dilemmas recur – unless organizations *engage* with paradoxes rather than being stuck in routine, repetitions and cycles, they respond in ruts.

In this *Introduction* we meet organizational paradox, a new lens for seeing ruts and rationalities that are increasingly absurd. Organizational paradox is busy being born in a welcoming intellectual community that is not just tolerant of methodological and paradigmatic differences but one celebrating diversity and multiplicity of ideas, building on an inclusive and robust conceptual core (Schad, Lewis, & Smith, 2019). In practice, designs need to be embraced by managers if more delightful organizations are to be its progeny. With this book, we desire to seed that progeny, taking organizational paradoxical approaches out of their intellectual enclave by translating them, as a guide to practice, for managers still captive to disagreeable practices (Ghoshal, 2005).

To account for, as well as take advantage of, the constant transformation and evolution that characterizes organizational paradox theory, we structure each chapter by first providing readers with a succinct description of the ‘conceptual core’ on which a majority consensus has been – at least momentarily – achieved. Then, since it is important to preserve theory vitality, the boundaries of this conceptual core are tested, by highlighting unresolved issues and remaining gaps, problematizing, revealing and challenging some of the assumptions that bound the paradoxical approach (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Doing this allows us to outline future, still unexplored, possibilities for conceptualization, research and application. Since paradox might seem a very abstract, even obscure, concept, conceptual definitions and theoretical debates are accompanied and enriched by concrete illustrations, vignettes and exemplary cases, demonstrating the pervasiveness of organizational tensions and the relevance of a theoretical framework aimed at understanding and managing them in practice.

Choosing which topics to include in this book was a difficult and intrinsically frustrating exercise, as is the case when compiling lists for any guides. Any inclusion requires exclusion, which is intrinsically controversial and subject to accusations of bias. At the same time, an Introduction is meant to be read as a coherent text (differently from a Handbook, in which chapters can be consulted individually, according to the reader’s specific interests). Thus, our choices (summarized in Figure I.1) were motivated by the desire to offer a logical ‘itinerary’, following a coherent narrative that guides the reader in exploring the paradox literature, which both offers guidance and leaves liberty for wandering, according to individual tastes and interests.

As the caption (which paraphrases the famous Magritte painting, *La Trahison des Images*) states, this map is not really a map, since it describes many possible ‘itineraries’ that can be traced by following the narrative of this Introduction. In addition to the main storyline, it is possible to retrace one’s

Figure I.1 'This is not a map'

steps, for instance to consider the critical management implications (discussed in Chapter 6) of pragmatic paradoxes, or to reflect back on the key definitions of paradox in light of discussion on the nested nature of paradoxes. The dotted line in the picture illustrates some (but not all) of the possible alternative path-

ways to explore the topic by iterating between chapters. The content of each chapter is outlined more specifically below.

Chapter 1 (What is paradox?) introduces key definitions and ideas developed by organizational paradox scholars, which constitute the currently agreed upon conceptual core of paradox theory. A concise definition of paradox as interdependent and persistent contradictions (Schad et al., 2016) is promoted as a dynamic model of organizing, highlighting the importance of acknowledging paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011), the role of paradoxical mindsets (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), as well as the latest discussions on the ontology of paradox (Hahn & Knight, 2019). A brief history of the evolution of the concept and of the vital scholarly community that has been studying paradox is provided. The chapter also includes concrete examples of organizational paradoxes and highlights the need to constantly test and expand on this conceptual core, to avoid the reification or taming of paradoxes (Cunha & Putnam, 2019).

Chapter 2 (How to deal with paradoxes) focuses on how paradoxes can be managed, showing the rich repertoire of actions that have been proposed (or empirically observed by researchers) to cope with contradictions. Structural (e.g. separation), intersubjective (e.g. practices) and individual (e.g. oscillation) responses are described, and their performative role in shaping the very tensions they supposedly react to is documented. Moving beyond a binary distinction between constructive responses based on acceptance, which are supposed to harness the potential of paradoxes, and negative ones, characterized by denial, that are thought to lead to vicious circles (Smith & Lewis, 2011), the pros and cons of each response modality are considered, together with the conditions that enable their manifestation.

Chapter 3 (The bright side: paradoxes and positive organizational scholarship) is explicitly meant to act as a precursor to the one that follows, considering the potential of paradox to leverage desirable change. Considering paradox from a Positive Organizational Scholarship perspective, the chapter highlights how paradoxical tensions can be harnessed to manifest virtuous organizational cultures of abundance and generate learning opportunities (Cunha et al., 2020). The chapter further considers the need for navigating contradictions implicit to positive organizational practices.

Chapter 4 (The dark side: absurdity and pragmatic paradoxes) explores the ‘dark side’ of paradoxes, showing that – under conditions of limited agency and disempowerment – tensions can be experienced by individuals as paralyzing, pathological conditions (Berti & Simpson, 2019; Tracy, 2004). By ‘zooming in’ on individual experiences of paradox, the role of absurdity, power and agency are emphasized, as is the need to create conditions that allow individuals to cope with tensions.

Chapter 5 (Nested, multiple and multidimensional paradoxes) examines the complexity of paradox, going beyond the idea that paradoxes have only two

opposite poles. First, we look at how paradoxes can be nested or embedded in each other and then we consider tensions generated by multiple poles, evolving over time, to deepen and make more complex how the phenomenon may be regarded in order to overcome any tendency to 'tame' paradox.

Chapter 6 (Paradoxes of power, control and empowerment) constitutes a purposeful side-trip, to look at a fundamental but underexplored paradox that characterizes all organizations, that between power over (the use of power to control others, which has oppressive consequences) and power to (the capacity to act in concert, producing collective achievement). One implies the other but has opposite and contradictory consequences. We also consider how this paradox can be met through the growing of coactive power, or power with, through processes of collaborative democratic governance. Focusing on this issue helps make paradox theory more 'sensitive to power' and expand its use as a Critical Management perspective.

Conclusions (The sociological futures of paradox: incorporating grand challenges) takes stock of the trajectory of paradox theory and attempts to plot (and direct) its future evolution, highlighting possible ways to expand and reinforce the theory, extending its reach and maintaining its vitality, also in relation to the evolving field of organizational studies and the new challenges of a transforming economy and society.

In concluding, it is important to mention what could appear to be the most important omission in our guide. We have made the choice to focus on the 'material' side of paradoxes, treating them as phenomena that have specific and assessable features and that can be appraised by an independent observer. Yet paradox can also constitute a powerful intellectual prism, a metatheoretical perspective that complements other theories of organization (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Lewis & Smith, 2014). As a complementary or auxiliary theory, paradox helps to shed light on a variety of organizational theories. By focusing on the contradictions of organizational life, paradox illuminates why things lead to their opposites, how solutions become problems, how success degenerates into failure, and so on. In other words, paradox helps with understanding why organizations are so rich in tension and contradiction, sometimes so absurd, yet with an absurdity that, if interpreted appropriately, can be so full of surprise and creativity. While we do not devote a chapter to the heuristic use of paradox, our treatment of the subject in our guide demonstrates implicitly the potential of a paradox framework to reveal organizational nuance and complexity, debunking the assumption that organizations should be seen as merely predictable mechanisms executing the tasks they were designed to do. Engineering has its place; so too does the theatre of the absurd, and each have their guides. In the one, linear rationality; in the other, paradox. Our aim is to be a guide that uncovers the engineering that scaffolds organizational reality by opening up the theatre of everyday organizational life to more paradoxical

accounts. In time, these accounts will lose their sense of playfulness and delight but until then, dear reader, we hope to delight you with the contents of this book so that it is worth the price of at least reading it once ... or twice ... but no more. Read, begin your enquiry, consider the paradoxes that frame your organizational existence... and cope with them!