

**An Event-System Perspective on Disruption:  
Theorizing the Pandemic and Other Discontinuities through Historical and  
Fictional Accounts of the Plague**

**Thomas J. Roulet**  
[t.roulet@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:t.roulet@jbs.cam.ac.uk)  
University of Cambridge

**Joel Bothello**  
[joel.bothello@concordia.ca](mailto:joel.bothello@concordia.ca)  
Concordia University

Forthcoming at the *Academy of Management Review*

**Abstract:**

Disruptions such as COVID-19 – and the subsequent flux they wreak on organizations and society – have become commonplace. In order to advance our understanding of (and adaptation to) future discontinuities and crises, we argue that we require a reconceptualization of how disruption occurs. To do so, we draw on Event Systems Theory (EST): in contrast to previous work viewing disruption as the outcome of a singular event, we focus on how disruption can occur from an event chain, i.e., a set of events that are temporally and causally connected. We abductively shape our conceptual arguments by drawing on narratives of past pandemics, reviewing two historical and two fictional texts that (re)create the experiences of those living through the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of the bubonic plague. Rather than focusing on events themselves, we identify how certain characteristics among events in a chain lead to four micro-level experiences: stagnation, disorientation, polarization and repudiation. We then proceed to examine how these micro-level reactions culminate into macro-level transformations of economic, political and cultural norms. Our event-system perspective on disruption and crises thereby generates insight, not only into understanding the (post-)pandemic world, but also into responses to future discontinuities.

**Acknowledgements:** We thank our Associate Editor Don Conlon for his editorial support and guidance, but also our anonymous reviewers for constructively *disrupting* our manuscript during this publication journey.

*“This chronicle could not be a story of definitive victory. It could only be the record of what had to be done and what, no doubt, would have to be done again.”*

- Albert Camus, *The Plague* (2012 [1947]: 237).

Much of the management literature on disruption focuses on how individuals, organizations and systems adapt to discontinuities stemming from their environment (Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005; Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, Shepherd, & Zhao, 2017). Within this body of work, the predominant assumption is that disruption occurs as the result of a singular event, i.e. a “jolt” (Gersick, 1991; Meyer, 1982; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). Large scale crises such as 9/11 (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharras, 2020) or Chernobyl (Beck, 1987) can be seen as critical events that trigger dramatic and visible changes across multiple levels, whether individual, organizational or systemic.

Yet such discontinuities can rarely be understood as a single isolated occurrence (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, reveals an alternate conceptualization where disruption is more aptly characterized as the outcome of a set of interconnected events, e.g., multiple waves of infections, new variants emerging on a regular basis, successive lockdowns, growing civil unrest and international tensions. A series of events, in other words, accumulate to generate profound and long-lasting changes upon organizations of all types and their broader social systems (Banerjee, Kharroubi, & Lewrick, 2020; Lin et al., 2021). Substantive transformation, then, may not be the result of any individual event, but rather a *chain* of events producing a cumulative impact (Bothello & Salles-Djelic, 2018; Djelic & Quack, 2007).

In this review, we explore this dynamic by drawing on Event System Theory, or EST (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015), to reconceptualize disruption as the product of an “event chain”, i.e., a temporally and causally bound series of disruptive events rather than a singular

jolt; in doing so, we seek to better understand not only the current pandemic and its aftermath, but also future crises that will be complex in terms of causality and temporality. EST focuses on events as units of analysis, i.e., as discrete occurrences with clear spatial and temporal boundaries, that cause divergence in normal, expected courses of action (Allport, 1940; 1954). The ontological assumption of EST is that individual, organizational and institutional phenomena – and even processes – can be decomposed into discrete, change producing events (Morgeson et al., 2015). To understand the unfolding transformations brought about by COVID-19 and other major discontinuities, we therefore require an examination of disruptive event chains rather than a parochial focus on any single disruptive occurrence.

This approach, by extension, involves examining the experiences of individuals involved in disruption and the “trickling up” effect of such experience to produce macro-level transformation, an area ripe for future research according to EST scholars (Morgeson & DeRue, 2006; Morgeson et al., 2015; Liu & Liu, 2017; Liu et al., 2021). This is especially important for expanding our understanding of disruption, given that many forms of discontinuity do not directly trigger change but rather generate reactions among actors that, in turn, lead to radical change (Weick, 1993).

Generating new theory around disruption and extending EST – accompanied by the need to understand COVID-19 – requires an abductive approach that moves recursively between phenomena-based “hunches” (Saetre & Van de Ven, 2021: 684) and potential theoretical explanations (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018). Following in the tradition of prior review essays (e.g., Tasselli, 2019; Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020; Raisch, 2021), we therefore draw on historical and fictional accounts to inform our arguments. Specifically, we focus on texts describing past occurrences of the bubonic plague, with a particular emphasis on the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that killed a third of Europe’s population. Naturally, there are many differences between those historical pandemics and COVID-19 – e.g., with respect to socio-

political structures and scientific/medical knowledge – yet there are also striking similarities with respect to how external events led to shifts in individual sensemaking, culminating in system-level effects. By synthesizing experiences of the Plague and identifying patterns across the four books, we can inform our understanding of how discontinuity unfolds: namely how sequences of disruptive events are mediated by micro-level experiences that lead to macro-level changes. This allows us to draw parallels with the events, experiences and effects that we observe across multiple levels, not only during the pandemic but also with respect to other discontinuities.

We review a mix of non-fiction and fiction. First, we build on two accounts written by historians: one book, by Renaissance historian David Herlihy, entitled *The Black Death and the transformation of the West* (Herlihy & Cohn, 1997), explores the effects of the Black Death on Medieval society and the economy. The second book, *In the wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the world it made* by the historian Norman Cantor (2001), follows a set of men and women from different levels of the social hierarchy as they navigate the Black Death and the recovery that follows. Our third book is fictional and set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the novel *The Plague* by French author Albert Camus (2012 [1947]), which narrates the spread of the bubonic plague in Oran, Algeria in 1947. Although the characters and story are fictional, much of Camus' source material is based on real epidemics that occurred in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and Asia. Finally, we review the book *A Journal of the Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe (1896 [1722]), a semi-fictional narrative about living through the 1655 Great Plague of London. Our two novels therefore (re)construct first-hand narratives of the plague on the basis of extensive historical research by their authors; the gradual transformation of sensemaking and meaning of those living through the pandemic provide important “emic” insights that complement the more “etic” accounts of the historical material. Theorizing from

such comparisons and from a range of materials can be particularly fruitful for organization studies (Cornelissen & Durand, 2004; Farchi et al., 2021).

Through our abductive analysis of the Plague – iterating between our respective readings of those accounts, the relevant psychological and sociological literature, as well as our personal experiences of the COVID pandemic – we observe four salient psychological experiences generated by disruptive event chains: stagnation, disorientation, polarization and repudiation. These micro-level reactions, in turn, erode existing institutional arrangements while allowing new institutions to emerge, ultimately triggering macro-level transformations of economic, political and cultural norms. Through this exploration, we not only are able to draw parallels between narratives from the Plague and the COVID-19 crisis, but can also contribute to an alternate understanding of discontinuity as a sequence of disruptive events. Our essay also contributes to EST by unpacking the nature of event chains (Morgeson et al., 2015: 531) and examining how their characteristics produce effects at different levels.

### **BEYOND DISRUPTION AS A JOLT: AN EVENT SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE**

Although COVID-19 has renewed academic interest in responses to disruption (Foss, 2020; Namatovu & Larsen, 2021; Huang et al. 2020; Huang & Farboudi, 2021), management academics have examined a wide array of crises ranging from environmental disasters (Paton & Johnson, 2001) to breakdowns in human systems (Perrow, 1981). Across these various phenomena, disruption is viewed as a “low-probability, high-impact situation” (Pearson & Clair, 1998: 66), i.e., a form of unpredictable and discontinuous change threatening the viability and survival of organizations and systems. Certain events such as the storming of the Bastille (Clemente et al., 2017) or the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Ho, 2014) generated such profound transformations that they defined an epoch, much as is the case with the pandemic or other recent events such as Brexit (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017).

While early management work largely presented disruption as a singular and episodic shock (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994), other large-scale discontinuities reveal the limitations to this ontology (Meyer et al., 2005). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be characterized as one disruptive event but rather as a series of cascading and intermittent disruptive events, ranging from the discovery of the coronavirus in late 2019 to multiple subsequent variants and resurgences. These events cumulatively result in considerable impacts such as collapsing healthcare systems, multiple lockdowns, and anti-vaccination rallies (Banerjee, Kharroubi, & Lewrick, 2020; Lin et al., 2021). Similarly, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, despite its disruptiveness, is to many Ukrainians simply the most recent event in a long-standing conflict with Russia.

Importantly, the link between the sequence and the ultimate set of outcomes is often mediated by cognitive and organizational processes (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). For example, Gustafsson et al. (2021) illustrate how, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, organizational leaders from a variety of industries engaged in practices of trust preservation to mitigate the damage wrought upon their client relationships. Conversely, Weick and Sutcliffe (2011) recount how a breakdown in communication served to escalate a controlled burn into a disastrous three-month forest fire. In these accounts, individual-level practices and cognitive processes ultimately mitigated or exacerbated disruption. Micro-level responses then, become key mediators in determining the ultimate macro-level impact of disruptive events.

In sum, we require a reconceptualization of how disruption occurs that operates both at the micro- and macro-level and that incorporates multiple events (including the causal and temporal relationship between events). To do so, we turn to Event Systems Theory (Morgeson et al., 2015; Liu & Liu, 2017; Liu et al., 2021; see also earlier work from Morgeson & DeRue, 2006). EST is a relatively new conceptual framework that seeks to examine how organizational phenomena can be decomposed into discrete events that are spatially and temporally bound

(Morgeson et al., 2015). EST theorizes events as discrete and analyzable occurrences that produce change for individuals, organizations and environments; these changes constitute a divergence from routine trajectories (Allport, 1940; 1954). Events can vary in terms of novelty, criticality and disruptiveness (Liu et al., 2021), occur over a range of time horizons and produce impacts at different levels of analysis, whether individual, organizational or environmental (Clemente et al., 2017; Morgeson & Derue, 2006). In this sense, EST is particularly tractable for understanding disruption, as the theory has the potential to link disruptive events with both macro-level impacts and micro-level sensemaking.

Importantly for our purposes of rethinking disruption, EST scholars argue that events can be spatially or temporally connected to form “event chains” (Morgeson et al., 2015). This notion allows us to depart from traditional conceptual premises on disruption stemming from radical rupture (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994) and instead apprehend disruption as the product of a set of interrelated events (Clemente et al., 2017; Bothello & Salles-Djelic, 2018). This reconceptualization thus aligns EST with work on institutional change and social movements: for instance, Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018) reveal how the emergence and evolution of modern environmentalism was driven by a series of incremental yet cumulatively consequential occurrences. Each individual event was, by itself, insufficient to elicit a change but in aggregate led to major tipping points that were misconstrued by external audiences as major junctures in environmental thinking.

Through this review, we extend EST in important ways. Firstly, while EST focuses on singular events producing changes in features of individuals, organizations and communities, we consider how multiple events, in aggregate, produce macro-level effects (Djelic and Quack, 2007; Clemente et al., 2017). Accordingly, our object of study is extended beyond the events themselves to incorporate the temporal and causal relationships *between* events (Roulet & Bothello, 2021). More specifically, we propose that characteristics of these relationships (such

as intervals or incremental change from one event to the next) affect sensemaking and event outcomes.

Secondly, despite the affinity of EST for studying mechanisms – i.e., by breaking down processes into discrete events – we still lack accounts where events at one level generate changes in features at another level. For instance, disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic are mediated at the individual level, triggering experiences such as doubt, fear and confusion (Bavel et al., 2020) that ultimately express themselves through behavioral and collective transformations. Morgeson et al. (2015: 531) note that the “psychological processes that link event[s] to event outcomes [is] clearly an important area for additional conceptual work.” We therefore require accounts highlighting the role of individual, micro-level reactions (i.e., psychological experiences) in discontinuity, and how these experiences aggregate into macro-scale transformation.

Third and relatedly, our reconceptualization of disruption as an event chain is also aimed at better understanding the subsequent impacts of discontinuity, particularly with respect to large scale transformations of economic and socio-political structures (Li, 2020). One of the key outcomes of disruption is social movements, i.e., “groups coalesc[ing] to make claims for or against certain practices or actors in order to create or resist new institutional arrangements or transform existing ones” (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2018: 282). We propose that the transformations resulting from disruptions are the product of individual experiences eroding existing institutionalized norms while creating the basis for new norms to emerge. For example, following the disruption brought about by World War II, a number of groups successfully discredited European economic and social institutional arrangements, replacing them with imported American models (Djelic, 1998). A closer look at event chains may inform our understanding about how social movements emerge as responses to discontinuity, and the



implications in terms of macro-level transformation. We proceed to discuss the materials that we will review to generate insights both into EST and the phenomenon of disruption.

## **DRAWING FROM HISTORICAL AND FICTIONAL NARRATIVES OF THE PLAGUE**

Our review combines historical and fictional accounts of the Black Death to better understand disruption as an event chain. Our abductive approach to theorizing (Saetre & Van de Ven, 2021) involves a recursive process that iterates between theory, where we identify shortcomings in conceptualizing disruption from an EST perspective, and review material, where we examine our texts for insights that are relevant to the conceptual framework. After multiple iterations, we settled on examining the micro-level psychological experiences and macro-level political, economic and cultural outcomes of the Plague as areas that could not only inform EST, but also provide insight into comprehending the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other crises.

We relied on two types of accounts of the Plague. On one side, we examined two historical texts providing a comprehensive retelling of the original emergence of the Black Death in 1346 and its aftermath. The first account is David Herlihy's *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (published posthumously by Herlihy's colleague Samuel Cohn in 1997), which takes a holistic, systems-level perspective on the Black Death and its impact on society and the economy. This text is well-regarded for its focus on the aftermath of the Black Death, examining the long-term effects of large-scale disruption on societal systems (Eckert, 2000). According to Herlihy, societal and technological innovation would not have been possible without the shock and disruption brought about by the Plague. The second book is *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* by the historian Norman Cantor (2001). In contrast with Herlihy's work, Cantor takes an individual-level perspective,

building on historical knowledge to narrate the lives of individuals experiencing the Plague. He introduces a comprehensive cast of characters including many historically accurate personalities such as Princess Joan of England, the Abbot Thomas de Birmingham, and landowner John Lestrage, while also integrating the narratives of anonymous individuals from different strata of society. Both texts unpack the societal consequences of the Plague, but from very different levels of analysis.

To complement these two historical accounts, we also review two novels. Fiction has been used as a source of theorization in AMR review essays in the past (see Holt & Zundel, 2014) as well as in other AOM outlets (Martin et al., 2018). We included fictional accounts as a way to capture the “subjective experience” of fictional individuals (Phillips, 1995: 625; Grimand, 2009), which allowed us to uncover how psychological experiences mediated between events and outcomes (Morgeson, et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021). The first novel we reviewed is *The Plague* (*La Peste* in French) by the French Absurdist author Albert Camus (2012 [1947]). The story is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and tells the story of a breakout of the bubonic plague in Oran, a coastal city in French-controlled Algeria. The novel is inspired by a real pandemic that took place in the city a century earlier, and centers on the protagonist Dr. Bernard Rieux, as well as his colleagues who are trapped in Oran as an outbreak of bubonic plague ravages the city. Our final reviewed book is *A Journal of the Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe (1896 [1722]) who narrates the experience of the 1655 Great Plague of London. Building on what are believed to be the notes taken by Defoe's uncle during that pandemic, the book oscillates between first-person stories and corroboration of others' accounts.

The mix of fiction and history help present the effect of disruption from different viewpoints, alternating between “emic” and “etic” perspectives of the Plague. Yet the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, first- and third-person accounts are sometimes blurred within our books: for instance, although Cantor's book is non-fiction, he often takes a

narrative approach and places us in the shoes of individuals from different social classes as they experience the Plague. Similarly, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, despite being written in the first person, was deemed as non-fiction for much of its history because of its correspondence with real events (Bastian, 1965). Camus' *The Plague* is based on methodical historical research on the Black Death and waves of the bubonic plague in post-Renaissance Europe, North Africa and Asia, but takes place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Camus himself notes that, although his book is not a "documentary", he undertook extensive research on historical and medical precedents years before writing the book, to depict the individual experience of the epidemic as precisely as possible.<sup>1</sup>

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES FROM DISRUPTIVE EVENTS**

We aim to unpack complex cause-and-effect relationships between disruptive event chains and outcomes at different levels. Following an abductive approach (Saetre & Van de Ven, 2021), we went back and forth between our readings of our four texts, our own experience and perception of the COVID pandemic, and our knowledge of existing and relevant social science literature. We discussed core themes from our readings and went through multiple cycles of conceptualizing the micro-level experiences of those living through the Black Death. We ultimately settled on four core psychological experiences surrounding disruption: stagnation, disorientation, polarization, and repudiation. Those four aspects are not meant to exhaustively capture psychological reactions to disruptive events, but are what we judged as having the most explanatory power to understand the plague, and by extension, COVID-19 and other crises.

### **Stagnation: The Breakdown of Responsiveness**

---

<sup>1</sup> Histoire d'un Livre. La Peste d'Albert Camus. Gallimard.  
<http://www.gallimard.fr/Footer/Ressources/Entretiens-et-documents/Histoire-d-un-livre-La-Peste-d-Albert-Camus>

When disruption occurs as a jolt, it often triggers panic as individuals struggle to make sense of the situation and devise an appropriate response (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020; Weick, 1993). In our reviewed works, the disruptive nature of events appears gradually to audiences; the plague initially appears as a trivial concern but incrementally grows in severity and scope, generating complacency among the characters involved. For instance, Dr. Rieux, the protagonist of *The Plague*, infers that an unusually high number of dead rats throughout Oran might be an early sign of the Plague, and warns his superior, Dr. Richard, to take immediate and decisive action. Dr. Richard, seeking to avoid alarming the public, opts to wait for more substantive evidence. Such passivity is a persistent theme: even when the city is quarantined with a quarter of the population succumbing to the pandemic, citizens continue their daily routines, creating rationalizations about why they will be spared. Similarly, Cantor's characters, from peasants to kings, despite being close to and distant from (respectively) the everyday suffering caused by the Black Death, are equally slow to make sense of the scope of the disruptive events and the ensuing devastation.

Across all four texts, this slowly unfolding chain of temporally and causally bound events causes **stagnation** as individuals do not recognize the novelty, criticality and disruptiveness of events within the chain, and therefore fail to engage in appropriate responses. For instance, Defoe (1896 [1722]: 22-23) remarks: “*while the fears of the people were young, they were increased strangely by several odd accidents, which put altogether, it was really a wonder the whole body of the people did not rise as one man and abandon their dwellings*”. We see a similar pattern in the other texts with various individuals who become paralyzed in their decision-making, vacillating between staying home or fleeing.

These accounts of the Plague reveal how an event may not individually elicit any action or response by affected actors if it involves only an incremental change in intensity from the preceding event. In this sense, stagnation is not the product of any individual event, but of the

relationship between disruptive events. The imperceptible changes between events foster a sense of complacency and denial about the magnitude of the problem (Martí & Fernández, 2013) which paralyzes individuals, and especially leaders. This prevents them from making important decisions about how to manage the unfolding crisis.

The parallel with COVID-19 is notable: passivity and denial contributed to the virus spiraling into a pandemic (Chen et al., 2021), much as it did for the bubonic plague. Early signs of a novel coronavirus in late 2019 were not acted upon by leaders because information was unprecedented, scientifically uncertain, and incomplete (The Independent Panel, 2021; Yoon et al., 2021). By early 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) labelled the coronavirus as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) rather than a pandemic, “partly because they wanted to avoid panic while encouraging world leaders to act according to WHO advice” (Maxmen, 2021: 500), behavior that is strikingly similar to Camus’ character Dr. Richard. Such hesitation, however, had the inadvertent effect of encouraging complacency among Western countries, who waited until the disease was declared as a pandemic before they reacted by shutting down borders and implementing quarantines.<sup>2</sup> A chain of *incrementally* escalating events therefore created stagnation that prevented action from occurring, whereas a singular and dramatic event with no recurrence may have elicited more rapid reactions.

### **Disorientation: The Breakdown of Temporality**

Conceptualizing disruption as a singular episode implies that there will be some endpoint, and that the event will follow a plot with a beginning, middle and end (Czarniawska, 1998). Yet when discontinuity is comprised of a chain of disruptive events with long, intermittent gaps, a conclusion becomes less evident: the accounts of the Black Death and subsequent plagues that

---

<sup>2</sup> The situation seems to be similar with the more recent occurrence of the war in Ukraine (Kazatchkine, 2022): Western political leaders and media outlets were oblivious to the signs of Russia massing troops at the border and remained idle while hoping for a peaceful resolution.

we review reveal how those suffering through these crises had no indication or expectation of an endpoint, after which life would return to normal. We can observe individuals, organizations and communities in such circumstances experiencing **disorientation** within a liminal space – i.e., a “longitudinal experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a chang[ing] context” (Beech, 2011) – from which they do not know when they will escape. Those suffering through the disruption were confined to the present moment, and dispossessed of the past and future (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2021; Martí & Fernández, 2013).

Disorientation is the product of drawn-out intervals between events. Camus provides a clear indication of this experience: once the full outbreak of the bubonic plague becomes evident the townspeople in Oran eventually stop guessing when their “exile” will end. He writes:

*...when the most pessimistic had fixed it at, say, six months... straining all their remaining energy to endure valiantly the long ordeal of all those weeks and days... some friend they met, an article in a newspaper, a vague suspicion, or a flash of foresight would suggest that, after all, there was no reason why the epidemic shouldn't last more than six months; why not a year, or even more? (Camus, 2012 [1947]: 72).*

In the same opus, this disorientation is also present in the character of Joseph Grand, a man suffering from arrested development who is seeking to write a book but cannot progress past the first line.

During COVID-19, we observe individuals who have experienced the same disorientation as Camus' character Grand: recurrent episodes of quarantine and confinement created a pervasive state of “languishing”, which Grant (2021) identifies as a feeling that one is “muddling through [their] days”. Healthcare professionals acutely experienced this dangerous state of disorientation: Awdish (2020: 2) notes of her experience as a medical doctor during the pandemic, “*there is so much talk of ‘endings’ and ‘after this’ and even of ‘returning’*

*to some way that we used to be... Only this timeless space feels real. This is the pause before a new beginning... And in this intermission, when we seem to exist outside our lives and outside time, we are changing.*" This period of "inbetweenness" generates changes within individuals that cannot be connected to the feature of any individual discrete event; instead, they are the product of a seemingly never-ending chain of events and, more importantly, of the drawn-out *intervals* between events.

### **Polarization: The Breakdown of Solidarity**

Social psychologists have revealed how, following traumatic but punctuated events such as house fires or spinal cord injuries, victims learn to cope over time by attributing the event to uncontrollable environmental factors rather than to the actions of themselves or others (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Thompson, 1985). In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for instance, survivors made sense of the disaster as an unpredictable "act of God" (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, & Hamedani, 2013). We argue that certain characteristics of an event chain, in contrast, shift the locus of responsibility; as individuals grapple with making sense of the complex causes of their ongoing suffering, they scapegoat outgroups as the root cause of their misfortune (Bavel et al., 2020; Howard, 2018; Roulet & Pichler, 2021).

In our reviewed texts on the Plague, we observe a pervasive phenomenon where social cohesion gradually erodes as the disease takes hold of the population, with outgroups – specifically minorities, foreigners and the poor – being the target of blame (Bavel et al., 2020; Howard, 2018). This **polarization** is a major and recurrent theme, yet it would be inaccurate to say that the plague caused the xenophobia; rather, it exacerbated it. The medieval Jewish population, in particular, suffered from being made into scapegoats: Cantor (2001) describes numerous incidents where Jewish townspeople were arrested and tortured into making false confessions about poisoning town wells with disease. The culprits were not only Christian

Europeans (who, in many cases, seized on the opportunity brought about by the plague to eliminate Jewish moneylenders to whom they owed large debts), but also certain guild masters who viewed Jews as competitors. Defoe (1896 [1722]), provides similar examples of xenophobia and fear of the other that persisted throughout the bubonic plague: *“as for the Dutch, the misunderstandings between our court and them had broken out into a war the year before, so that our trade that way was wholly interrupted; but Spain and Portugal, Italy and Barbary, as also Hamburg, and all the ports in the Baltic, these were all shy of us a great while and would not restore trade with us for many months”* (p. 234). The Black Death and other incidents of bubonic plague also created rifts along the lines of social class: the authors of all four texts reveal how the wealthy sought to distance themselves from the working-class members of society, who were disproportionately affected by the plague. Defoe remarks, for instance, that *“the richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry from the West part of the city, thronged out of town with their families.... In August, indeed, they fled in such a manner that I began to think there would be really none but magistrates and servants left in the city”* (Defoe, 1896 [1722]: 10-19).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath offer numerous parallels with this phenomenon of polarization, in terms of the marginalization of specific populations: For instance, former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Salvini falsely claimed that COVID-19 was spreading because of African refugees (Devakumar, Shannon, Bhopal, & Abubakar, 2020). Sinophobia was another particularly visible outcome, given the origins of the virus in Wuhan (Bavel et al., 2020), with then U.S. president Donald Trump nicknaming the pandemic the “Kung Flu”. Meanwhile the Asian American community faced a rise in hate crime during the COVID-19 pandemic across numerous Western countries.<sup>3</sup> As with the Plague, these examples reveal how a crisis may be misattributed as the “cause” of the disruption when in reality it is

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-56218684>



simply a tipping point that builds upon pre-existing conditions and tensions accumulated over time (Roulet, 2020). Framed in EST terms, polarization is the product of an event chain *intersecting* with another event chain – namely a pre-existing chain of events where one group has built suspicion and resentment of another.

### **Repudiation: The Breakdown of Belief**

In many cases where disruption is conceptualized as a jolt, cognitive dissonance can be resolved by post-hoc rationalizations, especially through the intervention of authority figures (Festinger, 1957). For instance, early on during the Black Death, Catholic authorities claimed that the disease was divine retribution for human sin: all four books are consistent in this message, noting how many individuals turned to religion to interpret such disastrous events, seeing the Plague as a punishment from God. Defoe, for instance, creates the character of Solomon Eagle who parades through the city of London, half-naked, with burning charcoal on his head, preaching repentance (Defoe, 1896 [1722]: 98). This theme is also highly salient in *The Plague*, as the population of Oran is left to confront the absurdity and meaninglessness of their existence when death and suffering is occurring everywhere around them. In this void, Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest, seeks to re-assert the authority of religious doctrine by providing meaning and causal explanations to a listless population. He preaches, “*Calamity has come to you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it*” (Camus, 2012 [1947]: 94). Early on, these efforts are successful in attracting congregants to his masses.

Yet such rationalizations and prescriptions inevitably collapse. In the texts, the seemingly random nature of death and suffering challenge any causal explanation offered by existing systems of belief. Cantor remarks that “*the good and the bad perished in equal numbers*” (Cantor, 2001: 120), challenging the Church’s explanation that only the sinful were perishing. Camus poignantly reveals the absurdity in both ascribing causes to random suffering

as well as predicting outcomes; in what is perhaps the most vivid scene in the book detailed over several pages, a small boy suffers grotesquely and dies of the plague, despite Paneloux beseeching God to spare the innocent child. Paneloux himself later becomes sick and dies ignominiously; by this time, the townspeople have seemingly renounced their faith.

This **repudiation**, or rejection of the existing systems of belief, is therefore an important outcome when events in a chain are perceived as random. In contrast to punctuated jolts of disruption – where it is easier to ascribe a narrative, especially if the occurrence does not repeat itself – the unpredictability of events in a chain sows doubt within predominant accounts of cause-and-effect (Durkheim, 2008; Roulet, 2020). During the Plague, recurring and sporadic events (e.g., waves of infection and death), presented multiple occasions where the explanations and predictions of authority figures were discredited or outright refuted.

Repudiation highlights the process of individuals coming to terms with the causal complexity involved in disruption: narratives of the Black Death show how the interpretation of the Plague's causes drew on exogenous explanations that were regularly challenged. The parallels with COVID-19 are evident, as faith in public institutions has dramatically plummeted as the result of the pandemic. As knowledge about the pandemic and vaccination efficacy evolved, governments and health authorities adapted by changing guidelines and public policy: citizens in Western and non-Western countries alike took this as a sign of incompetence and began challenging the narratives offered by their governments and by health authorities such as the WHO. Each explanation or prescription was often met with incredulity, leading to the emergence of conspiracy theories, e.g., that the disease was spread by 5G towers or was purposely leaked by the Chinese government (Romer & Jamieson, 2020). In this sense, the repudiation of authority was linked to the *irregularity* of disruptive events rather than resulting from the characteristics of individual events themselves.

## **Summarizing how Event Chains shape Psychological Experiences**

Above, we identified four key psychological experiences that can be attributed to characteristics of event chains rather than to any singular event. This allows us to extend EST: to summarize, we firstly illustrated how stagnation was the result of *incremental* changes from one event to the next, resulting in cues about disruption being missed (Maxmen, 2021). Secondly, the experience of disorientation was not characterized by an event, but rather by the *interval* between events. What Reinecke & Lawrence (Forthcoming: 19) call “temporal expectancies”, or “expectancies of how long things last” became blurred. Thirdly, polarization reveals how the Plague was insufficient, in and of itself, to cause conflict between social groups, but rather was a trigger of pre-existing tensions; as such, we conceptualized it as the outcome of an *intersection* of two event chains. Fourth and finally, the experience of repudiation was facilitated by the *irregularity* of events, which undermined the simplistic cause-and-effect narratives offered by authority figures.

These four experiences reveal how a disruptive event chain can be more complex than expected, not only in terms of causality – i.e., a difficulty in attributing a change to any individual event – but also in terms of temporality – i.e., the intervals and regularity among events. Defoe’s narrator explains as much, noting that one “*should keep his eye upon the particular providences which occur at that time, and look upon them complexly, as they regard one another, and as all together regard the question before him*” (Defoe, 1896 [1722]: 254). Using this understanding of psychological experiences during the Black Death, we can proceed to examine how psychological experiences lead to macro-level transformations.

## **FROM MICRO-LEVEL REACTIONS TO MACRO-LEVEL CHANGES**

EST recognizes that events at certain levels produce effects on others. We build upon this idea: our reconceptualization of disruption acknowledges the interdependencies and complex

relations between events, micro-level reactions and macro-level transformations. This “trickle up” dynamic (Bothello & Mehrpouya, 2018; Harmon et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019) can further help us explain how event chains and the four experiences we outline generate institutional transformations. We propose that collective efforts, often manifesting in social movements, are a translation of psychological experiences into action that is directed towards resolving uncertainty and returning to a more settled state of affairs (King & Carberry, 2020; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2001; Amis & Greenwood, 2020; Lander et al., 2022). Following our reconceptualization of discontinuities as chains of interconnected disruptive events, we revisit our four texts to unpack the broader macro-level changes experienced by medieval society subsequent to the Plague. We identify three transformations upon institutionalized economic, political and cultural norms. This, in turn, allows us to draw parallels with other continuities, and specifically the macro-level outcomes that have been unfolding since the pandemic began in early 2020.

### **The Transformation of Economic Norms**

In terms of impact on the economic system of medieval Europe, our four texts document how the Black Death and subsequent bubonic plagues broke “*continuities of economic life*” and “*disrupted established routines of work*” in Western Europe (Herlihy and Cohn, 1997: 40), leading to a fundamental restructuring of economic norms. We attribute this macro-level impact to a combination of micro-level experiences among those who endured the plagues; namely the experiences of disorientation and polarization.

In the short-term, the Black Death and subsequent plagues had the effect of producing severe economic exploitation, most visible in the practice of price-gouging. Defoe (1896[1722]: 33) recounts the story of an opportunistic doctor who “*gulled the poor people to crowd about him, but did nothing for them without money*”, while Camus narrates a similar

situation of exploitation in Oran, with profiteers “*taking a hand and purveying at enormous prices essential foodstuffs not available in the shops*” (Camus, 2012 [1947]: 236-7). We propose that such behaviors were the product of **disorientation**, as they indicate a breakdown of temporality: price-gouging reflects a short-term orientation of economic agents that disregards both the past reputation established with customers (Cabral and Xu, 2021) as well as future prospects for exchange. In our four books, we observe many instances of characters who live in their present and engage in exploitation: Cottard, a central figure in Camus’ novel, is a suicidal criminal prior to the plague but flourishes as a smuggler in the liminal conditions of the pandemic, abdicating any responsibility for battling the disease alongside his fellow citizens. Disorientation thus results in an erosion of norms around what constitutes appropriate economic behavior.

In the long-term, the Plague also undermined the feudal economic system; we argue this was the outcome of accumulated class **polarization** between landowners and nobility, on one side, and peasants and guilds on the other. Cantor (2001) documents how plague fatalities were dramatically yet unsurprisingly skewed towards the poor: this resulted in a shortage of workers and a surplus of land to cultivate in England, allowing surviving peasants to negotiate higher compensation for their labor. Faced with dwindling profits, landlords appealed to King Richard II, who intervened by capping wages at pre-plague levels under penalty of imprisonment. This edict culminated in massive civilian discontent among English peasantry, ultimately leading to a major revolt in 1381 (Herlihy and Cohn, 1997). Despite the movement being quelled, the popular uprising severely fractured the economic system of feudal serfdom; within a century it had been completely dismantled.

We note a comparable transformation in economic norms during COVID-19 that can be linked to the same micro-level experiences of polarization and disorientation. Early on, the economy was impacted by price-gouging around basic items like flour and toilet paper,

followed by a “K-shaped” economic recovery where a booming stock market enriched investors while the working class suffered illness, deaths and job terminations. As Devakumar and colleagues (2020: 1194) note, “rather than being an equaliser, given its ability to affect anyone, COVID-19 policy responses... disproportionately affected people of colour and migrants – people... over-represented in lower socioeconomic groups, [with] limited health-care access, or work[ing] in precarious jobs.” In the long-term however, one notable outcome of the pandemic – as well as from stimulus and relief packages in many countries – was a global labor shortage and rising wages, translating into what the organizational psychologist Anthony Klotz coins as “the great resignation”<sup>4</sup>. As in the aftermath of the Black Death, the balance of bargaining power in many professions shifted towards employees, who could increasingly leverage the labor shortage to request increased wages and job flexibility<sup>5</sup>. The shift in bargaining power towards workers was also evident through a resurgence of unionization campaigns by employees who have felt “undervalued and unappreciated” by their employers during the pandemic<sup>6</sup>.

### **The Transformation of Political Norms**

Our four narratives reveal how the plague rendered the medieval hierarchy – along with its accompanying institutions of authority such as the Church – more fragile, ultimately leading to dramatic transformations of the political system. As Thompson (1921: 571) notes of the Black Death, “*the failure of old authorities gave room for new and self-constituted authorities to establish themselves*”. We proceed to discuss these macro-level transformations of political norms as being the result of micro-level experiences eroding the existing institutionalized

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-10/quit-your-job-how-to-resign-after-covid-pandemic?sref=85rT08Vo>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/economy/global-labor-shortage.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2022/05/04/frontline-workers-were-excluded-from-companies-pandemic-windfalls-no-wonder-so-many-are-forming-unions/>

order, while leaving a vacuum for new bases of authority. We focus on stagnation among state and religious leaders, accompanied by repudiation of those authorities among followers and the emergence of new authorities.

We firstly note that **stagnation** among leaders in medieval European societies, in the short term, resulted in a significant deterioration in the ability of state authorities to handle the pandemic across multiple fronts: As Thompson (1921: 569) notes, “*The Black Death hit the governments of Europe hard... thousands of [the] technically trained class were cut down, so much so that the governments were crippled beyond what we may imagine; police protection, courts, law-making, the hundred and one everyday activities of an ordered society were arrested*”. In response to this impotence and paralysis of the state, Defoe (1896[1722]) discusses how piecemeal grassroots movements emerged among the affected populations that provided charity and care for the afflicted. Similarly, in Camus’ novel, state authorities are notably absent, save for police that prevent people from entering or leaving the city and the town Prefect who is hesitant to impose strict quarantines until it is too late. In their place are civilians, including Dr. Rieux, his colleague Dr. Castel, and a journalist named Rambert who work together tirelessly to combat the plague, aid victims and develop a serum.

In the long term, we observe how **repudiation** brought about by bubonic plagues undermined religious norms and the authority of the Catholic Church. The inability of the Church to provide compelling explanations about the provenance of the Black Death undermined the authority of the institution, contributing to the development of alternative systems of secular belief based on, for instance, medicine and nationalism. For instance, Herlihy and Cohn (2005) note: “*from utter despair, stargazing, and prayers to God [in the 13<sup>th</sup> century], chroniclers [of the 15<sup>th</sup> century] began to proffer practical lessons and specific herbal remedies for facing plague*” (p. 16). They also note a shift in explanation: bubonic plagues in subsequent centuries were attributed to political circumstances rather than divine wrath for

human sin, as had been the case during the Black Death – indeed, in these accounts, “*God was not mentioned*” (p. 8). Other developments further undermined the Church’s authority: this included the increasing popularity of a book by an Italian academic, Marsilio of Padua, that called for the subjugation of the Church (including the Pope) to the sovereign state (Cantor, 2001: 113), as well as the emergence of “*flagellantism*”, a movement deemed heretical by the Pope where penitents self-flagellated to cleanse themselves of sin, thereby eliminating the need for absolution by priests. Here again, the erosion of the Church as an institution created a void for social movements to fill in, challenging dominant narratives (Carty & Onvett, 2006) and creating new conduits for alternative voices (King & Carberry, 2020; Lander et al., 2022).

A comparable transformation has been underway during COVID-19, where the early denial and stagnation of numerous governments – some that sought to achieve “herd immunity” – was followed by a process of state actors muddling through a series of lockdowns, re-openings, travel restrictions, economic relief packages and vaccine distributions, to name but a few events. In response, we have witnessed, in many countries, a vocal minority who have expressed considerable repudiation of state policies, elected officials and the accompanying institutions – in particularly scientific and health authorities. For instance, in Los Angeles a dock employee attempted to crash a train into a Navy hospital ship because he was incredulous about the government’s claims about the severity of COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> Within the West more broadly, conspiracy-theory driven social movements emerged to question the causes of the pandemic and have deliberately disobeyed or sought to undermine lockdowns or vaccination campaigns. These acts may signal a more fundamental distrust of contemporary institutions of authority, much as was the case with the Catholic Church and state during the Black Death,

---

<sup>7</sup> Zaveri, M. 2020, April 2. Engineer Crashes Train Near Hospital Ship in Los Angeles. *New York Times*. New York, NY. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/train-crash-los-angeles-coronavirus.html>.



with the potential for new collective interpretation of events to emerge (Ocasio et al., 2016) shaped by, for instance, social media celebrities and authoritarian leaders.

### **The Transformation of Cultural Norms**

In our four texts, we observe that a culmination of disorientation and repudiation led to significant and long-lasting shifts in cultural norms. During the Black Death in Florence, many citizens who could not leave the city decided to simply give up, to “*drink and party away their final days in nihilistic revelries*” (McKinley, 2020). Cantor (2001: 202) notes that this **disorientation** was quite literally woven into medieval art and culture in the aftermath of the first wave, mainly in the form of tapestries, specifically, an art motif named “The Dance of Death” depicting skeletons rising from graves. Building on the work of Huizinga (2020[1919]), Cantor remarks that this representation depicted “*pessimism, lassitude and loss of confidence*” linked to the inability to “*confront and control the realities of life.*” In this sense, stagnation – i.e., a lack of agency – became memorialized in European art, attire, theatre and dance.

Following this, in the long term, was a **repudiation** of medieval norms, values and beliefs around birthright and social station. Social mobility was an important outcome of the Black Death: Cantor (2001) discusses how small-landholding peasants who survived the plague married daughters of other land-owning peasants, consolidating their wealth and moving upwards to become gentleman farmers. Many laborers became merchants, while merchants themselves married into nobility (Benedictow, 2004). As Thompson (1921: 568) notes: “*The old nobility of Europe... largely passed away, leaving their titles and their lands to the kings who gave them out to new favorites, so that a new noblesse arose in Europe, a parvenu nobility without the accomplishment, the pride, or the manners of the old noblesse.*” This social mobility was a direct challenge to the immobility of the feudal system, where one’s role and social standing within the medieval hierarchy was thought to be divinely ordained.

Repudiation also occurred elsewhere in Medieval society: in European legal systems, women became accepted as witnesses and non-notaries were able to draw up legal contracts (Herlihy and Cohn, 1997). Professional guilds, traditionally highly resistant to any form of change, had lost many members – and therefore much knowledge and expertise – during the pandemic; these guilds subsequently repudiated the traditional practice of hereditary succession that had been established for centuries (Kieser, 1989) in favor of recruiting apprentices without pre-existing family ties (Herlihy and Cohn, 1997: 45). These transformations reveal a striking rupture in medieval society, where individuals renounced past tradition in favor of more pragmatic approaches that would allow them to maintain their professions.

Similar macro-level effects on cultural norms – stemming from stagnation and repudiation – have also been visible during COVID-19. In a striking parallel to the Black Death in Florence, many individuals during the early pandemic chose to flout public rules and hold COVID parties, while in the long-term, an abnormally high percentage of the population reported experiencing burnout, loneliness, depression and pessimism about the future (Salari et al., 2020). In a further parallel to the repudiation we discuss above, many individuals have chosen to drop out of school and leave their jobs, renouncing traditional career paths and expectations (Dorn et al., 2020). Cultural norms around community and friendship have also been altered, with an increasing number of interactions taking place on virtual platforms rather than in face-to-face interactions (Pleyers, 2020; Gümüşay et al., 2021). Despite the gradual diminution of the pandemic, many students and employees are eschewing in-person formats in favor of online options. This represents a potentially long-term transformation of cultural norms around what education and community look like.

## **DISCUSSION**

Taking an Event System Theory (EST) perspective (Morgeson et al., 2015), we sought to build a conceptualization of discontinuity and crisis as a chain of events that are temporally and causally complex, and which occur at multiple levels. Employing an abductive approach (Saetre & Van de Ven, 2021), we drew from a review of fictional and historical accounts of the Plague to unveil four psychological experiences that result from disruptive event chains: stagnation, disorientation, polarization and repudiation. Stagnation stemmed from a failure to acknowledge the incremental nature of the growing event chain, while disorientation involved an inability to handle the intervals between events. The third experience, polarization, resulted from the intersection of an event chain with another, while the fourth and final experience of repudiation developed from the irregularity of events. We argued that these four experiences did not stem from the disruptiveness, novelty and criticality of individual events, but rather were the outcomes of relational characteristics among events. We then detailed how those experiences culminated into macro-level changes, sometimes mediated through social movements, causing broader transformations of economic, political and cultural norms. Figure 1 summarizes our conceptual argument, which we use as a basis to outline our contributions. We highlight how our review not only allows us to reconceptualize disruption and crises, but also contributes to the literature on EST. We also indicate how the inclusion of fictional texts can be generative in advancing organizational and management scholarship.

-----

Insert Figure 1 about here

-----

### **Reconceptualizing Disruption and Crises**

We started from an observation that the predominant focus on singular disruptive events by management scholars (e.g., Romanelli & Tushman, 1994) has been insufficient to characterize discontinuities and crises such as COVID-19. We illustrated instead how many of these

phenomena could be better characterized as event chains; what appear to be one-off jolts could, in fact, be understood as “tipping point” events both preceded by a series of build-up events, as well as followed by a set of ripple events. For instance, as previously pointed out by historians of the Annales School (Clemente et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019), events such as the storming of the Bastille were not singular events but rather the visible (and violent) tipping point of long-simmering discontent. Accordingly, our first contribution is to provide an alternate conceptualization of disruption through the framework of EST, indicating how a set of disruptive events can be connected in space and time and can aggregate to produce cumulative impact. As such, our arguments about event chains are not only meant to provide an alternative conceptualization of disruption, but also *reconceptualize* certain accounts that focus on discontinuity as a single event (Bothello & Salles-Djelic, 2018).

Furthermore, EST allows us to outline the effects of disruption at different levels of analysis; in the case of the plague and COVID-19, we could identify trickle-up mechanisms from micro-level experiences to macro-level effects. Yet we also acknowledge that different trajectories may unfold, with macro-level effects trickling down to organizational and individual levels. As an example, following the events of World War II, Britain re-oriented its economic policy towards financing domestic activities; this policy trickled down into the corporate governance of industrial firms, impacting decisions about debt load and bank representation on boards (Kern & Schnyder, 2021). More recently, economic downturns triggered by the pandemic have prompted firm bankruptcies and mass layoffs, leading to a substantial rise in reported anxiety and stress among the labor force (Banerjee et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021). Future research could therefore examine how chains of disruptive events operate at different levels of analysis.

Importantly, our EST perspective on disruption also has implications for how we engage in crisis management and devise responses to disruption. Future research could study,

for instance, how the multiplicity of waves and COVID-19 variants led to iterations of success and failure learning (Dahlin et al., 2018), as demonstrated in vaccines' development (Slaoui & Hepburn, 2020). An EST perspective may, furthermore, imply transitioning from a singular focus on adaptation and learning curves (Argote, 2012); instead, we may opt to incorporate sensemaking and narrative emergence around disruptive event chains, and examine how those mediate processes of adaptation and learning. This applies to all sorts of crises and disruptions: for instance, political and business leaders have been remarkably slow in recognizing the importance of climate change, which can be considered a form of stagnation around an incrementally yet exponentially growing problem (Schüßler, Rüling & Wittneben, 2014). This will likely be followed by disorientation as we seek to adapt to the increasing frequency and intensity of major climate disasters like forest fires, hurricanes, droughts and mass extinctions. In the process, the brunt of the impact will be borne by the most marginalized groups, further polarizing countries and causing repudiation of existing institutional arrangements.

### **Contributions to Event System Theory and Event-Based Research**

In parallel, our examination of the Plague across the four texts also allows us to generate contributions to Event System theory (EST), specifically as they relate to event chains. Recent work on EST has adopted a psychological approach to understanding how events affect workers (cf. Liu et al., 2021); in contrast to this micro-level focus, we indicate how psychological experiences mediate the link between events and *macro*-level outcomes (Morgeson et al., 2015). In other words, we unpack mechanisms of how psychological experiences “trickle-up” to macro-level results, in our case the transformation of economic, political and cultural norms.

Aside from the multi-level nature of the chains – i.e., events triggering psychological experiences at a micro-level, that in turn produce effects at the macro-level – we also contribute

to EST by theorizing about the nature of event chains, and how they produce outcomes. Specifically, prior EST research has focused on the characteristics of individual events, e.g., criticality, novelty and disruptiveness (Morgeson et al., 2015). In contrast we examine characteristics *among* events, e.g., the intervals between one event and the next, the increase in intensity between events, the predictability of when the next event will occur, and the intersection between different event chains. These are temporal and causal dynamics that have so far been unexamined in EST, and that have outcomes that cannot be accounted for by focusing on any individual event. Future research could build upon this basis by examining other characteristics of event chains that were outside the scope of our review.

### **Fiction as a Generative Tool for Organizational Theory**

Through our abductive analysis, we further the tradition of organization and management theorists drawing from fiction (Holt & Zundel, 2014; Martin et al., 2018; Julliot, Lenglet & Rouquet, 2022). Our choice of bringing in fictional accounts was motivated for multiple reasons: firstly, given that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect individuals for decades to come, (particularly as our understanding of “long COVID” develops) it contains deeply personal experiences that cannot be adequately understood by purely historical accounts that adopt a more “objective” etic perspective. Through an emic perspective, as retold by characters in the novels, we may make better sense of disruption as we are enduring it, an objective which becomes even more relevant given our interest in the psychological processes and sensemaking around a disruptive event. Within the novels of Camus and Defoe, the emic perspective of the protagonists therefore provides affective value. Secondly, by creating plausible scenarios of what *could* have happened, fiction also provides generative value for theory (Julliot et al., 2022). Such narratives allow us to identify limits in our understanding of social phenomena – in our case, with respect to EST and disruption.

However, even by the standards of fidelity to real-life events, our two works of fiction hold value. Both Defoe and Camus engaged in significant research to understand the individual experience of the Plague. These micro-level accounts therefore provide a form of triangulation with historical perspectives adopting a more macro-lens of broad social changes stemming from the Plague. This combination of fictional and historical perspectives on the same phenomenon enabled us to switch from one lens to another, shifting emphasis on various aspects of the phenomena to progressively enrich our theorization (Steele & Hannigan, 2020).

Rethinking our conceptual premises about disruption yields a range of relevant insights (Agarwal, Khanna & Singhal, 2020) where we can appreciate complexity across various dimensions – temporality, causality and non-linearity (Van der Vegt et al., 2015). We note that COVID-19 is unlikely to be the only large-scale disruption we face, with other major discontinuities on the horizon such as armed conflicts and international tensions between political blocks, the climate emergency, social polarization and rapid technological shifts. Those disruptive events can hardly be disentangled and are causally interconnected. The effects of these transformational changes will not only be understood by their magnitude and unpredictability, but also by their complexity and interrelations across events. We therefore require conceptualizations of disruption to characterize these phenomena more adequately.

## CONCLUSION

Review Essay pieces in the *Academy of Management Review* are often aimed at providing broader societal implications, by considering important topics through the lens of organization theory such as capitalism (Lazzarini, 2020) or artificial intelligence (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). In this vein, our review is targeted at advancing organization research to handle “the new normal” (Bridoux et al., 2020) of disruptions and crises. Envisioning the post-pandemic world is, in a similar way, prospective in nature, with the potential to open important areas of

research for management scholars (Agrawal et al., 2020) and to shape what “organizing” means as we enter a phase during which disruptions and crises become more common. Despite the heavy human and financial costs of the pandemic, the collective ability to respond to an unprecedented set of events provides hope for dealing with far more crucial issues such as the climate emergency and other grand challenges. As we progressively adapt to the protracted disruption from COVID-19, future research will be able to empirically take stock of what the resulting social and psychological transformations have been; this will enable us to respond more effectively when the next set of disruptive events emerge.



## REFERENCES

- Agrawal, V. K., Khanna, P., & Singhal, K. (2020). The Role of Research in Business Schools and the Synergy Between Its Four Subdomains. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(4), 896-912.
- Allport, F. H. (1940). An event-system theory of collective action: With illustrations from economic and political phenomena and the production of war. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 11(2), 417-445.
- Allport, F. H. (1954). The structuring of events: outline of a general theory with applications to psychology. *Psychological Review*, 61(5), 281.
- Amis, J., & Greenwood, R. (2020). Organisational change in a (post-) pandemic world: Rediscovering interests and values. *Journal of Management Studies*.
- Argote, L. (2012). *Organizational learning: Creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Banerjee, R. N., Kharroubi, E., & Lewrick, U. (2020). Bankruptcies, unemployment and reallocation from Covid-19. *BIS Bulletins*. (No. 31). Bank for International Settlements.
- Bastian, F. (1965). "Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year Reconsidered". *The Review of English Studies*. 16 (62): 151–173.
- Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., et al. 2020. Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(5): 460–471.
- Beck, U. (1987). The anthropological shock: Chernobyl and the contours of the risk society. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 32, 153-165.
- Behfar, K., & Okhuysen, G. A. (2018). Perspective—Discovery within validation logic: Deliberately surfacing, complementing, and substituting abductive reasoning in hypothetico-deductive inquiry. *Organization Science*, 29(2), 323-340.
- Benedictow, O. J. (2004). *The Black Death, 1346-1353: the complete history*. Boydell & Brewer.
- Berman, J. M. (2020). *Anti-vaxxers: how to challenge a misinformed movement*. MIT Press.
- Boodoosingh, R., Olayemi, L. O., & Sam, F. A. L. (2020). COVID-19 vaccines: Getting Anti-vaxxers involved in the discussion. *World development*, 136, 105177.
- Bothello, J., & Salles-Djelic, M.-L. 2018. Evolving Conceptualizations of Organizational Environmentalism: A Path Generation Account. *Organization Studies*, 39(1): 93–119.
- Bothello, J., & Mehrpouya, A. 2018. Between regulatory field structuring and organizational roles: Intermediation in the field of sustainable urban development. *Regulation & Governance*, (July): 1–20.
- Bourgeron, T. (2021). 'Let the virus spread'. A doctrine of pandemic management for the libertarian-authoritarian capital accumulation regime. *Organization*, 1350508421995741.
- Bridoux, F., Bundy, J., Gond, J.-P., Haack, P., Petriglieri, J., Stephens, J.P., Sutcliffe, K., (2020). Call for Papers: Academy of Management Review Special Topic Forum -The New Normal: Positive Organizational Impact in an Age of Disruption
- Bulman, R. J., & Wortman, C. B. (1977). Attributions of blame and coping in the "real world": severe accident victims react to their lot. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 35(5), 351.

- Cabral, L., & Xu, L. (2021). Seller reputation and price gouging: Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Economic Inquiry*, 59(3), 867-879.
- Camus, A. (2012[1947]) *The plague*. Vintage: New York, NY.
- Cantor, N. F. (2001). *In the wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the world is made*. Simon and Schuster.
- Carty, V., & Onyett, J. (2006). Protest, cyberactivism and new social movements: The reemergence of the peace movement post 9/11. *Social Movement Studies*, 5(3), 229-249.
- Clemente, M., Durand, R., & Roulet, T. (2017). The recursive nature of institutional change: An Annales School perspective. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 26(1), 17-31.
- Cornelissen, J. P., & Durand, R. (2014). Moving forward: Developing theoretical contributions in management studies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51(6), 995-1022.
- Dahlin, K. B., Chuang, Y. T., & Roulet, T. J. (2018). Opportunity, motivation, and ability to learn from failures and errors: Review, synthesis, and ways to move forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, 12(1), 252-277.
- Defoe, D. (1896[1722]). *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Longman's English Classics: London, UK.
- Devakumar, D., Shannon, G., Bhopal, S. S., & Abubakar, I. (2020). Racism and discrimination in COVID-19 responses. *The Lancet*, 395(10231), 1194.
- Djelic, M.-L. 1998. *Exporting the American Model: The Post-War Transformation of European Business*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. McKinsey & Company.
- Eckert, E. A. (2000). Book Review: The black death and the transformation of the West. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*.
- Farchi, T., Logue, D., Fernández, P., & Vassolo, R. (2021). Freedom behind bars: the central role of emotions in naturalizing an analogy for social change. *Organization Studies*, 01708406211053214.
- Foss, N. J. (2020). Behavioral strategy and the COVID-19 disruption. *Journal of Management*, 46(8), 1322-1329.
- Gersick, C. J. G. (1991). Revolutionary Change Theories: A multilevel exploration of the punctuated equilibrium paradigm. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(1): 10–36.
- Gümüşay, A. A., Raynard, M., Albu, A., Etter, M., & Roulet, T. (2021). Digital technology and voice: How platforms shape institutional processes through visibilization. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 2-44.
- Gustafsson, S., Gillespie, N., Searle, R., Hope Hailey, V., & Dietz, G. (2020). Preserving organizational trust during disruption. *Organization Studies*, 0170840620912705.
- Harmon, D. J., Haack, P., & Roulet, T. J. (2019). Microfoundations of institutions: A matter of structure versus agency or level of analysis?. *Academy of management review*, 44(2), 464-467.
- Herlihy, D., & Cohn, S. H. (1997). *The Black Death and the transformation of the West*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Holt, R., & Zundel, M. (2014). Understanding management, trade, and society through fiction: Lessons from *The Wire*. *Academy of Management Review*.
- Howard, K. C. 2018. From the Poor Clares to the Care of the Poor: Space, Place, and Poverty in Sixteenth-Century Geneva. *Footnotes: A Journal of History*, 2: 260–285.

- Huang, A., & Farboudi Jahromi, M. (2020). Resilience building in service firms during and post COVID-19: COVID-19. *The Service Industries Journal*, 1-30.
- Huang, W., Chen, S., & Nguyen, L. T. (2020). Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Resilience to COVID-19 Crisis: An Empirical Study of Chinese Firms. *Sustainability*, 12(21), 8970.
- Huizinga, J. (2020[1919]). *The autumn of the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.
- Julliot, C., Lenglet, M., & Rouquet, A. (2022). Peut-on appliquer les œuvres de fiction aux sciences de gestion? *Revue française de gestion*, (2), 71-83.
- Kern, P., & Schnyder, G. (2021). Corporate networks in post-war Britain: Do finance–industry relationships matter for corporate borrowing?. *Business History*, 63(6), 966-987.
- Lander, M., Roulet, T. J., & Heugens, P. (2022). Tempering Temperance? A Contingency Approach to Social Movements' Entry Deterrence in Scottish Whisky Distilling, 1823 – 1921. *Academy of Management Journal*.
- Lazzarini, S. (2020). Capitalism and Management Research: The Worst of Times, the Best of Times. *Academy of Management Review*, (ja).
- Li, P. P. (2020). Organizational resilience for a new normal: Balancing the paradox of global interdependence. *Management and Organization Review*, 16(3), 503-509.
- Lin, W., Shao, Y., Li, G., Guo, Y., & Zhan, X. (2021). The psychological implications of COVID-19 on employee job insecurity and its consequences: The mitigating role of organization adaptive practices. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(3), 317.
- Liu, D., & Liu, J. (2017). Dissecting event system theory: tenets and opportunities for research and practice. *QJ Manage*, 2, 64-80.
- Liu, D., Chen, Y., & Li, N. (2021). Tackling the negative impact of COVID-19 on work engagement and taking charge: A multi-study investigation of frontline health workers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Martí, I., & Fernández, P. 2013. The Institutional Work of Oppression and Resistance: Learning from the Holocaust. *Organization Studies*, 34(8): 1195–1223.
- Martin, L. A., Edwards, M., & Sayers, J. G. (2018). A “novel” discovery: Exploring women’s literary fiction for use in management and leadership education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 17(1), 24-40.
- Maxmen, A. (2021). Why did the world's pandemic warning system fail when COVID hit?. *Nature*, 499-500.
- Meyer, A. D. (1982). Adapting to environmental jolts. *Administrative science quarterly*, 515-537.
- McKinley, K. 2020, April 16. How the rich reacted to the bubonic plague has eerie similarities to today’s pandemic. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-the-rich-reacted-to-the-bubonic-plague-has-eeerie-similarities-to-todays-pandemic-135925>.
- Michaelson, C., & Tosti-Kharas, J. (2020). A World Changed: What Post-9/11 Stories Tell Us about the Position of America, Purpose of Business, and Meaning of Work. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(4), 877-895.
- Morgeson, F. P. (2005). The external leadership of self-managing teams: intervening in the context of novel and disruptive events. *Journal of applied Psychology*, 90(3), 497.

- Morgeson, F. P., & DeRue, D. S. (2006). Event criticality, urgency, and duration: Understanding how events disrupt teams and influence team leader intervention. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(3), 271-287.
- Morgeson, F. P., Mitchell, T. R., & Liu, D. (2015). Event system theory: An event-oriented approach to the organizational sciences. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(4), 515-537.
- Namatovu, R., & Larsen, M. M. (2021). Responding to COVID-19: Insights from African firms. *Africa Journal of Management*, 1-17.
- Ocasio, W., Mauskapf, M., & Steele, C. W. (2016). History, society, and institutions: The role of collective memory in the emergence and evolution of societal logics. *Academy of Management Review*, 41(4), 676-699
- Paton, D., & Johnson, D. (2001). Disasters and communities: vulnerability, resilience and preparedness. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 10(4), 270–27
- Phillips, N. (1995). Telling organizational tales: On the role of narrative fiction in the study of organizations. *Organization studies*, 16(4), 625-649.
- Pleyers, G. (2020). The Pandemic is a battlefield. Social movements in the COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of Civil Society*, 16(4), 295-312.
- Raisch, S., & Krakowski, S. (2021). Artificial intelligence and management: The automation–augmentation paradox. *Academy of Management Review*, 46(1), 192-210.
- Reinecke, J., & Lawrence, T. B. (2022). The role of temporality in institutional stabilization: A process view. *Academy of Management Review*.
- Robbins, H. (1928). A Comparison of the Effects of the Black Death on the Economic Organization of France and England. *Journal of Political Economy*, 36(4), 447-479.
- Romanelli, E., & Tushman, M. L. . 1994. Organizational Transformation as Punctuated Equilibrium. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 37(5): 1141–1166.
- Romer, D., & Jamieson, K. H. (2020). Conspiracy theories as barriers to controlling the spread of COVID-19 in the US. *Social Science & Medicine*, 263, 113356.
- Roulet, T., & Bothello, J. (2021). Tackling grand challenges beyond dyads and networks: Developing a stakeholder systems view using the metaphor of ballet. *Business Ethics Quarterly*
- Roulet, T. J., & Pichler, R. (2020). Blame game theory: Scapegoating, whistleblowing and discursive struggles following accusations of organizational misconduct. *Organization Theory*, 1(4), 2631787720975192.
- Roulet, T. J. (2020). *The power of being divisive: Understanding negative social evaluations*. Stanford University Press.
- Rowlinson, M., Hassard, J., & Decker, S. (2014). Research strategies for organizational history: A dialogue between historical theory and organization theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 39(3), 250-274.
- Sætre, A. S., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2021). Generating Theory by Abduction. *Academy of Management Review*, (ja).
- Scambler, G. (2020). Covid-19 as a ‘breaching experiment’: exposing the fractured society. *Health Sociology Review*, 29(2), 140-148.
- Schüßler, E., Rüling, C. C., & Wittneben, B. B. (2014). On melting summits: The limitations of field-configuring events as catalysts of change in transnational climate policy. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(1), 140-171.

Shymko, Y., Roulet, T. J., Pimentel, B. M. (2022). The Façade, the Face, and the Sympathies: Opening the Black Box of Symbolic Capital as a Source of Philanthropic Attractiveness. *Organization Science*.

Slaoui, M., & Hepburn, M. (2020). Developing safe and effective Covid vaccines—Operation Warp Speed’s strategy and approach. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 383(18), 1701-1703.

Steele, C. W., & Hannigan, T. R. (2020). Integrating and Complicating the Micro and Macro “foundations” of Institutions: Toward a More Optometric Institutionalism and an Institutional Optometry. In *Macrofoundations: Exploring the Institutionally Situated Nature of Activity*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., & Hamedani, M. G. (2013). Who explains Hurricane Katrina and the Chilean earthquake as an act of God? The experience of extreme hardship predicts religious meaning-making. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(4), 606-619.

Thompson, S. C. (1985). Finding positive meaning in a stressful event and coping. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 6(4), 279-295.

Van Der Vegt, G. S., Essens, P., Wahlström, M., & George, G. (2015). Managing risk and resilience. *Academy of Management Journal*.

Wang, M. S., Steele, C. W., & Greenwood, R. (2019). Mentalités and events: Historicizing institutional logics. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(2), 473-476.

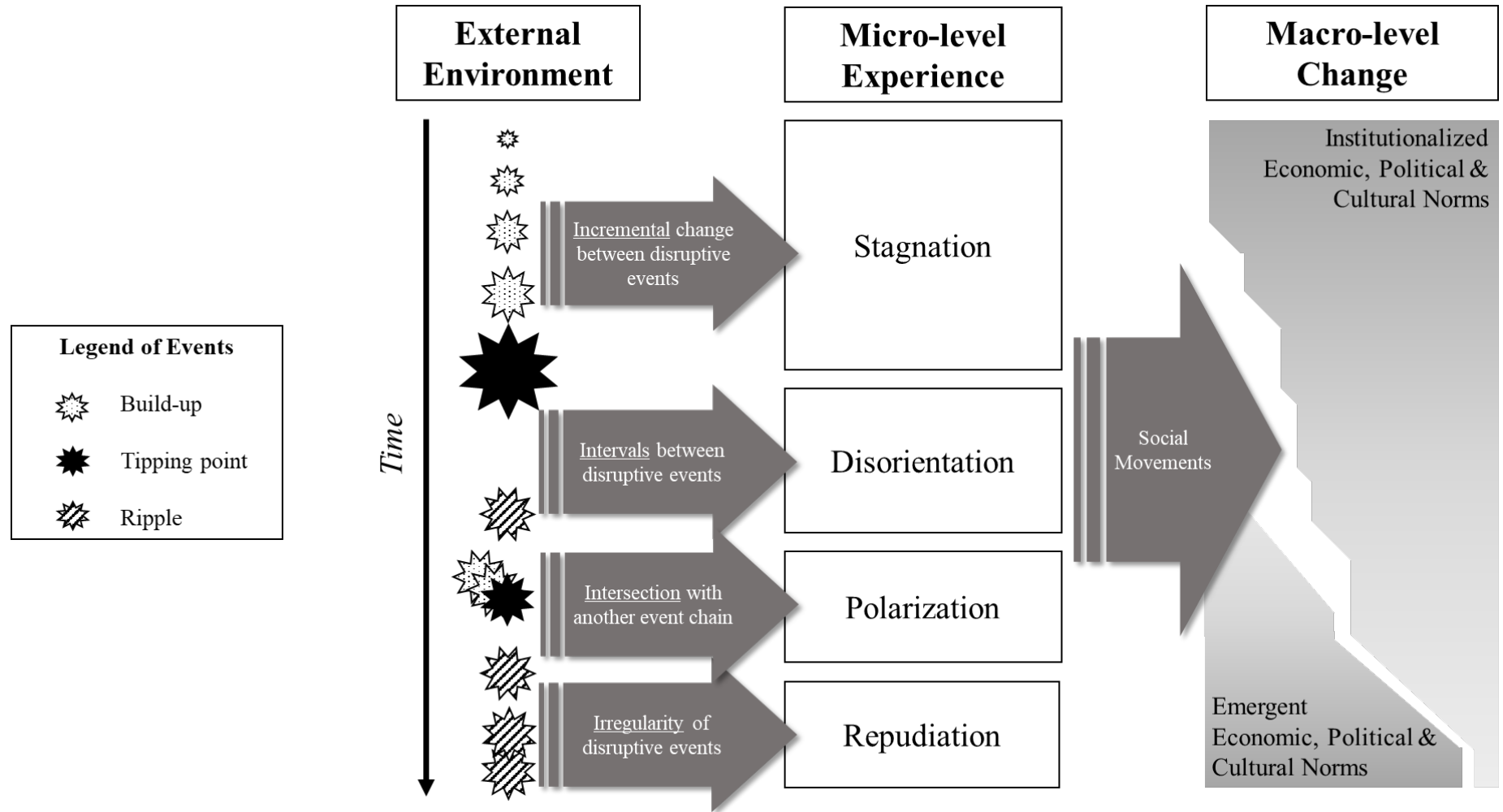
Weick, K. E. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster. *Administrative science quarterly*, 628-652.

Williams, T. A., Gruber, D. A., Sutcliffe, K. M., Shepherd, D. A., & Zhao, E. Y. (2017). Organizational response to adversity: Fusing crisis management and resilience research streams. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(2), 733-769.

Yi-Feng Chen, N., Crant, J. M., Wang, N., Kou, Y., Qin, Y., Yu, J., & Sun, R. (2021). When there is a will there is a way: The role of proactive personality in combating COVID-19. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Yoon, S., McClean, S. T., Chawla, N., Kim, J. K., Koopman, J., Rosen, C. C., ... & McCarthy, J. M. (2021). Working through an “infodemic”: The impact of COVID-19 news consumption on employee uncertainty and work behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(4), 501.

**FIGURE 1: Theoretical Summary: An Event-System Perspective on Disruption**



**Thomas J. Roulet** is an organization theorist based at the University of Cambridge, where he holds affiliations to the Judge Business School, the Department of Sociology and King's College, where he is the co-director of the King's Entrepreneurship Lab. His research focuses on negative social evaluations (scandals, controversies, stigma, or contestation), institutions and stakeholder relationships.

**Joel Bothello** is the Concordia University Research Chair in Resilience and Institutions, and Associate Professor in the Department of Management at the John Molson School of Business at Concordia University. He uses organizational theory to explore a range of business and society issues, ranging from the informal economy to CSR and sustainability.