

“Separation, abjection, loss and mourning: Reflections on the phenomenon of organizational miasma”

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Abstract

This presentation offers a theory of organizational miasma, a concept that describes a contagious state of pollution – material, psychological and spiritual – that afflicts all who work in certain organizations that undergo sudden and traumatic transformations. Miasma is offered not as another organizational metaphor, a prism through which to view particular organizations. Instead, I delineate the fundamental dynamics of organizational miasma as a theoretical concept that accounts for and explains numerous processes in these organizations. These include a paralysis of resistance, an experience of pollution and uncleanness, and feelings of disgust, worthlessness and corruption.

Miasma usually occurs in organizations that undergo a sudden transformation involving the discarding and loss of many of their valued members through downsizing or retrenchment, without either the necessary separation rituals being observed nor the psychological mourning. The ‘old’ organization is frequently presented as corrupt, indulgent and inefficient, contrasted to the ‘new’ organization that is entrepreneurial, dynamic and flexible. Yet, for many surviving members the new organizations is tainted by the presence of ‘murderers’, i.e. managers who have initiated a series of dismissals and ‘corpses’, i.e. employees who have been dismissed or are about to be dismissed and ‘disappear’ as ‘disjecta membra’, once alive, now discarded.

The concept of miasma is first introduced with reference to its origins in ancient Greek tragedy. I then describe the way this concept helped me understand certain processes of a particular organization that had undergone a period of considerable downsizing, losing some two thirds of its workforce in less than two years. With the help of insights into miasma developed by Parker (1983) and into the symbolics of organizational downsizing as a form of genocide developed by Stein (1998; 2001), I argue that miasma is the result of a failed separation rite, one that instead of honouring loss, finitude and discontinuity in today’s organizations seeks to obliterate and repress it. In this sense, miasma represents a contemporary version of tragedy where the very attempts to dissolve it end up by feeding it.

“Separation, abjection, loss and mourning: Reflections on the phenomenon of organizational miasma”

This presentation explores some of the darker sides of organizations – violation and toxicity. In particular, I want to offer some reflections on organizational miasma, a concept that describes a contagious state of pollution, material, psychological, moral and spiritual, that afflicts all who work in particular organizations. Miasma will be offered not as another organizational metaphor, a prism through which to view organizations. Instead, it will be used as a theoretical concept that helps illuminate the unconscious dynamics of certain troubled organizations that, usually as a result of a traumatic transition, find themselves in the grip of scapegoating, depression and inner turmoil. I will analyse some of the core features of organizations in miasmatic state, that include a paralysis of resistance, a deeply felt depression, an incapacitating ethos of self-criticism, an inability to maintain boundaries between public and private lives, a silencing of organizational stories and a compulsive scapegoating that creates ever new targets for ‘cleansing’. Using the concept of miasma, I will propose that attempts to cleanse such organizations eliminate the pathologies and return them to health, often leads to an intensification of these pathologies.

Miasma is a term that emerges from Greek tragedy. It is a term regularly used to describe a family, a city or a venture in the grip of disease, disorder and fear. It is a highly contagious state of affairs capable of afflicting everybody and of corrupting the institutional and moral fabric of a social unit. The cause of the miasma, as Parker (1983), a classicist who has carried out the major theoretical work on the topic, argues is often attributed to a single individual (e.g. Oedipus, Creon or Orestes) who has offended a deity by defiling a sacral command or by breaking a vow. In Sophocles’s Theban trilogy, Oedipus brings miasma to Thebes through his unwitting transgressions of parricide and incest. Oedipus is the miasma – he is the bringer of desolation, devastation, disease and death to his city.

Look around you at our city, see with your own eyes
our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head
from the depths, the red waves of death ...
Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops
And the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,
And the women die in labor, children stillborn
And the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down
On the city, his lightning slashing through us –
Raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
The house of Cadmus. And black death
In the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes. (22-30)

(Sophocles, 1984, verses 22-30. Translation by Robert Fagles with minor changes by the author)

Miasma goes well beyond physical or even moral uncleanness, indicating an affliction that is enduring and cannot be washed away, although certain actions are taken to deal with it. It is a state of rotteness for which individuals may be responsible and are certainly held to be responsible, but one that afflicts the entire state. A fundamental property of miasma is that it is highly contagious. This individual who brings miasma infects everyone he/she touches. Vegetti argues that “it is a sin that goes beyond the ordinary legal and moral limits and brings divine vengeance on the head of the guilty person, spreading out to affect the whole community ... and passing inexorably from one generation to the next. The idea of miasma probably has a concrete origin, representing the filthy, soiled state of someone who lives outside the standards of his or her community. In its most powerful sense, it refers to the bloodstained hands of the murderer or the sores of someone who might be seen as the victim of divine punishment.” (1995, p. 260) Once unleashed, the miasma is capable of afflicting everyone but also of sparing some people, or as Dodds eloquently puts it, it operates “with the same ruthless indifference to motive as a typhoid germ” (1968, p. 36).

Miasma goes beyond mere physical disease or toxicity. Lacking the contagious qualities of miasma, toxicity may be metabolized and neutralized. Miasma brings about a state of moral and spiritual decay, a corruption of all values and human relations of trust, love and community – people suspect their neighbors of being the cause, scapegoating and witch hunts are rife. Thus, a notable feature of miasma, and one that brings it to the heart of tragedy, is that the search for purification and expiation frequently helps to spread the corruption. Once it has established itself, miasma affects people in a persistent and arbitrary manner, deserving and undeserving alike.

Although miasma is a regular feature of all tragedy (“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” – Hamlet), its presence is nowhere more oppressively felt, more fundamental in driving the drama and more sharply depicted than by Sophocles who highlights the link between physical illness and the moral and spiritual decomposition of a community. Having witnessed and survived the great Athenian plague that devastated his city during the second year of the Peloponnesian War, Sophocles was uniquely sensitive to the way the moral fibre of societies, the trust among its citizens and belief in their institutions, collapse in periods of contagion, illness and warfare.

It is not accidental that the idea of miasma found a hospitable discourse in medicine where, over a number of centuries, it was considered as the cause of medical infection, carried by putrid, poisonous vapours, identifiable by their foul smell. This theory reached its peak in the 19th century when it was used to explain the spread of cholera in large metropolitan centres and initiated a series of sanitary measures (Halliday, 2001). Like many theories, it had numerous successful (and beneficial) applications before it was eventually discredited by the discovery that most germs were transmitted through water rather than through air. All the same, some rituals of the miasmatic transmission of disease persist to this day – people ventilate their houses and feel suffocation when they find themselves in enclosed spaces. Contemporary variants of miasma can be found in concerns over toxic fumes and secondary inhalation of tobacco smoke.

It is my contention that some of the core aspects of miasma and its consequences can be observed in certain organizations, especially those undergoing very rapid changes which involve lay-offs and redundancies. It was while studying such an organization that the concept of miasma helped me make sense of some of its most perplexing features which included a total paralysis of resistance, a corresponding increase of self-criticism accompanied by collapse of self-esteem, a constant search for scapegoats and measures to restore the organization to a state of prowess, and exceptionally acute feelings of anxiety alternating with depression. What struck me particularly was the contagious quality of these phenomena that seemed to affect everyone in the organization, no matter how competent or mentally strong they were; and also, the spiraling quality of these phenomena which resulted in ever expanding scapegoating.

A CASE OF ORGANIZATIONAL MIASMA

The organization in question was a semi-autonomous part of a larger and highly prestigious group in a knowledge-intensive industry, employing highly skilled professionals. The organization had undergone a sudden and dramatic change, following the arrival of a new leader who had overseen a move to a spectacular new building and had initiated a total overhauling of all of the organization’s symbols, logos, publicity materials and website, as well as many of its products. A sharp discontinuity separated the new organization from the old, whose leader had been prematurely retired and never re-appeared on the premises.

The past was vilified as a period of institutionalised mediocrity that was unsustainable. According to the new leader’s rhetoric, it had been a time of cheerful and messy indulgence that had led to underperformance and declining standards. The old organization, the new leader argued, had tolerated far too many eccentric and erratic artisans who had failed to keep up with the times, and the time was ripe for a radical shake up which would unleash the organization’s true potential, one that would raise it to world class status. As a result, some individuals were offered “generous severance packages”. The alternative would have been

that their lives would have “become difficult”. All but one of those approached accepted these packages. Several more came forward asking if they too were eligible and, after cursory discussions, many of them started to leave too. Some of them were older individuals opting for early retirement or new independent careers as freelance consultants. Others became refugees to more hospitable environments of competitors who were pleased to hire them. Most of those who left had been valued individuals with strong reputations. Yet, their departures were mostly unceremonial and their legacy forgotten with indecent haste. Later, I heard it said repeatedly that they had not been up to the standards expected by the new regime. Within two years two thirds of the old workforce had left.

A feature of the new regime was its very considerable preoccupation with image, sometimes at the expense of substance. Inordinate amounts of time were spent in meetings to determine and enforce a house-style in all communications, presentations to external bodies, relations with customers and so forth, and truly vast amounts of money were spent on re-branding, PR and presentation. Consistent with this preoccupation with image was the incessant repetition of the official institutional story with its well-rehearsed signifiers, like excellence, cutting edge, world class and so forth. This was essentially an aspirational story – a wish-fulfilling balancing act between where the organization would like to be and a sense that it was there already. In this official story, many of the organization’s participants were featured as stars, internationally known celebrities in their fields, innovative, adventurous and totally outstanding.

Yet, what I observed in many top meetings that I attended was quite different. Far from being treated as stars, I was struck by the extensive ‘objectification’ of employees, who were treated as pawns on a chess-board, arranged and re-arranged, deployed, redeployed and discarded with no regard to any desires or aspirations of their own. The organization’s customers too were regularly subjected to this kind of objectification, treated as resources to be used and exploited. The short-hand way of expressing this objectification was that people were “treated without respect”. Yet, what I found remarkable was that many of the employees who were victims of this objectification adopted it fatalistically for themselves. Many came to view themselves as objects of no intrinsic value but merely as resources adding or failing to add value to the organization. Their stories were silenced by an ethos that stressed that if one did not wish to be part of the organization’s new story, one had no place in it. And this was the case for many.

An outstanding characteristic of the new organization was the constant undermining of individuals’ self confidence by the very fetishization of the organization’s new image. A very pernicious critical ethos installed itself in the organization, one that affected nearly every person I had an opportunity to talk to and many activities. Its core message was “X is not good enough”, where X could stand for a person, an activity, a department, groups of customers, suppliers etc. This criticism was rarely rationally driven – for example, unsuccessful projects had often evaded criticism and become ‘no go areas’ of discussion; yet, many routine and successful activities came to be criticized as flawed and ineffective. People too were criticized, by focusing on whatever aspect of their performance could be criticized, no matter how effective or successful they were in everything else they did. Many of them were said to be ‘past their sell-by date’, a term I found especially distasteful.

As with objectification, criticism became internalised and part of the way many employees came to view themselves. Constantly measuring themselves against the idealized standards of the official story, the stars, the celebrities, the world leaders, it was not surprising that they found themselves lacking in some way or another. As a result, a widely felt depression afflicted many participants and was apparent but not generally discussed. People rarely smiled and rarely joked. Occasionally black jokes surfaced lacking the rebellious and original qualities of real humour. Even among the higher leadership echelons, feelings of doom and gloom regularly prevailed, often associated with the futility of fighting the wider organizational bureaucracy or the competitors’ ability to succeed in projects at which this organization was failing.

The organization’s shining glass building was originally meant to symbolize the transition from the organization’s indulgent and artisanal past to its modern and self-confident future. Instead, it became the focus of constant griping. People frequently complained of breathing difficulties,

headaches, and other physical symptoms, which they attributed to the hot and stagnant air and the failure of the air-conditioning system. For prolonged periods, a putrid smell pervaded the building, caused by faulty sewerage pipes and blocked drains, contributing to a sense of failure and decay.

Finding oneself in a miasmatic organization one may initially believe that one can keep it at arm's length, that one can maintain a purely instrumental relation to it, safeguarding their personal and family lives from its effects. This, however, quickly dissolves as barriers and barricades prove inadequate to stop uncomfortable feelings of colluding and being compromised through this collusion. Discussions with numerous members of this organization revealed self-doubts, self-criticisms and profound feelings of uncleanness that could not be kept from affecting most things that people did and felt. Eventually the miasma affected most things one does or thinks. Participants reported the dramatic transformation in their sleeping patterns which become saturated with nightmares – a central theme of these nightmares was an impostor syndrome revolving around inadequacy, exposure and shame. Acute anxiety attacks were common upon waking up. A tendency to spend more and more time on the premises of the organization along with an inability to do creative or original work while being there was also reported.

As someone interested in organizational stories and storytelling, I was particularly interested to observe their decline. While the old building had been abuzz with stories, banter and gossip, the shining public spaces of the new building rarely hosted any informal conversations and they were never filled with laughter; in the tiny, claustrophobic private offices, staff could occasionally be seen conversing in whispers; many of these whispered conversations concerned the imminent departures of yet more staff or the latest directive, target or missive from the organization's head. Griping, wincing and whinge were regular features of these conversations. I was surprised by the absence of any angry or defiant narratives, any tragic stories or any nostalgic recreations of the golden past. A profound silence surrounded people's actual experiences, rarely broken by very brief escapes into black humour or knowing nods. Just as some people succumb to an incurable illness by allowing it to colonize and monopolize every aspect of their life story, writing itself into every episode and every judgement, organizational miasma would appear to colour most moods, interpretations and judgements.

Overall, I would describe the feelings I observed as a profound sense of dejection and loss of self-esteem, a lowered level of energy and interest with corresponding inhibition of activity, and a strong expectation of punishment. What was remarkable was the sudden and complete transformation of those who had been competent, outgoing and active into self-doubting and inward-looking people nearly paralysed by fear, self-doubt and self-criticism. While the term 'burn-out' may have been used to describe some of these symptoms, there is one circumstance that mitigates against its use – many of the individuals afflicted by it made very complete recoveries as soon as they left the organization and moved to other jobs. This is something that I had numerous opportunities to observe – their recovery was almost as sudden and complete as their collapse. There were, however, certain individuals who never recovered.

ORGANIZATIONAL DARKNESS

An extensive literature has emerged dealing with organizational violence, in diverse forms, or organizational toxicity. A substantial amount was inspired by the extensive round of downsizing and dislocation undergone by many industrial societies but especially the United States in the 1990s (Ehrenreich, 2005; Uchitelle, 2006). A theorist who has made a great contribution to the psychological and social damage caused by these phenomena has been Howard F. Stein, a psychoanalytic anthropologist who carried out research in numerous organizations undergoing downsizing. Stein has developed his theory drawing on two core insights drawn from the work of Burkard Sievers (1986; 1990; 1993; 1994) – first, the calamitous destruction of meaning brought about by contemporary capitalism and its attempt to fill the vacuum with what Sievers describes as 'merchandized' meanings that evaporate instantly; and secondly, the misplaced faith in organizations of today to offer a taste (or a

surrogate) of immortality. In Euphemism, spin, and the crisis in organizational life, Stein (1998) argued that the very terms used to denote the phenomena under investigation are euphemisms that represent not a 'social construction of reality' but a systematic assault on meaning. Terms such as 'downsizing', 'rightsizing', 'RIF' (or reduction in force), 'managed health', 're-engineering' and so forth seek to conceal the bleak and brutal realities of many American workplaces. These terms invented and peddled by those Sievers has described as 'merchandisers of meaning' defile the human spirit, by forcing on it a seemingly unanswerable logic of markets, economic necessity and bottom lines.

In the follow-up, Nothing personal, just business: A guided journey into organizational darkness, Stein (2001) argues that the unanswerable logic of markets, economic necessity and bottom lines becomes a new fundamentalist religion that turns organizations into a place of darkness, where emotional brutality is commonplace and different forms of psychological violence, dehumanization, including degradation, humiliation and intimidation, have become the norm. Behind calls for flexibility among the employees, Stein sees the rise of the religion of the bottom line as one which is oblivious to all human values and blind to all suffering but demands constant sacrifices. Stein's use of the word 'religion' is neither accidental nor a euphemism – instead, it captures the nature of a misplaced faith, first identified by Sievers (1994) that organizations can give their loyal worshippers a taste of immortality. If in previous eras, religion had offered some consolation, meaning and a promise of salvation, people now turn to work and the world of seemingly immortal organizations for immortality. In as much as they are part of long standing, powerful organizations, people feel that they too share a part of this immortality. But the gods of the bottom line are implacable. They demand human sacrifices. Immortality requires that those who fail to add value be dispensed with. They are the 'collateral damage'. No suffering and no savagery is too great, so long as it is justified by the bottom line. People become dispensable pawns, resources to be used, exploited and discarded. Today's exploiter becomes tomorrow's discarded pawn, since the religion of the bottom line acknowledges no permanent authority, no human is too important to be dispensed with when his/her usefulness is over. This creates an ethos of survivalism – a constant anxiety over each individual's and each organization's ability to survive in what is construed as an environment of endless terrors and turbulence. A small drop in profits is instantly seen as an omen of a cosmic force boding disaster and calling for sacrifices. Immediately, the eye is cast to spot the suitable sacrificial lamb, the next candidate for downsizing and 'RIFing'.

There is a fair literature on different forms of organizational oppression, bullying and humiliation (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Czarniawska, 2002; Diamond, 1997; Fineman, 2003; Fortado, 1998; Frost & Robinson, 1999; Gabriel, 1998; Martin, 2000; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001; Sims, 2003). What makes Stein's contribution especially interesting is the link that he offers between public humiliation and private emotional experience of being worthless and feeling guilty. He argues that the religion of the bottom-line (like most religions) grows on the systematic dissemination of the belief that no-one is good enough – no employee is good enough, no venture is good enough, no action is good enough (Bunting, 2004; Gabriel, 2005) Of course all organizations inflict blows to our narcissism (Gabriel, 1999), but what we have here is a sequence of blows to our entire personhood, the product of a principle of managed social and organizational change whose model, Stein insists, is nothing short of the holocaust. Images from the holocaust saturate Stein's observations of corporate America, which he documents in a sequence of hugely impressive case studies. The core equation for Stein is an experiential and emotional one:

"Organizational darkness is not the fact of the 'symbolic' equation of the American workplace and the Holocaust, but the emotional experience of the workplace that makes the metaphor – and certain recurrent others – plausible and, for many, emotionally apt and 'right.'" (2001, p. 15)

Whichever part of the corporate landscape Stein casts his eye on, he observes the same experiences -- a pervasive sense of helplessness coupled with a systematic turning of a blind eye ('Business as usual, nothing personal'), a recurring surfacing of apocalyptic images of annihilation, a naturalization of a pseudo-clinical language of death ('dead wood', 'dead meat', 'excess fat', 'targeting' etc.) and, above all, a constant split between good and evil, useful and useless, deserving and undeserving, healthy and diseased.

Stein's equation of the brutalities of corporate America with the sufferings of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, politicians and others at the hands of the Nazis is undoubtedly one for which he may be challenged; it is also one of which he is himself acutely aware and repeatedly addresses. Does it not diminish the Nazi brutalities and the sufferings of its victims to have it compared with the less complete sufferings of the victims of corporate America? Further, does it not obliterate vital distinctions of politics to equate Hitler's Final Solution of the Jewish problem with the regular changes in labour force dictated by new technologies, new markets and new competitors? Stein's resolute view is that terror is terror and symbolism is real. 'Corporate cleansing' is not just analogous to 'ethnic cleansing' (what hideous euphemisms!), but they both rely on the same psychodynamic processes, which view the survival of the whole (the organization, the society, the nation) as depending on 'the expulsion of unwanted parts' (Stein, 2001, p. 69). Stein views the grotesque lament of Hans Frank, the odious Governor General of Poland under the Nazis, as emblematic of modern management: "My only wish of the Jews is that they should disappear." What today's manager wants is that the weak, the ineffectual, the recalcitrant, the ones who fail the excellence test and do not add value, should simply disappear. Thus, Stein maintains that

even though American-style organizational totalitarianism [from the 1980's through the present] has primarily symbolic casualties, they are casualties of terror nonetheless. One should never say that these are 'only' the victims of psychological oppression. And even though most of those who have been disposed of [via downsizing and other forms of 'managed social change'] are resilient and find other jobs (usually of lesser pay, benefits, and status), they carry the emotional scars of betrayal and of having been treated as inanimate 'dead wood' or as 'fat' to be trimmed. Once we recognize the official language of economics to be the smokescreen that it is, we have no trouble in discerning the brutality – even sadism – that it has obscured (Stein, 2007, p. 18).

A vicious circle is thus established, one in which attempts to cleanse the organization of toxicity, ends up reinforcing it.

THE NAZI GENOCIDE AS RITUAL SACRIFICE AND PURIFICATION

It is this link between genocide, ethnic cleansing and ritual purification that forms the backbone of Robert Jay Lifton's (1986) study of the Nazi genocide in The Nazi doctors: Medical killing and the psychology of genocide. How is it possible, asks Lifton, that a large number of German physicians, some with Nobel prizes, could have spearheaded a campaign that started with forced sterilization and culminated in the genocide of millions of people? Lifton's core argument is that genocide was an attempt to purify Germany from what was seen as the contagious sickness represented by the Jews, the Gypsies and all other social pathogens. Doctors colluded and even spearheaded this in the belief that they were helping heal the nation's body by ridding it of pathogens.

At the heart of the task is the question: Why all? What is the source of the impulse to destroy a human group in its entirety? ... The model I propose includes a perception of a collective illness, a vision of cure, and a series of motivations, experiences, and requirements of perpetrators in their quest for that cure. The perceived illness is a collectively experienced inundation in death imagery, a shared sense of Kierkegaard's 'sickness unto death'. It is the despairing edge of historical (or psychohistorical) dislocation, of the breakdown of the symbolic forms and sources of meaning previously shared by a particular human group. That collective immersion in death, bodily and spiritually, could not have been greater than that experienced in Germany after the First World War. (Lifton, 1986, p. 467)

Following that war, Germans had an immense experience of loss, followed by an experience of failed regeneration and 'collective desperation for a cure'. Killing, like ritual sacrifice, then

emerges as the attempt to rid the nation of the miasma represented by the Jews, the Gypsies and others who have infected it.

The 'disease' with which the Nazis were attempting to cope was death itself, death made unmanageable by the 'modern necrophilia' of the First World War. ... One way to deal with a death-saturated environment is to embrace death itself as the means of cure. ... Genocide requires both a specific victim group and certain relationships to that group. ... Nazi perpetrators had to see their victims as posing absolute danger, as 'infecting' the 'German national body'. ... The victim will destroy not only the perpetrator, it is claimed, but everyone and everything else. (Lifton, 1986, pp. 476-7)

The perpetrators of genocide, argues Lifton, thought that purification would restore Germany to wholeness and perfection. "Genocide is a response to collective fear of pollution and defilement. It depends upon an impulse toward purification resembling that given collective expression in primitive cultures. (Lifton, 1986, p. 481) But this is also the impulse noted by Stein in his case studies – the religion of the 'bottom line' requires sacrifices to purify the body of the organization from the ineffective and those who fail to add value. And in the highly image-conscious organization I delineated earlier, this same impulse led to the belief that if only the unwanted parts could be gotten rid of, the organization would shine like a beacon of pure light, coupled with the sudden realization that the unwanted parts could be gotten rid of.

Lifton's argument relies on two further features of the Nazi genocide – medical fundamentalism that cast physicians as the vanguard in the struggle for national purification, and bureaucracy that, as others have also noted, created "absolute barriers of thought and feeling between [genocide] and the outside world" (Lifton, 1986, p. 496). Similar phenomena can be observed in the world of organizations – the vanguard of the assault on the ineffective and weak is constituted by various downsizing gurus and their prophets, 'Chainsaw Al' and 'Neutron Jack'. Walls of silence, shame and anger separate off those who are discarded from those temporarily safe. As we noted earlier, there is a fundamental difference between killing people and dismissing them from their jobs. Nothing can match the horrors of the numerous genocides that have punctuated the last hundred years. Yet, the symbolic function of purification can be performed in many different ways.

The link between genocide, killing and purification knows countless manifestations. If Hitler sought to cleanse the body-politic of Germany of Jews, Gypsies and other undesirables, Stalin sought to 'purge' the vanguard party of traitors, formalists and bourgeois revisionists through show-trials, staged confessions and eventual liquidation (= turning solid dirt into liquid washable filth). Following events in Bosnia in the 1990s, the term 'ethnic cleansing' has assumed its place in the vocabulary of distasteful euphemisms for genocide. 'Mopping up' or 'cleansing operations' is a term used to describe the work of humanitarian organizations that are involved in mitigating the worst consequences of catastrophes, whether caused by humans as in Rwanda or by nature as in New Orleans, Pakistan, Iran and countless other places. It is notable that outsourcing of such 'cleansing operations' by governments allows them to 'wash their hands' of any possible involvement in causing the disasters in the first place. What we find in these cases are attempts to lift an affliction through what are presented as purification measures. In every instance, the aim of these measures is to lift the miasma, and in every instance, as we shall proceed to show presently, the consequence is its perpetuation and deepening.

MIASMA, DEPRESSION AND MOURNING

Let us now recapitulate the key features of an organization in the state of miasma, before seeking to account for its aetiology and trying to assess the implications of attempts to lift the miasma.

First, organizations in a miasmatic state involve relatively little employee resistance. It is as if the employees' fighting spirit is paralysed, as they internalize their status as unwanted, unsuccessful and unclean and lapse into depression and other symptoms. External violations and threats may be resisted or fought against, but the same can hardly be said for inner violations and decay. In fact, miasma appears to infect resistance itself, compromising it, polluting it and subverting it.

Second, miasma entails a constant criticism and self-criticism and the contagious experience of never being 'good enough'. Survivor's guilt may amplify the gloom and depression of those who escape early rounds of downsizing, sapping the desire to fight. As for the cleansers themselves, they are very aware that they can easily become tomorrow's deadwood and candidates for cleansing. Treating other people as objects has a remarkably deflating impact on oneself as a subject.

Third, the blame for this state of affairs is almost invariably placed on the leader, who readily comes to be seen as the bringer of the miasma. This is compounded if the leader is rarely seen or heard in public and only the results of his/her actions are visible. A silent killer, like a silent virus, treating people as objects, selecting, deciding and dismissing. At such times, a nostalgia for the organization's past and its previous leaders may offer some solace, yet miasma often afflicts the past as well as the present (just as it afflicts resistance and dissent).

In seeking to understand the causes of miasma and the attempts to deal with it, Parker (1983) has used the classic work of van Gennep (1960) and Mary Douglas (1966/2002; 1975) to argue that miasma is a state of pollution that is likely to happen in periods of sudden and severe transition from one state to another. Thus, the numerous rituals that accompany birth, death and marriage are intended to prevent the possibility of pollution, which in Douglas's (1966/2002) terms is a general property of "the betwixt and between". Of particular interest in connection with miasma are the funerary rituals, aimed at removing a dead person from the world of the living and consigning him/her to the world of the dead. Mourning, argues Parker, is a period when the living enter the same 'between' land as the dead before burial or cremation. "During the period of mourning, a two-way transition occurs; the dead man moves from the land of the living to that of the spirits, while the survivors return from death to life. The last rites finally incorporate the dead and the living in their respective communities." (Parker, 1983, p. 60) During mourning, familiar pursuits, such as eating, clothing etc. become forbidden or heavily regulated. Unless surrounded by such rituals, persons in transitional positions (corpses before burial, newly born babies before they have been named) as well as those who come into contact with them become dangerous and potential causes of miasma for all others.

The presence in an organization of people who are 'betwixt and between', for example, doomed but not yet departed, represents a similar source of miasma, in the absence of the traditional rituals that accompany people's arrivals to and departure from organizations. Stein has emphasized that absence of mourning is a regular feature of organizational downsizing, a feature also commented upon by Frost and Robinson (1999). In general, during periods of sudden organizational change, rituals of separation and incorporation become neglected, allowing contact with 'walking corpses'. But what exacerbates the miasma is the presence of a 'murderer' or 'murderers' whose hands are dirty with human blood, irrespective of their motives or rationalizations (remember, Oedipus, had no idea of the true nature of his actions). As Parker argues, miasma "is dangerous, and this danger is not of familiar secular origin. Two typical sources of such a condition are contact with a corpse, or a murderer" (Parker, 1983, p. 4).

Scapegoating is inextricably linked to miasma – Oedipus was expelled from the city of Thebes to rid her of the pollution he had caused. More generally, the Greek ritual of 'pharmakos' is a close parallel to Hebrew scapegoating, only it involved the banishment or sacrifice of one of a community's marginalized members as the price of purification for the rest. In organizations, we have a double scapegoating taking place – the [new] leader scapegoats the old leadership along with the dead wood (the abject or the 'dirt' in Mary Douglas,) that it has bequeathed them, viewing the downsizing as the necessary purification ritual which will augur a new beginning. However, the downsizing, the bleeding of an organization by its ruthless leader, is

experienced by many organizational members as the true miasma. Notice how this double scapegoating mirrors the relative positions of leaders and followers noted by Sievers:

Leadership in organizations manages the gap between deified men on the one hand and reified men on the other side. Leadership is the process through which the alienated split between the producing and the product artificially, i.e. in a reified mode, has to be bridged in order to re-accomplish the unity which originally existed. ... To alter only slightly what is known as a widespread management approach in contemporary organization theory, i.e. 'management by objectives', leadership becomes the management of objects. In so far as, through leadership, workers are managed like things and products, the process does not differ much from the management of other things such as machines or the product flow in a production unit. (Sievers, 1994, p. 173)

Leaders in miasmatic organizations, far from embodying Arendt's 'banality of evil', are viewed as truly majestic evil-doers, god-like figures whose omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence is combined with Omni malevolence. The workers, for their part, become objects pure-and-simple, devoid of aspiration, and fit for deployment, redeployment and discarding. They become 'corpses', 'figuren' (as the inmates of Treblinka were referred to), bodies devoid of life. Murderers and corpses fill the spaces of miasmatic organizations. All relations and activities become contaminated. Unlike other instances of organizational brutalisation, miasma does not invite resistance, fight and retribution. Instead, it undermines people from within; people lose their confidence and self-esteem, moral integrity evaporates and a moral and psychological corruption sets in. Guilt, shame, inadequacy and anxiety become endemic, spreading into people's homes and family lives. In this sense, miasma becomes the source of contagion, carried in the air as in the widely held Victorian theory of infection noted earlier (Halliday, 2001).

In a well-known essay on melancholia (depression) and mourning, Freud (1917e) observed many similarities between the two phenomena. There is, however, a key difference. In mourning all emotional attachments have to be withdrawn from a lost object that no longer exists. This is done with the help the rituals but above all requires a great deal of psychological work that leaves the mourner exhausted and drained. Melancholia, like mourning, is a response to a loss or a separation, but one where the subject does not know what it is that has been lost. Even when the sufferer is aware of the loss, Freud suggests, "he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. ... In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished" (Freud, 1917e, p. 254).

While Freud observed the similarities between mourning and depression, he did not exactly see them as alternatives. This is, however, fairly widely accepted now – melancholia is seen as setting in when, for any number of reasons, mourning has not been accomplished. Following Lindemann's (1944) pioneering work, many social psychologists (e.g. (Smelser, 1998)) have noted how when a public disaster takes place (Lindemann studied the survivors of a nightclub fire in Boston during WW2) a sequence of phases of bereavement takes place. Survivors go through various standard phases, notably, 1. Denial of the event and the loss, 2. A period of idealization of the lost ones, 3. Anger at their disappearance, 4. Guilt, self-accusation and blame for 'not having done enough', 5. Scapegoating others. Eventually, once the proper mourning rituals have been followed, most people are able to overcome their grief and resume their lives, re-aligning their social and emotional attachments, and forming new routines and new attachments. Similar processes have been observed in other community disasters. In Smelser's view, these phases are also characteristic of many different separations that we experience in life, including divorce, estrangement, moving jobs and houses and so forth.

Now, in the instance of organizational miasma, many conditions conspire to prevent mourning and even to disallow and dis-'honor' it (Meyerson, 2000). The 'old' organization, far from being idealized, is routinely vilified as old-fashioned, inefficient, sclerotic etc. Feelings of loss

and grief for the organization that has been changed by an 'irreversible discontinuity' are disavowed and repressed. Likewise, old colleagues, leaders, practices and so forth are denigrated as dead wood, behind the times or burnt out. We may hypothesize that organizations especially susceptible to miasma are those undergoing rapid transformation, caught in Douglas's 'betwixt and between'. These may include organizations caught in a shift from a public service ethos to a market-driven one or from product-based to customer-based values. However, the crucial factor triggering miasma would be the unseemly dismissals of visible members of staff and the perception of the leadership as having blood in its hands. In the absence of proper mourning, we would expect the scapegoating and ruthlessly self-critical processes noted earlier, leading to a generalized climate of depression, self-reproach, mistrust and suspicion.

An organization in a state of miasma reminds us of a city in the grip of a deadly and contagious disease, like the one that afflicted Pericles' Athens, so brilliantly described by Thucydides which, as we noted earlier, profoundly influenced Sophocles depiction of Thebes. It also evokes the self-same city under its three-year Nazi occupation. In such a city, no-one appears immune, no-one is spared. The disease undermines people's faith in their gods, their institutions, and their identity. Like the disease, the miasma cannot be fought or resisted. Initially, people may think that they can protect themselves or their families by raising barriers and constructing safe refuge. Some people may almost believe that they can continue to live their lives and tell their stories as if the miasma did not exist. One is reminded of Anne Frank's family in their attic trying to live their lives as though the world outside had stopped. Or the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, when it was viewed as the result of divine retribution for sexual corruption. It also reminds us of the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, when generations of local inhabitants suffered the most debilitating physical, emotional and spiritual consequences, irrespective of the scientists' reassurances that the size of the toxicity had been exaggerated.

But such attempts to fend off the miasma are no more successful than attempts to fight it through decisive 'cleansing' action. Miasma erodes boundaries and silences stories. As noted earlier, members of miasmatic organizations found it impossible to maintain boundaries between life inside and outside work or boundaries between sleeping and waking experiences. Depression and anxiety affected them through and through and spread to others in the familial environment. Organizations in a state of miasma are de facto total institutions, in the enlarged sense that Clegg and his colleagues have proposed: "they surround the person at every turn and cannot be escaped; they produce and reproduce the normalcy of life inside the institution, however abnormal it might seem from outside. Thus, total institutions ... contain the totality of the lives of those who are their members" (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 147). Or alternatively, organizations in a state of miasma remind us of those psychotic organizations analysed by Sievers where attempts at creating impermeable boundaries and safe areas "are vain, resembling the futile efforts to escape a plague that is devastating the country, which is so lucidly described by Edgar Allan Poe in 'The Masque of the Red Death'" (Sievers, 1999, p. 588). Yet, there are escapes from miasmatic organizations, just as there are escapes from total institutions, from other quarantined environments and even from genocides. And it is these escapees who are the storytellers.

CONCLUSIONS – TRAGEDY, CATHARSIS AND HEALING

Opposing the absolute certainty of death, different cultures have long sought to provide consolations in different ways, most especially the certainties embedded in faith in particular gods. The Greeks gave up the search for such consolations and ended up with two things, philosophy and tragedy. Philosophy rested on the belief that certainty and truth should be sought in rational argument rather than in divine revelation. Tragedy was the fruit of the discovery that truth is unstable and unable to offer the certainty they, like others, craved for. The fate of humanity, as Freud never tired of repeating, is truly tragic. When people act in confident knowledge of furthering their interests, their desires and their aims, they end up with outcomes they had never imagined. There is a vast and tragic discontinuity between the proclaimed intentions of people's actions and the outcomes of these actions. Suffering in

tragedy is not merely incidental – it is brought about by the actions of the protagonists themselves. Tragedy is never far from human affairs, even if we fail to observe it when it is staring us in the eyes. This is central to all tragedy – the participants' incapacity to recognize the true significance of what engulfs them. Immersed in illusions, they seek to escape through actions that lead to their escalating entrapment.

Miasma helped the audiences of dramatic performances make sense of the prolonged and undeserved sufferings of the protagonists. It helped them cope with the cruelties, injustices and sorrows that they watched on stage. It helped them reach catharsis, an emotional purgation brought about by witnessing terrible things befalling others with no harm to themselves. The marble seats on which they sat offered a sterile environment protecting them from the toxicity that saturated the heart of the theatre, the orchestra. But for the protagonists of the drama there was no catharsis, only suffering and belated recognition. Catharsis is the privilege of the audiences that witness their suffering, their folly and their downfall. In the organizational theatres that become sites of miasma, there are no spectators (unless maybe visitors from outside, members of other organizations) and therefore there is no catharsis. If this presentation has established something, it is that the search for catharsis merely reinforces the miasma.

The point of this presentation is not to examine if and how organizations that find themselves in the grip of a miasma can right themselves. The story of Oedipus is not encouraging in this respect. As we saw earlier, miasma persists across tragic time and space, and actions aimed at lifting it have the opposite effect. Individuals may escape from its grip but attempts to eliminate it from organizations through decisive 'heroic' cleansing action are doomed. If we return to the vital part played in the dynamics of miasma by the inability to mourn and consequent lapse into depression and scapegoating, it would seem that any attempt to transcend these dynamics must start with a recognition of what has taken place, a recognition of the loss, the pain, the tragedy. Recognition of what has been lost is a precondition for turning depression into mourning, and failed cleansing into partial healing. As Volkan has argued:

Mourning allows us to accept that a loss or a change has occurred. Without mourning we are trapped in the struggle to accept the tragedy and to adjust to life after it. If that struggle is not won, we cannot move on with our lives. We metaphorically remain hiding in the basement after the tornado has passed over and fair weather has returned. An individual, or a society, traumatized deliberately by others has a tendency to remain in the basement. The sense of shame, humiliation, and helplessness may become internalized, which consequently complicates the survivors' guilt. (Volkan, 2003, p. 82)

Mourning can help people come out of the basement and resume their lives, not without scars, but maybe without open wounds. Learning from societies that have managed to recover from profound trauma, injustice and pain, it may be that some organizations that find themselves in the heart of darkness can move towards the light by acknowledging past injustices without vindictiveness, past mistakes without guilt, and past losses without despair.

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