



# The great denial of the monstrous in organization theory

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## review of

Thanem, T. (2011) *The monstrous organization*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. (HB, pp. 160, £65.00, ISBN 978-1-84542-178-6)

## Incipit

When we began this review of *The monstrous organization*, we encountered an uncommon reading of organizational theory and life, populated by monsters, fantastical creatures and deviant bodies. The according of relevance to monstrosity has not aroused the same curiosity in Western authors, with certain fields of studies allocating greater prominence to monsters and monstrous aspects of life than others. The guiding question for our analysis was inspired by this disparity: why, within Western culture, do images of monstrosity abound in literature, paintings, architecture and cinema, whilst scant interest has been directed towards monstrous bodies and creatures in organizational theory and management studies?

An explanation for such a disparity is provided by Thanem as he outlines the rationalist pursuit of organizational theory which contributed to marginalizing the monstrous. The author indicates that 'Cartesian dualism is actualized in a wide range of organizational practices and theorizing' (23). This has been inherited by mainstream accounts of organizations from early-management theories inspired by scientific management principles to neo-institutionalist

theories, decision-making theories, organizational sensemaking and the tradition of critical management studies. This introductory point becomes crucial to explaining why monstrosity has been neglected in organization studies. Critical studies and mainstream approaches have in common an obliviousness to the materiality of organizational life. It is on these premises that the book begins with an attempt to develop an ambitious project: an alternative organizational ontology which seeks to reconcile the 'material, social and discursive realities' of organizations (32).

In addition to an introductory chapter, the book consists of five chapters and an epilogue, which outlines an envisioned future for organization studies in which the monstrous will finally be reintegrated. The chapters are specifically assembled into five thematic parts: Chapter 2 explores the historical constitution of organization studies, clarifying how the monstrous has been 'killed'. Chapter 3 provides an account of the exploitation of the monstrous, with a narrative replete with examples from biotechnology (the manipulation of animals' embryos), bodily waste (the manufacturing of fertility drugs), consumer products (the Monster Energy drink) and the entertainment sector (movies such as *Monsters, Inc.* and numerous fantasy movies). Chapter 4 is a miscellanea on the monstrous in Western thinking (e.g. the Victorian freak show), while Chapter 5 forms the backbone of the entire book, where an alternative ontology – a monstrous realist ontology – is proposed.

The book is varied in terms of the topics it covers, and it goes on to include theoretical works (e.g. actor-network theory) and illustrative examples of how the monstrous can be exploited and created by organizations. As opposed to being a unitary corpus, the book discusses the various means by which organization studies scholars have related to the monstrous, with the guiding thread being the great denial of the monstrous in the literature.

This review will be organized as an ideal conversation between three themes of the book: 'killing monsters', 'exploiting monsters' and 'monstructing', as well as our own understanding of monstrosity in literature, paintings, architecture and cinema. By creating connections and parallels and by highlighting dissimilarities, we hope to provide an original understanding of *the monstrous organization*.

## **Killing monsters**

A spectre has always hovered over the history of organization theory. Cognitivism was the byword in identifying the dominance of order over confusion, boundary-setting over boundary porosity, homogeneity over the multiplicities of roles and

sexualities and stability over the act of transforming. Thanem's initial chapter delivers a sharp outline of the book's objectives and the revolutionary project for the study of organizations that he intends to pursue. For Thanem, the neglect of monstrous aspects of organization is due to the persistent tendency to set boundaries, or to think in terms of hierarchical levels and the division of labour. Simultaneously, the 'killing of the monstrous' is traceable to the disregarding of the body – both by denying its status as an object of inquiry and by privileging a univocal sexuality.

Despite the exclusion of monsters from the territory of organizational studies, the monstrous has exerted a certain fascination in the Western imagination. As the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco observes, the 'monstrous represents the breaking of natural laws, the danger and the irrational which is out of human control' (Eco, 1987: 384). Eco suggests an interesting aspect of monsters in that they redirect the attention to irrational aspects of the human mind. For example, Greek mythology is habitually populated by anthropomorphic creatures, monstrous in their being, neither human nor animal. Their bodies are frequently hybrids that violate natural forms, as is the case with the Gorgons (with hair composed of living snakes and sharp boar fangs) or the Minotaur (with the body of a man and the head of a bull). In this light, the monstrous represents a way to express subversive aspects of life, and yet those aspects pertain to the sphere of the irrational. For instance, monsters generated by the unconscious, and their link with the human imagination, are recurring themes in paintings. The well-known etching by Goya, 'The sleep of reason produces monsters' (1799), depicts a man asleep surrounded by various horrific creatures, owls and bats. The most obvious reading is that when Reason sleeps, the imagination produces monsters. However, it is also worth noting that a converse interpretation may apply: that Reason alone, without imagination, leads to foolishness. Whether or not we subscribe to either of these interpretations, the explanation seems to lie in the ability to balance two sides of the same coin. This line of reasoning is suggested in Thanem's prologue, where the monstrous is not set in a binary opposition to the organization. Instead, the author's hope is that monsters may be naturalized as an integral part of organizational life.

### **Exploiting monsters**

The monstrous has proven to be a fruitful category upon which to draw, and Thanem provides an account of how it has been instrumentally exploited by the entertainment and advertising sectors, as well as by biotechnology, transgenic technology and the media. In this regard, one of the most detailed cases deals with the consumer drink Monster Energy, in which the author engages in a lively

critique of the iconography of monstrosity as well as the ability to harness the rhetoric of procuring strength and resistance, all with the aim of encouraging consumption. Simultaneously, Thanem provides examples from animated films which have the Monstrous being as their core subject. Movies such as *Monsters, inc.*, *Spiderman 3* and *The Dark Knight* are instances of commercial success which are heavily reliant on monstrous imagery.

Thanem goes on to refer to monstrosity with a more abstract meaning, providing examples of manipulation and transformation perpetrated by biotechnology and body-related waste, which somehow lead to monstrous creatures. Transgenic technology is, for instance, deemed monstrous insofar as it is used to speed up production in agribusiness, with dubious advantages for health.

To reinforce the theory of the Monstrous, Thanem provides examples that illustrate how consumer culture, technology and commercialization intertwine in contemporary society. However, it is worth noting that the use of the monstrous to criticize society is not novel. One of the most renowned illustrations by Bosch abounds with recurring images of monsters and horrific creatures: the visionary and well-known 'The garden of earthly delights' (c. 1500), is populated by weird creatures, with its right-hand panel representing Hell, with transfigured animals, demons and mutant creatures representing a defeated humanity – the monstrous here being an allegory of human corruption.

In this vein, beginning with a reflection on the mistreatment of the monstrous and the use of the monstrous imaginary for commercialization, Thanem, at least from our own reading, engages in a broader critique of present-day society (and, consequently, contemporary organization theory), which manifests in the reforming zeal which drives the author's alternative organizational ontology.

### **Monstructing organisational theory**

The second part (Chapters 5 and 6) deals with ontological issues, which embodies the reformative spirit of the book. Thanem intends to propose alternative theoretical grounds on which to lay the foundation for a monstrous organizational theory. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the author fine-tunes an 'ontology of becoming' (92), which enables the monstrous ontology to emerge. Thanem provides a critique of studies inspired by actor-network theory, critically scrutinized for obstructing materiality and the bodily aspects of organizations. Turning his attention to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblages, Thanem outlines an ontology of multiplicity, which allows monstrous forms of embodiment to become part of organizational life. Indeed,

in Thanem's words: 'a monstrous organizational theory requires a monstrous and realist ontology of heterogeneous and embodied assemblages' (9). This last quotation speaks volumes about materiality and the desire for different bodies co-existing in organizations. The overall interest for transgender and sexuality – and the explicit sexual viewpoint of the author – is a way of raising the issue of transgender people in organizations and finally dealing with 'monstrous' bodies.

Before concluding with an epilogue, Thanem reflects upon the concepts of ethics and politics. Without entering into a detailed analysis, it is suffice to say that, by combining the works of Hardt and Negri on multitude, along with Spinoza's concept of 'affective ethics', an inclusive organizational theory is proposed, opening up the way to alternative modes of organising and working, in which monstrous bodies will finally acquire their place.

In conclusion, our interpretation of the book necessarily sees a parallel with the post-apocalyptic *The scarlet plague* by Jack London (1912). Will the future of organizational theory be reborn from the ashes of the existing inadequate traditions of organization studies, as desired by Thanem? Or will the envisioned 'Monstrous Organization' perhaps have to face a more 'barbaric' era, as in London's *Scarlet plague*, once a monstrous engagement has disrupted traditional social and organizational norms?

With this in mind, we will wait and see what future lies ahead on the horizon for organization studies.

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