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H(a)unting quotas: An empirical analysis of the uncanniness of gender quotas

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abstract

Despite years of gender equality research and initiatives, women are still highly under-represented in top management positions. In Denmark, the number of female top managers is particularly low, despite Denmark's public image of being a country of equal opportunities. In several European countries, quota systems are proven to have a positive effect in increasing the representation of women in politics, as well as on corporate boards, but they are met with resistance from both men and women in Denmark, especially among Danish business leaders. Through empirical analysis of interviews with 45 Danish top managers, this paper investigates such resistance. Although the initial focus of the research agenda for the interviews was not quotas per se, but identity, gender and leadership more generally, the resistance towards – and even fear of – quotas was repeatedly brought up by interviewees, thereby unsettling the conversation. Based on this disturbance, we theorise gender quotas in organisations along a ghostly methodology as something uncanny. The analysis shows how the mere idea of quotas haunts the managers, who, in return, try to hunt down the quota ghost, as it apparently poses a threat to the current understanding of meritocracy. The fear of quotas seems to be what holds back the realisation of sustained gender equality. We argue that this fear is irrational and illogical and therefore suggest an approach of appeasement. Listening to the whispers of the ghost, we outline new present-understandings of merit. We hope that even if this paper does not bring legitimacy to quotas in the way that has happened in politics (in some countries), it will at least bring legitimacy to the discussion.

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that women remain under-represented in management positions (e.g. Acker, 2006, 2012; Ashcraft, 2013; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). It is also well documented that this misrepresentation is *not* due to the lack of skilled

women in the labour market, *nor* to the lack of women's ambition to become managers as many managers and politicians otherwise tend to use as an explanation for the lack of female managers (e.g. Roseberry and Roos, 2015). Rather, most research indicates that a historically and culturally normalised gender hierarchy produces systematic as well as systemic discrimination against working women by casting them as caretakers and nurturers rather than breadwinners, and thus they are not seen as 'management material' (Ahonen et al., 2014; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Koenig et al., 2011; Leicht et al., 2014; Muhr, 2011). Promotion criteria that rest on meritocratic values are therefore obstructed by such ideologically constructed (often unconscious) power dynamics, but also kept in place by those who benefit from them (Dover et al., 2016). As a result, women are, despite many years of organisational initiatives to change this, still systematically discriminated against in most lines of work (Beirne and Wilson, 2016; Kalev et al., 2006).

Due to the lack of success in changing the gender composition in organisations by meritocratic methods, gender quotas are mentioned more and more frequently as a possible way to overcome the ideological deadlock that seems to keep women in inferior positions (e.g. Noon, 2010). The argument for quotas is that instead of working to change people's attitudes in order to bring about different behaviour, quotas force organisations to change their behaviour at a much more fundamental and systemic level (Krook and Zetterberg, 2014). A direct change in behaviour, then, is argued to lead to a change in attitude much more efficiently than various attempts based on meritocratic values (Sacchet, 2008). The hope is that once women have reached a more equal representation in managerial positions, multiple ways of being a woman and a leader will be more visible and the risk of marginalisation and stereotyping should decrease compared to today, where women are heavily under-represented and opinions about women managers therefore come from very small samples of 'token women' (Kanter, 1993/1977) or socially constructed expectations as to how they will be as managers (Muhr, 2011; Muhr and Sullivan, 2013).

Despite positive results (in terms of changes in both behaviours and attitudes) from electoral quotas in the political arena (e.g. Murray, 2013; Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Zetterberg, 2008), organisations are reluctant to take up quotas as a way to ensure change. This reluctance seems to be especially strong in Denmark, where this present study was conducted. In the study, we originally set out to interview 45 top managers in 37 Danish organisations about identity, gender and leadership. However, a recurring theme in the interviews turned out to be the discussion of quotas, or rather a strong rejection of quotas. Although all interviewees worked explicitly to increase the number of women in managerial positions in their respective organisations, none of them expressed support for the use of quotas. In

fact, they instead regularly expressed anger, fear, discomfort, distress or the like when talking about quotas. They all saw quotas as a sign of (their) failure to obtain equality through (in their opinion) fairer methods. And this is despite the fact that Denmark has recently been found to rank among the lowest in the EU, with women making up only 15% of top managers in listed companies in 2015 (up from 10% in 1995), and a mere 6% of board chairs (up from 3% over the same 20-year period) (Larsen et al., 2015). According to a recent random sampling among the 1,200 largest companies in Denmark, 54% had not a single woman represented in top management (Erhvervsstyrelsen, 2015).

However, with all the evidence of how ongoing (subtle) discrimination of women hinders their career possibilities as well as all the evidence for quotas' positive effects on women's careers in politics, it is interesting (and somewhat odd) that people (both men and women) still seem to be so dismissive of quotas for management and/or organisational board positions. This paper investigates the reasons for this dismissiveness and asks: why are gender quotas so unpopular, and why do people keep believing in the myths of meritocracy? If we assume that people in our study tell the truth when they say they want – and work for – change, there is little 'rational' explanation for why they are so reluctant to use quotas (e.g. Noon, 2010; Zetterberg, 2008). Thus, there must be less rational reasons as to why they keep prioritising and spending a lot of money on methods that do not produce the results intended (Dover et al., 2016; Kalev et al., 2006). In exploring such 'irrationality', this paper will try to explain the reluctance to use gender quotas along more 'ghostly' lines, which try to go 'beyond the rationalistic accounts and the focus on individual identity struggles of the existing research' (Pors, 2016: 1647).

Analysing a phenomenon along a ghostly methodology means that if the rational explanation to a research problem or a puzzle (in this case, why gender quotas are not used more widely) seems insufficient or leaves us with a feeling of being unsettled (Blackman, 2015), we must look elsewhere, in this case in the shadows, the hidden areas, the places that make people uncomfortable and where people prefer not to look: the uncanny. In our case, following a ghostly methodology means that we track the utterances around quotas where interviewees become uncomfortable, secretive, angry or even scared. In walking down this ghostly avenue, we theorise how the suggestion (for some even threat) of gender quotas in corporate Denmark is indeed a ghostly matter in the sense that it emerges to haunt, disrupt, distort, trouble and bother the functioning of organisations.

To revive the discussion of gender quotas, we, in the next section, start out by positioning our paper in the extant body of literature on quotas, including looking at the outcomes of quotas and reactions to their implementation. We then

introduce our research methodology of analysing quotas through the metaphor of the ghost. That is, besides outlining the research context and our data collection, we also present how the ghostly methodology affected the analysis of the empirical data. Following this, we analyse the fear of quotas, which we, eventually, challenge in a concluding discussion where we dare to suggest letting the ghost haunt us (instead of the other way around, cf. the analysis) to get a more nuanced view on the merits of gender quotas.

Quotas: Early life, maturity and death?

There are many different types of quotas and different – and often conflicting – reactions to quotas. In order to be able to give a voice – and possibly life – back to quotas, we need to understand where they come from, where they have been implemented and with what effect.

A few facts

Quota systems are defined as a form of positive discrimination and were developed in order to change the possibilities for specific groups, which were defined as having disadvantages, based on their minority status in a particular setting, that the majority in this setting was not subjected to. Here the difference between positive discrimination and positive (affirmative) action is important. Positive action schemes target under-represented groups in a way that seeks to redress their existing disadvantage without granting them the *right* to have these disadvantages specifically taken into account in a selection process. Positive discrimination, on the other hand, is an explicit acknowledgement of the fact that certain characteristics (typically sex, race/ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual orientation and age) are prone to disadvantage a specific group of people. The difference between positive action and positive discrimination, then, is that in positive discrimination, these characteristics can be legitimately used as criteria for evaluating candidates (Noon, 2010). Quotas are thereby used as a type of 'fast track' to equal representation (Dallerup and Freidenvall, 2005), as the neo-liberal market model has proved inefficient in increasing the number of women (and other minorities) in senior political and managerial positions – despite the availability of qualified candidates (Noon, 2010: 729). The idea of positive discrimination, for example in the form of quotas, is to circumvent the effect of unconscious bias that produces the endorsement of men over women (Scholarios and Taylor, 2011).

The literature generally speaks of three types of quotas: for advisory committees, for business and for politics (Meier, 2014). The latter is by far the most widespread as well as researched. While electoral quotas have been introduced more or less formally in more than 130 countries worldwide (Krook, 2014; Krook and

Zetterberg, 2014), gender quotas for management positions represent a much more contested terrain. In Denmark, even talking about quotas as a political option has stopped. As shown by a survey study done by the Danish Institute for Human Rights, only 2% of Danish managers suggest that gender quotas should be used to increase the number of female managers and board members in organisations in the Danish labour market (Larsen et al., 2015).

Most of our knowledge about the structure and functioning of gender quotas therefore comes from the political rather than the managerial sphere. Although some of the legislative quotas appeared as early as the 1930s, most of the quotas before 1990 were installed on a voluntary basis by the individual political parties and were, as such, party quotas (Krook, 2008). Today we see a broad distribution of all three kinds. Interestingly enough, though, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East are generally far ahead of the European countries when it comes to electoral gender quotas. While Denmark does not apply any form of political quotas, countries like Burundi, Colombia and Afghanistan have legislative quotas for women of 30%, 30% and 27% respectively (Krook, 2008).

Outcomes of quotas

There is a general agreement in the literature that quotas work (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Some find major changes, others that quotas only 'led to a modest increase in the numbers of women elected, but did little to reduce vertical and horizontal segregation or bridge the gap between nominations to traditionally "feminine" and "masculine" portfolios' (Oñate, 2014: 351). However, no studies that we came across reported negative effects. In fact, several studies have investigated the assumed negative side effects, such as marginalisation of quota women, but have found no evidence to support the existence of such effects (e.g. Zetterberg, 2008). Quota women are, as a matter of fact, often found to be just as – or even more – qualified than their non-quota counterparts (both men and women) (Josefsson, 2014; Murray, 2010; O'Brien, 2012).

Studies also show that adopting gender quotas has broader societal/cultural impacts, as it seems to have spillover effects that help to increase women's rights more generally (Sacchet, 2008). Sacchet (2008) emphasised the more subjective impacts quotas can have on social and cultural levels of society by also addressing the problem of unconscious bias. Similarly, both Davidson-Schmich (2010) and Shin (2014) found spillover effects, showing that quotas not only benefited women working in political offices with quotas, but also positively influenced women working in political offices without quotas. For example, in Belgium, which has progressive quota legislation, politics is known for becoming increasingly 'women-friendly' (Meier, 2012). Additionally, studies emphasise organisational outcomes.

For example, Kirsch and Blaschke (2014) found positive effects on identity and image, equality bargaining, and political activity in the unions they investigated. Likewise, Stark and Hyll (2014) suggested that quotas for top management positions are socially gainful, following the assumption that employees invest in human capital to get a chance at landing top jobs. The authors' aggregation showed that the increase in human capital of the previously under-represented group (women) 'more than offsets the reduction of the human capital of the over-represented group [men]' (Stark and Hyll, 2014: 177). In the absence of quotas, on the other hand, women are assumed to find their odds of getting senior positions to be lower than men's, meaning even men of relatively low ability are induced to engage in human capital formation at the expense of some women of relatively high ability who do not expect to make it all the way to the top and therefore do not engage themselves in human capital formation. There is, for that reason, a business case for installing gender quotas, as these affect the chances of promotion and, for that reason, allegedly increase human capital overall, given that the newly encouraged women are more efficient in forming human capital than the displaced men (Stark and Hyll, 2014).

As Nugent and Krook (2016: 117) elegantly concluded: 'these results suggest that quotas are not a threat to "merit" at any stage of the political process – but rather, may foster diversity while also contributing to positive democratic outcomes'. Therefore, as Sacchet (2008) indicated, gender quotas should not just be seen as the end result of the debate. Quotas may in fact be the start of a process of renegotiating women's position and the social construction of gender in general.

Reactions to quotas

Despite their proven success, quotas receive massive resistance and opposition, which make them difficult to implement (Kirsch and Blaschke, 2014). As people do not seem to accept the basic diagnosis that women face greater barriers than men, most people (men and women alike) do not consider gender quotas legitimate or even find them fair (Dallerup, 2008). Consequently, as Dallerup put it, 'quotas are questioned again and again' (2008: 324). However, several researchers have also proven this resistance wrong (Noon, 2010; Nugent and Krook, 2016; Zetterberg, 2008). Noon (2010), for instance, provided counterarguments to four common protests against positive discrimination, including gender quotas, and in doing so presented a much more nuanced view on quotas when deconstructing the pseudo-scientific rationalism of having 'objective' standards and measures of a so-called best fit for any given position. Assessment processes, whether these are for recruitment or promotion, often include subjective elements such as interviews, not to mention the fact that finding the best candidate for a job is a question of comparative, and hence normative,

judgement. If social justice by means of equal representation of women in corporate leadership is an objective for companies like the ones presented in the analytical section of this paper, then gender equality ought to be a fully legitimate criterion for determining what constitutes 'best'. This ideological issue of selecting the 'right' *man* for the job does not get any less problematic when adding the concept of merit, which is not value neutral either, for as Noon (2010: 734) asked rhetorically:

> How is merit to be measured? Should it be focused on talent and ability, or should it also reflect effort and achievement? If elements of the latter category were included then merit would recognise personal achievements against the odds; for example, someone from an underprivileged background, state schooling, and a low ranking university might be more meritorious than a middle-class person from a private school and a top university, even if the latter had better qualifications.

In the case of this article, if merit is to reflect effort and achievement, then female candidates can be 'better fits' in comparison to their male counterparts, as they do not enjoy male privilege that exists as a function of one's group membership – or in this case lack of membership. Men benefit from privileges due to their gender. Eagly and Karau (2002), for instance, point to a prevailing perceived incongruence between the 'female gender role' and leadership roles (see also Powell and Butterfield, 2012). This is not to say that men do not suffer hardships; in some cases, they perhaps even suffer them to a greater extent than certain minorities. The point is, however, that men's non-gendered hardships are irrelevant to male privilege, meaning women making it to the top as potential candidates for senior management may be considered more meritorious than the men they compete against if recognising women's underprivileged position in that regard.

However, evidence of such privilege, as Phillips and Lowery (2015) argued in their study of racial privilege, may motivate members of privileged groups to believe that meritocratic systems and personal virtues are what determine life outcomes. Claiming not to have benefited personally from systemic racial privilege, 'Whites' (*sic*) are found to dismiss policies designed to reduce inequity on those grounds (Phillips and Lowery, 2015). If the premise holds true, then some of the anxiety towards quotas is to be found in the dissonance arising when men are confronted with their in-group advantages. This does not, however, explain why some women also fear the quota ghost.

The mixed reactions to quotas could have something to do with the fact that they seem to counteract other more neo-liberal trends – also in feminist thinking. As Krook (2008: 346) aptly puts it:

> While the global diffusion of any policy is a notable development, the rapid diffusion of candidate gender quotas per se is particularly remarkable. This is because positive

> action for women in electoral processes contradicts – or at least appears to challenge – a number of other recent trends in international and feminist politics, namely rising neoliberalism, supposed decline in women's movement activity, growing scepticism about the unity of 'women' as a category, and ongoing challenges to links between descriptive and substantive representation.

In this way, it seems like recent feminist trends, which argue for the independency and strength of women, thus reject the notion that women are in need of 'help' or 'fixing' (Ely and Meyerson, 2000) and therefore perceive quotas as degrading for women. Career women in particular, who usually view themselves as independent and strong, are therefore likely to reject quotas out of a fear of being viewed as 'weak' or 'in need of help' (Muhr, 2011). For these women – and men who support this (post)feminist point of view – the neo-liberal values of meritocracy are thus much more attractive, as they fit the desired norm of independent and strong women. Quotas today therefore become scary because they render the common understanding of having a meritocracy a myth (McNamee and Miller, 2013). If we are to support quotas, we also have to admit that meritocracy is a myth and that ideological constructs, such as unconscious biases, control us much more than we are willing to admit. As Noon (2010: 730) commented:

> This criticism [of quotas] is based on two assumptions that can be challenged: the assumption of a single form of positive discrimination [quotas] and the assumption that there is an objective measure of the 'best candidate'.

Sacchet (2008: 381) noted that 'the advantage of quotas is that they create *real* political opportunities. Other initiatives pay only lip service to gender equality, but quotas can change the gender composition of decision-making bodies by forcing women's entry into those spaces' (emphasis added).

Returning to our research question, then, the puzzle is now even greater. With this much evidence, how can such a strong reluctance to use quotas still persist? Do quotas still stand a chance, or are they dead? And if quotas were killed by a lethal consensus of disapproval from the very business world they wanted to create a more promising future for, are they now haunting us, trying to go about the unfinished business of gender equality? If that were the case, would it be possible to somehow revive quotas by bringing the ghost back to life, and what happens if we all make ourselves mediums for the ghost to speak through? What messages would it convey? Analysing quotas through the metaphor of the ghost allows us to ask new questions and in that way hopefully bring back to life if not quotas themselves, then at least a legitimate discussion of quotas.

Methodology: Analysing quotas through the metaphor of the ghost

According to Blackman, analysing something as a ghostly matter begins with 'a feeling of being unsettled or wanting to unsettle' (Blackman, 2015: 27). Drawing on Barad (2007), Blackman unfolded this by arguing that a ghostly methodology requires that 'texts, events, actors, and agencies are read "intra-actively" through one another' (Blackman, 2015: 37). The use of the term intra-action, she explained, 'signals that texts are not separate and then brought together, but rather that texts (or statements, events, actors, and agencies) are always-already entangled in complex ways in practices' (Blackman, 2015: 37). The 'ghostly' focuses not on bringing clarity to the narratives and utterances identified in organisations, but rather on analysing what it is that makes them complex. Analysing a research problem as a ghostly matter is therefore a question of paying attention to the fact that there is much more going on in organisations than what is suggested by ordinary explanations (Pors, 2016). We must instead seek explanations in the shadows, the darkness, the uncanniness of organisations (Gabriel, 2012; Linstead et al., 2014; O'Doherty et al., 2013), and be receptive towards 'attractors' (Blackman, 2015) that lure us down another analytical path with different theoretical resources from the initial ones. In the case of this paper, gender quotas represent such an attractor, as they encouraged us to do a second reading of the empirical material to better understand the uncanny and unsettling moments that the quota ghost presented. So unlike our first reading of the material, in which our analytic gaze was locked on how the interviewees' positioned themselves in relation to issues around gender and leadership more generally, we, with the second reading, allowed ourselves to be more receptive towards the atmosphere created in the interviews in the immediate presence of quotas. We will revert back to this coding process in the section about data analysis.

At the centre of this relatively new interest in the dark sides of organisations lies Freud's concept of the uncanny (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Muhr, 2011; Pors, 2016). The uncanny is not to be mistaken for the unfamiliar, despite its linguistic roots in the differentiation between *Unheimlich* (unhomely) and *Heimlich* (homely). So, the uncanny according to Freud *cannot* simply be translated from *Unheimlich* and mean unhomely or scary, as the German word *Unheimlich* carries deep historical relatedness with its 'opposite': *Heimlich*. *Heimlich* does mean homely, known, familiar, but it has also gained other meanings in German over time, such as secret or hidden, which is why, according to Freud (1955), it will always have a connection with the uncanny. '*Unheimlich* is in some way or other the sub-species of *Heimlich*' (Freud, 1955: 226). So, in the *Heimlich*, the familiar, the comfortable, lies the uncanny, the hidden, the things that unsettle us, to go back to Blackman's words. The uncanny understood as an interrelation of *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* means that it is 'nothing new or alien, but something which is

familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud, 1955: 241). The uncanny therefore describes how something supposedly familiar can suddenly seem unfamiliar and strange, but also how something unfamiliar and scary can seem oddly familiar and comforting. The concept of the uncanny in this way embraces ambiguity and paradox.

Freud's notion of the uncanny is the first step towards a conception of the ghostly that Pors (2016) aimed to develop. In doing this, she stressed the performativity of uncanny experiences or 'what uncanny moments might do to the people who experience them' (Pors, 2016: 1645). Pors combined Freud's notion of the uncanny and Gordon's discussions of the ghostly as a 'something-to-be-done' and a 'socio-political-psychological state when something else, or something different from before, feels like it must be done' (Gordon, 2008: 3). This does not necessarily mean, as Pors (2016) also pointed out, that people who have such experiences know exactly what to do, how and when. Nor does it mean that people act out the need for action that they feel. The reason for this, as Pors continued to elaborate, is that the ghostly is not a coherent vision, but is more like a question, because it represents unresolved tensions and hence is always-already about to happen, rather than an actual event that is happening.

Analysing talk about gender quotas along the metaphor of the ghostly is therefore to take the ambiguity and the paradoxes of the uncanny seriously. Rather than taking the words of our respondents literally, we aim to listen to the whispers of the ghost in order to be able to address the underlying norms and structures of privilege that hold back women and hinder the realisation of sustained gender equality. A methodological framework based on the ghostly in this way moves us 'beyond the rationalistic accounts and the focus on individual identity struggles of the existing research' (Pors, 2016: 1647) and towards the underlying norms and structures that make up inequality and, more importantly, keep one of the most efficient tools to fight inequality in the shadows, uncanny and feared. Therefore, our interest in the ghostly, as Pors (2016: 1649) also stressed, 'directs [our] attention to minor changes in register and to fleeting collapses of customary narratives' in order to expose the cracks and ambiguities that construct gender quotas as a ghost, as scary and unwanted. Below, we will, through elaboration of the research context, data collection and analysis, explain how we do so.

Research context

Unlike some of its Nordic neighbours (in particular Norway), Denmark has no quota system for women either in politics or in business (Nordic Labour Journal, 2013; European Commission, 2012; Quota Database, 2011). Rather, there seems to

be a strong belief in a meritocratic system, where the best person gets the job regardless of their gender. Moreover, there is a general reluctance in Denmark to discuss gender quotas politically; if mentioned, people tend to get offended or angry at the possibility of introducing quotas.[1] In fact, in a recent debate about the replacement of a charter for more women in management (which we will explain in detail in the next paragraph), quotas were used as a derogatory term to describe how the country's 1,200 largest companies were required to set a higher target figure for the gender composition in management *if* current target figures were met.[2] This requirement has, however, been abolished, and there are no sanctions if the target figures are not realised, as the only requirement remaining is for the companies to have the target figures (Larsen et al., 2015). Interestingly, despite the fact that Denmark has one of the lowest numbers of female top managers in the EU, the widespread public opinion is that Denmark is an equal society and that we are both gender and colour blind (Rennison, 2009; Muhr and Salem, 2013). Equality is therefore taken for granted as a Danish value that pierces through the welfare society (Holck and Muhr, 2017). In that light, the ghost of quotas may appear as a terrifying matter from another world, a spectre from a distant past threatening the egalitarian idyll. According to a recent representative survey by the Confederation of Danish Enterprise (2013), Danes believe that men, to a greater extent than women, want to be managers, while the tendency is for women to choose family life over careers. However, analyses measuring male and female middle managers' actual career aspirations find no such difference (e.g. Diversity at Work, 2011). The first type of surveys, therefore, dismiss gender inequality in the labour market as merely being a question of men and women having inherently different priorities because of their gender, which is problematic to say the least, given that differences among individuals in either group are much larger than between women and men. They are also very indicative of the strong Danish belief in meritocracy, despite what other analyses might say (Roseberry and Roos, 2015: 57-86).

Data collection

This paper is based on interviews with 45 top managers in 37 different organisations. The original study was initiated as one of the authors was granted access to interview top managers in 37 (out of the total of approximately 110) Danish organisations that had signed the 'Charter for more women in

[1] One example of this media reaction can be seen by following this link (in Danish only): https://www.b.dk/kommentarer/koenskvoter-er-koensdiskrimination.

[2] An example of this recent debate can be seen by following this link (in Danish only): http://www.altinget.dk/arbejdsmarked/artikel/advokat-godt-at-ministeren-dropper-koenskvoter.

management' (see Christensen and Muhr, 2018 for a different analysis of the same empirical material). The charter was an initiative introduced by the Danish minister for equality (Kvinder i Ledelse, 2013). Signing the charter was voluntary, but when an organisation did so, it agreed to comply with the following seven guidelines: 1) have a strategy or a plan for gender equality, 2) have numerical goals for improving the number of women in management positions, 3) have gender equality written into the personnel policy, 4) change recruitment processes to become more gender equal, 5) headhunt women, 6) have career development targeted women, and 7) report measurements, experiences and results. Once a year, a so-called baseline report had to be submitted to the ministry addressing the current status of women in management positions, what the goals were regarding how to increase the percentage of female managers and how these should be reached. Signing the charter, however, had no sanctions and was merely meant as a form of nudging, to remind the organisations of their challenge with regard to women in management. This also meant that the commitment and results varied a lot between the different organisations.[3]

Interviews were held with the CEO – and, depending on the size of the organisation and their willingness to grant us more than one executive interview, an additional executive or top manager – from each organisation. When possible, both a man and a woman were interviewed. In total 23 men and 22 women were interviewed. All interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were not centred around quotas directly, but as they were conducted in an open-ended and non-structured way about identity, gender and leadership, quotas came up as the respondents themselves brought them up. Most respondents mentioned quotas in one way or another. What made gender quotas a ghostly matter in the interviews was first of all how they became topical in our interviews – even without the interviewer asking for the interviewee's opinion on the issue – and second of all how they seemed to almost haunt the respondents and make them very uneasy when the topic fell on quotas. This guided the data analysis, as described below.

Data analysis

As the interviews were conducted in an open-ended fashion with the broad aim of gaining knowledge about Danish managers' opinions about gender and leadership and how they placed themselves in this debate, the first coding of the interviews was also very broad, with the bottom-up aim of coding the data for emerging themes around gender and leadership. The interviews were therefore not coded in

[3] See the website where the results were reported: http://www.kvinderiledelse.dk/om-charteret.aspx.

NVivo or similar programs, but read from start to finish. Reading through the transcripts of the interviews, a pattern quickly started to emerge: many respondents suggested that quotas were diametrically opposed to – the very antithesis of – the charter under discussion. The charter was perceived as voluntary and progressive, gender quotas as repressive and a step back. In other words, gender quotas, without being a specific topic on the research/interview agenda, still became topical momentarily, only to disappear again from the conversation a few moments later. This is what Pors (2016), establishing a framework on the ghostly, has described as 'changes in register' and 'fleeting collapses of customary narratives' (Pors, 2016: 12). Analysing the interviews along a ghostly methodology therefore became particularly interesting, as this would allow us to focus on these changes in register and fleeting collapses. Had we had a more traditional and closed coding process from the beginning, looking for predefined codes/themes in for example NVivo, this theme would probably not have made itself present.

What caught our interest in the first coding process was the atmosphere created in the interviews in the immediate presence of quotas, as all respondents reacted negatively – often strongly so – to the possibility of quotas. Because of these 'changes in register', we began a second – and more directed – coding for when and why such discomfort arose. Eventually, we ended up with the following codes, which the interviews were systematically coded for: 1) the fear of quotas, 2) the way merit was used as an explanation and 3) how gender quotas emerged as a ghost irrespective of their non-existence in the corporate reality. These three aspects then guided our selection of quotes for the paper. The citations presented therefore did *not* become part of the analysis merely because they mention gender quotas. Rather, the analysed citations were selected because they exemplify the awakening of quotas as a ghost that, when talking about it without acknowledging its presence, reveals more about the speaker than that which is spoken of. That is to say, even though significant work was being done to repress and make absent the possibility of quotas, it continued to linger everywhere in the interviews; it is present in its absence. The absence-presence of the ghost reveals how quotas are *not* causing certain prejudiced views to be held about women in relation to leadership. On the contrary, the ghost can tell a story of how it is misunderstood and misused as an excuse for these prejudicial views to be expressed. Constructing quotas as the antithesis of merit, thereby creating a false dualism in which both appear to be mutually exclusive, allows for the respondents to stick to the view that 'some social groups fail due to inability (typically a biological essentialist perspective) or personal choice (typically a preference theory perspective)' (Noon, 2010: 734). The ghost, in this way, unsettles the conversation, as it indicates there is more to the issue of gender quotas than what is said.

Analysis: The fear of quotas

As mentioned above, although the interviewer never directly asked the respondents' opinion about gender quotas, gender quotas still became topical in our interviews when talking about women in leadership (or the lack thereof). A good example of how quotas suddenly entered the conversation is found in the below statement by Paul. Note how quotas are described as an evil force that will take over as a last resort if the companies fail to do the right thing and solve the problem by their own methods:

> If we don't find a solution to increasing the number of women leaders, then we will end up with a quota system, and I don't feel comfortable about quotas. I think that [quotas] would be a shame and I consider it problematic for the men that are pushed out – and actually also for the women that get in because of quotas. Basically, I see it as if I had a fever; I do not get cured from breaking the thermometer, but that is what quotas do. But I am afraid that if we do not solve this issue and advance more women to the top level, then at some point quotas will be forced upon us. (Paul)

Quotas are, like this, most often talked about as something negative, something the respondents are afraid of, and something we should therefore try to avoid. However, what if, to stick with Paul's metaphor, the thermometer is already broken? In that scenario, the interviewee can, for obvious reasons, not break it, but will in fact have to fix it instead, because clearly it does not serve its purpose. We see how the ghost sends shivers down the interviewee's spine: the argument of having more women is not for the sake of having more women; it is provoked by a sheer fear of quotas. Paul thinks it is unfair – if not even oppressive – both for the men that do not make it in a quota system (for women), but also for the women who will get to climb the ladder because of such a system. However, he does not see the opposite perspective: that the current systematic (subtle) discrimination holds women back and obstructs meritocracy. The current ideology works as an invisible quota system (for men), but because it is invisible, it can be denied.

This is the part where we as researchers became unsettled and felt we had more to say; for would quotas not simply be a way of regulating the labour market, as in many other cases, where it is acknowledged politically that the market fails to reach a satisfactory equilibrium? Why is it that people seem to be so afraid of them? The ghost poses these questions to Paul. He is for the same reason trying to refute any arguments for a gender quota system, even though none have been presented to him during the interview. John, another interviewee, extends such fear of quotas and uses the ghost strategically as a scarecrow to intimidate his employees to do more work for gender diversity:

> We have approached these terrified old men [about gender diversity issues] – and there are quite a few of them! – and have told them: '[If you don't increase the

> number of women in your management team,] then the quotas will come. So if you don't like the thought of quotas, then you'd better [swearing] do something else!' (John)

This commandment of doing something (to avoid the ghost) seems symptomatic of the respondents' (re)actions to the ghost that keeps haunting them. Note, however, how this 'something' is exactly that: some activity or initiative that will keep the interviewees from having to deal with the ghost. Doing something else than implementing a quota system does not necessarily entail any real change in terms of gender diversity, and it reduces a discussion of fairness and equality to a bad excuse for not supporting quotas.

The uncanny paradox of quotas

So quotas can, as paradoxical as it may sound, become topical as a safeguard against quotas, because they are expected to become superfluous in the long run once organisations reach a certain critical mass of women. What makes it extra uncanny, however, is that there is no consensus on what 'critical mass' seems to be. Thus, 'critical mass' appears to be a cover for not really knowing what is a satisfactory number. The horrific absence-presence of quotas, in other words, pushes companies to do something about the very problem to which quotas are a potential solution.

> My interest in women and management began in the trade union. As I attended international conferences and congresses, it became very obvious to me that women were almost not represented at all. So I worked to increase the number of women, and we succeeded in getting some women in, for example, executive committees, and that was actually through a quota system in the beginning. As the presence of women gradually became more natural because some of the women advanced, we no longer needed the quota system. But in the beginning, in order to even acknowledge the existence of women, I was a strong advocate of quotas. (Barbara)

As Barbara goes on explaining, a quota system has the benefit of forcing people in organisations to change their behaviour instantaneously in order to accommodate a new corporate reality with a large(r) influx of women professionals. People's attitude will have to adjust accordingly. This is instead of the long haul of working to change attitudes, which would, allegedly, also change behaviour over time. Paradoxically, however, although she is very much in favour of quotas, they still haunt her, as she is astutely aware – and concerned about – others' fear of quotas.

> I am certainly not scared of quotas. But I have to admit that I cannot make myself a spokesperson for quotas on behalf of [company name]. However, if you ask me personally, then I am pro-quotas, because I think they are necessary for a period of time to change some things if these things cannot change by themselves. We have worked with getting women into management for 25-30 years and yet nothing has happened. (Barbara)

There are two interesting aspects in how the ghost of quotas haunts her here. She is personally in favour of quotas and knows that what they are currently doing in her company does not work. Still, she cannot make herself a spokesperson publicly *for* quotas. Even though she claims not to be scared of quotas, they still haunt her enough that she does not dare utter her support out loud. And if she is not scared of quotas, why does she need to say so? Who is she trying to convince? Herself? The quote illustrates how Barbara, in spite of her outspoken personal support, still has a tense, nervous and awkward relation to the mere idea of quotas, as she does not want to be stigmatised as the mad person who believes in ghosts – that would probably hurt the company image. Quotas are at best portrayed as a necessary evil that the company needs to get rid of as soon as possible because they come to distort the existing mechanisms of hiring and promotion. This fear of quotas, however, seems also to be what puts an end to the very gender initiatives that the fear itself may have given birth to, rendering efforts ineffective:

> I think that by virtue of having some goals, I am not saying that it is easier for women to get access, but I think the charter sets a clear target for how many women we want. That is, if we cannot meet the quota target for women that we have decided on, then I think we just don't take in any more male employees. That means we keep the numbers for men and women at the same level. So it is not easier for women to get into our talent programme, but there is a target for women to make up a certain share of the talent pool. (Karl)

Note how the target for women is just that, namely a target. If you do not hit the target, there are no sanctions; you simply have another go. We see how the charter, as a likely response to the spooking sounds of quotas, brings about concrete targets for how large a share of the total pool of talent women should account for. However, you can embellish the numbers, which are set up as a sex ratio, thereby reaching the goal artificially by keeping the influx of men low if the number of women candidates is inadequate. Some are, however, more explicit in showing their anxieties towards quotas than others:

> I think there is great resistance to quotas in companies. You can feel that. People get insanely frightened just from hearing the word. There are also a lot of male leaders who are extremely tired of discussing quotas. The discussion almost makes them vomit, and I do understand why they are tired hearing about it. It is not their fault. They are just who they are. Now, I can empathise with the male leaders who would have got the job if a certain quota for women hadn't needed to be met. So in a company like [company name], which really attaches importance to advancing women and so on, it is likely that men feel that their odds get worse if women are in the game too. (Nicole)

So targets for achieving a fixed percentage of women in management seem to offend everyone's illusion of having a meritocratic organisation. The haunting quotas bring about an experience of discomfort, as the socio-ideological order of

merit is challenged. There are, however, targets – that need to be met – for almost every other objective in businesses. Interestingly, no one seems to find *that* problematic. Why, then, the reluctance to appoint a specific number of female managers through gender quotas if gender equality is indeed a corporate strategic objective? It cannot be because equality is *not* a business issue, since the business case for equality, e.g. tapping into a greater pool of talent, is repeatedly mentioned in the interviews as a driver for change. Yet, the myth of meritocracy seems to be the lifeline of anti-quota arguments; it quickly becomes an either/or question of equality vs. merit, as if the two could not come together:

> Our CEO will say that he is not for quotas. Well, it might be that we as a company are, but personally he is not. He always wants the best. (Kaspar)

The ghost unsettles us as researchers in the sense that we see the limitations to organisations' willingness to walk the talk, to turn the plethora of platitudes into concrete action when stating that they want more women in management. They know it is the correct thing to say. The statements could be interpreted as what Christensen et al. (2013) labelled 'aspirational talk', i.e. a form of auto-communication of a desired future place for organisations to be, meaning that a discrepancy between talk and action is to be expected. In the case of the present analysis, however, the talk seems to be kept from becoming performative and thereby from making this desired future a reality, for as we shall see in the following section, our respondents prefer to stay within their comfort zone of meritocracy.

Merit as the expression of quota antipathy

What we can deduce from the comments that mention always wanting the best is how companies conveniently construct a false dichotomy of women and quality as if they were mutually exclusive, thereby keeping the anti-quota argument alive artificially:

> The biggest hurdle is the social acceptance of the quota – that is, the way in which one gets a position: do you get it due to merit or due to biological coincidence? How do you get the individual as well as the smaller and larger communities of people surrounding the individual candidate to accept that it is okay to hold a quota position? That would, for me personally, be a sign of [mumbling something that expresses dissatisfaction]. Also, if I had to hire: I have a quota that I need to meet, but I actually have a better candidate, regardless of whether it is a man or a woman. Business-wise, specifically, I would find that difficult. (Ethan)

Again, quotas and competencies are considered each other's opposites. The assertion seems to be that quotas obscure the smooth functioning and disturb the order of the meritocratic organisation, angering the interviewee, as his sense of entitlement is challenged, and making him uncomfortable in the situation due to

a lack of social recognition of quotas. But what if there is already a built-in quota system to the very focus on always hiring 'the best' based on merit and not gender? What if this myth renders management ignorant of the current subtle and invisible, but still de facto, quota system for men – one that works in reverse by limiting the advancement of women? Quotas for women are not considered necessary, meaning there is no need to bring them back to life.

> I would say that in recent years we have employed more women than men or at least an equal number. But that is not something we talk about, because every time we hire we agree that we want the best candidate. That is for sure what guides us. We have never had, or I cannot recall, a situation where we discussed whether to select this person or that person and where we then considered gender or skin colour or religion or something else, because we are pretty clear about wanting the best. And not just professionally, but also personality-wise with respect to whatever that is. (Keith)

As should be evident by now, 'wanting the best' seems to be the go-to phrase, the very expression of quota antipathy, and the reason why quotas have no business in this world. None of the interviewees, however, argues why that must be the case – it just is. The quota ghost disrupts the narrative of having an objective measure, especially when personality is introduced to the conversation, at which point it is not only us as researchers but also the interviewee who gets unsettled, given that he cannot see how a clearly subjective measure of personality-fit can be aligned with the idea of objectivity. As the conversation turns to quotas, the interviewee comes to face the liminality of merit, the strangeness of a system that purports to deliver the 'best' based on objective measures, which is, of course, problematic if the contemporary labour market is better viewed as a 'personality market' (Hanlon, 2016: 15). However, rather than having to deal with these ambiguities, quotas are relegated to the shadows.

Quotas lurking in the shadows

A shadowy underground is all there is left of the unwanted quotas, as organisations try to make gender equality a pure business case by stating it is not a matter of equality at all.

> I think this whole issue of women in leadership needs to be taken out of the hands of the Ministry of Equality. This is not a question of equality. It is a pure bottom-line question for society and for each and every company. Make this equality conversation a business conversation because from a societal perspective, it is absolutely terrible that we fail to benefit from one half of the population. I don't find it strange if people are led to believe that a quota system is the road to take. But I do not think that is the right way to go. If organisations apply quotas, women will be evaluated based on their sex and not their competences. I would say there is kind of a quota [system] today because men have got access through [invisible] quotas. But I think it would be a sign of failure if we cannot select competent women in a

> different way. However, I see the political pressure and I understand it too. It is reasonable to say that the politicians have to regulate if we as companies cannot figure this out ourselves. (Beth)

The attempt to turn a matter of equality into a business case is, paradoxically, what forces gender quotas to make themselves known as a ghost. The business case, as Knights and Omanović (2016) posited, tends to displace alternative approaches and generally neglects social-historical contexts. The ghost – as a balancing force – tries to bring back the issue of fairness and equality by highlighting historical and cultural inequalities that need to be taken into consideration – aspects that are not captured in the business case approach and, as a result, are repressed only to return as something uncanny. If companies really believe in the business case for diversity and equality, why are they not racing to be the first to reach these objectives in order to reap the advantage of gaining a competitive edge? It appears that not even the business case translates into sustained efforts for gender equality, even though it is thought to deliver competitiveness.

Having signed the charter, the interviewees all seem to agree that they share a common problem of not having enough women in management. Whether there is an issue or not is not what is discussed; instead of doing something about the problem, discussions revolve around what *not* to do:

> The charter is the alternative to quotas; to try to do something that way around [voluntarily]. It has, however, not really changed much if we look at the share of female leaders. (Beth)

Or as John put it:

> I think we need more women in management, and I usually say at conferences and the like that [name of company] is very much against quotas, and if we want to avoid the emergence of quotas, then we simply have to make sure it becomes unnecessary to talk about them. If we develop in the right direction, which we appear to be doing ... Well, the bottom line is: we cannot afford *not* to consider roughly half the labour market when recruiting. (John)

It seems the organisations have found sanctuary in simply doing something, although this *something* is really *nothing*, as it just means to do *anything* as long as it does not involve quotas. However, this something that they are doing does not produce the change they desire. There is little real change, as many of the respondents admit, but that still seems to be better than having to deal with the uncanniness of gender quotas. Gender quotas trouble and bother existing procedures, whereas the voluntary nature of the charter is easily aligned with current practices. Quotas would, in other words, turn already familiar processes into uncanny repetitions and reproductions of inequality. The perceived smooth functioning of organisations could no longer be perceived as such. The

meritocratic system practised would be exposed as a liminal state of organising. The uncanny moment of the ghostly allows us as researchers – and the respondents if receptive – to 'come into contact with the broader social and political stakes of work' (Pors, 2016: 1654) and of organising gender 'diversity'. If taking the accumulated responses at face value, it appears there is nothing companies will not do to avoid quotas. In the following section we discuss what is likely to happen if, instead of beating about the bush, we dared to acknowledge the gender quota ghost and allowed ourselves to be mediums for its messages.

Concluding discussion

Our analysis shows how quotas are a ghostly matter, as the mere idea of quotas haunts the managers, who, in return, try to hunt down the quota ghost, as it apparently poses a threat to the current understanding of meritocracy. Beirne and Wilson (2016: 232) argued that the aversion to and fear of quotas force the interventionist approach to 'be more focused on grassroots concerns and material conditions than contemporary debates on either positive discrimination or trade union action'. We would like to add another angle to this. What if we, by looking the ghost in the eye, could find a more peaceful relationship with it? The quota ghost's uncanny ability to unsettle the business-as-usual mentality does not mean we should not try to better understand it. Quite the contrary, as Beirne and Wilson argue, we need to be able to influence public and political opinion. Although we know we cannot do that in one article, we would still like to explore the possibility of beginning to do so through the metaphor of the ghost.

Our analysis of Danish managers' viewpoints on quotas along a ghostly methodology has yielded insights that we would like to discuss further. Firstly, the organisations presented are always on the defensive – never on the attack. Their focus is on getting rid of the ghost, i.e. proving once and for all that quotas have no place on Earth – probably because they fear that embracing quotas would be political suicide. Actions taken are thus reactionary – just what is needed to keep the ghost at a comfortable distance. As a result, progressive change does not even appear as an option. Any nuances to the quota discussion seem, for the same reasons, to be discarded and hence not explored. Noon (2010: 730-32), for instance, presents a 'tie-break' and a 'threshold' system as more moderate forms of positive discrimination than the current understanding of quotas. In the tie-break system, it would be permissible to base selection on gender if there were two or more equally qualified candidates. Taking into account group characteristics such as gender would mean that a female candidate, given that she belongs to the disadvantaged social group, has already proved herself more able by getting into a tie-break situation with a male candidate. The threshold system, on the other hand,

requires the candidates to pass a certain minimum qualification standard, after which hiring managers may consider gender and make choices favouring candidates from disadvantaged groups. Both systems allow organisations to redress their shortfall of women managers. However, the problem is that the interviewed Danish managers never get to engage themselves with these options due to their unsubstantiated fear of how quotas obstruct an assumed (but only illusionary) meritocratic functioning of organisations.

The fear of quotas as it is expressed in the interviews is therefore not rational, which is the second point that we would like to discuss further. The fear seems to be based on a form of pluralistic ignorance (Halbesleben et al., 2005, 2007; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004). This insight struck us in our intra-active reading of the transcribed interviews, which were conducted separately for each participating organisation, albeit with the charter as a common denominator. The organisations were as such already connected or entangled across the interviews in their perceptions of and reactions to the quota ghost. One of the reasons why the respondents in this paper accepted to be interviewed in the first place was to have a conversation with a researcher (the interviewer) in order to obtain the information thought necessary to analyse the identified problem: the low number of women in management. The danger of pluralistic ignorance kicks in when these interviewees – as a response to their inadequate knowledge in the area – begin to observe one another, hoping to find the answer. In that respect, they all seem to be doing the same; they are observing the lack of action. Nobody seems to know why quotas are bad, but everyone just assumes they are (no matter whether they believe in them or not), because the interviewees presume that everybody else is (also) of that opinion. So even when some of the respondents are of the opinion that quotas can indeed be integrated into the way we do business, they still express reluctance to bring the ghost to the table, so to speak, because they seem to believe that their peers are not in favour of quotas (either).

Now, if everybody thinks that and acts accordingly, being opposed to quotas will naturally be the norm. This probably comes out the strongest when one interviewee, Barbara, states that she is not afraid of quotas, and even personally is *for* them, but still conforms to the view that quotas are bad. Across all the organisations in the analysis – which must be assumed to be among the most progressive when it comes to gender diversity initiatives, as they voluntarily signed the charter for more women in management – we detect a fundamental fear of quotas. A fear so strong that it seems to be the reason why they never get to scrutinise why exactly they are so opposed to quotas – they just are.

The reason why gender quotas can become scary in the first place seems to be – following our analysis – that gender quotas are repressed to the shadows and thus

may reappear as something uncanny, which is probably why the interviewees and we as researchers become unsettled. Our analysis shows that a particular fear of quotas is formed around the fact that quotas are constructed as instruments of creating more 'women-friendly' conditions (Meier, 2012). Interpreted this way, quotas are written into a discourse where men and women are fundamentally different and that women might not be better leaders, but different ones (e.g. Eagly, 2005). This reinforces the hierarchy between the genders in relation to leadership (e.g. Muhr and Sullivan, 2013). Introducing gender quotas would, in that regard, be to perform what Beyes and Steyaert (2013: 1450) called an 'unsiting' in that quotas would unlock an affective reaction by reorganising a site's constellations of, in this case, immaterial forces. The unsiting act of the absent-present ghost can be seen as a process by which the familiar, although abstract, conception of merit is destabilised and made strange. Put differently, the momentary unsiting unsettles the interviewees and defamiliarises organisational structures that, as a result, become only vaguely familiar, or strangely familiar – uncanny. It is almost a Derridarian 'hauntology' (Derrida, 1994) in the sense that the ghostly matter of gender quotas has been suspended and repressed for so long that it now returns to haunt us to let us know that gender equality is not something of the present; its time is still to come.

The question that remains is: if it is not possible to bring legitimacy to quotas in business as has happened in politics in other countries, can we at least bring legitimacy to the discussion? Do we dare to mention this ghost? We will never be receptive to its message if we live in denial of its existence due to us fending it off with seemingly rational and logical arguments such as having a meritocratic system for hiring and promotion. That approach only blinds us to the illogical dimensions as well as the irrationality of those arguments. If we listened to the ghost's whispers, we would realise that the ghost is an effect of an invisible de facto quota system that privileges men due to assessment processes that are falsely believed to be based on universal, objective and neutral measures for 'best fit' candidates (meritocracy). Ultimately, hiring managers are making comparative, and hence normative, judgements about what 'objective' criteria are legitimate as measures, and selection choices may be affected by implicit biases (e.g. Reuben et al., 2014). One interviewee actually makes such a realisation when addressing the ghostly absence-presence of quotas during the interview:

> Everybody knows who you are when you're the only woman among all the managers. So to that end quotas might be beneficial. Perhaps you are also, as a woman, evaluated along a different scale because you are different. I would prefer to live in a world where you are evaluated on an equal footing regardless of whether you're a man or a woman. And we also claim that that is what we do. But we just have to remember that all of us – depending on what generation we come from – are raised with different expectations of what a typical man and a typical woman is.

> And we can never be sure that those expectations don't influence the way we are evaluated. I don't think that the scale of measure is completely identical for men and women. We might say it is, yes, and we will probably continue to assert that. But I just don't buy it. (Beth)

This realisation, however, does not make her an advocate of quotas, so there is still a task in turning anxiety into excitement if gender quotas are to have a fighting chance. At first, to believe in the ghost of gender quotas may seem somewhat superstitious; it requires us to unlearn everything that we have been schooled into believing about our current system – that it is meritocratic, and somehow more rational. In our case, the ghostly allowed us to be startled and unsettled, to dwell on aspects that at first we did not intend, and could not have expected, to stumble upon. The ghost only seems frightening because it exposes opponents of gender quotas – who argue in favour of merit – as defenders of the status quo. It is scary because the positive effects of equality are repressed, and thus become uncanny – not because the ghost is new or unfamiliar, but because part of the argument has been suppressed and is now returning to haunt us. As Rainbow Murray (2015) recently wrote on her blog:

> It is rather insulting actually to suggest that the reason why elite, wealthy, middle-aged white men dominate politics and other echelons of power is because they deserve to – because of their greater merit. This suggests, by inference, that under-represented groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and people from less privileged backgrounds, are relatively absent from politics because they don't deserve to be there. If we are basing this assessment on inherent talent, then we are saying that rich white men are naturally superior to everybody else.

The gender quota ghost materialises and manifests itself in the conversation and refuses to be put to rest, as it points to systemic organisational inequalities that prevent the hiring and especially advancement of women to top management positions. The ghost can, in other words, be seen as a benign spirit telling stories of historical and social disadvantages of women as a group. We suggest that by listening to the whispers of the ghost, and by letting it guide us in addressing underlying norms and structures of privilege that hold back women (while adding a layer of Teflon to men) and hinder the realisation of sustained gender equality, we may not only help the haunting quotas find peace, but also help ourselves create new organisational spaces for employees to draw on their full spectra of gendered competences, regardless of sex. So let us stop hunting down the ghost of gender quotas and let it, by all means, haunt us instead.

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But it does not take death to make ghosts of some