

Fully Embracing the Paradoxical Condition: Banksy to Organization Theory¹

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Abstract

Management and organization studies has recently expressed heightened interest in the concept of paradox. Paradox, etymologically para-doxa, is that which challenges the norm. Frequently representative cases drawn from the terrain of the arts and of artistic work have provided a context for exploring going against the norm, usually under the label of the *avant-garde*. In this article we explore the case of one artist, Banksy, whose art per se is not necessarily *avant-garde* but who, through systematic use of paradox, composes a persona that embodies and thrives on paradoxical meanings, aiming not at finding some form of balance but at performatively expressing an *avant-garde* disruption of art world norms. The case of Banksy can be transposed to organizational analysis with the intention of illuminating how paradox may be embraced by *avant-garde* organizational scholarship that thrives on anti-normative moves.

Keywords: para-doxa, paradox, Banksy, excess.

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The plural and complex nature of organizational systems renders contradictions inevitable. Some contradictions may be framed as paradoxes, persistent oppositions between mutually constituting forces (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016) such as between change-stability (Farjoun, 2010) or exploration-exploitation (March, 1991). The field of organization studies has recently witnessed a surge of interest in the role of paradox in explaining organizing. Paradox, recognised as constitutive (Putnam Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016) of organizing rather than as an indicator of dysfunction to be removed, has become a hallmark of non-conventional approaches to management. Initially, leveraging tensions to generate greater possibilities was viewed as a critical leadership capability for enhancing organizational performance (Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014). Subsequently, the literature extensively discussed how paradoxes can be “managed” by making tensions salient (Knight & Paroutis, 2017). More recently, in addition to warning of the negative implications of denying one or another paradoxical pole giving rise to anxiety and even paralysis (Smith & Lewis, 2011), paradox has been explored as a source of productive synergies, by attending to competing demands simultaneously via “both-anding” (Smith, Lewis & Tushman, 2016).

The normal emphasis on managing paradoxical tensions (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Smith, 2014) implicitly suggests that tension is antithetical to order, an order that must be maintained through management. Ironically, this focus can be critiqued as a way of transforming the paradoxical into the “doxical”, ignoring the very meaning of paradox as that which challenges the doxa (i.e. the common opinion), thus losing its *avant-garde* flavour. *Avant-garde* here denotes artistic production that going against traditional tastes, resisting commercialization and reification (Adorno, 1970 [1997]). Being a vanguard thus means more than being novel, ‘cutting edge’. Rather, by making latent tensions salient, visible, paradox theory has the potential to disrupt the status quo, offering new insights and innovations that can foster social awakening, if not transformation. In this, it is important to reestablish paradox theory role as *provocateurs* of the *avant-garde*, a role often played by social commentators, philosophers and social movement leaders or organizations.

When the arts reinforce the status quo, they do so as propaganda, as epitomized in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, or in the use of music (Perris, 1983), sculpture (Zheng, 2017) or architecture (Malone, 2017) by totalitarian governments. When art lacks innovative intention it is entertainment, offering audiences what they know they like. The *avant-garde* challenges conventions. The arts might therefore be expected to be a preferential field for paradox scholars, as art and artists often adopt an *avant-garde* and anti-hegemonic para-doxical stance (Irving, 1988).

In this article we look specifically at the arts as an expressive form of knowledge production which, by definition, productively critiques the doxa by being para-doxical, a rich site for the exploration of paradox (Sagiv & Yehekel, 2020). By exploring paradox as against (para) doxa we affirm the need to retain the meaning of paradox as that which is able to contest, depart from and diverge from doxa type of thinking – for example the idea that paradox is mainly a source of balance in organizations. We do so by learning from arts’ “anti-hegemonic stance” through an exemplary figure. We consider the case of Banksy as a contemporary illustration of the artist as a critical figure from whom MOS (Management and Organization Studies) might cultivate an appreciation for paradox to explore organization as a space in which affectivity, joy and surprise (e.g., Fotaki, Kenny & Vachhani, 2017) coexists with predictability and rationality. To this end we present paradox and ambivalence as conceptual approaches to organization

seen as spaces of delight, destabilization and disruption (Thanem, 2006), an antidote to normatively conventional conceptions of organizations.

Our main contribution to MOS lies in the defense of the aesthetic value of ambivalence through paradox. Organization Studies should consider the notion of the para-doxa as reflected in its very etymology, as a source of friction, even celebrating its presence as an indicator of a healthy system, one in which polyphony prevails over hegemonic voices that exclude dissonance (Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2006). To learn more about the process of creating para-doxa, we draw theoretically on the case of the controversial aesthete, "a paradoxical figure both depreciated and appreciated" (Kets de Vries, 1990, p. 759), who "becomes the guardian of reality, and in a paradoxical way, prevents the pursuit of foolish action" (p. 757) in the status quo. With this goal in mind we start by discussing the role of paradox in MOS. Next we discuss Banksy with regards to paradox theory, explaining how Banksy's work, in our interpretation, not the artist's, may help to expand paradox theory by unsettling paradox, presenting it as a form of non-functionalist thinking about organizations.

Paradox theory and para-doxa

A decade ago, Smith and Lewis (2011) observed that interest in paradox within organization theory is "increasingly crowded" (p. 381), an observation that indicates the growing prominence of a perspective viewing paradoxical tensions as inherent to organizing. The intensification of contradictory demands within organizational environments, deriving from an increasing plurality of interests, perspectives and genealogies of participating actors, often through collaborations and supply chains as well as the plurality of actors in a single organization, is striking. Social movements around climate crisis, racism, the primacy of shareholder value over stakeholder concerns as well as increased awareness about the global impact of organizations on people and planet, articulate these currents. A consequence is that organizing plurality denies attempts at defining organizations as a singular collective of actors in search of some idealized common goal; polyphony is increasing (Kornberger, Carter, & Clegg, 2006). Organizations are characterized by plural goals and a multiplicity of interests, as well as by historical trajectories that often create contradictions between present and past goals and identities. Consequently, contradictions become integral to organizing.

In responding to contradictions at the heart of organizational experience, agents may strive to manage tensions by reducing uncertainty and contradictions, returning things to how they were in the past, through "one best way" type of organizing. Alternatively, they may assume that contradictions must be lived with, "embraced". Embracing paradox has been viewed as a source of competitive advantage (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014; Takeuchi, Osono, & Shimizu, 2008) and exemplary leadership (Smith, 2014). In either case, there is a sense of maintaining the status quo rather than stretching conventional frames through *avant-garde* activism. Organizational paradox theory treats contradictions as a managerial tool, maintaining things as they were, at the cost of excluding elements of dissonance, agitation and negation, bringing tensions to the fore to challenge the status quo.

Assuming that paradox is a tool for superior management contradicts the very essence of paradox as a process that is anti-doxa, the taming of paradox (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Paradox is not a tool for integrating synergies but a process provoking unpredictability through an ethos of contestation. Paradox challenges organization to cultivate dissonance and agitate the status quo, to become, if only for a temporally short process, *avant-garde* (if only because the *avant-garde* of today becomes the convention of tomorrow). In hierarchical and conformist organizational systems, paradox can perturb the organizational order, introducing an element of subversion that is critically important in promoting organizational reflexivity. The dialectical synthesis of paradoxical tensions (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002) has organizational

significance for its potential to both create and disrupt organization – or even to disrupt to create alternative innovative organizational forms and practices.

The costs of conformity are well known (Esser, 1998; Nemeth, 2018) as are the benefits of resistance (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012), a para-doxa that leads to reflexive resistance rather than routine conformity. Several possibilities have been considered for cultivating “para-doxal” traits in organizations, including promoting psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018), creating cultures tolerant of positive deviance (Mainemelis, 2010), encouraging and practicing the art of constitutively saying no (Nemeth, 2018) as well as fostering organizational forms of jestership (Välikangas & Sevón, 2010).

The *avant-garde* potential of paradox as a form of social critique, a challenge to dominant, taken-for-granted discourses, is not expressed by creating scandal, or by going against conventions to remark a break with accepted tradition. Rather, it is achieved by using the same language and conventions of dominant discourses, while showing their inherent contradictions and the fragility of their assumptions. An excellent example is offered by the influential work of the economist Thomas Piketty (2014; 2020), who employs orthodox approaches, based on economic quantification of production and prosperity, to challenge the rational myths of neoliberal ideology, such as the idea that wealth inequalities are natural product of market forces, or that lowering income taxes is essential for stimulating the economy.

We will dive in the world of art, analysing how an artist may cultivate “para-doxal” distance as a lifestyle choice with a sense of duty towards illuminating others living a normal, but from the artist’s perspective, less meaningful life (Cinque, Nyberg & Starkey, 2020). Such distance is defined as the capacity for conserving an ethos of systematically opposing an existing system. Such an ethos may be described as elitism, anarchism or merely mischief. In this context, one figure, Banksy, constitutes a revelatory case, an exemplary contemporary para-doxal artist. We explain our reasoning in the next section.

Banksy’s para-doxa

In the arts, paradox, provocation and contradiction have long been celebrated as a source of inspiration (Cornwell, 2006; Lewis & Dehler, 2000). Marcel Duchamp, for instance, defaced the revered image of the Mona Lisa by painting a moustache on a cheap reproduction of the portrait. Labelled L.H.O.O.Q. by Duchamp, the letters of which, when pronounced in French, sound like “Elle a chaud au cul”, “She is hot in the arse”. Another of his jests “Fountain”, a urinal, exhibited as a readymade sculpture, was the only work rejected for exhibition by the American Society of Independent Artists in April 1917. Fountain later went on to achieve iconic status. As Foster et al. (2004, p. 129) note, “Fountain was suspended in time, its questions deferred to later moments. In this way it became one of the most influential objects in twentieth-century art well after the fact”. According to Vesely (2004), the urinal and L.H.O.O.Q. were fragments that functioned as visual aphorisms for the tension between the object positioned as art, the primary topic premised on an understanding whose conventions were well-accepted, against a secondary topic, the object as a challenge and critique making a new imaginative interpretation possible for those whom it confronts. What is true of the aphorism in general, provoking reflection with a pithy observation of truth, is made even more acute when the aphorism is visual. As a mode of symbolic representation, the aphorism achieved its greatest acuity in “an era dominated by highly individualized and introverted experience, atomistic thought and feelings” (Vesely, 2004, p. 325), a time of crisis, such as the First World War, when Duchamp sought to exhibit Fountain.

Duchamp was a master of the visual aphorism. So is Banksy, the “satirical street artist” (Vince, 2019, p. 9), who opened the genre of “high-street irony” (Branscome, 2011, p. 116) in the

fading days of neo-liberalism and its systematic culture of excessive individualism (Harvey, 2007). As often happens with change agents, Banksy both challenges and courts such a system, as sometimes happens in organizations (Petriglieri, 2020), while creating his own process of mythologization (Bradshaw & Holbrook, 2007). The paradoxes of Banksy's carefully crafted work and persona puzzle, confuse, provoke and delight, as he jests with identity, art and market logics (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012). As pointed out by Vince (2019), bemusement *à la* Banksy contains, even thrives on tensions. What is of interest for this essay is the paradoxicality characterizing aspects of his work. Banksy playfully practices the art of paradoxical ambivalence. Branscome (2011, p. 116) noted that "it is (...) difficult to locate Banksy exactly. When the jester rules the court, it is hard to tell when subversion of the system becomes cynical complicity". Who or what is Banksy? Is he a creative artist or a vandal, a creative genius or a fraud? Should he be taken seriously or ironically? Are his works of art mere "visual aphorisms" or consequentially political acts of rebellion? Or is he all these things at the same time? We explore three expressions of ambivalence in Banksy's work: is his work an expression of wisdom or of foolishness? Is he an entertainer or a social critic? Is he authentic or a fake? Finally what can be learned about paradox in organizations by using Banksy's art and the avant-garde as a lens into para-doxa?

Wise? Fool? Both?

Banksy's supporters maintain that he engages with the system while contesting it, taking it "from underground to overground" (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012, p. 156). Yet, for someone challenging doxa, his imagery is very easy to decipher and of immediate emotional appeal even to a less sophisticated audience, perhaps as a strength or as the mark of a very shallow intellectual and emotional experience (Jones, 2015). If the leading edge of art is supposed to be *avant-garde* in disrupting assumptions of normalcy, pushing the limits of the ways of seeing inscribed in their time (Clegg & Kornberger, 2003), Banksy's use of well-crafted *trompe-l'œil*s seems facile. Contemporary art, striving to capture the complex essence of reality, rises above mere craft, focusing on concept, performance, transcending the artwork's materiality (Bryzgel, 2019). Yet, one of his recent graffiti/performance ("God Bless Birmingham"), a painted team of magic reindeers which seem to lift in the air a (real) homeless man, has moved and convinced even one of his harshest critics (Jones, 2019), seeing it as joining social commentary and human kindness, conceptual performance and materialization, empowering rather than merely representing its subject. One of his more recent pieces ("Game Changer", displayed in a corridor at Southampton general hospital) shows a boy dressed in dungarees playing with a nurse superhero toy, with figures of Spider-Man and Batman discarded in a bin, paying tribute to the ordinary workers of the British National Health Service during the Covid-19 pandemic (Morris, 2020).

Being superficial could be a way of digging deeper. Asked what attracted his attention to paint on the wall dividing Israel's West Bank, Banksy answered superficially, "I was mainly attracted by the wall: the surface looked like it would take paint very well" (Dalley, 2017, p. online). In treating a conspicuous and controversial object such as the nine metre concrete-and-wire West Bank barrier (for the Israelis, a protection against terrorism; for the Palestinians, a blatant form of oppression and ethnic segregation) as a mere "surface", Banksy ironically stressed its complexity. The wall represents tensions that even the wisdom of the fool cannot capture. On his website, Banksy recounts how, after finishing the artwork, an old Palestinian man approached to tell him the painting made the wall look beautiful. Banksy thanked him, only to be told: "We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall. Go home". Summing up, it can be said that Banksy embodies the fundamental tensions between accessibility and depth as well as simplicity (of expression) and complexity (of content). Being foolish (or superficial) is one way of dealing with the unfathomable complexity of the social.

Also, it is possible to see an interesting parallel between the 'disruptive' work of an artist like Banksy, who uses an approachable 'language' to send simple, powerful messages to a broader, unsophisticated audience, and the work of Piketty, who challenges economic orthodoxy by using orthodox economic languages (GDP measures, tax reports, etc.). In both cases commercial success does not make neither of them less radical in their critique, with all due respect to Adorno (1970 [1997]).

Entertainer? Social critic? Both?

Banksy's court is that of social media, a force that today has an ambiguous role, both serving powerful institutions while mocking and even conspiring to subvert them. A satirical criticism of capitalism and neoliberalism and of their effect on society and the environment frames his themes. He frequently uses parody to make strong political statements, as in the case of the Walled Off Hotel (a sarcastic and dystopian version of the Waldorf; "a hotel, museum, protest and gallery all in one", Graham-Harrison, 2017, p. Online) which overlooks the West Bank barrier, offering its guests "the world's worst view" (Fulker, 2017). Banksy himself described the hotel as "a three-story cure for fanaticism, with limited car parking" (Graham-Harrison, 2017, p. Online). Another example is the pop-up exhibition Dismaland, which similarly plays with the concept of fakeness as seduction (Hietanen, Murray, Sihvonen, & Tikkanen, 2020).

Critical outsider? Cunning insider? Both?

Banksy's relation with the arts market is paradoxical. He is an anti-capitalist artist able to amass impressive wealth in the capitalist arts market (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012), which led Branscome (2011, p. 119) to ask: "has Banksy joined the ranks of collusion where the artist and art market are incestuously intertwined?" Experts value his "Game Changer" gift to the NHS at more than £5 million. He is an outsider-turned-insider as is often required to tackle paradox (Pradies et al., 2020); or better, he is both an insider and an outsider; inside the gallery catalogues and outside the system that they produce, promote and which he parodies. For instance, his artistic performances appear to have been well-integrated within the "system" they ostensibly denounce. An example is the famous performance during the 2018 auction of his painting "Girl with Balloon". As soon as the winning bid of £1.04 million was announced, the painting started to shred itself thanks to a shredder that the artist had built into the original frame. If the stunt was – as declared by the artist – intended as a satirical remark on the commodification of art, it clearly backfired since the half shredded painting – rechristened "Love is in the Bin" – is now estimated to be worth £2 million (Vince, 2019).

Whether he is a cunning (but hypocritical) artist or demonstrates an imperviousness to market dynamics through individual acts of resistance, the paradoxical effect is still present. Other examples include his "Tomato Soup" parody of Andy Warhol's work, when he replaced the famous pop art icon, the Campbell soup can, with a Tesco Value cream of tomato soup in the Museum of Modern Art. The key question is therefore not whether Banksy is a creative genius or a shrewd advertiser (Jones, 2007), but rather is the doxa further disrupted, or is it restored when an ironist (Banksy) parodies another ironist (Warhol)? Is it possible to critique a system that is offering hospitality to its critic?

Fake? Authentic? Both?

Banksy has created his own mythologization through anonymity (Bradshaw & Holbrook, 2007): "he's completely anonymous and he's really famous" (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012, p. 212). While posing as an individual street artist, he relied on a large network of artists, collaborators and employees to develop his "Dismaland Bemusement Park" (Vince, 2019). More significantly, he leverages paradox by building celebrity on secrecy (Dalley, 2017). What it is undoubtable is that – beyond his identity – he created a "cool" brand, a notoriously challenging endeavour

(Warren, Batra, Loureiro, & Bagozzi, 2019). Authenticity and transparency (Hess, 2007) are extolled as important organizational attributes, yet naive understanding of authenticity is necessarily problematic (Pfeffer, 2015). Banksy “squares the circle” by being both anonymous *and* authentic. He is public in a private way. His idea(s) are transparent while he hides his identity, proliferating through disappearance, in Botez et al.’s formulation (2020). He is not alone in this. In an era of transparency, maintaining mystery and surprise can be powerful marketing tools, giving rise the oxymoron: “mystery marketing” (Serazio, 2013, p. 148).

The combination of mystery and surprise, often creating strangely familiar effects (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013), has long been core to an institution as far removed from Banksy’s provocations as one can imagine, the British royal family. Bagehot’s advice in his 1867 handbook, *The English Constitution*, is that the role of the Sovereign was to embody a sense of “mystery” as a unifying figurehead legitimated by breeding and by history, surrounded by ritual and ceremony calling forth reverence and allegiance in subjects in awe of the spectacular and occasional royal conventions. An excess of uncontrolled and surprising exposition damages mystery, as television revealed (Waterman & Roseman, 1996). The authenticity of being anonymous is what connects the Queen and Banksy: each has a name that signifies anything and nothing because in practice they are virtually blank slates that project back reflections of who they are assumed to be in the media that projects them. In one case we really do not know the identity; in the other the media and commentators might presume that they do know the identity but in reality that identity thought to be known is an artful construction, almost as ambivalent of meaning as is that of Banksy.

In conclusion, the figure of Banksy reveals and leverages a number of paradoxical tensions, that both constrain and empower him. Banksy, who is both mainstream and liminal, sparked our organizational interest in the historical role of the artist as a receptacle and transmitter of paradoxical tensions, such as wise-fool, mocking-truthful, outsider-insider, fake-authentic. Visual aphorisms as interventions into notions of what art might be constituted as being, may at first glance seem to have as little to do with MOS but they come into organizational focus as practices of questioning conventions.

How do *agent provocateurs* generate tension to induce a public reaction?

We now discuss how a type of *agent provocateur*, à la Banksy, can generate a salience for tension that might generate public reaction and possibly even transformation by opening up the *avant-garde*. As Bürger (1974) defined it, the *avant-garde* attacks institutional doxa by merging art and life. The *avant-garde* opposes the doxa, positing a subversive alterity that draws not on the conventions of opposition and resistance but on a creativity that parodies that which those conventions privilege. It introduces noise in a system (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes, 2004) that raises awareness about contradiction without attempting to resolve it, something that we explore through three approaches inspired by Banksy’s repertoire that offer clues for an understanding how paradox may be engaged with and activated by ambivalence.

Explanandum to explanans

Paradox is often viewed as an *explanandum*, a phenomenon that needs explanation, which is the preferred approach when a given solution is found for a paradoxical problem, for example as in the case of “ambidextrous” solution (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013). With Banksy we learn that the *explanandum* can in fact be an *explanans*, i.e. an explanation rather than a factor in need of explanation: paradox is not something to be solved but an approach to explore and express the complexity of the world. Paradox theory in management and organization studies quickly assumed a normative approach by framing paradox as a tool with which to solve problems and reduce ambivalence by embracing “both-and” types of approaches (Smith et al.,

2016). Such convergence may be prescriptively appropriate but potentially deprives paradox of its surprising potential (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). With Banksy we follow a different path: the invocation of paradox as an explanatory device in which contradiction is mobilized to cultivate ambivalence rather than reduce it. Only recently has such an approach been embraced by management and organization studies through paradox theory. In paradox theory, paradox is not a dysfunction but a condition to be embraced – but not without costs. Embracing paradox is an exercise in cultivating an attitude of ambivalence, as Weick (1998) pointed out.

Cultivating ambivalence through concept pairs

The embrace of paradox implies thinking in concept pairs. Concept pairs such as exploration-exploitation (March, 1991), stability-change (Farjoun, 2010), mechanistic-organic (Burns & Stalker, 1961) impedes managerial resolve facilitating paradox resolution. Management theory tends to appreciate being resolute but the clarity of decision-choice may impede paradoxical thinking. In Banksy we find all sorts of departures from clarity: well-known images are subverted (as in “Devolved Parliament”, a 2009 oil-on-canvas painting that replaces British politicians debating in the House of Commons by chimpanzees), words are used to afford multiple meanings (as in the case of the painting, “Show me the Monet”). Even the idea that what attracted him to the West Bank was the surface can be read as a statement within a statement, or a statement that counters a statement, confusing more than clarifying, while rendering a clear political act into an anti-climactic declaration. In a world dominated by tweets with performative intentions, Banksy exposes the performative power of neutralizing one’s own performativity. Concept pairs thus afford many possibilities, not only those intended to produce effective results as paradox theory often predicts (Cunha & Putnam, 2019) but also those that produce effects through neutralization. Performative and anti-performative self-neutralization can be perplexingly para-doxa.

Battling stupidity can make one look stupid

A discussion around Banksy refers to the objective of his art. Is Banksy part of the system or a change agent using the system against the system? Is he a supreme ironist or a pragmatist taking advantage of the system’s own contradictions? Is he an anarchist or just another artist carving his own space? Banksy’s interrogations can be perceived as expressions of doubt. Even political positions must be expressed with a sense of self-doubt and an attitude of self-irony. Such interrogations have an echo in our own discipline: are we, as organizational scholars, when we criticize, trying to change the system or trying to find a niche in mainstream theorizing movements? It is because theorizing dynamics imply paradoxical tensions between the new and old (Clegg, Cunha & Berti, 2020) that these are critical questions for management and organization scholars. We need to consider the paradoxes pervading our discipline and how the use of impact for functional productive purpose can be problematic in itself. In this sense the search for competitive advantage through paradox can raise its own paradoxes.

In a world of functional consistency messages perceived as inconsistent, incomplete or indecisive raise questions and create space for what Ten Bos (2007) expressed, that when one tries to fight stupidity one can end up looking stupid. Banksy, one might interpret, cultivates this type of ambivalence, in a persona in which foolishness and wisdom meet (see e.g. Välikangas & Sevón, 2010). The interplay of wisdom and foolishness has been less scrutinized by organizational scholars than the gaining of wisdom by managers (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014) but it should be, as we point out next.

Countering functional stupidity through irony

Alvesson and Spicer (2016) have composed a conceptual analysis of organization as a terrain of functional stupidity. In the name of efficiency and technical rationality, organizations do sometimes create processes and routines that in the name of some goal, characterized as rationality and efficiency, creates systems that are irrational and inefficient to the point that they lose sense of their purpose (Merton, 1936), their reason for being. This is evident in the irrational organizations studied by Brunsson (1982).

Art can expose the irrationality of rationality, a challenge embraced by artists such as Kafka, Warhol, Heller and Banksy. Irony and ambivalence are the usual tools for unearthing the dysfunctions of organization, exemplified in writing in novels such as *Catch-22* (Heller, 1999) and *The Trial* (Kafka, 1998). Organization is a supreme form of disorganization in these novels in which effort in the creation of processes and procedures is marked by entropy rather than creative energy. These processes can create unimaginable levels of human suffering in multiple forms: rules that become ends rather than means, dystopian utopias, vacuous mission statements, schizoid actuations in which words and deeds follow in different directions.

Looking at social and organizational dynamics from this perspective indicates that organizational scholars have lessons to learn from artists of irony such as Banksy. We explore three lessons. First, instead of taking theories too seriously, it is important to see them as words in progress. Of course, we all know that theories are works in process, typically including a section noting the limitations of the work that is meant to protect the words of the theory. From Banksy we learn that it is possible to keep ourselves at an ironic distance from our theories. The functionalists may imagine themselves to be critical scholars and the critical scholars may reflect on their place in the system they criticize. The first may ask if their solutions are not actually the cause of problems whereas the latter may ask are they not playing a critical role in the system's very survival, by granting it the legitimacy of questioning? As Lampedusa (1958) observed, the element of change that is necessary to make sure that noting substantial changes at the end is the most significant.

Second, if we try hard to look smart and avoid being perceived as stupid (Empson, 2020), what if we assume that sometimes it is more powerful to embrace stupidity in doing one's work, work that is simply wrong and stupid? What if part of the non-sense we create (Tourish, 2020) results from attempts to look smart? Smartness can lead to stupidity as an intellectual channel is ploughed beyond its capacity to generate further life. Can good ideas emerge from stupid mistakes and the serendipitous opportunities thus created? What is more stupid: assuming the part of stupidity in serendipity, or countering stupidity at the cost of conformity and the endless repetition of ideas and the progressive rigor of our theories at the cost of their increasing irrelevance? Is facile provocation less effective because it is facile or should we assume that the discovery of good ideas implies pooling a number of bad ideas, as predicted by evolutionary theory (Weick, 1979)? Ideas that look smart because they are adorned with the conventions of smartness may just be a piece of theatre, as is the case with many propositions in our field, never to build a covering law.

Third, the acceptance that good organization research is the one channeled only to some "high rating" journals can be countered by Banksy's strategy. Some of his work will persist in the finest galleries. His paintings sell for millions – as we wrote these words, his painting "Show me the Monet" was sold for 7.5M Pounds. Other works were painted as graffiti that was often destroyed by competitors, officials, other vandals: they were not meant to survive but were part of the creative process. For organization theorists the implication is that an active intellectual life may be less dominated by the Darwinian logic of "publish or perish" (De Rond

& Miller, 2005) and more guided by the authorial desire to create an oeuvre. Tension between publication as power and publication as authorial expression finds inspiration in Banksy's work.

Contributions to theory and practice

We contribute to the discipline of organization studies by inviting scholars to explore manifestations of paradox as para-doxal rather than as managed or tamed version of paradox (Cunha & Putnam, 2019).

Contribution to theory

For theory, we explore the notion of paradox as navigated by actors interested in maintaining rather than resolving contradiction, in taking advantage of the novel, the ambiguous, the equivocal and the absurd, using it to accentuate the excessive rather than the balanced, to confuse rather than to clarify. Cultivating ambiguity has been associated with *avant gardism* in the arts but also in organizational practice, such as in the face of change (Cunha et al., 2014) or threat (Cappellaro, Compagni, & Vaara, 2020). Exploring paradox and its expression in artists such as Banksy can help consideration of the landscape of detritus, waste, marginalia and frivolity considered by Rehn and O'Doherty (2007) that is evident in works such as *Dismaland* or *Show me the Monet*. The use of paradox as a map to excess may help counter the logic of synergy, introducing a paradoxical polar opposition to the dominant, managerialist view of paradox as a tool for organizational balance. While paradox can play this role, it can also play in opposition by opening a window on what is excessive and monstrous: organizing as the art of frivolous fads and fashions, buzzwords, spectacle, illusions and illusionists (Boje, Rosile, Durant & Luhman, 2004). The other side of management can even be enjoyed with an ironical distance, as theatre, in which appearances are not necessarily what they seem, where apparent success borders failure, depth is superficiality and authenticity is false. Fully embracing the paradoxical condition would mean engagement with paradox as balance *and* as excess. Banksy, instead of offering clarity, uses paradox and ambiguity to sow confusion.

Paradox is the apparatus that allows actors, such as Banksy, to create personas that actively cultivate para-doxa; to remain at the fringes of the system rather than being inside the system. As asked of Gandhi: was he a saint among politicians or a politician among saints (Tiwari, Pandey & Maheswari, 2019)? Such ambiguity, the existence of several possibilities to explain a given phenomenon (Feldman, 1989), can be important for facilitating social change (Sgourev, 2013). Para-doxa is reconceptualized as provoking the system rather than making it more efficient. With this we rebalance paradox theory by considering its relation to the para-doxa, which in some cases contributes not towards rebalancing the organizational system as a function of managerial insight or paradox mindset but instead exposing political tensions that render apparent organization more plural than its imagery, its imagining, its assumed identity. In other words, the paradoxical competences of leaders politically coexist with the para-doxal inclinations of followers, sometimes for harmony, other times not necessarily so. From chaos and confusion can emerge new directions.

Contribution to practice

For practice, instead of seeing paradox as implying *both-and* forms of action we may actually be faced with a broader behavioural repertoire. Faced with pragmatic paradoxes of the type described by Berti and Simpson (2019), persons may reduce their expectations (Li, 2020) or keep an ironic distance as suggested by Fleming and Sewell (2002), inspired by the case of Švejk in resistance by not resisting but fully embracing the system, cultivating doubt, keeping an ironic distance through excessive compliance and finding a way to criticize without being categorized as a resister. Ambiguity and ambivalence as ingredients of wisdom entail that

paradoxical knowledge may imply the presence of a para-doxal stance. Instead of using devil's advocates, organizations may instead consider legitimate dissenters to understand how critics will counter their actions (Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001). Engaging with critics is important for conserving and grounding organization, increasing its porosity to a changing social environment. Instead of removing or silencing critics, organizations may benefit from actively engaging with them (Kenny, 2019; Swartz, 2010). Of course, the usefulness of these strategies extends beyond the world of arts.

Conclusion

We studied the case of Banksy as an example of how paradox may serve to avoid the reduction of the paradoxical side of organization to a new "doxa", ignoring the very meaning of paradox, that which goes against the doxa. We have explored how the arts and avant gardism can contribute to expanding the potential of paradox theory in a way that respects its etymological meaning and avoids an idealized view of paradox as a source of organizational synergies. Exploring the case of Banksy, we theorized paradox not as a source of balance but as a source of ambivalence. Considering Weick's (1998) idea of ambivalence as an expression of meaning, we invite organizational scholars to further engage with this possibility. To do so, we leave you with a snippet of news: in Kazakhstan, a man stood in the street holding up a sheet of blank paper. He was arrested and released successively because holding a white piece of paper does not constitute crime (*The Economist*, 2019). What words might one project on to the virtually blank and bland corporate interface with messy reality that MOS scholars confront?

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