Light in the Darkness? Managers in the Back Office of a Kafkaesque Bank

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Abstract
The ‘dark side’ of organizations has been represented in the literature as dysfunctional or abnormal, while more critical scholars regard it a condition of the ‘normal’ way in which organizations operate within a capitalist system. Drawing on the work of Franz Kafka, this paper develops a critique of both approaches. It is argued that we can learn much from Kafka because his representations challenge a top-down view of power and, therefore, suggest that there is light in the darkness. These insights are applied to a case study of a United Kingdom bank, to explore how managers, who are often neglected in critical accounts, are constituted through power relations, and how in the process of enrolling and controlling others, they discipline themselves. In taking this approach, the paper makes four main contributions. First, it elucidates how the ‘dark side’ has become an integral feature of everyday life in a contemporary organization and, second, it indicates limitations to the power that managers are able to exercise. Third, it explores how managers are fabricated as particular types of subject as they endeavour to discipline others, and finally it argues that whole layers of management can be understood as victims of the ‘dark side’.

Keywords
bureaucracy, financial services, Kafka, managers, power, resistance

Introduction
This paper is inspired by the work of Franz Kafka and it draws on his insights and imagery to reconsider the way in which power is exercised in the contemporary workplace. It does so by conducting a critical review of the mainstream literature which takes management prerogative for granted and regards the ‘dark side’ as the abnormal product of dysfunctional relations. Then it considers the literature that is critical of how managers exercise power in ways that intensify control over others. This literature either explicitly or implicitly refers to the ‘dark side’ as a condition and consequence of the normal, functional dynamics of how organizations operate in a capitalist system. Drawing on the case of a United Kingdom bank, the paper contributes to this critical literature by arguing that accounts of the ‘dark side’ need to pay much closer attention to managers.

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This is important because whole layers of management can be regarded as the perpetrators but also the victims of the ‘dark side’ and they need to be engaged if its debilitating consequences are to be addressed.

The dark side of organizations has been argued, in some accounts, to include phenomena as diverse as corruption, bullying, obsession, drug abuse, disasters and stress but it does not comprise an ‘integrated field’ of investigation (Vaughan, 1999, p. 272). A more critical body of literature presents work – and particularly managers – in a bleak, dark and even frightening way, focusing on the different ways that managers subject others to intensifying control in terms of what they do and think (see, for example, Barker, 1993; Carter et al., 2011; Delbridge, Turnbull & Wilkinson, 1992; Fleming, 2013; Ritzer, 2008; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). Although the present paper provides some empirical support for this critical perspective, it argues that there is always the potential for ‘light’ in the darkness, which resides in the ability that each of us has to exercise power (Foucault, 1977, 1982).

Scholars have explicitly discussed the dark side in relation to new organizational forms (Victor & Stephens, 1994, p. 479), organizations (Vaughan, 1999, p. 271), groups (Thomas & Hynes, 2007, p. 375), numbers (Seltzer & Anderson, 2001, p. 481), the team concept (Parker & Slaughter, 1988, p. 19), corporate culture (Willmott, 1993, p. 515), consulting (Boussebaa, 2008, p. 466) and management decisions (Boddy, 2006, p. 1461). The images that the metaphor of the dark side conjures up include Nazi concentration camps, gulags, totalitarianism as expressed through George Orwell’s 1984 or Kafkaesque bureaucratic organizations. To refer to the dark side, however, implies that there is also a side where there is some form of ‘light’ and this term is evocative of job fulfilment and self-expression, greater equality, power sharing, dialogue, negotiated outcomes, multiple voices, work–life balance and ethical decision making.

This paper draws on insights gleaned, in part from Kafka, and it follows an established tradition in organization studies of using novels to provide richer insights into organizational issues (see De Cock & Land, 2006; Willmott, 1993). The explicit advocacy of the use of literature can be traced back to Waldo (1968), who argued that analysis using novels adds to the concept of the scientific ‘case study’ by including ‘the concrete, the sensual, the emotional, the subjective, the valuational’ (Waldo (1968, p. 5). Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux (1994, pp. 7–12) further contend that novels as a genre engage with the complexity of everyday life, and this is a dimension that is lacking in both the mainstream and critical approaches to the ‘dark side’, which this paper seeks to redress.

Josef K, or simply K, is the key protagonist in Franz Kafka’s (1925) classic novel The Trial and, as the chief financial officer in a bank, he is in a position of some authority. He awakes, on his 30th birthday, to find that he is under arrest. He does not know what he is charged with nor who is charging him. The book has a nightmarish quality that can be read, at one level, as an account of powerless individuals who are trapped in unfathomable bureaucratic institutions. It is disturbing because it resonates with many contemporary critical accounts of organizations in which scholars interested in new forms of work organization have explored innovations such as total quality management (TQM) (Parker & Slaughter, 1993), teamwork (Barker, 1993; Parker & Slaughter, 1988), corporate culture (Fleming, 2013; Ray, 1987; Willmott, 1993) and business process reengineering (BPR) (Grey & Mitev, 1995; Willmott, 1994) in ways that emphasize their dark side, though without necessarily naming it as such. These and other critical accounts do not view the dark side as organizational deviance, a dysfunctional by-product or an ‘unanticipated consequence’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 273) of managerial designs, but rather as a condition of organizations in a capitalist society.

It could be argued that these critical scholars present a Kafkaesque view of work because Kafka has been closely linked to a “cultural pessimism” following the onset of “modernization” (Warner, 2007, p. 1020), where the ‘logic of bureaucratization’ points ‘into very dark corners’ (Warner,
Hence Parker presents Kafka’s work as offering ‘darkly fantastic representations of work and organizations’ (Parker, 2005, p. 160) and Kets de Vries (1995, p. 55) asserts that Kafka ‘sees the workplace as an arena for the interplay of “uncontrollability, unpredictability and helplessness”’. Keenoy and Seijo (2010) have described Kafka’s novel *The Castle* as ‘a graphic representation of the incapacity of both individuals and organizations to resist the tendency to cultural entropy’ (Keenoy & Seijo, 2010, p. 179), while Meyers (2004) depicts Kafka’s anti-heroes as ‘perpetually despised and frequently humiliated outsiders, constantly terrified and profoundly alienated’ (Meyers, 2004, p. 329).

Warner (2007) refers to Primo Levi’s (1989) analysis of Kafka in a way that seems to put this dark interpretation of his work beyond debate. Levi argued that in his own work he sought to lead ‘the reader from darkness to light’ (Warner, 2007, p. 1032), but asserts that Kafka takes us in the opposite direction. This bleak interpretation links Kafka to the work of Max Weber (1921/1968) who saw bureaucracies as ‘cages in the sense that people are trapped in them, their basic humanity denied’ (Ritzer, 2008, p. 27). Although Weber saw the potential merits of ethical bureaucracy, he was concerned that ‘Society would eventually become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures’ from which ‘there would be no escape’ (Ritzer, 2008, p. 27). Yet, in contrast to what Ritzer calls Weber’s ‘dark and pessimistic outlook’ (Ritzer, 2008, p. 188), the possibilities for resistance and the potential for the ‘light’ to emerge are far more embedded in Kafka’s work than his ‘dark’ imagery ostensibly suggests. This reflects Kafka’s ‘anti-authoritarianism’ (Lowy, 1997, p. 120), his ‘sympathy’ for ‘all mistreated workers’ (Wasserman, 2002, p. 473) and his reformist endeavours to reduce the ‘exploitation’ of ‘the working class’ (Wasserman, 2002, p. 480).

The limits to the power that managers are able to exercise are explored in this paper through a case study of the back office of a UK bank, which considers how local managers celebrate, enact but also struggle with issues of control. It explores how managers, as much as employees (Barker, 1993), or for that matter ‘academics’ (see Keenoy & Seijo, 2010), engage in self-discipline (Foucault, 1977). It also highlights that while managers exercise power over others they can also be understood to be victims of contemporary institutions in the sense that they are required to embrace a subjectivity and enforce working practices that are not always of their design, which can be debilitating for them.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section discusses the mainstream literature that regards the dark side as abnormal or deviant and the second explores the critical literature that views the dark side as a normal feature of how organizations operate in a capitalist system. The third section revisits Kafka’s classic novel *The Trial*, to illuminate the ways in which power is exercised and internalized in the contemporary workplace. The bank case study is then introduced and analysed before drawing out the main contributions of the paper.

**The Dark Side as Non-conformity, Dysfunctionality and Abnormality**

Vaughan (1999, p. 273) defined the dark side of organizations or ‘how things go wrong in socially organized settings’ as resulting from routine nonconformity or organizational deviance. It includes mistakes, misconduct and disasters that arise when organizations ‘deviate from formal design goals and normative standards and experiences’ leading to ‘harmful social consequences’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 273). In contrast to Vaughan (1999), this paper argues that routine conformity or things going ‘right’ in organizational settings can also be considered to be part of the ‘dark side’. This is evident when the human costs of the normal observance of routine are considered, for example, when routine renders work increasingly repetitive and monotonous, as will be explored in the
following case study. This paper develops the argument that the dark side of organization should not simply be equated with the violation of corporate rules but may indeed result from conformity with them and so actions must be assessed against their human costs.

The argument departs from the organizational behaviour literature that limits the dark side to deviance, abnormality or ‘motivated behaviour by an employee or group of employees that has negative consequences’ for an individual or group ‘within the organization, or the organization itself’ (Griffin & O’Leary-Kelly, 2004, p. 4). This understanding does not consider actions and practices to be part of the dark side if they are ‘undertaken in the best interests of the organization’ (Griffin & O’Leary-Kelly, 2004, p. 6). Yet harm is not always the result of an accident, error or mistake, nor is it necessarily ‘directed by one or more persons in a workplace toward the goal of harming one or more others’ (Neuman, 2004, p. 62). Instead it may arise due, perhaps, to thoughtlessness, a lack of empathy, mechanistic thinking, the profit motive or perhaps ambition and greed. Harm may unintentionally occur when employees suffer fatigue, stress, boredom or injury when work is organized with little concern for employee welfare. To link the dark side only to those practices that are intentionally harmful is problematic because it neglects the potentially damaging consequences of organizations that appear to be operating without any apparent concern to do harm.

To link the dark side to abnormality is also problematic and this is evident in Boddy’s (2006) work. Here he attributes recent corporate failures to ‘organizational psychopaths’ who ‘are only interested in self-enrichment’ and ‘lack remorse about who they run over’ (Boddy, 2006, p. 1467). This does not explain why people that society deems to be otherwise normal, even highly performing and socially respected, may act in ways that appear to be ‘completely indifferent to the suffering’ (Boddy, 2006, p. 1464) of other people. This is apparent in the following case study, in that senior managers designed a work regime that rendered work meaningless and, in this sense, they demonstrated little regard for others.

In a review of the literature on organizational politics, Hall, Hochwarter, Ferris and Bowen (2004) argue that politics is generally seen as a negative and therefore dysfunctional phenomenon. It is for this reason that they and others link politics to the dark side partly because ‘political behaviour is seen as obstructing or impeding what should otherwise be rational decision processes’ (Hall et al., 2004, p. 240). Hence Ferris and King (1991, p. 64) describe ‘political behaviour’ as that which contributes ‘to distortion, error, and inaccuracy in performance evaluation decisions’. Hall et al. (2004) question this orthodox thinking because it is believed that ‘political behaviour’ can potentially be ‘functional’ for the organization (Hall et al., 2004, p. 251). Nevertheless, they endorse the view that this paper is concerned to question for they regard politics as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending upon whether it is ‘functional and useful’ or ‘destructive’ for ‘organizational life’ (Hall et al., 2004, p. 255).

A strong feature of the ‘functional’ literature then is to couple the dark side with negativity and dysfunctionality, for example, by considering politics (Ferris & King, 1991), entrepreneurship (Kets de Vries, 1985) or ‘impression management’ as having a potentially damaging impact on ‘organizational performance’ (Bratton & Kacmar, 2004, p. 306). This does not mean that this literature is insensitive to the individuals who work in organizations (see Neuman, 2004, p. 62) but it reflects that it tends to be written from a managerial perspective. Hence Bratton and Kacmar (2004) question the ‘instrumentality’ of ‘extreme careerism’ but they do not question the ‘instrumental rationality’ (Weber, 1964) that imbues everyday organizational life. Moreover, Kets de Vries (1985, p. 161) expressed concern about the dark side of entrepreneurialism, because an entrepreneur’s ‘bias towards action, which makes them act rather thoughtlessly’ can ‘sometimes can have dire consequences for the organization’. Overall then, this literature situates the dark side in relation to non-conformity, abnormality or dysfunctional relations. It is preoccupied with organizational
performance rather than employee welfare and it is grounded in a managerial view of the world. It assumes that if organizations could only be made to work without error then there would be no ‘dark side’.

**The Dark Side as a Condition and Outcome of Capitalist Organizations**

There is an alternative critical literature that views the ‘dark side’ as a pervasive feature of organizations in advanced capitalist societies. Here the focus is on how management extends control over the technical labour process and/or endeavours to reconstitute employee subjectivity. Hence the corporate culture movement has been characterized as ‘incipiently totalitarian’ (Willmott, 1993, p. 515) as it promotes a monolithic system of thought and action that fosters, or even requires, absolute employee identification with corporate goals and values such as quality and flexibility. This ‘corporate culturism’ has been criticized because in the name of increased employee autonomy it extends control into how people think and feel (Willmott, 1993, p. 515; see also Fleming, 2013). Similarly, Casey (1995) critically examined a ‘culture program’ which, she argued, was ‘capable of shaping the way things are done … and the character of its employees’ (Casey, 1995, p. 93). This totalizing expression of normative control represents for Ezzy (2001) a ‘colonization of the self’ that results in ‘the virtual absence of displays of resistance or opposition’ (Ezzy, 2001, p. 636).

The critique that current ways of organizing intensify control over both working practices and/or employee subjectivity – such that employees can see no alternative to a corporate worldview and readily embrace intensive working practices – emerges in studies of a range of management interventions and innovations. Hence, Delbridge et al. (1992, p. 97) argue that TQM intensifies ‘work by eliminating “waste” or “slack”’ (which includes people), while Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1993, p. 28) propose that it is a ‘totalizing narrative’ that, by implication, silences voices that might challenge the corporate worldview. In their analysis of BPR, Grey and Mitev (1995) assert that in delivering both unemployment on the one hand and work intensification on the other, BPR is ‘distinctive in the scale of human misery which it promises to produce’ (Grey & Mitev, 1995, p. 11). This debilitating understanding of contemporary management has also been identified by Parker and Slaughter (1988, p. 19), in the practical realization of what they describe as the ‘team concept’.

The managerial colonization of the modern ‘self’, bolstered by fashionable management concepts, has recently been flagged by Costea, Crump and Amiridis (2008, p. 681) as a danger that ‘cannot easily be dismissed’. In an analysis of the ideas of the management guru Stephen Covey, Cullen (2009) echoes Willmott’s (1993) earlier critique of the dangers of corporate culture, by asserting that ‘Covey’s voice gradually becomes louder and more imperative, drowning out the possibility for engaging with other perspectives’ (Cullen, 2009, p. 1241). Finally, this colonization is observed by Fleming (2013), who refers to an emerging trend of ‘neo-normative control’ which exhorts employees to ‘just be yourself’, have fun and to challenge the way the organization operates. It is argued that this is itself a subtle form of control that has ‘augmented the scope and nature of managerial power’, which provides one explanation for why ‘we continue to work longer and harder than ever’ (Fleming, 2013, p. 486).

These accounts warning of intensifying control over working practices (e.g. Delbridge et al., 1992; Carter et al., 2011; Grey & Mitev, 1995; Parker & Slaughter, 1988; Ritzer, 2008; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992) and the ‘colonization of the self’ (Casey, 1995; Costea et al., 2008; Fleming, 2013; Willmott, 1993) resonate with the case study to follow. A danger, however, of focusing solely on how one group exercises power over another is that one risks adopting a ‘propertied’ (Foucault, 1977) concept of power – whereby power is assumed to be the ‘possession’ of management. This
paper is therefore concerned to follow a ‘relational’ approach, whereby power is understood as ‘modes of action upon possible action, the actions of others’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 224). This understanding presents a far more fluid concept of power than that found in some critical studies and many mainstream accounts because it recognizes that power is not the property of certain groups or individuals. Critical accounts that focus only on the ways in which managers increase control also risk the danger of underplaying the opportunities for resistance. To avoid this, attention will be given in this paper to how the exercise of power is always a messy, contested affair, recognizing that there is always the potential for finding space through which to escape or evade control.

Another danger of focusing on management control is that we may neglect the extent to which managers are also themselves the subjects of power. Managers may then be represented as omnipotent and/or fundamentally ill-intentioned. By contrast, however, this paper seeks to understand the complex experience and subjectivity of management. It endeavours to understand what managers share in common with those who are seemingly subordinate to them, and how managers are also simultaneously ‘tightly bound by rules’ (Ritzer, 2008, p. 43). Sensitively attending to the voices of managers is a relatively rare occurrence in critical management studies, as Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008, p. 492) have pointed out. In offering a more sensitive but still critical portrayal of managers, this paper considers how they are both victims and perpetrators of bureaucratic control. Many layers of management are victims in the sense that they are required to inhabit ‘the system’, for as they watch, enrol and control others, they simultaneously discipline themselves. As managers do not ‘possess’ (Foucault, 1982) power they are engaged in a constant struggle to ensure that others exercise power in ways that are supportive of the corporation, and this results in managers exercising power over themselves as well as through others. Analysed in this way we can perceive some light in the panoptic darkness in two ways.

First, we can observe that managers are not as invulnerable as some of the aforementioned critical ‘dark side’ accounts tend to imply. Second, we can suggest that employees have much in common with whole layers of management, whose work is also repetitive when it primarily involves processing, monitoring and disciplining others. Both employees and managers are diminished, to different degrees and in different ways, through such work. Although today’s office culture of working long hours may be seen as a form of wage slavery, Donkin (2001, p. 26) argues that it is a voluntary act born of habit rather than subjugation. He asserts that these ‘long hours’ are worked to reverse the loss of ‘joy in work’ (Donkin, 2001, p. 303). Yet this argument divorces work from extant inequalities and power relations. Hence ‘the biggest risk associated with any worker’ and manager remains ‘the loss of their job’ (Donkin, 2001, p. 249).

Donkin (2001) presents an essentialist understanding of the self, seeing subjectivity as a matter of personal agency, and therefore neglecting how subjectivity is constituted through power relations (Foucault, 1977). It is not quite the case then that we are simply ‘willing prisoners’ (Donkin, 2001, p. xxii) or that we have ‘manacled ourselves’ (Donkin, 2001, p. 26) to our organizations, but more that we are both fabricated and constitute ourselves as particular types of subject (Foucault, 1977). In view of this, we may not see a way out of the organizations that we have helped to construct nor are we necessarily willing to make the sacrifices needed to dismantle them. Neither staff nor many managers enjoy the freedom to fulfil their potential within the extant order and both have to be engaged in order to achieve change. If our research accounts only attend to the suffering of those on the lowest rungs and are blind to the suffering of those higher up, there is a danger of disengaging a whole series of actors who need to be enrolled to effect change. The next section revisits these issues through the work of Franz Kafka who was highly sensitive to the ‘dark side’ of bureaucratic organizations but, as we shall see, provides insights that allow for a nuanced reading of it.
The Trial: An Alternative Reading

It is customary to associate Kafka’s work with lonely, perplexed and threatened individuals, who are harassed by forces that are impenetrable to them. Nevertheless, there is a consistent line of defiance, resistance and hope running through Kafka’s work that his association with the dark side fails to grasp. In The Trial, K exhibits what Collinson (1994) refers to as ‘resistance through distance’, for as K explains to an advocate engaged in his defence, at first ‘I didn’t take the case very seriously; when I was not, so to speak, forcibly reminded of it I forgot all about it’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 145). At other times, K is openly defiant. For example, when he visits the magistrate who is examining his case, he rails against the injustice of his situation. There is also an element of humour (Collinson, 1988) in his recalcitrance. Hence he laughs at the magistrate, shouting ‘You blackguards! … I make you a present of all of your hearings’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 38).

K also seeks or gains allies that help him to resist including an artist, his Uncle and the advocate. During K’s first encounter with the advocate, he expresses indifference (distance) towards his situation, retaining a ‘mood of abstraction’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 73). K is even distracted through a sexual encounter during this initial meeting, which Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, p. 129) describe as a form of ‘making out’ (see Burawoy, 1979). Towards the end of the book, K tires of the ineffectiveness of his advocate and attempts to dismiss him, which could be described as ‘resistance through persistence’ (Collinson, 1994). In such instances, it cannot be said that ‘Kafka’s heroes turned inward, tormented by their fathers and themselves’ (Meyers, 2004, p. 336) because although Kafka reveals ‘the darkness hiding in the light’ (Parker, 2005, p. 155) he also hints at the light hiding in the darkness.

In organization studies, there are many accounts of resistance that counter top-down ways in which to understand how power is exercised (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994). These accounts recognize that control and resistance interpenetrate each other (Burrell, 1992). Kafka’s work is continually sensitive to this ambivalence ‘for life as he saw it was endlessly ambiguous’ (Muir, 1999, p. 9) or ‘simultaneously controlling and liberating’ (Keenoy & Seijo, 2010, p. 180). Kafka’s approach is dialectical in the sense that it explores ‘the relation between opposing propositions, and hence the inter-connectedness of supposedly separate terms’ (Parker, 2005, pp. 164–165). The enduring legacy of Kafka’s work, however, is a sense of the dark side of organizations or an uneasiness regarding the ways in which individuals can become lost in bureaucratic machinations. Indeed, the gloomy outcome that K’s life is ultimately taken by unknown individuals seems to draw us to precisely this conclusion. Yet one can offer a different interpretation of his work.

A key to a different reading of The Trial is evident in the allegory towards the end of the book, when a priest relates to K a story concerning a ‘man from the country’ who comes to a ‘door-keeper and asks for entry into the law’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 166). The door-keeper, who warns the man that ‘I am powerful’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 166), says that ‘he cannot grant him entry now’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 166; emphasis added). The man asks if ‘he will be allowed to enter later’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 166; emphasis added). The door-keeper is noncommittal and, following other obfuscations, the man ‘decides it would be better to wait until he gets permission to enter’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 166). Over many years the man ‘attempts to be allowed in’ but each time the door-keeper tells him ‘that he cannot allow him to enter yet’ (Kafka, 1925, pp. 166–167; emphasis added). At the end of his life, the man asks the door-keeper ‘How is it that in all these years nobody except myself has asked for admittance?’ He replies ‘Nobody else could gain admittance here, this entrance was meant only for you. I shall now go and close it’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 167).

The meaning of this allegory seems to be intentionally unclear, but, insofar as it suggests that no one can decide how we should proceed but ourselves, it makes the case for free will. The
door-keeper cannot grant entrance to the man nor can he deny it because whether the man enters or not is his decision alone. It is, then, the limitations that we impose upon ourselves that shackle us, and only we can remove them. It is, at least partly, our belief that others are powerful, and that we are powerless, which inhibits us from acting, resisting or going through the door ourselves. It is evident that K does not understand this because he subsequently explains to the priest that he must leave because he has ‘a responsible position in the bank, they will be waiting for me’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 172). Yet it is K, not the bank or others that determine what K must do. He is bound by his acceptance of a ‘responsible position’ and is ensnared by his belief that he is accountable to it. In the final pages of The Trial, K walks to his doom but only after he decides ‘that resistance’ is ‘futile’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 175). This bleak scenario suggests that we have little alternative other than to accept the status quo and yet the book can also be interpreted to mean precisely the opposite – that we are free to act.

In order to reconsider the relationship between managers and employees, I believe that we can think about the door-keeper as representing management or those in positions of authority more generally, and the man as representative of employees. Although I use Kafka’s allegory as a metaphor for the management-staff relationship, this analogy will proceed through both ‘comparison’ and ‘anomaly’ as my concern is to illuminate ‘dissimilarity’ (Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002, p. 295) with both functional and critical ways of thinking about the dark side. Kafka offers many different ways to interpret the relationship between the door-keeper and the man, which unfold during a conversation between K and the priest. I will highlight just some of them. First, the priest tells K that one interpretation of the allegory is that the door-keeper ‘is afraid of what he tries to make fearful for the man’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 170). I take this to mean that the door-keeper or manager is afraid of the freedom of others to act, to resist or to become other than what they are. The door-keeper is therefore deliberately obscure and threatening so that ‘the man’, that is, employees, are afraid to exercise power that might challenge his apparent authority. It also suggests that the door-keeper is afraid of his own freedom because he does not enter through the door himself. This is indicative of how those in positions of authority (and we) tolerate and reproduce the status quo, for we are afraid of losing the material and existential security we derive from organized work.

Second, it is suggested that the door-keeper or manager is actually subordinate to the man or employees and it is emphasized that he ‘does not know’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 170) that this is the case. This subordinate position is attributed to the door-keeper or manager being ‘tied to his post by his office’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 170) whereas the man came to the door voluntarily and is free to leave. Moreover, the gate-keeper waited many years for the man whose death marks the end of his service. This interpretation turns hierarchy on its head and suggests a third point: this is that managers exist, in part, for those whose lives they endeavour to control, monitor, measure, punish and reward. In this sense their lives and suffering are entwined with the lives and suffering of employees and so both would benefit, to different degrees, from a change in that relationship. Yet, the relative material advantages and subjectivity of being a door-keeper or manager who ‘strictly performs the duties of his office’ and ‘has a deep respect for his superiors’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 168) means that he cannot see beyond ‘his office’ so as to see another way of being.

A fourth interpretation that is offered is that the door-keeper or manager suffers under an illusion, which is that he is able to ‘close the door’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 171). I take this illusion to refer to the belief that one can possess power and the ability to withdraw freedom from another. I would add to this, however, that managers cannot close the door on their own freedom. This is because, like the ‘man’, they ineluctably have a choice in terms of how to ‘be’. For example, Thomas and Davies (2005) explored how social worker managers face ‘pressures to be more managerialist, procedural and distanced’ (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 724) and yet refused ‘to act in managerialist ways, refusing to be dispassionate’ (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 732).
My reading of the allegory does not exactly mirror nor is it an exhaustive catalogue of the interpretations that Kafka makes possible, but it renders the relationship between managers and employees far more complex than is evident in ‘dark side’ accounts. First, because managers are represented as potentially fearful and vulnerable beings, they are afraid of their freedom and that of others to act in ways that might challenge the status quo. Second, the lives and suffering of both managers and employees can be understood to be entwined and yet managers may be unaware of this interconnection, especially when they believe themselves to be superior to employees. Third, Kafka turns hierarchical power relations upside down by suggesting that superiors are actually subordinate because they are inevitably dependent on those who are seemingly subordinate to them. Fourth, as Foucault (1977, 1982) subsequently argued, power is not presented as the possession of those who are assumed to be powerful. A final insight is that through offering multiple, conflicting and ambiguous interpretations of his own allegory Kafka rejects ‘analytical closure’ (Oswick et al., 2002, p. 298) implying irony, openness and caution in terms of how we interpret the world. He asks us to look again and in this way restructures ‘the world of the reader in unsettling and challenging ways’ (De Cock & Land, 2006, p. 525). These insights, together with those of Foucault (1977, 1982), inform the analysis of the following case study.

Case Study: Britlay Bank

Britlay Bank [pseudonym] is a major, UK-based, high street bank that employs approximately 20,000 staff in 1,700 branches. Successive programmes of centralization and reengineering have culminated in the creation of seven back-office processing centres (PCs) and this last phase led to 4,000 redundancies in the branch network. This paper is part of a broader in-depth study of the bank, which was conducted over a 6-month period. It included ten visits to three branches, five visits to the head office and ten visits to a PC, the latter being over a period of 3 months.1 The nature of the research involved trying to understand the culture of Britlay Bank, while recognizing that ‘culture is contested, temporal, and emergent’ (Clifford, 1986, p. 19) and that ‘cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). The aim was to get inside so as to say something about ‘the ways of being and seeing for members of the culture examined’ (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 13).

The bank was selected as a case study because it was engaged in BPR2 and senior managers promised in-depth research ‘access’ (Stake, 2000, p. 446), which is essential when trying to understand culture. In-depth, in this instance, means access to a wide range of documents and to individuals from multiple areas of the organization (branches, back office, head office) and different hierarchical levels (office floor, middle and senior managers) over a sustained period of time. Limits were imposed on the research by the time constraints of conducting it and practical difficulties such as the inability to observe meetings that were organized on an ad hoc basis. This paper draws on research conducted in a PC which employs 240 people and it focuses mainly on the experiences of those in managerial positions from the PC manager through to the supervisors.

Data were collected in three ways. First, through 54 tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, including individual and group interviews with, in total, 81 employees. This included interviews with 10 senior and middle managers, 6 back office managers, 6 supervisors, 5 team leaders, 6 branch managers, 17 branch staff and 31 back office staff. Senior and middle managers were initially interviewed as a means to understand the structure and culture of the organization and open-ended questions were asked about recent changes or innovations and the strategic thinking behind them. This was a ‘snowball sample’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 523) in the sense that interviewees were asked to recommend individuals who were involved in the strategic design and implementation of innovations related to BPR. Subsequent interviewees were selected with the...
aim of understanding the impact of change and so individuals from each hierarchical level and functional area of the PC were interviewed, which can be understood as a ‘purposeful’ (Coyne, 1997) sample. This was part of an emergent process because the interviews could have continued but the research reached a ‘saturation point’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 523) when new insights into the way of life stopped emerging.

Overall, I understand this approach as ‘sampling for meaning’ where the ‘rationale is that of the discovery of the insider’s view of cultural and personal meaning and experience’ (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995, p. 11). This stands in stark contrast to positivist assumptions of being able to produce replicable, mirror-like, neutral representations of the world. Indeed, the language of sampling implies ‘passive respondents’ but here the participants ‘actively shaped the direction and outcome of this research’ (Fortado, 1998, p. 17) through the insights that they provided. In addition to tape-recording the interviews, copious notes were written during the interviews and this led to the first stage of the analysis which involved identifying key words, writing notes in the margin and expanded notes as ideas emerged and connections were made. This analysis triggered themes, ideas, directions, enigmas and patterns to explore during the ongoing research process.

The second method of data collection involved reading and re-reading corporate documents including strategy statements, training materials, staff briefings, minutes of meetings, and change documents, and watching corporate videos. This gave rise to the second stage of the analysis whereby these materials were analysed to provide insights into the planned programme of change and its operation and they were used to chronologically reconstruct the change programme. The third method of data collection was through informal, non-participant observation. Hence, during the 25 visits to the bank, field notes (Van Maanen, 1988) were written before, in-between and after the interviews that recorded first impressions, passing conversations, details regarding decor and the architecture of buildings. This included observations of cashiers at work in the branches but not of the processing clerks in the open plan, back office, other than at a distance. The back office staff could be observed because the interviews were conducted in a room that one entered through the open plan, back-office work space.

The research and analysis involved in stages one and two highlighted an intensely controlled work regime which struck me as Kafkaesque. I then revisited Kafka ‘for inspiration and insight’ (De Cock & Land, 2006, p. 518) and his allegorical tale of the door-keeper and the man led me to rethink the gathered empirical material. The allegory was the ‘flint’ that together with the empirical ‘rock’ created a spark enabling me to translate ‘experience … into the intellectual sphere … [whereby one] … gives it form’ (Mills, 1959, p. 199). It allowed for ‘a reduced set of data as a basis for thinking about its meanings’ (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 428) and gave rise to the third stage of the analysis, which amounted to a ‘fine-grained, line-by-line analysis’ (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 160) of the tape-recorded interviews.

First, I explored the ways in which employees disciplined managers. Second, I examined how the PC managers are subject to discipline from above and discipline themselves. Third, I considered how managers could be regarded as victims rather than simply agents of contemporary ways of organizing. This was an iterative process that involved shuttling ‘back and forth between existing materials and my own research’ (Mills, 1959, p. 202). The engagement with Kafka was not unidirectional but ‘more akin to a mutual dialogue’ (De Cock & Land, 2006, p. 518) as empirical material, previous theorizing and literary insights were used in a way that informed each other. My concern is not to indicate how ‘good novels can educate better managers’ (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994, p. 1) but rather to use them to challenge both traditional and critical ‘dark side’ accounts of organizations.
The setting: a processing centre

There are seven work sections in the PC each with between 15 and 35 staff, which perform discrete tasks, such as processing direct debits or standing orders. The work is highly individualized, monotonous, closely monitored and resonates with Taylorism-Fordism in its ‘ghastly sublimation of the human spirit’ (Donkin, 2001, p. 149). The staff have monthly reviews along with 6- and 12-monthly appraisals. Although the staff should be assessed according to core values which include teamwork, initiative and customer service, the staff indicated that the managers are primarily concerned with individual output and error rates.

In The Trial, Kafka (1925) asserts that the hierarchical structure facing K ‘was endless and beyond the comprehension of even the initiated’ (Kafka, 1925, pp. 93–94). The result was that ‘business simply appeared’ to ‘minor officials’ who ‘did not know where it had come from, then passed it on, and they were not told where it was going’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 94). This resonates with work in the PC, for the staff process images of documents that disappear into the electronic ether once they have finished their part of the process. The environment is clean and paperless, but beneath the anaesthetized surface, there is a world of ‘pain and discomfort’ (Burrell, 1997, p. 46) wrought of repetition for those who toil in this modern clerical factory. If ‘the most terrifying idea is meaningless and goalless existence’ (Burrell, 1997, p. 173) then this ‘temple of human sacrifice’ (Donkin, 2001, p. 303) seems designed to intensify such terror.

Each day, the staff record the time that they spend processing different types of work on individual time sheets. They are allocated to work queues which have targets for processing items. For example, on the mandates section, the staff must complete 90 signature checks or process 125 cancelled cheques each hour. The staff are required to have short exercise breaks during the day to avoid repetitive stress disorders. The possibility of such disorders does not stem from ‘organizational-technical systems failures’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 293) because this is how the system of work was designed. The extent of the repetition that provides the conditions for such disorders could be described as a form of ‘torture’ (Burrell, 1997). It is a cause of harm, if not disaster, for employees, in the sense that it limits what they do and can be – and may negatively affect what they become, physically and mentally. Data are fed into a work tracking system that produces weekly performance reports for each section and individual.

The above insights support Victor and Stephens’ (1994) critique of new organizational forms that ‘offer no ongoing relationships, no safe haven, no personal space’ (Victor & Stephens 1994, p. 481). The majority of the staff perform the same task day after day, week after week, stretching into months before being moved to another equally repetitive task. Surveillance saturates life. Work is checked, in some instances, by one’s peers. The staff do not know whose work they are checking nor who is checking their work. Errors identified by the branch staff or by customers are logged against individual names. It cannot be said that any ‘disaster’ has resulted from such work in the sense of a loss of life or environmental damage and so it does not fit neatly with Vaughan’s (1999) understanding of the ‘dark side’. Nevertheless, individual employees may experience having to work in this way as disastrous for them personally and collectively, the cumulative waste of human potential in such systems could also be regarded as a social disaster.

Employees disciplining managers

Although the control is intense, the limits to managerial power and the ability of the staff to discipline management were evident during a customer service programme for all 1,400 staff in the seven PCs. Introduced two years after the PC’s were first set up, it amounted to a day-long course
during which the staff were encouraged to take responsibility for customer service failings, as Chris, a team leader, explained:

It was designed to make you more aware of how you might speak to somebody on the phone. How you might respond to a query, because if you don’t do it today, it’s gonna look bad on us and they’ll [customers] go somewhere else. [The] Exercise really aimed at improving you, to help them [management], to help the bank really.

The staff were tasked to consider the ‘reality’ of their working lives and to imagine a ‘fantasy’ situation that would improve customer service. This exercise was supposed to last for an hour but it unleashed such animosity that the course facilitators were unable to progress beyond it. This came as a complete surprise to the management, showing how divorced they are from the experience of work. As a result, the original course was largely abandoned. Jennine, a course facilitator, explained that ‘It was quite shocking at the beginning as to how sort of demoralized people did feel’ and she thought that ‘initially they [management] didn’t expect the reaction they got at all’. The staff animosity reflected the boring and monotonous work and the obsession with error rates and output. Yvonne, another course facilitator, explained:

It turned into therapy sessions … it was almost trying to boost them, make them feel better, reassure them that the managers were aware … there was almost a shift quite early on of forgetting trying to aim towards getting ideas out of them … and how can we make it generally a nicer place to come to work, and not have people dreading coming in.

The system of work has created a ‘tangible social harm’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 284) for employees, and although this was not a ‘mistake’ on the part of management nor an example of ‘misconduct’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 284), the ‘dark side’ of organization is evident.

If we understand power as ‘relational’ (Foucault, 1977) as Kafka’s allegory of the man and the door-keeper indicates, this suggests that everyone is able to exercise power to some extent. This relational understanding of power resonates with the case of Britlay Bank, first because through their resistance to the customer service programme the staff were able to block management’s intended designs. Hence the original course was largely abandoned and it became a vehicle through which the staff voiced their discontent. Second, in response to the negative staff comments, changes were made to the work regime. In particular, management promised to reduce the emphasis on checking and to introduce greater job rotation. This overt staff resistance, therefore, forced management to consider the workers’ experience of work.

Third, in response to the expressed staff discontent, a leadership training programme was created for management. This was another more indirect means through which the staff disciplined the management. Finally, there was evidence of managers disciplining themselves by seeking to change their behaviour and by reconstructing their subjectivity. For example, Julie, a section manager, remarked:

The big group meeting that we have every month. I’d put it off because of the volume of work and I put it off and put it off and I thought ‘Well I shouldn’t be doing that’.

The resistance expressed during the customer service workshops led Julie to reflect on her relationship with the staff. She had put work volume before communication and had cancelled team meetings to meet work targets. We can observe therefore that Julie is also disciplined by the intense work quotas and so, like the staff, she has reason to resist them. Julie monitors herself and has adjusted her behaviour according to the concerns voiced by the staff. She is both a watcher of
others and is watched by others. Julie is not ‘in ignorance of the actual accusation’ made by the staff but – like K – she must now ‘recall the most trivial actions and events of one’s life, present them and review them from every angle’ (Kafka, 1925, pp. 100–101). Another section manager, Steve, remarked that during the workshops, the staff expressed that:

‘The only time you see your manager is when you have your monthly feedback.’ I knew that I had a problem, in that my head was always down because of the volume of work that I had to process … So I make an effort now. I make sure I go around at least two or three times a week just having a general chat.

Once again, it is evident that those who are ostensibly in positions of authority are also disciplined by work volumes. Moreover, they have been disciplined by those who are seemingly subordinate, requiring them to reflect on how they think, work and interact with the staff:

I’ve made more of an effort to find out about the families and things of the people who are quiet … It’s very hard to talk to people about their family life when they don’t volunteer the information, what I’ve done is, I’ve looked in their files first. One of my chaps, who I knew nothing about, I looked in his file and he’s 15th November. So when I was chatting to him one day I just said ‘What are you doing to celebrate your birthday John’ and he was really surprised that I knew it was his 50th. (Julie, section manager)

Julie looked into the files to find out more about the staff and, it could be argued, that she is exercising a more ‘intrusive’ (Victor & Stephens, 1994, p. 481) form of control than before. Nevertheless, it is evident that disciplinary processes work in multiple directions and we have considered one example of how the staff are able to exercise power over those who are seemingly more powerful than them.

**The watchers: managers disciplining themselves**

In Kafka’s allegory, it is the door-keeper’s role to watch and wait for the man. He never leaves his position nor does he pass through the gate. He is tied to his position and identity as a door-keeper. He apparently disciplines himself, for we are not told that anyone monitors how and whether he performs his duties. This section explores how, although they are not free from discipline from above, managers can be compared to such door-keepers. It considers how they engage in processes of self-discipline for as they watch (wait for) and discipline others they discipline themselves:

It’s pretty easy to know if somebody’s finished what you’ve allocated them to do … They can’t sit there and do nothing. I can, at any time of the day; I can see how fast they’re working. I can see the last piece of work they do, if they haven’t done anything for 5 or 10 minutes. Only from that factor whereby basically [they are] being watched. (Gary, supervisor)

As Gary explained, it is his role to continually watch the staff and yet, through continually watching others, he watches and disciplines himself. He constitutes himself as a watcher or door-keeper, who is tied to his role and subjectivity. Many ‘dark-side’ scholars have focused on how managers discipline employees through surveillance but this tends to omit how managers are simultaneously disciplined through executing these processes of observation and control.

The staff are instructed not to check the amount of work pending on their individual, electronic, work queues. The rationale for this is that they should work in a regulated, mechanical way. This creates problems for the managers who are tasked to enrol employee freedom in support of the organization, because it shifts the emphasis from self-discipline towards external regulation:
Unless people know what’s on their queues it’s difficult for them to know whether anybody else needs help … When you were paper based, you could see that people were struggling, whereas when it’s queue based, it’s difficult to know. (Gina, supervisor)

The majority of the staff here, they’re working from an image machine all the time. They might know that there’s so many standing orders to process but it’s not, they’re not that aware of it. They are not looking at this pile of work. In a branch you’d be thinking ‘I’ve got to get all this done before I go home’ or if it came to 5 o’clock there’d be more of a commitment to get that work finished, whereas we haven’t got that here. It’s hard to get that commitment here from the staff. It’s people at the top end who are aware of the queues, who are rallying around, trying to get people to work overtime and that … If we’re aware that our queues are getting really horrendous and we see people chatting, we’re the ones sat there thinking ‘If they don’t stop talking in a minute I’m going to have to say something’. (Julie, section manager)

These comments suggest that the individualizing, mechanistic, electronic controls militate against the staff using their autonomy to help each other. The dark side therefore resides not only in apocalyptic events but also in the quotidian human consequences of such limiting ways of working. The system of discipline has shifted from internal towards external regulation and this requires management to watch others and, in the process, to discipline themselves:

As a manager when you’re watching the throughput of the rest of the team, the quality. You can gauge if somebody has done it and we also do spot checks, random checks on time sheets, to make sure they’ve been completed correctly. (Di, processing manager)

The staff are monitored by a chain of managers all of whom are ‘watching’ those below them. They conduct endless ‘checks’ and, in the process, watch and check themselves. Gary, a supervisor, explained how he must comport himself and, in doing so, highlighted other ways in which managers fabricate and discipline themselves:

As a supervisor, manager, one of the biggest things is your own personal demeanour. You know, you’ve got to come in to work no matter how you feel. You’ve got to be bright, lively, always on hand, no matter how much work you’ve got.

The staff are required to gather qualitative evidence in support of their performance and this is assessed during performance evaluations. In this way the staff are required to make a ‘case’ of their lives. Yet managers are required to constantly watch for and mull over the validity of this ‘evidence’. The monitoring of work preoccupies and inhabits them, and they must be vigilant, to ensure that those who resist the machine are caught. There are many ways that the staff are able to resist: for instance, by fiddling their time sheets. They are also able to put complicated jobs back into the system for someone else to complete. The staff can ring customers but let the phone ring only once before putting the phone down. In doing so they still gain the time allocated for attempting to contact a customer. The staff can ‘diarize’ jobs, which means that they complete the work but then, instead of finalizing the job, they put it back into the system under the pretence that additional information needs to be obtained. This work is then picked up later in the day, and finalized, but the staff are awarded additional time for it. Through surveillance, the managers seek to limit such fiddles and so one could argue that they have less freedom than the staff. This is because the staff are concerned with both their performance (conformance) and fiddling (escape). Alan, a supervisor, was passionately supportive of the control/surveillance that the new PC regime facilitates:
Work processes and work procedures have changed for the better because people can’t hide in this place, whereas in the branch, I can think of two or three people who would have got away with it for years and years. Whereas in this place, we can quite easily tell who are the workers, and who are the non-productive people, and they can’t diarize things and they can’t shove things in drawers … So I like that idea that everybody is accountable, and you can find out exactly what people have done, whereas in the branch, there was no way of knowing what people had done.

Alan’s anger at having seen individuals escape control in the branches imbued his celebration of accountability. His desire for an equitable system, and his concern to avoid the ‘dark side’ of ‘nonconformity’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 282), led him to overlook the dark side or debilitating consequences of surveillance both for himself and others:

Here all my people are sat around together and I can see at a glance what everybody’s doing and, if I feel as though somebody’s not pulling their weight, I can go into the system and ask the system to tell me what they’ve actually done … the biggest difference here is that you can see workers, and you can see the non-workers and you can prove it. In the branch, there was nothing more aggravating [than] knowing that people weren’t working and skiving.

Alan described his constant surveillance of others and yet, through this monitoring of others he must be continually alert, constantly employed and ‘always on the watch’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 154). Alan is like a ‘lidless eye’ for there is no respite as he monitors others. In contrast to Thomas and Davies’ (2005) findings, but like Kafka’s (2007) door-keeper, there appeared to be no separation between the ‘corporate me’ and Alan. Employing ‘bureaucratic opportunism and professional zeal’ (Seltzer & Anderson, 2001, p. 494), he rejoiced that he could ‘prove’ what people were doing and relished ‘the system’s’ capacity to find the ‘non-workers’. The work and the requirement to control others seemed to define Alan’s sense of self. He had become the system from which others sought to escape. In the process of surveillance, his role as a watcher imposes limits on what he does and can be. Di, a processing manager, alluded to the reconstruction of the self that managers go through, as they are ‘normalised’ (Foucault, 1977) into becoming managers:

Something that I notice with new managers is they talk ‘I’, and when you settle into it, you tend to talk ‘we’.

This splicing together of the corporate and individual self reflects that the identity of individuals goes through a transition, as they become managers. The financial rewards for this are limited certainly in the case of supervisors. Moreover, the opportunities to realize one’s potential are curtailed because, although the work is less repetitive for managers than it is for frontline staff, many of their ‘abilities remain unused’ (Ritzer, 2008, p. 31). To be engaged in endlessly watching and disciplining others is hardly exhaustive of human potential and there is no reprieve because there is no ‘one best way’ and no end point to managing:

Management is about moving the goal posts isn’t it? And keeping everything fresh, you know, there are no right and wrong answers. It’s just keeping people’s brains concentrated. (head of the PC)

The head of the PC depicted management as the continuous search for ‘freshness’ and the constant need to keep ‘people’s brains concentrated’. It suggests that managers are engaged in an incessant process of self-discipline as they seek to discipline others (see Watson, 1994). This is rendered all the more problematic because, contrary to Alan’s claims, the system is not ‘so perfect after all’ (Kafka, 1927, p. 178) and the staff are able to fiddle:
We trust them as well with machine breakdowns. If they have problems with the machines, obviously they can’t work, so they log it down but I can’t, with 31 staff, I don’t know whether the machine’s gone down or not so there is an element of trust. (Gary, supervisor)

Gary’s comments point to a perennial uncertainty facing managers. Thus they are dealing with imperfect systems and with staff who may not be compliant. This intensifies the need to monitor, watch and discipline both others and themselves. As the first section indicated, it underlines that there is light in the darkest of work regimes because managers can never know exactly what it is that their staff are doing, nor are they able to remorselessly keep ‘people’s brains concentrated’, as least in the way intended.

Managers as victims

This section will argue that many layers of management can be regarded as victims of contemporary ways of organizing because they limit what they are and can be; they aremere links in a chain forged by others:

Kim : Even communication down to our level is nonexistent sometimes. How can we tell the staff if we’re not told ourselves?
Author : So you don’t have a formal team brief?
Jan : Should do but it tends to get a bit lost at the top and it’s not always passed down.
Alan : It comes from Mike [PC manager], and it’s given to managers, and they read about it and then it gets passed to the managers and supervisors but that can take days and that’s the problem. And if one processing manager has told their section manager, and the section manager tells the supervisor, some sections know like a day, two days, three days before the rest of the Centre. (supervisors)

As the above extract indicates, supervisors are on the receiving end of decisions taken by senior back office managers. Gina, a supervisor on the enquiries section, felt divorced even from the section managers, who are immediately above her in the hierarchy:

The Head of the PC comes out and speaks to you ... but then you’ve got your processing managers who sit away from everything and, as a result, you feel as though you are detached from those kind of people because they’re not part of the section … And some of the section managers are the same way. They don’t just come round for a general chat or see how everybody is doing … But they seem to expect us to do that. We’re the ones who go round but they don’t do it themselves and I think that’s a shame because it would make them seem a bit more human rather than a manager.

Gina’s comments suggest that she is disconnected from managerial others who do not seem to her to be fully ‘human’. Another supervisor conveyed a sense of powerlessness and of being a victim in relation to the setting up of the PCs:

Gary : They obviously did have to change to survive, and they were pretty ruthless. I think they are still pretty ruthless.
Author : Do you mean the senior management or?
Gary : I think it comes down from senior management. I don’t think particularly the management here are ruthless, but I think the further up you go they’re interested in results, and the way they achieve those results is you’ll do it and that’s that. (supervisor)
Critical scholars tend to present frontline employees as victims of management control and work intensification. Yet many layers of management can also be understood to be victims because they are subject to work regimes and rules that they have not created, and may disagree with, but are required to enforce. Gary suggested that the more hierarchically distant the managers are, then the more ruthless they become. One explanation for this is that local managers are forced to deal with people rather than numbers. This is not a burden for ‘the top officials’ who ‘keep out of sight’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 84) of the ‘pain’ (Burrell, 1997, pp. 183–184) of those below them. Kim, another supervisor, explained that she is, to a large extent, powerless in the face of a regime that she did not design:

I mean the changes, we don’t have any say over the changes, you just either go with it or you get out. Obviously we’ve decided to go with them and we’re stuck with it.

Kim articulated a resigned subjectivity and instead of being part of a powerful bureaucracy that controls ‘others’, she considered herself to be a victim, caught up in the machinations of senior managers.

The head of the PC articulated that ‘a lot of reputations’ were bound up with the success of the PCs. Consequently, ‘there was a lot of attention to figures because that’s all that could be seen from the Centre’. He felt that this helped to account, contrary to his instructions, for the fact that so many of his managers continued to focus on output and error rates. Hence the threat to jobs, and the pressure to hit targets was so intense, that the figures have left an enduring mark on managerial subjectivity:

Now that feeling was so strong, it’s still planted in some people’s brains, particularly if you are of a similar view, that this place should be a factory and efficiency and error rate is really the only thing that’s important.

The head of the PC is not exempt from performance pressures and he reflected on the situation when the PCs were first set up. His comments endorse the view that whole layers of managers ‘are only cogs in this machine’ (Lowy, 1997, p. 127):

If we’d have gone into backlog, I’d have been out. No doubt whatsoever … As it turned out, we didn’t, but did I feel vulnerable? Too bloody true I did … probably for the first time in my life did you feel that your performance that day, reflected where you may be in two to three weeks’ time.

The concern, when the PCs were set up, was to meet targets, and this reflected the demands of senior managers who are divorced from everyday operational issues. There was an intense rush to implement the new structure. This reflected the interests, careers and ambitions of those in senior positions who were responsible for designing and implementing what was, for them, an exciting new project. Their ‘pleasures’ (Burrell, 1997) and preoccupations are far removed from the ‘pain’ of the staff and the PC managers’ concern to motivate the staff. The enduring motivational problem in the PCs is a reflection of the type of jobs that were designed in the abstract by individuals, who were far removed from those on the front line, and from those managers who are charged to ensure that the work is done. Both are victims in the sense that the staff work in monotonous ways while local managers must find methods to motivate them. Although staff motivation was not a concern for the designers, it is for those tasked with making the PCs work. This is because systems cannot work without employee consent and even engagement, which indicates the disruptive power that the staff could exercise, should they have the will to do so. Once again, this indicates that the darkness may not be all-embracing.
The focus on numbers in the PCs is at least partly a manifestation of senior managers managing ‘at a distance’ (Latour, 1987) from those whose lives they command and control. Hence the staff are transformed into figures, through the emphasis on output and error rates, to ensure that senior managers can manage distally. In the extract to follow, Gary, a supervisor, explained the consequences of this emphasis on figures, which he is required to enforce. He contrasted the importance attached to figures when appraising someone’s performance, with the more qualitative ‘evidence’ – which the staff are also required to collect. The appraisal system grades the staff as ‘O’ – outstanding, ‘H’ – high achiever, ‘G’ – good, IR – improvement required and ‘U’ – unsatisfactory:

The way that I do it so that I don’t get pulled up [disciplined], I can only qualify somebody not meeting their quality or throughput performance rates, if they’ve got some personal problem, while they’ve been working that queue … You could have somebody on a monthly basis, they’ve got evidence coming out of their ears. Things they’ve been involved in. They’ve done this, done this but every single month they’ve never achieved their quality rate and they’ve never achieved their throughput … It would be touch or go whether they got IR or a G and I suspect because of their performance they’d get an IR. No matter what happens down here in terms of evidence, done this, done that because, at the end of the day, they’re a processor. Two main things, the throughput and the quality rate … They’ll [management] tell you that it’s at your discretion and all that, but I know for a fact from what comes out, facts and figures, number crunching…

Gary expressed dismay that output and error rates dominate performance assessment, but he nevertheless conforms to this demand. In such instances, managers are required to do things which they find contradictory, spurious or indefensible. The corrupting way in which power is exercised is apparent when such tasks are nonetheless undertaken. This is evident in the conduct of appraisals:

**Steve**: One thing I do find a bit frustrating is that you’re told roughly how many Os, Hs, Gs, you should have on your section, which sometimes means that someone who deserves a particular category … aren’t gonna get the H. And that’s unfair because it means they’re not getting the reward they should do. Now that’s a frustration for me and I’ve got to sit down in front of that individual and try and justify it that they’re only a G.

**Julie**: When you actually believe they should be a H.

**Author**: Why – who is putting that pressure on you to do that?

**Steve**: Well it just comes down the hierarchy. It comes right from the top and they put pressure from head office to the PCs, and then down to processing managers, and down to section managers, down to supervisors. It just comes down from the top. (section managers)

It seems that once ‘the system’, or senior managers, have decided how many of each grade there should be then, irrespective of performance, it ‘can never be persuaded to change its opinion’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 117). Decisions come down through the hierarchy and are absorbed by these officials. Precisely who or what the hierarchy is, is not clear. Steve referred to the hierarchy in the abstract, suggesting people that he had ‘heard’ of but had ‘never seen’ (Kafka, 1925, p. 139). These section managers explained the injustice of the system but then justified the unjustifiable to the staff that they grade. They do so because they are located within a hierarchical system and to retain their position of authority and, their relative privileges, they accept the rules. In fact, they enforce these rules even though they disagree with them. In such instances, despite voicing their dissent, it is apparent that they have internalized discipline and have become, at least in part, the system itself.
It appears that, for them, the system cannot be challenged. These managers did not indicate that they would refer such cases to a senior person or would refuse to comply. Yet, as Kafka (1926) highlights, it is they rather than the hierarchy that enforce the rules. This is evident in that the head of the PC fervently denied that there are limits to the number of grades that can be allocated. He also expressed frustration about the staff continuing to be narrowly assessed according to errors and output:

> Output shouldn’t dominate. It should be a part of it but no bigger part as to comment on the quality, the core standards, the punctuality, the sickness, the initiatives … one of the staff said to me ‘I understand still that you have to be 120% efficient to get a H.’ Now I’m so disappointed that there’s still that there … So the message going from me through the processing managers, through to the section managers, still isn’t strong enough.

The head of the PC does not ‘possess’ power and has to achieve his goals through others, but the system seems to take on a life of its own or, as Kafka puts it, ‘the machine is still working and speaking for itself’ (Kafka, 1925, p.166) irrespective of the head’s commands. In this sense he is a victim of the bureaucratic machine and the discipline it fosters because it works in a way that contradicts and undermines his desires and commands for a more human-focused method of assessment.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Bauman (1988) and others (Burrell, 1997; Donkin, 2001) have discussed how the optimistic view of the Enlightenment as a means ‘of enhancing life’ (Feingold, 1983, p. 398) came to an abrupt halt with the Holocaust, when ‘Reason itself’ came ‘to be used for insane purposes’ (Burrell, 1997, p. 140; Sørensen, 2014, in this issue). This paper has provided a contemporary illustration of reason being used for dark ends (see also Ritzer, 2008). Drawing on insights gleaned from Kafka (1925), I have made four main points. First, that the dark side needs to be analysed in relation to conformity and functionality rather than simply non-conformity (Vaughan, 1999) or dysfunctionality (Griffin & O’Leary-Kelly, 2004). This is because the dark side is not an aberration or a temporary blip: it is an ingrained feature of contemporary ways of organizing (see Burrell, 1997; Donkin, 2001; Ritzer, 2008).

Second, critical ‘dark side’ scholars have tended to represent managers as exercising power over others so as to intensify control. Yet, it is equally important to identify the limits to this project and to explore how the seemingly powerless also exercise power. In the case of Britlay Bank, it was apparent that, through resistance, the staff disciplined the management and this led to the failure of a customer service programme. The staff also exercised power through putting complicated jobs back into the system, fiddling timesheets, putting the phone down on customers, and diarizing work. These insights highlight that – like Kafka’s door-keeper – managers are vulnerable to the exercise of power by those who are ostensibly subordinate to them.

Third, although critical ‘dark side’ scholars have focused on how managers discipline others, what tends to be missed is how, in the process, managers discipline themselves. As control over working practices and subjectivity is intensified, managers create themselves as particular types of subject. Kafka was aware of such dynamics and depicts in his classic novel, *The Castle*, how officials or managers are not supposed to display ‘sympathy or anything of that sort’ (Kafka, 1926, p. 193) for those they control. Instead, they must act ruthlessly by disciplining themselves and others in ‘strict compliance with and execution of [one’s] duties’ (Kafka, 1926, p. 233). At Britlay Bank, similar dynamics can be observed for there was a stringent emphasis on monitoring and rewarding performance based on error and output rates. This was diligently enforced despite the head of the PC’s insistence that it was not necessary to do so.
The rejection of the head of the PC’s call for a more humanized system of discipline fits with Vaughan’s (1999) depiction of the ‘dark side’. Hence she describes non-conformity as ‘extreme rule-mindedness that deflects individuals from actions that are most beneficial to the organization’ (Vaughan, 1999, p. 281). The discipline of targets, it seems, has forged a particular managerial subjectivity that is preoccupied with numbers. This suggests that both managers and employees share a common cause because both are diminished by contemporary ways of organizing. Managers are diminished because to spend one’s life disciplining others is to subject oneself, at least in terms of subjectivity, to a disciplinary gaze. Moreover, to be constituted as and to constitute oneself as a ‘watcher’, a number-cruncher or a ‘gate-keeper’ provides only partial fulfilment of their potential as human beings.

The fourth insight is that although critical commentators have understandably represented employees as victims of new forms of control (e.g. Delbridge et al., 1992; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992; Willmott, 1993), in many ways whole layers of management are also victims of the dark side. As Burrell (1997) predicted, the emphasis in large organizations, such as Britlay Bank, is not on ‘“empowered” managers playing a role in a “decentralized” system [but] upon a centralized schematization’ (Burrell, 1997, p. 177). In a number of instances, the managers enforced what they understood to be contradictory or unjust demands. Hence the assessment of staff performance was supposed to reflect their overall contribution and yet it was believed that only output and error rates counted. Likewise, managers felt that they could only award so many of each grade. In both instances, the managers in the back office are victims of a flawed and contradictory work regime. We can also observe that the design of dull, individualized and repetitive work is hardly a recipe for stimulating work or motivated employees. Consequently, the PC managers have to try to make the system work even though they played no part in its design. These managers are victims of the regime and this is also evident in that their jobs are insecure, repetitive and ‘ripe for culling’ (Burrell, 1997, p. 174). A failure to conform or to deliver, as the head of the PC indicated, is, therefore, a threat to their job, income and career. These insights indicate that it is not just employees who suffer due to the ‘dark side’ of contemporary organizations.

In The Castle, Kafka suggests that authority is supposed to operate like clockwork but ‘officials’ often have to work at night to meet work demands. In view of this, errors occur and fatigue means that officials do not always act in an impersonal way. The official may then empathize with those they are supposed to treat impartially. At such moments, Kafka (1927) argues, the officials have ‘actually ceased, then, to be an official’ (Kafka, 1927, p. 239). It is here that Kafka suggests a way out of the bureaucratic embrace, for when ‘cares and concerns’ (Kafka, 1927, p. 233) for others endure, humanity ‘literally rips the official organization apart’ (Kafka, 1927, p. 239). At such times, the great edifice of surveillance begins to crack, opening up slivers of light; fissures through which people can escape. These are not temporary openings in an otherwise inescapable net but reflect fundamental limitations in the system of regulation. It is a system that asks us to become impersonal and yet Kafka suggests that through our humanity we can resist. This resonates with Seltzer and Anderson’s (2001) conclusion that ‘numbers and the systems that produce them are morally neutral. It is what we-or-others do with them that counts’ (Seltzer & Anderson, 2001, p. 507). To empathize, to care, to not blindly follow instructions offers a way to resist (see Thomas & Davies, 2005). To achieve radical change would require people to resist ‘the safety of the rubber stamp’ and to make an ‘often-painful adjustment’ (Donkin, 2001, p. 215) in terms of how they view the world and themselves. Kafka (1927) speaks directly to us of the personal threat but also the rewards that such rebellion poses for ‘how will it be afterwards, when it’s over … there we stand alone, defenceless in the face of our misuse of office – that doesn’t bear thinking about. And yet we’re happy. How suicidal happiness can be!’ (Kafka, 1927, p. 239).
To conclude, among the many rich insights that Kafka’s work provides, one of the greatest is the absurdity of life for those who are confined to the boxes marked out by the distinctions of hierarchy, functionality and specialization. It is absurd for both those who squirm beneath the rules and for those whose life it is to enforce them. This paper has focused on the latter. Kafka’s work cries out for alternative ways in which to organize and govern ourselves. The ‘dark side’ for Kafka is not to be found in non-conformity but conformity. Indeed, non-conformity is linked to the light. The lid to the box remains open for Kafka, the mesh that we have forged for ourselves can be torn apart. The need to do so is perhaps more pressing at this moment than ever before. The calamities of inequality, hunger, unemployment, wasted talent, work intensification, dehumanizing working conditions, financial mismanagement and environmental disaster are woven into the cages and rules that we have constructed – yet there is light to be found in the darkness.

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1. A book has been published based on this study which explores the totalitarian implications of contemporary management interventions (see McCabe, 2007). It asks whether employees who are treated as machines become machines. In contrast to this paper’s focus on first-line and middle management, it explores the strategic thinking behind new wave management and the experiences of back office and branch employees. It examines how employees reproduce the conditions through which they suffer even as they resist the corporate machine.

2. The case study was part of a broader ESRC-funded project which the author worked on with Professor David Knights. The grant investigated the human implications of BPR in the UK financial services sector. Over a two-year period four case studies were conducted, with organizations that are household names in UK finance. Its objective was to investigate whether BPR is effective in improving customer service, organizational performance and quality of working life. It also sought to understand the relationship in management thinking/practice between BPR and other aspect of management and organizations such as corporate strategy and organizational culture. This article draws on empirical material which the author collected while working on the project.

**References**


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