

## **Protest? Then What?**

***How economic globalization creates a social double bind and a mental health epidemic in the west worker population***

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### **Abstract**

*This article postulates that the global market is an open system that has no control process. It also advances that “developed” societies unconsciously make contradictory and paradoxical demands on their workers – called a “double bind” in psychology – that put the workers in unmanageable situations. The fact that these paradoxical demands are not explicit can drive the individuals subjected to them to madness. The authors posit that the epidemic of mental health problems at work in developed societies is exacerbated by the effects of this social double bind. The authors suggest that the paradoxical nature of market demands should be made explicit and that a regulative process should be introduced to thwart the market’s exponential drift, which is a characteristic of open systems.*

**Keywords :** Economic globalization, Double bind, Mental health, Revolt, Resignation, Regulation, Systemic

### **Introduction**

#### **The global market functions as an open system**

The capitalist paradigm that the market should be governed solely by the principle of supply and demand is beginning to reveal its limitations (World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Labour Office (ILO) 2011). In fact, this so-called regulation is manifesting itself in the West as a mass exodus of entire sections of the economy, a growing population of unemployed and individuals sidelined by society, and millions affected by occupational disease (de Gaulejac 2011; Rowland 2006). The logic of maximizing return on investment in a global market can only lead to the collapse of organizations and States that maintain high standards of occupational health and safety, social security, and environmentally responsible sustainable development (Tremblay 2010). Indeed, the cost of meeting these high standards no longer allows Western businesses to remain competitive with emerging-economy companies that are not subject to such constraints. Of course, there are other factors, such as geography and weather in some places, that contribute to this disenfranchisement of endogenous production.

While the capitalist economy's original assumption postulates automatic market regulation based on the model of supply and demand, it appears from the perspective of a developed Western country that, in reality, the global economic system behaves like an open system without any regulative device (von Bertalanffy 1968). As demonstrated by systems specialists, an open system can only increase its tendency to diverge. An open system behaves like heating without a thermostat: it goes on heating...until the fuel is gone. In the economy, the growing demand in the West for "cheap" goods accelerates the exodus of companies that produce these goods to emerging countries where production costs are much lower than in the West. In so doing, the citizens of Western countries become poorer and consume more and more "cheap" imported goods, ignoring local products that have become too expensive. It is therefore no longer the high-performing companies that survive when others disappear, it is the companies that use the least constraining legislative contexts that survive and cause those that maintain the highest standards of social responsibility to disappear (International Organization for Standardization ISO 2009). From this perspective, the absolute requirement of profit without any safeguard can only result in wage, social and environmental lowballing. This article explains why, in this inhuman context, the citizens of developed countries protest or become resigned and proposes an alternative to these two behaviours.

## Theory

### **Economic globalization creates a social double bind in the West**

In his work on schizophrenia, Gregory Bateson described the paradoxical injunction or double-bind concept (Bateson et al. 1956; Watzlawick 1976). The paradoxical injunction consists in simultaneously requiring something and its opposite from an individual. Gregory Bateson and his successors have shown that the impact of this attitude is to drive the individual to madness. The hypothesis explored in this article is that in a global market, the changes in the working world in Western capitalist societies generate many mental health problems (International Labour Organization ILO 2011) because these changes are based on a paradoxical injunction that is implicit, not voiced, and puts the workers in these countries in a double-bind situation.

The two injunctions that govern the labour market in the 2010s stem from different realities. Individually, they are not paradoxes and appear to be self-evident, because they are such a part of our daily reality. However, their coexistence in a global market makes them increasingly paradoxical and lays the foundation for a schizophrenic society.

The first injunction is inherited from the 1980s concepts of total quality and excellence (Peters and Waterman 1982) which followed a period of growth known as "The Glorious Thirty" (1945-1975). It posits that only the best performing organizations, those that produce the best quality goods and services, can survive, grow and be profitable. Obviously, excellence depends on competent, trained, motivated human resources managed by visionary, stimulating managers who acknowledge their subordinates' contributions. This injunction has caused workers, organizations and developed societies to introject this message of excellence and performance as a condition of survival. As a result, the new workers and decision makers of this world have entered the labour market inculcated with this evidence that quality and excellence are necessary for the survival of our organizations. Furthermore, this injunction has also led generations of professionals (many of whom belong to generation X (Kelly 2011)) to develop a professional ideal that supports these extremely high standards. For over thirty years, this injunction seemed all the more reasonable because the results materialized. Of course, some sectors (i.e., agriculture) appeared to be exceptions to this rule, but the push for excellence appeared to compensate the best performers generously.

The second injunction has cropped up more recently and remains so implicit and unconscious that it even seems difficult to state. It also differs depending on whether an organization's operations or services can be delocalized or whether delocalization is not an alternative (such as local health care, real estate services, etc.).

When delocalization is possible, the injunction states "If you commit everything and you make concessions, you will save your jobs". This injunction is a fool's game because it incites workers to concede many of the benefits gained during the Glorious Thirty and to exhaust themselves by giving their best, all in the hope of saving their jobs. Unfortunately, the competition is one-sided. Until emerging economies have caught up with the standard of living in developed countries and the attendant compliance with social, environmental, and other legislation, their workers will remain unbeatable competitors. Only high-value-added activities may be able to defer the inevitable consequence: the sole logic of return on capital is leading developed countries to bankruptcy.

When delocalization is not possible, the injunction says “Means are limited and you have to make do with what you have”. In other words: “Do more with less”. Since there are no controls, public pressure to receive more services at low cost from private or public organizations is boundless. This pressure is brought to bear on workers via political representatives or shareholders (who often are institutional investors that manage the workers’ pension funds), decision makers and managers of organizations. Therefore the workers are caught between the first injunction to excellence and the second injunction to do more with less. The more the workers concerned have constructed a demanding professional ideal for themselves, the more they will tend to expend excessive energy in their attempts to fulfill this ideal. In the absence of an explicit regulative process, the only alternative to professional burnout is to forgo the professional ideal and accept a reduction in the quality and excellence of the work done. Not only can this recanting of the “job well done” ideal cause considerable grief, it becomes frankly unbearable when the professional activity involves supporting fragile human beings (in hospitals, seniors’ homes, schools, etc.).

In both these cases, the fact that the social paradox of these two injunctions is not explicit is pathogenic and the paradox introduced by society as a whole finally lands upon the workers as individuals. They then must assume that their inability to preserve their jobs or maintain acceptable quality in goods or services constitutes personal failure. And this failure can generate considerable suffering and despair.

These observations were previously made more than 30 years ago when the globalization of agricultural markets endangered local producers in Western countries. But only the agriculture sector was concerned and these phenomena were considered marginal. However, the ability of emerging countries to produce high-value-added goods and services has gradually eroded increasingly large chunks of the economy. Today, it is no longer just a question of economics, but also of public health (Mutualité Sociale Agricole (MSA) 2011). More and more workers in developed countries are becoming unable to sustain the profitability and productivity comparison in market globalization. The sometimes tragic consequences experienced by unemployed workers, the chronic overload affecting many employees and the inability of the most conscientious to maintain the minimum quality level expected by customers leads to a veritable epidemic of work-related mental health problems. It is therefore high time that politicians take steps to regulate how the working world operates and adopt public health measures that can erase this epidemic.

### **Possible solutions**

#### **Make the paradoxical nature of market injunctions explicit and prioritize a meta-value that takes human beings into account**

Since the relentless march of globalization is unlikely to be reined in, developed countries can at least try to reduce the public-health impact of this phenomenon. The first strategy is based on the paradoxical injunction work by G. Bateson. Bateson suggested explaining the paradox of these injunctions, rendering it visible, and ending the double bind by setting as a priority one of the values to which the injunctions refer, which he called the meta-value. In our case, the social meta-value that dominates all the others asserts that “profitability and work productivity must be maximized”. This way, society creates the conditions of an open system, with no regulation except to maximize profitability and productivity. Therefore, the meta-value that is a social and political priority must be modified. In concrete terms, a meta-value stating, for example, that “every citizen has a right to a job and a minimum income” – and this exists in many national constitutions – could replace the current “profitability and work productivity must be maximized” meta-value.

This proposal has already been implemented in European agriculture. Under the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), governments have introduced a Single Farm Payment for farmers in the European Union that is independent of production so they will not leave farming (decoupling concept). This payment is subject to “cross-compliance” conditions relating to environmental, food safety, animal welfare and plant health standards, as well as the requirement to maintain all farmland in satisfactory agricultural and environmental condition. The situation is not perfect, but it shows that when the political will is present, it is possible to maintain activities that do not meet the priority value of “profitability and work productivity must be maximized” but instead the value “every citizen has a right to a job and a minimum income”. From the public health standpoint, it is interesting to note that even when European farmers have an income that can partially offset the lack of productivity and profit, satisfaction is not a given.

Indeed, some farmers have difficulty dealing with their inability to be profitable and their survival sometimes seems to them to be the result of shameful state assistance that is not available in other sectors of the economy. This malaise probably stems from the fact that, despite its laudable objective of supporting the survival of essentially unprofitable businesses, the CAP keeps the farmers in a double-bind situation with two new paradoxical injunctions. On the one hand farmers are urged to “be free entrepreneurs, competitive, confront the market” and on the other hand “it is impossible for European farmers to be competitive so we will help you with direct payments”. Thus, although the initial paradoxical injunction postulated the death of less profitable businesses, the new injunction allows their survival, but at the cost of a new paradox that generates disquiet and suffering. Once again, the fact that these paradoxical injunctions are not explicit leaves workers with a feeling of guilt and shame that affects their health.

### **Regulation strategy**

For many years, the “do more with less” paradigm has been imposed on organizations. As previously noted, it is important to stress that this paradigm stems from citizens’ boundless expectations regarding high-quality, low-cost public services or high returns on their pension funds. Hence they become the artisans of their own misfortune. As illustrated at the top of Figure 1, these high expectations exert considerable pressure for productivity and profitability throughout the chain of command and finally on the workers themselves. In light of their inability to achieve these unrealistic objectives, a large percentage of the players in the system try to find coping strategies. Whether their strategy is to reduce quality, voluntarily slow down the work process, or miss work on a regular basis, these employees are caused to behave like organizational delinquents in order to protect themselves from a system that has no regulative mechanism. Christophe Dejours explains this by saying that workers have to develop defence mechanisms that enable them to deal with the gap between the work expected by the organization and the real work that can actually be done (Dejours 1993a; Dejours 1993b; Dejours 2000).

Whether at an individual, organizational or social level, we usually see two types of response: on the one hand is a response based on anger and indignation (de Gaulejac 2011), expressed as a cycle of “anger-protest-revolt-dispute-punishment-frustration-anger”. The current Occupy movement is a perfect illustration of this response and its probable ineffectiveness. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the act of even justifiably denouncing the pernicious effects of a globalized market will significantly change the pernicious effects. It is much more likely that at some point the spokespeople for this movement will be punished for the social disorder they have perpetrated. The second response is based on sadness and resignation and becomes a cycle of “overload-powerlessness-resignation-burnout-despair-illness-absence-survivor overload” (Dejours 2000). Note that the transition from the cycle of anger, where individuals revolt, are punished, frustrated, then eventually shift into the cycle of sadness, resignation, burnout and finally illness, is frequently observed.

Through individual or organizational interventions as occupational psychologists, we have proposed and developed a third possibility as an alternative to revolt and resignation. It is illustrated in Figure 1: regulation. There is no point in denouncing the “do more with less” paradigm that produces the effects of an open system, or trying to adjust to it. By definition, the system diverges until it has exhausted all the fuel that feeds it. The fuel in this case is the workers’ energy. It is therefore essential to introduce a regulative mechanism in this system that limits its voracity. Concretely and as shown in Figure 2, individuals, organizations or societies should make a list of everything that can or should be done. Then, various scenarios should be developed, based on choices made from the list of everything that can or should be done. These choices would reflect the meta-values that society has decided are priorities. Therefore, if “protect workers’ health and safety” is a priority value, the choices to be made will take into account the workers’ ability to achieve the chosen scenario while remaining healthy in the long term. Obviously, each of these scenarios, because they are based on choices and “to choose means to renounce”, generates positive or negative impacts that must be identified. In the end, the chain of command must choose a scenario, decide to implement it and inform users or customers of the impacts that they will have to live with (Figure 3). In this way, the chain of command will reintroduce a regulative mechanism and close the system that the supply and demand model left open.

### **Conclusions**

In the absence of a regulative process, the global market is leading developed countries to exhaustion and bankruptcy. At the same time, the resulting diminishing resources would require that political and social choices be made to take this reality into account before it imposes necessary choices, as recently occurred in Greece.

This is a political and social problem that must be managed nationally and internationally. However, since they do not recognize this more or less distant outcome, the leaders of developed countries allow their workers and unemployed to bear the responsibility for the announced failure. Everything that happens – for example, plant closures, reduced quality of services and care, chronic overload or the inability of young people to find jobs – appears to be the consequence of the workers' inability to be competitive. As a result, their daily ordeal is compounded by guilt and the shame of not being able to get on the global economy bandwagon. At the same time, those who are on the bandwagon stick to their seats and hope they do not end up on the roadside tomorrow morning... And they avert their eyes when those left behind call out to them.

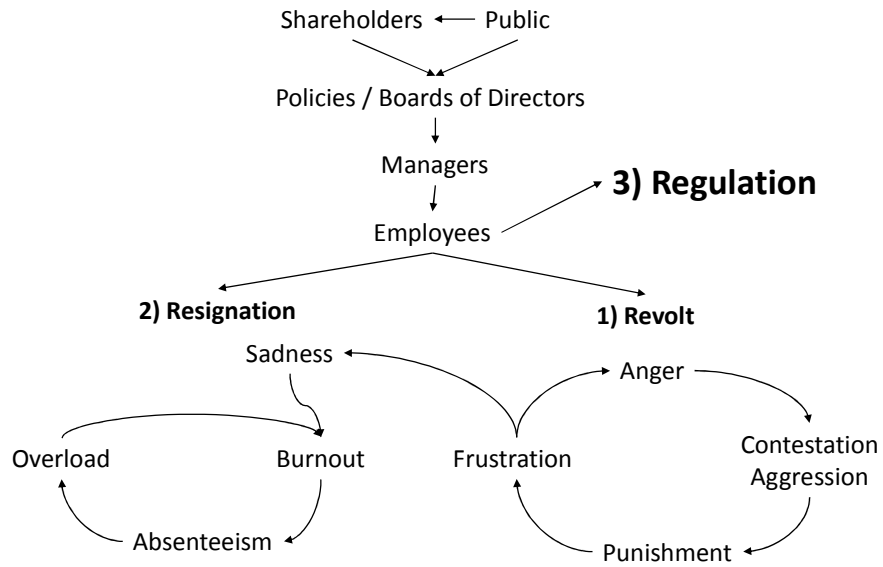
Nevertheless, there is still time to decide at a political, social and organizational level to introduce a regulative process for prioritizing the values that we want to defend as a society, set priorities, make choices that consider resources and the means actually available, and finally manage the impacts these choices generate. This "regulative" approach has the advantage of restoring power to individuals and enabling them to extricate themselves from powerlessness and deal with the reality experienced in the field. After the protest, there is hope in regulation.

### **Acknowledgments**

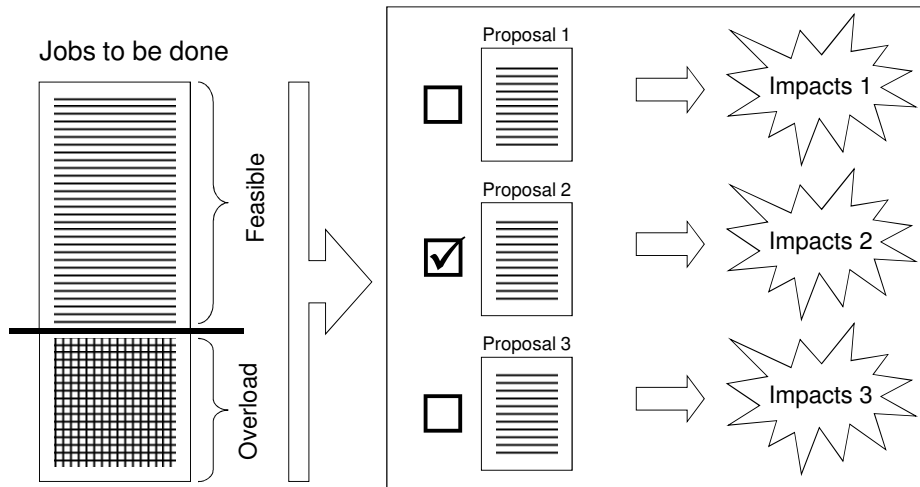
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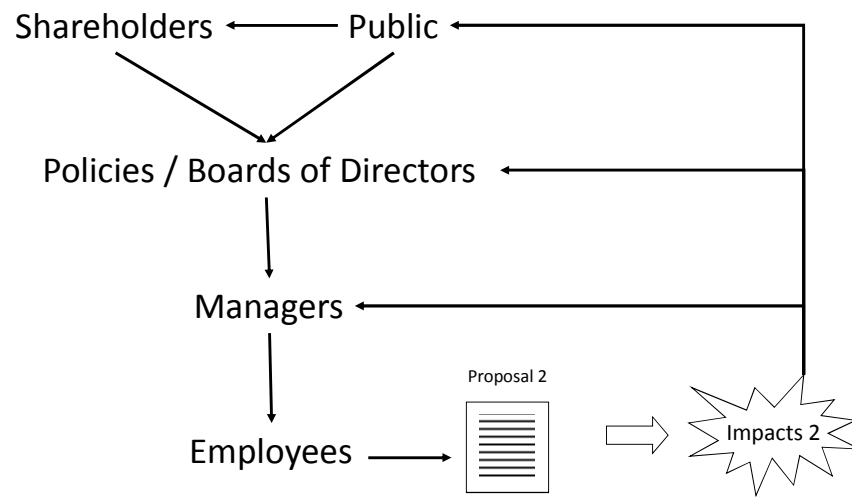
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**Figure 1 – Regulation strategy**



**Figure 2 - Develop scenarios and make choices**



**Figure 3 – Explain the impacts to the public and customers**