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MAKING SENSE OF THE ABSURD IN A KAFKAESQUE BUREAUCRACY: MANAGING INNOVATION PROJECTS IN A
LARGE BRAZILIAN COMPANY

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Making sense of the absurd in a Kafkaesque bureaucracy: managing innovation projects in a large Brazilian company

ABSTRACT

Dysfunctional bureaucracy is a major challenge for developing countries like Brazil today. There are innumerable problems, among which the lack of effectiveness, inefficiency, and absurd contexts that lead to stress, suffering and burn-out are highlighted. Although such organizations have received attention from the area of Administration and Organizational Studies, the studies related to coping with absurd contexts are very incipient. More rare are the empirical studies that analyze the daily life of people who face such situations. In order to address such gaps, this research is based on an empirical study carried out in a 15-month period (October 2015 to December 2016) of data collection through 45 interviews, conversations and daily observation of managers of research, development and innovation (R&D&I) projects in the largest company in the electric sector in Brazil. Secondary data and documents were also collected. The goal of this research is to develop theory about the absurd in bureaucratic organizations. This research contributes to the development of academic knowledge in two aspects: first, from the theoretical point of view, when dealing with absurdity in a bureaucratic organizational context, a subject not much discussed; second, from a practical point of view, to deepen the knowledge about the daily life of managers, and to bring elements that allow to rethink several of the daily challenges of these managers. Data was analyzed through an iterative thematic analysis. The data theory presents that the absurd is understood from the notions of: (a) Environment of contradictions; (b) Fear and guilt; and (c) Loneliness. In answering the proposed research question, the contributions of this paper are: (i) the elaboration of a working definition for absurdity; (ii) contribution to the practice of innovation management in the Brazilian electric sector, based on the reflection of its innovation dynamics. The theory

generated is under construction and reflects the interpretation of a particular researcher. The effort of this research is expected to stimulate researchers in the continuity of research into the absurd in bureaucratic organizations.

Keywords: Sensemaking; Absurdity; Bureaucracy; Electrical sector.

Introduction

Imagine that, newly recruited into an organization, and when you have completed the necessary documents, you realize that a mistake has been made, concerning your identity for example. Seeking to correct this error, you find yourself wandering from office to office, from one interlocutor to another, having to always bring new documents, meet new requirements induced by new processes. You feel like you are going in circles, because after having believed that you have finally reached the right service or the right person, you realize that this is not the case. Like the hero of the novel *The Castle* by Franz Kafka, you have the feeling that all this makes no sense, that you are trapped in an absurd system.

Some of our large organizations are not so far from the dystopian worlds that Kafka described. This is also what the managers of research, development and innovation projects (R & D & I) interviewed in the context of doctoral research conducted in one of the largest state-owned companies in the production and electrical distribution in Brazil. "It does not make sense", "it is absurd", underline some managers interviewed because they know that many of the activities they carry out will have no consequences on or for the organization. Indeed, while Law No. 9.991 / 2000¹ requires the development of innovations in this sector, investments are used to satisfy this legal obligation rather than to actually produce new products and services. The company, which will be called Electric in the rest of this paper, has invested more than 200 million reais since 2001 (or about 30, 7 million euros) in around 160 innovation projects, while

¹ This federal law provides for investment in research and development from concessionaries and approved companies in the electricity sector, with a view to improving energy efficiency.

only a few products or services are operated by the company and practically none has been marketed. In other words, the managers interviewed work on complex projects, in a particularly bureaucratic environment, "for nothing", a bit like the heroes of Kafka's novels (Kafka 1998[1925]; 2008[1926]; 2015[1915]; 2017[1919]), for which they describe what they live "as absurd".

Drawing on existentialist philosophy and Kafka's work, we can define the absurd as a fundamental human conflict between our tendency to seek meaning and our inability to find it. **The absurd, in this perspective, comes from the gap induced by our relationship to the world, a gap which leads us to disorientation and despair.** What do individuals in these bureaucratic organizations like Electric rely on to describe their work as absurd? In other words, how do they make sense of this absurd? With what consequences ?

The objective of this paper is thus to report and analyze how the actors, immersed in a large bureaucratic enterprise, make sense of their work experience. We first underline the common points and differences between Weberian bureaucracy and Kafkaesque bureaucracy, before briefly presenting what we mean by meaning construction. After a brief presentation of the research context, we show how Electric's players make sense of the institutional environment, the organizational context, their responsibilities, of what they are doing and feeling and show how these experiences come from an absurd Kafkaesque.

From Weberian bureaucracy to Kafkaesque bureaucracy

The bureaucratic ideal described by Weber (2003[1921]) is characterized by a rational and legal mode of social control, on the one hand, and a hierarchical functioning, on the other. This so-called rational-legal order presupposes an impersonal system of functions, based on a set of rules and procedures which gives the system rationality and predictability. Admittedly, the rules which characterize the Weberian bureaucracy may seem to us too numerous, making

us waste an infinite time without us understanding why, but they have the merit of being predictable and, if they work as planned, of dealing everyone too. The bureaucratic model would thus be the most rational means that we know of to exercise imperative control over human beings (Weber, 1946).

Organizational researchers will oppose Kafka's bureaucratic nightmare to this ideal. The rationality of the Weberian ideal becomes labyrinthine, the rules and laws themselves contain errors, communication is confused. Theoretical (Beyes, Costas, & Ortmann, 2019; Caygill, 2019; Huber, 2019) and empirical studies (Clegg, Pina e Cunha, Munro, Rego, & Sousa, 2016; Hodson, Martin, Lopez, & Roscigno, 2012; Hodson, Roscigno, Martin, & Lopez, 2013; Munro, & Huber, 2012) thus reveal that modern bureaucracies are marked by divergent objectives, a sign of tensions between different interests, logics and rationalities; patrimonialism, in other words the possession of all powers in the hands of the only leaders; the existence of unwritten rules; chaos, consequence of the contradictory priorities of the actors, of undesirable interactions between organizational processes or of abuse of power linked to the arbitrary use of bureaucracy by certain actors; and finally the fear of those who experience this chaos. For these researchers, these features characterizing contemporary bureaucracies would bring them closer to the systems described by Kafka than to the Weberian bureaucracy.

Attempting to account for the experience of people working in this type of organization, Clegg and his collaborators in organization theory relate three dimensions of the experience which echo what the heroes of Kafka live: disarray, consequence of the restrictions imposed on the action of the actors by the organization and the lack or absence of support from which they benefit; impotence, which leads to emotional reactions like anger; and the emptiness or lack of meaning linked to the intrinsic complexity of the system and the feeling that the organization is actively seeking to prevent any attempt at understanding.

This does not mean, in our view, that people working in these organizations give up making sense of the environment in which they live and their experiences. The work of the organization theorist Karl Weick thus shows that when faced with interruptions in the course of their activities, that these interruptions are linked to unexpected results, pitfalls, or the detection of abnormal elements, individuals, in order to be able to continue these activities, must be able to make sense.

Sensemaking: Producing plausible interpretations to act

Sensemaking can be defined as the process through which an individual extracts one or more indices of the environment, links it to a framework of interpretation that he or she has selected, and this in order to produce a plausible explanation of what has happened (Weick, 1990; 1993; 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). This explanation, which he or she will retain for future interpretations, allows at the same time to put an end to the feeling of confusion felt when faced with the presence of several interpretations of the situation - what Weick calls the *equivocality* of the situation- , but also, and at the same time, to choose a course of action among those possible.

This sensemaking process is triggered by interruptions in the course of the experience or action (see Figure 1). Most of the time, we don't need to build meaning, because we know why we act, we have a frame of reference that allows us to make sense of what we do. Unexpected external events (for example an order from our superior that does not correspond to our understanding of our role) or internal events (for example a feeling of confusion) can interrupt this normal course of events, preventing the performance of our activities, our plans, or usual thought processes because they go beyond the frame of reference that we use to act, thus obliging us to make sense to reconnect with the course of our actions.

Sensemaking thus refers to the process through which individuals choose or construct a plausible interpretation of the situation (what is happening?) in order to put an end to the confusion they feel, to recreate an order and to act (what to do ?). This process therefore presupposes the selection, from the frames of reference and related interpretations, of a frame of reference, a framework which, once retained, will serve as a guide for future action. Action, in this perspective, in that it carries with it the frame of reference of which it is the result, participates in the realization of this frame of reference. In this process, which Weick calls *enactment*, the environment, because it is more or less malleable, is at least partly the result of our actions and the interpretations attached to it.

If we project our frames of reference on our experiences and our environment, they are also the ones that allow us to detect anomalies, these indices which, because they come out of these frames, interrupt the course of our actions and force us to make sense.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

For Weick thus, the process of sensemaking is fundamentally pragmatic in that it serves primarily action, and retrospective in that it relates to a past, a present or a future envisaged as already realized. It is also social, both because it is formed in and through language and social interactions, but also because it participates in the construction of the social identity of the one who makes sense.

Essentially developed to understand how members of an organization were or not able to coordinate their actions in extreme situations (such as a chemical accident, forest fire, hostage taking) or during large-scale strategic changes , the framework proposed by Weick was little used to study the way in which individuals made sense of their experiences in more everyday work situations, in particular in bureaucratic environments like the one presented by Electric.

Electric: innovating in the bureaucracy

In 2017, Electric is a company with more than 25,000 employees, whose main activity is the production, transport and commercialization of electricity. A subsidiary of Eletrobras System, a company linked itself to the Ministry of Mines and Energy, Electric is governed by Law Nº. 6.404 of December 15, 1976 and must strictly follow the rules issued by the National Agency for the Regulation of electric energy, ANEEL (National Electric Energy Agency). Thanks to its thermal and hydroelectric power stations, it produces the equivalent of 15% of the electricity in Brazilian territory.

Since the market opening law in 2004, the company has been able to sell its electricity over almost the entire territory. This deregulation has been accompanied by increased competition, particularly in terms of innovation. Law Nº. 9.991 of July 24, 2000 thus obliges companies in the Brazilian electricity sector to invest a percentage of their net income in research, development and innovation. To meet its obligations, Electric has developed more than 160 innovation projects in fields as diverse as: **production control, social and regional integration, telecommunications, alternative energy sources and even electricity transportation.** This movement towards openness, innovation and competition is also marked by increased control by the authorities and tighter constraints for Electric. If the company has to invest 1% of its revenues in innovation, it is ANEEL who decides, at the end of the process, whether or not it is innovation. Otherwise, the company risks heavy penalties. At the same time, Electric is unable to increase its financial leeway. Any profit must indeed be transferred to the user in the form of a reduction in electricity prices according to resolution Nº. 316 of May 13, 2008. The company's revenues were thus reduced by 2 between 2012 and 2016.

Methodology

The research we present here took place over a 15-month period, during which 45 current or previous R&D project managers were interviewed. Focusing on their perception of research, development and innovation projects, in general and within Electric, then on their own experience of innovation projects, these interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes, were recorded, transcribed and, for twenty five of them, we analyzed through a coding and categorization process in order to bring out the key themes for the actors as well as the meaning they give to them. Supplemented by observations and informal conversations with members of the organization, these interviews revealed that, for many actors, being responsible for a project at Electric did not make sense, that it was an experience that many aspects of which were absurd, an experience that generated feelings of frustration, loneliness and fear.

We were able to identify 161 projects in total, being 123 completed R&D&I projects, and 38 ongoing projects. We set out to interview managers whose projects took place between 2005 and 2015 (a total of 81 projects). The selected timeframe for the selection of these projects is justified by the fact that, due to the great rationing of energy in Brazil which took place in 2001, new guidelines and adjustments were implemented by the Federal Government in 2004. The company gave us formal authorisation to carry out the research as well as the interviews. In addition, all interviewees gave us informed consent in their interviews. The interview script items were structured into the following question blocks: (i). perception about innovation; (ii). perception of the R&D&I of the company; (iii). narratives about personal experiences in R&D&I projects; (iv). construction of R&D&I by the respondents.

This set of interviews served as a primary source of research, in addition to which we also used secondary sources including notes in field journals for personal reflections, reactions and emotions (Spradley, 1980), as well as public and institutional documents. In

addition, we also conducted documentary research on public data from research institutes such as the Brazilian Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA, Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada), the Brazilian Survey of Technological Innovation (PINTEC, *Pesquisa de Inovação Tecnológica*,) and the Brazilian Institute of Industrial Property (INPI, Instituto Nacional da Propriedade Industrial), on the following topics: innovation, intellectual property rights, and technological transfer.

Given the amount of data, we divided the corpus into folders according to the file type (images, video files, audio files, text files, website content) and, to help us organise the data, we used Atlas.ti 7.0, a software programme which enabled us to manage the codes, quotes, analysis notes and primary documents, facilitating the establishment of connections among them (Bandeira-de-Mello, 2006). In this sense, in performing the **thematic analysis**, we followed the analytical frameworks proposed by **Srivastava and Hopwood (2009)**, **Braun and Clarke (2006)**, and **Spencer et al. (2003)**. As a first step, we listened to all the interviews to familiarise ourselves with the data. From this, we were able to draw initial general ideas about the field. We then proceeded to transcribe the interviews. This was an arduous and tiring task, particularly for audios involving more than one interviewee.

Once the interviews were transcribed, we studied the transcripts, alongside the preparation notes for each interview, and the annotations. This phase involved the use of two notebooks for data pre-analysis and the first observations during field work. After this, we began to encode the data with Atlas.ti and Excel (see Figure 2). In this second phase, we reread all data and freely coded everything we could (words, phrases, activities, actions, concepts, thoughts). This generated a lot of codes. At each coded interview new questions and new insights emerged, which could then be used in the subsequent phases.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

After this first round of data coding, we went back to the analysis and reread all the material over and over again, creating new codes, deleting others and grouping codes together. We also tried to visualise how some codes were connected to others. During this process, we used design thinking tools and mind maps to try to visualise the relationships between the large groups of codes which were emerging. We then went back to the data to see whether these large groups were consistent with the data. There were differences among the groups, yet at the same time they were consistent with each other. We then were able to give the themes a working title. We then undertook the process of choosing themes, and how they related to one other. After naming the themes, we began to look for the story these themes were telling us.

In total, there were two entire notebooks of observations, 852 quotes, and 404 pages of quotes to be used.

Interruptions where it is necessary to make sense

There is a wide variety of the innovation projects at Electric: study and systems modeling making it possible to design or renovate installations, mathematical modeling of the performance of protection systems and automation of electricity transport networks, alarm processing system in control centers, methodology for cost analysis and definition of performance indicators for operations and maintenance, for example. These various projects, whatever their nature, must obtain the approval of the ANEEL supervisory authority before their implementation.

Before the 2012 reform, project applications, once filed, could take several months or even years to be approved by the authorities, an anomaly that constituted a major interruption in the work of the project managers.

At the beginning, this approval phase was very distressing for me, because it took a long time and I was afraid of losing the timeline for the project. If I had known that I was going to have to wait from 2010 to 2013 until the contracting part, I think I would have abandoned the project. But since we had started the process, we had to go all the way.... (E5, l. 192-195)².

The projects I have participated in have taken years to be approved. [...] and there you see the discrepancy and that the project is exceeded (E2, l. 132-136).

Over time, the coordinator remains the same but people change [...] you have to put together a new team, but that doesn't necessarily bring better things (E3, l. 67-71).

Contracting has a very detrimental impact, because it is very time consuming, and then it loses its essence, its innovativeness (E16).

These bottlenecks could even lead to the project being stopped, the latter no longer being economically or technologically relevant.

When the project was submitted, the dollar was 2.3 reals. When the project was authorized, it was 4.4 reals. As this project required imported parts, we could not continue (E1, l. 181-183)

² E1,... Indicate the numbers of the people interviewed; ln-ln + m the line numbers from which the words mentioned have been extracted. The words are translated from Portuguese to English.

Since the reform of 2012, it is the management of Electric who approves or not the projects, while ANEEL remains the competent authority to recognize (or not) the project as an innovation, once it has been carried out.

Now the audit [is] at least six months or a year after the end of [the project]. There are projects here that ended five years ago and have not been audited yet. It's not that they won't be audited, but when? Four years from now, I might not be here anymore, not that I'm leaving tomorrow, but I might leave one day, and the memory of the project will be lost. So, what was the initial goal, what were the results, where did it come from? It's something I do not know. Either you document it very well, and that's in the management assignments, or just makes the process quicker (E5).

In addition, since Electric managers change frequently, the initial agreements obtained may be called into question.

When my department had a positive vision of innovation, we had several projects. When there was a change in the department, other managers arrived, and these managers no longer had the same vision of innovation, because in fact, we have different conceptions (E2, l. 55-58).

Faced with these extreme slowdowns or blockages, managers seek to make sense of these interruptions in the projects they wish to implement. The selected interpretations highlight that they face both institutional and organizational contradictions.

Institutional and organizational contradictions

Certain blockages of projects are seen as the necessary consequence of a drastic reduction in the means of the company, a reduction linked to the contradictions that the regulatory framework of the sector itself entails.

And because we (the company) are state-owned mixed-economy, we cannot “swim in the profit” [expression for keeping the profits], we have to reinvest in the system. We are failing to reinvest in the system because the tariff has been cut in half. So we have a ticking time bomb in our hands. (E1, 1.79-82).

We used to have profits of BRL 2 to 3 billion. We started to pay BRL 2 billion in damages, because of this tariff cut. Our only source of revenue is the tariff. (E1, 1.86-88)

The law thus indicates:

Art. 2nd: Generation concessionaires and companies authorised to produce independent electricity are obliged to apply annually the amount of at least 1% (one percent) of their net operating revenue in research and development of the electric sector (Law N°. 9.991, of July 24, 2000)

Art. 12, Single paragraph: The revenues that are destined to the electric power company will be shared with the company through the process of tariff revision, observing the percentages presented in the Manual approved by this Resolution (Normative Resolution N°. 316, of May 13, 2008)³.

³ Author's translation.

Officials also point to organizational contradictions that appear to be the counterpart to industry rules that both compel and inhibit innovation. Project managers, once validated, are obliged to successfully complete the project because they become personally responsible for it.

The guy must be the project manager, but it's not only professional, it's on his CPF (personal identity number (E1, l.316). [...] You take the risk [...], and then you will be penalized, it will come from your pocket (E1, l. 370).

The person in charge will need support because it will be difficult to find someone who will agree to take direct responsibility [for the project] with his CPF [...] you are not acting to deceive but it will be your fault [if the project does not succeed] (E3, l. 260-62).

But if the manager is therefore personally - and financially - responsible for the project for which he/she is responsible of, he/she has neither the hierarchical support nor the space for maneuver necessary to succeed. **The rules are numerous and cluttered with paperwork.** The projects are complex and require a particularly validated circuit - that of the functional manager, the R & D & I committee, then the Executive Board - which will take a total of at least 9 months. A public call for partnerships will then be opened so that scientific institutions can respond to it. It will of course be necessary to justify the choice of partner selected and to formalize the process that led to this choice. The partners, mainly public universities, will also have to comply with a significant formalization (in particular providing documents proving that the institution has the human and technical skills and capacities to carry out the project), which will take them on average to minus six months, the period during which the persons planned to participate in

the project may have left the company or the service. However, any amendment to the project requires authorization, all purchases must be subject to a call for tenders, and all acts relating to the project must be documented in order to be able to account for all the activities related to the project.

To give you an idea, the project was proposed in 2001 to R&D department, but we couldn't do it, because it was so bureaucratic that our university partner said, I don't want to do it anymore, we won't participate (E6, l. 342-345).

I think we should have a management of R&D contracts, do you understand? So that [bureaucracy] would be less dependent on the R&D project manager. Accountability [accountability, we mean having to account for your work], all that can only go back to the manager. Collecting such tax, no, take another tax, [...] take a look at this madness. No one can do that, no one is an expert on this (E3, l. 130-134).

These rules and operating methods are also constantly changing.

At that time, the R&D coordination team thought that it would be better to [...] segment the projects. [...] Then in 2010, Electric decided to work on major projects, due to difficulties [...] and wasted resources. Then in 2012, the new team says that the project is too expensive. [...] We could make a prototype, but not build it (E6, l. 73-113).

In addition to the lack of support from the hierarchy, there is the lack of control over the projects themselves, despite the existence of many rules to be observed.

I believe that the reality of Electric [in the management of R&D projects] is a lack of control, precisely a lack of systemic vision at the top [...] (E7, l. 90-91).

You see, in terms of structure, I think we'd have to have control [on assigning people to projects], I even talked to W. about it in one of my first chats with him, and he said, "How is this possible?", and he said "No, it doesn't work" (the R&D&I workflow). There is currently no member of the department responsible for R&D, working in these R&D projects. There are about 30 ongoing projects, and no one knows what is happening with these projects. We have 30 projects, and only four people in the team. We could divide the work up, and each person will be a member of that R&D team. (E, l. 130-36).

Slowness and blockages are thus interpreted as the results of institutional contradictions, on the one hand, and organizational contradictions, on the other. Because the rules both oblige and prevent innovation, project managers retain a framework of interpretation that concludes with the absurd.

From the absurd to the fear

For many of the managers interviewed, working in this environment of rigid and changing rules, while their individual responsibility is engaged "does not make sense", is "absurd".

When you've spent some time in the company, you see that some things don't make sense. There is no sense in having an organization that depends on its structure to function (E2, l. 262-264).

Well, it doesn't make sense. Research and the academic world are there to develop things to improve, to give results and not to deliver a volume of documents (E7, l. 74-77).

Increasing rigor won't solve the problem. It won't solve anything. Just look at Brazil. Or even myself. The bureaucratic procedures that are required are absurd (E40, l. 32-34).

Difficulties working in such an environment generate not only frustration, but also fear, as we can observe in the following excerpts.

And so sometimes you get a little frustrated because of the bureaucracy and the delays (E32, l. 117-118).

I received an email today about a possible project cancellation due to the time it took to sign the contract [with the partner university]. In the end, Electric therefore considers that it should be canceled, but the university says "Wait, we have invested in this project". It ends in blood and tears because the person was counting on this project (E7, 274-278).

And it's scary, because the guy [the manager] has to be a project manager, and it's not that professional, it's on his CPF [personal identity number] (E1, l. 221-222).

The CPF - Cadastro de Pessoas Físicas is a register managed by the Brazilian federal government, in which all-natural persons, regardless of their age or nationality, residing in

Brazil, must register. Each declarant is identified by a CPF registration number of 11 decimal digits, which allows the Brazilian tax administration not only to identify these citizens, but also, in the event of requesting accounts or to sue the citizen, in case of suspicion of fault or embezzlement.

[...] And the greatest fear of the project manager is perhaps how the audit of ANEEL will go, and, if something goes wrong, ANEEL arrives, jumps on us and I must respond to it in justice, it's a shadow that hovers over the heads of many people (E5, l. 297-300).

The sensemaking process thus concludes not only in the absurdity of the organization and the work itself, but also in frustration and fear, leading managers, when they can, to renounce all responsibility of project.

Enacting the absurd: fleeing or suffering

Project managers therefore "enact" actions that both confirm the absurdity of the system and allow them to escape it, if they can (see Figure 3).

Each project manager takes a risk. A risk of producing something that does not exist [if the innovation is not recognized as such], your identity number is there in the contract. This is something people say here "hey, I'm not going [to the project]". Fewer and fewer people want to pay the price (E1, l. 288-291).

We have a huge bureaucracy, this is one of the problems for which I no longer do R&D projects, because of the chaos and risks that are too great for the person responsible for it (E3, l. 52-54).

Other managers, admittedly few, who cannot give up because it would cost them other problems, express real suffering.

Now I asked to quit the project, it doesn't make sense, but I'm tired. I have gained 40 kg since I became project manager. I weigh 136 kg. So, I asked to leave. Today, after each effort, I say to myself "I think I am going to die, and tomorrow there will be someone else in my chair as if nothing had happened, because life will continue and so the company, so I'm trying to save my life (E13, l. 293-300).

Insert Figure 3 about here.

The institutional absurd, vector of suffering at work

Working at Electric doesn't just mean following many rules or spending time filling out paperwork. The Kafkaesque bureaucracy is thus distinguished from the Weberian model by the fact, first of all, that the rules which govern it are contradictory. In the Trial, Joseph K. is arrested, and will be sentenced, but he is free to go to work. In the Castle, K. does not work, but receives letters of congratulation for his work. At Electric, innovation is an obligation, but regulations reduce the means to achieve it. Second, this bureaucracy is, unlike the Weberian bureaucracy, unpredictable. K. gets different answers and interpretations each time when he questions the villagers about the castle. At Electric, the rules change faster than the time required for the innovation to take place or the response times of the bureaucracy itself (which can take several years to validate an innovation project, for example). If none of the managers interviewed underlined any abuse of power or any form of privilege by the directors, they finally

noted the inaccessibility of the system by pointing out the absence of hierarchical support, and of a global vision in terms of innovation to support the project. Like the castle itself that K. is trying to access, or like the accusation that Joseph K is trying to find out, project managers are plunged into a system whose managers and cogs are not accessible.

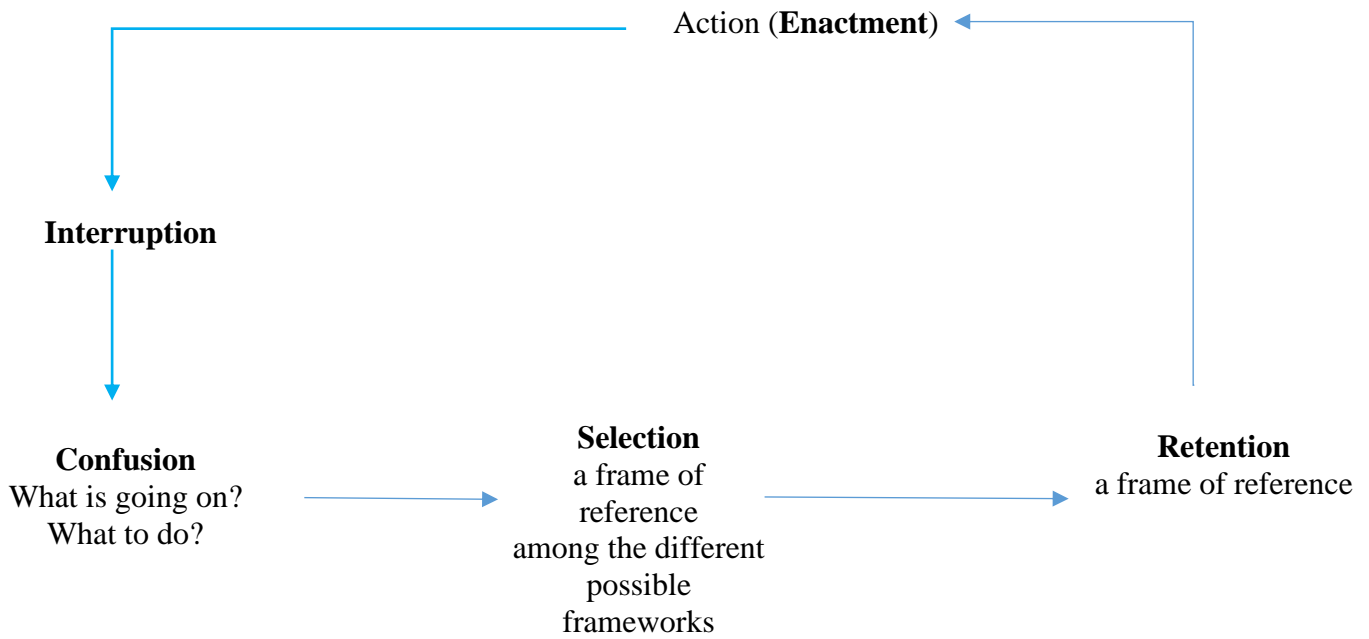
To the contradictions, unpredictability and inaccessibility are added, in the Kafkaesque bureaucracy, individual responsibility and associated loneliness. Like the heroes of Kafka who are guilty or responsible for the absurd situation in which they are plunged, the persons in charge of Electric thus feel frustration and fear vis-a-vis the responsibility which falls to them in a universe on which they did not little or no catch.

If the existentialist definitions of the absurd underline the inability of man to make a sense of existence, those responsible for Electric are able to produce interpretations of this absurd. It is thus because they live these contradictions, this unpredictability, this inaccessibility at the same time as the responsibility for the projects which they carry out, that they qualify their experiences of absurd. And it's also because they make sense of this absurdity that they feel both frustration and fear of working in such an environment.

Appearing to be registered both in the organization but also in the institutional environment through laws governing the electricity sector, the sense of absurdity highlighted in this empirical work invites us to broaden our understanding of suffering at work. Too often reduced to a proximal vision (Allard-Poesi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2017; 2018) - in which the immediate environment would be the determining spring of suffering at work -, this understanding deserves that we take into account the institutional, political, but also strategic and economic dimensions that participate in these suffering situations. In any case, this is what Electric managers, like the heroes of Kafka, invite us to do in the sense of the absurd that they relate to us.

FIGURES

Figure 1. The sensemaking process by Weick



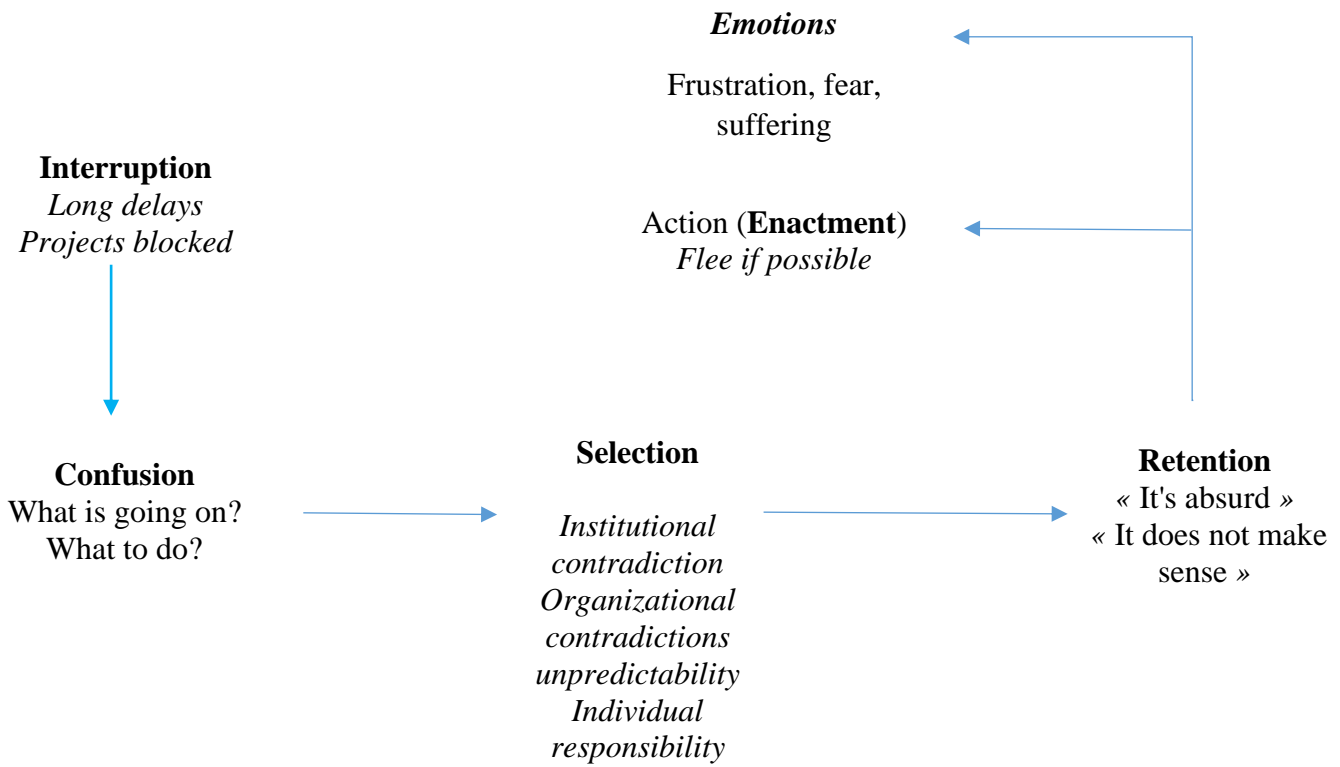
Source: Author.

Figure 2. Example of how text data was managed in Excel

Interviewee /lines	Units of meaning	Categories
E1/L220	being responsible for the technical part, the manager	The manager is responsible for the technical part of the project
E1/220-21	There is [problem]one that is terrible and scares everybody [...]the manager has to be responsible for the economic-financial part	Being economically responsible for the project as a manager is scaring
E1/221-22	And that's scary, because the guy [the manager] has to be a project manager, and it's not only professional, it's on his CPF [personal identity number]	
E1/288-91	Every project manager has a risk. Risk of delivering something that did not exist, your CPF is there, in contract administration. It's another thing people say here "man, I wont get into it (the project)," less and less people want to give their heads to the prize.	Being economically responsible for the project as a manager is a risk
E1/316-318	You take the risk. Not the risk of recognition, you run the financial risk of being targeted, if something goes wrong in these things you're not used to do daily. I repeat: this is the main problem.	
E1/223-24	He needs to approve bills, and there's a lot of things that are done that are not the daily routine of a technician but of an administrator.	The manager is completing non routine work, in particular approving bil
E1/225-28	The manager there said that he would not administer any contract from the operating directorate, [...]because when this department was created, he asked for people and we couldn't send anyone, so he doesn't analyse any project from OD.	The manager doesn't analyze the contract because he didn't have people from OD
E1/229-30	This one, that I was with a colleague, he said to me "look, I "went into that cold" (be in a problematic situation), but I don't fall in another one. That's enough!".	The manager doesn't analyze the contract [participate in a R&D project] because he doesn't want to be in a problematic situation
	The project cost about \$ 8 million, and we were already without money	

Source: Author

Figure 3. The sensemaking process at Electric



Source : Author.

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