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# ORGANISATIONAL LETHALITY/ORGANISATIONAL VITALITY

## PART ONE

### HIDDEN ORGANISATIONAL LETHALITY: AN EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

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## Foreword

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The Critical Perspectives in Social Innovation series of working papers is designed to provide challenging analyses. The purpose of the series is to critically examine prevailing assumptions, practices, and narratives within social innovation. By bringing together academic research and practitioner insights, the series seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, encourage reflection, and support the development of a critically informed social innovation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

In this essay, part 1 of Organisational lethality/Organisational vitality, Neil develops the concept of 'organisational lethality, arguing that all organisations exhibit organisational lethality to varying degrees - not just organisations where killing is visible.

The next essay in this series outlines how to overcome organisational lethality through a five-step transformation path towards 'organisational vitality'.

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# Organisational lethality/Organisational Vitality

## Part 1

### Hidden organisational lethality: an existential challenge for social innovation

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Organisational lethality - which I define as the capability and capacity of organizations to kill - has become increasingly pervasive. Organisational lethality encompasses organizing to kill people, other species and the biosphere. Organizing killing can be intentional (e.g., militaries), direct (e.g. tobacco companies) or indirect (e.g. fossil fuel consumption). Organisational lethality can manifest in immediate or accumulative forms, ranging from the direct act of killing to the 'slow violence' of climate change, poverty and pollution<sup>1</sup>. In this essay I argue that *all* organizations exhibit organisational lethality to varying degrees - not just organizations where killing is visible.

To date, the term organisational lethality is primarily applied in the terrorist and organized crime literatures. For instance, examining how factors such as ideology, size, territorial presence, age, and network connectedness influence the lethality of terrorist organizations<sup>2</sup>. The term organisational lethality resonates with the 'extraordinary death work' literature which focus on organizations which intentionally kill<sup>3</sup>, such as death rows<sup>4</sup>, terrorists<sup>5</sup> and the military<sup>6</sup>. Work on organisational evil also provides insights on the operation of lethality such as Stefan Kuhl's work on how 'ordinary organizations' kill -in particular 'state organizations of force'<sup>7</sup> and Zygmunt Bauman seminal work on the role of bureaucratic organizations as enablers of atrocities<sup>8</sup>. Carole L. Jurkiewicz et al exploration of organisational evil<sup>9</sup> and Danny Balfour et al on 'masked' and 'unmasked' administrative evil<sup>10</sup> also provide valuable insights into how the ordinary can become lethal.

I extend organisational lethality to include all organizations which visibly kill through the production of goods such as weapons, fossil fuels and other pollutants. I go further and include organization in which killing is *hidden*. This includes the service organizations -finance, consultancies etc. – as well as media and academic organizations which enable organisational lethality. I go further still by including all organizations who consume or promote products and services that kill - frequently in the full knowledge of their lethality. Organisational lethality has become deeply embedded in the norms, practices, and behaviours of organizations, posing significant and complex challenges for social innovators.

On first sight, to apply a term like organisational lethality to all organizations may be perceived as excessively all-encompassing. Surely social enterprises, faith or health organizations cannot be compared to the military or a tobacco company. While many organizations seek to save rather than kill, despite good intentions, they too are implicated in killing.

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<sup>1</sup> Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Asal, V., & Rethemeyer, R. K. (2008). The nature of the beast: Organizational structures and the lethality of terrorist attacks. *The Journal of Politics*, 70(2), 437-449.

<sup>3</sup> Charmaz, K. 1980. *The social reality of death: Death in contemporary America*. Addison-Wesley.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, R. (1990). *Death work: A study of the modern execution process*. Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co. Trombley, S. (1992). *The execution protocol: inside America's capital punishment industry*. Crown Publishers. New York.

<sup>5</sup> Berko, A. and Erez, E., 2005. Ordinary people and "death work": Palestinian suicide bombers as victimizers and victims. *Violence and Victims*, 20(6), pp.603-623.

<sup>6</sup> Charmaz, K. 1980. *The social reality of death: Death in contemporary America*. Addison-Wesley.

<sup>7</sup> Kuhl, S. (2016). *Ordinary Organizations: Why normal men carried out the Holocaust*. Polity. Cambridge

<sup>8</sup> Bauman, Z (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Polity Press. Cambridge.

<sup>9</sup> Jurkiewicz, C. L. (2012). *The foundations of organizational evil*. M. E Sharpe. New York.

<sup>10</sup> Balfour, D. L., Adams, B.A., & Nickels, A.E. (2020). *Unmasking Administrative Evil*. Fifth Edition. Routledge. NY

I posit that all organizations are embedded in an economy with a death drive: a globalised thanato-economy<sup>11</sup>. I characterise a globalized thanato-economy as built on lethal extractive and consumption practices that are deeply woven into the fabric of global socio-economic life<sup>12</sup>, making the prevention of organisational lethality a profound ethical and systemic challenge.

The organisational and management studies literature often urges systemic engagement with social problems, wicked problems or grand challenges<sup>13</sup>. However, it is forgotten- or overlooked- that the problems the globe confronts are often perpetuated by legally sanctioned organisational practices. For example, fossil fuel companies operating legally while accelerating climate collapse exemplify how legality obscures lethality<sup>14</sup>. In other words, organisational lethality is driven by the normalization of practices and encompassing tendencies of powerful organization such as militarized policing or fossil fuel dependency, which are legitimized through state policies and societal acceptance - or acquiescence.

Charting the dimensions of organisational lethality is an ethical imperative for social innovators—a critical precondition for dismantling extractive systems that propagate interconnected polycrises: ecological collapse, economic exploitation, political destabilization, and social disintegration<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, the switch from organisational lethality to its antithesis ‘organisational vitality’ is paramount. I define organisational vitality as the capability and capacity of organizations to *regenerate* life. The next essay in this series outlines a five-step transformation path towards organisational vitality.

The next section briefly outlines the globalized thanato-economy before describing the concept of organisational lethality and discuss the implications for social innovation and social innovators.

## Why a ‘globalized thanato-economy’?

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A globalized thanato-economy is a system that is fundamentally organized around practices that kill: now; soon or later. It is an economy driven by extractivism- where power, profit and growth are prioritized over life. Extractivism then is the ‘socio-ecologically destructive processes of subjugation, depletion, and non-reciprocal relations, occurring at all levels of practice’<sup>16</sup>. The conceptualization of a globalized thanato-economy builds on Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee’s term ‘necrocapitalism’<sup>17</sup> and Abdénago Yate Arévalo and Carlos Díaz Rodríguez ‘thanatoeconomy’<sup>18</sup>. However, I encompass state capitalism and the mixed socialist- market economies as well as capitalist economies to emphasise the scale and reach of organisational practices that kill.

All types of organizations—public, private, civil, and criminal—are implicated in killing in a thanato-economy, whether through direct actions like war or industrial accidents, or through more gradual and

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<sup>11</sup> Yate Arévalo, A., & Díaz Rodríguez, C. (2015). From ‘thanatopolitics’ to the universalization of economic rationality: ‘thanatoeconomy’ *Revista Colombiana De Bioética*, 10(1), 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.18270/rcb.v10i1.687>.

<sup>12</sup> Freudenberg, N. (2014) *Lethal but Legal: Corporations, Consumption and Protecting Public Health*. OUP. Oxford

<sup>13</sup> For instance: Lindebaum, L (2025). Hope. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2025.0145>

<sup>14</sup> Beckert, Jens. (2025). *How we sold our future: The failure to fight climate change*. Polity Press. Cambridge.

<sup>15</sup> Morin, E & Kern, A. B. (1999). *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*. Translated by Kelly, Sean; LaPointe, Roger. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

<sup>16</sup> Chagnon, C. W., Durante, F., Gills, B. K., Hagolani-Albov, S. E., Hokkanen, S., Kangasluoma, S. M., Kontinen, H., Kröger, M., LaFleur, W., Ollinaho, O., & Vuola, M. P. (2022). From extractivism to global extractivism: The evolution of an organizing concept. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 49(4), 760-792.

<sup>17</sup> Banerjee, S. B. (2008). Necrocapitalism. *Organization Studies*, 29(12), pp. 1541- 1563. doi: 10.1177/0170840607096386

<sup>18</sup> Yate Arévalo, A., & Díaz Rodríguez, C (2015)

deferred consequences such as pollution-linked diseases, climate-driven disasters, and the cumulative effects of toxins in the environment<sup>19</sup>.

The accumulation of carbon dioxide, military and industrial toxins over time is a global existential crisis<sup>20</sup>. For instance, despite unequivocal evidence that the planet's future depends on moving away from fossil fuels, production and consumption is higher than ever. Toxins enter our bodies as we go about our everyday business - eat, drink, breathe as well as our workplaces and leisure<sup>21</sup>. Our bodies and planet have been remade by cumulative military and industrial projects through 'attritional catastrophes' - such as radiation from nuclear testing, 'forever chemicals' (PFAS) and lead in petrol<sup>22</sup> and the 'toxic layering' of multiple potentially interacting toxins<sup>23</sup>.

Legal and policy frameworks often legitimize or normalise organisational lethality practices: aided and abetted by think tanks, law firms and consultancies. They are framed as necessary for competitiveness, growth or national security. The lethal harms produced by the thanato-economy are not always immediate or visible; they often manifest as slow violence, with effects that unfold over generations - as outlined above - and have a disproportionate impact on marginalised communities<sup>24</sup>. Attempts to reform the system through compliance or incremental change frequently fall short, as they do not address the underlying organisational and systemic logics that perpetuate organisational lethality.

Given the burgeoning environmental externalities of a globalized thanato-economy, I argue that all organizations are complicit in organisational lethality by degree. For some organizations, such as the military, the extensive capability and capacity for lethality is perceived as their legitimate function. For others, it arises from deliberate actions taken with full awareness of the high probability of deaths caused by the production and consumption of goods and services. A recent example is the recent surge in fossil fuel production by oil, gas, and coal companies<sup>25</sup>. However, there is a long history of known lethality in production and consumption<sup>26</sup>. Examples include the 'matchgirls' use of white phosphorus and 'radium girls' ingestion of radioactive material through licking paint brushes as they painted watch dials - also lead in petrol and paint<sup>27</sup>.

In many cases, organisational lethality is enacted - and amplified- through indirect or collaborative organisational efforts. For instance, universities accepting military research contracts, the widespread organisational consumption of fossil fuels and insurers insuring what should be uninsurable<sup>28</sup>, contribute

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<sup>19</sup> Higgins, P. (2015). *Eradicating ecocide: Exposing the corporate and political practices destroying the planet and proposing the laws to eradicate ecocide*. Second Ed. Shepherd-Walwyn. London.

<sup>20</sup> Gabbott, S & Zalasiewicz. (2025). *Discarded: How technofossils will be our ultimate legacy*. OUP. Oxford

<sup>21</sup> Gardiner, B. (2020). *Choked: The age of air pollution and the fight for a cleaner future*. Granta. London

<sup>22</sup> Renfrew, D. and Pearson, T.W., 2021. The Social Life of the "Forever Chemical": PFAS Pollution Legacies and Toxic Events. *Environment and Society*, 12(1), pp.146-163. p146

<sup>23</sup> Goldstein, D. M., & Hall, K. 2015. Mass hysteria in Le Roy, New York: How brain experts materialized truth and outscienced environmental inquiry. *American Ethnologist*, 42(4), 640-657. P640.

<sup>24</sup> Otto, F. (2025). *Climate Injustice: Why we need to fight global inequality to combat climate change*. Trans. Pybus, S. Greystone Books. Vancouver.

<sup>25</sup> Jack, S & Masud, F. (2025). BP shuns renewables in return to oil and gas. 26/2/25  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3374ekd11po>

<sup>26</sup> Jarrige, F & Le Roux, T. (2020). *The Contamination of the Earth. A history of pollutants in the industrial age*. MIT Press. Cambridge.

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, B. 1995. The politics of occupational ill-health in late nineteenth century Britain: the case of the match making industry. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 17(1), 20-41. *American journal of public health*, 106(5), pp.834-840. Clark, C. (1997) *Radium Girls: Women and industrial health reform, 1910-1935*. UNC Press. Chapel Hill. Needleman, H.L., 1997. Clamped in a straitjacket: The insertion of lead into gasoline. *Environmental Research*, 74(2), pp.95-103. Rosner, D. and Markowitz, G., (2016). Building the world that kills us: The politics of lead, science, and polluted homes, 1970 to 2000. *Journal of Urban History*, 42(2), pp.323-345.

<sup>28</sup> There are examples of insurers who insure for employee & public deaths in polluting industries. A famous example was Union Carbide, who claimed part of the amount they compensated the families of victims of the

to this phenomenon. Many organizations also have the latent capacity to cause or enable organisational lethality such as prisons (death row for instance) or health services denying access to certain groups. These examples highlight how organisational decisions and partnerships create the conditions for socially lethal outcomes up to a global scale.

## Why 'lethality'?

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In this section I outline the use of lethality in a military context and then apply it to a wider set of organizing practices and organizations. The term lethality is borrowed from the military context, where it was first applied by Trevor Dupuy in 1964 to evaluate weapon effectiveness through his 'Theoretical Lethality Index' (TLI)<sup>29</sup>. The TLI quantifies the number of people a weapon could theoretically kill in one hour under ideal conditions.

Over time, the concept of military lethality has expanded beyond weapon effectiveness to encompass the broader capability to neutralize or destroy enemy targets. This includes factors such as training, innovation, and the flexible deployment of weapon platforms and troops<sup>30</sup>. Lethality now includes strategic influence, often referred to as "the battle for the narrative" to shape perceptions and deter aggression<sup>31</sup>. Since the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy and the second Trump administration, the pursuit of lethality has become a central focus for the U.S. military and its allies<sup>32</sup>.

No doubt lethality will join the graveyard of military buzzwords in time. However, it has proven to be exceptionally malleable and employed as a justification for decision-makers to endorse virtually any policy or action - justifications frequently made without presenting tangible evidence to substantiate the claim. For example, policies like the U.S. military's transgender ban and the wholesale sacrifice of all things Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) were justified on the grounds of improving lethality, even though no evidence was provided<sup>33</sup>.

Leaving aside politically driven sacrifices in the name of lethality, it could be argued that its pursuit is merely reaffirming the purpose of military work which General Rupert Smith described as the focus on killing people and breaking things<sup>34</sup>. For Harold Laswell, 'the distinctive frame of reference in a fighting society is fighting effectiveness. All social change is translated into battle potential'<sup>35</sup>. Hence, military organizations seek to *encompass* ideas, people or products which may have utility. Militaries constantly seek to improve the means of violence through appropriating and/or stimulating scientific, technological, economic, social and cultural innovation.

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Bhopal disaster. See: <https://www.bhopal.net/what-happened/the-immediate-aftermath-1984-1989/compensation-injustice-1989-settlement/>

<sup>29</sup> Historical Trends Related to Weapon Lethality: A Report prepared for the Advanced Tactics Project of the Combat Developments Command, Headquarters US Army, under Contract No. DA 30-069-AMC-647(X), dated August 28, 1964. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD0458760.pdf>

Dupuy, T. N. (1979). *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company.

<sup>30</sup> Holland, T.J. (2024). Decoding Lethality: Measuring What Matters. *Military Review Online Exclusive*. October. pp1-8. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archive2024s/English/Online-Exclusive/2024/Decoding-Lethality/Holland-Decoding%20Lethality-UA.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Rivera, W.A. & David, A.P. (2025). *Towards a More Comprehensive Understanding of Lethality* <https://www.strategiceducationinternational.org/post/towards-a-more-comprehensive-understanding-of-lethality>

<sup>32</sup> The isomorphic pressures of the US military has resulted in the term lethality being adopted by other militaries such as the UK & Australia. See: Allison, G. (2025) How the British Army aims to 'double lethality'. *UK Defence Journal*. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/how-the-british-army-aims-to-double-lethality/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/prioritizing-military-excellence-and-readiness/>

<sup>34</sup> Smith, R. (2006). *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world*. London: Penguin.

<sup>35</sup> Lasswell, H. D. (1941). The garrison state. *American Journal of Sociology*, 46(4), 455-468. p458

Military research agencies scour universities (and associated 'innovation and entrepreneurial clusters') for products and services with utility. Big-spending militaries frame innovation. For instance, research in neuroscience, robotics and nanotechnology is funded by military organizations, as well as less glamorous areas such as textiles, food and plant technologies and semantics. Researchers and innovators in these fields may be unaware of their contribution to the pursuit of lethality. But whether utilising innovations generated indirectly or through direct procurement, the distinctions are frequently blurred, and the result is a symbiotic relationship<sup>36</sup> which intensifies the lethality of militarization. The military pursuit of lethality brings military 'encompassing tendencies'<sup>37</sup> - the accumulation of military power and the militarization (or weaponization) of ideas, people and things - into harsh relief.

## From lethality to organisational lethality

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Lethality is a stark descriptor of the purpose of organizing to kill and its encompassing tendencies. It can be applied to a wider set of organizing practices and organizations than the military. Given that all organizations are enmeshed in a globalized thanato- economy which is hell bent on facilitating the death of people, other species and the planet, I extend the term lethality to include all organizations. Organisational lethality, therefore, is the capability and capacity of organizations to kill.

There are other terms which seek to describe the immense impact of social and economic processes on individuals and groups. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's<sup>38</sup> and Iain Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman's<sup>39</sup> complementary versions of 'social suffering' which examine the systemic roots of human distress. Bourdieu emphasizes the symbolic conflicts tied to power dynamics within institutions, whereas Wilkinson and Kleinman focus more broadly on moral failures. Bourdieu's approach is more overtly political, while Wilkinson and Kleinman advocate for 'caregiving', the critical reflection, moral engagement, and active participation to alleviate suffering as distinct from a dispassionate sociological gaze.

Another term, 'social harm' emerged within criminology as a critical response to the limitations of definitions of crime, which are often confined to acts defined as illegal by the state. The use of 'social harm' and the emerging discipline of zemiology - the study of social harms-<sup>40</sup> represents a shift to examining harm that impacts individuals, communities, and societies, regardless of whether they are legally recognized as crimes<sup>41</sup>.

Social death is a powerful term which Jana Kralova describes as the 'loss of social identity, loss of social connectedness and losses associated with the disintegration of the body'<sup>42</sup>. Originating in death studies,

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<sup>36</sup> McNeill, W. H. (1982). *The pursuit of power: Technology, armed force, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. vii

<sup>37</sup> Goffman, E. (1968), *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Penguin, London.

<sup>38</sup> Bourdieu, P., Accardo, A., Balazs, G., Beaud, S., Bonvin, F., Bourdieu, E., Bourgois, P., Broccolichi, S., Champagne, P., Christin, R., Faguer, J-P., Garcia, S., Lenoir, R., Œuvrard, F., Panofsky, A. and Pinto, L. (1999) *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Translated by P.P. Ferguson. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>39</sup> Wilkinson, I., & Kleinman, A. (2016). *A passion for society: How we think about human suffering* (Vol. 35). University of California Press.

<sup>40</sup> Pemberton, S. A. (2016). *Harmful societies: Understanding social harm*. Policy Press.

<sup>41</sup> Social harm's origins can be traced back to Edwin Sutherland's 1949 seminal work on white-collar crime, which highlighted harmful actions committed by elites and corporations that were regulated by civil law rather than criminal law. Sutherland's ideas challenged the conventional focus on street-level crimes and opened the door to considering other forms of societal harm. Sutherland, E. H. (1983). *White collar crime: The uncut version*. Yale University Press.

<sup>42</sup> Králová, J. (2015). What is social death? *Contemporary Social Science*, 10(3), 235–248. p246.

social death has been used to describe slavery as a state of being excluded or invisible within society<sup>43</sup> as well as the loss of place, heritage and link between current and future generations in genocide scholarship<sup>44</sup>.

Social suffering, social death and social harms are evocative concepts by which to dissect and delineate the horrors and misery created by human organizing. However, organisational lethality emphasises the destructive force of organisational processes that can annihilate people and the planet - slowly or rapidly.

Organisational lethality directly signals the potential for all organizing and organizations to cause deaths, not just cause pain, disadvantage or the exclusion/annihilation of groups. Moreover, organisational lethality invokes a sense of finality and existential threat. It is my hope that a better understanding of the processes of organisational lethality can create a greater sense of urgency and moral responsibility to act.

### **Visible and hidden organisational lethality**

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I define organisational lethality as the capability and capacity of organizations to kill. This includes the action of organizations who knowingly create or consume products or services which kill people and the planet. For instance, killing through the production, consumption and disposal of goods which kill over time - such as the brown lung disease of cotton workers or deaths from climate change due to burning fossil fuels. Organizations can unknowingly kill, usually when a new product or process is introduced. However, when the scientific and medical evidence demonstrates a causal link between product/process and deaths and the activity continues, organizations are knowingly killing.

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<sup>43</sup> Patterson, O. (2018). *Slavery and social death: A comparative study, with a new preface*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>44</sup>Králová, J. (2015). What is social death? *Contemporary Social Science*, 10(3), 235–248. p246.



**Figure 1 Organisational lethality**



Organisational lethality manifests in both visible and hidden forms (see figure 1). Visible organisational lethality refers to the overt, direct, and often intentional capacity of organizations to kill. This includes the production of weapons, military operations, products known to cause harm, like fossil fuels or hazardous chemicals as well as the encompassing tendencies of the fossil fuel industry.

In contrast, hidden organisational lethality operates less conspicuously, embedded within the everyday practices of organizations not typically associated with killing. Hidden organisational lethality occurs in service industries, consultancies, media, and academic institutions that enable or legitimize lethal practices-such as by providing legal, financial, or reputational support to harmful industries, or by normalizing extractive and ecologically destructive behaviours. Hidden lethality also includes organizations that consume or promote products and services with known lethal consequences, often under the guise of legality or necessity, thereby perpetuating the thanato-economy.

In sum, both visible and hidden lethality are deeply woven into the globalized thanato-economy, making all organizations, regardless of their stated missions, complicit to varying degrees in processes that kill people, other species, and the planet.

### **Dimensions of organisational lethality**

In this section I outline four organisational domains of organisational lethality: public sector, private sector, criminal and social sector (summarised in table 1).

**Table 1 Organisational domains of organisational lethality**

|            | Public sector organisational lethality                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Private sector organisational lethality                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Civil sector organisational lethality                                                                                                                                                                                   | Criminal organisational lethality                                                                                              |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definition | The creation & implementation of laws, policies and practices which kill people or the planet by design or omission                                                                                                                                  | The production and distribution of products or services which kill people and the planet.                                                                                                                                                                     | The creation, adoption & implementation of policies and practices which kill people or the planet                                                                                                                       | The illegal production and distribution of products or services which kill people and the planet.                              |
| Examples   | <p>Military</p> <p>paramilitary/ police actions</p> <p>Executions</p> <p>Enforced sterilisation</p> <p>Genocide</p> <p>State maintenance of fossil fuel industries &amp; infrastructure</p> <p>Denying individuals or groups access to resources</p> | <p>Tobacco products</p> <p>Fossil fuels &amp; petrochemicals</p> <p>Forever chemicals -PFAS (Per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances)</p> <p>Fast &amp; highly processed food: salt, sugar &amp; fat</p> <p>Weapons</p> <p>Private military contractors</p> | <p>Fossil fuel &amp; plastics consumption</p> <p>Co-option by state organizations</p> <p>Philanthropic, social finance or CSR contributions</p> <p>Think tanks/ Not for Profits promoting socially lethal practices</p> | <p>Drug trafficking</p> <p>Arms trafficking</p> <p>Hazard waste tipping</p> <p>People trafficking</p> <p>Organ trafficking</p> |

### Public sector organisational lethality

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Public sector organisational lethality encompasses the legitimized use of lethal force in pursuit of strategic objectives and internal order. Also, laws and policies which harm targeted groups (such as genocide) and the planet (such as state maintenance of fossil fuel industries).

State law, regulation and policies tend to frame the nature and extent of organisational lethality through providing (or withholding) legitimacy, enabling (or disabling) frameworks and the participation (or not) in international treaties or regulatory frameworks. For example, dismantling environmental protection and the assault on 'net zero' by the Trump administrations panders to polluters<sup>45</sup> and increases organisational lethality through the consumption of ever more fossil fuels as well as creating a hostile

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<sup>45</sup> Goodwin, J (2020). Deregulation on Demand Trump EPA Panders to Polluters in Dismantling Clean Power Plan. *Center for Progressive Reform*. <https://progressivereform.org/publications/deregulation-on-demand/>

environment for alternatives. In turn, this deepens the organisational lethality of all organizations who consume fossil fuels.

Public organizations also are deeply embedded in the procurement and consumption of lethal goods and services.

#### Private sector organisational lethality

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Private sector organisational lethality primarily arises from the production and distribution of goods and services that kill - often knowingly perpetuated despite clear evidence of their lethal effects. This includes fossil fuels, tobacco, weapons and plastics industries. Private sector lethality is also enabled by the insurance<sup>46</sup>, financial institutions,<sup>47</sup>, think tanks and media outlets<sup>48</sup> who support the primary killers.

The pursuit of profit in other contexts also kills. The price and availability of drugs, for instance. Pharmaceutical companies have frequently been criticized for setting prices at levels that make essential medicines inaccessible to many in the Global South such as HIV, oncology and hepatitis C drugs<sup>49</sup>. Food companies kill through adding high levels of fat, sugar and salt<sup>50</sup>. The processed food sector creates highly addictive products that slowly kill - and attempt to hide the fact<sup>51</sup>.

Private sector organizations also are deeply embedded in the procurement and consumption of lethal goods and services.

#### Civil sector organisational lethality

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The civil sector is typically seen as a virtuous force for good which seeks to save rather than kill. But most civil sector organizations are equally embedded in the globalized thanato- economy as other organizations in the procurement and consumption of goods and services that kill. Moreover, the resources civil sector organizations access - such as grants, philanthropic, social finance or CSR- often derives from private or state organizations which are deeply implicated in organisational lethality practices.

The notion that all civil sector organizations are virtuous in an organisational lethality context is debatable. Of course, virtue is in the eye of the beholder, but there are numerous think tanks and not-for-profit organizations who promote organisational lethality - for instance the Heritage Foundation<sup>52</sup> and FutureCoal<sup>53</sup>.

#### Criminal organisational lethality

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Criminal organisational lethality occurs through the production and distribution of product and services which kill - with legality usually defined by states. Certain products can be legal or illegal in different

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<sup>46</sup>Khan, R. (2024) *Within Our Power: Cut Emissions Today to Insure Tomorrow*. Insure our Future. <https://reclaimfinance.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Insurance-Scorecard-2024.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Etienne, C& Schreiber, P. (2025) *Bank Transition Plans: A Roadmap To Nowhere*. Reclaim Finance <https://reclaimfinance.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Bank-transition-plans-a-roadmap-to-nowhere.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Dunlap, R. E., & McCright, A. M. (2010). Climate change denial: Sources, actors and strategies. In *Routledge handbook of climate change and society* (pp. 240-259). Routledge.

<sup>49</sup> Lexchin, J. (2024). Profits First, Health Second: The Pharmaceutical Industry and the Global South: Comment on " More Pain, More Gain! The Delivery of COVID-19 Vaccines and the Pharmaceutical Industry's Role in Widening the Access Gap". *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 13, 8471.

<sup>50</sup> Moss, M. (2014). *Salt, sugar, fat: How the food giants hooked us*. W. H Allen.

<sup>51</sup> Moss, M. (2021). *Hooked: How Processed Food Became Addictive*. Random House.

<sup>52</sup><https://www.heritage.org/>

<sup>53</sup><https://www.futurecoal.org/>

jurisdictions (such as alcohol) or produced legally and used for illegal purposes (such as arms or prescription drugs like Oxycontin). These activities include drug and arms trafficking, hazardous waste dumping, and trafficking in people or organs.

Criminal organizations frequently exploit legal loopholes, societal vulnerabilities, and the normalization of harmful practices to perpetuate lethal outcomes. For instance, the proliferation of drugs or weapons can destabilize communities, create and perpetuate cycles of poverty, violence and death<sup>54</sup>.

## **Implications for social innovation**

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Social innovation practice is situated within a globalized thanato-economy—an economic system fundamentally driven by extractive and destructive logics that propagate ecological collapse. For social innovators, my analysis serves as both a warning and a call to action. Social innovators must confront the reality that all organizations, not just obviously harmful ones, possess some degree of organisational lethality.

In my view, social innovators are ethically compelled to understand the dimensions of organisational lethality within and between organizations as a prerequisite for any solutions. Moreover, as social innovators we must recognize our own complicity as even organizations with positive missions (like universities or NGOs) can indirectly enable or amplify organisational lethality through policy, partnerships and procurement.

Social innovation, therefore, is not just about alleviating disadvantage or exclusion, but about confronting and dismantling organisational processes that actively or passively kill.

I consider organisational lethality as a useful concept to understand the dimensions of a globalized thanato-economy.

To prevent (or repair) organisational lethality demands a paradigm shift from purely reactive mitigation to pre-emptive and regenerative change. This involves treating organisational lethality not as an inevitable or regretful byproduct of organizing but as a moral failure requiring urgent, collective action.

## **Conclusion**

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The concept of organisational lethality exposes the uncomfortable reality that all organizations are implicated to varying degrees in practices that kill people, other species and the planet. By framing organizing and organizations within the context of a globalized thanato-economy, I highlight how extractive logics and lethal practices are deeply woven into the fabric of modern economic and social life.

An organisational lethality perspective challenges the prevailing notion that only certain sectors or overtly harmful organizations bear responsibility for killing. Instead, it demands that we recognize the pervasive and often invisible ways in which organisational lethality is legitimized, institutionalized, and perpetuated across public, private, civil, and criminal domains.

Recognizing organisational lethality as an existential challenge is an ethical imperative for social innovators. Only by confronting this uncomfortable reality can we begin to dismantle extractive systems and reimagine organizations as forces for regeneration and life. The path forward requires a fundamental shift from mitigation to transformation-towards organisational vitality, where the capacity to regenerate life replaces the capacity to kill – the focus of part 2 of Organisational lethality/ Organisational vitality.

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<sup>54</sup> Crocker, R., Webb, S., Garner, S., Skidmore, M., Gill, M., & Graham, J. (2017). *The impact of organised crime in local communities*. Police Foundation.

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