Editorial

The Dark Side of Projects: Uncovering Slavery, Corruption, Criminal Organizations, and Other Uncomfortable Topics

Giorgio Locatelli[1], Efrosyni Konstantinou[2], Joana Geraldi[3], and Tristano Sainati[4]

The Rationale

Unethical and illegal practices abound in our modern world. For example, slavery in several countries was abolished at the turn of the nineteen century, yet, at this very moment, approximately 40 million people worldwide are considered to be modern slaves (International Labour Organization [ILO] & Walk Free Foundation [WFF], 2017), more than three times the entire Atlantic slave trade. The extent of corruption is equally shocking and costs society US$3.6 trillion globally in the forms of bribes and stolen money (Johnson, 2018), roughly Germany's GDP, the fourth highest in the world. The two examples are just the tip of the iceberg; the business world has dark stains, and projects are no exception. For instance, construction projects employ modern slaves (Amnesty International, 2021; *Gulf News*, 2019; Pattisson et al., 2021), are involved in corruption scandals (Lehtinen et al., 2022; Olken, 2007, 2009), and are sometimes used for money laundering (Locatelli et al., 2022). The dark side of projects, that is, "any illegal, or unethical phenomena associated with projects" (Locatelli et al., 2022), as those exemplified above, is real, relevant, and merits further investigation.

Happily, in recent years, we have observed a small yet growing community of project scholars interested in the dark side, including corruption (Locatelli et al., 2017; Osei-Tutu et al., 2010; Owusu et al., 2019), sexism (Henderson et al., 2013; Pinto et al., 2017), modern slavery (Brookes et al., 2020), and greenwashing (He et al., 2021). Such topics are traditionally considered inconvenient and uncomfortable to research and therefore tend to remain hidden, both as a phenomenon and a field of study. Some topics, such as corruption and sexism, are scarcely covered in project journals; others are completely ignored, including modern slavery and money laundering. With this Special Issue and online collection, we aim to open the space for discussion (and more research!) on the dark side of projects and invite you to join our efforts. To this effect, our article (Locatelli et al., 2022) has been designed to support researchers' first steps in studying the dark side, including an introduction to the ontological dimensions and definition of the dark side and the research lenses that researchers can use.

We invite you to explore it, so that the torches of light we researchers hold can bring light into the dark side in project practice. With this editorial, we introduce the special issue resulting from the call for papers: "The Dark Side of Projects: Uncovering Slavery, Corruption, Criminal Organizations, and Other Uncomfortable Topics." With this, we also introduce a novel online collection called "The Dark Side of Projects."

The Journey

"But those who, for once in their lives, have found a new tone, a new way of looking, a new way of doing, those people, I believe, will never feel the need to lament that the world is error, that history is filled with people of no consequence, and that it is time for others to keep quiet so that at last the sound of their disapproval may be heard."

(Michel Foucault, on ethics)

When we embarked on the journey into the dark side of projects, we were fully aware that we might not find all that we were looking for. Where are the boundaries of the dark side? What do these boundaries look like? Where do we start practicing the dark side? And where can we start our studies of it? We were also concerned that fellow scholars in project studies would face the same difficulties. However, and similar to many other special collections, which aim to break new ground in project studies, we were guided by the need to find a new tone and a new way of looking into the dark side. We wanted to leave no stone unturned, to challenge the boundaries

[1] School of Management, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
[2] The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London, London, UK
[3] Department of Organizations, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark
[4] School of Civil Engineering, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Corresponding Author:
Giorgio Locatelli, School of Management, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Email: giorgio.locatelli@polimi.it

and ultimately, as Foucault suggests, to throw a stone in still water and create a ripple effect that would be in itself the promising start that we struggled to identify.

From the start, we were aware that research on the dark side of projects is limited and more work is needed. As we proposed the topic to our *Project Management Journal*® (*PMJ*) Editorial Board, we were advised that we might not receive many submissions, and this Special Issue was accepted with a certain level of skepticism. We decided to press forward because we wanted to foster research on the dark side of projects and increase awareness of this emerging and relevant branch of research in project studies, as well as the very extent of the dark side in project practice. Our fellow board editors were actually correct. The Special Issue Call for Papers (Locatelli et al., 2020) attracted 27 proposals, from which 15 were invited for full submission. However, 5 of the 15 full submissions failed to meet our expectations regarding relevance to project studies or the actual quality and were therefore rejected. We continued working closely with 10 manuscripts through three rounds of reviews, but only two papers were accepted and have since been published.

Several rejected proposals were not research papers but rather industrial reports. They might be interesting, but an academic journal is not the place for them. Another common ground for rejection was that proposals misunderstood what constitutes the dark side in projects. Such papers had a limited relationship with the dark side in projects and, despite reviewers' suggestions pointing to forms to strengthen the relationship, the authors maintained a focus on empirical phenomena and interpretations that were unrelated to projects. At the same time, while managing this process, we wrote our own paper (Locatelli et al., 2022).

In summary, compared with other Calls for Papers presented in *PMJ*, we received and published fewer papers. This was a known risk. The low numbers and their spread in topics are more evidence that (1) scholars are reluctant or not interested in writing on these topics, and (2) even when they decide to write, their work struggles to survive peer review. Hence, the lower numbers reinforce even more the need to raise awareness and open a dialogue about the dark side of projects

Accepted Articles

This special issue includes three articles, briefly presented as follows.

In "The Dark Side of Environmental Sustainability in Projects: Unraveling Greenwashing Behaviors," He et al. (2021) discuss greenwashing behaviors in projects. One of the wrongdoings of the dark side is to deceive others. The authors discuss how some project-based companies develop narratives that clash with their actual practices. Two such narratives, for example, are about health and safety and happy workers while exploiting them, or speaking about green initiatives while polluting and adopting unsustainable environmental practices. In particular, the authors discussed how economic pressures, institutional opportunities, information asymmetry, and moral disengagement encourage contractors to develop greenwashing behaviors in delivering infrastructures. This article is important because it points out the hypocrisy around the dark side. Organizations that pride themselves on being ethical have behaviors that are unethical (or illegal). The beautiful and shining narrative of organizations picturing themselves as green, inclusive, or respectful of their workforce was no more than public relations. The reality might be very different: such organizations might exploit the environment in an unsustainable way, exploit the workforce, or promote cut-throat behaviors. As discussed in this article, greenwashing is precisely one of these phenomena.

In "A Qualitative Analysis of Unethical Behaviors in Projects: Insight From Moral Psychology," Sarhadi and Hasanzadeh (2021) discuss ethics in projects. The topic is important, as project actors walk a fine line between what they consider to be morally admissible and what is required for projects and themselves to succeed. At the heart of the article is also the struggle between individual and structural responsibility, which is core in ethics' literature and practice. Drawing on Levinasian and Nietzschean moral psychologies and cross-case analysis, the authors suggest a framework for ethical behavior in projects and conclude that the project manager's moral compass partly draws on unconscious existential meaning. The article is relevant and worth reading for several reasons. First, it provides an informed walk-through of developments in moral psychology from modernity to late modernity. Such a review is useful for scholars new to the area who would like to establish their views and theories in a more comprehensive framework on the topic or are looking for theoretical inspiration to interpret their data. Second, their framework is also useful for judging project decisions' morality. It argues that an existential will to meaning helps balance infinite responsibility for others (Levinasian Ethics) and will to power and mobility (Nietzschean's philosophy). Third, the case illustrates how the framework can be applied to empirical data and provides glimpses into how ethical tensions driving decisions and behaviors are enacted in project practice.

Our article, "The Dark Side of Projects: Dimensionality, Research Methods, and Agenda" (Locatelli et al., 2022), provides the foundations for scholars interested in joining our efforts to shed light on the dark. In this article, we introduce the dark side of projects, their relevance, potential avenues for future research, and methodological strategies "*to see in the dark*." We start our journey by characterizing the dark side as multifaceted, ambiguous, and elusive but also very real. Dark side materialization includes very different phenomena, ranging from corruption to modern slavery, from sexism to waste of resources, and organizational power and politics. This variety makes the dark side broad and widely spread across industrial sectors and countries and, therefore, potentially present in a variety of empirical contexts. One of the key implications is the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes the dark side. For example, while (hopefully) everybody might agree

that corruption is a practice of the dark side, would the construction of vanity projects, such as expensive sports infrastructure used only for a few weeks for an Olympic game or a sky ramp in the desert, also be considered the dark side? Also, adding a further layer of complexity, the dark side is contextual; that is, some phenomena are considered the dark side on the world stage (usually mostly influenced by the Western European value system), where, in some countries, they are not dark side and vice versa. We developed a thorough discussion on the infinite shades of gray that led us to define the dark side as "any illegal or unethical phenomena associated with projects." We unfold the definition and discuss the key elements of the dark side. We also provide an account of the limited project studies literature on the topic showing that the study of the dark side of projects is in its infancy, and more research is relevant and urgent but also hard to conduct. We, therefore, propose a wide research agenda accompanied by an *escape manual* with suggestions about data collection, conceptual development, and theoretical and epistemological positioning to investigate the dark side.

Moving Forward

Our paper collection is modest: two papers and one more from us out of 27 proposals and 15 full submissions. Yet, we believe we have taken one step in the right direction, so there is one more pathway for project scholars to break the silence and make their contribution to the dark side of projects. The special issue is not the end of the story. We have launched a novel online collection called "The Dark Side of Projects." This collection will be an open door and invitation for papers dealing with the dark side. With this in mind, scholars intending to research and publish on this topic are welcome to contact *PMJ* associate editors Giorgio Locatelli (giorgio.locatelli@polimi.it) or Joana Geraldi (jge.ioa@cbs.dk) to discuss their ideas. Additionally, this collection will be the place to go for scholars and practitioners interested in reading about the dark side of projects. Our goal is to make research and discussions about the dark side more widely spread.

Let's turn on the light on the dark side!

References

Amnesty International. (2021). In the prime of their lives, Qatar's failure to investigate, remedy and prevent migrant workers' deaths. https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/MDE2246142021ENGLISH.pdf

Brookes, N., Glass, J., Castro, A., Locatelli, G., & Oliomogbe, G. (2020). *Eliminating modern slavery from projects*. December, 1–32. https://www.apm.org.uk/media/47794/modern-slavery-final.pdf

Foucault, M. (1989). *Ethics—Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984*. Penguin.

Gulf News. (2019). *Qatar covered up the death of 1200 workers*. https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/qatar/qatar-covered-up-the-death-of-1200-workers-1.63329360

He, Q., Wang, Z., Wang, G., Xie, J., & Chen, Z. (2021). The dark side of environmental sustainability in projects: Unraveling greenwashing behaviors. *Project Management Journal*, *53*(4) 875697282110427. https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728211042705

Henderson, L. S., Stackman, R. W., & Koh, C. Y. (2013). Women project managers: The exploration of their job challenges and issue selling behaviors. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *6*(4), 761–791. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMPB-06-2012-0033

International Labour Organization (ILO) & Walk Free Foundation (WFF). (2017). *Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—dgreports/—dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf

Johnson, S. (2018). *Corruption is costing the global economy $3.6 trillion dollars every year*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/12/the-global-economy-loses-3-6-trillion-to-corruption-each-year-says-u-n

Lehtinen, J., Locatelli, G., Sainati, T., Artto, K., & Evans, B. (2022). The grand challenge: Effective anti-corruption measures in projects. *International Journal of Project Management*, *40*(4), 347–361. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2022.04.003

Locatelli, G., Geraldi, J., Konstantinou, E., & Sainati, T. (2020). The dark side of projects: Uncovering slavery, corruption, criminal organizations, and other oncomfortable topics. Call for Papers. *Project Management Journal*.

Locatelli, G., Konstantinou, E., Geraldi, J., & Sainati, T. (2022). The dark side of projects: Dimensionality, research methods, and agenda. *Project Management Journal*, *53*(4).

Locatelli, G., Mariani, G., Sainati, T., & Greco, M. (2017). Corruption in public projects and megaprojects: There is an elephant in the room! *International Journal of Project Management*, *35*(3), 252–268. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2016.09.010

Olken, B. A. (2007). Monitoring corruption: Evidence from a field experiment in Indonesia. *Journal of Political Economy*, *115*(2), 200–249.

Olken, B. A. (2009). Corruption perceptions vs. corruption reality. *Journal of Public Economics*, *93*(7–8), 950–964. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2009.03.001

Osei-Tutu, E., Badu, E., & Owusu-Manu, D. (2010). Exploring corruption practices in public procurement of infrastructural projects in Ghana. In *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *3*(2), 236–256. Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1108/17538371011036563

Owusu, E. K., Chan, A. P. C., DeGraft, O.-M., Ameyaw, E. E., & Robert, O.-K. (2019). Contemporary review of anti-corruption measures in construction project management. *Project Management Journal*, *50*(1), 40–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/8756972818808983

Pattisson, P., McIntyre, N., Mukhtar, I., Eapen, N., Mukhtar, I., Bhuyan, M. O. U., Bhattarai, U., & Piyari, A. (2021).

Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022

Pinto, J. K., Patanakul, P., & Pinto, M. B. (2017). "The aura of capability": Gender bias in selection for a project manager job.

International Journal of Project Management, *35*(3), 420–431. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2017.01.004

Sarhadi, M., & Hasanzadeh, S. (2021). A qualitative analysis of unethical behaviors in projects: Insight from moral psychology. *Project Management Journal*, *53*(4) https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728211037775.