



Special Issue 2028—Call for Papers *M@n@gement*

Is progress taken for granted?
Social change, backlash, and resistance in organizations

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Dissent in the face of social progress

The production and dissemination of knowledge, particularly on inequalities, climate change, and biodiversity, are increasingly under attack. These attacks are reflected in some political and administrative decisions adopted across several national contexts, such as the measures taken by President Donald Trump since his return to power (Yourish et al., 2025). Beyond the US, academic freedom is being directly or indirectly undermined in many countries. For example, in France, controversies surrounding 'Islamism' within universities, reignited by the Minister of Higher Education, have been accompanied by concrete attacks on several scientific institutions (Le Nevé, 2021).

Although research on grand challenges (Gariel & Bartel-Radic, 2024; Mercier-Roy & Mailhot, 2024), sustainability, and ecosystem transitions is still ongoing (Barlatier et al., 2025), climate policies and the low-carbon transition are also under attack from many sides. These attacks range from climate scepticism to misinformation and lobbying, and aim to delay or weaken existing or future standards, as illustrated by the recent deregulation movement in Europe around the Omnibus law. Despite research pointing to the depletion of global resources (Berkowitz et al., 2019), sustainable finance, ESG investing, and CSR are becoming increasingly polarized. For example, some asset managers are taking a more cautious approach to their commitments (Harmes, 2025), and major players such as BlackRock announced in 2024 that they would be withdrawing ESG-labelled financial products (Posner, 2024). Some companies are reviewing their CSR practices and communication by adopting withdrawal or 'silence' strategies (Carols & Lewis, 2018).

At the same time, the movement for equity, equality, and inclusion seems to be reaching a peak when it comes to considering diverse identities within organizations (Ayoko & Fujimoto, 2023). And yet, it is simultaneously accompanied by growing opposition. The murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests in 2020 intensified diversity initiatives, while fuelling a conservative backlash (Scott et al., 2025). In connection with these events, the public statements of certain companies, far from achieving consensus, have sometimes crystallized negative reactions (Folberg et al., 2024).

Finally, the flexibilisation of work is also undergoing changes. While teleworking, part-time work and flexible hours have become the norm, particularly because of the health crisis (Wheatley et al., 2024), the ideal of constant availability remains dominant (Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022; Chung & Seo, 2024). Barriers to the use of these arrangements (such as stigmatization and career penalties) persist and are even becoming more pronounced, while calls for a return to the office are growing (Le Monde, 2025).

Whether it be attacks on science, the retreat from climate and financial commitments, the contestation of inclusion policies or the questioning of individualized management systems, these developments reflect a critical re-evaluation of social and ecological advances perceived as progressive: a phenomenon known as 'backlash'.

Backlash or resistance to social progress

At its most basic level, backlash is defined as resistance to social progress (Flood et al., 2021). It is an active 'counterattack' against initiatives, programmes, knowledge, and policies that aim to change existing patterns of inequality and injustice. Used at a political level, the term refers to a retrograde goal of returning to a previous social condition, using extraordinary objectives and tactics that challenge dominant narratives to interfere with the dominant public discourse (Alter & Zürn, 2020). The concept of 'backlash' emerged in the 1970s in the

United States, in political science, to describe and analyse right-wing extremism (Lipset & Raab, 1970). The emphasis is then placed on the link between 'backlash' and symbolic investment in the past (Alter & Zürn, 2020): beyond simple opposition, backlash is often associated with fear of loss and nostalgia for an idealized past. In the 1990s, the feminist movement took up this notion (Burke & Black, 1997), suggesting that every advance made by women triggers a hostile reaction to block or reverse their gains. Since then, it has been particularly mobilized in the field of gender studies and research on diversity, equality, and inclusion (Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Phelan & Rudman, 2010), which combine backlash with the study of the negative social and economic consequences affecting individuals who go against social norms.

Today, some researchers attribute a systematic nature to backlash. All projects aiming for social justice encounter resistance from privileged groups seeking to restore or maintain their power, contributing to a growing polarization of opinions (Ross et al., 2019). This development has been fuelled by several structural and psychological factors that have broadened its scope, including fear of losing resources, fear of the emergence of new dominant values, and questioning of existing values (Iyer, 2022).

Backlash, organisation and management

In management literature, the issue has mainly been explored from the perspective of diversity. Studies have focused on how women, particularly those in leadership positions, who challenge gender stereotypes may face a number of sanctions, such as hostile messages, negative evaluations, lack of promotion, or tensions with colleagues (e.g. Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Saint-Michel, 2018; Ciancetta & Roch, 2021).

However, in a context where organizations play an increasingly political role (Scherer et al., 2014; Mair & Rathert, 2025), where they constitute a microcosm reflecting societal aspirations, and are part of increasingly connected networks of stakeholders, the phenomenon of backlash impacts organizations as a whole. Management and organization studies, together with other disciplines such as political science, sociology and psychology, can contribute to exploring the phenomenon at the institutional, organizational, managerial, and individual levels to shed new light on these dynamics, help us analyse them critically and position ourselves, as researchers and practitioners, in these debates.

At the institutional level, backlash can be understood through the three pillars—regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive—that structure the legitimacy of practices (Scott, 2001). It is not simply a matter of decline, but rather the outcome of institutional efforts aimed at undermining or redefining norms that were previously thought to be established (Lawrence et al., 2011). For example, the recent decline in commitment to sustainable development in the United States is based on anti-ESG laws passed in 37 states and decisions by the Supreme Court (Ybarra & Turk, 2025). At the same time, a 'backlash industry' is mobilizing framing marketing strategies to influence norms and representations (Scott et al., 2025). Nevertheless, institutional work does not only serve to destabilize institutions; it can also aim to defend, maintain, or strengthen them through various institutional maintenance practices involving stakeholders both inside and outside organizations (Micelotta et al., 2013).

At the organizational level, backlash can be overt, as illustrated by the explicit withdrawal of social or environmental policies under pressure following governance or political evolutions. These changes can generate opposition from stakeholders and can prove difficult

to implement depending on how deeply rooted they are in regulations, culture, or processes. Alongside these apparent shifts, more subtle forms of backlash are also emerging: resource reductions, the withdrawal of objectives, silence, and changes in vocabulary, generating tensions between discourse and practice. Among stakeholders, trade unions play a central role in protecting existing rights (Godard, 2014; Kaufman, 2015). They constitute a counter-power that can either slow down backlash or contribute to it (Heery, 2016).

Managers appear to be key intermediaries, caught up in contexts of ambiguity, conflicting values and contradictory demands. Neither mere executors nor fully autonomous, they are faced with moral and political dilemmas (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Contu, 2018), which sometimes lead them to support strategic changes, and sometimes to resist or attempt to preserve certain commitments. However, backlash remains poorly conceptualized as a specific managerial challenge with both organizational and societal dimensions.

At the individual level, organizational contexts characterized by normative uncertainty or contested values can exacerbate the identity and moral tensions experienced by individuals, with lasting effects on their commitment, well-being and career choices (Petriglieri, 2011). These tensions drive action, with employees who are particularly sensitive to social or environmental issues making their voices heard within organizations in the form of internal activism (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). But threat is as much a cause as a consequence of backlash: it can emerge from perceived threats to the identity, status, or legitimacy of certain dominant groups, revealing ambivalent dynamics.

Taken together, these different levels do not function in isolation but feed into each other: institutional transformations redefine the organizational and managerial scope for action, which influences individual experiences, which in turn can help to consolidate, influence, or challenge existing institutional frameworks.

Research objectives and illustrative questions

This special issue aims to contribute to the theorization of the backlash phenomenon by analysing its institutional, organizational, managerial, and individual manifestations. The objective is to gain a better understanding of the internal and external mechanisms that promote backlash, as well as its effects and their complex relationships. Ultimately, this special issue will seek to understand the representations and experiences of the various stakeholders faced with backlash, including the multiple forms of resistance it can generate.

This special issue calls for papers based on a variety of methodological and conceptual approaches and encourages the adoption of multidisciplinary approaches at the intersection of management science, sociology, political science, psychology, communication, philosophy and law, among others. Submitted articles may be conceptual or empirical and based on a variety of ontologies. They may explore in depth one of the manifestations of backlash (e.g. questioning of science, environmental commitments, DEI policies, or flexible work), take a more comprehensive approach to the phenomenon of backlash, or conduct comparative studies. Submitted manuscripts may also offer an analysis focused on a specific level of analysis (individual, managerial, organizational, or institutional, for example) or undertake a multi-level analysis.

Although the subject of backlash is broad and covers various aspects related to organizations, submissions can address a range of topics that include, but are not limited to, the following:

At the institutional level:

- What are the different forms of backlash affecting organizations? Are there 'invisible' forms of backlash?
- How and to what extent does backlash contribute to the deinstitutionalization of established norms (e.g. ESG, DEI, climate)?
- What forms of institutional work produce or hinder backlash?

At the organizational and managerial level:

- What roles do different modes of governance and different forms of organization play in weakening or, conversely, protecting social progress? Are democratic organizations, in particular, more or less prone to backlash?
- How do organizations respond, resist, protect themselves, and participate in backlash?
- What are the risks, uncertainties, and tensions generated by backlash? How can they be managed?
- What forms of collective response are organized to face backlash (e.g. meta-organizations, networks, lobbying)?

At the individual level:

- How do individuals participate in or resist backlash (e.g. through employee activism)?
- What is the impact of backlash on individuals (identity, career paths, values, social representations, experience)?
- How does backlash transform or disrupt individuals' relationships with work and the company?
- What forms of individual and collective resistance to backlash can be observed? What are the conditions and effects of this resistance?

Finally, the interactions between these different levels:

- What is the role of researchers and what stance should they adopt in response to this phenomenon?
- What methodological and epistemological approaches are best suited to studying backlash, its mechanisms, and its consequences? What methodological innovations are needed to better understand its contemporary forms?
- How can organizational theory contribute to understanding the phenomenon of backlash?
- What are the multi-level interactions between societal, organizational, and individual backlash?
- How can backlash contribute to the emergence of other backlashes?

The submitted manuscript must comply with the guidelines indicated here: <https://management-aims.com/index.php/mgmt/preparation>.

Timeline

Proposals for papers must be submitted from **1 February 2027 to 1 June 2027** at the latest, via *M@n@gement*'s submission platform, for publication in December 2028.

An online paper development workshop, organized by the guest editorial team, will take place on **19 November 2026** across different time zones. Proposals (maximum 3,000 words, including references) should be submitted to lnoury@audencia.com by **19 October 2026**. Participation in this workshop is not a prerequisite for submitting to the special issue.

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Biographies of the editorial team

Sarah Richard is associate professor at Audencia Business School (France). Her work focuses on inclusion policies. Her research mainly concerns disability policies, which she studies at the individual, organizational and societal levels. She is also interested in organizations on the margins of the traditional employment sphere, having studied, in particular, the functioning of sheltered employment, whose model she analyses and questions. Her work has been published internationally in journals such as the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Vocational Behaviour and Work*, and *Employment and Society*. Sarah was guest editor of a special issue on disability for *Revue française de gestion*. Together with several colleagues, she coordinates a French-speaking research network on the subject (Ges'handi).

Lucie Noury is associate professor at Audencia Business School (France). Her work focuses on contemporary transformations of professional work and organizations, leading her to explore issues such as the meaning of work and its place in our lives, flexible work and new employment relationships, and the positioning of professions in relations to climate change. Her work has been published in journals such as *M@n@gement*, *Organization* and the *Journal of Professions and Organizations*. Lucie has been guest editor of several special issues (notably in the journals *Organization* as well as *Gender, Work & Organization*) and is associate editor at *Revue française de gestion*.

Pauline de Becdelièvre is professor at Paris-Saclay University (France) and *agrégée du supérieur*. Her work focuses on social dialogue, with a particular interest in the concept of activism and its evolution. She is also interested in professional trajectories and careers, particularly those of atypical workers. Her research has been published in international journals such as the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* and *Personnel Review*, as well as in French journals such as *Revue française de gestion* and *@GRH*. Pauline de Becdelièvre was also guest editor of a special issue on new forms of work for the journal *@GRH*.

Céline Louche is professor of business and society at the University of Waikato–Waikato Management School (New Zealand). Drawing on organizational, institutional, and strategic perspectives, her research examines the interactions between organizations and society. It focuses on topics such as responsible finance, corporate responsibility, sustainable development, and sustainable business models. Her work has been published in journals such as *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *Business & Society*, *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Organization & Environment*. Céline is co-editor-in-chief of *Business & Society* and serves on several editorial/scientific committees, including *Organization & Environment*, *European Management Journal* and *M@n@gement*. She has been part of the editorial team for two special issues of the *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* and *Organization & Environment*.

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