

Capitalism and Psychology

Identity and Angst: on Civilisation's New Discontent

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Nowadays it is widely assumed that mental problems (depression, ADHD, anxiety...) are expressions of underlying neurobiological processes and, moreover, genetically based. Pills are in; talking is out. My position, as a psychoanalyst, is diametrically opposed to that: psychological, even psychiatric, problems are moral disorders. Individuals are expected to live up to an ideal image that society imposes on them and it is their failure, and even their success, in doing so that makes them ill. This is, of course, a revival of the classic Freudian idea which he proposed in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1929).

Freud's vision is far more nuanced than the naive anti-society attitude so often ascribed to him. He assumes that between society and the individual there is an area of tension in which the individual's desires are, indeed must be, reined in by society. The question is what are the different forms that this area of tension can take on. One must assume that different social structures will lead to different processes of identity-creation and to different mental disorders.

This reasoning leads me to distinguish three different types of society which always have a serious impact on identity, discontent and pathology. I have called them the Victorian, the post-May 68, and the Enron societies. An alternative, more ironic designation might be: the age of the right orgasm, that of compulsory free love, and finally that of pleasure on credit.

THE VICTORIAN MODEL OR THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT ORGASM

I can be quite brief on the Victorian model because it is the model with which we are most familiar. It is a thoroughly patriarchal society in which the accent is entirely on prohibition. Furthermore, it is explicitly coupled with a traditional class structure and a dominant reli-

gion. There is hardly room for the individual, who merely forms part of a coercive society. In World War I nearly an entire generation spontaneously joined up and grown men were prepared to go 'over the top' to meet their death. It is no accident that psychoanalysis emerged out of this society, and an over-coercive morality came to be seen as a cause of illness.

Freud did not hesitate to adopt a clear ethical position on this relationship between society and the individual. Psychopathology is at least partly created by an excessively strict moral code in which sexuality finds pathological outlets through neurotic behaviour. The implicit norm for successful treatment, therefore, is that the individual should achieve orgasm in the right way, and not succumb to neurasthenic masturbation, angst-ridden abstinence, hysterical frigidity or obsessive fear of germs. For therapeutic reasons, according to Freud, the analyst will often have to combat an over-strict super-ego, as well as what he calls the cultural super-ego (Freud, 1930a). At the same time, he is convinced that the analyst should never adopt the role of a saviour or guru (Freud, 1923b). The aim of treatment is to give the subject enough freedom to make his own ethical choices.

THE POST-MAY 1968 MODEL OR COMPULSORY FREE LOVE

This brings us to the post-May 1968 model, the effect of which is the reverse of the Victorian model. This is reflected in particular developments in the field of human rights. The Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was intended primarily for specific groups. It dealt with the rights of women, of children and also involved community concerns such as the right to education, to medical care and so on. But from the 1960s it became directed increasingly at almost every form of authority, and was concerned not so much with freeing vulnerable groups as liberating individuals in general. It was the era of the autonomous self and the authentic personality, preferably enjoying as many rights as possible. Duties were simply passed on to the community.

The problems which people brought to the consulting room did not differ greatly from those of the previous era, although they expected (and received) different answers. Psychotherapy was also caught up in the general sense of liberation. Instead of Victorian suppression, we had post-68 imposition, and everything that had been forbidden now became compulsory. And so in a relatively short period the patriarchal accent on duty was replaced by what, German-Dutch cultural philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk (2007) called the paradise of indulgence. The effects of this became particularly clear in the 1990s when the welfare state in Western Europe seemed to consist of a collection of individuals who each took their own rights for granted. Nowadays it is fashionable to wag the finger in reaction against the May 68 period: the pendulum has swung too far, people are much too egoistic and show too little community spirit and so on. English publicist Theodor Dalrymple (2001) is an eloquent illustration of this. His position is very simple: the current flood of psychological disorders is a result of today's self-indulgent society and is being sustained by therapists who keep people under treatment far too long by persuading them that they cannot help themselves. His books are full of juicy anecdotes which, to the layman, seem extremely convincing.

Anecdotes, of course, do not constitute scientific proof and, furthermore, Dalrymple is

not well-informed about recent socio-political developments. The welfare state which he considers to lie at the heart of the problem, certainly in Great Britain, has had one foot in the grave since the 1990s. That people misuse the system is undeniable but profiteering and malingering cannot explain the growing numbers of suicides among adults and so-called behavioural disorders among children.

To my reasoning, neither profiteering nor a rising suicide rate are the result of an over-indulgent society, rather the opposite. Together with extreme individualism, they are the result of a third social model that in many respects is new and which I call the Enron model of pleasure on credit. It is this model that has created today's discontent, although 'discontent' is much too weak a term in this case.

THE ENRON MODEL OR PLEASURE ON CREDIT

Not so long ago, society was determined by the interplay between at least four dimensions: the political, the religious or ideological, the economic and the cultural, in which the political and the religious aspects were usually the most important. Today, they have all but disappeared. Politicians are fodder for stand-up comedians, religion calls up images of sexual abuse or suicide terrorism, and as for culture, everybody is now an artist. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1999) described one effect of this in trenchant terms: never have we known so much freedom and never have we felt so powerless. However, in my opinion, 'freedom' is too optimistic a word for the modern indifference that has taken the place of the religious and ideological restrictions of the past.

There is only one dominant discourse still standing, namely the economic. We live in a neoliberal society in which everything has become a product. Furthermore, this is linked to a so-called meritocracy in which everyone is held responsible for their own success or failure – the myth of the self-made man. If you succeed, you have yourself to thank; if you fail you have only yourself to blame. And the most important criterion is profit, money. Whatever you do must bring in the cash; that is the message.

In socio-economic terms we are speaking of a neoliberal meritocracy. The neoliberal is convinced that every market regulates itself and consequently should be steered as little as possible so that everybody has an equal chance. That sounds very fine, but the result of this model has been virtually the opposite: inequality increases in leaps and bounds together with regulation. Instead of the citizen being a part of a community, we now have the *individual* in direct opposition to the *organisation*. Furthermore, the identity of that individual is coming under attack, as evidenced by the nature and frequency of certain disorders.

Neoliberal meritocracy

So long as meritocracy limits itself to ensuring that the top boy or girl in the class wins a scholarship and later goes on to earn a good salary, few people would object. But today, meritocracy is deeply embedded in a high-tech, lightning-fast, globalised, pseudo-free market and it is that combination which is fatal for society as a community. It becomes very clear when we look at the area of tension between the individual and society. Until recently this

area was controlled by a traditional code of ethics which was solidly rooted in a grand, overarching religious or ideological narrative. This ethical system has now disappeared, together with the grand narratives, and the ideals of the past are dismissed as 'woolly'.

Alasdair MacIntyre, Scottish philosopher, has written a striking account of this disappearance and its consequences. Instead of the earlier ethical system, he writes, we live today under the yoke of a moral fiction, the fiction of systematic effectiveness. He calls it 'moral' primarily because that effectiveness involves manipulating people to achieve an external goal. And he calls it a fiction, because it is not in the least effective. On the contrary, it is nothing more than a mask for excessive social control. (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 73-79)

Setting aside the mask, it is not very difficult to see that the external goal is more profit. Within the model, everything has become a commodity, a negotiable object, and that applies particularly to what previously had been an ethical concern, namely enjoyment. It also applies to matters that until recently were human rights, such as medical care, education and a free press. Ultimately, it even applies to us ourselves for we too are becoming negotiable products, since digital information about our consumer behaviour is traded for large sums of money.

Today our primary duty is enjoyment, to 'benefit' as much as we can whether for cash or increasingly on credit. Omnipresent advertising illustrates how virtually everything has been eroticised. Enjoyment in the true meaning of the word has become an important medical commercial goal, by which pharmaceutical companies make it their business to persuade healthy men to swallow Viagra.¹ The result is that people fall ill from an excess of 'enjoyment', from an addiction to everything from sex to shopping.

Also what were once our rights have become products to pay for. In a neoliberal environment, health care and a decent education cost a fortune. Education is extremely important because within the model the individual has only one duty: he must succeed and make full use of every opportunity open to him. Whoever succeeds will have only himself and his own efforts to thank and the same applies to those who fail. That is the new creed. By virtue of the meritocratic system, success can necessarily only occur in competition with one's colleagues; solidarity should only be considered if it returns a profit in the short term. In the Enron company this became known as *Rank and Yank*. The achievements of every employee were judged competitively and on that basis one fifth of them were sacked each year after being publicly humiliated by having their name, photo and 'failure' posted on the company's website. (de Waal, 2009, p.51) In a very short time, almost every employee started to lie about his achievements, which ultimately led to the company's bankruptcy. Nevertheless, various weaker versions of the Enron model are still in operation elsewhere.

What effect does this have on the new discontent? Or more generally, on the tension between the individual and society, and the identity disorders it gives rise to?

THE NEW DISCONTENT

From citizen as a member of society to individual confronting the organisation

Since the 1990s the classic area of tension between society and citizen has shifted to opposi-

tion between the individual and the organisation. This change reflects a generalised management culture in which efficiency is the highest, indeed the only good. There is opposition because the individual does not identify himself with the organisation and is certainly no longer prepared to sacrifice himself for it. He is only interested in what it can provide. Without a coordinating ethical system, everything is permitted so long as it is not explicitly forbidden by contract; that is the core of neoliberal morality. Diametrically opposed to individual rights is the organisation, which wants to limit them, or rather the demands of the individual, supposedly in the public interest, though in fact in the interest of the organisation.

Since there is no convincing communal ethical system to express that public interest, the new moral criterion becomes purely utilitarian. In concrete terms this means that everything is measured, preferably quite literally, in terms of production, growth and profit. To conduct these measurements each organisation must make frequent evaluations, which within a short space of time take on the air of formal inspections. After all, everyone is now suspect because everyone is out for their own good. In addition, the organisations themselves are led by people who as individuals are equally concerned with their own advantage and consequently are even more suspect. Hence they too will need to be checked on and evaluated, raising in turn the question of who should assess the inspectors and so on. In such a society the authority that was once exercised by identifiable figures disappears and is replaced by a bureaucratic power within an anonymous organisation functioning on the basis of increasingly detailed contracts.

And thus begins a negative spiral between individuals and organisations, who trust each other less and less as time goes on. Precisely because an overarching ethical system has disappeared, the organisation has to introduce ever more regulations combined with ever more registration systems to ensure that the regulations are observed. Hence the exponential growth of cameras checking on everyone and everything together with public and secret evaluation systems, function systems and so on. The individual for his part feels increasingly that his rights are being infringed and distances himself from the organisation. In concrete terms everybody tries to escape as far as possible from the proliferation of regulations and registries. This is perhaps easier than it seems because the possibility of interfering with systems of registration and measurement increases in proportion to their growth. The measurements become less and less reliable, leading to yet more registrations and controls. But the inevitable consequence of all this is a climate of angst and uncertainty.

In my opinion, the most important effect has been a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic. In the earlier models, every professional could, to a certain degree, decide what he considered to be important. This implied internal motivation, an intrinsic drive to do well and an associated sense of responsibility. Nowadays, the criteria are imposed from outside, with no account taken of local or individual differences, resulting in a boring uniformity of products and performance. These external criteria imply that motivation to perform well no longer comes from within but are merely a response to externally imposed standards. Almost every study into motivation concludes that this has an extremely negative effect both on the employees input and work-satisfaction and on the quality of the completed work. (Pink, D. 2009) After some years this leads to the disappearance of any kind of work ethic and subsequently of any ethic at all. In its place comes external regulation in the form of handbooks and

closed circuit cameras. After all, if I may no longer judge the quality of my own work, and the standards are imposed from outside, I shall not feel particularly involved or responsible. That is only one step away from not caring at all, so long as I stay within the imposed limits. At that moment, ethics effectively disappear.

Social angst as the hallmark of the new identity

Every social order determines both the development of identity as well as the potential disorders of its members.² Under the yoke of the hyper-strict super-ego, Victorian society produced neurotic citizens who, as a group, were always ready to fight for their own patriarch against that of another group. The Enron society produces individual consumers who compete with each other. For French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the command of the post-modern super-Ego is "Enjoy". (Lacan, 1966, p. 821) The malaise of the Victorian had to do with too much group and too little enjoyment. The current malaise of the post-modern individual is the result of too much enjoyment and too little group. We have to enjoy ourselves madly, or to express it more correctly, consume madly, and compared with a few years ago the limitations on enjoyment are minimal. The snake in the grass is that we must earn it, literally or figuratively, by being successful – which is our duty – in constant competition with others. Such a system justifies the angst of Thomas Hobbes: *Homo homini lupus est*.³ The result is what Mark Fisher tellingly calls 'depressive hedonia' (2009, p. 21).

A meritocratic system very rapidly starts to privilege certain characteristics, and punish others as a way of maintaining itself. Since a competitive character is a must, individualism soon takes over. Flexibility is also highly desirable, but the price is a superficial and unstable identity. Solidarity becomes an expensive luxury and its place is taken by temporary coalitions whose main purpose is to gain more from them than one loses. Strong social bonds with colleagues are virtually excluded, emotional commitment to one's work hardly exists, and there is certainly no loyalty to the company or organisation. In this connection, the typical defence mechanism is cynicism, reflecting the failure or refusal to commit oneself. Individualism, profiteering and the 'me-culture' are becoming quasi-endemic and are the clear consequences of the Enron model and not of the welfare state in the past. Below the surface, there is fear, ranging from a fear of failure to wider social angst. This psychiatric category has increased spectacularly in recent years, and the pharmaceutical industry has benefited greatly. I see the results of this in the increasing diagnosis of autism among young people. In my opinion, it has little to do with traditional autism but reflects the growth of social isolation, an escape from the threat posed by the 'Other'.

The compulsory competition created by financial meritocracy makes it increasingly necessary to carry out evaluations in the workplace. This leads to a decline in autonomy and the individual's sense of agency. In combination with a growing dependency on external and constantly shifting evaluation criteria, it causes what the American sociologist Richard Sennett graphically describes as the infantilisation of the work-force. (Sennett, 2003, p. 46; pp. 102-107) Adults give in to childish bursts of anger, are jealous about trivialities, tell white lies, are often deceitful, enjoy the misfortune of others and harbour petty feelings of revenge. Teasing was once a problem for schools; now it can be seen in the workplace as a typical

symptom of powerlessness whereby frustration is taken out on the weakest. It is part of the so-called 'bicycle reflex': kick downwards and push upwards.

As well as a declining sense of agency there is also a general encroachment on self-respect and identity. Both depend to a large extent on receiving recognition from the 'Other'. This is the lesson that rings through from Hegel to Lacan. For Hegel, recognition by others lies at the heart of our self-awareness. Lacan sees identity developing from the phrase *Tu es cela*, ('That is what you are', Lacan, 1966, p. 100) with the underlying motif being the fear that the other no longer needs us, the *Veut-il me perdre?* ('Does he want rid of me?', Lacan, 1973, p. 194). Sennett expresses the same idea when his modern-day employee asks *Who needs me?* (1998, p. 146) For growing numbers of people the answer is 'Nobody'. They belong to the *quantité négligible*; they have become superfluous, even invisible.

The result is humiliation, guilt and shame because one hasn't made it, because one is a 'loser', which is one of the most important recently-coined terms of abuse. It is all the more distressing because it is usually directed at people who in spite of all their hard work have fallen by the wayside. Burnout is caused not so much by pressure of work as by a lack of appreciation and respect, both horizontally and vertically. (Vanheule *et al.*, 2003; Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2005) It is not confined to the lower levels of society but can be observed at every level.

Stress and illness among academics is not the result of pressure of work but from its combination with a loss of autonomy in doing that work. (Berg *et al.*, 2004)

After a number of years, because of the system itself, there emerges a clear polarisation between winners and losers. Furthermore, the losers are told that it is their own fault although their own experience has been of a steady loss of voice and autonomy. Opposite them there are the winners. Some bold sociologists have claimed that in an intensive meritocracy, the most successful display a psychopathic profile. (Babiak & Hare, 2006) As an aside, it is interesting that in the bible of neoliberalism, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, greed is put forward as the most important human virtue.

The self-perpetuating nature of the system has to do with the preferential treatment accorded to the winners. In a relatively short time, it leads to a system of *winner takes all*, in which the middle group becomes steadily smaller and the gap between the top and the bottom grows ever wider. Increasing social inequality correlates very clearly with greater social problems, with failure at school and criminality as well as a whole range of illnesses from diabetes to depression. The studies by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010 & 2007) provide overwhelming statistical material on this subject and should be compulsory reading for every politician.⁴

Alasdair MacIntyre, who was cited earlier, predicted twenty years ago what is now taking place in the provision of therapy: psychotherapists and managers are melting together into a hybrid Cerberus whose task it is to oversee social adaptation and enhanced efficiency. He adds: 'Neither manager nor therapist, in their roles as manager and therapist, do or are able to engage in moral debate' (*op. cit.*, p. 30). To me, as a psychotherapist and professor, this is the breaking point. In the Victorian period of double morality, Freud took a stand against an over-repressive society. During the post-May 68 period the majority of analysts sensibly said nothing. But that is now no longer an option because the present system is ethically reprehensible. A society that allows the social networks, in the true meaning of the term, to be systematically undermined by the way in which work is organized is signing its own death warrant.

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Endnotes

1/ In an officially published article (Bradfield *et al.*, 2009), unsurprisingly in the *Journal of Medical Marketing*, this strategy of in fact misleading people is admitted in as many words while celebrating its financial success. A couple of quotations: 'Although a standardized "functional" or "dysfunctional" erection does not exist, Pfizer has reclassified and pathologized "normal" sexual changes as sexual dysfunctions (p.347) (...) By including a "mild" category of erectile dysfunction, Pfizer was able to expand the market from 10 million men with "impotence" to 30 million men with "occasional erectile dysfunction" (p. 348) (...) Moreover, the publication and dissemination of these high rates of dysfunction gives the impression that normal sexual decline is now a serious public health "epidemic".' (p. 348)

2/ This is the subject of a new book: Paul Verhaeghe, *Identiteit* [Identity] (De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2012).

3/ The main difference is that the 'war of all against all' in Hobbes' time was motivated by religious and political ideals, and furthermore there was a real shortage of inherited property. In a neoliberal meritocracy the competition is geared entirely to personal gain; the point is no longer inheritance but inequality which can best be measured by differences of income (cf. Wilkinson, 2007). In Western Europe, these differences have grown so much in recent decades that it has even been suggested that the middle class is disappearing.

4/ On the basis of an impressive amount of research, Wilkinson (2007) shows a clear negative correlation between physical and mental health and life expectancy with three central factors: low social status and a consequent lack of agency, limited social relationships, and negative experiences in early childhood. The strongest precondition for those three factors is social inequality based on income, which is precisely the goal of neoliberal meritocracy. Two examples out of many. Lower-grade British civil servants display a higher level of blood-clotting based on stress, which leads to four times as many heart failures (p. 163). It has been shown experimentally that low social status among apes generates resistance to insulin which is a precursor of diabetes (p. 73). Heightened aggression among men, depression among women, behavioural problems among children and addiction in all categories are the psychological consequences (chaps. 5, 6 & 7).