

k-punk

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the privatisation of stress¹

Ivor Southwood tells the story of how, at a time when he was living in a condition of underemployment — relying on short-term contracts given to him at the last minute by employment agencies — he one morning made the mistake of going to the supermarket.² When he returned home he found that an agency had left him a message offering him work for the day. But when he called the agency he was told that the vacancy was already filled — and upbraided for his slackness. As he comments, “ten minutes is a luxury the day-labourer cannot afford”. Such labourers are expected to be waiting outside the metaphorical factory gates with their boots on, every morning without fail. In such conditions

daily life becomes precarious. Planning ahead becomes difficult, routines are impossible to establish. Work, of whatever sort, might begin or end anywhere at a moment’s notice, and the burden is always on the worker to create the next opportunity and to surf between roles. The individual must exist in a state of constant readiness. Predictable income, savings, the fixed category of “occupation”: all belong to another historical world.³

It is hardly surprising that people who live in such conditions — where their hours and pay can always be increased or decreased, and their terms of employment are extremely tenuous — should experience anxiety, depression and hopelessness. And it may at first seem remarkable that so many workers have been persuaded to accept such deteriorating conditions as “natural”, and to look inward — into their brain chemistry or into their personal history — for the sources of any stress they may be feeling. But in the ideological field that Southwood describes from the inside, this privatisation of stress has become just one more taken-for-granted dimension of a seemingly depoliticised world. “Capitalist realism” is the

term I have used to describe this ideological field; and the privatisation of stress has played a crucial role in its emergence.

Capitalist realism refers to the widespread belief that there is no alternative to capitalism — though “belief” is perhaps a misleading term, given that its logic is externalised in the institutional practices of workplaces and the media, as well as residing in the heads of individuals. In his discussions of ideology, Althusser cites Pascal’s doctrine: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”: psychological beliefs follow from “going through the motions” of complying with official languages and behaviours. This means that, however much individuals or groups may have disdained or ironised the language of competition, entrepreneurialism and consumerism that has been installed in UK institutions since the 1980s, our widespread ritualistic compliance with this terminology has served to naturalise the dominance of capital and help to neutralise any opposition to it.

We can quickly grasp the form that capitalist realism now takes by reflecting on the shift in the meaning of the famous Thatcher doctrine that “there is no alternative”. When Thatcher initially made this notorious claim, the emphasis was on preference: neoliberal capitalism was the best possible system; the alternatives were undesirable. Now, the claim carries an *ontological* weight — capitalism is not just the best possible system, it is the *only* possible system; alternatives are hazy, spectral, barely conceivable. Since 1989, capitalism’s success in routing its opponents has led to it coming close to achieving the ultimate goal of ideology — invisibility. In the global North at least, capitalism proposes itself as the only possible reality, and therefore it seldom “appears” as such at all. Atilio Boron argues that capitalism has been shifted to a “discreet position behind the political scene, rendered invisible as the structural foundation of contemporary society”, and cites Bertolt Brecht’s observation that “capitalism is a gentleman who doesn’t like to be called by his name”.⁴

The Depressing Realism of New Labour

We would expect the Thatcherite (and post-Thatcherite) right to propagate the idea that there is no alternative to the neoliberal programme. But the victory of capitalist realism was only secured in the UK when the Labour Party capitulated to this view, and accepted, as the price of power, that

“business interests, narrowly conceived, would be henceforth be allowed to organise the shape and direction of the entire culture”.⁵ But perhaps it would be more accurate to record that, rather than simply capitulating to Thatcherite capitalist realism, it was the Labour Party itself that first introduced capitalist realism to the UK political mainstream, when James Callaghan gave his notorious 1976 speech to the Labour conference in Blackpool:

For too long, perhaps ever since the war, we [have] postponed facing up to fundamental choices and fundamental changes in our economy [...] We’ve been living on borrowed time [...] The cosy world we were told would go on forever, where full employment could be guaranteed by a stroke of the chancellor’s pen — that cosy world is gone...

However it is unlikely that Callaghan foresaw the extent to which the Labour Party would come to engage in the politics of “corporate appeasement”, or the extent to which the cosy world for which he was performing the last rites would be replaced by the generalised insecurity described by Ivor Southwood.

The Labour Party’s acquiescence in capitalist realism cannot of course be construed as a simple error: it was a consequence of the disintegration of the left’s old power base in the face of the post-Fordist restructuring of capitalism. The features of this — globalisation; the displacement of manufacturing by computerisation; the casualisation of labour; the intensification of consumer culture — are now so familiar that they, too, have receded into a taken-for-granted background. This is what constitutes the background for the ostensibly post-political and uncontested “reality” that capitalist realism relies upon. The warnings made by Stuart Hall and the others writing in *Marxism Today* at the end of the 1980s turned out to be absolutely correct: the left would face obsolescence if it remained complacently attached to the assumptions of the disappearing Fordist world and failed to hegemonise the new world of post-Fordism.⁶ But the New Labour project, far from being an attempt to achieve this new hegemony, was based precisely on conceding the impossibility of a leftist hegemonisation of post-Fordism: all that could be hoped for was a mitigated version of the neoliberal settlement.

In Italy, autonomists such as Berardi and Negri also recognised the need to face up to the destruction of the world within which the left had been formed, and to adapt to the conditions of post-Fordism, though in rather a different manner. Writing in the 1980s, in a series of letters that were recently published in English, Negri characterises the painful transition from revolutionary hopes to defeat by a triumphalist neoliberalism:

We have to live and suffer the defeat of truth, of our truth. We have to destroy its representation, its continuity, its memory. All subterfuges for avoiding the recognition that reality has changed, and with it truth, have to be rejected. The very blood in our veins had been replaced.⁷

We are currently living with the effects of the left's failure to rise to the challenge that Negri identified. And it doesn't seem a stretch to conjecture that many elements of the left have succumbed to a collective form of clinical depression, with symptoms of withdrawal, impaired motivation and the inability to act.

One difference between sadness and depression is that, while sadness apprehends itself as a contingent and temporary state of affairs, depression presents itself as necessary and interminable: the glacial surfaces of the depressive's world extend to every conceivable horizon. In the depths of the condition, the depressive does not experience his or her melancholia as pathological or indeed abnormal: the conviction of depression that agency is useless, that beneath the appearance of virtue lies only venality, strikes sufferers as a truth which they have reached but others are too deluded to grasp. There is clearly a relationship between the seeming "realism" of the depressive, with its radically lowered expectations, and capitalist realism.

This depression was not experienced collectively: on the contrary, it precisely took the form of the decomposition of collectivity in new modes of atomisation. Denied the stable forms of employment that they had been trained to expect, deprived of the solidarity formerly provided by trade unions, workers found themselves forced into competition with one another on an ideological terrain in which such competition was naturalised. Some workers never recovered from the traumatic shock of seeing the Fordist-social-democratic world suddenly removed: a fact it's

worth remembering at a time when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is hounding claimants off incapacity benefit. Such a move is the culmination of the process of privatising stress that began in the UK in the 1980s.

The Stresses of Post-Fordism

If the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism had its psychic casualties, then post-Fordism has innovated whole new modes of stress. Instead of the elimination of bureaucratic red tape promised by neoliberal ideologues, the combination of new technology and managerialism has massively increased the administrative stress placed on workers, who are now required to be their own auditors (which by no means frees them of the attentions of external auditors of many kinds). Work, no matter how casual, now routinely entails the performance of meta-work: the completion of log books, the detailing of aims and objectives, the engagement in so-called “continuing professional development”. Writing of academic labour, the blogger Savonarola describes how systems of permanent and ubiquitous measurement engender a constant state of anxiety:

One of the more pervasive phenomena in the current cod-neoliberal academic dispensation is CV inflation: as available jobs dwindle down to Kafkaian levels of postponement and implausibility, the miserable *Träger* of academic capital are obliged not just to overfulfil the plan, but to record [...] every single one of their productive acts. The only sins are sins of omission [...] In this sense, the passage from [...] periodic and measured measurement [...] to permanent and ubiquitous measurement cannot but result in a kind of Stakhanovism of immaterial labour, which like its Stalinist forebear exceeds all rationales of instrumentality, and cannot but generate a permanent undercurrent of debilitating anxiety (since *there is no standard*, no amount of work will ever make you *safe*).⁸

It would be naïve to imagine that this “permanent undercurrent of debilitating anxiety” is an accidental side-effect of the imposition of these self-surveillance mechanisms, which manifestly fail to achieve their

official objectives. None other than Philip Blond has argued that “the market solution generates a huge and costly bureaucracy of accountants, examiners, inspectors, assessors and auditors, all concerned with assuring quality and asserting control that hinder innovation and experiment and lock in high cost”.⁹ This acknowledgement is welcome, but it is important to reject the idea that the apparent “failures” of managerialism are “honest mistakes” of a system which sincerely aims for greater efficiency. Managerialist initiatives served very well their real if covert aims, which were to further weaken the power of labour and undermine worker autonomy as part of a project to restore wealth and power to the hyper-privileged.

Relentless monitoring is closely linked to precarity. And, as Tobias van Veen argues, precarious work places “an ironic yet devastating” demand on the labourer. On the one hand, work never ends: the worker is always expected to be available, with no claims to a private life. On the other hand, the precariat are completely expendable, even when they have sacrificed all autonomy to keep their jobs.¹⁰ The tendency today is for practically all forms of work to become precarious. As Franco Berardi puts it, “Capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers”.¹¹ Such “packets of time” are not conceived of as having a connection to a person with rights or demands: they are simply either available or unavailable.

Berardi also notes the effects of digital telecommunications; these produce what he characterises as a diffuse sense of panic, as individuals are subjected to an unmanageable data-blitz:

The acceleration of information exchange [...] is producing an effect of a pathological type on the individual human mind and even more on the collective mind. Individuals are not in a position to consciously process the immense and always growing mass of information that enters their computers, their cell phones, their television screens, their electronic diaries and their heads. However, it seems indispensable to follow, recognise, evaluate, process all this information if you want to be efficient, competitive, victorious.¹²

One of the effects of modern communications technology is that there is no outside where one can recuperate. Cyberspace makes the concept of a

“workplace” archaic. Now that one can be expected to respond to an email at practically any time of the day, work cannot be confined to a particular place, or to delimited hours. There’s no escape — and not only because work expands without limits. Such processes have also hacked into libido, so that the “tethering” imposed by digital telecommunications is by no means always experienced as something that is straightforwardly unpleasant. As Sherry Turkle argues, for example, though many parents are increasingly stressed as they try to keep up with email and messages while continuing to give their children the attention they need, they are also magnetically attracted to their communications technology:

They cannot take a vacation without bringing the office with them; their office is on their cellphone. They complain that their employers rely on them to be continually online but then admit that their devotion to their communications devices exceeds all professional expectations.¹³

Practices ostensibly undertaken for work, even if they are performed on holiday or late at night, are not experienced simply as unreasonable demands. From a psychoanalytic point of view, it is easy to see why such demands — demands that cannot possibly be met — can be libidinised, since this kind of demand is precisely the form that the psychoanalytic drive assumes. Jodi Dean has convincingly argued that digital communicative compulsion constitutes a capturing by (Freudian/Lacanian) drive: individuals are locked into repeating loops, aware that their activity is pointless, but nevertheless unable to desist.¹⁴ The ceaseless circulation of digital communication lies beyond the pleasure principle: the insatiable urge to check messages, email or Facebook is a compulsion, akin to scratching an itch which gets worse the more one scratches. Like all compulsions, this behaviour feeds on dissatisfaction. If there are no messages, you feel disappointed and check again very quickly. But if there are messages you also feel disappointed: no amount of messages is ever enough. Sherry Turkle has talked to people who are unable to resist the urge to send and receive texts on their mobile telephone, even when they are driving a car. At the risk of a laboured pun, this is a perfect example of the death drive, which is defined not by the desire to die, but by being in the grip of a compulsion so powerful that it

makes one indifferent to death. What's remarkable here is the banal content of the drive. This isn't the tragedy of something like *The Red Shoes*, in which the ballerina is killed by the sublime rapture of dance: these are people who are prepared to risk death so that they can open a 140 character message which they know perfectly well is likely to be inane.

Public Renewal or Private Cure?

The privatisation of stress is a perfect capture system, elegant in its brutal efficiency. Capital makes the worker ill, and then multinational pharmaceutical companies sell them drugs to make them better. The social and political causation of distress is neatly sidestepped at the same time as discontent is individualised and interiorised. Dan Hind has argued that the focus on serotonin deficiency as a supposed "cause" of depression obfuscates some of the social roots of unhappiness, such as competitive individualism and income inequality. Though there is a large body of work that shows the links between individual happiness and political participation and extensive social ties (as well as broadly equal incomes), a public response to private distress is rarely considered as a first option.¹⁵ It is clearly easier to prescribe a drug than a wholesale change in the way society is organised. Meanwhile, as Hind argues, "there is a multitude of entrepreneurs offering happiness now, in just a few simple steps". These are marketed by people "who are comfortable operating within the culture's account of what it is to be happy and fulfilled", and who both corroborate and are corroborated by "the vast ingenuity of commercial persuasion".

Psychiatry's pharmacological regime has been central to the privatisation of stress, but it is important that we don't overlook the perhaps even more insidious role that the ostensibly more holistic practices of psychotherapy have also played in depoliticising distress. The radical therapist David Smail argues that Margaret Thatcher's view that there's no such thing as society, only individuals and their families, finds "an unacknowledged echo in almost all approaches to therapy".¹⁶ Therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy combine a focus on early life (a kind of psychoanalysis-lite) with the self-help doctrine that individuals can become masters of their own destiny. Smail gives the immensely suggestive name *magical voluntarism* to the view that "with

the expert help of your therapist or counsellor, *you* can change the world *you* are in the last analysis responsible for, so that it no longer cause you distress”.¹⁷

The propagation of magical voluntarism has been crucial to the success of neoliberalism; we might go so far as to say as it constitutes something like the spontaneous ideology of our times. Thus, for example, ideas from self-help therapy have become very influential in popular television shows.¹⁸ *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is probably the best-known example, but in the UK programmes such as *Mary, Queen of Shops* and *The Fairy Jobmother* explicitly promote magical voluntarism’s psychic entrepreneurialism: these programmes assure us that the fetters on our productive potentials lie within us. If we don’t succeed, it is simply because we have not put the work in to reconstruct ourselves.

The privatisation of stress has been part of a project that has aimed at an almost total destruction of the concept of the public — the very thing upon which psychic well-being fundamentally depends. What we urgently need is a new politics of mental health organised around the problem of public space. In its break from the old Stalinist left, the various new lefts wanted a debureaucratised public space and worker autonomy: what they got was managerialism and shopping. The current political situation in the UK — with business and its allies gearing up for a destruction of the relics of social democracy — constitutes a kind of infernal inversion of the autonomist dream of workers liberated from the state, bosses and bureaucracy. In a staggeringly perverse twist, workers find themselves working harder, in deteriorating conditions and for what is in effect worse pay, in order to fund a state bailout of the business elite, while the agents of that elite plot the further destruction of the public services on which workers depend.

At the same time as a discredited neoliberalism plots this intensification of its project, a kind of right-wing autonomism has emerged in Phillip Blond’s *Red Toryism* and Maurice Glasman’s *Blue Labourism*. Here the critique of social-democratic and neoliberal bureaucracy goes alongside the call for a restitution of tradition. Neoliberalism’s success depended on its capturing of the desires of workers who wanted to escape the strictures of Fordism (though the miserable individualist consumerism in which we are all now immersed is not the alternative they sought). Blond’s laughable “Big Society” and

Glasman's disturbingly insular "white working-class" "communities" do not represent persuasive or credible responses to this problem. Capital has annihilated the traditions that Blond and Glasman hanker after, and there is no bringing them back.

But this should not be a cause for lament; far from it. What we need to revive is not social formations that failed (and failed for reasons that progressives should be pleased about), but a political project that never really happened: the achievement of a democratic public sphere. Even in Blond's work, the lineaments of a hegemonic shift can be discerned — in his startling repudiation of the core concepts of neoliberalism and his attack on managerialism; and in the concession that, contra Thatcher, it turns out that there *is* such a thing as society after all. Such moves give some indication of the extent to which — after the bank bailouts — neoliberalism has radically lost credibility.

The recent upsurge in militancy in the UK, particularly amongst the young, suggests that the privatisation of stress is breaking down: in place of a medicated individual depression, we are now seeing explosions of public anger. Here, and in the largely untapped but massively widespread discontent with the managerialist regulation of work, lie some of the materials out of which a new leftist modernism can be built. Only this leftist modernism is capable of constructing a public sphere which can cure the numerous pathologies with which communicative capitalism afflicts us.