

Nine rather disconnected paragraphs : on mental health, capitalism, creative education and the politics of friendship

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Nine rather disconnected paragraphs on mental health, capitalism, and creative education, and the politics of friendship.

There's an image I recall doing the rounds on Facebook a little while ago: posted by the Occupy Everywhere group, it pictured a medical practitioner with stethoscope slung round his neck, making notes on a clipboard. He was shown against a textured red background and enclosed by assertive black text, which asked: 'Feeling Sad and Depressed?' before going on: 'Are you anxious? Worried about the future? Feeling isolated and alone?' Finally it delivered the punch-line: 'You might be suffering from CAPITALISM', and helpfully listed a series of potential symptoms through which the diagnosis might be made: 'Homelessness, unemployment, poverty, hunger, feelings of powerlessness, fear, apathy, boredom, cultural decay, loss of identity, extreme self-consciousness, loss of free speech, incarceration, suicidal or revolutionary thoughts, death.' Depression is here considered as an understandable outcome of living in a society where inequality is rife and money concentrated in the hands of the few, and where advertising and media create unsustainable wants, and damaging images of self. That there seems no alternative, and that we feel increasingly powerless to effect change adds to the feelings of depression to which we may already be prone.

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Writer Mark Fisher recognizes how: 'Mental illness has been depoliticised, so that we blithely accept a situation in which depression is now the malady most treated by the NHS.' He says: 'The NHS, like the education system and other public services, has been forced to try to deal with the social and psychic damage caused by the deliberate destruction of solidarity and security. Where once workers would have turned to trade unions when they were put under increasing stress, now they are encouraged to go to their GP or, if they are lucky enough to be able to get one on the NHS, a therapist' and he suggests that '[d]epression is the shadow side of entrepreneurial culture, what happens when magical voluntarism confronts limited opportunities.' This 'magical voluntarism' is 'the belief that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be' and Fisher considers it 'the dominant ideology and unofficial religion of contemporary capitalist society, pushed by reality TV 'experts' and business gurus as much as by politicians.' The term was developed by clinical psychologist David Smail, who took a social materialist approach to mental health, arguing: 'The so-called psychiatric 'disorders' [...] are the creation of the social world in which we live, and that world is structured by power'. Smail describes how magical voluntarism is 'the self-help doctrine that individuals can become masters of their own destiny' and how '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'. Here, therefore suffering is privatized, and little note is taken of the social, cultural and political issues that negatively affect people's lives. Rather than try to change the world – perhaps through collective action – people are enjoined to change themselves; and if they are unable to – and depression persists – then it is their own personal failing.

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Academics Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes would position themselves very differently to either Fisher or Smail, but do take a critical view of the current focus upon changing the individual, rather than the system of which that person is a part. Their book *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* argues that such an approach to education 'promotes the idea that we are emotional, vulnerable and hapless individuals' and that as a result '[i]t is an attack on human potential.' They consider that staff and students are increasingly infantilized by an emphasis upon how they feel rather than what they think, but they share Fisher's belief that larger forces may at play than an individual's personal inability to cope with workplace stress, quoting the example of one lecturer: 'Instead of being able to raise the real issue of workload, we get 'circle-time'.' In effect, Ecclestone and Hayes claim that the focus upon personal feelings deflects attempts to criticize the system, institution or management and thus undermines attempts to think critically and intellectually about wider social or political realities.

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James Leadbitter, the artist known as the vacuum cleaner, points to the way in which the term 'mental health problem' is used in mainstream discussions of mental health by press and charities. He suggests that whilst dealing with depression, anxiety, self-injury and hearing voices may variously be isolating, difficult, exhausting and challenging, they are not

impossible to manage; by contrast the real problems for those suffering mental ill health lie in dealing with psychiatrists, psychologists, ATOS + DWP, drug companies and a society which fails to talk about and act on the high rates of suicide. He concludes: 'Yes, us crazy people have a lot of problems, but the biggest one is being told our mental health is a problem, when it clearly isn't.' There are two things to note here: firstly that the people with mental health 'problems' can be the experts in their own condition but their insights are rarely listened to; and secondly that it is the wider system which once again needs change.

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For a time art schools provided space for an awkward squad of mavericks determined to think and do things differently, or for 'messy' people who didn't really know what might be possible, or what they could do in their lives. Having periods of mental ill health before or during studying art was not at all unusual, and indeed many people focused upon their experiences as material for their work, used their practice to think about and work through their experiences, or tested out ideas for the way they now hoped to live. Artist Gary Hume has said that when he was at college 'it was full of kids from all kinds of backgrounds, mainly misfits and outsiders. That is exactly why they were at art college.' His words appeared in an article for The Guardian where Sean O'Hagan noted how creative culture has become increasingly gentrified. O'Hagan suggests that: 'The access that smart, creative, messy kids from council estates once had to polytechnics, universities and art colleges has been eroded by prohibitive college fees.' Hume asks with great concern: 'what do all the wrong people do now? Where do they go – the misfits and the outsiders? If you can't do something meaningful through art because you can't afford to go to art college or even rent a studio, what happens to you?'

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There was a moment when the previous Labour government championed an agenda of widening participation, which seemed on the face of it, a good thing – after all, who wouldn't want more students from different backgrounds getting access to education, rather than just the usual privileged suspects? The reality was different (isn't it always?) and, at least in the university where I work, what seemed to happen was that as more places became available the proportion of middle-class girls increased. Once with us, they were 'all present and correct' as a colleague of mine has it: there were no problems with their attendance, they were diligent at meeting deadlines, everything was in place for assessment as required, and yet there was also little sense expressed that what they were doing mattered to them personally, beyond the grade they achieved. I'm being a rather harsh – I don't think it is their fault that getting good grades had hitherto been promoted as the single main measure of success in their lives so far. For many of them, they couldn't wait for university to be over and to escape into the 'real world' of work – until they either discovered the precarity of zero-hours contracts or the impossibility of even getting an interview – and then they felt short changed by the system that had got them there with the promise that university education would lead to job + house + car + holidays = happily ever after...

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Education is becoming ever more instrumentalised: it's not about what and how you might learn but about gaining grades and qualifications, which then act as gatekeeping devices for future life options. The now is not important – what matters is always the subsequent step, and so on, in an endless process of deferral. From the earliest days of primary education, testing and the specificities of curriculum delineates children into groups from which it is hard for them to deviate: once a path has been 'chosen', then it is difficult to change or step sideways, or turn back and start over, if you feel you have made a mistake: such 'decisions' are taking place frighteningly early in people's lives. In an interview, Noam Chomsky describes how education is increasingly about training to test. He says: 'It's a way of training for obedience and passivity, and making sure you don't understand the significance of discovery, creativity, working for others, and you just listen and obey. That's the way school curriculums are being redesigned. There's other modes of controlling students. One of them is just debt. College debt in the United States now is higher than credit card debt and that's a terrific way to trap young people. If you come out of college with tens of thousands of dollars of debt, that sharply restricts your choices.' Debt is a disciplinary technique: if you are struggling to keep your head above water, you don't have a lot of time for changing society or agitating politically, intellectually or creatively.

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Lots of people found a way forward in art schools because it was OK to spend time thinking about the things that concerned us, and to work out how we might live and make and be, without the pressure of student loans, and without all that much concern for the grades we got. I don't think any of us thought that what degree we got would much define us: rather, it was a tiny first step onto the road of an art practice that would perplex, empower, excite, and challenge us by turns – or else a useful preparation for thinking critically, making stuff happen and realizing the value of a community, if we decided we didn't want to consider ourselves artists. And whilst the celebrity culture of the YBAs had emerged when I was at college, most of us didn't harbour any hope (or actually much desire) that we would be 'picked up' by a dealer and thrust onto the international art scene – in fact I recall one young British artist invited to give a talk to us art students who seemed so utterly miserable about the whole experience that I'm sure many of us had our minds made up to seek alternatives!

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Art education is struggling to hold open a space for doing and thinking differently, but this is against the prevailing odds: the diversity of prospective students is being narrowed by increased fees and diminished funding; creative education is being further instrumentalised to the needs of current corporate interests rather than enabling people to think, imagine and act (alone, and together) upon creating other potential futures; 'success' is narrowly defined to earning over a certain amount in an approved graduate level job, or making it big in some aspect of socially mediated or celebrity culture, rather than living a fulfilled and interesting life. Whereas failure was once a foundational myth for artists (think of Picasso's recurrent fascination with the fictional Frenhofer in Balzac's story 'The Unknown Masterpiece', or of the inevitable Beckett quotation that we should 'Fail again, fail better') these days it is something to be avoided: there's little room for messing up, messing about and getting messy as a positive approach to finding or making our way in a messy, complex world.

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None of what I have said adds up to a solution: in fact I frequently feel so despairing and disabled by the overwhelming scale of the problems in society, education and healthcare that I am entirely uncertain as to what action to take. I hardly want to suggest, then, that I know what everybody else ought to do about it all. I can state the blindingly obvious – that the perennial questions of capital and class, privilege and disenfranchisement continue to have their effects, and that they still provide the disciplinary framework within which we struggle to find a way to live – but I'm not sure what to do, other than that I must do something, and preferably find some way to do it with others. I'd like to come up with an ambitious scheme for change, but like David Smail, I am wary about making grand claims. Smail thought that: 'Psychotherapy cannot be expected (even though it claims) to be able to cure the ills which are inflicted on people as they grow up in a noxious, consumerist culture which is manipulated on every side by commercial interests.' At the same time, he considered that it could still help people: he believed that psychotherapy only works to the extent to which the therapist becomes a true friend to the client, and recommended both that we ought to take care in life, and of the others with whom we are involved. It seems on the face of it like such a small thing, but I think that it is a political act nonetheless to take care and to be a friend. I try to be so to the students and staff with whom I work, to the graduates who have passed through the course and who have gone on to the next stages of their lives, to the artists and others with whom I collaborate, and through the independent serial I publish, which emerges out of countless conversations with people I know and goes on to develop new friendships through the readers it finds. I suppose I hope that I will encounter friendship and care by return: friendship is after all a two-way street. It's also a space for an interesting mix of criticism and tolerance. Friends can fall out, and reunite; friends can be cut a bit of slack when they behave badly for a while; they can speak the truth to us about difficult things when we need to hear it; they can be frivolous and serious by turn; they can support us when we are struggling, and share our joy when something comes to fruition: fundamentally, friends care for one another in good and bad times. None of this seems much when faced with the power of global capital and its crippling physical and mental effects upon very many people, but because friendship is a coming together, and a space for conversation, I harbour the hope that it also offers collective strength and the potential for group action, and therein is the beginning of a struggle against the status quo. I really don't know if any of this enough, but it's what I'm trying to do right now: I'm living as if friendship matters.

Joanne Lee