

Mindfulness—it's not what you think

Toward critical reconciliation with progressive self-development practices

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Mindfulness - it's not what you think

Towards critical reconciliation with progressive self-development practices

Taking note of the self

Mindfulness has been described as “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2017: 1127). Contrary to common belief, then, the aim of mindfulness meditation is not to clear the mind of thoughts, but instead to develop a certain way of relating to thoughts, emotions and sensations – succinctly summed up in the popular slogan ‘Meditation – it’s not what you think’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Incidentally, the slogan also captures the aim of this paper, which is to nuance the way in which mindfulness meditation, understood as a set of self-development practices aimed towards moment-to-moment awareness, is generally perceived within critical management studies (CMS). Here, the emergent consensus is that self-development practices produce various individual pathologies and reinforce the societal status quo (e.g. Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Garsten and Grey, 1997; Hancock and Tyler, 2004). Using the practice of mindfulness meditation as an example, we set out to challenge this consensus and explore the progressive potential of self-development practices. That is, we will examine criticism of as well as advocacy for mindfulness meditation, thus aiming to arrive at potential reconciliation through a hopeful *and* realistic account.

Interest in mindfulness meditation as an organizational practice has been growing in the last few decades as evidenced by the ever-increasing number of self-help resources as well as academic articles (Badham and King, 2019; Good et al., 2016) that run parallel with proliferating opportunities for mindfulness meditation at work, as offered to employees of organizations like Google, the World Bank and U.S. Congress (Baer, 2014; Confino, 2014; Seitz-Wald, 2013). In the process, the concept of mindfulness has itself become contested and now various definitions carry with them a host of different connotations (Badham and King, 2019; Good et al., 2016; Islam, Holm and Karjalainen, 2017; Williams and Kabat-Zinn (eds), 2013). In their recent comprehensive review of the field, Badham and King (2019: 3) categorize these different understandings by way of two distinctions: whether mindfulness is viewed as an *individual* or *collective* experience, and whether it is aimed toward *instrumental* or *substantive* purposes. While individual approaches understand mindfulness as a personal experience of present-centered attention and awareness,

collective approaches attribute less significance to the individual self and instead emphasize interdependence, group mind and cooperation. Instrumental approaches are focused on stress-reduction, emotion regulation, performance and organizational success, while substantive approaches emphasize mindful consideration and reflection on purpose as well as “the value of transcending self-centered concerns of individuals and organizations” (Badham and King, 2019: 3).

In this paper, we engage primarily with mindfulness meditation as an *individual* experience, albeit with potential collective dimensions and implications. Thus, we define mindfulness meditation as a set of *meditation practices*, which may involve the accepting, non-judgmental focus on one’s breath, body, thoughts or emotions (*vipassana*) as well as a more deliberate emphasis on love, kindness and compassion (*metta*) (see e.g. Harvey 2012). Such practices may serve both *instrumental* and *substantial* purposes, which may at times interweave, thus blurring the distinction. It is from this grey area of entangled purposes, which has hitherto remained largely unacknowledged within CMS, that we seek to nuance the discussion of what it means to take note of the self in this way.

The paper proceeds by, first, outlining the position of ‘anti-mindfulness’. This position, we argue, is dominant in CMS as well as parts of the critical social sciences, more generally, and assumes that self-development practices as a whole and mindfulness meditation in particular: (1) produce individual pathologies and (2) reinforce the societal status quo. Based on empirical investigations of what mindfulness meditation actually does to and for its practitioners, we subsequently question these assumptions through an ‘*anti-anti mindfulness*’ approach (Badham and King, 2019: 17). Seeking to move beyond the anti-performative mode of pure criticism, which has long haunted CMS, we engage with the mindfulness meditation practices of ‘organizational allies’ (Parker and Parker, 2017), using Occupy Wall Street as an example. On this basis, we draw on Connolly’s work on micropolitics (2002) as well as Butlers’ recent advocacy of nonviolence (2020) to extend the progressive potentials of mindfulness meditation beyond alternative contexts and into mainstream organizations. Developing this potential, we introduce Hartmut Rosa’s sociology of world relations (2019) and suggest that mindfulness meditation can potentially enable the establishment of interstitial spaces of *resonance* in the midst of dominant logics of escalation and competition. According to Rosa, this would be a necessary first step in any attempt at establishing a post-growth society, thus aligning mindfulness meditation with a central aspiration within CMS (eg. Johnsen et.al. 2017; Parker et.al. 2014; Zanoni et.al. 2017).

Anti-mindfulness

Since Christopher Lasch's famous critique of 'the culture of narcissism' (1979), it has become something of an orthodoxy within the critical social sciences, generally, and CMS, more particularly, to highlight the oppressive or in other ways problematic aspects of the individual pursuit of authenticity and self-realization (e.g. Bell and Taylor 2003; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Garsten and Grey, 1997; Hancock and Tyler, 2004; Honneth, 2004; Illouz, 2008; Pedersen, 2008; Rose, 1996; Salecl, 2011). Whether im- or explicitly, these analyses support what might be termed the *hypothesis of pathology*; the claim that – contrary to their promise of authenticity, liberation and self-actualization – self-development practices actually produce depressed (Ehrenberg, 2010), over-worked (McGee, 2005), self-critical (Salecl, 2011), passive-nihilistic (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Critchley, 2010), guilty (Spicer, 2011) and/or alienated (Cederström, 2011) subjects who feel empty, superfluous and without purpose (Honneth, 2004). The pathology hypothesis, then, suggests that the promise of self-development practices is not fulfilled and that engaging with these practices may actually leave people worse off than they would have been without them. While critical scholarship on mindfulness meditation, specifically, remains limited (Madsen, 2015: 74), existing studies of this set of practices tend to echo the wider hypothesis of pathology. Accordingly, the promises of mindfulness meditation are described as 'overblown' and 'cruel' in that 'stress, anxiety and feelings of depression are not seen as a creation of the external work environment. Instead they are a creation of your own lazy and unfocused mental habits' (Cederström and Spicer, 2015: 25).

While the pathology hypothesis may seem particularly damning, reversing the promises of self-development, generally, and mindfulness meditation, specifically, - a second recurring feature of critical accounts of self-development, what might be called *the status quo hypothesis*, is, we believe, actually more important. This second critique begins from the same assumptions as the first, namely that discourses and practices of self-development tend to individualize structural problems and frame them in terms of (in)adequate self-management and adaption (Rimke, 2000), leading to a situation in which individual subjects are pre-occupied with (blaming) themselves, instead of engaging collectively in the ridding of structural problems (Davies, 2015; du Plessis 2020a; Spicer, 2011).

Here, a central point of concern is the tendency for counter-cultural and anti-capitalist potentials in authenticity and self-actualization to be disarmed through co-optation into what Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have called ‘the new spirit of capitalism’. Today, demands from leftist movements of the 1970s for the right to authenticity, creativity and difference have been transformed into corporate requirements that the contemporary subject must keep cultivating in order to stay employable in an increasingly precarious labor market (Bröckling, 2005; Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fleming, 2009). Hence, self-development practices serve to reinforce the status quo because critique of structural problems is directed back at the self (Willig, 2012) who must resiliently adapt to societal demands, which are accepted as self-evident truths (du Plessis, 2020b). In our desperate quest for self-improvement, or so the analysis goes, we lose the energy and ability to participate in any form of social change while constantly feeling guilty and anxious that we are somehow inadequate (Salecl, 2011).

With regard to mindfulness meditation, the most famous proponent of the hypothesis of status quo is arguably Slavoj Žižek, who in a number of places (e.g. Žižek, 2009: 66; Žižek, 2001:12) has described these practices as the perfect ideological supplement to late capitalism. In allowing the subject to uncouple and ob-/retain inner peace from the stressful tensions of capitalist dynamics, mindfulness meditation, according to Žižek, is the most efficient way for us to fully participate in these very dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity (Žižek, 2001: 12). This analysis reverberates throughout the critical literature on mindfulness (e.g. Kucinkas, 2019; Madsen, 2015; Purser and Mirillo, 2015; Purser, 2018; Walsh, 2018). Here, scholars point towards its ‘individualizing impetus, diverting systemic critique’ (Islam, Holm and Karjalainen, 2017: 21), which reduces it to nothing more than ‘a quick fix for unfortunate but inevitable work place stress, a palliative for the symptoms of work pressures’ (Karjalainen, Islam and Holm, 2019: 19). Accordingly, the recent proliferation of mindfulness meditation into organizations is seen as an example of capitalism assimilating its own critique and utilizing ‘the highest forms of human existence as a means of producing profit’ (Saari and Harni, 2016: 99).

In sum, the anti-mindfulness hypotheses begin from the common assumption that mindfulness meditation purports to solve collective, structural problems by, simply, taking note of the self, meaning two interrelated issues arise: status quo at the collective level and pathology at the level of the individual.

Anti-anti mindfulness

The analysis above provides vital insights into and important critiques of the increasing prevalence of self-development discourses throughout western societies in recent decades. However, the practice of mindfulness meditation evades the critical diagnosis in several ways. First, the pathology hypothesis is generally not supported by clinical studies. To the contrary, capabilities associated with mindfulness meditation such as meta-awareness, dis-identification from internal experience and reduced reactivity to thought content (Hadash et.al. 2017) seem to effectively reduce anxiety, depression and stress (Khoury et al., 2013), mood symptoms (Hofmann et al., 2010), rumination and worry (Querstret and Cropley, 2013) and low quality of life (Hilton et al., 2016). These symptoms resemble some of the very pathologies, which critical studies associate with the quest for authenticity and self-development; meaning, mindfulness meditation solves the mental problems it is accused of causing. Furthermore, mindfulness meditation has been shown to improve relationships (Reb et.al. 2014) as well as the capacity for empathy (Dekeyser et al., 2008) and compassion (Condon et al., 2013). These findings move the effects of mindfulness meditation beyond improving personal health towards enhancing the individual's consideration for the collective.

This brings us to the argument that mindfulness meditation also seems to evade the status quo hypothesis. Thus, influential mindfulness teachers have published books that explicitly commit mindfulness meditation to progressive political agendas such as international solidarity, mindful consumption and ecological preservation (Hanh, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2013: 538ff). Furthermore, mindfulness meditation is often integrated into environmentalist and social justice movements (Kaza, 2008; Berila, 2016; Yang, 2017). In the clinical scientific literature, there are also indications that mindfulness meditation might be more than a facilitator of neoliberal solipsism (e.g. Höllinger, 2004: 290). Indeed, one pilot-study conducted in a German call-center found that Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) made employees better at coping with stressful situations at work *and* 'more critical toward their work-environment' (Walach et al., 2007: 188). This runs counter to the anti-mindfulness stance, which implies an image of the 'mindless workplace meditator' who willingly conforms to the demands of management. Thus, empirical studies suggest that meditators are capable subjects who are doing their utmost to cope with individual stress and provide relief from collective pressure. If we accept that such endeavors deserve to be understood and respected, we might become more open to the possibility that practicing mindfulness meditation does not necessarily imply a passive disinterest in, nor complacency with, structural working conditions. Or

in other words, that ‘mindful politics’ (McLeod, 2006) might not be the oxymoron that the critical literature assumes it to be.

Nonetheless, the anti-mindfulness analysis, as presented above, has achieved a near hegemonic status within the CMS community and critical social science, more broadly. Among the few to question this consensus, Morton (2015: 223) notes how the endless repetition of ‘paternalistic jeremiads on (...) supine self-actualization culture’ (Morton, 2015: 223) has become a deeply pleasurable compulsion among critical scholars. Additionally, some of these scholars have offered their jeremiads as ‘aesthetic products’ (Mogensen, 2018: 226) for general consumption in the form of popular books on the perils of self-improvement (e.g. Binkley, 2014; Brinkmann, 2017; Cabanas and Illouz, 2019; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Davies, 2015; Joiner, 2017; Purser, 2019). There is, indeed, something in the self-soothing intimacy of self-development practices like mindfulness meditation that makes them an expedient target of eloquent academic critique, expressed through dramatic and ‘mordantly entertaining’ (Mogensen, 2018: 224) analyses that reveal how these practices are really a product of hidden ideological mechanisms, turning self-actualization into a mere instrument of accumulation. The concomitant critique of narcissistic subjects who prefer staring at their own navels to directing attention outwards and joining the fight against injustice, by extension, seems to be articulated from a dignified place of service to ‘the public’ rather than ‘the self’. According to Morton (2015), however, the trouble with this position is the same as the trouble with stepping outside of language; ultimately, he argues, these attacks on narcissism might be seen as particularly ingrained expressions of narcissism (Morton, 2015: 223).

Relatedly, Morton (2015: 251) identifies a certain ‘taboo on the notion of interior life’ as well as a rampant *Buddhaphobia* in leftist thought, detailing how the uncanny queerness of the passive, downward-looking Buddha statue of indeterminable gender has long haunted western thinkers. *Buddhaphobia* revolves around some of the same components as homophobia: ‘a fear of intimacy, a fear of ambiguity, a fear of inwardness and introversion’ (Morton, 2015: 187). As such, it may help explain the gap between practice and critique that is characteristic of many of the critical accounts of mindfulness meditation; those who criticize mindfulness may be afraid to try it. While we do not mean to fetishize personal experience or claim that scholars must have first-hand knowledge of the phenomena they study, the discursive approach taken in many critical accounts of mindfulness meditation (e.g. Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Islam, Holm and Karjalainen, 2017; Madsen, 2015) tends towards abstract conceptualization that sidesteps phenomenological engagement with what meditation might actually feel like. This tendency to downplay the subtleties of mindfulness

meditation as a set of *practices* with experiential implications for the production of subjectivities prevents the critical literature from making detailed inquiries into the forms of subjectivity that are created through mindfulness meditation (Chari, 2016).

Additionally, the status quo hypothesis is premised on the notion that the political efficacy of mindfulness meditation is to be staked upon its ability to motivate certain types of political action. This is a rather instrumental approach to political activism that ignores the political potential of mindfulness in so far as this potential might exist outside of direct political action. The subjective, relational, emotional and cognitive capacities that subjects who practice mindfulness meditation might develop and inhabit are not necessarily without political relevance (Chari, 2016: 235-6). However, analyzing mindfulness meditation through a discursive and instrumental lens neglects this possibility, overlooking the potential for political change to emerge from the development of new forms of relationships to self and others that are currently foreclosed by the parameters of neoliberal subjectivity (Chandler and Reid, 2016). These capacities might contribute to particular ways of engaging as political subjects that could be both critical of and/or complicit with neoliberal subjectivities— a possibility which has been largely overlooked (for one notable exception, see Islam, Holm and Karjalainen, 2017: 22).

Finally, critical anti-mindfulness accounts seldom leave much room for ambivalence and contradiction. Instead, their conclusions tend to become quite *categorical* in the sense of operating primarily with dichotomous either/or-distinctions between inner and outer world, individual and collective, oppression and freedom, benevolent and harmful, etc. Thus, the *dialectics* of these categories are overlooked, and the opportunity for conceptualizing self-improvement practices as complex, contradictory and processual is missed. Thus, critical accounts of mindfulness meditation and other practices of self-development are strikingly ‘anti-performative’ (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009) in their disengagement from the object under study and apparent satisfaction with the strategy of shocking the meditating masses out of their ‘ideological slumber’ (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009: 542). Interestingly, some of the authors who are specifically invested in the pure critique of self-development, are influential spokespersons for the more general possibility of ‘critical performativity’, of engaging both critically *and* constructively with the object of study (see e.g. Fournier and Grey, 2000; Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

Thus, there seems to be a case for ‘walking the talk’, which we will attempt through suggesting what a critically performative engagement with mindfulness meditation might look like.

Acknowledging that the task of critical performativity is never easy, we take our cue from alternative organization studies (e.g. Parker et al., 2014), which invites a move away from habitual practices of analysis and critique of dominant organizational forms. Instead of condemning old and bad practices, we should seek out and lift up new and better alternatives, thereby turning ‘opposition and analysis into proposals’ (Ibid: 31). The impasse of engaging constructively with organizational practices that one is critical of, then, is scurried by turning to the more amenable activity of promoting practices of which one is supportive (Parker and Parker, 2017). Thus, we turn to a brief analysis of how mindfulness meditation was integrated into the progressive resistance of Occupy Wall Street, using this analysis as the basis for a subsequent discussion of the transformative potential of deploying mindfulness meditation practices in more conventional settings.

Exploring progressive potentials

The most direct entry point for exploring how mindfulness meditation might help foster alternative subjectivities and capacities is, we suggest, found in the use of such practices within explicitly ‘alternative’ movements that target oppressive systems. As Rowe (2016: 4) notes, such movements ‘provide ethical and political analyses that can guide the deployment of mind/body practices in the service of radical change’. One particularly pertinent example of this is Occupy Wall Street, which is described by scholars (e.g. Rowe, 2016; Chari, 2016) and activists (Writers for the 99%, 2012) alike as reliant on practices of mindfulness meditation and yoga. These practices, moreover, ‘were integral to its endurance and impact; they were not a sideshow’ (Rowe, 2015: n.pag). While the actual impact of Occupy Wall Street – and the Occupy Movement, more generally – may have been limited, its prefigurative potential as a model of social transformation has been widely acknowledged (see e.g. Brisette 2013; Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012; Reinecke, 2018). Therefore, it is noteworthy that mindfulness meditation practices are consistently highlighted as central to the organization of Occupy; as a prerequisite for its relative endurance, if not eventual success.

The meditation group at Occupy arranged daily hour-long mindfulness meditation sessions, which at their largest drew more than 200 participants (Writers for the 99%, 2012: 89). The most common feedback given to facilitators included accounts of how mindfulness meditation helped participants gain a certain distance from strong emotions and put them ‘in touch with their responses to particular issues in a non-violent, non-confrontational setting. This avoided immediate reactions,

which were often based on misunderstanding and could lead to larger disagreements’ (Writers for the 99%, 2012: 88). Furthermore, the group meditations also strengthened intentions and actions ‘that went beyond non-violence and truly embraced and embodied compassion’ (Writers for the 99%, 2012: 89). Mindfulness meditation thus helped activists to create ‘a more participatory, inclusive environment within the movement and helped to broaden the scope of the voices being heard’ (Writers for the 99%, 2012: 92). When these experiences, as reported by the involved practitioners, are taken seriously, mindfulness meditation can be understood as a practice through which activists work towards an embodiment of their radically democratic values so as to individually and collectively *prefigure* (Yates, 2015) the societal changes that they want to see – for example through the cultivation of compassion and connectedness as opposed to greed, fear and resentment.

Thus, a stated goal of the meditations at Occupy was the cultivation of ‘an understanding of the connection between personal transformation practices and social transformation’ (Writers for the 99%, 2012: 88), which was based on a fundamental belief that ‘a peace-full person first, a peace-full collective second leads to a peace-full earth’ (Writers for the 99%, 2012: 92). As one activist (quoted in Rowe, 2015: n.pag) put it:

If you look at the general mechanics of anti-oppression discourse and training, it is observing how socialization and social structure speak through us, and then finding points of intervention so that we can make deliberate decisions about our agency rather than just moving through racist, patriarchal, colonial inertia. It is a form of meditation.

Seeking to conceptualize the reported experiences of mindfulness meditation in the Occupy movement, we can interpret the practice of mindfulness meditation as a tactical, micropolitical intervention on the visceral and infrasensible register that, while operating below cognition, is open to both cultural inscription and technical intervention and permeates the macropolitical sphere (Connolly, 2002). As Connolly (2002) suggests, such micropolitical interventions are significant as they may help form the more generous dispositions necessary for successful Left macropolitics. However, such technical interventions can be utilized both in the service of pluralistic and generous political programs and as a means of enhancing more possessive and discriminatory agendas. In this reading, then, mindfulness meditation can be understood as a means to many ends that has no inherently positive value in and of itself.

Contrary to this position, however, one may argue that no means are ever neutral. In her recent

advocacy of nonviolence as key to a more equal society, Butler criticizes the ‘means to an end’-argument by asking: “...what if the use of violence as a means to a goal licenses, implicitly or effectively, the use of violence more broadly, thereby bringing more violence into the world?” (Butler, 2020: 14). A similar dynamic, but with opposite value, might be at work in relation to mindfulness meditation practices: what if any use of mindfulness will bring more mindfulness into the world? Thus, even if we accept the risk that mindfulness meditation can, in specific instances, be applied for less than noble purposes, we might maintain a general potential for positive change that is inscribed in mindfulness meditation as such, independently of why and where it is employed.

This leads to an alternative hypothesis, the so-called *Trojan horse*, which emphasizes the progressive potentials of mindfulness meditation regardless of its organizational and institutional embeddedness (Farb, 2014). This line of argument is often followed by corporate mindfulness practitioners who respond to accusations of diluting the radical potentials of mindfulness through propagating a supine, secularized *McMindfulness* that is deprived of its radical Buddhist roots and, therefore, only cause individual pathology and support the collective status quo (Purser and Loy, 2013; Purser, 2019). Contrary to the critical hypotheses, the Trojan horse hypothesis stresses that while managers who implement mindfulness meditation programs may have questionable motives such as profit maximization, the meditation techniques themselves can transform organizations from the inside out by heightening the individual awareness and collective compassion of participants in spite of the commercialized context.

In this reading, mindfulness meditation can be conceptualized as the cultivation of an interstitial, alternative sphere of *resonance* in the midst of the competitive, instrumental sphere of corporate life. Rosa (2019) defines the concept of resonance as both a mode of being and a normative conception of ‘the good life’ in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Resonance is thus ‘alienation’s other’ in which the self is ‘...moved, touched, “meant to be” or “addressed”, but also feels capable of reaching out and touching or moving the external world. Hence, resonance is a mode of *liquefaction* in the relationship between self and world’ (Rosa, Lessenich and Dörre, 2015: 300; our emphasis).

Resonance, then, is a conceptualization of the individual’s intrinsic connection to the world; not just causal and instrumental, but constitutive of the subject. The relationship between self and world is resonant if and when it is experienced as mutually responsive and supportive. On this definitional basis, Rosa identifies several axes of world-self resonance, including religion, nature, music,

literature, love -relationships and genuine dialogue. The establishment and protection of such ‘spaces of resonance’ can be viewed as a progressive endeavor since these spaces ‘...do not conform to the logic of escalation’ (Rosa, Lessenich and Dörre, 2015: 298), inherent in modern capitalist societies (see also Rosa, 2013). Accordingly:

Efforts to increase and sharpen individual and political sensibility for experiences and spaces of resonance (...) would be of crucial importance to any attempt at establishing a post-growth society. The subjective drive for escalation and increase could vanish if, through establishing and securing spaces of resonance, subjects would feel capable of re-appropriating the (public and political) world (Rosa, Lessenich and Dörre, 2015: 302).

As an example of the liquefaction between self and world that is characteristic of resonance, Rosa mentions the act of breathing as the most basic act of life and the most fundamental process of exchange between subject and world. Hence, breathing blurs the distinction ‘between the air as part of the external world that I breathe in, and my breath that is in me’ (Rosa, 2019: 56). Paying attention to this process, which is a central element in most mindfulness meditation practices, allows the subject to become more aware of – and begin to modulate – the relation between self and world. Consequently, Rosa sees the increasing prevalence of breathing-focused practices such as mindfulness meditation as ‘further indication that in everyday cultural terms, our relationship to the world is perceived as being in need of correction or repair’ (Rosa, 2019: 56).

According to Doran (2017), and in line with Rosa’s argument, post-industrial capitalism is characterized by the rise of sophisticated social and corporate technologies designed to target and capitalize our innate tendency towards absence from moment-to-moment experience. On the other hand, Rosa (2019: 119) describes meditative silence as a ‘meaningful, “speaking” silence’, during which people who meditate may experience ‘deep resonance’ ‘in the sense of a quasi-mystical experience of the world’. Such resonant silence, we believe, can be seen as a first and necessary *point de résistance* against the further capitalization of attention. Mindfulness meditation and the cultivation of resonance could, consequently, be understood as a critical resource for developing alternative norms and forms of subjecthood that run counter to those promoted by the attention-technologies of contemporary society.

Mind the hype

We invite exploration of the critical performativity of mindfulness through a practicable redefinition of mindfulness meditation and other personal development practices so as to facilitate serious consideration of their potential to reinforce progressive agendas. As an example of what an *anti-anti-mindfulness* approach might look like in practice, our consideration of the progressive performativity of mindfulness meditation, however, does not imply a dismissal of critical accounts. To the contrary, what is needed is a viable methodological framework for more nuanced appraisals of mindfulness meditation as well as other ‘alternative’ practices of the self.

For example, it is undeniable that mindfulness meditation is currently accompanied by a substantial amount of hype (Van Dam et. al., 2018). The portrayal of mindfulness as a near universal panacea for an increasingly wide range of ailments has justifiably raised eyebrows and led scholars to point out that in-depth research lags significantly behind the documented proliferation of programs (Badham and King 2019:7).

In pointing to the critical performativity of mindfulness meditation, we do not intend to extend the hype by mindlessly touting its universal transformative potentials. Instead, our aim is reconciliation between otherwise opposed positions so as to stimulate critical engagement with the profound ambivalence of mindfulness meditation. How might we, for example, separate the transformative potentials of so called of ‘1st generation Mindfulness Based-interventions’ such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), from 2nd generation interventions that seek to heed some of the anti-mindfulness criticism by more closely embodying how the technique was conceptualized in ancient contemplative traditions (Van Gordon & Shonin 2020)? And how do we distinguish the practices of eco-activists who use meditation as a vehicle for transcending our current anthropocentric, individualist worldview and moving towards a more transpersonal ecocentrism (Bragg, 1996; Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1999) from the meditation techniques used by, say, Monsanto (Pinsker, 2015)?

Relatedly, Rosa warns against the reification and commodification of resonance, which is ‘more likely to generate echo effects rather than actual resonance effects’ (Rosa 2019: 387-88). In order to draw distinctions in such complex empirical terrain, the classical CMS story of evermore sophisticated and impenetrable normative control, exercised upon subjugated employees who mistake it for freedom, needs a rewrite in the direction of more open-mindedness, engagement and nuance.

In evaluating what mindfulness meditation may do to self and society, then, we must neither fall for the temptation of exaggerated promises of ‘instant Zen’ nor should we glibly accept the dramatically entertaining ‘no-way-out’ narratives of critical scholars. Instead, we suggest, critical scholars (with whom we proudly self-identify) should pay attention to the spaces of resonance that may open up when we take mindfulness meditation seriously and remain open to the possibility that it’s not what we think. This requires that we take note of our attitudes, prejudices and modalities of thinking in the present moment as well as our deep-seated attachments to them. Ultimately, the transformative potential of mindfulness may lie in its ability to combine performative resonance with critical reflexivity.

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