The Individual and Work: Politicised Psychotherapy

By Alex Delogu

Introduction

There exists a rather worrying critique of psychotherapy in that it may exist in service of harmful societal forces. To put it concretely, the risk is that psychotherapy is used to rehabilitate people to return to a societal system that itself harms and breaks them. This is not a criticism of psychotherapy itself, but rather a particular function that psychotherapy risks adopting. This is not something interior to psychotherapy but rather a demand that is placed on it from the outside. How should psychotherapy respond? The aim of this paper is to show that this is a demand that must be resisted if one is to maintain the ideal of doing no harm seriously. The problem itself appears in the unusual conjunction of our commonly held ideas about *individuals* and *work* and the impact that these ideas have on physical and mental well-being. Identity and work are intertwined (Gertz, 2019, p. 127). Before looking at these two aspects, let's explore the critique in more detail.

The Critique

I first encountered this critique through the work of philosopher Mark Fisher who wrote insightfully about the effects that culture and politics have on the psyche of individuals. As a biographical note, Fisher was open about his struggles with depression and sadly took his life in 2017 (Colquhoun, 2020, p.2; Fisher, 2021a). I mention this as sometimes philosophers can have a reputation of operating at a theoretical distance from their subject, but in this instance, we have a person thinking and philosophising through their lived experience.

Fisher's most influential book *Capitalist Realism* (2009) is concerned with how the political system at the time stunted our capacity to even imagine an alternative society beyond that of the doctrines of capitalism, leading us down a bleak imaginative cul-de-sac that makes "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). The focus here is that the social environment has a direct impact on our capacity to imagine and on mental health more generally, which will be returned to later.

From a mental health perspective, Fisher's main concern was that this connection between our environment and mental health was being undermined by the idea of the "atomistic individual" (Fisher, 2009, p. 37). By over-emphasising the individual, the political and social causes of mental illness are diminished. By extension, the impetus to change things at a social and political level are similarly diminished (Fisher, 2009, p.37). If we become blind to the causes of our distress, how can we possibly change them? It is this disconnect that led psychologist David Smail to state that "psychotherapy does not work" (Smail, 2001, p. viii), where he argued that a psychotherapy that aims to heal people but ignores the societal causes of mental illness will fail from the start. It would simply end up treating a symptom, something many therapists would reject. This adds a nuanced danger to the popular idea that the only thing you can change is yourself.

To counter this trend means that psychotherapy must become socially and politically aware in its functioning (Fisher, 2009, p. 37; Totton, 2003, p. 49). Psychotherapy should not simply be a tool to adjust people to social norms but something that holds these norms into question. It is important to note that this is not an excuse to ignore developmental and family contributors to distress. The political and social are simply inherent dimensions of that very process.

Pathological Individualization

The idea of there being an absolute individual exists only as an abstraction. The reality of our situation is that the social nature of being human precedes any notion of individuality. "There's no such thing as the individual" says Fisher

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(2021b, p. 119). I have argued similarly elsewhere (Delogu, 2020).

The detrimental effects of an over-emphasis on individuality can hardly be overstated, especially in a society that glorifies individuality. The pandemic has no doubt had an enormous impact of the focus on individuality. "Loneliness hangs over our culture today like a thick smog" (Hari, 2009, p. 88). Loneliness can occur because of social isolation but exists even in the presence of others. As the adage goes, the loneliest place is amongst a crowd. Hari points to a key factor in reducing loneliness and that is being together with others who hold shared meaning or values (2019, p. 100): just being together with people is insufficient. One might think the internet helps in this regard, and no doubt it does to a degree, but it is a paltry substitute for real togetherness (Hari, 2019, p. 108).

These isolating social conditions have an impact on how we see ourselves in the world. Nolen Gertz puts it well:

"So a system built on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness can induce nihilism by treating lifelessness, oppression, and unhappiness as *personal feelings,* as feelings that reveal a person's pathological inability to be happy, the result of which is that we respond to our suffering with the nihilistic desire to *change ourselves* rather than with the political demand to *change the system*" (2019, p. 169).

This is not an argument against personal improvement. Rather, the danger is that mental health difficulties come to be viewed as a personal failing where in fact it is often a reasonable and understandable reaction to systemic demands that are detrimental to physical and mental well-being. The difficulty is in identifying these connections. It is much the same as exploring someone's developmental history and connecting past and present difficulties, except in this situation, the net is cast a little wider into the cultural domain.

There is a discourse and language that goes with this individualization, of which I am sure many are quite familiar. Belief in the common idea that "you can achieve anything" has become more and more a reality today. Smail calls this "magical voluntarism" - "the belief that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be" (Fisher, 2021a). This idea is clearly false. Obviously, it is important to have belief in oneself, but that "you can do anything" is an unfulfillable expectation. Should one not achieve these expectations the outcome is regarded as a personal failing. Believing in this also entails its opposite: "It is the flipside of depression – whose underlying conviction is that we are all uniquely responsible for our own misery and therefore deserve it" (Fisher, 2021a). This sort of view is unfortunately all too common in positions which discriminate against people from lower socio-economic backgrounds: "We have begun to think: I will look after myself, and everybody else should look after themselves, as individuals. Nobody can help you but you" (Hari, p. 101).

Byung-Chul Han makes some acute observations about the

direction this type of thinking in his book *The Burnout Society* (2015). Han sees burnout, depression, ADHD, borderline personality disorder as exacerbated by modern living and this illusion of infinite potential. "They are pathological conditions deriving from an *excess of positivity*" (2015, p. 4). We live in a society more inclined towards individual achievement, driven by the ideals of "freedom, pleasure, and inclination", where everyone "must be a self-starting entrepreneur" (Han, 2015, p. 38). This is the downside to there being less constraints on how we choose to live; we are confronted by choice paralysis. Echoing Fisher, the implicit contemporary burden - the illusion of absolute freedom is exhausting, collapsing into its depressed opposite, that "Nothing is possible" (Han, p. 11). It becomes an individual failure for people who cannot achieve their potential. There comes a weariness from *too much* freedom, from having to constantly become something better. Leading society towards competitive performance between individuals, "a space where solidarity and empathy are only dangerous distractions weakening the warrior that you are obliged to be" (Berardi, 2019, p.46).

It should be clear how insidious this type of thinking has become. Obviously, people want to achieve their potential, to be free. But to demand it, expect it, and make it the order of the day is a form of violence that becomes internalized. It is oppression that becomes internalized and invisible because who wouldn't want more freedom? A paradoxical control through the promise of infinite possibility.

Vignette 1

> *The thing that I found challenging was that he would nearly always circle back to the idea that it was down to his lack of will power or motivation for not being able to move past his anxiety and enjoy even basic things in his life.*

I was working with a client, let's call him Bob, who was quite depressed. Bob had stopped enjoying things pretty much altogether. He did a lot of exercise; a lot more than I do in fact. He was on medication for depression and had noticed no change. He came to therapy because of an upcoming job interview which he aced but could not face starting the job and was subsequently dismissed. He had no traumatic family history, if anything they may have been distant, but it was hard to establish how much. How do you quantify an absence? The thing that I found challenging was that he would nearly always circle back to the idea that it was down to his lack of will power or motivation for not being able to move past his anxiety and enjoy even basic things in his life. "It is ultimately my responsibility to change" he would say, as if everything hinged on him alone. His conviction on this point at times had me struggling to think otherwise. My interventions never really evoked more thought around this core conviction. The short-term therapy came to an end.

Work
These profound ideas about our individuality and identity impact how we organise our work lives. Work has a profound effect on self-worth. The first question likely to be asked of a stranger is "What do you do for a living?" (Graeber, 2019, p. 240). In his philosophy of existentialism, Sartre cautioned against rigidly identifying with a distinct archetype, "there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavour to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, and auctioneer, a tailor" (Sartre, 2004, p. 386). We collapse our potential into easily digestible archetypes. This goes for therapists as well. To not simply become a therapist, to keep your being an open question (Bion, 2018, p. 30).

Work leaves not solely an ideological mark. The toll which workplaces upon the body is often visible through strains, injuries, or illnesses. The body is thus the site where work leaves its mark. The "body is political" (Totton, 2003 p. 47). There are marks particular to the "labouring body" and the "consumerist body" (Totton, 2003, p. 49-50) and following Han let us coin the modern "achievement body" (2015, p. 8). As a subtlety, we are called to see the damage from what anthropologist David Graeber calls "spiritual violence" (2019, p. 67). That is, the detrimental impact of meaningless work, lack of values, and an increasingly uncertain future (Hari, 2019; Graeber, 2019; Gertz, 2019, p. 124-138).

The proposed solution to the ills mentioned above is often more work. "Some have done better than others because they've worked harder than others. *If you want to do that well, you should work hard too*" (Fisher, 2021, p.

122). All this even though "[m]ore often than not, individual wealth owes more to luck, laws and regulations, inheritance or fortunate timing than to individual brilliance" (Standing, 2017, p. 32). There are thus many more factors than individual motivation. Though likely preaching to the choir, many who do not work don't do this by choice. Often, some relational difficulty or trauma gets in the way for those who want to work. I feel like I am defending idleness here. Let it be said that people shouldn't need an excuse to be idle, there is nothing wrong, lazy or otherwise, about idleness and leisure (Standing, 2017, p. 117).

I think it is very important however, to carefully interrogate any inherited social assumptions we carry about work because they can carry into therapy. As Graeber points out, many think "that those who avoid work entirely should probably drop dead" (2019, p. 242). Work is considered a fundamental human trait. To not work is viewed as pestilent. Even within psychiatry "having a job is considered one of the major characteristics of being a high-functioning person" (Wang, p. 51). Again, this is political standpoint, as "a capitalist society values productivity in its citizens above all else, and those with severe mental illness are much less likely to be productive in ways considered valuable: by adding to the cycle of production and profit" (Wang, p. 51).

There is a connection between how work is also valued in monetary terms. There is a long history of the devaluation of women's labour (Federici, 2014, p. 92-96) or what today can be called "caring labour" (Graeber, p. 236; Block, Croft, Schmader, 2018). In other words, work that has traditionally been

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done or assumed to be done by women, e.g., cleaning, raising children, teaching, nursing, etc. Psychotherapy as a line of work can be similarly included. "The more your work helps and benefits others, and the more social value you create, the less you are likely to be paid for it" (Graeber, 2019, p. 207). So, we have this societal devaluation of jobs that are of enormous benefit to the social fabric of our lives.

The hypocrisy of this position was highlighted during the pandemic. "Unskilled labourers" magically became "essential workers". Graeber, writing pre-pandemic, proposed a thought experiment: "If we all woke up one morning and discovered that not only nurses, garbage collectors, and mechanics, but for that matter, bus drivers, grocery store workers, firefighters, or short-order chefs had been whisked away into another dimension, the results would be equally catastrophic" (2019, p.208). Many of these jobs tend to be the ones that generate the most scorn during strike action taken to secure better pay or working conditions.

Vignette 2

I had a client, let us call him Jeff. When Jeff was a child, he would be beaten for not helping in his father's business operated from home. He would be paid little or nothing for his long day's work. This happened intermittently over several years. Jeff now becomes retraumatised by the mere mention of work and all that this word symbolises. He would work in manual labour types of jobs (caring labour) and is extremely sensitive to the disparity in pay between himself and the people he would work for, that is, the managers or coordinators would be making a lot more money than him. In therapy Jeff fluctuates between wanting to work to make a better life for himself and not wanting to work because of the stress it causes him. He receives disability pay to sustain life's basics. Jeff gets along somewhat better with his father. Work remains traumatising.

Commentary

It was clear that there was a strong connection between Jeff's mistreatment by his father and his ongoing difficulties with work. This developmental aspect was explored on many occasions but is not the focus here. I was struck however by the fact that the things that were triggering him revealed an injustice. Specifically, management earning much more money for the same or fewer hours. A classic capitalist arrangement. This seems to be something that others take for granted but because of Jeff's heightened sensitivity, it could not be ignored.

It seemed to be that rather than his father being the source of his future difficulties that he was a conduit for these social forces of workaholism. Culture

is not something outside of the family, but the family is our first encounter with culture. "The family is permeable to environmental forces and exterior influences" (Guattari, 2009, p. 201-202). In Jeff's case, his father had embodied this work ethic to an authoritarian degree, and he was encountering a variation of this same theme in his adult work life. To say that his difficulties with work are solely to be resolved through exploring his past would be the sort of nihilism inducing interpretation mentioned earlier.

"If the symbolic father is often lurking behind the boss– which is why one speaks of "paternalism" in various kinds of enterprises–there also often is, in a most concrete fashion, a boss or hierarchic superior behind the real father. In the unconscious, paternal functions are inseparable from the socio-professional and cultural involvements which sustain them" (Guattari, 2009, p. 201).

I often felt compelled, especially early in the therapy to intervene with anxiety management to help Jeff to cope and continue to work. However, I resisted this compulsion. On reflection, it would have been a mistake. Further, it was not Jeff's goal. Had I pursued this intervention, it would have been based on my assumption that helping Jeff to endure work was the correct course of action. Though he wanted to work, I wondered whether this desire was socially conditioned, or was it something he wanted. His father valued work above all else. I tried to proceed in a way that kept the possibilities of these questions open, at least in my mind. To simply treat

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the therapy as rehabilitation for work would have fallen into the trap mentioned at the outset, facilitating my client's exploitation and his inner self-exploitation.

Conclusion
The purpose of this work is to show how society and politics shapes our ideas of individuality and our attitudes to work. We are permeable in our most intimate mental functioning; we are not closed off. These attitudes affect everyone, both therapists and clients. For therapists, we have a responsibility to not simply reiterate and reinforce this social and political structure but to create a space for radical reassessment of all assumptions. What has been in question here are ideas of individuality and how these may become pathological coupled with scrutiny of the many social contradictions and attitudes to work. ☽

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