'It's not your fault': Consciousness-raising as a reversal of magical voluntarism

Mark Fisher

Neoliberalism has privatised stress. While working conditions, pay and social security have declined, the therapeutic culture which has aided and abetted neoliberalism has encouraged us not to see these as political problems which can be addressed by collective action, but as forms of individualised stress which must be managed by drugs, positive thinking or mindfulness. In order to overcome this, we need to reverse neoliberalism's project of responsibilisation. Instead of 'taking ownership' of distress that has been imposed upon us, we need to find ways of linking individual suffering to the distal causes which have produced it. The best strategy for doing this is a practice developed by socialist-feminism: consciousness raising. Consciousness raising worked by encouraging people to talk together about their feelings – which had precisely the effect of depersonalising suffering, and directing attention to the power structures which actually produced it. How can we revive consciousness raising in the 21st century?

I CANNOT WRITE HONESTLY about the importance of David Smail's work without talking about its importance to me. Encountering Smail's writing and thinking has enabled me to come to a better (and more compassionate) understanding of myself, and it is has done so by allowing me to recognise that what I had previously experienced as a set of 'personal' problems had their roots in social power.

I've suffered from depression intermittently since I was a teenager. Some of these episodes have been highly debilitating – resulting in self-harm, withdrawal (where I would spend months on end in my own room, only venturing out to sign or to buy the minimal amounts of food I was consuming), and time spent on psychiatric wards. I wouldn't say I've recovered from the condition, but I'm pleased to say that both the incidences and the severity of depressive episodes have greatly lessened in recent years. Partly, that is a consequence of changes in my life situation, but it's also to do with coming to a different understanding of my depression and what caused it.

Depression is partly constituted by a sneering 'inner' voice which accuses you of self-indulgence – you aren't depressed, you're just feeling sorry for yourself, pull yourself together – and this voice is liable to be triggered by going public about the condition. Of course, this voice isn't an 'inner' voice at all – it is the internalised expression of actual social forces, some of which have a vested interest in denying any connection between depression and the wider social field.

My depression was always tied up with the conviction that I was literally good for nothing. I spent most of my life up to the age of thirty believing that I would never work. In my twenties I drifted between postgraduate study, periods of unemployment and temporary jobs. In each of these roles, I felt that I didn't really belong: in postgraduate study, because I was a dilletante who had somehow faked his way through, not a proper scholar; in unemployment, because I wasn't really unemployed, like those who were honestly seeking work, but a shirker; and in temporary jobs, because I felt I was performing incompetently, and in any case I didn't really belong in these office or factory jobs, not because I was 'too good' for them, but – very much to the contrary – because I was over-educated and useless, taking the job of someone who needed and deserved it more than I did. Even when I was on a psychiatric ward, I felt I was not really depressed – I was only simulating the condition in order to avoid work, or in the infernally paradoxical logic of depression, I was simulating it in order to conceal the fact that I was not capable of working, and that there was no place at all for me in society.

When I eventually got a job as lecturer in a further education college, I was for a while elated – yet by its very nature this elation showed that I had not shaken off the feelings of worthlessness that would soon lead to further periods of depression. I lacked the calm confidence of one born to the role. At some not very submerged level, I evidently still didn't believe that I was the kind of person who could do a job like teaching. But where did this belief come from? The dominant school in psychiatry locates the origins of such 'beliefs' in malfunctioning brain chemistry, which are to be corrected by pharmaceuticals; psychoanalysis and forms of therapy influenced by it famously look for the roots of mental distress in family background; while cognitive behavioural therapy is less interested in locating the source of negative beliefs than it is in simply replacing them with a set of positive stories. It is not that these models are entirely false, it is that they miss – and must miss – the most likely cause of such feelings of inferiority: social power. The form of social power that had most effect on me was class power, although of course gender, race and other forms of subordination work by producing the same sense of ontological inferiority, which is best expressed in exactly the thought I articulated above: that one is not the kind of person who can fulfil roles which are earmarked for the dominant group.

It was on the urging of one of the readers of my book *Capitalist Realism* that I started to investigate David Smail's work. It confirmed the hypotheses about depression that I had stumbled towards in my own thinking. In *The Origins of Unhappiness*,

Smail describes how the marks of class are designed to be indelible. For those who from birth are taught to think of themselves as lesser, the acquisition of qualifications or wealth will seldom be sufficient to erase – either in their own 'minds' or in the minds of others – the primordial sense of worthlessness that marks them so early in life. Someone who moves out of the social sphere they are 'supposed' to occupy is always in danger of being overcome by feelings of vertigo, panic and horror:

> *isolated, cut off, surrounded by hostile space, you are suddenly without connections, without stability, with nothing to hold you upright or in place; a dizzying, sickening unreality takes possession of you; you are threatened by a complete loss of identity, a sense of utter fraudulence; you have no right to be here, now, inhabiting this body, dressed in this way; you are a nothing, and 'nothing' is quite literally what you feel you are about to become.*

What Smail offers here is a new and fruitful approach to class politics: an approach that is all the more important given the deflation of class consciousness that has happened over the past 30 years. The deflation of class consciousness has been narrated by the dominant neoliberal discourse as if it were equivalent to the disappearance of class as such. The fact that it could seem even remotely plausible to claim that class has now disappeared is one indication of the scale of the success of the neoliberal project. It is certainly true that class has been disappeared – in precisely the sense that the term 'disappeared' was used to refer to the way in which enemies of some authoritarian states were abducted and killed. But the removal of class from popular consciousness – the disappearance of the concept of class from media discourse – has allowed ruling class power to operate in ever more brutal ways. The deflation of class consciousness has led to the rise of virulent forms of class hatred, as Owen Jones's book *Chavs: the Demonization of the Working Class* demonstrates. The popularity of *Chavs*, however, suggests that there is a growing awareness of the ways in which neoliberal media and political discourse has propagated class-based shaming.

It isn't only neoliberals who have retreated from class. In 'Marx's Purloined Letter', an important essay written nearly 20 years ago now, Fredric Jameson pointed out how 'the denunciation of class – even amongst Marxists – has become an obligatory gesture today, as though we all know that race, gender and ethnicity were more satisfactory concepts or more fundamental, prior, concrete, existential experiences'. Jameson warned that:

> *[It] would be a great mistake for Marxism to abandon this extraordinarily rich and virtually untouched field of analysis on the grounds that class categories were somehow old-fashioned and Stalinist and needed to be renounced shamefacedly in advance, in order for Marxism to stage a respectable and streamlined reappearance in the field of intellectual debate in the new world system.* (Jameson, 1999)

Sadly, this now reads less like a warning than a prophetic account of the emergence of a left which has indeed jettisoned class as an embarrassing relic.

It is worth recalling here that class does not – and cannot – have any sort of official existence in capitalism. Capitalism is supposed to have rid us of feudalism's encastements. The point of Marx's critique of the French Revolution was to expose this as an illusion, or, rather, only a partial truth. Instead of delivering the universality it promised, the French Revolution amounted to the takeover by a particular class, the bourgeoisie – and, furthermore, in a certain sense, this class didn't even act in its own interests, but in the interests of the real ruling power on earth, capital.

Yet a return to the so-called strict Marxist definition of class – the idea that class is determined by relationship to means of production – will not be sufficient. One problem with this definition is that, on its own, it does nothing to counter Capital's claims to meritocracy and classlessness. It tells us nothing about why there is a class system – why, that is, whole groups of people have their relationship to the 'means of production' effectively fixed. A proper analysis of class demands an account of the forces – cultural, sociological, 'psychological' – that perform this fixing. Moreover, far from being the only proper Marxist account of class, the very economism of this definition is opposed to the spirit of Marx's analysis, which disdained 'the economic' as the bourgeois category par excellence. (It's probably worth also noting in passing here that, at least since the 1970s, the concept of 'production' has proved very problematic, for many reasons. All of the current emphases on so-called 'immaterial labour' point to the inadequacy of the old concept of 'means of production' for grasping the nature of capitalist exploitation today.)

An adequate understanding of class requires us to get to grips with the question of subordination, and how it is produced. Class consciousness, Jameson argued in 'Marx's Purloined Letter', 'turns first and foremost around the question of subalternity, that is around the experience of inferiority. This means that the 'lower classes' carry around within their heads unconscious convictions as to the superiority of hegemonic or ruling-class expressions or values, which they equally transgress and repudiate in ritualistic (and socially and politically ineffective) ways' (Jameson, 1999). This marking as inferior is fundamental, although we could say that, in the ordinary course of things, the assumption of inferiority isn't directly 'experienced' at all; rather, it functions as an unconscious frame which shapes and conditions all experience.

One of the most powerful and painful explorations of these machineries of inferiority in English literature comes in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, a novel that has a new relevance in the era of neoliberalism. Pip has been taken to the house of the rich woman, Miss Havisham, and made to play with her ward, the beautiful and haughty Estella. Estella humiliates Pip by mocking his 'coarse hands' and 'common boots'.

Afterwards, when he reflects on the encounter, Pip feels a profound sense of shame.

> *I took the opportunity of being alone in the courtyard to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. My opinion of those accessories was not favourable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages. I determined to ask Joe why he had ever taught me to call those picture-cards Jacks, which ought to be called knaves. I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too.* (Dickens, 2005)

Here, the sense of shame and inferiority which had previously been in the background of Pip's experience – a vague frame – comes to the foreground. But this foregrounding is very far from constituting class consciousness. It is more like the opposite of class consciousness, in that the structures which produce Pip's sense of inferiority recede from attention, in the very moment that Pip internalises his feelings of shame and starts to see himself from the perspective of the dominant class. Pip's shame, and the pursuit of wealth and success he subsequently undertakes in order to ameliorate it, are a kind of parable for what has happened under neoliberalism.

Beverley Skeggs has written of the ways in which, under neoliberalism, people from working class backgrounds have been induced to see themselves from the point of view of a 'bourgeois gaze', a gaze which constitutes them as necessarily lacking. The widespread recruiting of working class people into identifying with the bourgeois gaze is perhaps the real meaning of New Labour politician John Prescott's claim that 'we are all middle-class now'. The feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray once wrote, 'there is one sex, and it is male' in order to highlight the ways in which patriarchy closes off the possibility of sexual difference. We might say that, under neoliberalism, 'there is one class, and it is middle'. The paradoxes of this over-extension of the concept of the middle should be obvious – if 'everyone' is middle-class, then what, exactly, are they in the middle of? What imaginary topology is there that could position 'everyone' in the 'middle' in any case?

One effect of the idea that 'everyone is middle-class' is responsibilisation. If 'everyone is middle-class', then those who are not wealthy or successful must have failed. Each individual member of the subordinate class is encouraged into feeling that their poverty, lack of opportunities, or unemployment, is their fault and their fault alone. Individuals will blame themselves rather than social structures, which in any case they have been induced into believing do not really exist (they are just excuses, called upon by the weak). What David Smail calls 'magical voluntarism' – the belief that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be – is the dominant ideology and unofficial religion of contemporary capitalist society, pushed by reality TV 'experts' and business gurus as much as by politicians. Magical voluntarism is both an effect and a cause of the currently historically low level of class consciousness. It is the flipside of depression – whose underlying conviction is that we are all uniquely responsible for our own misery and therefore deserve it. A particularly vicious double bind is imposed on the long-term unemployed in the UK now: a population that has all its life been sent the message that it is good for nothing is simultaneously told that it can do anything it wants to do.

We must understand the fatalistic submission of the UK's population to 'austerity' as the consequence of a deliberately cultivated depression. This depression is manifested in the acceptance that things will get worse (for all but a small elite), that we are lucky to have a job at all (so we shouldn't expect wages to keep pace with inflation), that we cannot afford the collective provision of the welfare state. Collective depression is the result of the ruling class project of resubordination. For some time now, we have increasingly accepted the idea that we are not the kind of people who can act. This isn't a failure of will any more than an individual depressed person can 'snap themselves out of it' by 'pulling their socks up'. The rebuilding of class consciousness is a formidable task indeed, one that cannot be achieved by calling upon ready-made solutions. What Smail's work encourages us to imagine is some space between therapy and political action; it is perhaps only in such a space that class consciousness can be reflated. Progressive political movements must take seriously the emotional structures that reproduce class power and other forms of political subordination. They must actively confront the ways in which shame and inferiority are engineered by the ruling structures, and internalised by subordinate groups.

A rediscovery of the techniques of consciousness-raising developed by socialist-feminism would be one way in which these machineries of inferiority could be made visible and ultimately dismantled. Consciousness-raising was about bringing into view precisely those structures – capital, patriarchy – which are hidden by and in 'ordinary experience'. Making the structures appear, allows us to see that we as individuals are not responsible for so much of what happens in our lives. Despite what neoliberal magical voluntarism tells us, it is not our fault. The awareness of the structural causation of much of what we are invited to think of as our 'internal' lives can help to engender the 'compassionate solidarity' that David Smail rightly called for. And, in a seeming paradox, giving up the fantasy of individual responsibility is the first step to achieving a collective agency: the only agency that will actually succeed in a world dominated by capital.

References

Dickens, C. (2005). *Great Expectations.* Delaware: Prestwick House Literary Editions, p.64.

Jameson, F. (1999). Marx's purloined letter. In Michael Sprinker (Ed.) *Ghostly demarcations: A symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx.* London: Verso, p.49.

Jameson, F. Marx's purloined letter, p.47.

Smail, D. (2001). *The nature of unhappiness.* London: Robinson, p.44.

Mark Fisher (1968–2017)

We are very sorry to say that Mark Fisher has died since the conference. We extend our condolences to Mark's family, friends and those who knew him and his work. Reading the paper is particularly poignant now as we know that Mark took his own life less than 18 months later. The following piece about Mark has been written by his friend Dr Ray Brassier, Professor of Philosophy, American University of Beirut.

Mark Fisher was a writer, teacher, and activist. After studying English and Philosophy at the University of Hull, he pursued graduate work, first at the university of Birmingham then at the University of Warwick, where he completed his PhD in Philosophy and Literature in 1999. While at Warwick, he became a founding member of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, an interdisciplinary collective whose investigations of digital culture later proved to be seminal. In the early 2000s, he taught philosophy at a sixth form college in south London and became known for his influential blog K-Punk [http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org], writing about music, culture, and politics. As his reputation grew, he became a freelance writer as well as a part-time lecturer at the University East London and Goldsmiths College, where he was eventually appointed to a full-time position in the department of Visual Cultures. In 2008, Fisher co-founded Zero Books with a remit to publish writing that would be 'intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist'. His first book, *Capitalist Realism*, helped launch the Zero imprint and confirmed his standing as an important cultural theorist. The follow-up, *Ghosts of My Life*, also published by Zero, appeared in 2013 and his final book, *The Weird and the Eerie*, came out in December 2016, just a few weeks before his death.

Fisher's work is an ambitious synthesis of cultural and political criticism, drawing upon psychoanalysis, Marxism, and post-structuralism. What sets his writing apart from standard academic criticism or journalistic commentary is the sense of political and existential urgency that courses through it. He sought to diagnose neoliberalism's chokehold on contemporary consciousness and loosen its grip. 'Capitalist realism' is his name for the insidious ideological framework through which neoliberalism has narrowed the horizon of cognitive and political possibility and carried out the 'slow cancellation' of the future. Fisher refused to accept this annulment. The overarching constant animating all of his writing is the persistent effort to open up existential and political possibilities shut out by capitalism. He pursued this struggle not only in his writing, but also through his teaching and activism, whether by giving classes on 'popular modernism', advocating for the politicization of mental health, or protesting against the relentless marketisation of education. The struggle was personal as well as theoretical: in January 2017, suffering from severe depression, Fisher took his own life. The courage with which he resisted the lure of resignation remains an example for all those struggling for another future.