

**The Making of Docile Working Class Subjects: CBT, Class and the Failures of
Psychoanalysis**

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In this short paper I want to open up some trails of enquiry in my own thinking about psychoanalysis, class and contemporary culture. By way of introduction I have three quotations:

The first is from my clinical practice, taken from a session with a working class woman who has in many respects become a middle class subject through her education and her profession. She was describing a relative's wedding, a very lavish and expensive affair held at a Home Counties hotel. She points out that in spite of the best champagne, the designer clothes and the top class venue that this was still a 'chav' gathering, a good imitation of a middle class wedding, but an imitation none the less.

The second is from an article by Neal Lawson in last year's Guardian. He writes: 'Shopping is the predominant way in which we know ourselves and each other and it is now at the point of ruling other ways of being, knowing and living.... We are watched, recorded and ordered not by our political beliefs but by our shopping desires'. (The Guardian, August 3rd 2009)

The third is from Lord Layard, the government advisor on happiness and work, writing in The Sunday times in March of last year. He writes 'Work gives us meaning and identity, and employment is important in recovering from depression and anxiety. Redundancy can lead to higher rates of depression and suicide. Hopefully the difference in this recession is that people will realise that mental illness shouldn't have a stigma attached to it. One of the purposes of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is to show that mental health conditions can be cured'. (The Times, March 15th, 2009)

What possible links could there be between an aspiring working class wedding, shopping and CBT for the unemployed? What ties these three seemingly disparate subjects together is the nature of the contemporary scene in which they are produced. We live in a time where the

individual citizen is endorsed to be an active agent, a powerful consumer in the production and maintenance of their life. We are all now responsible for our emotional and material welfare, free to make choices about how we want to live. Yet our consumer and relationship practices – how we shop, how we marry – are marked by a relentless middle classness, an aspirational measure that silently and coercively shapes the apparent exercise of our choice. Furthermore, this contemporary emphasis on individual responsibility drastically redefines the place of the social. We live in an era where social problems are individualised, understood as caused by the actions or choices of individual subjects. As Lord Layard makes clear in the quotation above, redundancy is not a political event, a consequence of recession or globalised management practices; redundancy is an individual problem which an individual can therefore, with support, sort out. It is psychological, not economic. The redundant do not need political activism, they need cognitive behavioural therapy. Zygmunt Bauman captures very well this atomising of the social:

....the matter of improvement is no longer a collective, but an individual enterprise. It is individual men and women on their own who are expected to use, individually, their own wits, resources and industry to lift themselves to a more satisfactory condition. (2000: 135)

Of course, using one's own resources to lift one to a better place has a very particular construction for a working class subject, particularly when one's economic and material circumstances make such a reworking of one's life an impossibility. Yet, we live in a time where the exhortation to consume, to shop and to succeed elides class disadvantage. The copying of life styles modelled on the very rich, the very privileged - the very middle class - have become a compelling compensation, and imprisonment, for those who will always live below or outside of the dominant forms of wealth and cultural status.

In this short paper I will be arguing that the current dominance of CBT is an effect of a transformation in how modern subjects are both formed and governed in an era of globalised risk. This transformation has had profound consequences for working class life, consequences which CBT has been instrumental in neutralising and domesticating. Drawing on the work of both Foucault and Butler, the first part of this paper is a brief exploration of how working class

life has been increasingly colonised or interpellated by middle class modes of living and being. The paper then moves on to analyse the working class encounter with psychotherapy regimes at two key points; during the post war period and towards the end of the last century, when CBT became the public health therapy of choice. Whilst the post war role of psychoanalysis was largely the normalisation of working class life, this paper will consider whether in contemporary times it could serve a more radical purpose. If CBT is a space for making working class subjects docile, could psychoanalysis be a space for resistance and opposition?

Power regimes and the working class subject

Foucault's concept of governmentality, I would argue, was prescient in its anticipation of the way that contemporary power regimes operate. No longer exercised by the sovereign and privileged few, contemporary power is a dense and multiple network of disciplinary techniques, bringing into visibility the ordinary individual as a case for training, classifying, normalising and excluding. This simultaneously 'individualizing and totalizing form of power' both governs the subject and incites the subject to self-govern. Foucault elaborates: 'Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise (170: 1976)

In turning to an analysis of the regulation of the working class subject, this tension between power as instrumental and power as objectifying is useful. Put somewhat reductively, middle class subjects are produced as self-governing, whilst working class subjects are governed by outside interventions. The psychological services – within which I would include psychoanalysis - have always had a very particular objectifying function in terms of working class communities. Whilst middle class subjects may choose to go to therapy to further their self formation, working class subjects are more likely to go either under conditions of enforcement - via social services, probation, child guidance – or as an effect of their inevitable failures within a system that has remained irreducibly middle class in terms of its systems of advancement and privilege. Of course, this is not to overlook the regimes of self-formation that operate within and across working class life. However, these regimes are increasingly modelled on an imitation of the middle class 'norm'. In a recent book, the sociologist Steph Lawler, eloquently traces how

insidiously the middle class individual is the template for working class identity; it is the aspirational standard against which the working class always falls short. Indeed, what Lawler claims, is that individuality, that sense of *being* an individual, is itself a middle class practice.

I have many examples of this from my own working class background, but the one that remains significant is going to grammar school at 11. Until that point I was in many ways an ‘unclassed’ subject in that I had no sense of identifying as working class. I became working class when confronted with the dominantly middle class life of the other grammar school girls. Suddenly, owning a detached house, holidays abroad, having a parent with a profession, speaking French and German, were experiences against which my own background fell woefully short. What had previously been my norm – living in a council house, holidays in Cornwall, having a parent who ran a shop and speaking no foreign languages at all – were transformed into signifiers of lack, experiences to be hidden and to become quiet sources of shame. Lawler goes on to describe how representations of working life are always negative:

working class people, it is assumed, don’t know the right things, they don’t want the right things – they don’t look right and they don’t act right. By contrast, middle class identities silently pass as normal. (2008: 125)

In my own research on adoption and child protection interventions, it was very noticeable how failures of working class mothers are both publicly pathologised and punished. The public narratives of these women rarely focus on the structurally generated poverty and exclusion that produce the emotionally impoverished parenting practices that lead to the removal of their children. These working class women are vilified as some kind of ‘unnatural’ deviation from the middle class norm of mothering. Furthermore, in our society the failures of middle class mothers are hidden, ignored or re-normalised. Any family problems or troubling behaviours are more likely to be privately discussed in the analyst’s consulting room, rather than publicly discussed in the social workers office.

In a recent Guardian article, Jenni Russell discusses the deeply hierarchical nature of the dominant white middle class culture of the UK. She writes:

Anyone who hopes to be socially mobile has by definition to learn to read a culture that is not the one they grew up with. Otherwise, no matter what their formal qualifications they will either fail to get in or fail to progress. (The Guardian July 28th, 2009)

Russell had begun this article with the story of an educated working class man who had been rejected from a city firm because his table manners were inappropriate. His breach of middle class manners had suggested to the employer that the man's capacity to socialise and negotiate in business would be severely limited, making him an unsuitable candidate for the firm.

Judith Butler's development of Foucault's theory of power could be particularly relevant here. She has written extensively on both the productive effects of subjugation on marginalised identities and the public disenfranchising of certain forms of love and loss. In an interview from 1999, she explores how certain forms of desire become ungrievable within certain public discourses:

..it's rather what it means to have one's desire formed as it were through cultural norms that dictate in part what will and will not be a lovable object, what will and will not be a legitimate form of love.

If being working class is always situated as second class, then surely there must operate a foreclosure on the field of working class life as a possible and legitimate position of aspiration and viability. Butler is eloquent on the melancholic consequences of foreclosure in the field of homosexuality, but I wonder whether this could be transposed to think about working class subjects. In a culture dominated by middle class values, being working class is always formed through some kind of disavowal of that which one is.¹ Butler writes: 'It is an identity based upon the refusal to avow an attachment, and hence the refusal to grieve' (140: 1997).

¹ There is a substantial literature on the complex formations of classed identity by female working class academics, for example Hey, V (2006) 'Getting over it? Reflections on the melancholia of reclassified identities', *Gender & Education* 18 (3) 295-308; Mahoney, P and Zmroczek, C eds (1997) *Class Matters: working class women's perspectives on social class*, London: Taylor & Francis; Steedman, C (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*, London: Virago

Returning to the example of the working class man with ‘bad’ table manners, his ability to get work will depend upon a disavowal of his working class position. In making for himself an identity forged through disavowal, he will institute a melancholic identification to that which can not be actively acknowledged and so not actively mourned. This certainly resonates with my own experience at grammar school. In order to belong, I identified with the dominant middle class value system, thus refusing my working class identity. Split off, made unconscious, my attachment to my working classness was an attachment I could not grieve because it was an identity with out any value or legitimacy within the prevailing school culture. Depression is usually the consequence of an inability to either mourn or acknowledge a loss, making me wonder whether there is a culturally induced depression at the heart of a lot of working class lives.²

Depression of course is the psychological condition of our time and one which CBT has been deployed to ‘fix’ in primary care health settings through the UK. Sorting out and silencing the narratives of depression through CBT has become *the* treatment in these settings, with accompanying medication as part of the therapy. The question for this analysis is whether working class subjects can re-territorialize their position and whether psychoanalysis has a role to play in such a radical project? Butler, of course, is committed to exploring the productive possibilities within any relation of power. She writes:

For Foucault, then, the disciplinary apparatus produces subjects, but as a consequence of that production, it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself... the law turns against itself and spawns versions of itself which oppose and proliferate its animating purpose. (1997:100)

Can a working class subject rework the ‘injurious interpellation’ of their position, using it as a resource in its overthrow, re-making that identity as both a ‘site of radical reoccupation and resignification’ (ibid: 104)?

² Layton (Layton et al 2006: 107-8) discusses how capitalism works to ‘unlink’ the individual subject from social processes, an unlinking that clinical psychoanalysis reproduces in its practice.

For Foucault, psychoanalysis was too embedded in the production of an oppressive form of individualism to be any kind of space for radical resignification. In the section that follows, I want to consider the encounter between psychoanalysis and working class life at two key historical points in order to interrogate its contribution to a radical remaking of working class experience.

Post war

The post war re-construction of the family within a newly emergent welfare state has been well documented by numerous commentators. My focus here is to briefly outline a transformation in how the working class subject was regulated in this period, a transformation in which psychoanalysis was central.

Up until the Second World War, there had been a marked discrepancy between how middle class families and working class families were understood to function. Whilst separation was assuming a central psychic role in the constitution of middle class mothering, it had had little significance in child welfare work with working class families. Before the war, the separation of working class children from their troubled families was a routine intervention that was not constructed as emotionally damaging or psychologically consequential for the child. The working class mother-baby relationship was not understood in psychological terms and so could be unproblematically interrupted or severed. As Steedman (1986: 17) comments: ‘...the psychoanalytic drama was constructed to describe that of middle class women’. After the Second World War, the working class family was transformed and a new technology of the working class subject emerged, one closely modelled on the middle class family.

In ‘Governing the soul’, Nikolas Rose traces the impetus that the post war period gave to the normalisation of the well developed heterosexual family unit, with a whole range of cultural interventions – child guidance clinics, health visitors, child rearing manuals - devised to measure and to adjudicate upon the psychological and emotional lives of middle class children: ‘In the clinic the troubles of childhood would be diagnosed, norms of adjustment and maladjustment would be produced and refined and normalization would be undertaken’. (1989: 158)

Psychoanalysis made a foundational contribution to the newly emerging field of infant and child psychology, helping to chart the vicissitudes of the internal life of the family and supporting a re-domestication of women's lives after the comparative freedoms of the war years. This was a time when psychoanalysis enjoyed great visibility, providing competing theorisations of early nurture and maternal attachment (Anna Freud, 1942; Winnicott 1984; Bowlby 1990; Klein 1991). The primacy given to the formative events of earliest infancy - both real and psychic - made separation a key psychological experience (Rose 1989:168), confining middle class mothers to their households in a position of continuous nurture.

As has been well documented the living conditions of urban working class communities were brought into sharp focus by the evacuation of working class children, described by Burlingham and Freud in 1942, giving rise to a whole new platform of welfare reforms in the post war period. However, it was not just the evacuated child's physical being that was of concern; it was also their psychic being. These children, Burlingham and Freud argued, were more tormented by separation from significant parental figures, than by the bombing raids over London which had led to their removal. The working class subject was beginning to acquire a psychological life.

As Donzelot has elaborated, in this period the working class child was transformed from a product of a corrupt and degenerate environment to a product of emotionally troubled and damaged parents, opening up the possibility for psychological treatment informed by psychoanalysis. This was the era when psychoanalysis had an active relationship with services to the working classes, via both the newly formed social services, child guidance clinics and the Tavistock, helping individuals and families achieve the proper standards of normalisation.

In the 1950s and 1960s the working classes were most fully penetrated by this new familial discourse, colonising its still surviving patterns of autonomy, with governance by professionals of the new psychological sciences (Donzelot 1979:79). I encountered in my own working class family in the early 1960s a residual resistance to this technology imported through the outside professional. My mother had such a grave suspicion of hospitals and outside professional help that she had all her children at home, and would refuse to open the door to the health visitor.

From today's perspective it seems quite unthinkable that psychoanalysis was actively informing worker perspectives throughout the welfare professions. Whilst aimed at securing very normative purposes, the post war psychological services emphasis on slow, dedicated case work and a belief in progress and change, speak to a radically different world from that which we live in today. It is interesting that by the end of the 60s social work brought into question the use of psychoanalytic perspectives in undertaking case work with troubled families. There was already creeping into that discourse risk assessment and the need for fast focussed action – today's contemporary world was already beginning to emerge as the certainties of the post war period crumbled. It is to the contemporary period I will now turn.

Late Modernity

Hall & Iqbal in their new book on CBT (2009), trace its historical emergence in the 1970s in America as a complex effect of dissatisfactions with psychoanalysis. CBT, they argue, fitted an era dominated by 'evidence based, time limited and cost effective interventions (ibid:16). This was, of course, the era when the post war grand narratives of progress, tradition and security were in question, giving rise to new individualising regimes, characterised in the UK by Thatcherism. It seems to me that there is a complex link to be made between the conditions of late modernity, the de-throning of psychoanalysis, the emergence and now dominance of CBT and the position of the working class, who are now the main recipients of this form of therapy. Is there something about the slow, indeterminate and unfocussed unravelling of the psychoanalytic encounter that makes it too subversive in contemporary times to be freely available to working class subjects? It is to this question and analysis that I will now turn.

There is a proliferation of commentaries and theorisations of late twentieth century western life, variously referred to as late modernity, post modernity, liquid modernity, risk society, the new individualism. Elliott and Lemert (2009: xi) in their recent analysis, cite four dimensions to this transformation in contemporary life: a relentless emphasis on self-reinvention; an endless hunger for instant change; a preoccupation with short-termism and the episodic and a fascination with speed and dynamism. These four dimensions could equally be understood as characteristic of Cognitive Behavioural therapy – a short-term, focussed intervention aimed at reframing – reinventing - the clients problems as speedily as possible, within a few brief episodes of

counselling. CBT's contemporary popularity is in part a reflection of how closely its practices are tied to key aspects of contemporary life, in quite stark contrast to the psychoanalytic clinic, where slowness and indirection are foundational.

Most accounts of these current times emphasise globalisation and the new technologies as key in transforming the way that subjects are now formed. We - and I will come back to who this 'we' might signify - now live in a state of 'precarious freedoms' liberated from the old traditional structures, such as family, marriage and secure employment. The contemporary high speed individual no longer seeks stability within the personal or public sphere, having witnessed the erosion of traditional certainties - pensions, the nationalised services, job for life, national security, the nuclear family. In place of these institutional structurings the individual is thrown back on their own self as the basis for their identity or position in the world. People now have what Beck & Beck-Gernsheim term do-it-yourself biographies, with the nomad the favoured metaphor for the contemporary subject.

In the global age one's own life is no longer sedentary or lived in a particular place. It is a travelling life, both literally and metaphorically, a nomadic life, a life spent in cars, aeroplanes and trains, on the telephone or the internet, supported by the mass media, a trans-national life stretching across frontiers (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 25)

What might the emergence of this kind of subject signify for working class life? And what role can psychoanalysis now play? Clearly recent events suggest that capitalism in its globalised contemporary forms needs this kind of subject to both work its practices and consume its products. The contemporary mobilities and freedoms so often described by commentators often feel class blind, as if somehow everyone has some kind of equal opportunity to endlessly reinvent themselves in a rapidly changing world. This sense of a class free, therefore barrier free world, where everyone can get on if they so choose, is an effect of this contemporary technology, concealing the social inequalities that continue to operate to exclude working class subjects.

The casualties, then, of these modern times are always those who were already marginal or subjugated. This is not the place to dwell upon the rise of refugee communities, peoples

displaced by war, climate change or the spread of western industrial practices – populations made nomadic by dreadful circumstances. Within the west itself, the consequences for working class communities have been marked. The inevitable failures to acquire and achieve in a culture that still unreservedly operates the barriers of class, creates a potentially unhappy population that requires disciplining and making docile. Returning to Lord Layard in one of my opening quotations, treating unemployment as an individual problem with the provision of a therapy such as CBT, insidiously suggests that being out of work is a personal, not economic failure. By individualising a wider political issue, CBT blunts and deflects any attempt by the subject to locate a more social sense of their current position. Furthermore, as we approach 3 million unemployed any possibility of that mass experience being unified into a collective protest becomes diminished through the atomising tactic of CBT.

Depression is an inevitable effect of social practices that not only exclude and marginalise, but do not recognise the viability of a working class life. Confining depression to an individual diagnosis drains the subject of any sense of social injustice, fight or resistance. It seems to me that CBT is the ideal therapy for disciplining those whose failures might become a resource to resist and oppose. It is why, I speculate, that psychoanalysis no longer finds itself easily welcomed within primary health care and hospitals. As I said earlier, the more open ended space of psychoanalysis is structurally against the politics of speed. It is a space where unhappiness can be slowly unravelled, not fixed and depression understood, not medicated. For much of the last century, however, clinical psychoanalysis in this country has been aimed at the normalising achievement of middle class individualism, rooted in post war theorisations of the mother-infant relationship. If psychoanalysis can loosen its persistent attachment to these outmoded traditions, it could emerge as a radical place, a subversive refuge for these troubled times. As Foucault so clearly elaborates, the contemporary self does not need discovering, but resisting:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are..we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries. (336: 1982).

Sally Sayles *The Making of Docile Working Class Subjects*

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