

Power, Responsibility and Freedom

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By

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Introduction

The standpoint from which I write is a 'clinical' one, and the (tentative and provisional) conclusions I come to are the result of having struggled for years to make sense of the kinds of distress people bring to the psychological clinic, and how they cope with it. In the course of that struggle I have found myself constantly wandering into territory that is only partially familiar to me and being forced to use tools not routinely found in the clinical psychologist's kit. Though this is not a work of sociology, politics or philosophy, it will at times seem as if it is trying to be; but I want to insist, still, that it is a work of clinical psychology, and that is because it is throughout rooted in and informed by 'clinical' experience.

Even then, however, I have heavily to qualify the use of the word 'clinical' because it carries with it so many false assumptions. The majority of those who find themselves in distress in Western society turn to the clinic because there is nowhere else to go that carries the same promise of relief. They, as well as most of those who treat them, believe that they are hosts of a personal illness or disorder that can be cured by established medical and/or therapeutic techniques. That belief, however, is in my view (and the view of many others) false, and it is clinical experience itself that reveals it as false.

By 'clinical psychology', then, I do not mean a set of medically or therapeutically based procedures for the cure of emotional distress, but rather a privileged opportunity to investigate with people the origins of their difficulties and to consider the possibilities for change.

Unfortunately, orthodox clinical psychology has in my view failed to make the most of this privileged opportunity, and has been misled by its anxious desire to heal, as well as by its perception of its own interest, into betraying the scientific basis on which it claims to rest. For 'science' means taking reality into account and articulating the lessons it teaches (i.e. attending to evidence). And that is exactly what clinical psychology has not done. For reasons which I have written about elsewhere (see, for example, Smail [1995](#), [1998](#)) clinical psychologists have been very well placed to gather evidence about the nature of distress which is as little distorted by interfering factors as it is possible to be. But though this evidence undoubtedly forms part of their unformalized experience, in their official theorizing they have steadfastly disregarded it in favour of conventional, quasi-medical notions of personal disorder and 'treatment'.

What clinical experience teaches in fact is not that psychological distress and emotional suffering are the result of individual faults, flaws or medical disorders, but arise from the social organizations in which all of us are located. Furthermore, damage to people, once done, is not easily cured, but may more easily (and that not easily at all!) be prevented by attending to and caring for the structures of the world in which we live. These are questions neither of medicine nor of

'therapy'. If anything, they may be seen more as questions of morality and, by extension, politics.

The nature of morality

It is inconceivable that emotional suffering could be banished from our lives. Being human entails suffering (even if we have lost the knowledge and wisdom which allow us to suffer with dignity and compassion). At the same time, there can be little doubt that a rearrangement of the ways in which we act towards each other could bring about a very significant lessening in the degree of emotional pain and anguish that has become so commonplace in our society that it is barely noticed.

A moral vision of peace, justice and freedom is not hard to establish; the landscape of Eden is easily recognized. What is not easy to understand and resist are the many ways in which the means of achieving that vision are concealed and obscured, and it is with these questions that I shall be most occupied.

Morality arises through the experience of a *common* humanity and its affirmation in the face of power. Morality is not an individual, but a social matter; it makes demands upon us which extend beyond our finite, individual lives. It is about resisting those forces which seek to drive wedges between us in order that some may feel and claim to be more human than others.

Our common humanity rests upon our common embodiment. We are all made in exactly the same way. We all suffer in the same way. Most immoral enterprises seek in one way or another to deny this truth and to justify the greater suffering of the oppressed or exploited on the grounds of their being 'different' in some way – physically, racially, psychologically, genetically, and so on. Absolute, self-conscious immorality, on the other hand, makes use of its knowledge of our common embodiment to inflict maximum pain and threat: the torturer does unto others as he would not have done to himself, and the terrorist, choosing victims at random, implicitly acknowledges the equivalence of all people.

The history of the 'civilized' world is one in which powerful minorities have sought (ever more successfully) to impose and exploit conditions of slavery on an impoverished majority. This is necessarily always an *immoral* undertaking, for by its actions it denies the continuity of humanity between slave and master while seeking ideologically to obscure that denial¹.

Morality now

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the structure of global society is grotesquely unjust and the means of maintaining it so not only profoundly immoral but insanely dangerous. We crazed, clever monkeys knowingly contemplate the destruction of our own habitat and yet seem helpless to stop ourselves. There seems to be no moral guidance to point a way out of our predicament. The moral voice, stripped of authority, has been drowned out. God is well and truly dead; the Market has triumphed; only the fittest shall survive. Can there be a moral counter to the new Business barbarism?

Unlike the kinds of arguments which establish scientific knowledge, moral arguments are not progressive and accumulative, nor are they ever conclusive. Moral argument and social critique constitute a running battle with ruling power, and even though they may be dealing with eternal truths, they will never find a form in which these can be asserted once and for all; the best they can hope for is to find ever new ways of re-formulating and re-stating their insights such that brakes are applied to the ever-expanding ambitions of power.

A further difficulty is that, insofar as they are successful, moral argument and praxis will be corrupted and co-opted in the interests of power. Christ's message becomes 'The Church'. Because power is power, it holds all the cards, and will *never* be defeated – only impeded. Marx's greatest mistake was to assume that capitalism contained the seeds of its own downfall. Seemingly he hadn't conceived of moving goal-posts

For anyone hoping to win the moral high ground once and for all on the basis of a knock-down argument or a conclusive act of rebellion, the inevitable dominance of a corrupt and corrupting power is likely to be a cause of despair. For such a person the insights into venality, stupidity and corruption of, say, a Swift, turn to absolute cynicism rather than merely profound disillusion. Not only are illusions destroyed, but idealism too is crushed.

Illusions and ideals

But there is a big difference between illusions and ideals. The loss of illusion is a necessary process on the painful road of enlightenment; the loss of ideals is spiritual death. We live in an age which is very nearly spiritually dead. Perhaps it *is* spiritually dead. The only redeeming prospect is that, unlike bodily death, spiritual death need not be final. (Spirit is not a personal possession, but a property of common humanity; it therefore does not die with the individual body, but is in a completely literal sense immortal.)

Ideals are in this age poorly understood. People are clear enough about goals, objectives and 'targets', but moral purposes which are *designedly* unachievable faze the Business mind. Ideals are not just unlikely to be realized – by their very nature they can *never* be realized. Nevertheless, their existence is what makes life worth living.

The essential moral insight is that human existence *has* to be informed and guided by ideals which are more than merely achievable personal goals, and that we must operate by moral rules in a game in which we shall always be defeated. There is absolutely no necessity that a life lived in pursuit of good rather than power will be materially rewarded in this world or a next; such a life does not permit of final achievement and satisfaction. *There is no spiritual nirvana, no final solution, no ultimate certainty; no City of God, no Kingdom of Heaven, no end of history.*

Every inch of moral ground gained will be lost and will have to be re-taken over and over again. Every moving argument will be negated and will have to be re-stated in a form unanticipated by power, every morally uplifting tale will be culturally silenced or revised and will have to be rewritten in a newly subversive guise.

If, furthermore, we do not guard against the futility of optimism, we run the risk of handing the world over to those who know how to exploit it to their advantage. In the last few pages of *Taking Care* I give [examples](#) of the kind of optimism born of faith in Right and Reason which, reassuring though it may have been at the time, is revealed in the cold light of history to have been pathetically misguided.

In the past we have only been able to take morality when laced with religion; hitched to a terrifying authority or a fatuous promise of everlasting life. Our task for the twenty-first century is to see that a moral society is one supported by human ideals far more profound, stable and enduring than a childish dependence on supernatural fantasies or the expectation of material reward. The reason why we have to do this is simple and we all know it: no man is an island.

At the heart of our problem is our understanding of self.

The Business view of humanity

There are more instructive uses for the clinic than the doubtful virtues of 'treatment' so ably criticized by Michel Foucault and Christopher Lasch (see 'The Experience of Self'). For the clinic is a fine place to observe the workings upon us of our environment; talking to people in troubled states of mind brings to our attention far less any inadequacies or shortcomings of their own, and far more the noxious influences of the world in which we have to live.

What has been particularly evident to me from the distress people have felt and expressed is - beyond the damage done to them, significant though it is - the way that Business culture has over the last twenty-five years or so colonized our minds.

Despite a significant hiccup around the middle of the twentieth century, Business has finally triumphed at its end. In doing so, Business 'values' and language, its precepts and its *Weltanschauung* have seeped into every corner of our souls and shape every aspect of our conduct. In trying to understand ourselves and others we seem unable to think beyond Business psychology: selfish competitiveness fuelled by anxiety. We are possessed by the horrific individualism upon which Business mores are based.

We see ourselves as distinct, self-creating and self-motivating social units, psychologically co-terminous with our skins. We believe that, unlike every other entity in nature, we control and take responsibility for ourselves, that we live out our lives through a series of decisions which we take in accordance with our feelings and our purposes. We have unquestioning faith in our rationality, believing that we

One of the fevered dreams of the new century is of immortality. Leaning back in his stretched limo, an aged Texan billionaire explains his expectations of a genetically engineered infinity. Reckoning he will be able to buy a life halted at about the age of forty, he'll 'travel a lot', which is something he's always wanted to do. He'll 'get a nice girl friend' to accompany him. And he'll 'have time to read the newspapers'.

are able to direct and if necessary change the course of our lives according to perceived necessities. We do, it is true, acknowledge the possibility of 'unconscious' motives, but these are again seen as personal to ourselves and in principle alterable once their nature has been brought to the attention of our conscious will. We believe that happiness is obtained through personal development and consumption. We are even losing the courage to die.

A new Copernican switch

Our only hope is to 'de-centre' ourselves, to see that we are *not* islands and that our existence does indeed make sense only as 'part of the main'². We are social creatures who have come to mistake our nature as isolated individuals. Consequently, we do not understand how our social world has come into being nor how we operate within it: we stumble around blindfolded, full of envy, rage and pain.

We are not who we take ourselves to be: not, individually, the architects of our personal destiny, not responsible for all we do and think. We are truly not, even, extinguished by a personal death; the Texan billionaire does not in fact have to steal the existence of our progeny in order to find time to enjoy the newspapers (but for our progeny, of whom he will be a part, to exist, he will need the courage to die).

Exactly as Copernicus showed that our planet is not the centre of the universe, so we need to see that our 'selves' are not the *fons et origo* of our experience and conduct. As far as understanding ourselves is concerned, our Twentieth Century psychologies have been almost entirely misleading. It is with some of these misunderstandings, and the ways they are exploited by power, that much of the rest of this publication will be concerned.

1. Anyone who thinks that slavery no longer exists in the modern world should consult *Disposable People*, by Kevin Bales (Univ. California Press, 1999). Not only is the practice of slavery widespread, but it exists on an unprecedented scale. Bales is careful to consider only 'true' slavery: people being forced to work for nothing. People having to work at meaningless jobs for barely subsistence wages is little better (see Viviane Forrester's [The Economic Horror](#) for a denunciation of this state of affairs).

2. Thanks to Ernest Hemingway, not too many people can be unaware of this passage from John Donne's *Meditation 17*, but it will do no harm to repeat it: -

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

2

The Structure of Social Space

To understand the relations between society and self, to make sense of our experience as sentient and moral beings, we need to develop knowledge which doesn't at present exist. The division of labour in the intellectual marketplace has resulted in a profound and pervasive disarticulation of knowledge. For example, sociologists know little of what psychologists are doing, and neither group is likely to be familiar with the work of moral philosophers. Even if they were (and in those rare instances when they are) the various forms of specialized 'knowledge' are not constructed to fit together at all easily. Academia has become a competitive industry, not a body of men and women seeking to understand the place of humanity in the world.

Social injustice and inequality are intimately linked to personal pain and unhappiness, but there is no academic discipline centrally concerned to investigate and explain the relations between them. Such work takes place only incidentally and on the margins.

Although, thankfully, it is coming at last to be recognized in the social and life sciences that a separation of mind from body is not one that can validly be maintained, a similarly unhelpful separation of self from society is still very much in evidence. The very fact that sociology and psychology are set up as separate disciplines, splitting what is in fact an indissoluble whole (i.e. the social and the personal), means that even the student who strives for integration is stuck at the very foundation of his or her thinking with the assumptions derived from one end of an artificial dichotomy.

There is a further, logical, difficulty at the heart of our efforts to understand ourselves, and that is that, in order to do so, we cannot get *outside* ourselves. We can do a lot better with inanimate matter and with biological systems less complex than ourselves precisely because in the process of investigating them we do not (so much) have to take into account our *own* essential nature. We can look at them from the outside. When thinking about ourselves, however, we are caught up in covert purposes and motivations which are so much a part of ourselves that we cannot possibly be objective about them. In the context of our thinking about ourselves, there *is* no outside. Even so, perhaps we could get quite a bit further than we have.

Conventional psychology

Psychology, for example, seems almost wilfully blind not only to the significance of its own existence (in maintaining an individualism which is of the first importance to the preservation of the current social order), but also to some of the most glaringly obvious factors in human motivation (e.g., the operation of interest).

I do not mean that psychology should *not* exist, but its potential value, from a clinical perspective at least, lies less in its exclusive focus on individuals than in its ability to illuminate subjectivity: what it *feels* like to be a person *in the world* (and why). It is in any case a pretty strange sort of individual that emerges from the typical introductory psychology text – a disjointed collection of mechanisms (perception, sensation, emotion, cognition, etc.) which somehow manage to combine to generate ‘behaviour’ which is, in the final analysis, willed, rational and apparently entirely detached from the kinds of preoccupation (about money and power) which in fact, whether or not we like to admit it, so dominate our daily lives.

Although psychology attempts to preserve its ‘scientific’ status by seeming to stand outside the object of its study so that the latter’s ‘behaviour’ can be predicted and controlled, it nevertheless, tacitly or otherwise, ends up with a perspective on the person as a rational agent who looks out at the world from the self as centre, processes ‘stimuli’ and ‘decides’ what to do.

This kind of view fits in, of course, pretty well with our everyday understanding of ourselves and how we function, and no doubt helps thereby to preserve the appeal of ‘official’ psychology. One of the more obvious features of the vast bulk of the ‘findings’ of ‘scientific’ psychology is that they accord closely with common sense. This is of course not necessarily a fault, and could I suppose be taken as an indication that things are not going too far wrong. However, it seems to me more likely that this somewhat tedious confirmation of received wisdom is a reflection of a set of assumptions which underlie the views of us all – psychologists both lay and professional.

For when we come to thinking about ourselves, our ‘psychologies’ and our relations with each other, we are governed by some very basic prejudices which, though in part very much culturally and socially determined (and, as we shall see, mercilessly exploited by power) are also very nearly inescapably imposed upon us by our nature as creatures embodied in time and space.

View from the self as centre

Each one of us occupies, in the grander scheme of things, an infinitesimal space for an infinitesimal length of time, and yet, for us as individuals, this is all the space and all the time we have and so figures subjectively as hugely significant.

Our greatest intimacy is with the bodily sensations that mediate our relations with the world around us: because we *feel*, physically, what is going on, we have a sense of ‘interiority’ which seems to be just about the most indubitable indication of what is happening to us. We feel we know what is going on in our own ‘minds’ with an especially privileged certainty, while we can only make educated guesses about what goes on in the minds of others. The physical experience of doing things – experience which is absolutely unavoidable – convinces us that, most of the time, doing things means assessing options and taking decisions. We seem to be given an indisputable knowledge of wishes and intentions which are entirely private to ourselves, and our greatest guarantee of the truth of someone else’s wishes and

intentions seems to be to induce them to give a truthful account of them from their own inner experience.

Our understanding and assessment of the world around us is mediated socially by the people and things we come into direct, bodily contact with. The language we speak we learn from those who speak to us, and we speak (extraordinarily precisely) with their cadences and their accent. Our experience of social power is transmitted by those with whom we have daily contact – first families, then educators, then employers. On the whole, the nearer people and things are to us the more significance we are likely to accord to their effect upon us (inevitably, for example, children experience their parents as enormously powerful). At the same time we are of course surrounded by a complex apparatus conveying information and controlling meaning; the extent to which we are able to gain a critical purchase on this apparatus will determine our understanding of our world. In all these spheres we are encircled by an horizon beyond which the world is a mystery.

From the perspective of time also we occupy a life-span which gives us a sense of the 'length' of history. The elderly live in an era which, for their grandchildren already beyond the reach of fashion, becomes a realm merely of nostalgia. The Norman Conquest seems to most of us in Britain (who know about it at all) to belong deep in the mists of the past – and yet there are still families living on estates seized then, and it takes only 13 seventy-year-olds, living back-to-back, to get there.

We live, then, at the centre of a world of 'proximal space-time'.

This world is deeply, perhaps even by now indelibly, established in modern culture. Only rarely from within our social and cultural institutions - as rarely, for example, in literature as in the law - is there a glimmer of acknowledgement that we are not, at least ideally, the originators of our own conduct and masters of our own fate. The whole tendency of Western ways of thought has been increasingly to see the individual as autonomous.

Just as it was difficult for mediaeval men and women to shake off the conviction – so powerfully endorsed by their own senses – that the earth was at the centre of the universe, so does it appear self-evident to us that it is our experience as individuals embodied in time and space which yields us our most reliable knowledge of how we and others tick. It is my belief that we are as profoundly misled by the perspective from self-as-centre as our ancestors were by their geocentric view of the universe¹. I hope in the rest of these pages to show in more detail how, and with what consequences, we fall into error in our understanding of ourselves. Before that I want to sketch the basics of a possible alternative view.

An alternative perspective

Global society constitutes a system of inexpressible complexity. It is like a huge central nervous system in which 'social neurons' (i.e. people) interact with each other via an infinity of interconnecting and overlapping subsystems. The fundamental dynamic of the system is *power*, that is the ability of a social group or individual to influence

others in accordance with its/his/her interests. *Interest* is thus the principal, and most effective, means through which power is transmitted.

Here, already, is the starkest possible contrast with our conventional psychology: what animates us is not rational appraisal and considered choice of action, but the push and pull of social power as it manipulates our interest. It is not argument and demonstration of truth which move us to action but the impress of influences of which we may be entirely unaware.

Reason, then, is a tool of power, not a power in itself. Just like moral right, rational right is not *of itself* compelling and, when it is in nobody's interest to regard it, will be disregarded. Those who - like [Thomas Paine](#) for example - seem successful advocates of Reason in its purest form, may fail even themselves to see that it is in fact not reason alone that makes their words persuasive, but the causes (interests) to which reason becomes attached. No doubt *Mein Kampf* was as persuasive to those already sold on its premises as *The Rights of Man* was to 18th century revolutionaries in America and France. This does not mean, to those who value reason, that Paine's writing is not worth infinitely more than Hitler's; it means simply, and sadly, that Reason alone is impotent. What really matters is power itself.

In her mordantly compelling Lugano Report², Susan George vividly draws attention to the inadequacy of rational argument as a means of influencing people. In starting to consider alternatives to the potentially disastrous practices of global capitalism, she writes:-

This section has to start on a personal note because frankly, power relations being what they are, I feel at once moralistic and silly proposing alternatives. More times than I care to count I have attended events ending with a rousing declaration about what 'should' or 'must' occur. So many well-meaning efforts so totally neglect the crucial dimension of power that I try to avoid them now unless I think I can introduce an element of realism that might otherwise be absent.

...[B]ecause I am constantly being asked 'what to do', I begin with some negative suggestions. The first is not to be trapped by the 'should', the 'must' and the 'forehead-slapping school'. Assuming that any change, because it would contribute to justice, equity and peace, need only to be explained to be adopted is the saddest and most irritating kind of naivety. Many good, otherwise intelligent people seem to believe that once powerful individuals and institutions have actually *understood* the gravity of the crisis (any crisis) and the urgent need for its remedy, they will smack their brows, admit they have been wrong all along and, in a flash of revelation, instantly redirect their behaviour by 180 degrees.

While ignorance and stupidity must be given their due, most things come out the way they do because the powerful want them to come out that way.

Power is generated within and through social institutions. The institutions of power operate independently of particular individuals and at varying distances from them, affecting them via almost unimaginably complex lines of influence that travel *through* individuals as well as through other institutions. A highly simplified diagram (from *The Origins of Unhappiness*³) suggests the basic structure through which power operates: -

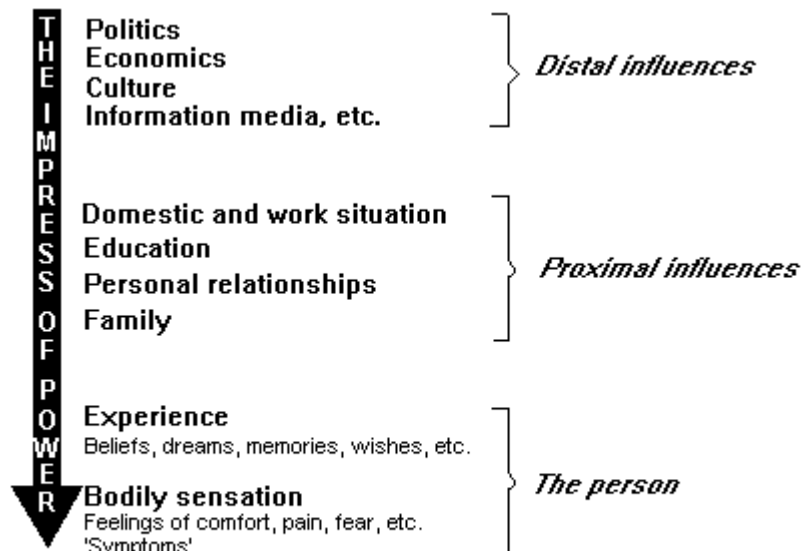


Fig 1. The impress of power

The further away from the individual person a particular social institution is, the more powerful it is likely to be and the more individuals it will affect. For example, the machinery of global capitalism has enormous effects on vast numbers of people in the world who are themselves in no position to be able to see into its operation. Fig. 2 attempts to give an impression of the pervasiveness of distal influence. Individual citizens have virtually no way of resisting the powers which bear down upon them - their only hope is to act in solidarity with others.

Apparently paradoxically, the nearer to the (average) individual an institution is, the *less* its total power is likely to be, though, owing to the distortion of his or her perspective, it will be *experienced* by that individual as *more* powerful. For example, as might be the case with employers, we tend in every day life to attribute considerable power to those whose 'decisions' most nearly affect us. However, it is rarely, if ever, that an employer 'makes a decision' in the sense of spontaneously exercising free will over us; it is far more likely to be the case that the employer's 'decisions' are conditioned by economic events which operate at such a distance from us (as well as the employer) that we cannot even discern their basic properties.

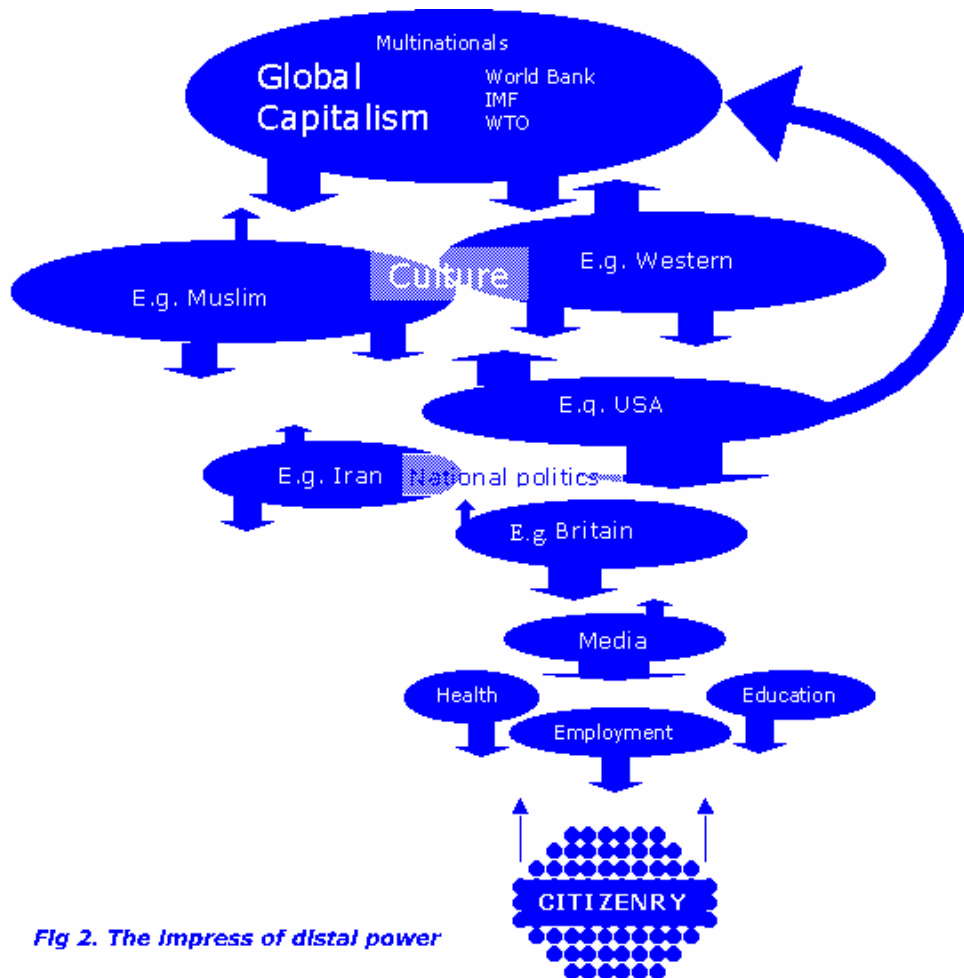


Fig 2. The Impress of distal power

Each of us is thus surrounded by a spatio-temporal 'power horizon' beyond which it is impossible to 'see'. The radius of this horizon will of course differ between individuals according to the availability to them of power. In a general sense, the better educated and well connected will have 'longer' power horizons compared to less advantaged people. Despite obvious benefits of class, however, the majority of us probably find ourselves in boats more similar than different - hence the ability of higher-order power to manipulate entire populations in terms of their understanding of how the world works.

A number of interesting consequences follow from the notion of 'power horizon'. One is the new meaning it gives to the concept of the 'Unconscious'. Unconsciousness ceases to be, as it is in Freudian theory, a property of individuals, and becomes an external, social phenomenon: we are unconscious of what we cannot know or have been prevented from knowing. At the most proximal level, parents may conceal aspects of the(ir) world from children, or exercise their power to forbid access to activities or information they deem unsuitable for their children, or indeed threatening to themselves. At more distal levels, we are nearly all unconscious of the origin and manner of transmission of powers which affect our lives in all kinds of crucial and intimate ways, not because of our own stupidity or wilfulness, but because they lie beyond the zone our gaze can penetrate.

A further consequence of our limited power horizons is, as already implied, the opportunities which are opened up for the more or less deliberate exploitation of our perspective. The globalization of the 'free market' is one obvious area where the ruthless malpractices of Business can be shifted beyond the horizon of those most able to object. Opposition to abuses of power in 'developed' democracies can be dealt with by media manipulation and appeasement while the most brutal exploitation of labour, etc., is shifted to places likely neither to fall readily under the eye nor to engage the feelings of the general public. What goes on in Burma, Brazil, Indonesia or Singapore is, for example, relatively easily maintained as a matter of indifference to the vast majority of voters in Britain. (It is true, of course, that readers of the broadsheets - often now sneeringly referred to as 'high-minded' - and viewers of television's intellectual safety-valves, Channel 4 and BBC2, may be to some extent apprised of what goes on further afield. But, as one BBC political commentator elegantly put it 'the trouble is, it's a tabloid world' in which it matters little what goes into high minds.)

It is also worth noting how the limited reach of our personal memories through time hugely facilitates the recycling of fashion and the maintenance of obsolescence, the disruption of on-going organized resistance (e.g. the demise of unionism, whose ideological origins are by now totally obscure to most people), and the ability to veil in a fog of oblivion the savage iniquities upon which much of our social structure is founded (the manner in which those who robbed and murdered their way to property and wealth have managed since to clothe themselves in the regalia of honour, virtue and distinction, is a matter for unceasing wonder).

The extent to which an individual can be said to 'have' power will depend upon the *availability* to him or her of power within the system, i.e. how much power is transmitted *through* him or her from outside sources. (I have tried to outline out what this model signifies for the experience of psychological distress in [Fundamentals of an Environmental Approach to Distress](#).) Fig. 1 gives the impression that power flows only in one direction - from the more to the less powerful. This is of course somewhat misleading: it is possible both for proximal to influence distal institutions and for individuals to act back onto their environment. It is however the case that the flow of influence in this 'reverse' direction is strictly limited in scope and distance.

An individual can in this way be defined as *an embodied locus in social space through which power flows*. People are thus held in place within the social environment by the influences which structure it, and their freedom to change position or influence people and events is strictly limited by the availability of power within the sub-systems in which they are located. In fact, *no* significant amount power is available to the individual beyond that which is afforded by the social environment.

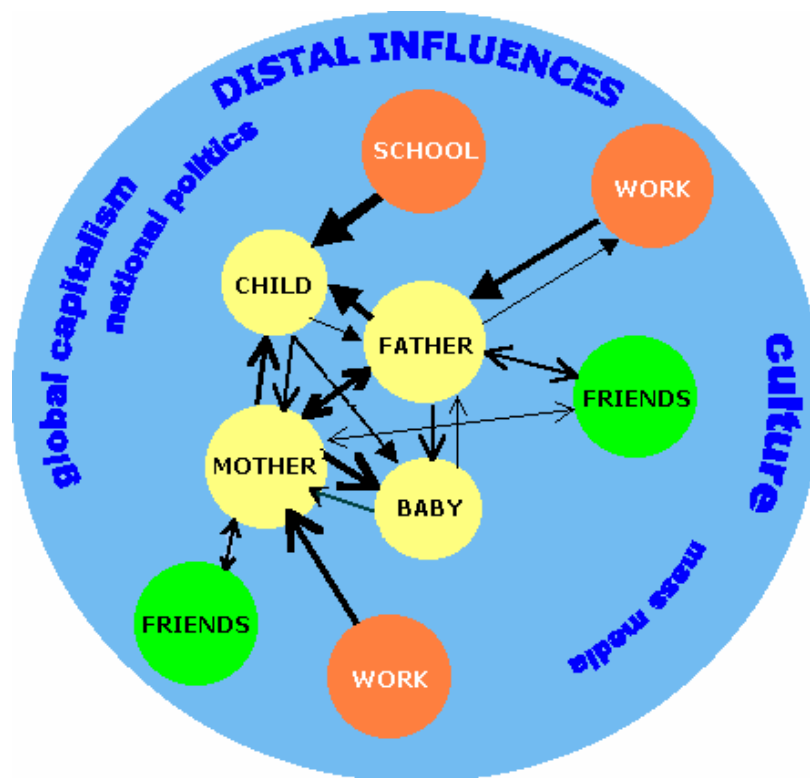


Fig 3. Influences in social space

Some of the complexity of social space is conveyed in fig. 3. A (rather stereotypically conceived!) family floats in social space, the direction of

influence between its members and some proximal systems shown by the arrows and its relative strength by their thickness. Rather as if each of the smaller spheres were like a neuron or system of neurons in a nervous system, the 'electrical impulse' of conduction is power and the 'neurotransmitter' is interest. But the diagram leaves out infinitely more than it can illumine. Quite apart from the different ways in which power can engage or coerce interest, it is impossible to convey the way it flows *through* the system. Power does not originate within the individuals, nor within the institutions shown (e.g. work, school), but is generated much more distally within and between socio-economic and cultural systems whose all-pervasive influence defies intricate analysis⁴.

By defining the individual as a locus in social space without any significant intrinsic power of his or her own, I suspect I will be felt by many to be making a travesty of our idea of what it is to be human, and to be attempting wantonly to destroy precious notions of freedom and dignity.

I do acknowledge that the project I am engaged in is in some ways reductive, but I would also claim that it is a reductionism with a difference. Scientific programmes in psychology in the past have, knowingly or not, always sought to place the scientist him or herself beyond the reductive notions applied to the object of study (i.e., people). It was for the behaviourist to discover and apply the 'laws of behaviour' and for the rest of humanity to be predicted and controlled by them. Psychoanalysis, in pronouncing judgement on the contents of our 'unconscious minds', takes up its 'scientific' position with insupportable arrogance.

What I am proposing is rather different: a set of concepts that take account of and to an extent explain the anomalies and difficulties of our conventional psychology but that also accommodate and elaborate rather than undermine our sense of ourselves as social agents. I am, it is true, actively seeking disillusion, but from illusions which in fact serve to enslave rather than sustain us.

In the following page I will try to clarify some of the issues in a little more detail.

1. This is of course not a view which I have simply invented for myself out of nowhere. An excellent academic account of the social origin of self may be found in Ian Burkitt's *Social Selves*. Sage, 1991.
2. George, Susan. 1999. *The Lugano Report*. Pluto Press.
3. Smail, David. 1999. *The Origins of Unhappiness*. Constable.
4. For a website packed with information about the scientific understanding of complex systems, try <http://www.calresco.org/>

3

The Experience of Self

I do not believe that the best route to understanding what we mean by the 'self' is through introspection. The 'discoveries' that can be made through attending carefully, even sceptically, to one's own psychological processes tell us very little about what it is to be human (though they may tell us a great deal about what it's *like* to be human). Several philosophers – some of them extremely influential – have fallen to the temptation to draw sweeping conclusions about the nature of the self from their closeted ruminations over what went on inside them (*cogito ergo sum*, etc.), with consequences that have been profoundly misleading.

As I have already suggested, the view from the self-as-centre is subject to several kinds of limitation and distortion in both time and space. The trouble is, it is a perspective that is hard to challenge because it is so compelling and appeals so readily to the prejudices we all tend to share as the result of our singular embodiment.

For when we look inside ourselves, we all tend to 'discover' the same kinds of phenomena: feelings, thoughts, perceptions, intentions. From these we are almost bound to conclude that, as individuals, we harbour systems of sensation, emotion, cognition and will which, in their various combinations, will be sufficient to explain our 'behaviour'.

Traditional approaches to psychotherapy have done nothing to diminish this picture – and in fact a great deal to strengthen it. And yet it is from the experience of trying to help people in distress that the inadequacy of the conventional approach has been borne in on me. It is not that conventional psychotherapy does not investigate and illumine the reasons for someone's distress often quite convincingly; indeed it is the great privilege of being able to talk to people at length, and without the usual kinds of threat which result in defensive and deceiving communication, which makes psychotherapy *as a situation* a most revealing medium of research. It is, rather, the widespread and well documented inability of therapy to put right the troubles it uncovers that points us away from our received wisdom about what makes people tick.

For what becomes painfully obvious as people struggle with their distress is that the simple biological and psychological resources with which they came into the world are almost entirely incapable of making any significant difference to their predicament. It is not, furthermore, just that their troubles are due to environmental causes beyond their control (though it is extraordinary that this glaringly obvious circumstance is so often ignored by conventional therapies) but that the very constitution of their 'selves' is social rather than individual. A great part of what 'I' am lies outside and beyond 'me', and is therefore not amenable to the operation of my 'will'.

Our bodies impart to us an overwhelming impression of 'inside' because, of course, everything we experience and do is mediated by the biological equipment which goes to make up our individual existence, and of which only we ourselves are directly aware. And yet the *causes* of what we experience and do are equally overwhelmingly *outside* ourselves. Not only are all the abilities we have – from language to the most trivial (or sophisticated) social skill – acquired from outside, but their effective performance depends a) upon our having *available to us* the *power* to act, and b) upon there being a social context to receive our actions and render them intelligible. Almost everything that I experience as part of 'me' is dependent for its acquisition, meaning and performance on *us*.

I am at least as much a social as a biological construction.

What might this mean for our conventional psychological understandings?

Feelings

More than anything else it is our singular embodiment which makes individuals of us. Although we share our physical construction, in all essentials, with every other member of the species, each of us is encapsulated in a skin which marks us off from the rest, and only we know for sure what is going on inside that skin (or so it seems). And what tells us what is going on is our feelings.

Even here, of course, we depend in all sorts of ways on the social context in order to recognize and make sense of our feelings, and their meaning and communication rely utterly on the mysterious faculties of sympathy and empathy, without which human relationship and interaction would be impossible. When we cease to resonate in sympathy with someone else's pain, when, for whatever reason, we fail utterly to make the intuitive leap which places us empathetically in someone else's shoes, we become frighteningly diminished as human beings. The genocidal mob lives on the lowest moral plane imaginable.

Our singular embodiment places a kind of paradox at the very centre of our existence. On the one hand, feelings, and our unique awareness of them, are where our individual lives are lived. On the other, it is experience of our feelings which forms the very basis of the possibility of putting ourselves in the place of 'the other'. It is the experience of pain and pleasure (and anxiety and dread, anticipation, excitement and joy, and so on...) which makes my life important to me, which shapes and defines my mortality. But it is also the recognition that I share these feelings with all those others who are built the same way that extends the meaning of my existence beyond myself and makes me first and foremost a *moral* creature.

It is all too easy to get derailed from our moral life as social beings into the anxiety-driven existence of one of Margaret Thatcher's 'individuals', fixedly preoccupied with *their own* bodily sensations of pain and pleasure, lack and satisfaction. Modern consumerism encourages the belief that this is the 'normal' way to be. Insofar as it succeeds, it will destroy not only society, but life itself.

I hope it is apparent that by making our feelings, the sensations of our singular embodiment, the basis of our moral and social

existence I am in no way trying to detract from their importance to us as individuals. I am not, for example, suggesting that we should submerge our personal interest in some abstract notion of the greater good, that we sacrifice the felt present for a notional future. What I am trying to say is that it is our awareness of (most importantly) our own pain which puts before us the pain of others and which behoves us, with them, to make a better (less painful) world. It is precisely *because* feelings are where life is lived that we should strive to construct societies that make life tolerable for all, not just some of us.

It is our feelings – the sense conveyed to us of our relations with the world around us – which, so to speak, hook us into the networks of interest by means of which power is conducted. At the most primitive level, we are attracted and repelled in various degrees by the sensations which our dealings with the world give rise to, and it is through this process that we learn what appears to be in our interest, and what not.

The essential crudeness of this process is of course quickly overlaid by the almost infinite variety of refinements which a social system consisting of creatures as complex as ourselves will bring forth. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault¹ sets out a brilliant analysis of the way in which European powers have learned over the past few centuries to eschew control of the citizenry by violence and terror in favour of the much more subtle (and effective) use of a kind of discipline (through examination, observation and record-keeping) which eventually becomes internalized by individuals themselves. Christopher Lasch makes similar points in his analysis of the 'tutelary complex'² that turns our attention inward in a kind of anxious self-monitoring, keeping us perpetually comparing our 'selves' with others.

Discipline and Seduction

The solicitations of seduction have not replaced, but exist alongside a technology of discipline which still broadly controls the functioning of the societal apparatus. Indeed there is often a curious, contradictory fusion of the two which leaves many of us in a state of anxious bewilderment.

The principal means of discipline is the threat to livelihood. Endless, often contrived change, authoritarian hierarchies of 'management', the control of potential sources of social critique (contractual gagging, punishment of 'whistle-blowers', etc.), all exist against a pervasive background of job insecurity. Lay-offs, redundancies, pay cuts, people being forced to apply for their own jobs: the imminence of personal catastrophe has become a leading feature of daily living.

The harsher the reality of the world imposed on people, the more blandly seductive the concepts with which we are induced to frame our experience. 'Enjoyment' becomes the key, publicly endorsed criterion of a worthwhile life, behind which, however, reigns a terror of insecurity. An almost hysterical mediatized incitement to self-indulgence runs alongside a pitiless dismantlement of the social support systems of the poor, weak and disadvantaged; the public world is progressively impoverished while the private imagination is fed with ever more 'exciting' promises of sensual enrichment.

High capitalist consumerism goes one stage further (though not more subtle): rather than playing on the pains and anxieties which punishment and discipline arouse, the individual becomes manipulable through the provision of opportunities for untrammelled *pleasure*. What one might call the deregulation of addictive self-indulgence that has taken place in recent years appeals directly to the most basic bodily sensations of pleasure (pornographic sex, drugs, artificially enhanced foods, etc.). This, of course, engages the individual's interests in the furtherance of a system which, in the longer (economic) term, benefits only a very small proportion of the population.

There is little reason to suppose that power cannot be infinitely resourceful in inventing ways of engaging people's interests through the manipulation of their feelings, but there is of course far more to this process than the direct stimulation of pleasure and pain. The control of *meaning* (ideological power) forms an immense part of the apparatus of social control, and, to be in a position to analyze some of its procedures and effects (which will be the subject of later pages), we need to consider some further aspects of the composition of 'selves'.

The role of commentary

A great part of what we take to be characteristically human achievements – in particular thinking and willing – is intimately bound up with our ability to use language.

Our propensity for reflecting about ourselves, for weighing and assessing the evidence of our senses, for comparing, anticipating and judging, all depend on our learning to use words. The use of language permits us to extend our society, materially and conceptually, illimitably further than any other group of animals could conceivably achieve, and indeed it is essentially our linguistic ability which defines our intelligence. In our everyday sense of ourselves, however, we often overlook the extent to which what we take to be individual, interior aspects of our personal 'psychology' are in fact extremely fallible social constructions, culturally acquired via the medium of language.

For what we take to be *causal* process of thought, decision and will are frequently little more than a kind of running commentary that accompanies our actions. As we grow up we learn to attach words to our activities that, if we're not almost superhumanly attentive, come in our understanding to replace the activities themselves. An awareness that we are pushed and pulled by, quite literally, the force of circumstances gives way (if indeed it was ever perceptibly developed) to a conviction that our commentary on these events actually gives rise to them. As the Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vigotsky argued so powerfully³, the child's thought is not somehow simply internally generated, but is acquired from the social context. Thinking is self-talk which has become silent.

Many of the characteristics that we tend to regard as entirely 'psychological' are acquired in exactly the same way as thought and language - that is to say, from outside. The most significant case in

point is probably 'self-confidence', the crumbling of which is so often at the root of the kind of personal distress which can be 'diagnosed' by the experts as 'neurotic'.

Confidence in themselves is acquired by children as they grow up through the confidence powerful others place in them. Just as children learn to think by hearing what others say to and about them, so they learn to assess themselves according to how they are actually treated. What feels like an entirely internal faculty, a kind of moral property which ought to be under the individual's personal control, is thus a 'wired-in' characteristic which can no more be changed at will than can the language we speak.

Some approaches to therapy recognize this at least implicitly when they accord a crucial role to the 'therapeutic relationship' itself in, for example, instilling confidence in the patient through the therapist's 'unconditional positive regard'. Though there is doubtless some truth in the idea of the 'corrective emotional experience', the therapist's role in his or her patients' lives is (even in the bizarre practice of 're-parenting') far less powerful than the role of actual parents. Therapeutic influence of this kind typically lasts no longer than the therapy itself.

'Motives'

In psychotherapy and counselling as much as or perhaps even more than in everyday life, we take it as of the first importance to establish what we see as the *interior validity* of people's utterances, acts and intentions. We feel a strong need, that is, to establish the purity or otherwise of their 'motives'.

In therapy, for example, the concept of 'insight' is crucial: in order to be able to act in accordance with therapeutic prescription, it is felt, the individual must be able to *see into* the internal processes which cause resistance or compliance, for it is these which provide the motivation for his or her overt conduct. Again, some humanistic psychologies, borrowing from existentialism, lay great emphasis on 'authenticity' as a prerequisite for morally sound and 'healthy' conduct: there needs to be, that is to say, a kind of harmony between inner intentions and the outer expression of them.

In everyday social life the transparency and sincerity of what others say and do is considered an important factor in establishing their trustworthiness - to the extent that in the sphere of public life, politicians (and the media circuses that attend them) will place more importance on, for example, the perceived 'sincerity' of their utterances than on the actual policies they advocate and institute.

In these instances we are again, I believe, confusing *commentary* with the existence of an interior 'psychological' world which, we feel, needs to be accessed therapeutically and inspected morally if we are to remain healthy, adjusted and properly disciplined citizens.

There is, however, no such interior moral space, and in my view the concepts which are thought to arise from it can be better accounted for by considering the relations between, on the one hand,

what we tell ourselves (i.e. what I have called 'commentary'), and, on the other, what we do, what we feel, what we tell others, and what can be established objectively. The following table attempts to clarify this view: -

		<i>accords with:-</i>				
		my actions	what I feel	my account to others	the best available account	<i>Result</i>
<i>My commentary</i>					YES	Insight
			YES	YES		Sincerity
		YES	YES			Authenticity
		YES		NO		Deception
		NO	NO			Self-deception

If, therefore, my commentary - what I tell myself - accords with what can be objectively established (what I have called the 'best available account'), I can be said to have insight. If my commentary accords with what I feel and with what I tell others, I can be said to be sincere. And so on.

Mystifications of Interiority

Much of what psychoanalysis takes to indicate a realm of 'unconscious motivation', and, more importantly perhaps, many of the ways in which we deceive ourselves and cause others pain by referring to pure motives for bad actions, can be demystified by the use of the kind of conceptual schema outlined here.

Take for example the parent who deserts his or her family. The harassed father, say, who takes off in early middle age with his secretary may have few qualms about his wife's predicament because he has come to loathe her, but he will be able to overlook the devastation his children feel at being left (not so different from, indeed perhaps much more intense than hers) by telling himself he 'still loves' them. 'Love', from his perspective, is an internal, somehow self-validating state expected to sustain his children in their loss. For them, however, 'love' is their experience of his embodied presence and support, the withdrawal of which inevitably indicates love's absence. What he tells himself accords neither with his actions nor, almost certainly, with what he feels (most likely an all-consuming - and sadly all-too-temporary - passion for his secretary).

I hope it is clear that this is not meant as a moralistic injunction against divorce. Life is often almost unbearably difficult. But fooling each other and being ourselves fooled about the difficulties only serves, in my view, to compound them.

I do not want to claim that this schema is absolutely accurate or logically watertight - it is intended more as a model - but it does do away with the necessity for postulating complex and ultimately mysterious internal moral and psychological entities. In banishing a literally understood interior space, it reinstates the importance of the external world we all occupy. It downgrades psychology and upgrades sociality. Perhaps the most important effect of this is to shift our judgement of the validity or otherwise of what people say and do from unanalysable, supposedly interior moral impulses to an essentially exterior, social world of language and action. A world which is through and through permeable to the operations of power and understandable only in relation to them.

I do not mean to suggest by any of what I have said so far that the embodied individual is bereft of agency in any sense; what I do want to say is that what we take to be the individual, personal processes through which we understand and shape our worlds tend to be inflated by a sense of personal *autonomy* which is very largely illusory.

'Cognitions'

Much of what we take to be 'cognitive processes' consists in one form or another of commentary, or self-talk. Cognitive psychologists – especially the less sophisticated ones - often write as if decision-making processes, attitudes, beliefs and so on are independent, essentially rational 'schemata' existing somehow as causal agents in people's brains, and that they can in principle be isolated and accessed (by, say, a 'cognitive therapist') and, where necessary, altered to give more satisfactory behavioural outcomes. Much of the procedure of identifying and altering such 'cognitions' takes place through the medium of language. In this way, it is felt that, at least in principle, an individual can tell you what, for instance, his or her 'attitudes' are (or at least that they can be inferred from his or her account), and that they can be altered through rational discussion. The most vociferous – and simple-minded - proponent of this kind of approach in the therapeutic world in recent times has been Albert Ellis, whose brain-child, 'Rational-Emotive Therapy', is widely practised.⁴

However, rather than being behaviour-causing schemata, localizable inside people's heads and describable by them, 'cognitions' of this kind can only be understood as social constructions, distributed throughout a network which extends far beyond the individual who appears to host them. What we so often take to be an 'attitude', for example, is little more than the commentary individuals give to account to themselves (and/or others) for the way they conduct themselves in a particular circumstance. People do, of course, behave *characteristically*, but they do so for reasons which are far more complex than simple cognitivism allows.

People may or may not be aware of the ways in which their interests are 'hooked' by powerful influences in social space-time, but in almost all circumstances they will be ready to offer an account of what they are doing and why, and indeed to maintain a commentary to themselves on the significance of their actions. The accuracy of any

such commentary – whether delivered by the individual him- or herself or by an independent observer – will depend upon the extent to which the social causation of the behaviour in question is transparent. And, given the complexity of social influence, very often it will not be. As we shall see later, the illusion that the individual in some sense owns, hosts or is responsible for conduct whose origins are in fact largely social is one which is frequently ideologically exploited by power as a means of obscuring its own machinations.

The illusion that the individual is the sole originator of his or her conduct is of course nowhere more compelling than to the individual him- or herself, and it is as much as anything the conviction with which people are ready to account (through commentary) for their conduct which gives rise to the whole notion of 'cognitions'. For the most part, though, all I am aware of when I perform some action or other is the bodily processes which take place in me as I do so. I will probably have long forgotten that the names I give to these processes ('I wanted to', 'I thought that', 'I intended to', 'I meant to', 'I decided to', etc., etc.), rather than describing some self-evident, causal, internal rationality, were acquired originally from the often tentative and puzzled efforts of others trying to read the significance of my infantile adjustments to a world getting to grips with me.

Commentary consists largely of a series of guesses about the meaning of my actions based for the most part on very scant evidence, but, because of the extremely limited perspective from the self-as-centre, it *seems* to the individual involved a fairly comprehensive account of his or her (embodied) experience.

The notion of 'will' is susceptible to very much the same kind of analysis.

'Will power'

I have tried before to challenge the notion of 'will power' in my writings (in particular [The Origins of Unhappiness](#) and [How to Survive Without Psychotherapy](#) with, as far as I can tell, results that demonstrate mainly how reluctant people are to abandon it. Let me first place the argument in context.

In saying that there is *no such thing* as 'will power', I am not suggesting that as individuals we are likely to find ourselves reluctantly compelled to act against our wishes by some inexorable alien force, and certainly not by a force of this kind which could in principle be understood and manipulated by some superior breed of scientific social engineers. This is the (*Brave New World*, *Clockwork Orange*) nightmare of those who take seriously the preposterous ambitions of scientific psychologies such as behaviourism. Nor am I saying that the non-existence of will power furnishes us with a kind of permanent excuse for immoral or illegal conduct.

In essence I am making quite a limited and modest claim: that there is *no internal, moral faculty innately resident inside human beings which can be called upon at times of crisis to deliver them from difficult or unwanted situations*.

This is not the same as saying that there is no such thing as 'will', nor that we cannot speak legitimately of 'free will'. Will is the

availability of power to an individual to direct socially acquired influence back into the environment. How 'free' the will is depends upon the *extent* of powers available to the individual in social space-time.

For everyday purposes, of course, there can be no sensible objection to people talking about 'will power'. It's a useful, uncomplicated way of referring to the extent to which people can reasonably be expected to exercise the powers that are normally available to them. If I get fined for parking on the yellow lines I can scarcely invoke the non-existence of will power as a defence because the option of not parking on the yellow lines would (almost certainly) have been available to me.

The quite limited claim I am making is that when there is no power available to the individual from the social environment (either now or historically), *there is no further, or ultimate source of power upon which he or she can be expected to call simply by virtue of being human*. Disputes about 'will power' and whether or not someone should have applied it then become questions of whether or not he or she *had access to* the necessary powers to act in the particular circumstances.

Here again the view from the self-as-centre is very misleading. It is almost impossible when one does something with difficulty or an unusual amount of effort not to credit oneself with special, *internal* powers. Our view of ourselves is not as of a locus in social space *through* which power flows, but as an *agent* within which power *originates*. For when we act, all we are immediately aware of is the feelings that accompany the action, and if they are stressful, or if we find ourselves acting against the normal run of our inclinations in pursuit of some 'higher' goal, it is entirely natural that we attribute to ourselves some special power which seems to have an unusual moral cachet. In these circumstances, what we tend to do is sum up a highly complex social process in a simplified commentary which we quickly and mistakenly take to have a substantive reality of its own.

Please note here again that my account is not reductive in the sense that I am banishing morality to the realm of the 'unscientific' or somehow diminishing the freedom and dignity of humankind. What I am suggesting is that many of the phenomena we take to be indicative of *individual* autonomy and virtue are in fact analysable only in terms of *social* factors.

The illusion of autonomy

Psychological attributes which are conventionally taken to be aspects of our individuality – 'cognitions', 'will', etc. – are, then, principally illusions created by what I have called 'commentary'. The processes which these words attempt to describe are in fact more accurately to be seen as being distributed within the social space-time in which the individual is embedded.

This view is one which may try the patience of even the best-disposed reader, since it appears to undermine some of our most cherished notions about the human spirit. For example, I remember one well-known and highly respected (also by me) psychologist

reacting with dismay at my suggestion that, of themselves, *ideas* cannot have power. Social solidarity, the taking up of ideas and putting them into action, may well be powerful, but an idea on its own can 'do' nothing. I can see that, on the face of it, this appears (among other things) to rob us of the hope that oppressive power may be combated by the exercise of mind.

Again, I think, we are in cases like this misled by a kind of shorthand way of thinking into a conviction that metaphors we invent (e.g., a 'powerful idea') describe real entities. In everyday conversation it is perfectly reasonable to describe an idea to which, say, millions have come to subscribe as 'powerful'. But when analytical accuracy becomes important, we need to be able to see that it is the fact that millions *have* taken it up that *makes* it powerful. If we fail to recognize this, we give up too much power to the public relations industry and the doctors of spin.

Power is a social acquisition, not an individual property. The isolated individual, uprooted from the social context, not only has no significant powers, but would be unrecognizable as a human being. The autonomy with which we credit ourselves is an illusion entirely dependent on the unreflective commentary which we generate from the self-as-centre, and which is reinforced by a host of interests to whose advantage it works.

The illusoriness of autonomy becomes apparent in everyday waking life only when the customary relation between conduct and commentary breaks down, and nowhere is such breakdown more apparent than in the course of psychotherapy. Absolutely central to the experience of psychological distress for most sufferers is the awareness that their conduct bears painfully little relationship to their idea of themselves, their wishes and their striving. Their 'cognition' and their 'will', in other words, seem incapable of affecting what they do or how they feel.

It is extraordinary that theorists of psychotherapy have been able to make so little of this state of affairs, since, more clearly than anyone, therapists are confronted by phenomena which cry out for an analysis that could reconcile their apparent contradictions. It's true, of course, that the notion of the Unconscious was elaborated precisely to account for the contrasts between people's conscious accounts of their actions (their commentaries) and the actions themselves. However, all 'the Unconscious' does is shuffle the problems from one 'part' of the individual to another: the whole apparatus of commentary gets shoved wholesale and unmodified into an imaginary interior space even less intelligible than the one it started out in. This manoeuvre serves only to make matters more mysterious. Not only is the individual's own commentary disqualified (perhaps rightly, perhaps not), but it is replaced by the commentary of the therapist who claims to be able to discern the 'unconscious' origins of conduct buried deep within.

Apart from this gambit, however, psychotherapy and counselling have done almost nothing to get to grips with the issue that stares them in the face, i.e. the disarticulation of commentary and conduct. Having (often correctly) uncovered the environmental causes of the patient's predicament, all too often 'therapy' can manage little

more than an appeal to the person's non-existent autonomy to make the necessary changes (i.e. 'accept responsibility' for them: 'only you can do it', etc., etc.).⁵

Clinical neurology offers many examples of conditions in which words become catastrophically split from actions such that patients' utterances and beliefs about what they're doing may be entirely at odds with conduct which is nevertheless in itself far from chaotic, and directed towards perfectly coherent and (to others) comprehensible ends. For example, in his book Descartes' Error (Papermac, 1996), Antonio Damasio uses evidence from the observation of brain-damaged patients to suggest that mind is the product of an organism, not just a brain, and organisms are located in and mediate environments. Brain, body and environment flow into and out of each other, and what we do is by no means simply the result of the deliberations of a rational conductor sitting somewhere inside us.

I think there are also clear enough intimations of this in ordinary experiences familiar to all of us. The foremost of these is in dreaming. The 'commentator' is often absent in dreams, and the sense commentary allows us in waking life of being somehow in charge, gives way to a mysterious world in which we are constantly surprised not only by the events which overtake us but also by our response to those events. It is often not clear which of the multiple characters in dreams is 'self' or 'other', and the identity - the feelings, intentions, even the sex - of the dreamer becomes extraordinarily fluid. The dreamer spectates rather than directs, reacts rather than commentates. What we dream is, after all, nothing but our 'own' ideas and images, and yet we are constantly surprised - sometimes even terrified - by them. In dreaming sleep the illusion of 'ownership' dies with the silencing of the commentator, and dreamers are left to observe more or less passively the ways the world flows through them.

What people who suffer psychological distress tend to become aware of is that no matter how much they want to change, no matter how hard they try, no matter what mental gymnastics they put themselves through, their experience of life stays much the same. This is so because there is no such thing as an autonomous individual. What powers we have are acquired from and distributed within our social context, some of them (the most powerful) at unreachable distances from us. The very *meaning* of our actions is not something that we can autonomously determine, but is made intelligible (or otherwise) by orders of culture (proximal as well as distal) over which we have virtually no control.

A person's character is not something he or she can choose, or indeed alter at whim, since character is held in place historically and contextually by powers and influences which are almost entirely independent of personal influence.

However outrageous some may find this 'deconstruction' of personal autonomy, I take for my evidence the experience of those

who have had to struggle with suffering. I suggest, furthermore, that sooner or later it is the experience of us all.

As long as our actions accord more or less satisfactorily with our wishes and our intentions - as long, that is to say, as commentary and conduct are articulated reasonably comfortably - we are likely to subscribe happily enough to the notion of personal autonomy. When, however, as happens not infrequently in most of our lives, we find what we are doing running counter to what we want, what we thought we believed, and possibly even our best efforts, we begin to catch a glimpse of how human conduct really comes about. Our mistake at such times is to attribute our difficulties to some kind of aberration such as 'mental disorder'. We invoke 'circumstances beyond our control' only when we want to dissociate ourselves from the results of our actions; the point, rather, is that circumstances are *always* beyond our control, but most of the time not felt (or said by us) to be.

The extent to which you can alter your 'self' will depend upon the powers available to you to alter your world. 'Therapy' may help someone to redeploy more effectively than before what powers and resources are available to him or her (which explains the oft-cited research finding that young, attractive, verbal, intelligent and successful people gain most from psychotherapy). Therapy may also provide the person with much needed support and solidarity at times of great trouble. Beyond these entirely 'ordinary' (in Peter Lomas's sense⁶) services, however, there is no magic about therapy, and no reason to justify its becoming a professionalized form of 'treatment'.

'Selves' are not individual, autonomous constructions, but form at the intersection of social influences themselves part of a vastly complex system. It is not that 'selves' cannot or do not change; it is simply that significant change comes about as the result of shifts in the pattern of social influence, not because of the individual's personal wishes or efforts.

1. Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish*. Penguin Books.

2. Lasch, Christopher. 1985. *The Minimal Self*. Picador.

3. Vigotsky, Lev. 1962. *Thought and Language*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

4. An excellent critique of the limitations of cognitivism in therapy and counselling is to be found in Robert T. Fancher, *Cultures of Healing*, New York: Freeman and Company, 1995.

5. Experimental psychologists and neuroscientists have done very much better with investigating the illusoriness of 'will-power', 'decision-making', and so on. Ingenious experiments strongly suggest, for example, that our actions are frequently under way *before* our awareness of having 'made a decision', and that the reasons we give for what we do are frequently confabulated after the event. Much of the more recent of this work is usefully and accessibly summarized by Susan Blackmore (2001), *Consciousness, The Psychologist*, **14**, 522-525.

6. Lomas, Peter. 1999. *Doing Good?* Oxford University Press.

4

The Technology of Profit

I. Make-Believe

Apart from the latent violence that constitutes the ultimate sanction of every society, the dominating power in the modern Western world is that of money. If the last four or five hundred years are anything to go by, it seems to be a fact of political economy that money accumulates in fewer and fewer hands. With only rare bumps and hiccups to hold up its 'progress' here and there, society has become increasingly unequal, and at the present time the profit motive seems not only unprecedentedly rampant, but to hold sway virtually unchallenged.

Such spectacular greed, such indifference to the poverty and suffering it inflicts between and within populations across the globe, cannot be established and maintained without a technology of social control. My concern is of course with the psychological aspects of this technology and my purpose here is to elaborate on some of the factors already identified in earlier pages as contributing to the mystification of our understanding of the way the social environment works.

The maintenance of economic power in the hands of a tiny minority of the world's population is helped by the ability of the powerful to exploit our situation as isolated individuals locked within proximal worlds.

There *is* a 'real world' where the mechanics of power are manipulated to the profit of those who have learned – whether consciously or not – how to benefit from them. Though it touches on us often enough, and that most often painfully, the way the real world works is for the most part kept beyond the horizon of our ability to discern. Our preoccupations are with things closer to home: with our own economic survival and that of those close to us, with our status within the social groups we occupy locally, with everyday personal satisfactions and discomforts, with ambitions, dreams and wishes.

A characteristic of the real world is that the beings in it (including, of course, all of us) are embodied. They live and die; some thrive, some suffer. It does not suit the interests of unequal power that the hard realities of this world are too well understood by those – the vast majority – who profit from it least. For us there needs to be – and has been – created other forms of world, not real, where we may lead disembodied lives, detached from the possibility of laying living hands on the levers of power. It is a world of make-believe, where inside is indistinguishable from outside and where we may live more easily in our dreams than in our bodies.

A parallel universe of discourse

Our capacity as human beings for imagination and story-telling makes us exquisitely vulnerable to exploitation by those who understand the properties of ideological power. Our natural propensity to credit commentary above any more detached understanding makes us more than prepared to open our minds to versions of 'reality' which are laced with some kind of appeal to our tastes, preferences or perceived interests. We are, one could say, naturally credulous

The societal apparatus which exists for the manipulation of our credulity forms an absolutely essential part of the technology of power. In everyday parlance this is, of course, for the most part what we mean by 'the media'. But the news and entertainment media are not the only determinants of the way we see and interpret the world. Education and the related institutions of intellectual endeavour and instruction are also crucial to our understanding. None of this, of course, is lost on those in whose interest it is to channel the fruits of our labours into their pockets. In recent years the encroachment of Business into areas once thought (no doubt naively) to stand apart from commercial interest has been perfectly obvious. Universities fall over themselves to replace academic standards with business ones and corporate intrusion into schooling no longer causes much surprise or indignation (George Monbiot's exposure of the extraordinary influence of corporate power on the public sphere in Britain² seems to have caused barely a ripple).

This is not necessarily part of a consciously directed process. As I have tried to show in previous pages, conscious direction is in any case largely a myth. As money-power – capital – flows into fewer and fewer hands, it creates a network of interest that maintains and accelerates the process, rather as the streams which form the rivers and the rivers themselves as they flow to the sea may carve their beds more deeply. There is indeed a degree of impersonality in the way 'the market' structures itself which side-steps the will of those who become caught up in it.

In this way the interests of significant, if relatively small, sections of society become hitched to the necessary process of disguising the fact that a system designed to maximize the profits of a few cannot at the same time run to the advantage of the many. The growth of advertising and public relations, the arrival on the political scene of a new profession of 'spin-doctor', etc., testify to the importance of controlling public perception. Apart from those summoned to the financial elite who manage the economy of the 'free market', the best and brightest of our youth are recruited to the media of make-believe. Making people believe that what is least is in fact most in their interest has become a societal task of the first importance.

Once again, the attribution of greater reality to words than to worlds is already prefigured in the almost irresistible priority we accord as we grow up to commentary. Pretty well everybody is in this way primed to attach enormous importance to language, and I would not want to suggest that this phenomenon is in any way the invention of a

cynical controlling power. It does not have to be conspiracy that rules our society (though sometimes it may be), but merely the sliding together of the interests which oil the wheels.

The Perversion of Evidence

One reason for the invincibility of crude social power is its lack of theoretical dogmatism and its pragmatic readiness to adopt a belt-and-braces strategy when it comes to securing its position (that is to say, it has no integrity). While the promotion of make-believe remains a central technique of loosening the individual consumer's grasp on the world, attention is still given to controlling the processes through which we traditionally evaluate reality. The approach to scientific evidence is a good case in point.

Though no doubt intellectually demanding in many respects, the scientific method is at its best the least coercive as well as the most accurate way we have of establishing what is - while acknowledging the limitations of these concepts - 'real' and 'true'. The effectiveness of the scientific method - fundamentally libertarian at its core - is not lost on those wishing to co-opt it in their interest; but to do so they have, of course, to pervert it.

At the crudest level there is simply the possibility of fiddling the figures - an approach widely adopted in recent years by, in particular, governments who wish to 'demonstrate' that what isn't the case, is (e.g. the ceaseless manipulation of employment and other statistics). Beyond this, however, is the far more insidious intrusion of corrupting power into the scientific community itself. Instead of 'the evidence' flowing from the unconstrained agreement of unbiased observers struggling in good faith to arrive at the most objective assessment possible, it becomes a kind of bludgeon with which to silence precisely those same observers

The social sciences are particularly vulnerable to this kind of corruption, nowhere more obviously than in the case of the evaluation of the effectiveness of psychotherapy. The interests of a booming industry combine with those of a handful of academic 'authorities' such that the latter use their status within the system to assert the effectiveness of therapy, basing their 'argument' on a tiny (and entirely questionable) handful of studies and in the face of mountains of counter-evidence which have accumulated over decades¹. 'Scientific' debate, in such circumstances, becomes an adversarial contest in which 'evidence' is treated like a kind of rhetorical football.

The outcome of this state of affairs is disastrous, for the processes whereby we arrive as a society at objective judgements about reality has become corrupted and rendered untrustworthy at its very heart. Scientific argument becomes a contest of authority based on status (a concept fundamentally inimical to the scientific method) and ordinary people understandably turn from a power-ridden perversion of 'objectivity' to essentially magical systems which, though equally if not more misleading, seem at least subjectively satisfying.

Modern philosophy, for example, has over the twentieth century come more and more to credit the importance of language and to discredit any notion not only that the world can be directly known (which certainly seems impossible), but that there is any point at all in speculating about what lies beyond language. There is nothing, says Derrida, outside the text; popular readings of Foucault privilege 'discourse' above all else; Rorty scoffs at the idea that our understanding could 'hold a mirror up to nature'.

While these philosophers have serious, possibly even valid, points to make, their standpoint also lends itself wonderfully well to a society which seeks ideologically to detach its citizens from their embodied relation to a material world. Serious intellectuals seem to be the last to anticipate the use to which their work will be put. When, for example, Jean Baudrillard writes of the 'hyperreality' created by unfettered consumerism, it is all too easy for the edge of critical irony to be lost from his text and for it to become a kind of sourcebook for marketing executives, admen and other cultural illusionists. The whole notion of 'postmodernism' becomes popularized as the cutting edge of social and intellectual progress, distracting us from the (much more comprehensible) insight that what we are involved in is in fact a recycling of high capitalist economic strategies which reached a previous peak seventy or eighty years ago.

Psychology also has played an enormous part in helping to dematerialize the Western world over the past century. Freud managed to represent the significance of our experience as not only all in the mind, but most of it in the 'unconscious mind' such that it became well and truly impossible for us to criticize our world (just to criticize our *selves*, and that only with the help of a professional psychoanalyst). Indeed, for much of psychology, what goes on in the world, what are the material relations between individual and society, is a matter of complete irrelevance. All that counts is what goes on inside the individual's head. Whatever the benefits of this view in terms of the hope it may bring to people of controlling their fate, it is an absolute godsend to those who have a less rarefied grasp of how to make the world work to their advantage. Thieves sack the mansion undisturbed while its occupants remain sunk in their dreams.

In her book *No Logo*³, [Naomi Klein](#) demonstrates how uninterested many modern corporations are in the actual material products that carry their brand. The products themselves may in fact be manufactured at rock-bottom cost by contractors located in 'export processing zones' in the developing world, with competing labels 'often produced side by side in the same factories, glued by the very same workers, stitched and soldered on the very same machines'. The 'value added', the vastly inflated costs of these objects which go to feed the corporate structure, is what is crucial, and it is spun out of nothing, pure marketing make-believe.

If, as I sometimes think it is, Psychology is the greatest intellectual confidence trick of the twentieth century, it is one whose sheer economic importance is not to be underestimated!

Effectively, then, we find ourselves cut loose in a world of words where what is true and real is a matter of what we can be persuaded to believe. Those who profit most from this state of affairs will be those best able a) to control the use of language and b) to exploit the capacity of language to introduce us to an infinity of 'realities'.

In [The Origins of Unhappiness](#) I described the way in which the conceptual frame of Business came during the nineteen-eighties to be imposed right across the cultural board. No established social practice or institution was left out: education, health, sport, leisure and travel - and of course government itself - all were flooded with the same debased and simplistic language of business and accountancy. Absolute values such as Truth and Right, features of the now discredited Enlightenment, were replaced with the crude market criteria of what pays. Nothing has changed since to impede this process.

Whoever controls language, controls thought. We now have installed at the heart of our culture a generation barely able to think outside the parameters of business. 'Reality' is described and experienced in terms of competition, cost and profit; worth is judged in terms of wealth and status. The whole conceptual and

Examination of the Business lexicon testifies to George Orwell's prescience, for largely it is a vocabulary of opposites, designed to simplify our thought such that we are no longer able to represent to ourselves the poverty of our experience. Where there is emptiness, there shall be hype.

Examples:-

Awesome	Unremarkable
Culture	Fashion; policy
Customer	Passenger; Patient
Cynic	Critic
Downsize	Sack
Enjoy	Buy, consume
Excellence	Mediocrity
Exciting	Boring
Flexible	Unstable and insecure
Icon	Fleeting media creation
Innovative	Stale, reinvented
Job-seeker	Person deprived of work
New	Old
Passion	Hobby
Passionate	Feigning interest
Quality (total)	[meaningless]
Reform	Revert or deform public into private structures
Restructure	Strip assets and sack workers
Robust	Inert, feeble
Major	Trivial
Stunning	Unremarkable
Target (tough new, setting of)	Complete executive inaction

Surveying 'the market' in the USA at the turn of the millennium, Thomas Frank provides a brilliantly caustic analysis of corporate make-believe and its attendant vocabulary: [The Big Con](#), Guardian, 6.1.01. This language is so absurd as to be almost beyond satire. For a little light relief, however, see another [Guardian contribution](#), this time by Tony Benn (23.1.02).

linguistic register of our lives has been collapsed into one dimension, and with it our capacity to experience ourselves as anything other than business successes or failures: what matters is not the contribution you make to the social world, but how much money you can make from it. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the once idealistic youth of our universities – it is commonplace, for example, to come across students of medicine who, seriously worried about the money and status attached to their proposed career, yearn instead to become management consultants. Not to have a Mercedes by the time you're thirty is to have failed in your life's project.

The philosophical subtlety that at the highest intellectual level acknowledges the *relativity* imparted by discourse to our ideas of reality is, however, by no means reflected in the 'tabloid world' we are now forced to inhabit. The reality which Business culture and ideology offers us is not presented as one alternative among several, but as 'the real world' to which all of us must shape up if we are not to end up hopelessly at the bottom of the heap.

Just occasionally the universe of discourse suffers a rude intrusion of reality which somehow catches us all out, and we are left open-mouthed, not knowing quite what to make of our situation. The story of the railway network in Britain provides an excellent example.

Despite a series of accidents, some very serious and some minor, and an unremitting history of cancellations and delays, the management of the privatized rail companies claimed to be providing a steadily improving service in which safety was their first priority. Throughout the system the experience of failure was met with evasive assurances and oddly recurring excuses (e.g. that lateness was due to a bridge having been 'struck by a motor vehicle'.) To be a passenger was like entering a virtual world in which a pretence of (thwarted) efficiency consistently blanketed the actuality of cancelled trains and late arrivals, cold waits on decaying stations and missed appointments.

Then, in October 2000, a broken rail brought an express train off the track near Hatfield, killing four people and injuring many others. Suddenly reality broke through. The safety which had before been spun as 'number one priority' now became a priority in fact. Apparently overnight, 1000 miles of track became suspect and over 200 speed restrictions were imposed. At two hours' notice the line between Glasgow and Carlyle was closed. Senior managers of Rail Track, the company mainly involved, appeared on television like penitent schoolboys caught red-handed in some embarrassing misdemeanour. In an instant, it seemed, passengers had become embodied and the railways and rolling stock re-materialized as objects in a real world.

For exposure of a similar contrast between words and action in the field of education, see [Nick Davies's article](#) on despair in the classroom, The Guardian, 2.11.00.

It is therefore recognized and expected that the person-in-the-street will assume a fairly direct linkage between descriptions of the world and the world itself. What ordinary people think, what they conceive of as the truth, is of the utmost importance as their actions (particularly of course, their actions as consumers) are likely to be based upon it. The best, most convincing *description* of the way things are comes in this way actually to constitute how they are 'in fact'. The traditional struggle to *represent* the world in words is replaced by a struggle to *create* a world in words. The success or otherwise of this project is measured in terms of 'credibility'.

This is the universe of discourse where the spin-doctors dwell, but the world in which it places us is a strangely fragile one. For although the media and marketing technocrats vie with each other to foist upon us that 'reality' most profitable to themselves and to the influences which control them, it becomes pretty obvious that we are not talking here about what most people think of as reality, but about make-believe of differing degrees of credibility. At the heart of this whole enterprise, then, there is a contradiction: 'credibility' – what people can be persuaded to believe – is the ultimate goal of 'spin', but in the popular mind there remains an indissoluble, though inarticulate, link between what is believable and what is real or true. Credible worlds, in other words, are not the same as real ones. Business fakes a world which it sells us as the truth, but is fatally undermined by the truth that lies beyond it.

For language need not be simply the means whereby we create an infinity of relative worlds (that is to say, a snare and delusion). On the contrary, it may be used in the struggle to decode our experience of reality, to give us a sense of what is *actually* happening in the world. Precisely the point of the Business take-over of language, of the frenetic collective voice of the media, is to drown out the possibility of our articulating to ourselves the nature of the reality in which we are caught up.

The first task of any oppressive power is to strip the subjective voice, the languaged sensibility of the embodied person, of authority. If you are to be gulled by the make-believe of the public relations world, the last thing you must be permitted to credit is the evidence of your own senses (who do you think you are – an expert or something?). This is because the ability of the individual embodied subject to evaluate the evidence of his or her experience is the ultimate defence against illusion.

This is very far from saying that our subjective experience is infallible. The vulnerability of personal experience to error – i.e., of being wrongly interpreted in words – means that we need to take great care to check on its validity before we act on it in any irretrievable way (this process, in fact, constitutes the heart of scientific method). The subjective perspective needs to be evaluated *intersubjectively* (which brings it as near as possible to being objective) but there is still, ultimately, no *authority* beyond it. Furthermore, the representation to ourselves of our own experience, and the processes of checking it against the experience of others, all take place in the medium of language. The fallibility of words gives us plenty of reason for being

careful with how we use them, but no reason at all for abandoning our project of trying to understand the world.

A walk round Nottingham city centre

I haven't been here for a while. They've now unveiled the huge new structure replacing the Victorian buildings they knocked down at the very centre of the city. Idiotically, I'd been hoping it would be a bit like the new building in London or Berlin, energetic and impressive even if all about corporate power. But it's almost indescribably horrible, a total disappointment: tacky and garish. For some reason it reminds me of an inflated version of flaking 1950s structures you used to see at French Channel resorts. Over-literal, as if it's meant to look like a boat: incongruous streak of blue punctured by portholes ([picture](#)). It looks cheap, and falsely cheerful. In effect, they've wrecked the heart of the town.

The shops have slid further into barely disguised penury. Cut down on staff even further, dirtier than they used to be – there's a sense of economic desolation about. And that's reflected in the shoppers too, harassed women laden with plastic bags, at the end of their tether, yelling at their children. Young, equally harassed family men, drawn and defeated, not at work today, not at work any day. Junk food, junk clothes, junk commodities. Junked youngsters bunking off school prowling restlessly in the shabby mobile phone shops.

It feels as if we're getting nearer and nearer to the edge of a disaster. The people, the commercial structure, the very fabric of the city cannot, surely, take much more. Almost everything, almost everybody is being squeezed dry; you can hear the pips squeaking. It's all about money, the desperation for it, the panic as it siphons off out of sight, sucked up into some social stratum just not visible here.

I wonder if the other people walking round here interpret all this. Could they articulate the contrast between this reality and the 'hyperreality' of the glamorous celebrity world through which they're induced to run into debt? Do they account for their situation in terms of anything other than personal failure? Or is this just the way things are, to be lived only with resignation or in the hope of winning the lottery?

There has, over decades, been an unremitting onslaught against the art and science of interpreting one's own experience, to such an extent that many people – consciously or unconsciously – find it impossible to have an opinion without the prostheses of the media or the prescriptions of one or other of our modern doctors of meaning. The first task of any rebellion against Business dominance is to re-establish the integrity of the universe of discourse; that is to say, to return to the search for words that describe the world as accurately as possible.

II. Outside-In

In order to maximize its effectiveness, consumer capitalism, the engine of profit, needs to detach individuals from an accurate understanding of, and significant influence within, the social and material environment they occupy. The ideal unit of consumption (i.e. person), utterly vulnerable to the interests and influences of 'the market', is: -

- a) **dissociated** – unable to form solidarity with others, and hence
- b) **disempowered**
- c) **dislocated** from any reliable anchorage in the material environment from where resistance could be mounted.
- d) **disembodied** - e.g., psychologically 'freed' from the limitations which embodiment places on his or her ability to consume.

Social space-time must become so blurred, so insubstantial, that the person becomes entirely dependent, materially and psychologically, on the reality which is offered him or her through the manufactories of make-believe which we recognize collectively as 'the media'. Apart from establishing control over language, and hence what I have called 'commentary' (and so thought itself), a primary aim of economic exploitation is to collapse the distinction between inside and outside.

The necessity of bending reality to essentially commercial ends is widely evident throughout the media. The exploitation of 'virtuality' in video games, the obsession with the supernatural and fantastic in popular cinema and fiction, whatever they may say about our taste for violence and pornography, at least have the merit of being reasonably clear about where they stand (i.e. 'inside' rather than 'outside').

There is however, an altogether more subtle and disorientating fusion of fact and fiction, reality and make-believe which has in recent years increasingly infected the medium through which it might be hoped that we have readiest access to accurate distal information – television.

'Real' figures (minor government ministers, 'celebrities') make appearances as themselves in fictional dramas; public figures (e.g. the prime minister) offer 'private' revelations in chat show appearances. Nothing more than publicity-seeking perhaps. But beyond this are the endless 'fly-on-the wall' 'docu-soaps' which present a kind of dramatised banality of everyday life in which viewers may enter doctored worlds made exciting, presumably, only by the restrictiveness and impoverishment of their own reality. 'Reality' thus becomes an object of fascination for those denied a life in public. Where necessary, furthermore, reality must be deliberately distorted to conform with the 'truth' that the programme makers have decided to present. Actors are hired to play out the lucrative fantasies of 'investigative journalists' in documentaries screened as in deadly earnest (as opposed to the consciously spiced 'drama-docs'), or to pass themselves off as members of the public in revelatory talk shows.

Outside is the real world in which we are embodied and live our lives with others. Inside is the psychologically manipulable world of imagination where we can be *made to believe*, but where also, it is important to note, we host personal powers and resources which (though originating from without) can be seen as in a sense our individual 'property'. Thus, on the one hand, the potentialities of imagination may be recruited to mask the realities of our existence, while, on the other, those personal powers and resources which we might potentially be able to develop to our advantage and (in the broadest sense) enrichment must be extracted from us and sold back to us as commodities.

In this way, the *world* is turned outside-in such that, among other things, real exploitation and deprivation are represented and experienced as essentially *psychological* failures. Correspondingly, *people* are turned inside-out such that, among other things, any real (embodied) powers or abilities they may have acquired are externalized, commodified and marketed.

Making the public private

Psychology is the principal tool which has been used to privatize the public world in which actions really count. Almost by definition, the focus of psychology is on what goes on, supposedly, inside the isolated individual. The private world of beliefs, desires, disembodied thoughts and 'cognitions' becomes the arena in which we believe we have to operate in order to change our lives. This is indistinguishable from belief in magic, for it places us in an immaterial, interior world whose main contacts with external reality are *wishful* rather than *actual*. It is absolutely no accident that there has in recent years been a resurgence in frankly magical and religious systems of belief and that these have become increasingly interwoven (as in 'alternative medicine') with popular conceptions of science. What we fail to recognize is that, certainly in the psychological sphere, what we take to be 'scientific' *is* for the most part magic.

The prevention of individual citizens' participation in public space is the central strategy of a program of systematic disempowerment which leaves the resources of the material world exposed unresistingly to corporate plunder. Politics is virtually eradicated – the 'third way' announces an end to conflict of interest, and in a sense this is all too true: the only interests left are those of big business, which rules largely undisturbed by the opposition of those (the vast majority) whom it damages. As I shall elaborate when I come to consider the concept of 'responsibility', the social havoc that is wreaked by unfettered economic greed comes to be interiorized as the personal weakness and irresponsibility of those principally affected.

The struggle of ordinary people to retain the commons – lost over centuries of land enclosure – has now shifted onto psychological grounds. The individual is driven out of public space in countless, almost imperceptible steps, many of which are mystified as somehow 'person-friendly'. Note, for example, the disappearing use of surnames

in British culture. This is part of a process of 'impersonalization' in which that element that gives to *anyone* a *public* role is eradicated. The telephone sales man or woman, the functionary who fields your enquiry or complaint has no *identity* beyond the anonymous first name that goes with the parroted 'how may I help?' – not only is there no space in which they can be located and held accountable, there is nowhere for them to *signify*, to be agents in public space. This is just about the purest obliteration of the distinction between inside and outside, for just as one is robbed of public dignity, so also the bestowal of intimacy which use of the first name gives is tipped out into a world of universal indifference. To have a surname and title is now no longer accorded as of right to all, but has become a prerogative of the relatively powerful, that is those who can lay some claim to be influential in public space. The rest of us will be known only by our first names, very much as plantation slaves used to be: not as an indication of the private affection in which we are held, but as a sign of contempt for our insignificance.

For most of us, real life is experienced as a kind of frustrating barrier to admission to the 'hyperreality' held before us by the media, the heaven-on-earth where the rich and famous, the celebrities and the lottery-rich enjoy the rewards of their virtue, their talent and their luck. Where formerly people were pacified with a prospect of paradise, the modern mass consumer is mesmerized by the outside chance of admission to the real Olympus where the modern incarnations of the old gods

By happy coincidence, the very day after I write this, a scheme is announced on BBC Television News wherein a range of female celebrities, including the Prime Minister's wife, have donated cast-off clothing which may be borrowed by penurious job applicants to increase their chances of success at interview.

Rather like earthworms having slid into a cobra's skin, these poor women will presumably be thought to have had bestowed upon them for a moment a kind of hyperreal identity that will fortify them in their venture into public space.

dwell and disport themselves, sometimes indeed crossing its fortified barriers to allow us to touch or be touched by them.

Apart from the small but undying hope that good fortune may gain us entry, the most the rest of us can hope for is to live vicariously on the controlled visits allowed us by the celebs into their world. We may, for example, stand on the outside looking in, like the crowds at the crush barriers of a film premiere, and we will be drip-fed a certain degree of manufactured intimacy with them as the beautiful people confess their secrets on the talk-shows and invoke (or fall victim to) the public relations machinery that surrounds them.

We are not readily invited to go behind the scenes of this theatre in order to observe how and by whom its world is created and populated, its players cast, their masks selected. Still less are we allowed a glimpse into the real halls of power where the big deals are struck and the big money made, nor into the haunts and homes of those who make it. For the glamorous world of celebrity is the principal

vehicle of an ideology of interiority which would become rapidly called into question if the general populace got too clear a view of how things really work.

Although, of course, the ephemerality of fashion cannot be disguised, we still believe that the celebrity, the famous 'personality', somehow deserves his or her elevation by virtue of individual qualities (even if only physical beauty) which are somehow to his or her personal credit. Celebrity, in other words, is presented as personal achievement, thus making the rest of us look like - if not failures - people who have not got what it takes to make it past the boundaries of ordinary life.

However, what looks like personal 'charisma', 'star quality', etc., is on the whole the capricious gift of a publicity machine that runs on energy supplied by a far more sordid world. Though, of course, some occupants of hyperreality have been constructed on the basis of a degree of embodied talent (e.g. sporting stars), this quickly becomes inflated and exploited far beyond any reasonable assessment of its original significance or true social worth. For the most part, celebrity is the creation of a media industry built to uphold an ideology, and it is the ideology that matters, not its creatures. 'Charisma' is but the visible aspect of a power which does not originate within the individual celebrity, but is accorded him or her by the puppeteers of the media world; and it can, of course, be instantly withdrawn, the star eclipsed. (Media people know well enough their strength, as anyone who has encountered the arrogant, blasé exercise of their dominion will be able to affirm.)

I am not, of course, saying anything here which is not already well known and widely discussed. What I think we do not see so clearly, however, is the degree to which this faked world that lies beyond our actual lives really does pollute our existence. Despite its shoddiness and insubstantiality it really is a vast constituent of our environment, and inevitably flows through us such that we come to accept the premises on which it is built even if we react against some of the crudity of its expression. Not only does it serve to blunt our critical faculties, to 'dumb us down' and divert our energy inward to the satisfaction of artificially created needs, not only does it reinforce a mythology of personal worth based on the individual exercise of interior powers, but it places us within an inescapably and unremittingly painful situation where the *actuality* of our lives is constantly undermined. We are, that is to say, thrown into a state of pervasive uncertainty and insecurity over how far we are from coming up to scratch, from breaking out of the grey limbo that is our existence into the bright world the other side of the television screen.

There are other ways too in which we are induced to host as our personal failings the iniquities of the outside world.

In his masterly analysis of the effects of French colonial rule in North Africa, Frantz Fanon demonstrated how the impress of distal power can end up as hatred and strife among the oppressed groups themselves, thus apparently legitimizing conceptions of the ruled by the rulers as, for example, genetically tainted, psychologically inferior or 'mentally ill'⁴. A similar process is in my view involved in some

aspects of what has come to be known as 'political correctness', the typically Orwellian irony of which is that they are neither political nor correct.

There is of course no disputing that in modern Western society whites often oppress blacks and men often oppress women. This is bound to be the case in a social context in which people are forced to compete for scarce resources and to differentiate themselves from each other in any way which will accord them greater power, however illusory that power may be (nothing, after all, could be more pathetic than the belief that 'whiteness' confers *personal* superiority or that men are in some way to be valued more highly than women).

However, *it is a conceptual mistake of the first magnitude to attribute the causes of such oppression to internal characteristics or traits of those involved*. So long as *sexism* and *racism* are seen as personal attitudes which the individual sinner must, so to speak, identify in and root out of his or her soul, we are distracted from locating the causes of interpersonal strife in the material operation of power at more distal levels⁵. Furthermore, *solidarity* against oppressive distal power is effectively prevented from developing within the oppressed groups, who, successfully divided, are left by their rulers to squabble amongst themselves, exactly as Fanon detailed in the case of Algerians impoverished and embittered by their French colonial masters.

It is not that racist or sexist attitudes do not exist - they may indeed be features of the commentary of those who exercise or seek to exercise oppressive, possibly brutal proximal power. But that commentary is not the *cause* of the process that results in such proximal oppression and it is as futile to tackle the problem at that level as it is to try to cure 'neurosis' by tinkering with so-called 'cognitions' or 'unconscious motivation'.

This, I think, explains the otherwise puzzling success of 'political correctness' at a time when corporate power extended its influence over global society on an unprecedented scale. For this success was in fact no triumph of liberal thought or ethics, but rather the 'interiorizing', the turning outside-in of forms of domination which are real enough. The best-intentioned among us become absorbed in a kind of interior witch-hunt in which we try to track down non-existent demons within our 'inner worlds', while in the world outside the exploitation of the poor by the rich (correlating, of course, very much with black and white respectively) and the morale-sapping strife between men and women rage unabated.

Once again, we are stuck with the immaterial processes of 'psychology', unable to think beyond those aspects of commentary we take to indicate, for example, 'attitudes' or 'intentions'. The history of the twentieth century should have taught us that anyone will be racist in the appropriate set of circumstances. What is important for our understanding is an analysis of those circumstances, not an orgy of righteous accusation and agonised soul-searching.

III. Inside-Out

What makes the 'inner world' so important to us is that that is where we experience our lives. There is, of course, no 'world' there at all, but a wonderful confusion of feeling and imagination, thinking, dreaming and memory that furnishes our personal idea of what it is to be human and to be alive. It constitutes our subjectivity.

It is, I believe, a profoundly ironic paradox that modern psychology has done more than anything else to divert us from an understanding and appreciation of the subjective experience of self. Instead of a delicate, modest, tentative, respectful consideration of the unfathomably chaotic, sometimes extraordinarily beautiful, sometimes horrifically frightening, always wildly idiosyncratic interior which is to be found within each one of us, psychology has tried to unpick us with a kind of fastidious distaste that has nothing to do with love and everything to do with discipline.

At least in part because of the success of the psychological enterprise, we are as individuals largely unable to celebrate and rejoice in the experience of self, but rather, when we have to, turn our gaze inward with deep apprehension for what we may find there. What we find, certainly, is a person like no other - and that is one of the principal causes of our misery.

For psychology has imposed on our subjectivity an entirely inappropriate normativeness, a narrow set of moral and aesthetic prescriptions which turns each one of us into a kind of self-diagnosing psychiatric inquisitor, ready to infer from the recognition of each new feeling pathological deviance from an ideal we think we see embodied in everyone else.

I can think of no approach to psychological therapy which doesn't harbour at its core a humourless authoritarianism, a moralistic urge to control, that has the ultimate effect of causing infinitely more pain than it could ever conceivably hope to cure. Invested with the authority our social institutions accord it, psychology pokes its fingers into our souls and, pronouncing disapprovingly on what it thinks it reveals, spreads dismay and despondency among the populace.

For you don't have to have been near a psychologist or psychiatrist to have been infected with the cultural dread of being different. Far from having supported the individual's sense of subjectivity, psychology has assisted in throwing it into question to the point that the principal concern of many of us is to hide from others what we fear to be inside ourselves.

What we *think* should be inside ourselves seems to be a kind of anodyne pastiche of the model of humanity fed us by the advertising industry, or possibly the kind of cold, confident *Übermensch* of the TV fantasy hero or heroine - calculated, controlled, super-competent in money, war and sex.

In contrast to this, however, what resides within is the tangle of sensitivity and eccentricity that truly reflects our individuality. It couldn't really be otherwise: we *are* all different because we have come from different places at different times with different people. No two people have the same experience of the world. It is impossible to

overestimate the importance of this diversity; instead of attempting to discipline our subjective individuality, to iron out interior differences in accordance with a regulatory ideal of 'normality', we should appreciate this inner chaos as reflecting the raw material of our *significance* as human beings.

However, the material of subjectivity is indeed raw, and its significance is lost without a public world that can structure it and give it expression. For our private experience to mean anything, for its value to be realized, it has to be accommodated within a 'commons' - within public space - that *recognizes it as a contribution*. In order for this to happen, public space has to be sufficiently structured, sufficiently attuned to the enormously wide scale of human experience and the ways of human embodiment, to receive, make sense of and use constructively what each of us has to offer.

A life is given meaning and value not by being 'enjoyed' in private, but by being lived and appreciated in public. Even the most tortured private experience can find dignity as well as worth if there exists to receive it a convivial social world where human beings act with and for each other. This is not what happens when the overriding principle of social life is profit.

Rather than *validating* private experience, consumerist society *exploits* it. In this situation we are not able to use whatever we know of life to contribute to the well-functioning of the whole, but have such knowledge extracted from us and sold back to us in the form of commodities. Just about any kind of human activity, any form of spontaneous or creative action, can be analysed into its constituent parts and synthesized into a saleable object. Any even remotely identifiable human experience or feeling is dragged out of the most intimate recesses of the soul, grafted to consumer goods of one kind or another (if only in the form of an image) and offered back to us as something we could only hope to acquire commercially from outside.

This is psychological privatization - a kind of economy of spirit-laundering in which the advertising industry and the media appropriate those interior constituents of ourselves of which (not least because of a

The privilege of having been able to talk to thousands of people over the years in a setting that minimizes threat (and so the need for self-defence) means that I know one or two secrets about human beings that come in pretty handy. They are just about as close to 'psychological laws' as anything you are likely to encounter. For example: -

Absolutely everybody wants to be liked (law 1).

Everyone feels different inside (less confident, less able, etc.) from how they infer other people to feel (law 2).

Few honest and courageous people who have achieved anything of real value in life do not feel a fraud much of the time (law 3).

Acceptance of these three 'laws' alone would save an awful lot of people an awful lot of grief!

disciplinary 'psychology') we have grown deeply mistrustful, stamp upon them their commercial legitimation, and sell them back to us. We are in this way offered for our personal consumption a toxic adulteration of spiritual sustenance which had in its original form been perfectly nutritious, even if we had often been largely unaware of its role and function within us.

In an excellent article in New Internationalist⁶, Jonathan Rowe uses almost identical words and ideas to reinforce the case:-

In economics there is no concept of enough: just a chronic yearning for more, a hunger that cannot be filled. This requires that all life must be converted into a commodity for sale. The result is a relentless process of enclosure. It started centuries ago with land. Today it is encroaching upon every aspect of our individual and collective beings.

Think about the growth industries today. We buy looks from plastic surgeons, mental outlooks from pharmaceutical companies, the activity of our bodies from 'health' clubs, interaction with friends from telecommunications firms, and on and on. Security comes from police departments, insurance companies and privatized prisons. Transport comes from oil and automobile companies.

Virtually every life function and process is turning into something we have to buy. And lest anyone suspect a tired ideological shtick, let's say right here that the government is a culprit too. It turns education into schooling and community into bureaucracy – much as the market turns childhood into a petri dish of nagging.

Either way, what the economists call growth becomes a process of cannibalization. The formal economy, private and public sectors alike, takes us apart piece by piece and then sells us back to ourselves.

We must become less so that the economy can become more. Little wonder we feel drained and stressed. We become the biological counterparts of the oil wells and toxic dumps, both the raw material of the economy and the receptacles of its waste. Meanwhile, millions don't have enough to begin with.

Consumerism exploits interiority to the point that people are almost totally drained of it. Instead of our privacy being *honoured* and our individuality being *endorsed*, our innermost feelings, hopes and fears are tipped out into the open and picked over for their commercial potential. There is no secret desire, no haunting fear, no tremulous shred of anxiety, no fragment of tenderness that will not be exposed to the jaded inspection of the market, worked over and placed on the junk stall for mass consumption.

When what was inside is relentlessly exposed to public view in this way, it is robbed of all its sustaining power, and there is left within us nothing but an emptied-out husk of impulse. Unable to draw with confidence on the wealth of our private resources - a confidence born of the *faith* that it is all right to be chaotically human - we are reduced

to putting on a lifeless show of passion that has lost all personal meaning. People brought up in this culture have no endorsed experience of *inside*, but can only imitate the media stereotypes harnessed to consumption. Interiority becomes a simulacrum of commercially created image; a puzzle; a source of anxiety. What we are truly left with inside is those aspects of subjectivity in which the market has no interest: an inarticulate sense of futility, drudgery and loss.

One sees the results of all this particularly clearly in the psychological maladies of the young - maladies not of their *personal* being, but forms of *social* sickness arising out of the lack of fit between the subjective experience of embodied self on the one hand and the public vehicles available for giving them expression on the other.

Human bodies do not in fact change in accordance with media ideals (hence perhaps the increasing need for the creation of fantasy worlds in which to accommodate the demands of the latter). If the internal requirements and promptings of the body are to be understood, they need a public culture that recognizes and gives them meanings which are both common and adequate. That is to say, we need not only to be able to refer to and enact our private experiences and impulses in ways that will be recognized and understood by others, but these public recognitions and understandings need to accommodate such experiences and impulses accurately, comfortably and productively.

People brought up in the capitalist revival of the 1980s and 90s, even though - many of them - exceptionally well provided for materially and more than adequately trained in the management of commodified relationships, often received practically no education at all in what it is to be human. Their parents, preoccupied with a scramble for security in a heartless and brutally competitive economic world, were happy enough if they could provide the requisite consumer goods and otherwise leave their children's education to 'experts'.

This generation thus depended for its understanding of itself on an unprecedentedly shallow business culture that dealt almost exclusively in commercial stereotypes and images. Emotional relationships were more likely to be formed with games consoles, computers and fantasy role-play figures than with people who were able to acknowledge, explain and interpret what goes on *inside* human beings with any degree of honesty.

Quite apart from being officially devoid of compassion and altruism, the 'Thatcherist' culture ignores any kind of human emotion or impulse that falls outside the business register. That is to say, anything *inside* that cannot be turned *outside* as a commodity, that cannot be hooked into a disciplinary economic anxiety; anything that is vague, complex, tender, or that binds people in solidarity rather than pitting them against each other in competition - anything like that is simply left in an incoherent, inexpressible, mysterious lump within, like a large indigestible meal that the subject cannot remember having consumed.

The result of this is to be seen as a new form of 'anxiety' in the young. The typical 'case' is a young man (men are, I suspect,

marginally more vulnerable than women) who has perhaps been quite successful at school, is socially quite competent and well integrated (though friendships may be more superficial than profound), doing pretty well in his job or course of study, yet assailed periodically by anxiety that, though experienced as overwhelming, displays little outward sign of distress. What usually underlies this form of anxiety seem often to be almost banal fears, some of which are in fact the lot of all but the most fortunate human beings and some simply unavoidable emotional reactions which at other times might even have been regarded as a blessing.

For example, self-consciousness in publicly conspicuous situations, discomfort at public speaking, etc., may be experienced as something totally alien and incomprehensible, such that the individual cannot make a connexion between the situation and his feelings: over and over again he may put himself into such situations in the expectation that there should be 'no problems', only to find yet again that problems there are indeed. Confusion over emotional attachments can lead to similar uncomprehending panic: falling in love seems to be something for which many young men possess no framework of understanding.

The psychologist's job at this - and, I believe, at any other - time is not to *diagnose* the 'inner person' but to *explicate* his or her relationship with the outside world. This is to switch 'professional' attention from discipline and conformity to a libertarian concern with understanding subjective distress as a function of the personal (and ultimately, of course, wider) environment.

While this may, I suppose, be viewed as a valuable form of 'therapy', there is a far more important task, and one which reaches well beyond the mere practice of psychology. This is the task which faces all of us of rebuilding a public world that *accommodates* the human subjects who go to make it up.

Many young people these days seem not to expect to be embodied. Since the markers available to them of what is human derive mainly from advertising and the media, or from their own experience of the binary world of a mechanized virtuality, they are often not prepared for the signals they receive viscerally of what their world is doing to them. Their anxiety stems essentially from their being unable to interpret their own feelings.

One suggestion sometimes found helpful by a few such sufferers is to read nineteenth century literature - this may re-introduce a culture in which 'interiority' was not regarded as a neurotic condition and where a person could, for example, die of a broken heart.

1. This phenomenon is encountered in pure form in the volume edited (in utterly good faith but with dismaying results) by Colin Feltham: *Controversies in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, Sage Publications, 1999. For a powerful critique of the corruption of the psychology industry see [Tana Dineen's](#) *Manufacturing Victims*, Constable, 1999.

2. George Monbiot. *Captive State. The Corporate Takeover of Britain*. Macmillan, 2000.
3. Naomi Klein. *No Logo*. Flamingo, 2001.
4. See in particular Chapter 5 in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin Books, 1967.
5. A persuasive statement of a very similar view is to be found in Paul Farmer, On suffering and structural violence, In A. Kleinman, V. Das & M. Lock (eds), 1997, *Social Suffering*, Univ. California Press.
6. Rowe, Jonathan. 2000. Eat, sleep, buy, die. *New Internationalist*, **329**, November 2000.

5

Responsibility

Ever since I first started to think about the processes involved in the origins and experience of psychological distress, the question of responsibility has over and over again forced itself upon me. In this way, the view put forward here seems to have evolved through a kind of dialectical process, itself shaped by changes and developments in the socio-political context in which the phenomena of and explanations for 'mental disorder' have been set.

At first, in the early 1960s (in Britain), the dominant philosophy in both psychiatric and psychological spheres was crudely mechanistic and 'objective' in the sense beloved of behaviourists. 'Mental illnesses' were illnesses like any other, imposed on the hapless victim through events beyond his or her control and largely devoid of meaning as far as his or her personal life was concerned; or else they were the result of 'maladaptive' habits acquired through more or less accidental processes of conditioning. Alternative views (as for example psychoanalytic ones) were marginal and largely discredited, and treatment approaches relied on the application of medical or psychological techniques based on biological or behavioural assumptions which paid no attention at all to the patient's subjectivity.

In this setting, certainly, patients were not held officially accountable for their difficulties (though the various forms of 'treatment' meted out often contained a distinctly punitive element that, to the reflective onlooker, belied the morally neutral stance of the practitioners). As responsible agent and subject, the individual person was simply an irrelevance.

When, therefore, theoretical innovators arrived on the scene such as R.D. Laing in psychiatry and Carl Rogers and George Kelly in clinical psychology, their introduction into the picture of notions like meaning, subjectivity and responsibility (often borrowed from European phenomenology and existentialism) brought fresh, new perspectives which many of us seized on with relief and enthusiasm. The 'organism' that had been the object of the clinical gaze became a human being whose troubles were to be understood as the product of a particular life.

This new 'humanization' was reflected clearly enough in my own thinking and writing, and my first solo effort - [*Psychotherapy: A Personal Approach*](#) - duly contained a chapter on freedom and responsibility which draws heavily on Sartrean ideas. My concern in that book was to elaborate a view that tries to acknowledge the person's subjectivity and agency while rejecting any element of blame. These are themes which I have come back to again and again in my writing, and while I would still not repudiate the view put forward in that early work, it has since become modified to an extent which renders it, I think, more or less obsolete.

For what seems to me to have happened over the years is that a mechanistic and objectivist approach to people's distress that, while it didn't overtly blame them, *dehumanized* them, has been replaced by a 'humanist' and 'postmodernist' one that *interiorizes* the phenomena of distress and - often explicitly and nearly always tacitly - holds people responsible for them. Even though the pendulum seems to have swung from an almost entirely exterior approach to an almost entirely interior one, the problem of responsibility has not been solved: formerly we had people for whose condition *nobody* was responsible while now we have people whose condition is largely if not solely *their own* responsibility. The reason for this is to be found in what these two extreme positions have in common: *a studied avoidance of the social dimension*.

It is true that, as the pendulum began to swing (for example with Laing's work), the social power-structure did indeed become visible for a moment, even to the extent of spawning 'radical psychology' movements. However, as far as the mainstream is concerned, the possibility that emotional distress is the upshot of the way we organize our society has never been seriously entertained and at the present time is if anything further than ever from any kind of official recognition. The imputation of responsibility is absolutely central to this state of affairs.

'Responsibility' is, however, not a unitary concept, and is in fact used in a confusing number of overlapping senses, usually depending for their interpretation on the rhetorical ploy the utterer is seeking to adopt. The most frequent everyday use is that of responsibility as blame: 'who is responsible?' is equivalent to 'who is to blame?'. This is the sense in which people suffering emotional distress usually understand 'responsibility', and I would maintain that for the most part they are not mistaken in their anticipation that this is how society also understands it in relation to 'psychological disorder'.

Once the concept of responsibility is invoked in this sphere it raises the question of who is to blame for my suffering - I, or someone else? The message of the therapeutic industry has been that the blame lies with the sufferer; it is of course not stated as crudely as this, but is implied in the notion that somehow the individual lacks the moral fibre to face up to his or her difficulties and mobilize the necessary internal resources to deal with them. Most sufferers feel this keenly without any overt prompting from those around them: a guilty sense of weakness and moral inadequacy is one of the most frequent and uncomfortable accompaniments of distress.

With the exception of legal responsibility, which largely concerns the external imposition of clearly defined and codified rules and obligations that, it is assumed, the individual may choose to observe or transgress, 'responsibility' is usually seen as a kind of praiseworthy moral faculty internally available to everyone who is not in some way exceptionally damaged, as for example by brain injury or madness. 'Responsibility' is thus a kind of virtue (closely related to 'will power') which may be appealed to, a 'sense' which may when necessary be sternly invoked, or a capacity for resolve which may be stiffened through therapeutic intervention.

It is important to note this *virtuous* quality of responsibility, for while it may constitute a mark of maturity and an index of mental 'wellness', it is not usually seen as something beyond the person's power to summon up if absolutely necessary. Only in the most exceptional circumstances will a healthy adult be considered 'not responsible' for his or her actions. The exercise of this kind of virtuous, morally loaded responsibility is often seen as burdensome. To act responsibly is to act with consideration and restraint; to act irresponsibly is to be selfish, disobedient, disloyal.

There is enormous potential here for hypocrisy, sanctimony and manipulation. For when 'responsibility' of the morally virtuous kind is most earnestly advocated, it is usually by the advantaged for the disadvantaged. To say that someone is irresponsible, 'has no will-power', etc., is not to commiserate with them as having been somehow *deprived* of virtue, but at least tacitly to accuse them of wilfully withholding conduct that they could enact if they chose. There is, I suggest, a strong positive correlation between a) the height of the rung occupied on the ladder of power, b) the strength of a sense of personal virtue, and c) the firmness of the conviction that those lower down should act more responsibly.

The sense in which therapists and counsellors advocate responsibility for their clients probably derives from the existential view that, to achieve 'authenticity', a person must embrace the inevitability of their own choice of action: your fate is to be free and no one performs your actions but you. While this view does have the merit of escaping the blind mechanism of orthodox (medical and behavioural) approaches, it rarely manages to avoid the moralism which so easily attends the notion of responsibility, and therapeutic practitioners quickly find themselves in a familiar paradox.

For while they exhort their clients to 'take responsibility' for their lives, they concurrently assure them that they know that 'pull yourself together' is a popular prescription that doesn't work. The therapeutic notion of responsibility, it is implied, is altogether different, more subtle, than crude advice about pulling selves together. The trouble is, though, that in practice there is very little difference between these two approaches, and indeed as far as clients experience them they are virtually identical.

A further uncomfortable aspect of this paradox is that the role of qualified, trained professional usually implies that a skill is being offered which does not place the onus for its effectiveness on the client. Reasonably enough, in consulting a therapist or counsellor, clients expect to be cured, not to find that cure is a matter of their own responsibility. Psychotherapy must surely be the only profession to posit fundamental principles such as client 'resistance' to account for its inability to deliver the goods.

To understand why therapists and counsellors have been locked in this contradiction for so long one need look no further than their interests. Quite obviously, they are unable to claim that their influence can reach in any significant way beyond the consulting room, and if they are to justify taking fees for their activities, it simply *must* be the case that clients harbour *within* them the possibility of change.

Therapy creates the crucible in which it is forced thereafter to work its magic, and any theoretical consideration of responsibility is inexorably limited to the (supposed) moral resources of the client.

But the paradox of responsibility is escaped easily enough, I believe, if one extends the analysis beyond the walls of the consulting room. For responsibility is inextricably bound up with power, and power is accorded from without, not from within.

People cannot 'pull themselves together' not out of any wilful reluctance to do so but because the *power* to do so is not available to them. Exactly the same applies to 'responsibility'. I can only be held responsible for what I have the power to do, and if I do indeed have the power to choose, only then can I reasonably be said to be responsible for my choices. No responsibility without power; no power without responsibility. And we are not talking here about 'will-power': the exercise of responsibility in no way depends on the application of any such mysterious internal faculty (see above, 'The Experience of Self') but rather on the availability of external powers and resources.

Our 'self-as-centre' culture makes it very difficult for us to conceive of responsibility as anything other than the application of personal influence which has its origin entirely within the individual agent. It takes quite an effort of imagination to see the person - as I suggest we should - as a point in social space-time *through which* powers flow. Though, as an individual, I am indeed that point through which whatever powers and resources available to me may be, so to speak, refracted back into the social world, I certainly did not personally create them out of nothing.

Quite apart from our star-struck admiration of celebrity, we have an enduring cultural tradition of fascination with and deference to power which induces us to see it as an individual quality - even, as I have already suggested, a virtue. We see 'great men' (and sometimes women) as preciously rare phenomena, bestowed upon the world by some nameless providence, and we honour their occurrence with a special kind of awed respect.

While there are clearly aspects of embodiment that contribute to some kinds of exceptional ability - not everyone can be an Olympic athlete - it is altogether an open question whether the kind of admiration we are ready all too often to accord people who find themselves in the position of wielding *social* power is justified by their personal qualities. It takes a Tolstoy (in *War and Peace*) to see through the myth surrounding Napoleon and it is only in retrospect that the absurdity of Hitler's status is revealed.

'The psychology of leaders,' [Chomsky](#) writes, 'is a topic of little interest. The institutional factors that constrain their actions and beliefs are what merit attention.'¹ And that is precisely the point: circumstances choose the person, not vice-versa. Since circumstances decree that there can be only one leader, we make the mistake of concluding that the leader who emerges - Hitler, say - is unique, either (at the time we adulate him) in his virtue or (after his fall from grace) in his evil. It is, however, the office (and what sustains it) that is unique, not the person. Just look at the politician who is voted from power or the pop star who falls out of the charts - victims of instant

ordinariness! Here, before our very eyes, we observe what happens when social power ceases to flow through the embodied locus which constitutes our individuality. In fact, as the cynical manipulators of the popular culture industries well recognize, the 'unique star' can be elevated from a very wide range of very ordinary people, but, having been selected, it takes a rare and exceptionally balanced head for the manufactured celebrity not to believe in his or her own image.

The notion of 'responsibility' lies at the heart of what one might well call our suppression of the social. Whatever it is we seek to understand - ranging from the reasons for personal distress to the 'evil' of spectacular crime or the failure of public servants to avert some social disaster - it is always to an unanalysed and unanalysable individual, internal world (where 'blame' is harboured) that we turn our gaze. This evasion of the obvious - that it is the way our society is organized and structured that constitutes the main source of our difficulties - is understandable only in terms of the extent of the powers which are deployed to maintain it. This can be seen very clearly in current political discourse.

As essential cogs in the vast economic machine designed to extract profit for the minority at the top of the social pyramid, politicians have an important role in representing disadvantage as personal moral failure. How wittingly they perform this role is open to question but, as a matter of 'commentary', is a question of little interest. The distal pressures on the advocates of the 'third way' to reinforce an interiorized view of responsibility are enormous.

Policies of 'naming and shaming', the imputation that inadequacies in health and education are somehow due to the unwillingness of individual teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, etc., to apply themselves to the full, linkage of 'rights' with 'responsibilities', and so on, all help to constitute the political paradox that those in the position (or so it would seem) of being most able to

As I write this, an outcry rages in the media about a little girl who is brutally abused and finally killed by her deranged carers. Yet another example of official failure, apparently. Who's to blame here? The doctor who misdiagnosed her injuries? The child's social worker? The social worker's managers? The police? Dismay is widespread that 'the system' still fails after all the previous enquiries and reports following similar instances.

Absolutely nowhere have I seen in this discussion a cool appraisal of the society in which this family was located, of the sheer weight and number of desperate circumstances like these, of the fatigue and overwork of those struggling to operate the under-funded and under-valued public services. No one draws the obvious inference from the dreary repetition of such cases that they are bound to be a regular feature of a society which tolerates such high levels of deprivation. Books like Nick Davies's [Dark Heart](#)² are vanishingly rare, and when they do appear seem hardly to be noticed.

shape distal influences, expend the greatest energy in representing them as proximal (indeed internal).

In fact, of course, national politics does not so much exercise power as serve it. Where multinational capital dominates, the local political role becomes that of obscuring the true sources of power and the effects these have on the objective and subjective wellbeing of the citizenry. 'Politics' has become a form of *management* that itself actually destroys the public space in which political activity can take place. Our possibility of playing an active part in influencing those social structures that ultimately impinge intimately on our lives

In typically Orwellian manner, the conditions in which responsibility can and should be exercised become inverted, and 'third way' politicians preach responsibility for those who have no power while utterly disregarding the duties to society of those who have. Entire communities (miners, steel workers) can be thrown on the social scrapheap in the interests of profit, and the only official talk of 'responsibility' is for those whose lives have been shattered to accept whatever scraps are thrown to them and sort themselves out as best they can without disturbing the peace.

is whittled away to nothing, while our relative immiseration becomes internalized as personal fault.

Poverty, for example, is represented in 'third way' politics not as an evil that causes social disintegration and personal emotional damage, but as an unwarrantable 'excuse' for individual moral failure. The crumbling of public services, increase in crime, etc., are represented as the result of the incompetence, intransigence and irresponsibility of public sphere workers and of the 'evil' apparently endemic in the 'criminal element' of society.

When it comes to trying to decide what people can be held accountable for and what not, the subjective sense of 'responsibility' is almost entirely unreliable. Everyone is familiar with liars and self-deceivers who claim that something was not their fault when it obviously was. What presents more of a challenge to psychological understanding is those people who claim and feel responsibility for things that are in fact obviously outside their control. Perhaps it is the greater authenticity of the over-conscientious person compared with the deceiver that gives us a clue as to why any 'internal' account of responsibility is invalid. The conscience, after all, does not lie: it reports (commentates) faithfully enough on how it feels to be the instrument of wrong-doing. But, as is clearly demonstrated by those in whom it is over-developed, the conscience can be *mistaken*. What it is mistaken about is not the *feeling* of responsibility, but the *origins* (or possibly the definition) of the 'wrong-doing'.

It is the *feeling* of responsibility (conscience) that the powerful seek to exploit in others in order to divert attention from the actual (distal) *causes* of their discomfort. I am host to the powers that flow through me and, if I'm honest (authentic), I cannot deny the sense of ownership that they create in their passage. The person who *does* seek to deny this sense of ownership, possibly by claiming 'it wasn't me', or

'it's not my fault, I had a terrible childhood', etc., is indeed being inauthentic. But not *necessarily* inaccurate from a causal perspective. As a society we attach, in this instance, much greater weight to authenticity than to accuracy.

For the purposes of understanding how and why people experience and act in the world as they do, and what freedom they may have to act otherwise, the concept of 'responsibility' has become virtually useless. What we need is a psychology that switches its attention from a metaphorical 'inner world' to try instead to elaborate the ways in which powerful influences in the external environment of social space-time serve to liberate or enslave us as well as to shape our consciousness of ourselves. As things are, it is not at all clear how far individuals are able to marshal and control the influences that flow through them. Furthermore, in our attempt to understand the processes involved we are constantly misled by the assumption that our commentary refers directly to them.

1. Chomsky, Noam. 1989. *Necessary Illusions*. Pluto Press, p. 19.
2. Davies, Nick. 1998. *Dark Heart. The Shocking Truth About Hidden Britain*. Vintage.

6

What Then Must We Do?

That is the question that Leo Tolstoy, having surveyed the misery of the ordinary Russian people, tried to answer in 1886. It is also the question that people pose – often somewhat resentfully – when confronted by the kind of objections to the social and psychological *status quo* that I have raised in these pages. 'It's all very well to criticize, but have you got any better ideas...?'

The role of social critic is these days not a comfortable one, and tends to invite various dismissive diagnoses from those who seem to feel affronted: 'pessimist', 'depressive', 'arrogant', 'cynic', and so on. It is not to avoid these diagnoses that I attempt an answer to the 'what must we do?' question here: they will be pinned on me anyway, as sure as fate. I merely want to demonstrate that, as I suggested at the beginning of this short work, an answer is not difficult to find. The difficulty, as the oblivion into which Tolstoy's wonderful book has sunk demonstrates so well, is in putting any answer into practice.

We are faced at the societal level with exactly the same problem that faces the client of well conducted psychotherapy: we can see clearly enough the events – among them our own actions – that have led to our predicament, but the means of rectifying them are still beyond our reach. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), tragedy offers a far better model for human distress than does psychotherapy: although we can envisage remedies for our condition, we are at a loss to know how to put them into effect.

And so the 'answers' that I try to sketch out below are not given in the expectation that they are to be easily achieved, or indeed achieved at all. Perhaps, at most, they may help to retain a kind of hope.

In keeping with the 'proximal-distal' dimension that I have used to consider the causes of distress, so also the implications for what we should do may be categorised according to the readiness of their availability to us as individuals. There are, it seems to me, four spheres in which action necessary to redress the difficulties identified in the previous pages of this work may conceivably be taken. Ranging from the proximal to the distal, they are the clinical, scientific, philosophical and political spheres. I hope it goes without saying that in what follows I am not pretending to offer an exhaustive analysis of what may be possible, but merely picking out some of the more important issues that suggest themselves for our attention.

Implications for 'clinical' practice

We cannot, I think, escape the clinic. Although it is almost certainly not the most appropriate site in which to address the kinds of psychological distress and suffering that afflict people in present day

society, there is no other which is obviously more appropriate. Although the long-term answers to those of our woes that are potentially amenable to influence may lie much more at the distal reaches of social organization, it is (as clinicians are the first to point out) still *individuals* who suffer and seek some remedy to their pain. It would be a callous society indeed that stood back and offered them nothing just because nothing much is likely to provide any real 'cure' at the personal level. It is incumbent on us to do what we can, even if we cannot do much. In a fractured, largely urban society in which, thankfully, religion no longer plays a significant role, the clinic, in one form or another, is the place people will turn to when in difficulty, and it is for the foreseeable future in the clinic that we shall probably be doing the little that we can. As it is, however, the clinic is profoundly inadequate for the task at hand.

No one is more aware of this inadequacy than those who encounter the clinic – whether as practitioners, consumers or simply observers – and are able and willing to reflect on their experience of and role within it. The kinds of questions to which such experience gives rise are clearly reflected in the discussion taking place on the [forum](#) attached to this website, where people contemplating, or having just embarked upon, a therapeutic career are particularly open to the inevitable inconsistencies and dilemmas inherent in the role.

In his contribution, for example, Paul Moloney (12/4/01) faces squarely the limitations of the therapeutic role while acknowledging the almost irresistible pressures on clinicians to disregard them. Penny Priest (12.14.010) asks whether the whole therapy business should be scrapped. Jim Keys (12/3/01) suggests a partial rescue of therapeutic integrity by characterising it as a 'radical dialogue' rather than a quasi-medical treatment. Kamilla Vaski (11/15/01; 11/21/01) encourages us to have the confidence to 're-imagine' the role of therapist such that the limitations described by Paul (and indeed myself) are accepted in fact as strengths. All these, and other, contributions wrestle with the recognition that, though nothing like what it is conventionally cracked up to be, there is *something* about the therapeutic role that is indeed valuable. Kamilla's invitation to re-imagination of what therapy may be about suggests to me a positive emphasis on a number of themes: -

- **Demystification.** Although itself not a concept taken up by counsellors and psychotherapists in their theoretical reflections, 'demystification' describes quite well what the best of them spend much of their time doing in practice. For it is indeed the case that people seeking therapy often start out with very little idea about what is causing their troubles. Conventional therapies spend a great deal of time in what one might call the demystification of the proximal sphere, i.e. unpicking with clients the events and relationships in their immediate experience which give rise to all the phenomena of psychological distress, self-accusation and self-deception that are familiar to most practitioners (I have tried to describe the foremost among these in [How to Survive Without Psychotherapy](#)). Elsewhere I have called this process

'clarification', and it is perhaps the most developed of the three principal planks of therapy (the other two being 'comfort' and 'encouragement'); that is to say, it is the process that therapists of all schools spend most time thinking and writing about, and attempting to teach. Insofar as there can be said to be 'skills' of therapy and counselling, the arts of listening carefully and helping to clear ways through people's confusion can probably be developed through guided practice, and hence tend to form the core of most schemes of 'training'.

However, having, so to speak, cleared the conceptual undergrowth obscuring the client's view of his or her immediate predicament (so as to achieve 'insight'), most approaches to therapy consider that the work of clarification is done and that it is now up to the clients themselves to switch on their 'responsibility' and put matters right in ways that I have suggested in earlier pages are quite likely impossible. The notion that a 'clinical' predicament could be demystified to the point of showing that there is *nothing* a client could do about it precisely *because* it is not his or her fault, but the outcome of distal influences over which s/he can have no control, is unacceptable to most therapists not because it is unreasonable but because it is, from a professional point of view, extremely inconvenient. From the client's point of view, however, it need not be inconvenient at all, but constitute rather the lifting of a heavy burden of moral apprehension, if not outright guilt, that was completely unmerited. The aim of therapy then becomes to clarify what it is *not* as well as what it is possible for individuals to do to influence their circumstances, and, given the limited powers available to most of us to act upon our world, the most 'therapeutic' outcome may well be achieved by the former.

Such an undertaking leads to a very different kind of dialogue from that characteristic of conventional therapy. Rather than there being a progressive emphasis on the 'inside', culminating in the patient's assumption of responsibility for a moral universe of which s/he is supposedly the author, there is likely to be a literal process of 'enlightenment' in which the person is released from all kinds of mystified responsibilities and helped to see him or herself as embodied and located within an external reality highly resistant to individual influence and totally impervious to wishfulness. The implications of such a dialogue are indeed radical - even, given the nature of current Western society, subversive - but they may still be therapeutic.

- **Rescuing subjectivity.** Each of us lives at the centre of a private world of thoughts, feelings and experiences which is quite unique as well as exquisitely vulnerable. When, as inevitably we must, we compare this world with the world in which those around us appear to live their lives, our sense of our own vulnerability may become so acute as to be almost unbearable, for their world may seem to reflect a certainty and solidity which is entirely lacking in ours. Within the secret

depths of our personal experience are packed a seemingly infinite range of hopes, fears and fantasies, desires we hardly dare to recognize and shames that are anguish to contemplate. From the moment of birth, and indeed before, we are exposed to an unremitting tempest of sensation – pleasures as well as pains - to which, as we mature, becomes attached a framework of judgement that buzzes with justifications, condemnations and self-deceptions to the point where any kind of self-certainty seems impossible.

What gives form to this subjective world, makes it intelligible and bearable, is the social space in which we find ourselves located and which confers meaning on our experience. Subjectivity is born of embodiment but achieves coherent understanding through social interaction. Our bodies, to be sure, give us knowledge of the world, but we can only truly make sense of that knowledge through the structures of meaning which are provided through our congress with others. But that does not mean that our embodied knowledge of the world is infinitely malleable, can be shaped into whatever stories people choose to tell us. Those stories may be true or they may be false; they may guide us towards an intelligible world which answers faithfully to our embodied understanding, or they may obscure it from us in a blanket of mystery that renders our actions tentative, fearful, dangerous.

Where the public world is painstakingly shaped to accommodate, appreciate, elaborate and civilize our private experience, a kind of harmony may be given to our lives that, while certainly not erasing all possibility of tragedy, at least gives us a chance to live, as selves, in accord with others about the nature of the world into which we have been thrown. There comes to be a kind of satisfaction in being a subject in social space.

Where, on the other hand, the public world is shaped to exploit our subjectivity, to mystify, obscure or distort the wordless knowledge our bodies give us of the world, no such harmony will be possible. Either we may accept and attempt to live within the distortions, surrendering to orthodoxy at the cost of our souls, or we may be driven to live out our subjectivity in a constant state of confusion and apprehension, scurrying in the cracks which show through make-believe like woodlice in a rotten wall. Very rarely, some people seem to have from the start a confidence in their embodied experience that no amount of adversity can shake, but even so they nearly always find themselves in a revolutionary minority split off in many ways from the social mainstream.

In comparison with the centuries of art, literature, philosophy, religion and science that have strained to dignify our subjective experience of life by building a worthy public framework for it, the stance taken by psychotherapy has been deeply ambivalent and for the most part extremely superficial. Indeed, it's hard to avoid the judgement that, in most of its

official theorizing, therapy has been one of the principal means of discipline whereby the subject is forced into line with the ruling dogmas of power. Very few approaches to therapy explicitly reject at least a covert form of 'normativeness' in which certain moral and/or aesthetic standards of human being are specified not in the subject's interests, but in the interests of power. In this kind of approach subjectivity is constrained rather than liberated, and patients' fearful expectations of being judged are only too quickly confirmed.

However, there are some exceptions to this tendency (see for example [Reading Psychotherapy](#)) and I suspect that in practice (as opposed to their official pronouncements) many counsellors and therapists adopt an approach to their clients which affirms rather than subverts their vulnerable subjectivity (this, no doubt is why therapy is so often seen as a preferable alternative to the 'medical model' of psychiatry). Nevertheless, this is not a securely established aspect of therapy in general, and far too many clients will have experienced an increasing rather than a lessening strain on their subjective experience of self as the result of therapy.

But what does it mean to 'affirm vulnerable subjectivity'?

- **The rehabilitation of character.** The notion of 'change' lies at the heart of virtually all approaches to psychotherapy and counselling. At first glance it seems, furthermore, self-evident that it should. Asked what it is that should change as the result of therapy, most practitioners would, I suspect, refer to some aspect of the client's 'self', i.e., something inside the person. At one extreme this might be, for example, aspects of a hypothetical construct like 'the unconscious', at the other the internal cognitive processes that are taken to control behaviour. It is this insistence on change that in my view tends to cancel out many of the otherwise valuable insights that therapists have articulated over the years. People are not allowed to be themselves.

Take as an instance of this the 'client-centred' approach of Carl Rogers. As Rogers's work gained in influence at about the middle of the twentieth century, it did indeed bring with it a great sense of liberation: much of the grim moralism of 'dynamic' psychotherapy seemed to fall away, and the emphasis Rogers placed on 'unconditional positive regard' and 'empathy' seemed to allow subjects to escape the yoke of therapeutic discipline and, precisely, come to be themselves.

But, as the professions of therapy and counselling burgeoned, 'positive regard' turned out not to be unconditional, and empathy to be not so much an end as a means. For these constructs were treated as merely *instrumental* in the altogether superordinate task of bringing about change. The upshot of this is to place a new burden on patients, for they are freed from an external therapeutic discipline (mediated by 'interpretation', 'the analysis of the transference', etc.) only to

have to repay the warmth and empathy of their therapist by successfully changing themselves. The Rogerian counsellor is not *just* warm and empathic: the warmth and empathy carries with it an expectation – all too easily turning to an obligation – to *change*.

Much of the time, however, for reasons dealt with at length in earlier pages, change is precisely what clients cannot do, not because of incompetence or ill will, but because the powers by which change could be effected are, quite literally, beyond them. To all the other senses of inadequacy and guilt that they may be carrying, then, is added the guilt of being unable to reward their counsellor's kindness with an appropriate therapeutic adjustment of self.

The answer to this dilemma, I believe, is to remove from an otherwise benign emphasis on acceptance and empathy their element of instrumentality. They should be, simply, ends in themselves. The best word I can think of for an appropriate, non-instrumental approach for therapists and counsellors to take to their clients is *compassion*: not so different from 'empathy', perhaps, but a little warmer, recognizing not so much that it is necessary to stand in the other's shoes, but that we *already are* in each other's shoes. If you prick us, do we not bleed?

What clients have to change, if they can, is not their selves, but their world, and in their attempts to do that both they and we have no realistic alternative to accepting that they are who they are. I, you, everybody is not so much a 'personality', with all the assumptions that tends to bring of a modular self to which potential structural adjustments of various kinds may be made, as a *character*, a body inscribed by its experience of the world, indelibly expert in its own idiosyncrasy. We may *feel with* others whose predicaments form no part of our own experience, but such compassion need bring with it neither the wish nor the hope that they should change. Images of suffering demand not that the sufferer changes him or herself, but that the suffering should be relieved. The starving child needs food, not moral uplift.

The appropriate role for therapeutic psychology is to record, celebrate and wonder at the extraordinary diversity of human character and to reject immediately any notion it may be tempted to conceive of making moulds for people. We are *really* not there to judge or shape people, and we need nurse no secret agenda for change. Such change as therapists and their clients may pursue together has no need of mystery, nor even delicacy, but is a down-to-earth matter of what powers are available to the person to make a difference. And if the person, as is often the case, can do nothing, the compassionate acceptance of who they are may still be a comfort.

- **Reinstating the environment.** There is no reason why 'clinical' psychology should be seen as synonymous with

therapy. Indeed, it is only in relatively recent times – particularly with the rise of the ‘dynamic’ therapies of the twentieth century – that the doctoring of the self has come to be seen as the principal business of psychology. The focal concern of psychology with the making of individual subjectivity in no way implies that subjectivity is necessarily *self*-made. Personhood, along with the subjective awareness of it, is the outcome of an interaction of a *body* with a *world*, and it therefore behoves the psychologist to pay careful attention to the constraints and influences of both .

As is the case with the emerging discipline of ‘community psychology’¹, it makes as much sense now as it did to Plato to consider the ways in which individuals are shaped by their environments, and to distinguish environmental influences that are benign from those that are malign.

If this seems entirely obvious, it is salutary to remember that the whole thrust of ‘therapy’, and much of the weight of ‘evidence’ from social psychology, has been to suggest that the environment does not have a defining influence on individual psychology and that not only can people somehow choose whether to be influenced by it or not, but that pretty well any damage done can be repaired. Earnest debates take place as to whether, for example, poverty and unemployment, loss, brutality and violence contribute to mental disorder, crime, and so on. The fact that human beings are complex, resourceful and resilient means that simple cause-and-effect answers to such questions are not unequivocally demonstrable, and so it is easy to conclude that the pain and havoc wreaked by the ills of society are actually factors of, for instance, weak or vulnerable ‘personalities’ rather than of the ills themselves. This answer is of course exactly what is required by a global corporate plutocracy that depends for its survival on the unremitting exploitation of a mass of ‘consumers’ who must a) be stuffed to bursting point with rubbish, and b) be rendered as far as possible incapable of accurately criticizing their condition.

But the relation between environmental influence and personal psychology is complex not because it is mediated by some indefinable aspect of the ‘human spirit’, but because environmental influence is in itself far more complex than we have hitherto considered. Because psychology (and especially therapeutic psychology) has been so preoccupied with supposedly interior factors of motivation and cognition, etc., its considerations of environmental influences has frequently been extraordinarily crude and casual – to the extent that it could be argued, for example, that siblings share a ‘similar environment’ or that the influence of TV violence could be measured by showing violent cartoons to toddlers.

In fact, of course, people know perfectly well that huge advantages are to be gained from occupancy of favourable environments, and the more they have been beneficiaries of such environments, the better they know it. Moralistic homilies

and visions of a compensatory after-life are strictly for the masses. The occupants of corporate boardrooms and big country mansions pay unwavering attention to the kinds educational establishment attended by their offspring and the quality of 'lifestyle' they submit themselves to.

How environmental influence works, how it interacts with embodiment, how some social relations become crucial while others glance off apparently unnoticed, constitute questions of enormous subtlety and difficulty and provide material for generations of study. This is, furthermore, a perfectly proper study for clinicians. Rather than attempting to peer into the murky depths of a metaphorical psychic interior, populated only by the hypothetical constructs of our own imagination, we need to get down to the much more difficult and demanding task of trying to tease out the ways in which environmental influences combine and interact to shape our subjectivity.

Scientific implications

I don't want to get into an argument about what does and does not constitute 'science', and I certainly don't want to align myself with the narrow Anglo-American scientific orthodoxy that tends to get dismissed by its opponents as 'positivistic'. But neither do I want to subscribe to the neo-Romantic position often taken up by anti-science, in which rhyme is preferred to reason.

What seems to me important, for 'clinical' psychology anyway, is what I take to be the broad project of science rather than the particular content of its methodology. By this I mean a commitment to achieving and communicating an understanding of the world and its occupants that is based on experience, reasoned argument, painstaking and sceptical checking and, ultimately, an appropriate (though very rarely total) degree of consensus. It seems to me that this process is likely to be essentially materialist and realist, though of course critically so.

The integrity and value of science in this sense depends on its being unconstrained and un-perverted by special interests or by the kind of Authority that forms itself into a dogmatic ruling orthodoxy. And that kind of freedom is of course precisely what, in our neck of the social-scientific woods, we have not got. What has come to be put forward as 'scientific' in clinical psychology and psychotherapy is a set of dogmas that is shaped and maintained almost exclusively by interest and aimed resolutely at obscuring the causes and consequences of emotional and psychological distress.

There are at least two main sources of interest involved in this state of affairs. The first is the proximal interest of clinicians who, whether consciously or not, perceive their livelihood to depend ultimately on their personal ability to bring about cure (though they may find a more intellectually diplomatic word for it). This is the source of interest that guides much of the research activity and clinical case discussion in the literature on therapy and counselling. It makes sure that only certain kinds of questions are asked and only certain kinds of 'findings' considered relevant: questions about therapeutic *technique*

presuppose clear-cut answers that, when they are not forthcoming, are taken to indicate simply the need for more research.

The second, more distal, influence is broadly political, and seeks to maintain a fiction of personal psychopathology as the explanation for mental 'disorders'. The drive, for example, for 'evidence-based practice' in 'mental health' services is imposed by central *Diktat* and countenances only research projects that conform to a primitive set of quasi-medical assumptions dressed up as 'science'. Inspired by Fordist and Taylorist principles (i.e. the conveyor-belt, deliberately de-personalized and managerially controlled methods of production developed towards the beginning of the 20th century), the Business model of knowledge which has come to prevail in the last twenty years is technician and crudely pragmatic. It assumes that knowledge-production is achieved by posing appropriate sets of designer questions and must be directed and controlled by management. Once produced, knowledge is to be transmitted thereafter by means of off-the-shelf 'training' modules.

This approach to the managerially directed division of labour in 'science', whereby centrally determined questions are farmed out to technicians for a kind of algorithmic 'research' process yielding packaged knowledge that, in turn, is further disseminated by operatives versed in the techniques of training, rules out just about everything that is creative, intelligent and worthwhile in scientific discovery and teaching. For these latter are processes that take place at the very forefront of human endeavour (i.e. are not manageable 'skills') and depend for their significance and fruitfulness on qualities of understanding and enquiry that are not specifiable technically in advance. The kinds of flexibility and resourcefulness, sensitivity and intelligence that are the hallmarks of, for example, good scientists and teachers cannot be contained within a packaged 'spec' of the kind so beloved of business managers (the myth of specifiability is a core feature of Business culture), but are the result of a kind of nurturing husbandry of inquisitiveness and creativity whose results can only be hoped for, not guaranteed.

By deliberately excluding the kind of intellectual originality and adventurousness that is characteristic of real achievement in the sciences as much as the arts, Business may well protect itself from unwanted surprises, but it does so at the expense of producing a dumbed-down, uncritical environment that is deadeningly third rate, uncreative, and ultimately (because essentially stupefied and imperceptive) profoundly ineffective.

As far as research in 'clinical' psychology is concerned, we need to recognize that (as, no doubt, in many other areas) no further progress will be made until we have re-established an environment for theoretical speculation and practical enquiry that is both independent and secure. That is to say, the discovery and development of knowledge (recognizing and communicating what is true about the world) is completely inimical to the play of interest and must, as far as is humanly possible, be separated from it. The one-dimensional culture of the corporate plutocracy, interested only in profit, is incapable of producing the conditions in which intellectual pursuits flourish. For the

kinds of unconditional patronage and guaranteed independence necessary will not only be seen ideologically as needlessly wasteful and unacceptably out of managerial control, but would in fact inevitably constitute a threat to the corporate regime itself. As soon as the cultural unidimensionality of Business is shattered by the introduction of non-bottom-line dimensions, it finds itself vulnerable to orders of criticism that threaten its very survival.

The corruption of science by business interest in the pharmaceutical industry constitutes a microcosm of our society. Impecunious scientists whose public funding has been withdrawn are induced to have articles published in learned journals under their name, but which have in fact been written by ghost writers in the pay of the drug companies (all this documented in *The Guardian*, 7.2.02). In this way an appearance of independent *evidence* is used to create a spurious *authority* to underpin *make-believe*.

Business is definitely not interested in the disinterested pursuit of scientific evidence. The principal alternative open to it is, as we have seen, the development of increasingly convoluted systems of make-believe to run alongside the extremely banal technological processes of knowledge-production that are managerially controllable.

Philosophical implications

Paradoxically perhaps, the existence of make-believe proclaims the importance of truth. Notwithstanding the best arguments of the 'constructivists', make-believe is not the outcome of an *ultimate* relativity, but derives its importance from its ability to be *taken for* the truth. The possibility of truth *lies behind* make-believe, just as a covert truth-claim lies behind every avowedly relativist account of how things are. In this way make-believe is subservient to truth; it seeks to stand in for truth, but is always at risk of being dispelled by it.

Make-believe (spin) is essential to politics precisely because politics is so vulnerable, even in today's depleted democracy, to dreaded 'public opinion'. For public opinion is what people believe to be true, and as long as political power is contingent on what people think, it will be essential to control what they think. Hence the enormous effort that is put politically into maintaining ideological power, to controlling the formation and reception of meaning in every sphere and at every level. But truth is still not sovereign, for behind truth lies power.

It really doesn't matter to politicians how blatant and absurd (to the more discerning consumers of the 'safety-valve' media) the (mis)representation of truth becomes just so long as mass opinion continues to be controlled. This is because what people take to be true still, just, has the propensity to undermine power. If power should ever manage to find a way of subverting this last vestige of democratic influence, it will cease immediately to bother with spin and abandon with huge relief all the apparatus of make-believe, for truth will no longer be important.

Corporate plutocracy still depends to an extent on a depleted democracy and must therefore sustain a notion of the 'truth', but this is a severely debased form of truth, i.e. truth as virtually synonymous with public opinion and purveyed by the public relations and advertising industries. Precisely because it has become so debased, so transparently fabricated and manipulated, 'truth' may be mistakenly represented (perhaps, indeed, in good faith) by the intellectuals of 'postmodernity' as an outmoded construction of the discredited 'grand narratives' of former times. But rather than the exposure of the, so to speak, conceptual *impossibility* of truth, what we are witnessing is the *disempowerment* of truth, its cynical reduction to technologies of spin in which there is a tacit acknowledgement that truth is on the way to not mattering at all.

Truth, and its parasite make-believe, thus only matter as long as there is a possibility of popular solidarity forming around a common understanding of what is the case (e.g. how the world works to immiserate us) and destabilizing the structures of global corporate plutocracy.

In this state of affairs the philosophical task becomes that of rehabilitating the concept of truth, which in turn means deconstructing constructivism!

There can be no doubt that language is of the first importance in the formation of human conduct and society. But this does not mean that language is generative of reality itself. The over-excited embrace (and often only rudimentary understanding) in broadly 'therapeutic' circles of notions of 'discourse', 'narrative', etc. having their origin mainly in the writings of French post-structuralists such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, has resulted in an almost psychotic disregard of the real circumstances of people's lives.

Of course words do not directly reflect an incontrovertible reality or 'hold a mirror up to Nature'; *of course* language can never give direct access to Truth. And of course language is absolutely essential to our understanding of and interaction with the world and each other. But this does not invest language with some kind of magical power of creation in which it brings worlds into being. Certainly language is the principal medium of persuasion, but it persuades by pointing to something other than itself, something that *is the case* rather than something that is merely *said*².

It is easy to see how we can be misled by our linguistic ability into investing it with magical power, but only the machinations of power, surely, can explain the extent to which the world has come to be presented as de-materialized at the highest intellectual levels. Foucault spoke, after all, of the 'discourse of power', not the power of discourse, and yet it is this misconstruction which seems to have gripped the imagination of the 'constructivists'. Language does not *describe* reality, they say, in contemptuous dismissal of the 'grand narratives of the past'. No, but neither does it bring it into being.

Language allows us to place our experience at a distance from us, to hypostatize and manipulate it. Otherwise, we could only *live* our experience – or be lived by it, rather in the manner of dreaming. Inevitably, we are constantly tempted to believe in the actuality of our

imaginings (which is why scientific enquiry has to be so sceptical and so painstaking), but when we take imagination as definitive of reality (or alternative realities), we have sunk into collective madness.

It is in the interest of any powerful minority that has been able to shape society to its own considerable material benefit, and at the cost of depriving the majority, to obscure not only the processes by which it has achieved its position but also the very nature of reality itself, particularly the significance of people's experience of pain. There is enormous scope for such obfuscation in the time-honoured and entirely familiar ideological and rhetorical manoeuvres ('spin' and PR) that aim at convincing us that black is white. But to insert at the highest levels of philosophical thought the premise that there is no such thing as reality is a coup indeed.

While we may agree that in the past a too heavy-handed positivist authority attempted to claim a special relationship with Truth that allowed no use of linguistic concepts other than its own (i.e. that language could indeed be used to describe an independent reality), we need to recapture a view of language as *articulating* our relations with the world *as best we can*. We can in this way acknowledge that any form of 'ultimate' reality must always remain a mystery beyond our grasp, but that that does not mean there is no such thing as reality. Some things are more real, some statements more true, than others. Reality is sensed in embodied experience before it is articulated in words, and what we say needs always to be checked against other kinds of evidence, including where necessary every other possible intimation we may have of our living existence in material reality.

Political implications

Let us not mince matters. The following speaks for itself. It is the Statement of the Centre for Research in Globalisation, as set out in their [website](#): -

CRG Statement

The Centre's objective is to unveil the workings of the New World Order.

War and globalisation go hand in hand, leading, in the post Cold War era, to the destruction of countries and the impoverishment of hundreds of millions of people. In turn, this global economic system is marked by an unprecedented concentration of private wealth. The institutions of war, police repression and economic management interface with one another. NATO is not only in liaison with the Pentagon and the CIA, it also has contacts with the IMF and the World Bank. In turn, the Washington based international financial bureaucracy, responsible for imposing deadly "economic medicine" on developing countries has close ties to the Wall Street financial establishment.

The powers behind this system are those of the global banks and financial institutions, the military-industrial complex, the oil and energy giants, the

biotech conglomerates and the powerful media and communications giants, which fabricate the news and overtly distort the course of world events. In turn, the police apparatus represses, in the name of "Western democracy", all forms of dissent and critique of the dominant neoliberal ideology.

This "false consciousness" which pervades our societies, prevents critical debate and masks the truth. Ultimately, this false consciousness precludes a collective understanding of the workings of a World economic and political system, which destroys people's lives. The only promise of global capitalism is a World of landless farmers, shuttered factories, jobless workers and gutted social programs with "bitter economic medicine" under the WTO and the IMF constituting the only prescription.

The New World Order is based on the "false consensus" of Washington and Wall Street, which ordains the "free market system" as the only possible choice on the fated road to a "global prosperity". The GRG purports to reveal the truth and disarm the falsehoods conveyed by the controlled corporate media.

Michel Chossudovsky,
Editor
29 August 2001

This seems to me about as succinct a summary of the state of affairs confronting us as one is likely to find.

Nothing could suit corporate plutocracy more than for people to believe that the real satisfactions of life stem ultimately from the cultivation of privacy: that subjective well-being, that is to say, is a matter of 'personal growth' *from the inside*. One-dimensional Business culture in fact closes down public space such that the 'real' world' (i.e. the world of the market economy) becomes simply a given that people have to accept without question: 'resistance is useless'. If the many can be persuaded that they have no say in the shaping of material reality, and that personal satisfaction is purely a matter of self-doctoring and private consumption, the world is left wide open for exploitation by the few.

When the only public meanings available are the grim and unassailable 'realities' of the market, people are left to scabble together for themselves make-shift ways of sharing experiences that actually cannot be accommodated within the Business model (an example would be the rituals of grief that have developed rapidly in recent times – impromptu roadside shrines, greater emotional demonstrativeness, etc.). Quite apart from feeling politically impotent (and demonstrating our alienation by shunning the 'democratic' process in unprecedented numbers) we have to cast around for ways of making *communal* sense of experiences that inevitably arise from our existence as embodied beings but are no longer served by abandoned – and often discredited - traditions.

However, because we are social beings, individual subjectivity cannot develop and flourish in a virtual vacuum. The structures of public space necessarily supply a kind of exoskeleton for our feeling and understanding of what it is to be human, and where those structures are drastically reduced, our subjectivity becomes fractured and incomplete. At its most grotesque, people may become stripped of public identity altogether: nameless automata at the end of a telephone without powers of reason or judgement, able only to reiterate a handful of stock phrases.

It is of course understandable for people to feel that one answer to the heartlessness of the outside world is to retire into the realm, if not of the inner self, at least of the private life of home and family, etc. However, I suspect that this kind of strategy is built on the false premise that inner space, privacy, is somehow independent of public structure. In fact, if anything, the opposite seems to me to be the case. For individual people, hell is more often to be experienced within the confines of the family (or indeed the agonies of introspection) than it is in the spaces beyond, and public structures of meaning – what one might broadly call cultures – that have evolved over time to accommodate the concerns of embodied human beings may offer an escape from privacy that actually lends meaning and significance to once private suffering. A decent, caring, multi-dimensional public world makes *use* as well as *sense* of private pain and confusion. One of the most tormented and abused (and admirable) people I ever met was rescued as child from total perdition by films and books, which, among other things, uncovered, to her amazement, the possibility of love.

The way to rescue subjectivity is, then, not to sink further into our 'inner worlds', but to struggle to open up public space and build within it structures that are adequate to giving meaning and purpose to our lives. The relentless Business onslaught over the last couple of decades has stripped away practically every way we had of understanding ourselves other than the stupefying mantras of the market economy. Deeply hostile to social, intellectual, artistic, spiritual and what [Ivan Illich](#) called convivial ways of thinking, being and experiencing (not least because they give subjects the possibility of criticizing their condition), Business, where it cannot undermine them directly, invades them parasitically, like one of those wasps that lays its eggs on the pupae of other creatures. Intellectual life gives way to a kind of managerially authorized posturing, intelligence to the bureaucratized application of mindless rules, history to fashion. Even ordinary conversation, via the media, takes on the tones of hyperbolic advertising gibberish.

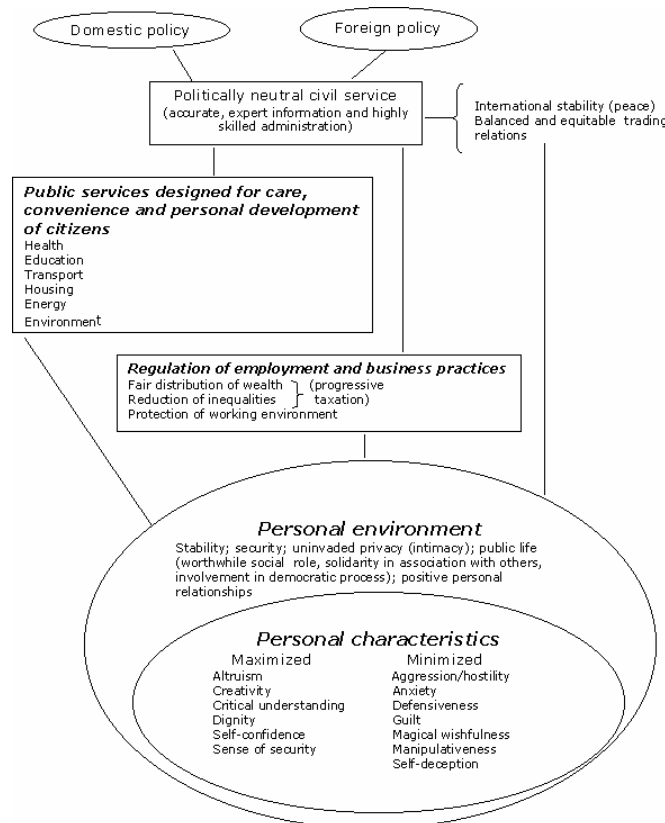
Every nook and cranny of existence is turned to commercial use and the apparatus of consumerism is everywhere. Taxation is replaced by sponsorship. Every article for sale is laden with the 'added value' of ever more contrived and crazy exercises in branding. Sport becomes big business. Thought, feeling, relating and understanding become prescribed, iterative rituals in which people no longer know what they think, or what to think, unless it is prescribed by commercial logic, or the crude dogmas of political correctness that have come to replace morality.

And all the inarticulate confusion and despair that this state of affairs generates is to be soaked up by 'counselling'.

There can be no doubt that this Business take-over of just about every aspect of life has been successful almost beyond belief, so much so that it is virtually impossible to envisage how the process might be either reversed or overthrown. There was, to be sure, a great deal that was unsatisfactory about the traditional orthodoxies that prevailed before the take-over, and to attempt to return to the intellectual, moral and spiritual institutions we used to know would indeed be retrograde in the worst sense. We need to recover the multidimensionality of public space that we have lost, but without the stuffy authoritarianism and entrenched inequalities that often went with its principal features.

There are still those who hope that something like this might be achieved by existing political organizations. In an excellent article in the [Guardian \(20.3.01\)](#) David Marquand offers a perceptive analysis of the social ills that beset us and the need for a 'renewal of the public services and the culture that sustains them', and hopes that this may yet form a real (as opposed to virtual) part of New Labour's project in Britain. However, nothing has occurred since the re-election of New Labour that took place a couple of months later to inspire confidence that that may be the case – other, of course, than copious amounts of verbal make-believe.

A rather less optimistic perspective is gained from a re-reading of [C. Wright Mills's](#) brilliant book *The Power Elite*, written almost fifty years ago. In it, he documented the processes that closed down and commercialized public space in the USA, replaced its civil service with



agents of the corporate plutocracy, and so on - the development of the very processes, indeed, that so dominate us now and to which there seems to be no organized and publicly endorsed opposition. There is, thankfully, an unofficial and unendorsed opposition that from time to time makes itself felt in no uncertain manner (as it did, for example at Seattle and Genoa), but it is not yet clear how or whether this could become a political factor in the consciousness of the vast mass of the public who are currently firmly in the grip of the conventional media.

Consider for a moment the (highly over-simplified) diagram above of how a conventionally left-wing political system might theoretically be aimed at creating the kind of personal environment where individuals could flourish as both public and private beings.

It is sobering to reflect that even this relatively modest ideal has become so far out of reach as to appear simply absurd. For national governments no longer determine their own policies, and the influences of global corporate plutocracy intrude at every level of social organization to further their own interests.

In the absence of any organized opposition, all we can do is resist as best we can. It is vain to expect, though, that the piecemeal dissent of scattered individuals is going to make much of an impact. The apparatus of power is too well developed for that.

But nothing lasts for ever, and untrammelled greed has its blind-spots. Maybe the best we can hope for is to have some idea of what to do when the apparatus collapses.

1. A good account can be found in Orford, J. *Community Psychology: Theory and Practice*, Wiley, 1992.

2. An excellent critique of 'postmodernist' overstatements of the power of words may be found in Margaret S. Archer, *Being Human. The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 2000. One does not have to concur with the author's religious inclination to appreciate the passionate lucidity of her defence of reality.