

Day-to-day Normality as Source of Depression

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Winter 2019

They say that depression is the disease of this century. Psychology books don't only list the symptoms, they also specify the experienced sensations: changes in sleep habits, moods, lasting sadness, anxiety, emptiness, despair, low self-esteem, a feeling of helplessness... Deep inside we feel a constant unrest and a sense of powerlessness to change it.

It is not surprising that depression is the disease of this century. If it's true that when the state and its institutions exist, the individual is subjugated to external forces; then, I think, it's also true that the progress of the existent entails an increasing impossibility – or a personal sense of impossibility – to refuse it. In addition to subordination, routine, work, to social hierarchies and human alienation, to the economy and morality – that from the start have undermined the individual – there is today also a technological and scientific machine that robs us from the last bits of courage to desire something else. The objective alienation of individuals from their relationships, their energy and time are combined with their alienation from their emotions and their capacity to act. We are stuck in deep shit and are unable to change that – if this is real or fiction has no significance because the passing of one day to the next doesn't correspond to a real and direct desire. “To live” has become barely more than the obligations and roles we fulfil and no matter why, we feel damned to reproduce them.

What psychologists call “learned helplessness” goes hand in hand with lasting depression or sometimes it precedes it: resignation and the feeling that nothing can be done to change something in a negative situation. The feeling of being unable to avert negative events or experiences gives rise to a wretched resignation which reproduces itself once it has settled in.

Two psychologists (Seligman and Maier) with little empathy for dogs have, in an experiment in the sixties, imprisoned them and given them electro shocks without giving them a possibility to escape from the cage or from the shocks. In the beginning the dogs would rampage before the unpleasant stimuli started, but once they became conscious of the impossibility to stop this experience they would fast curl up in a corner of the cage – adapted and suffering. They learned there is nothing they can do. Helpless. They faced the situation obstinately while enduring the pain. The fact that the researcher later on changed a condition – the possibility to leave the cage – doesn't change anything: the dogs stay in the corner where they are curled up when the shocks are given.

Daily life is a huge cage in which we are regularly administered shocks. They don't kill us, but we continue to die – above all emotionally. And at the height of suffering that is imposed on us, we still bear feelings of guilt – we were not capable of dealing with it, we didn't adapt. Those who have more expectations fall deeper, but every one starts to stumble at some point – it is very democratic. We sustain the lasting slump in a long, unpleasant sensory inducement in which the “cage” and the “shocks” are one and the same, not distinguishable; we learn and internalise that everyday reactions (we can hardly speak of actions) are and will be like this so that the conditions of living cannot be changed, that it doesn't depend on us. In this way is my life not mine, and as much am I unable to stop the suffering I experience. Individual alienation and learned helplessness are two intertwined processes. The social order is a source for depression as well as a depressive factor.

Aside from our specific experiences that can lead us to sadness and helplessness, everyday life is more than sufficient grounds for such an immense spreading of depression.

As others have pointed out, this “moral anxiety” kills certainly more than any other poison. Whereas many psychological sessions argue that there are no grounds to be depressed, can we in this context on the contrary actually say that an analysis of reality shows us these grounds.

When depression, in this perspective, is a normal consequence of the normal course of events, then its demise depends on a rupture in the normal course of events.

Psychology attempts to bring peace to the restless minds through helping individuals to find their own way of dealing with suffering. At last the individual is capable of developing automatic strategies that fade out the suffering. But while adapting to a personal tragedy is a personal need, is it then valid to seek adjustment for a social – and thus externally imposed – tragedy? I think for example (concerning the first) of the death of a comrade, and (concerning the latter) of the obligation to work. Moreover, shall this adjustment even be possible? To continue with the same example, the loss of a loved one (because of death, flight, separation, estrangement) is a severe violence which can happen to you at a particular moment – and normally from that moment where we hit rock bottom, we start slowly to step by step get up again, which can take years – up until a satisfactory emotional stability. On the other hand, work is for example subtly violent which according to its scientific application and dosage can become excessive, and is daily – routinely and inevitably – applied for decades without end. We hit rock bottom without ever leaving it behind – that is the martyrdom to which we are condemned and from which we never even know how to adapt to it since there is no way to detract from it.

We curl up into a corner; there remains nothing but the cause of the problem and it shows itself ostentatiously so that we cannot forget it as much as we would want to.

I don't want to fall into the rhetoric that psychology only serves to have “the individual adapt to society” - even if it often does that. You ascertain your own individuality – which is already an achievement nowadays – and attempt to find ways in which you can minimize the suffering that you can't handle any more. But from the perspective of “social anxiety” of which I was speaking – when the social order is the cause of emotional suffering – is psychology only an anaesthetic. The anxiety we feel as well as the problems of our personal relationships are further maintained because the social structures require it. Happiness is difficult when we are forced into an activity which drags on for hours each day. Happiness is difficult when rigidity stands in the way of laughter, movement and joy. It is difficult when what we are is forced into a social role, when communication is not upfront, when integrity is punished...

To get rid of the sadness which is an outcome of the normal course of things, it is necessary to bring this course to a halt. And to end this course of things, a social response is needed, one clearly based in the individual but which goes beyond personal problems to understand it as a social consequence. In this case only revolt is therapeutic – to revolt as an immediate subversion of the social order and relations because they are the cage as well as the shocks within our lives.

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Translated for The Local Kids, Issue 3

First appeared as *Die tägliche Normalität als Quelle der Depression* in *Fernweh (Anarchistische Strassenzeitung, München)*, Issue 30, December 2018

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