

Are we fashioning ourselves into psychotics?

It seems French psychoanalysts are encountering more and more psychotics in their consulting rooms. **Henrietta Moore** and **Renata Salecl** ask whether we should be pessimistic about our future selves.

Psychotics are people who have their own very special view of reality, who have not, in Freud's famous formulation, agreed to give up something to be part of society. Such individuals often function perfectly well for long periods of time until a small event in their life triggers a full blown delusion.

French psychoanalysts are reviving Helen Deutsch's idea of so-called 'as if' personalities, these are people who might not actually develop a full blown psychosis but nonetheless have a psychotic structure. Some analysts call these cases 'ordinary psychosis' or 'white psychosis'. What distinguishes these individuals from neurotics is that they often express enormous certainty with regard to their perception of reality. They are people without doubts.

One French psychoanalyst describes the case of a male patient who had a number of successful careers in his life. As a young man, he had befriended a lawyer in a prominent firm and became a successful lawyer himself. Then he met a sailor on the street and followed him into the merchant navy. Later he encountered a business man and he subsequently turned himself into a successful business man. This was not a delusory form of psychosis triggered by a particular event. Rather it was a series of successful identifications where the patient not only mimicked other individuals, but was to use these powerful identifications with people he randomly encountered to transform his whole life without experiencing any apparent anxiety or doubt about the path he had chosen. When the psychoanalyst asked the patient why, given his success, he felt it necessary to enter analysis, he replied simply: 'My wife told me to do so.'

One of the features of psychotics is that they are obsessed with mimicry, shaping themselves according to one set of ideas and then just as quickly abandoning them. Late capitalism thrives on this very process not just in the market place, but at the level of identifications and social relations. Are we not all of us under the impression that we can have it all, that there is no need for us to acknowledge limitations? Do we not all believe in some measure that we can make out of our lives what we want, create ourselves, and hopefully even avoid mortality? A recent *Cosmopolitan* magazine headline read 'Become yourself, only a better one'. The self is something to be aspired for, like the latest fashion or the latest consumer object.

Self aspiration and the created self are seductive. The winner of the most recent UK *Big Brother* contest was a Portuguese transgender woman, Nadia Almada. When she was told that she had won, her response was: 'Now I am recognised as a woman.' With her self-transformation, she seemed to embody for the audience the ideology of self-creation that underpins today's consumerist society. It is perhaps not surprising that psychoanalysts report that they are encountering numbers of people who come into analysis with the demand: 'I want to reinvent myself'.

In late capitalism, the true self is increasingly self-made, and more than that an individual project. In the 1980s and 1990s drawing on late Foucault, academic theories emphasised the social construction of the self. However, now self construction has become a cultural imperative in the West, and the emphasis is not on social determinations, but on the individual project of self-making. This is related to what Ulrich Beck and others have called 'individualisation'. While individualisation takes many forms, it always involves a 'fetishisation' of the autonomous self, one that refuses to acknowledge the idea that society can set limits on self-aspiration. Paradoxically, the ideology of a limitless world is itself a product of late capitalism and the relentless drive of consumer society with its emphasis on endless choice and possibility.

But, the world of choice is not necessarily a comfortable one. In a world in which we are apparently free to make ourselves into whoever we choose, the existence of so many possibilities is a kind of tyranny. How do we choose, and what happens when we get it wrong? However, choice is a chimera because although our lives no longer seem subject to traditional forms of authority, like family, church and community, our self-fashioning relies deeply on identification with new forms of authority. Chief among these are celebrities. Early capitalism celebrated 'the self made man' who took entrepreneurial risk through exploiting his (sic) talent. Late capitalism has taken this a stage further and made the self made man – David Beckham, for instance – a commodity.

But, despite this process, there is little proof that contemporary society is increasingly psychotic. People are still deeply concerned with the question of who they are for others, and how they should interact with others. We certainly live in a world that is self-centred and encourages us

to 'love ourselves'. However, to follow this imperative is not a simple matter which is why finding an answer to it is a lucrative business. A simple search on Amazon.com tells us that there are 138,987 books which try to help you love yourself – including the *Learning to Love Yourself Workbook*, which shows that labour is as important a part of capitalism as ever. ■

Psychoanalysis@lse

A new research programme, psychoanalysis@lse, will start in 2005. Building on the School's expertise in social psychology, and the expertise of key visiting and Centennial professors, the research focus of psychoanalysis@lse will be on the potential of psychoanalysis and social psychology to assist understanding of issues of social justice and social conflicts in the context of wider contemporary social and economic transformations.

The programme begins with a series of debates on intolerance chaired by Susie Orbach, visiting professor in the Sociology Department, from January to June 2005. Renata Salecl will also be involved in this initiative. A conference 'Flesh and Blood: psychoanalysis, politics and resistance' will be held at LSE in summer 2005.



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