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New Forms of Self and Psychic Suffering Today and their Implications for Psychoanalysis

New forms of self and psychic suffering today and their implications for psychoanalysis

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Abstract This paper examines the emergence of new forms of self and psychic suffering in Western societies, contrasting them with earlier eras. Drawing on Frankfurt School critical theory and contemporary psychoanalytic insights, we argue that our neoliberal era has produced fragmented, exhausted selves struggling to maintain coherence amidst relentless demands for productivity and self-optimisation. Through composite case vignettes from psychoanalytic practice, the paper illustrates how individuals today often present with a split between outward functionality and inner turmoil, relying on external scaffolding like addictions or social media validation to hold themselves together. Unlike the repressed Victorian self or the empty postwar self, the contemporary self is characterised by a flattening of interiority, erosion of agency, and difficulty engaging in self-reflection or forming meaningful relationships. We contend that psychoanalysis faces significant challenges in this context, as its emphasis on intimacy, vulnerability and meaning-making clashes with neoliberal values. However, psychoanalysis can play a vital role in resistance by creating spaces for critical self-reflexivity, reconnecting individuals to their social contexts, and fostering genuine human connection. This requires moving beyond neutrality to actively engage with sociopolitical realities in the clinical setting. Ultimately, the paper suggests psychoanalysis must navigate a precarious position, being true to its core relational ethics while adapting to a cultural milieu that often devalues depth and interdependency. By illuminating how neoliberalism deforms personality and social bonds, psychoanalysis can contribute to imagining and cultivating more humanising alternatives.

Keywords Neoliberalism; Psychoanalysis; Selfhood; Psychic suffering; Critical theory; Social context

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We want here to lend our voices – and case vignettes – to the growing chorus that is suggesting the emergence of new forms of the self in Western societies, and reporting on how they manifest in private psychoanalytic practice. Philip Cushman was one of the first to propose that we are encountering a new self in the clinic: not the Victorian, sexually restricted self of Sigmund Freud's life, and not even the post Second World War empty self that (at least according to Cushman) largely replaced the former, but 'a flattened, multiple self' that is 'thin or superficial' and characterised by 'a way of being that has diverged sharply from the emphasis on interiority' that preceded it (Cushman, 2015, p. 426). This new self – manifesting in a variety of forms – presents also a new challenge to psychoanalysis: along with a flattening out of the self and an emphasis on the external, comes a lack of internal structure and something more akin to unthinking existence than unconscious repression. What is the wider social context which is reflected in this development? And how can and should the analyst respond to this? What role, if any, is left for psychoanalysis?

We proceed by first introducing case vignettes, which we suggest present us with a sample of new forms of the self that have emerged in our current era. In our analysis, we contrast the constitution of the self and its psychic suffering today with the ones that characterised two earlier eras – that of Freud and that of post Second World War Western societies (which we dub, for reasons that will emerge, 'Marcuse's era').[1] We conclude with reflections about what these developments mean for psychoanalysis – how they make psychoanalysis, in one sense, impossible and, in another, necessary and important.

Before proceeding, we would like to enter an important caveat about our case vignettes. These are chosen from a particular social group (people of means in private psychoanalytic practice) and location (London, UK). This limits the scope of what can be concluded. For example, the milieu of being in and out of work and welfare probably produced different forms of the self than the ones we encountered and report on here.[2] It might still be that there are general themes that cut across social class and location: for example, a delinking of individual and society (Layton, 2006). Yet, even leaving aside the possibility of such cross-cutting themes, we submit that there is something of interest in the cases we present: it is perhaps

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[1] In this process, we are adopting a similar tripartite division of the recent history of the self and its psychic suffering to the one by Cushman (2015) indicated above, and the one found in Stubenrauch (2024).

[2] See, for example, LaMothe (2017) for a focus on lower economic classes, drawing on Silva (2013), and concluding that those in lower economic classes believe 'themselves to be solely at fault while overlooking the hidden fist of the market' (LaMothe, 2017, p. 57).

particularly important to understand the forms of the self of those who are, on the face of it, successful in Western societies (their 'winners'), and perhaps particular telling about that society if they in the very activities that make them successful are, as we will see, self-destructing in one way or another.

One final preliminary: in addition to relational psychoanalysis and its openness to the idea that psychic suffering can result not just 'from reassertions of early states' but from 'relational failure' at a societal level (Layton, 2014, p. 466), we draw our inspiration from a group of intellectuals collectively known as the (early) Frankfurt School. These theorists, particularly from the 1930s onwards, embraced psycho-analysis in order to explore the profound connection between our psychic lives, on the one hand, and culture and society, on the other (see, for example, Whitebook, 2018). They argued that individual character structures and behaviours were constantly transformed by historical exigencies, but that this was at the same time obscured in the very process of sociohistorical shaping of individuals (for example, Horkheimer, 1935/1993). They resurrected a critical version of Hegel's concept of 'second nature' to capture how the shaping of individuals by their sociohistorical context gets lost in how habitual, even natural, the resulting psychic structures feel to us. As a result, we do not tend to question these structures or even recognise how they congeal into accepted norms and personality types (a similar idea is taken up in relational psychoanalysis literature, notably with Lynne Layton's concept of 'normative unconscious processes' (2008, pp. 1–24)). This paper is an attempt to make the social-historical shaping (more) visible, and to reflect on what the role of psychoanalysis is in such attempts.

Case vignettes: some of the new forms of self and psychic suffering today

Below, we offer four vignettes, which represent synthesised case studies of personality dynamics frequently encountered in contemporary psychoanalytic therapy. While based on common presentations, these vignettes *do not describe actual current or former patients*. Instead, they are composite characters constructed to illuminate emerging sociocultural psychological patterns. They serve an allegorical role in elucidating psychosocial forms rather than detailing specific therapies. To rephrase John Adlam (2015, p. 20), they allow us to write about the *sorts of things* that characterise people in the *sort of situations* that patients of a certain age and background in private psychoanalytic practice present with, without exposing any individual's particular suffering or circumstances. Through interpre-tive engagement, we seek to provide insight into the interior character structures and external cultural currents producing today's prevalent psychic struggles and consider the challenges they present for psychoanalytic work.

John – The high cost of success

John, a 32-year-old corporate lawyer, arrives at his sessions visibly exhausted, his once-crisp suit now rumpled. His eyes, bloodshot from lack of sleep, dart nervously as he speaks about his increasing reliance on cocaine to meet the relentless demands

of his job. The weight of expectation from senior partners and clients, and his identification with certain social ideals, creates immense pressure.

"I don't know who I am without this job," John confesses, his voice barely above a whisper. "But I'm not sure I can keep going like this either." The cocaine, once a temporary solution, has become a crutch he cannot discard, even as it chips away at his health and sense of self.

John's struggle epitomises the paradox of success in the current social system: the very qualities that make him 'valuable' in the market – his drive, his willingness to sacrifice – are bound to be exploited beyond any sustainable limit. His addiction is, thus, not just a personal failing, but a symptom of a system that demands inhuman levels of productivity, efficiency, and emotional detachment.

In therapy, John grapples with the realisation that his worth isn't solely determined by billable hours or client satisfaction. The analyst gently guides him towards reconnecting with his long-buried needs and emotions, helping him imagine a life where success is not synonymous with ways of being that are self-destructive. It is a slow, painful process, as John must confront not only his addiction, but the very foundations of his identity continuously shaped by neoliberal ideals.

James – Failed mirroring

James, a 24-year-old graduate student, hunches over his phone during sessions, his fingers twitching with the urge to check his social media accounts. His eyes, usually glued to the screen, occasionally meet the analyst's gaze, revealing a depth of pain and longing that his carefully curated online persona never shows.

"I know it's not real," James admits, referring to the validation he seeks online. "But it feels like the only way anyone will see me." His voice cracks, betraying the loneliness that lies beneath his digital facade. "I think I have body dysmorphia," James declares. He is desperate to find an answer as to why he spends over six hours every day taking selfies and obsessing over creating the perfect social media image so as to obtain more likes.

James's addiction to social media is more than a personal vulnerability or diagnostic disorder; it is a reflection of a society that has commodified human connection and self-worth. His desperate pursuit of likes and followers is a poignant attempt to fill the void left by meaningful human relationships in an increasingly atomised world.

The analyst faces the challenge of helping James see beyond the metrics of online popularity to find self-worth. It is a delicate balance, acknowledging the real pain and isolation James feels without hastily resorting to diagnostic short-cuts (body dysmorphia), while questioning the societal structures that have led him to seek validation in such a hollow form. Together, they need to work towards building a sense of self that is not perpetually dependent on external validation, a radical act in a world that constantly foregrounds such validation and quantifies human value.

Josh – Searching for intimacy in a market of one

Josh, 27, presents a facade of nonchalance about his porn addiction. "It's just what guys do – I am wired to need it," he says with a shrug, but his voice lacks conviction. As sessions progress, moments of vulnerability peek through his carefully constructed armour.

"Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to really connect with someone," Josh admits in a rare moment of openness. "But it feels safer this way." His words reveal the fear and longing beneath his defensive exterior. Josh's struggle is not just with porn; it is with intimacy itself in a world that often reduces human relationships to transactions as well as promotes certain types of masculinity.

The analyst's challenge lies in creating a space, where Josh can begin to see human relationships as a complex interaction, and where 'guys', too, can be vulnerable. It is a slow process, marked by Josh's resistance to reflecting on his issues and demanding from the analyst to provide concrete techniques to tackle problems, taking a transactional view of the therapeutic encounter, rather than one of subjects engaged in a mutual search for understanding. Yet, in the moments when Josh allows himself to be seen, there is a glimpse of the healing potential of profound human connection, standing in stark contrast to the empty comfort of his porn habit.

Jessica – Fragmented self

Jessica, an actress in her early 30s, enters each session as if she's stepping onto a stage, her posture perfect, her smile dazzling. But as she speaks, the facade crumbles, revealing the turmoil beneath. She assuages chronic emptiness through substance abuse and casual, often dangerous sexual liaisons, suggesting a desperation for relief from the psychic numbing of her real needs that she inflicts on herself. Her career choice that began as an outlet for self-expression has become subjugated towards the goal of achieving fame, whilst also leaving her fragile and volatile, without intimate bonds to provide grounding.

"I don't know who I am when I'm not performing," she confesses. "It's like I'm always on, always selling myself, and I'm so tired." The tears appearing in her eyes are in stark contrast to the composed image she usually projects.

Jessica's fragmentation illustrates the psychic toll of her environment's constant demand for external success, such as fame and recognition. Her struggle to integrate her public and private selves reflects the broader societal pressure to brand oneself, to be always 'on', always marketable.

In therapy, healing her divided self would require forging an identity that honours her multidimensionality beyond reductive external success. But given that her alienation is socially engendered, collective measures are also vital – cultivating cultural worlds oriented toward sustaining different parts of a person rather than eagerly burning through 'human capital' in a short-sighted quest for profits and prestige. Jessica would need to learn to question the societal pressure to split and sacrifice selfhood as the price for advancement, if she hopes to chart a new path aligned with her wellbeing.

Forms of the self: new and old

Let us begin by noting some common features of these four vignettes. First, all patients experience a stark split between their outer presentation and inner life, often accompanied by resistance to acknowledging this divide. Second, they seem to rely on external scaffolding (e.g., substances, social media, casual sex, fame, porn) to maintain functioning, coupled with a lack of internal structures for self-soothing and regulation. Third, they exhibit a strong identification with social expectations and indexing of self-worth to external standards (career success, social media likes). Fourth, the expectation of therapy in at least some of them is mainly around acquiring additional external supports (diagnosis, techniques) rather than fostering self-reflection or rebuilding the self. Finally, there is a pervasive sense that only the existing social reality is possible, leading to a desire for assimilation rather than exploration of alternatives.

These characteristics suggest a profound shift in the nature of psychological distress. Unlike the repressive structures of self that dominated earlier psychoanalytic theory, we now witness individuals struggling with a paradoxical state of consciousness without thinking or true self-reflection. Our patients (like John, James, Josh, and Jessica) find themselves caught in a painful cycle of neglect of their deepest needs and emotions. They have developed a protective, zombie-like numbness, not as a choice, but as a necessary adaptation to the relentless demands of their environment. This emotional detachment, while offering a temporary shield, ultimately leaves them feeling disconnected and alienated – from themselves and others. They move through life in a state of existential limbo, their actions often automatic and devoid of deeper meaning. Perhaps most poignantly, these individuals are haunted by a pervasive sense that their current identity and life circumstances are inescapable, foreclosing possibilities for growth, change, or alternative ways of being. This belief, deeply ingrained by societal pressures, creates a profound sense of hopelessness and entrapment, further reinforcing their emotional withdrawal and psychic suffering.

To fully appreciate these new forms of self and psychic suffering, we contrast them with earlier eras of Western modernity. While acknowledging the limitations of such broad strokes, we will present a Frankfurt School-inspired view of three distinct eras, focusing particularly on how the third – our current neoliberal age – has given rise to new forms of psychic distress.

Freud's era: the nineteenth and early twentieth century

The rise of industrial capitalism transformed societal fabric, challenging traditional structures with bourgeois individualism and free-market ideals.[3] This metamorphosis significantly influenced human psyche, creating new forms of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis emerged amidst this transformation and drew attention to what lies beneath this subjectivity: the tension between desires and society's requirements,

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[3] For a classic study of (central aspects of) this transition, see Weber (1905/1992).

and specifically how libidinal impulses and desires had to be first violently repressed and then sublimated in order to facilitate the conscious potentialities driven by the demands for the intensification of capitalist production.

This 'repressive sublimation' – to use a notion introduced by Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s rooted in the writings of Freud, Wilhelm Reich and T.W. Adorno – led to the distancing and progressive alienation from the individual's intimate desires and bodily urges. The supplanting of one's 'libidinal kernel' with a sense of sublimated 'second nature' was seen as evidence of cultural advancement, yet it came at a high psychic cost and inherently produced conflicts in the psychic economy.

The Frankfurt School theorists, particularly Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002), illuminated repressive sublimation through their interpretation of Odysseus's encounter with the sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*. By having himself bound to the ship's mast in order to enjoy the sirens' song without having to be lured by it to his death, Odysseus gains pleasure and validation from pitting his rational mind against the forces of nature and desire represented by the sirens without being overcome by them. He succeeds in taking (what he thinks is) the most efficient route to his destination, but this success in (purported) instrumental rationality comes at the expense of having to repress his intimate desires and bodily urges. This dramatises the repressive dimension of sublimation. Early capitalism progresses precisely through the subjugation and control of nature's chaotic and libidinal forces. Odysseus exemplifies the strained effort of the bourgeois rational mind to establish mastery over internal and external nature. His subjectivity is consolidated through this confrontation with the non-rational, in which reason is threatened but ultimately prevails. Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation also highlights the element of class domination connected to the bourgeois phase: the workers (symbolised for them by Odysseus's crew) are denied all sublimation, even the innocently rendered one of art, while the bourgeois master (Odysseus) mixes repression with enjoyment of sublimation in art.

Yet, in his transcendent moment of enjoying the sirens' song, Odysseus also experiences the promise of a blissful union of humanity and nature. In this respect, the sirens' song also represents the promise of art and aesthetics as a critique of repressive rationality, pointing towards a potential reconciliation of reason and nature. This highlights the unfulfilled emancipatory potential of repressive sublimation.

In the early Frankfurt School's uptake, psychoanalytic insights are historicised. Instead of reflecting a transhistorical, anthropological structure of human beings, Adorno and colleagues suggest that what presented itself in Freud's clinic was a particular configuration in which society and individuals were intertwined in that time, whereby the pressures of nineteenth century restrictive sexual mores and punitive superegos resulted in repressive sublimation and neuroses.

Marcuse's era: mid-twentieth century

The transition from early capitalism to Keynesian, social democratic capitalism brought new dynamics between individual psyche and socioeconomic realities. The emphasis shifted from production to social welfare and consumption, altering

patterns of repression and identification. Punitive superegos gave way to frail egos acting more as cheerleaders than disciplinarians.

This shift transformed the dominant mode of subjectivity and its relation to enjoyment. Early capitalism required sublimation of desires into socially acceptable channels. In contrast, the welfare state and consumerist ideology compelled individuals to consciously 'enjoy' as a duty, a form of 'repressive de-sublimation' (Marcuse, 1964/2002, pp. 59–86; 1970). The mid-twentieth century 'regular guy' and 'popular girl' were compelled to display and exaggerate happiness and enjoyment, but of specifically prescribed consumer pleasures in relation to the available prefabricated gratifications (Adorno, 1951/2005, pp. 58–60).

Adapting Horkheimer and Adorno's *Odyssey* interpretation, we might imagine Odysseus transforming his ship into a pleasure boat, where crew and leader revel in socially organised pleasures, drowning out the sirens' song. This pleasure boat, while comfortable, remained repressive in what and how its people pursued happiness, splitting off certain desires (such as desires for gender equality or homosexuality) and characterising them as deviant or pathological (see Cushman, 1994, pp. 826–827; Metzl, 2003, Chapters 2–3; 2009).

This new subjectivity created its own suffering and anxieties. Individuals were compelled to outwardly perform socially sanctioned modes of happiness, masking any inner dissatisfaction or anxiety. They were less concerned about repressing desires (and then sublimating this) than compelled to pursue specific desires (as much as something we are compelled into can still be considered a desire); and thereby to forge only limited parts into a unified self.[4]

The social role of the mid-twentieth century psychoanalyst (which in the US took predominantly the form of the 'ego-psychologist') was to get the individual to conform to social expectations of happiness and return to being a productive worker/consumer. With the expanding material wealth, low unemployment figures, and the welfare-state safety net of 1950s and 1960s, such conformity provided a relatively high degree of stability or even recognition, at least for male members in work who were valued as a unit of 'human capital' and often given jobs for life. However, although apparently 'freer', repressive de-sublimation is in fact more insidious, in that rather than enabling at least a possibility of awareness and recognition of a conflict, it coopted one's desires and then modified them in particular ways.

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[4] It is here where our account differs, to some extent, from Cushman's account of the empty self as characteristic of this period: it is true that the forms of self in question 'longed for the proper commodity—good part-objects or the empathic selfobject—in order to fill up the emptiness or expand and liberate the core "trueness" inside' (Cushman, 1994, p. 826), but we would maintain that the self was not entirely empty, containing instead certain ego ideals and congealed parts of the character that were seen to be in line with these ideals.

Our era: late twentieth and early twenty-first century

We follow here common practice to speak of our era in terms of 'neoliberalism'.[5] While the ideas driving neoliberalism had been around since the 1940s, they started to become a social-political reality from about 1980 onwards, after Margeret Thatcher (in 1979) and Ronald Reagan (in 1981) had gained power in the UK and USA, respectively. It was characterised by massive deregulation of financial and labour markets, by privatisation, and market-orientated governance – all elements continued, even strengthened after the original architects had been replaced by apparently 'left' successors (Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, etc.). Following Michel Foucault's (2004/2008) influential characterisation, we note that what made it 'neo' rather than classical liberalism is the driving thought that markets and market-conforming characters and behaviour do not arise naturally, but have to be actively created through interventions, notably by the state (be it by force, as the 'Iron Lady' often had it, or nudges, as a later Conservative Party Prime Minister, David Cameron, had it). As Thatcher put it famously: 'Economics are the method; the object is to change hearts and souls' (Butt, 1981). This meant promoting a hyper-competitive environment, configuring human beings always and everywhere as *homo economicus*, and spreading either markets or market-like organisation to every more spheres of life, including, for example, the National Health Service and universities in England. It also meant promoting metric-driven notions of worth and success, and the individualisation of risks, including scaling back the welfare system and making any remaining welfare payments highly conditional on certain market-conforming behaviour. It came with a privatisation of debt (Lazzarato, 2011/2012; Streeck, 2014). Its effects included the end of the job-for-life employment structures and the advent of zero-hour contracts and the gig economy of supposedly self-employed 'entrepreneurs', foregoing sick leave and holiday pay. Even those likely to gain employment have been caught in the sense of precarity that now seems to extend to all jobs – not just the day labourer of old, but also senior managers.

These developments have deeply influenced the psyche of the individual, leading to novel forms of alienation, anxiety, and identity struggles. The individuals from our vignettes were all born into neoliberalism once it had become more established from 1990s. They all come from one of the heartlands of neoliberalism, the UK, rather than countries where more welfare provision and other social safety nets have remained in place. They no longer resemble the nineteenth and early twentieth century neurotic types who struggled to repress their socially unacceptable desires. Nor do they match the mid-twentieth century individuals compelled to superficially 'enjoy' life, and repressively mask their suffering as 'happiness' and 'enjoyment'. What can we say about their ways of being, and consequently, suffering?

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[5] For influential accounts of neoliberalism, see Harvey, 2005; Dardot and Laval, 2013; and Brown, 2015; see also Palley, 2005. Our case vignettes and argument concern people who were shaped by the neoliberal era as described in these accounts. We remain agnostic as to whether the neoliberal phase of capitalism is coming to an end. For arguments to the effect that this is the case, see, for example, Varoufakis, 2023. Finally, our critical reflections are limited to the current neoliberal age in the West and its two predecessor eras; we do not here comment or reflect on other past or present systems.

One of the key sources of the new forms of distress has been the widely noted acceleration of life, and in particular working life, under neoliberalism (Rosa, 2005/2013; see also Bauman, 2007). It is a system that prioritises profits and short-term gains – maximising shareholder value – over human needs and wellbeing. This has led to excessive demands at work with long working hours, constant availability, and pressures to always perform at peak levels. These expectations are supported by a comparison-driven society that equates self-worth with economic output, appearances, and popularity, creating a culture of individualistic 'meritocracy' where any failure appears only due to the individual. As Layton (2009, p. 107) reports, following the work of Sennett (2006), this makes people continuously and overwhelmingly anxious about failure, about being found useless or redundant, and creates feelings of disposability.

A combination of the comparison-culture and huge inequalities between individuals, together with continuously reducing and offloading of formerly public and social responsibilities towards their citizens onto individuals themselves through ideas of individualistic 'meritocracy', ends up in increased repudiation of vulnerable states as shameful (Layton, 2009; 2014).The constant anxiety about being seen as a failure or redundant pushes individuals towards the belief that an image of strength and success needs to be maintained at all times as no vulnerability or weakness is allowed or will be tolerated by the system. Such level of pressures for performance creates an unsustainable level of hyperactivity, responsibility, burnout, or, in turn, callousness to ensure 'success' – as, for example, in John's case from the vignettes. David Butler (2015, p. 36) helpfully refers to this 'compulsory work ethic as "hyper-entrepreneurialism"'. Importantly, success or even survival in this system requires an individual neglecting or repudiating even their basic human, social and emotional needs, which are, paradoxically, sacrificed for the image of 'normality' and 'success' (think, particularly, of the vignettes of Josh and Jessica).

Thus, contemporary individuals, in navigating their neoliberal circumstances, are desperately trying to maintain a facade of 'normality' that includes displaying (purported) sovereignty, invulnerability, and constant self-optimisation (Brown, 2015). To do this, they are forced to deploy 'precarious defenses', which can be often seen in 'obsessive-compulsive processes such as addiction, or … compulsory procrastination' – as in our vignettes – seeking to 'create a psyche-somatic boundedness that arrests any sense of falling, leakage, or disintegration' (Butler, 2015, p. 36). The first aspect of these new forms of suffering, therefore, is one renouncing any possibility to acknowledge or express, never mind understand, one's suffering.

As we saw, the internalised ethos towards 'success' and 'advancement' at any personal cost, driven by anxiety about inadequacy, produces lives stripped of genuine connection – resembling what Rahel Jaeggi (2014) refers to as 'relation-shiplessness' and Eva Illouz (2007) emphasises as capitalism's harsh impact on our emotional lives. Following a consumerist logic of transactions and efficiency, no resources remain for genuine identity exploration and meaning-making beyond market metrics. This intensifies dependence on work identity, transforming even potentially fulfilling careers into depleting environments lacking social nurture (as, for example, in Jessica's case).

In all the ways mentioned above, the neoliberal economic system promotes the belief that individuals are to cope with all social risks and insecurities themselves, as 'responsible self-investor[s]', by developing a 'market self', reduced to instrumental reasoning, highly elastic and adaptable to the needs of the capital (LaMothe, 2017, p. 51). The instilled beliefs of endless responsibility, constant demands for availability and adaptation, and de-prioritising or commodifying social and emotional connections that could provide an alternative view or reflection, do not only further increase the anxiety and distress. They also lead individuals to 'misinterpret and misattribute the sources of their suffering' (LaMothe, 2017, p. 49), and consequently, misdirect their agency away from understanding, analysing and improving their situation. The neoliberal economic regime obscures the relation between the distress that one feels and one's environment.

To sustain the levels of distress with an exhausted and overwhelmed mind and impoverished social and relational holding, requires significant numbing or compartmentalising. This is often achieved through various types of 'self-medication', whether drugs, alcohol, consumption of online media, or other addictions, which are often, as we saw in the vignettes, explained away as lifestyle choices. Although offering temporary relief by covering up for the real issues and allowing minimal functioning, they quickly become self-destructive and erode agency further, adding to fragmentation and a loss of selfhood. This shift is evident not only in the clinical setting but also in cultural critiques of our 'burnout society' (Han, 2011/2015).

The numbed and repudiated parts of the self result in feelings of alienation, loneliness, dissatisfaction, rage and inner turmoil. Ever more frequently, individuals (like James) rely on psychiatric diagnostic labels to make sense of their predicaments, believing that psychopharmacology can 'fix' their brains and psychic turmoil, or at the very least, provide momentary get-out-of-jail cards in the hypercompetitive environment that makes so little allowance for anything else. This is in part due to wider cultural impulses towards the commodification of relationships and finding quick solutions. However, it is also because the situation of repudiation of vulnerability, fear of being found a failure or disposable, and one's internalising sole responsibility for one's situation, makes exploring these feelings feel too dangerous.

What can be observed today suggests a more profound loss of selfhood and individuation than in previous eras. The condition of subjectivity today no longer revolves around the repressive sublimation or even de-sublimation of desire, which both required at least some internal structure to the self.[6] It could even be argued that the culture promotes wholesale abandonment of (unconscious) repression itself as a structuring principle, encouraging individuals to pursue any desire via

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[6] While neoliberalism hasn't wholly displaced earlier forms of subjectivity and suffering, it has transformed them. Marcuse's concept of 'repressive de-sublimation' remains relevant, particularly regarding sexual taboos like masturbation and pornography consumption (consider again Josh). However, this de-sublimation is now more deeply entwined with commodification, creating billion-dollar industries which, as one of our reviewers put it, 'at first glance may appear liberating as a removal of a social prohibition, but create new forms of surplus repression in flattening what could be emancipating, polymorphous eroticism into highly repetitive, phallocentric, depictions of penetrative sex'.

neoliberal mantras that 'everything is possible' through individual effort and ambition. Importantly, however, the abandonment or erasure of (unconscious) repression is here not a liberation. It is in stark contrast with the reality of the system that is neither really liberal nor supportive of human needs, that drives many people towards self-destruction just to be able to 'survive' the current moment, and in which the overwhelming social and economic pressures on the individual, which they are not able to sustain and are at odds with human needs, eventually fracture selfhood. Ironically, this all happens in a context presenting itself as fostering self-realisation and genuine individuality.

For all their criticisms of repression, early Frankfurt School theorists recognised that some 'basic repression' is inevitable for human civilisation, in contrast to 'surplus repression' that is merely required for social domination and would be redundant and avoided in a free society (Marcuse, 1955, p. 35). They also recognised that sublimation is a potentially good and needed structuring principle (Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 79). Through sublimation autonomous subjectivity emerges (or, at least, can emerge), allowing us to be individuals who have some sense and control over both our inner experience and desires, and our outer experience and circumstances as well as the ability to relate critically to our social surroundings. It enables having a porous but somewhat stable boundary between our unconscious and conscious. This requires time and constant energy to be maintained, something that seems no longer to be available under the constant pressures to which this phase of capitalism subjects a person.[7]

To adaptively use the sirens' analogy again for our neoliberal times, Odysseus is now too exhausted to even register the sirens' song. After years of war and wandering, or perhaps too many sirens' songs, he has become numb and apathetic. The hero who once surged with vigour and curiosity now drifts listlessly, neither stirred to passion nor tempted to ruin, he passes the sirens with barely a glance or consumes their song as just another product. His weariness acts as armour against their music. Or maybe Odysseus has already succumbed to consuming narcotics, or engaging in addictive behaviours that erase his memories and dull his desires. He floats aimlessly from one experience to the next, unmoved by the world around him. He has chemically regulated his own nature, severing his connection to the present.

In these scenarios, Odysseus does not regulate his bodily and psychic energies through rational control, nor even with a controlled form of de-sublimation. His total exhaustion or intoxication mean he cannot regulate anymore *at all*. The hard-won mastery of the Enlightenment hero devolves into joyless endurance or addicted oblivion. He becomes incapable of chasing or even reflecting on what he wants, but also loses his agency in the process.

Today's individuals cope by adopting passive postures of detachment or numbing themselves, to protect themselves from risky real desires and needs, and reduce the pressures and suffering. Weary, apathetic, addicted, or over-medicated, having tried everything, they float past the songs of their inner sirens, deaf to their pull. But this

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[7] Recalcati (2021) suggests that with the end of a structured self capable of repression, the unconscious as traditionally understood – as born from repression – also disappears, although what results is far from transparency of the self either, but a more unstructured inner turmoil.

comes at the cost of vitality: instead of harnessing their impulses, they resign themselves to over-stimulation or empty disengagement.

While these observations emerge from a limited number of cases in a private psychoanalytic practice, their relevance extends far beyond it and its application to famous actors or high-powered attorneys. Most of us buy into the achievement ethos and rely on external crutches in our own lives to hold it together, as we aimlessly flick through social media posts, or binge-watch TV series, or give into workaholic tendencies, or use shopping to compensate for our anxieties and burnouts. Furthermore, the social pressures and their effects on people have become part of our cultural world, making it onto our televisions and streaming devices (think of *The Idol*, *Industry* or *Succession*).

Psychoanalysis's survival in our neoliberal times

In the neoliberal landscape, psychoanalysis finds itself in a precarious position. Its values of relationality and interdependency contradict the individualism and transactional logic of neoliberalism. While mid-twentieth century psychoanalysts focused on 'normalising' patients within a society that still offered meaningful identities in relatively stable social positions, today's neoliberal capitalism has eroded personal significance, leaving individuals feeling replaceable, disposable, with their subjectivities gradually unravelling. Even those in privileged positions struggle, clinging to a sense of self-worth through responding to constant demands for availability, maddening competition, and relentless pressures to enhance their value and skills. They also, importantly, often – although this did not feature in our vignettes – are only able to cling onto their sense of self-worth by differentiating themselves from and criticising the people perceived to be below them in the work or class hierarchy, often compromising their values and the sense of self in the process (Layton, 2009; 2014). They themselves can only keep functioning with copious distractions and addictions, recognising the lack of any real social safety net that could cushion failure. This leaves everyone perpetually one misstep away from devaluation and precarity (Butler, 2004).

In such an environment, the self loses its integrity and coherence, becoming ever more unstable and malleable, requiring external scaffolding to maintain minimal functioning. This scaffolding includes not just medication or diagnoses as mentioned above, but also relationships with therapists, life coaches, yoga teachers, multiple partners, and so on, that are supposed to help oneself hold oneself together. Paradoxically, these supports often enable further instability and self-erosion.

The clinic lays bare the symptoms of the self's inevitable disintegration when confronting a social order where one can only survive through paradoxes: success at the price of self-destruction, a self that is fashioned on the difference from a devalued other and at the sacrifice of one's own values, a mantra that everything is possible although one can feel that no one can humanly achieve it. Everyday survival seems to require adhering to the system's requirements, lest you are left behind and fall out of the game altogether, as only this path appears to allow some semblance of 'normality' for one more day.

This self-disintegration often presents in the psychoanalytic clinic as burnout, exhaustion, and even contemplation of suicide, yet most patients shrink from the act, not necessarily out of fear of death itself, but rather a dread that even death could somehow 'miscarry', failing to provide the longed-for escape or resolution. Trapped in life yet unable to 'die', they inhabit a liminal space between the two, a zombie-like animated wasteland. Psychoanalysis itself becomes primarily about managing this 'semi-automatic' state of being that lacks vitality rather than analysing inner conflicts; shoring up a dissolving self, and providing respite from perpetual crisis, rather than engaging with depth psychology.

The contemporary psychoanalytic process aims to foster a nurturing space for relearning intimacy and mutuality. Through emotional attunement and bearing witness, analyst and patient co-create a relationship of profound trust and vulnerability. Yet, for many patients, the vulnerability and loss of control intrinsic to intimacy provokes unbearable anxiety linked to fears of engulfment or exposure. Psychoanalysis honours the complexity of these feelings rather than pathologising them, yet the social and work environments of the patients often don't.

As we have seen from our clinical vignettes, the patients' issues highlight how the instrumentalism driving social connections under neoliberalism can sometimes make it hard for people to find connection and support or genuinely engage with others. While therapy, particularly psychoanalysis, can offer a space for connection and self-discovery, it is clear that broader changes in society are also needed to truly support people like John, James, Josh and Jessica. Their stories remind us of the importance of empathy, meaningful human connection, and creating environments where it is allowed to be vulnerable and ask for help. They also highlight how crucial it is to look beyond quick fixes and surface-level solutions when it comes to mental health and personal growth.

Is psychoanalytic work still possible today? The first crucial step is to create a space where individuals can connect their distress to the social systems they inhabit, questioning the values they uphold and the personal cost of their success. The internalisation of neoliberal beliefs interferes with individuals' ability to correctly interpret their experiences (LaMothe, 2017, p. 56), misdirecting their agency and hindering their capacity to act effectively. Two neoliberal narratives – individualism and self-reliance (LaMothe, 2017), and the repudiation of vulnerability (Layton, 2009) – are particularly significant. These narratives create an illusion of agency, but are leading individuals to perceive their suffering as personal failure rather than the result of broader social forces. Psychoanalysis can support the dismantling of these internalised dynamics, helping individuals work through the resulting sense of powerlessness. However, as LaMothe (2017) argues, psychoanalysis must extend beyond individual exploration to include re-engagement with social associations that address social, political and economic ills.

This approach requires departing from the traditional norm of neutrality in psychoanalysis, moving from a two-person to a three-person psychology, whereby 'three-ness' refers to 'the inclusion of the everpresent, interpenetrating social realm'

(Cushman, 1994, p. 832).[8] And it would involve actively striving for changes in the social fabric, such as through professional associations, drawing on 'the private pain observed in the clinical situation' as 'testimony to the impingements of an increasingly traumatogenic social order' (Hollander, 2017, p. 648) and as motivation to seek change.

This does not mean being partisan in a pejorative sense: it would be about bringing the wider social forces and structures into the conversation to counter the individualising of risk and delinking from the social (see also Eisold, 2020), not about prescribing a specific course of action in relation to them. It is more about bringing in sociology than about bringing in a particular political view. As Fanon emphasised, this approach enables the patient 'to choose an action with respect to *the real source of the conflict*' (Fanon quoted in LaMothe, 2017, pp. 49, 63), where this real source, often, is (or at least includes) the social structure.[9]

As a number of analysts have already pointed out, the long-held norm of neutrality is unrealisable anyway. For example, Nancy Caro Hollander (2017) and Lynne Layton (2009) argue that all clinical choices are inherently political, and maintaining a supposedly neutral stance can perpetuate the very norms contributing to patients' psychic pain. Cushman (1994) further contends that this false neutrality is a political act that evades responsibility for the unavoidable value judgments in therapy. Instead of feigned neutrality, psychoanalysts should offer critical self-reflexivity, questioning both themselves and the sociopolitical context – a practice that stands in opposition to neoliberal values (Cushman, 2015, p. 423). This might mean exemplifying our 'ability to mourn our losses; face uncertainty; and tolerate ambiguity, paradox, and vulnerability' (Hollander, 2017, p. 643).

Psychoanalysis can also expose how viewing others as mere objects for personal gain inflicts psychological wounds, leading to alienation and isolation. It connects individual suffering to the objectifying social relations perpetuated by capitalism. As a hermeneutic practice, psychoanalysis acknowledges that human subjectivity is shaped by social interactions and cultural discourses, challenging neoliberalism's illusion of the self-sufficient autonomous individual. It allows patients to question this ideology, reminding them, as Cushman (2015) notes, that relationships are fundamental to human flourishing. In this sense, psychoanalysis creates islands of relational healing that disrupt social atomisation and could engender a form of everyday resistance and strengthen 'the bedrock of democratic citizenship' (Cushman, 2015, p. 450).

However, the future of psychoanalysis as a resistance-fostering practice is uncertain. It faces pressures from medicalisation of mental healthcare, consumer demands for quick fixes, and the alignment with capitalist narratives of productivity. To preserve its integrity, psychoanalysis must resist devolving into a tool for adapting to the status quo, continuing to uphold the ethics of relationality and meaning-making while integrating the wider social context into clinical practice.

[8] This notion of 'three-ness' is different from, albeit not incompatible with, the aspirational thirdness found in Jessica Benjamin's (2004) work and taken up by others in relational psychoanalysis (Layton, 2008).

[9] For examples of what this might look like, consider the two case studies discussed in Hollander (2017, pp. 645–647); see also the case study in LaMothe (2017, pp. 64–66) and in Layton (2006, pp. 110–116).

Although increasingly out of sync with the surrounding culture, psychoanalysis's capacity to nurture intimate relationships suggests its potential for resistance

The early Frankfurt School advanced the thesis of the demise of individuality. It appears even more salient today than when proposed in the mid-twentieth century. Still, we have suggested that psychoanalysis can help reveal the 'normal sickness' inherent in contemporary social relations and values, and their role in dismantling the coherent individual self that is required for depth analysis. By elucidating how neoliberalism's demands deform personality, psychoanalysis clarifies the importance of recuperating humanising social bonds, meaning, and alternative structures beyond their reach – and can play, we suggested, a vital role in such recuperation. Perhaps, in this way, we could finally move beyond our Odyssean bind: no longer needing to repress desires that return as external siren songs; nor desperately pursuing socially sanctioned pleasures that deafen us to deeper longings; nor fragmenting ourselves through intoxication until we cannot hear the music at all. Instead, we might attune both to our internal truths and to others, enabling thus genuine relationships beyond these defensive manoeuvres against desire.

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