

The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education

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The book is about the trend in education, at all levels, from primary through secondary to FE and University towards a new prioritisation of the emotions in learning. Principals (or what the authors might term 'orthodoxies') of therapy are being applied to education.

The government has a programme called SEAL – social and emotional aspects of learning. Part of this programme is based on the idea that there are emotional aspects of learning and attending to them will increase learning. Parts of the programme however go well beyond this and simply promote the language and practices of psychotherapy in schools. This programme initiated in primary schools but has recently been exported to secondary schools. The authors claim that the psychotherapeutic trend towards seeing students as vulnerable and in need of support has a long history in Further Education but it has been given a new impetus and political dimension in the current climate.

Of particular interest is the authors' thesis that the left has abandoned notions of people themselves fighting against oppression and thus gaining dignity in the process in favour of a culture of the victim. Unions are now concerned not with rights but with anti-bullying campaigns. The political struggle has been given up and replaced with a concern to offer individuals 'support'.

The authors share with Professor Frank Furedi (*Therapy Culture*) - the basic critique that all the 'support' and apparent concern – albeit commercial – for wounded individuals offered by therapy, and its prioritisation of the emotions, leads to diminished selves. From demeaning and effectively compulsory 'circle time' in primary schools to 'learning power' programmes and peer mentoring in secondary schools to the endless monitoring and self-surveillance techniques in FE to the emphasis on vulnerability in the University the authors depict an educational world which has surrendered to therapy 'professionals'. A training in appropriate emotional responses and a cultivation of a passive narcissism has become the norm.

This culminates in the 'therapeutic workplace'. Significantly the authors suggest that the use of therapy techniques in the workplace is not a sinister attempt by capitalists to control workers but in fact lies in a breakdown of civil society. The authors argue that with a breakdown in civil support systems people increasingly look to work for social fulfilment. In the words of the authors the workplace becomes 'overburdened' with the emotional demands of employees and managers alike, (though it is management who ultimately benefits).

The authors trace the development of therapy culture from the sixties to the present day citing several texts which they claim to be key. They identify the breakdown of religion and an attempt to escape the tyranny of the family as key elements in the start of a narcissistic turn inwards. They argue that the process has been accelerated in Britain by New Labour which, being a party without political (class) roots, has latched on to popular therapy culture as a way of connecting with the public.

The authors note that there is a sinister link between the authoritarian anti-social behaviour campaign and therapy culture. Parenting classes imposed by the courts are an obvious example. The sense is that if people won't take the support we'll make them. In schools a concern with vulnerability is giving way to a programme that actively promotes 'emotional well-being' as part of the curriculum. This is a bizarre kind of attempt by government to

order up happiness by edict. The authors point out that the SEAL programmes which are so enthusiastically promoted by New Labour are based essentially on pop-psychology. They are not the result of empirical investigation but rather gain their legitimacy because they echo what is going on in popular culture.

The authors argue that once people cease to follow externally imposed goals and instead seek 'self-fulfilment' as the primary aim of life it is inevitable that therapy becomes an end in itself. There is nothing left to do but the endless pursuit of 'self-development' through therapy. As R.D. Laing remarked "therapy is a way of life".

The authors see this as representing an essentially narcissistic turn inwards – away from real problems of life which are met in the 'external' world. Therapy believes that people are weak and vulnerable; everyone is a victim and external challenges are best avoided. In contrast the authors believe that young people benefit from engaging with the world and not being wrapped in cotton-wool. They argue that adult students are demeaned by emphasising the benefits to 'self-esteem' of participating in adult education above the increased subject or craft knowledge they gain.

This is a stunning work. The insights into psychotherapy are to the point. The collection of evidence that there is indeed a 'therapeutic turn' in education is powerful. The arguments about the workplace being overburdened with emotional demands and the link between therapeutic education and the decline of traditional political struggles are interesting – even if the claim cited by the authors of Terry Eagleton that post-modern thought is a political response to the collapse of communism sounds somewhat like that of a University marxist. (I would argue that philosophical movements have a history of their own which is not reducible to political events; post-modernism is one place to go after phenomenology).

It is a pity that the book has gone to print in draft form. There are numerous mistakes which reflect various drafting processes and in at least one place this renders the meaning unintelligible.

The problem with this book is that the authors promote a vision of education which is indeed fairly traditional. They argue for a compulsory (this is implied) liberal humanist education based around subjects and the authority of teachers. In essence they want a restoration of the previous state of affairs. At one point there is the regrettable paragraph that "For us, it is stating the obvious that emotions are involved in teaching but primarily with the intention and not with the content of what is transmitted. Knowledge can be taught passionately or indifferently by and to people who may be distraught, upset, happy or content. It does not matter. Knowledge, as it were, conquers all". This does indeed sound cold. It is also wrong; a passionate teacher makes all the difference. A passionate teacher builds a relationship with his students.

More seriously the vision of education here is one which has itself not been subject to criticism. This paragraph, as well as the authors' assertions about the authority of teachers, indicate that they see education as a transmission of knowledge; 'knowledge can be taught'. They dismiss advocates of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) as being naïve liberals, because the ideas of Paulo Freire arose in a very different cultural and political situation to ours (Latin America and working with oppressed illiterate peasants). There may be arm-chair Freirists in education; I don't know. But, leaving aside Paulo Freire's rather prescriptive Marxism what for this writer is exciting about Paulo Freire is that he does a critique of the vision of education which sees it as the transmission of knowledge from experts to passive students who are seen as vessels to be filled up,

calling this vision the 'banking concept of education'. Freire argues for an approach which is based around developing the students' critical faculties through a mutual and collaborative exploration of a topic with the teacher as a kind of more experienced student. Essentially; the teacher does not claim authoritative knowledge and thus does not need to claim authority. And indeed this is the case as a simple phenomenology of teaching would show; however much of a subject expert I may be it is never the case that 'I, the teacher, knows' and my students don't. All that can truly be said is that most of the time I am likely to know somewhat more than the students. Everyone – Latin American peasant or modern European schoolboy – has the capacity for critical thought. Once this is recognized the authoritarian nature of the teacher-pupil relationship has to be abandoned. It is this authoritarian relationship which does indeed alienate so many students, especially working class ones, in schools. For this writer the problem with Paulo Friere is that if you have to be told then you won't get it anyway.

The authors of this book want an education which is based on the Enlightenment values of 'reason, science and progress'. This is indeed a worthy aim. But it may be unrealistic. The disillusionment with religion (at least churches) has no doubt been key to the success of therapy. Indeed the case is made and the authors refer to it that therapy is a new kind of asceticism. However; it may be that there is also a disenchantment with science, reason and progress. Science seems to have reached a limit in many areas; apart from the troubling world of genetic manipulation and Dolly the sheep there are no longer exciting discoveries to be made that speak to the public. (The Higgs-boson particle is never going to compete with Madonna on the front-page of the tabloids). Materially we have progressed a long way in the last three hundred years; destitution has been abolished. Socially too there has been progress in many fields in the last three hundred years; the political emancipation of women is usually seen as progress (other than perhaps by Nietzsche); many see the replacing of household servants with consumer products to be a sign of progress. What remains? Certainly we have not achieved social justice. Our economic and political system enshrines alienation, even if we have abolished destitution. As a species we are still involved in very large scale wars. Biodiversity is rapidly declining as our impact on the environment continues to grow. (This is a scientific and perhaps critical matter though it may take on emotional dimensions in popular presentations). Many individuals do indeed feel their lives to be missing something.

We would suggest that reason is needed now more than ever, in the form of critical thinking rather than in the field of scientific expertise. This is not to denigrate science but to note that it appears that the more pressing problems for Western societies are now no longer those which require scientific knowledge to solve but those more intractable problems of existence and social organisation which require critical thinking.

Simply making more or better machines is no longer the answer. The 'crisis' in the West may be spiritual or existential. It is possible and we suggest this as scope for thinking rather than as a ready-made answer that the success of therapy and therapy culture is because it *appears* to answer to peoples' needs for meaning and a more compassionate society. In fact the therapy industry may be a crude form of exploitation, financial and emotional, of 'patients', who do not have solid roots, adrift in a society which is wholly individualistic, ready to succumb to the empty promise of a practice which offers 'self-fulfilment' mistaking the feeling of being taken 'very seriously' for having roots. Therapy it seems to us combines consumerism – the idea that everything can be bought – with elements drawn largely from psycho-analysis, itself a rewrite of ascetic Christianity. We would suggest though that 'reason, science and progress', as a package has reached a turning point of sorts. It can no longer solve the problems it has brought into being – such

as alienation suffered in capitalism. Thus we do not think that an education based on 'reason, science and progress' is as relevant as it used to be. Nor, though, do we believe in abandoning enlightenment values – simply though we believe more critical thinking is needed.

Therapy and pop therapy in schools is indeed a horrible diminished and diminishing phenomenon. The strength of this book is that it provides a timely critique of this. In our view though therapeutic education is a move from bad (authoritarian, banking system education) to worse (demeaning emotional intrusiveness and control in new forms of emotional abuse legitimised by being called 'therapeutic').

Addendum - Emotionalism

The legitimization of a new form of abuse.

It seems that we are addicted to abuse. At the moment in the name of 'sharing' or 'being open' or 'emotional intelligence' new forms of abuse are being developed.

Having outlawed the obvious forms of abuse, sexual and physical abuse, new forms are being brought in. This movement which claims to be a kind of enlightenment but is in fact a cloak for new ways to abuse children is sweeping the 'caring' professions. The organization which represents private psychotherapists even has the temerity to claim an equivalent professional status with psychologists and psychiatrists for these self-appointed and self-qualified impostors. In as much as this falsification is allowed this sets the tone for the intellectual standards that prevail.

This is an example;

A few years ago a case conference for children in care would have been an adult centered business; the child would perhaps hardly have been consulted and adults would have gone about their business making decisions "in the child's best interests". Perhaps the child was given an opportunity to speak in a rather limited way. In the contemporary inclusive and 'sensitive' world this has all changed. I heard today that in one county the trend now is for cases to be convened in the child's place of residence. This is a good example of the trend. It is done in the name of inclusion. It sounds inclusive, democratic even. It sounds sensitive to the child; all these professionals going out of their way to meet the child on his own ground.

But, think about it a bit more. Is the child 'included' or being sent up? In fact his being a child is emphasized to ridiculous proportions; he is being infantilized. As if he couldn't get on a bus or get a lift from a care worker. Worse; because the meeting has come to him he is being silenced. If 10 'professionals' descend on his home and move in, without his invitation, but rather at the invitation of the home managers, this emphasizes his powerlessness. He can speak now but only as a child. A new tactic of power.

This trend which in its broadest terms is about using inclusion and 'support' to render people powerless is rapidly becoming the main tactic of power in dealing with the vulnerable. We used to abuse them for kicks or treat them in an authoritarian manner; now we just silence them with 'support'

All the emotionalism of the new culture is in fact emotional weakness not strength. It is emotional weakness which emotes and constantly 'goes for the emotions' in every encounter. I doubt whether there is a need to counter this trend with 'knowledge'. I doubt the extent to which it should be read as Professor Furedi does as a disenchantment with the enlightenment. This trend is simply a spurt of weakness - and a new tactic that joins personal weakness to the tactics and operations of power.

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