

Mental illness and the American Dream: Part 2

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This is the conclusion of a two-part series. The first part appeared on March 24.

The American dream

Let's say what the Surgeon-General's report could not: the underlying cause of mental illness is desperate unhappiness. This is so obvious (at least to the ideologically unblinkered) that it almost seems to cry out from the report's findings. Add to this the fact that the epidemic of mental illness is global (with the statistics for other industrialized countries much the same as US levels or else quickly catching up to them) and something else becomes clear—that the underlying cause of the unhappiness is capitalism.

But probably nowhere else in the world is unhappiness a more unpopular subject than in the land of the American dream. Everywhere you are surrounded by images of happiness and success—TV sitcoms and Hollywood happy endings and Calvin Klein billboards and celebrity faces staring at you from virtually every magazine cover and tabloid front page. Of course bad news gets lots of attention, but only after it's been sensationalized (or demonized or trivialized) by the mass media—that is, after it's been stripped of its relevance to most people's lives; sensibilities get so deadened in this way that a basketball game can be more involving than watching a city get blown up. This kind of unhappiness does little to disrupt the veneer of happiness that envelops American society.

In official ideology, social classes don't exist in America, only "winners" and "losers" do, and the promise of the American dream is that everybody can be a "winner." That dream was always a mirage; 150 years ago, Thoreau already saw the unhappy truth: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." [1] Since that time, the mirage has become much more sophisticated and alluring: the cult of success and celebrity lets everyone be a "winner" vicariously. But the desperation has also intensified. Consider, for instance, the misery contained in these facts: America now has the longest work year of any industrialized country in the world. The average American married couple now works 6 weeks more each year than it did in 1989 (and 15 weeks more than it did in 1979). [2] What's left of life after a 50- or 55-hour workweek and another 25 to 30 hours of unpaid work at home? People are worked like machines and run into the ground—until their hearts stop or their minds snap. And, for all that sacrifice, they have less and less to show for it, as living standards fall and the class divide broadens into a chasm. It almost goes without saying that most people are condemned to mind-numbing (and eventually soul-destroying) jobs, which nevertheless they're terrified of losing. And family life, which used to be, at least to some extent, a haven from the misery of the outside world is now more likely to be itself a source of pain and distress that is often emotionally devastating.

For many people it keeps getting harder to bear their desperation quietly. But what can they do? Who can they turn to? The traditional channels for social discontent—the Democratic Party, the trade unions, protest movements—are all dead ends, and widely perceived as such. Besides, in a world that just seems to stare back at you with a blank smile, it's difficult even to see what connection your desperation has with reality. And then

there is the immense pressure to conform that makes itself felt in every corner of American life, so that it isn't just those with diagnosable mental illnesses who are "stigmatized" but all too often anyone who "acts weird" or who simply doesn't "fit in." Under these conditions, it isn't any wonder that millions of people break down, dealing with an unbearable reality by what Freud called a "flight into illness." Millions more are almost as miserable, but because they go on functioning, their condition passes for "normal." And finally there are those who, instead of internalizing their despair, lash out in explosive rage, most often at their loved ones but increasingly in horrifying spasms of indiscriminate carnage which the media persists in characterizing as "meaningless" violence.

People and things

So we confront a stark contradiction—so much unhappiness in a country that was founded on the principle of "the pursuit of happiness." True, this principle is deceptive since what it promises isn't happiness but just the chance to pursue it, and what most people get is endless pursuit and precious little joy. Still, the identification of American society with happiness played an enormous role in the political and ideological struggles of the twentieth century: in contrast to the grim repressiveness of Soviet society, America seemed a "free" country where individuals could live any way they wanted. And with the postwar boom and the rise of consumerism, happiness was on sale everywhere. Never have the pleasures of the marketplace been more mesmerizing—the glitter of the shopping mall, the seductiveness of advertising, the magical aura that seems to surround every new commodity; companies like Nike don't sell mere products anymore, they sell embodiments of dreams. But for all the hype and flashiness, the basic message is as old as capitalism: possessions are what make you happy. Here we have the "common sense" of the marketplace in all its crudeness: everything (and everyone) is dealt with in terms of buying and selling, every relationship is reduced to what Marx once called a "cash nexus." This idea is so commonplace under capitalism that we rarely notice how perverse it is, because what it really amounts to saying is that happiness derives *not from people but from things*. In other words, this is a kind of happiness that has been *dehumanized*.

The question is—is it still happiness? Obviously, the great majority believe it is: consumerism is incredibly popular. But the epidemic of mental illness shows that there is a terrible gulf between what people think they feel and what they really do. Assaulted by the non-stop propaganda machine of advertising, people can convince themselves for a while that they are happy. But eventually happiness has to bear some relation to the satisfaction of real needs and desires or else it is an illusion, a kind of euphoria not so different from what one can get out of a bottle or in a church. A dehumanized happiness is a contradiction in terms: genuine happiness can only come from people, not from things. This isn't to deny that happiness requires a certain level of material comfort: nobody can be happy if, say, they are starving or homeless. But things can only provide the preconditions for happiness, they aren't a substitute for it. A full belly and a roof over one's head isn't happiness but subsistence, and if that is all there is to life, then life is a misery.

In capitalism, the forms of happiness are constantly passed off as its content. Food is a good example: the attention lavished these days on cooking and going out to restaurants is extraordinary, and yet very little of this has to do with the pleasure of eating. Mostly it has to do with the social cachet to be gained from cultivating a refined taste in food and wine—or to put it more indelicately, snob appeal. Instead of a celebration of eating, we get the *fetishizing* of food. If happiness were the main concern, then it would quickly become apparent that there are two conditions that make for a good meal—good food *and* good company. But no attention is paid to the second of these conditions because capitalist society is organically incapable of doing anything about it. Pretentiousness and arrogance are the rule in fancy restaurants, which almost always leaves a bad taste in your mouth no matter how good the food is; meanwhile, in the fast food chains across the social divide, people mechanically eat denatured, assembly-line food in a cheerless environment where the only sign of happiness is the plastic smile on the Ronald McDonald dummy.

Why is the pleasure of good company such a rare experience? Because friendship, camaraderie and community are all marginalized within capitalism: to the extent that they exist, they do so in spite of the society, not because of it. In a system that only recognizes individuals as buyers and sellers, what common ground can there be between them? People live in "communities" but without any shared bonds or common interests between them, and this void expresses itself in the "heart" of these communities which is typically the shopping mall, a place where nothing communal goes on. Each person is reduced to a self-enclosed, atomized existence. You go to work every day on a crowded bus or subway and you never speak to anyone or even look them in the eye. You live for years on a street or in an apartment without so much as saying a word to your neighbors. You attend a movie or a concert with other people, and when it's over everyone walks away without any discussion or interaction. Millions of people go for days or even weeks at a time without any human contact whatsoever, sitting at home alone at night in the blue glare of a TV set. (This is especially true of the elderly whose suicidal thoughts the Surgeon-General's report claims are "a natural facet of old age.") All of this is such an ingrained part of our lives that we rarely even give it a second thought.

Sexual misery

But an atomized existence is an inhuman one: to be estranged from other people is to be estranged from one's own humanity. This kind of individualism isn't freedom but a prison in which the individual is walled up within himself. And the toll this takes, the wounds it inflicts, are most painfully felt in the most intimate relationships between people. If happiness comes from things, if every relationship is determined by its cash value, then what becomes of love? It too becomes a thing to be possessed. As with food, so with love: the forms of happiness are separated from their human content and then fetishized. In the case of love, it is sex that becomes the fetish, once it has been divorced from tenderness. Outwardly we live in a sexual cornucopia: everywhere (ads, TV, movies, the Internet, magazines) there are images of bodies—young, seductive female ones—shoved in our faces. No image is too graphic to be portrayed, and the more taboo the behavior, the trendier it is. Since the sixties, a major shift in attitudes has taken place, a pendulum swing from puritanism to a much more "liberated" sexuality. And what could be a more palpable manifestation of the happiness of the American dream than this easy access to the pleasures of the flesh?

But the change is much more superficial than it looks: underneath, there is still the same sexual misery that prevailed in earlier, more puritanical times. That becomes evident from a study published a year ago in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that found that 43 percent of women and 31 percent of men in America suffer from sexual dysfunction.[3] Again we confront some staggering numbers, as

disturbing as the ones on mental illness. For all the apparent freedom and openness about sexuality, nearly half of all women and a third of all men aren't having any sex at all. Some of this is due to physiological problems, but a major factor is emotional distress, and the main causes for that, the study found, are stress due to deterioration in economic position and sexual trauma, i.e., rape or abuse suffered in childhood. Or, to put this another way, the cause of this distress is violence—both economic and sexual—that leaves its victims so badly mauled that they are left sexually numb. In general, the study finds a "strong association between sexual dysfunction and impaired quality of life," which is an important point because it underscores that, contrary to all the fetishism, sex doesn't exist in a vacuum: either it flourishes as part of a fulfilling life or else it is mangled (or repressed entirely) as part of an "impaired" one. And this in turn suggests that as bad as the figures in this study are, the reality is probably worse because there are a lot of people who, while they aren't sexually dysfunctional in a clinical sense, are still deeply unhappy in most aspects of their lives including their sexuality.

Sex without tenderness is as dehumanizing—and as unsatisfying—as sexual repression. One sign of this dehumanization is in everyday language, in the use of terms like "hormones" instead of desire and "chemistry" instead of falling in love. Human relationships are reduced to a biological mechanism, and what gets lost, for one thing, is the element of protest in love, the insistence on *the primacy of feelings* over all the social and family pressures to conform and in effect accommodate oneself to a life without love. To give in on that is the start of giving in on many other things. In this biochemical landscape, sexual relationships look like the chance encounters of molecules: two people collide, go to bed because of some kind of "chemistry," and then "split" when the chemistry is "gone," veering off in different directions until they each collide with someone else. People can go through dozens of relationships in this way, blind to their own feelings and oblivious to the feelings of their lovers. Nothing changes in these relationships—and nothing changes from one relationship to the next—because nothing is revealed.

The art critic John Berger once made a useful distinction between nakedness and nudity: he saw the first as being oneself "without disguise," while the second was being "on display," where one is "seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself." [4] In the matings based on "chemistry," as opposed to romantic love, people are never naked, only nude: they never open themselves up emotionally and so they can never break down the wall that separates them from the other "body" in bed. Even the sex is often only "intercourse" in a technical sense because there isn't any real commingling of pleasure, only an exercise in mutual masturbation. (Freud once described every sexual act "as a process in which four persons are involved," [5] by which he meant, among other things, the fantasy that each person takes to bed along with his or her lover. In sex without tenderness, you never escape that fantasy because you never have any contact emotionally with the other person: you are making love, not to them, but to an image in your head. You are locked up inside yourself, as is your partner, and so it helps if you don't have to look at his or her face, which accounts to some extent for the growing popularity of oral sex.)

It isn't surprising that people come away from such "relationships" more lonely—and more unhappy—than they were before. It also isn't surprising that women are more hurt by the lack of tenderness than men: one of the findings in the *JAMA* study was that sexual dysfunction was especially common among young women. This doesn't make any sense from the standpoint of "hormones" and "chemistry," which would assume that women in the prime of life would also be in the prime of their sexual activity. But that activity is actually one of the key causes of sexual dysfunction, according to the study: "Since young women are more likely to be single, their sexual activities involve higher rates of partner turnover as well as periodic spells of sexual inactivity. This instability, coupled

with inexperience, generates stressful sexual encounters, providing the basis for sexual pain and anxiety.” Things improve markedly as women get older, largely because they tend to enter into long-term, stable relationships, where there is more of a chance of having a measure of tenderness.

Men, or at least young men, don't seem to have the same problem with the lack of tenderness in sexual relationships. This isn't because "men are from Mars and women are from Venus" (as pop psychology currently has it), but rather because they are raised differently from childhood, and bond with their parents in different ways. This is territory first charted by Freud, and it would take us too far afield to follow him there. But the inhuman coldness of contemporary sexuality still leaves its mark on men, if not in the quantity of their sexual activity, then certainly in the quality. You see that particularly in the tremendous growth of pornography. *The Sunday Times of London* ran an article 18 months ago headlined “US is addicted to porn” which reported that during the Clinton era “adult entertainment has grown into a business worth \$10 billion annually. As much as \$4.2 billion is generated by hard-core videos alone, up from just \$10 million 25 years ago. Americans spend more on hard-core pornography, telephone sex and strip clubs than they do at cinemas. Porn videos account for a quarter of all those rented or sold in America, while strip clubs generate more money than all other live entertainment in the country, including rock concerts and Broadway theaters, put together.”[6]

Again, it's hard not to do a double-take when reading this. (That we can be shocked so often is itself shocking: it shows that the mass media blacks out virtually anything to do with the real lives of most people, especially their unhappiness.) The picture it paints is of a deeply sick society, but we need to be clear about the nature of the sickness involved. Inevitably, right-wing moralists (and anti-pornography feminists) seize on facts like this to bolster their arguments for a return to puritanical repression. But it isn't sex as such, but a *dehumanized* sex, that is the sickness here. In Victorian London, world capital of prudishness, the streets were crowded with thousands of prostitutes: an inhuman morality and an inhuman sexuality complemented each other. Today, for all the changes in sexual attitudes and social life, things are not so very different: pornography is the sordid side of the prevailing *loveless* sexuality. What is the appeal of pornography? It is sex made-to-order: the clothes are off, the beautiful (or, more commonly, beauti *fied*) body is lying there, ready, willing, available. You don't have to do anything, you certainly don't have to get to know her or even try to seduce her, because she already comes pre-seduced, as it were. And that of course is the whole point: pornography is a *running away* from real sexuality to a passive voyeurism, and it has more to do with fear than with sexual desire. (It's also a running back—a retreat—to an adolescent attitude to sexuality, the gist of which is that sexual fulfillment is having as many orgasms as often as possible. This retreat is evident, as a psychoanalyst astutely observed recently, in the very name of that quintessential sex magazine *Playboy*, “composed as it is of “play” and “boy” as opposed to Eros and man.”)[7]

Pornography is essentially just another kind of sexual “dysfunction”, another kind of sexual misery. Love isn't a thing and there isn't anywhere it can be bought—not in a porn store or a strip club and not even in a marriage license office. Love can only be exchanged for love, as Marx once noted, and to be loved you yourself have to be *lovable*, i.e., capable of inspiring love in someone else.[8] This would be taken for granted in a truly human society, but in capitalism what prevails are inhuman relationships in which people treat other people like things, and so the connection between loving and being loved falls apart. Sex becomes a commodity for sale, and in a way pornography, even more than prostitution, epitomizes the alienation inherent in that exchange because what's being sold isn't a body but merely an image or a voice, sex reduced to an abstract “value”. What a measure of despair those billions spent on pornography are! Think of how threadbare the illusion is and how hard the

“customer” has to work to make it convincing, to “buy into it” long enough so that he'll get his “money's worth”—a few seconds of relief. This isn't happiness but a wretched counterfeit.

We are living in the twilight of the American dream. The epidemic of mental illness, the pervasiveness of sexual misery—these both show that the rift between the happy surface of society and the despair underneath is becoming too great to sustain. Millions of people are losing any hope that life will ever get better. But the fading away of a false dream can also be the beginning of a revival of hope. Society needs to find a new road forward so that the mass of humanity isn't condemned to misery, and the desire for happiness needs to find a new dream, one that isn't a mirage. Happiness can become a reality only if its human content is restored to it, and that means that the happiness of one is inseparable from the happiness of all. This is a dream that only socialism can realize. With the dawning of the twenty-first century, happiness is once again becoming a revolutionary longing.

Notes:

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854) in *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: 1981), p. 111
2. Economic Policy Institute, *The State of Working America 1998-99*. This report is available on line at www.epinet.org
3. Edward O. Laumann, Anthony Paik, Raymond C. Rosen, “Sexual Dysfunction in the United States,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Feb. 10, 1999, v. 281, pp. 537-544
4. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: 1972), p. 54
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess* (New York: 1977), p. 289
6. *Toronto Star*, Sept. 6, 1998 (reprinted from *The Sunday Times, London*)
7. Norman Doidge, “Hugh Hefner got it all wrong”, *Toronto National Post*, Dec. 1, 1999
8. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: 1977), p. 132



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