

**All 'existence'
or appearances that deceive and cause misconception**

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René Magritte, *La Reproduction Interdite* (1937) | Collection Museum Boymans van Beuningen Rotterdam

Abstract

In this paper we will survey a few developments concerning an increasing focus on 'the *Self*' amid eroding state functions and a destabilising relationship between citizens and government. We will argue through some of these developments that political-societal reality as presented and advocated by policymakers neither addresses nor represents the reality that citizens face in their daily lives and that depoliticizing mechanisms are ruining social institutions in particular.

keywords:

political philosophy, social psychology, state capitalism, mass culture, repressive tolerance, citizenship

Introduction

When Freud published his magnum opus around 1900 and presented his typology of the *Ich*, *Es* and *Über-Ich*, he probably did not realize the impact his work would have on the politico-social life of modern man. But rather than locating compulsive pathological phenomena at the individual micro-level, we would advocate above all a *social-psychological* approach in which man is placed in his relevant socio-cultural and ideological context and is central to it. In this way one acquires a better understanding of the motivations and causal mechanisms underlying both individual and collective psychological phenomena. Since the *Frankfurter Schule*ⁱ and especially the work of Adorno, Habermas, Fromm and Marcuse, this approach has contributed much to understanding conforming as well as destabilizing mechanisms, structures and developments that transcend the individual domain.ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, these insights remain overshadowed by massive policy propaganda that holds individuals, as 'modern citizens', responsible for failing public policies in many an area. Both the pursuit of happiness and the lack thereof, including shortcomings and gaps in the socio-economic field are thus *depoliticized* and detached from their policy and ideological contexts. A serious development with far-reaching consequences for people and society. Where do we stand today in terms of this?

Nature, nurture and the mechanisms of socialisation concerning liberty and equality

Plants, flowers and trees grow toward the light and crowd each other for the best spot. It is often no different with humans. Who will say what each person is or is not entitled to in terms of 'a place under the sun'? A question as old as mankind itself.

Throughout history, there have been a variety of responses to this. Ranging from hierarchical orders — which may or may not have been considered 'natural' — to concepts of equality cast in human rights principles. Societies were subsequently organized in corresponding ways, according to the prevailing ideology of those (i.e. those in power) who (thought they) were entitled to decide. Still today, these principles compete for precedence — and especially for practical implementation where such rights are concerned. With great consequences for populations in question.

This can be traced to conceptions of democracy and dictatorship. In general, it is assumed that democracy is based on (political) equality of all citizens and that this also guarantees a certain degree of social equality. On the other hand, dictatorships or authoritarian systems have been established which, while claiming the same — and more — as in the practice of democracy can be quite coercive, if not repressive, and maintain structures of inequality on many fronts.

As for the concept of freedom, similar questions arise. Democracy may aim to unite 'the best of different worlds' — or represent the 'least unfavorable' system — but the social reality in terms of individual freedom rights is paradoxically put under considerable pressure, if not eroded, by a clinging to often rigid economic (production and consumption) structures. The expanding uniform mass culture is the result of this. In authoritarian systems, human beings may be completely subordinated to a myriad of 'production standards', but in state capitalism, assumed to be 'free', this is often just as true. Lucrative exploitation is the key word. And that is not bound by 'limits,' as it turns out.

But human existence naturally encompasses more than (theoretical) concepts of freedom and equality that can be 'adjusted' and 'readjusted' over and over again according to changing mores to serve political-economic ends. A decent place under the sun requires more than basic living conditions such as food, clothing and shelter. Freedom from want, deprivation, threat, oppression and persecution are codified human rights for a reason. In order to lead a full human existence, it also involves nothing less than sufficient development and personal growth opportunities through institutionally regulated

education, health care and social security. Not on a bargain or by means of charities at random, but (constitutionally) legally anchored and secured.

Now, all that may be assumed to be 'familiar', practice is often miles away from it. Many consider themselves fortunate not to have to live in deprived circumstances, but the reality is often a different one. Even those who are relatively 'well off' are often at the mercy of profit- and power-hungry figures and groups who are not quite so concerned with other people's happiness, or have little regard for it. We encounter such plutocrats and oligarchs everywhere. However, when state apparatuses give free rein to these categories, the stage is set. Then there may be formal talk of freedom and equality, but the repressive hierarchies are unmistakable. Hence Marx spoke of «class societies», which however with collectivist ideologies and their applications have not ended, but have paradoxically continued. This is not the end of the matter, however, in view of the capitalist state order that has adopted, *nota bene*, many traits of this 'collectivism'. The constant monitoring of citizens and all the bureaucratic fine-tuning this entails is permeated with gross intervention, or rather invasion of the personal domain. Although formally speaking this does not (yet) go as far as the well-known authoritarian systems with their repressive state apparatuses, they are already well on their way to being no less 'effective'. Especially when the state neglects its protective functions, it risks jeopardizing and forfeiting its legitimacy as well as its right to exist.

Failing states

'Let man as a citizen manage his own existence' seems to be the cynical motto used to justify this abstinence. After all, 'opportunities' abound. Thus the circle is complete and the structures remain untouched. 'Freedom' is thrown in man's face, with which the citizen is held fully responsible for everything allegedly wrong in the sphere of existence. 'Existential questions' are left to philosophers. After all, that doesn't affect policy choices or the status quo, does it?

The fact that many people (are at risk of) going astray is apparently no reason to wonder about anything that might point to a defective way in which societies are organized or governed. Especially when 'doing it yourself' is paramount. After all, modern man is independent and mature enough to determine goal and direction and does not need the 'coercive hand of the state' [sic!]

Such is the double standard that is so pregnant in modern life and drives many to despair. Why then continue to maintain and finance state apparatuses if they are only of marginal importance in the end? A question that is hardly ever asked, but is certainly relevant.

It could be argued that man is ultimately always dependent on himself, even though it may seem otherwise given his social capacity. While 'man as a social being' may be rather overrated and dependence on others too often used as a fallacy, this does not mean that one lives in a vacuum. Societies are formed by individuals, connected or not, who have different but in part corresponding and coinciding interests. Democratic legal states are established for the benefit of both phenomena as expressed in the private and public law domains. Law, however, presupposes and is based on «raison», or rationality and reason. When these are lost or neglected, the entire (state) structure comes into question and citizens can blow the whistle on the representation of their interests. Determining social position and identity then becomes a gratuitous affair. Though without much meaning, it does carry the risk of slipping into grim and dark directions. After all, man wants to be able to cling to something. If not law or reason, then salvific 'dei ex machina' of all kinds. Saviors of mankind' have manifested themselves as such in all kinds of capacities throughout history. Usually not to the glory of many, by the way.

The administrative puppet clique is wasting time, money and effort with bureaucratic-procedural chicanery that no one needs and that only leads to unnecessary postponement of matters. This solves

nothing, but at most maintains the status quo. And paradoxically this is often precisely what is intended. Under pretexts of due 'diligence' and 'prudence', trade-offs are legitimized that serve anything but the public interest, but are primarily aimed at continuing one's own position as well as serving the interests of powerful industrial, financial and military lobbies. This reduces the political establishment to the slavish executor of an oligarchic-plutocratic coterie that actually is pulling the strings. The deliberately gullible public is thus under the assumption that their interests are being 'carefully guarded' and that administrative-management leadership is in reliable hands. Until the masquerade is blown that is, and citizens are fully confronted with the consequences of these (non- and negligent) actions. But by then it is usually too late and the damage is done.

What else does man have left but to 'continue against all odds'? Does one actually have a real choice as far as concrete possibilities of existence are concerned? Or do we have to settle for undefined and capricious twists of fate? Then all efforts to achieve a certain degree of security of existence for each other will have been in vain. Human beings, however, are both a product of nature and culture and have to relate to them. That remains a difficult task, no matter how 'modern' and 'free' one may think himself to be. The solipsist can feel '*ganz allein*' and nevertheless not lonely, many turn out to be lonely in the midst of many others. The winged motto 'lonely, but not alone' may then be used for consolation, it leaves aside the anonymity of (an equalizing) mass culture and its often associated problematic positioning. A little 'surfacing' to soothe the burdened mind then does not help. What will?

Silent forces of civic power

Making solidarity connections and breaking nonsensical ones. Making a good distinction between these and not indulging in too much conformist nonsense in this regard. That would already make a difference. For although man 'must' do all sorts of things, he is often forced to be empty-handed when it comes down to it. This has not much to do with 'free choices', but all the more with patronizing repression. Man can free himself from this, but it must be done in cooperation with others, otherwise he will be played off against each other. The «*fragmentation society*», as we would like to term this destabilizing development in combination with the aforementioned abstinence, has already made many deep marks.

Furthermore, one can distance oneself from coercive norms that serve only to maintain discussable selective positions of third parties. In other words, not cooperating with their perpetuation so that, despite all the «repressive tolerance» exhibited (Marucse), such positions lose the right to exist. This can be done in a variety of ways. From ignoring procedures and guidelines to denouncing abuses. Not allowing oneself to be intimidated and not making unfortunate compromises just to keep the 'peace'. No matter how dependent on others one may be.

In short, to take a position and stand in daily practice against everything that structurally limits the (individual) human being in his or her development, well-being and radius of action, but for which there is no justification. This also has political consequences (or at least should have). But how paradoxical reality is also in this regard when one considers how such matters are fiddled around with and on which often a few extra shovels are added on top. Is man also on his own in this regard? Unfortunately, yes. This is shown by many citizens' complaints against the government that are initiated regularly. The rule of law appears to be an uneven playing field in many respects. Of course cases can be litigated, but legal inequality and forms of 'class justice' are prevalent. Can a simple citizen buy off cases? Can he/she have qualified legal aid and sustain legal proceedings indefinitely? Three times No. Without sufficient resources, one is a priori hopeless. Law is for the rich and powerful, citizens who do not have 'the right network' will just have to figure out how to represent their interests. Striking examples abound.

But if the rule of law does not provide (adequate) relief, what then? All that remains is obstruction, however undesirable this may be. Yes, then there is 'a gap'. And one does not fix it with rhetoric. Then it is to be feared that institutions will be left for what they are and that people will leave it at that. Many reports about a disappearing middle class, deranging young people, increasing problems of poverty and inequality, angry ('demanding') citizens, or failing government (in terms of 'execution' that is) have indeed addressed this development, but rarely put it in the right context. One then comes up with 'solutions' such as 'capabilities', 'involving' people, (even more) 'customization', or simply 'listening' and 'offering a sympathetic ear' and what not, but fails to localize matters, let alone addressing painful issues. That avenges itself to this day. Before coming up with all kinds of remedies, the right questions will have to be asked. What do analysts actually expect? That such reports will make a difference? Certainly not, if one is not willing to examine oneself and recognize that docility is not compatible with critical distance. No matter how comfortable one may feel. This balloon has long since been punctured by the many-headed 'uncomfortable' reality. Nonetheless, people continue to wallow in their own rightness as if everything were just a matter of ... (fill in a gratuitous platitude one likes to use and that we know all too well). A waste of effort and a lot of (digital) paperwork.

Concluding remarks

The repressive propaganda has to be unveiled and reduced to its essence, the illusions and fallacies have to be stripped of their pretense, and correct administrative relations have to be re-established and respected. That is quite a lot, but it is unavoidable if there is to be real light from which the whole of society can benefit. Then there really is a place under the sun for everyone. No, certainly not 'everything of value' needs to be defenseless, but that does require some self-reflection. Hypocrisy or thick-skinned selective indignation will not do any good. Good governance requires significantly more than simply keeping up appearances. Whether this is done against one's better judgment or not. Human beings may be full of contradictions as Freud argued, but the citizen is by no means a fool and usually keep a sharp eye on his interests, even if he is often presented otherwise. Policy makers had better be well aware of this.

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May 2024

ⁱ See Freyenhagen, F. (2018) *Critical theory and social pathology*, in: Hammer, A., A. Honneth and P. Gordon, (eds.) Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School. London: Routledge

ⁱⁱ See Van der Kooij, E. *Burgers op drift* [Drifting Citizens. The state of despair; pathology of a disoriented society], Blacklabel Publishing, 2020. See also Laitinen, A. (2015) Social pathologies, reflexive pathologies, and the idea of higher-order disorders. *Studies on Social & Political Thought*, Vol. 25, dec. 2015, pp. 44-65; Laitinen, A. and A. Särkelä, Analysing Conceptions of Social Pathology: Eight Questions. *Studies in Social & Political Thought*, Vol. 28, 2018, pp. 21-30; Laitinen, A. Four Conceptions of Social Pathology. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2020; Jacobs, K. & M. Kettner, Zur Theorie 'sozialer Pathologien' bei Freud, Fromm, Habermas und Honneth, *IMAGO. Interdisziplinäres Jahrbuch für Psychoanalyse und Ästhetik*, Band 4, 2016, pp. 119-146; Hirvonen, O. On the ontology of social pathologies, *Studies in political thought*, Vol.28, 2018; 9-14 (special issue conference edition, Critical theory and the concept of social pathology, Centre for Social and Political Thought, University of Sussex, Sept. 13th 2017); Bueno, A. (2017) The psychic life of freedom: Social pathology and its symptoms. *Philosophy & Society*, Vol. 28 (3) (A previous version of this paper was presented at the workshop Anerkennung und Freiheit – eine Verhältnisbestimmung (University of Zurich, January 2016) »»

The main argument that is put forward is that coherent pathological phenomena and their manifestations in society are facilitated by structural deficiencies and defects (deficits) in the institutional edifice and are directly related to them. The way in which citizens are led to believe that they would be in full control of 'self-actualization' is part of this.