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feature | Mark Furlong



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CRYING TO BE HEARD

Mark Furlong on the self under crisis

Ben was a well-spoken man in his early thirties, attending a fee-for-service psychotherapy practice on the gentrified edge of a large Australian city.¹ As he put it, he had been ‘nudged’ to attend by his ex-partner Seher: ‘She told me, “You’ve stalled, fallen in a hole. Maybe you’re depressed or something else. Go and see someone, it can’t hurt – see this woman Rose.”’

Rose, a psychoanalytically-oriented practitioner, asked the standard assessment questions and Ben answered simply, without much elaboration, over the first half of the fifty minute interview.

‘Yes, I am embarrassed, for sure,’ he said, about finding himself a client of a professional therapist; no, he was not sleeping or eating well; no, he had no history of emotional or psychiatric problems (nor did anyone in his family); yes, his mood, energy level and libido were lower than normal; ‘Yes, I am going over things, and going over things – over and over again’ and, ‘No, I am not thinking of killing myself.’ A little later he returned to the question of self-harm and repeated, ‘No, really, I’ve no plan to do that. [But] yes, I am really sick of all this. It’s like I’ve got the handbrake full on – and I’m trying to drive my life somewhere! I’m going only half-pace, less, and I’m going as hard as I can. Worse, I’m not even heading in a straight line!’

During this briefing Ben appeared both disheartened and agitated. Speaking more intensely, he said he had lost ‘pretty much all I used to own – the value of my shares, the equity I had in my [inner city] unit, my *pied-à-terre* I used to call it, my bolt hole, my cave – it’s all gone, down the gurgler. Like my confidence: shot.’

Rose asked him to explain what had happened.

‘My job was with a hedge fund,’ he replied, ‘and what we did was gamble, placed bets, laid them off, over and over, round and round. And, like lots of us, I was also doing some day-trading on the side. All of us did this. We were doing great.

‘[What] goes around and around in me, even right now, is this. This is

what I've spent my whole life learning: keep your eyes open, look to what the smartest guys do, not just what they say – you know the people you'd call “the relevant experts”, the people you refer to in your business for what is extra technical. And [this] is what I really believe in: get the facts, do the sums and go for it – like those who really succeed have always had to do.'

Ben's financial tactic had been simple. To maximise his prospects he had divested himself of his substantial equity in property and leveraged his assets by borrowing 'hard, but not right to the max'. Then, after taking considerable care, he had invested in a basket of shares and options: 'Good names, [like] Babcock and Brown – you know, they were being heavily spruiked as recently as early this year: hard to believe, isn't it? – Macquarie, [and] a whole lot of what I calculated represented a good spread of the short and the long. Nobody really ever lost – the ride had been running hard for so long. And then, whammo! At first there was bad news from the States ... but who cares, I wasn't exposed to the sub-prime slime, or I didn't think I was. “Don't break, hold your nerve, junior,” I told myself, “It'll pass.” Bang, then the margin calls started coming in, and you're a goner once this shit starts, unless, of course, you are a really heavy hitter. I never was, [but] I could have been, a bit later. Now, it looks ... over, like a dumb dream ... The protocol I lived by – kaput, zapped, taken off me. If you can't be in control, you're a loser. But that's not me, and now, fuck it, it is.'

Rose had consulted with others with similar issues to Ben and there seemed to be a pattern. Ben was well-educated, came from a 'good home', seemed well-adjusted, had no history of neurosis or behavioural problems, and presented following a clear precipitating event – a set of factors mental health professionals normally associate with a positive prognosis. Yet despite this – or perhaps in some way because of it – there remained something disquieting about his story.

He is like someone from *Australian Idol*, Rose thought, talking about himself in sound bites, as if he has a batch of cue-cards that prompt him to repeat all these badge-statements. What, if anything, sits behind the slogans, the over-valued clichés – the 'move on', 'go for it', 'make the play', 'be out there' mantras he's picked up from sports talk, the media and the motivation industry?

Ben exhibited a degree of narcissism, but Rose did not believe this was the best formulation for his presentation. He was not manipulative, nor was he uncaring, at least in the abstract, and he was to some degree likeable, albeit feckless. What distinguished him was that he had no centre, no affective and cognitive structure. He was an unstable concoction, an admixture of all the right attitudes and pop-market values – an assembly whose association had just been disrupted. He was depressed, yes, and he was anxious. Yet those feelings were not just the reaction of a central nervous system to being confronted by a subjectively perceived trauma. Those symptoms were also the pre-verbal

communications of a social animal whose message had to be disowned because it contradicted his day-in, day-out lived ideology. Before the market crash he said, 'I was fine; never better.' What is frightening was that his private identity was so fractious as to be indexed to his performance in the financial market, a context he endowed with such magic that he emptied himself and became hollow and contingent.

Ben's story prefigures how the current financial crisis is interleaving with matters of personal subjectivity and mental health. What follows is an effort to develop a dialogue between the personal and the economic.

The collapse of Lehman Brothers, an iconic private financial institution, in mid-September 2008 catalysed a radical series of convulsions. We are now in a new era, one whose conditions are markedly dissimilar to those that preceded. As John Hinkson recently noted in *Arena*, we can expect an extended period of acute-on-chronic uncertainty.

Until the financial crisis settled in as our permanent circumstance, the well-adjusted knew how to behave: it made sense to inspect the available options before selecting the course of action and it was a ritual of modernity that one sought out the best information and advice, and then made decisions. This creed was to be followed whether the question at hand was directly instrumental, such as the matter of superannuation, or personal, such as whether to have children.

The configuration of subjectivity included a moral, as well as a pragmatic, dimension. For citizens who believed the neoliberal mantra – that it is possible to be 'in charge of your life', 'to make the most of your talents and opportunities' and so forth – the self-help metaphors had the status of a creed. More than mere guidelines, they were both obligations and injunctions: 'If I *can be* master of my own fate, I *ought to be*.' The logic radically instrumentalised the 'project of identity' and provided content for the process of individualisation, a cultural and ideological tide Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and others argue has openly colonised political theory as well as how individual persons experience language and imagine themselves.

Individualisation is a rhizome with many shoots, not least the virulent hatred of dependence and the concomitant valorisation of independence, crucial in the project of welfare reform and beyond. In this regime, one holds oneself to be – and, in turn, is held by the state to be – totally responsible for one's own fate. The 'dream of the autonomous subject' is a mythopathic, male-stream imagining of the self, one that idealises personal distance, instrumental control, self-confidence, goal-setting, the auditing of personal performance and so forth. These specifications – these dots – can be joined together to form a (more or less) stable outline, a particular example of subjectivity.

In mid-September 2008, our well-adjusted citizen, with no warning from the mainstream media, was confronted by the meltdown of the entire financial system. In full view the 'best and the brightest', the so-called

‘smartest guys in the room’, got it spectacularly wrong. The dream of autonomy took a beating – perhaps even a knock-out blow – and the logic of control was disturbed, if not fractured.

An old Arabic saying suggests that ‘men resemble their times more than their fathers’. An event of the magnitude we are experiencing will produce psycho-social effects. So what options for selfhood and identity might the financial crisis create?

Unlike boosters who breathlessly predict a future which qualitatively breaks with the present (see, for example, Damien Broderick’s *The Spike*), the novelist William Gibson once said, ‘the future is already here – it’s just unevenly distributed’. If we look around we will find that the templates for the post-crisis subject are already present. Four possible images, four more or less intermingling options, are put forward below.

The first and most obvious consideration is that the outlook is significantly dystopian. The logical correlate is that people will become depressed and anxious.

Because of the human tendency to fantasy – to project our inner landscape onto what is around us – hopelessness sets the stage for a suppression of mood and, most often, for a lessening of agency. Current research on what are termed ‘high prevalence primary mental health problems’ – anxiety and depression – clearly indicates that this cluster of ‘symptoms’ is on the rise.

According to the World Health Organization, depression is already ascending the list of ‘burdensome’ diseases. A range of commentators, such as Lisa Appignanesi, argue that “depression” worldwide will soon be second in serious disease only to heart disease and, in the developed world [sic], will become the number one disease’. Not least of the reasons for this trajectory is, presumably, our experience of a new ‘stressor’, an awareness that the environment is itself endangered, if not already irrevocably poisoned. According to the *Age*, Grant Blashki, from the University of Melbourne’s Medical School, has warned that:

global warming was making many people anxious [as] constant reports about the dangers of climate change added to the burdens already felt by many people. [He said that] the mental health impacts of climate change will not be restricted to rural areas [as] people with depression and anxiety have a low threshold to taking on the negative information about climate change which feeds into a hopelessness about the future. [In a forthcoming address] Dr Blashki will call for healthcare professionals to brace for a wave of climate change mental illness in a speech to mark today’s World Health Day.

Clearly there are other factors in play: public funding for therapeutic services for these ‘conditions’ is now more available; services are increasingly de-medicalised; public campaigns, and well publicised personal stories, have resulted in ‘high prevalence’ mental health

problems now being less stigmatised than previously and so forth.

But what is the phenomenon referred to as depression? The psycho-medico and pharmaceutical complex calls it an illness, syndrome or disorder. Do such medical terms necessarily represent the best form of address? In its everyday manifestation, depression has long been understood as part of ordinary life, a feature that Samuel Johnson famously, if crudely, characterised as ‘the black dog’ and which Goethe, with a more elegant poignancy, termed *weltschmerz* – world weariness. Thus, unless one holds a strictly biological position about aetiology, it seems clear that the state of the world has a significant bearing on one’s mental state. We can privatise this ‘illness’ or it can be seen for what it is: a semaphore signalling a larger distress.

The designation ‘solastagia’ was developed by Glenn Albrecht from the University of Newcastle’s Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health following research on the psycho-social effects of the strip mining of coal in the Hunter Valley, to denote the loss of wellbeing which follows the awareness that one’s environment has suffered serious deterioration. We might expect the quicksand-like nature of our financial markets to have a similar effect.

The second option for subjectivity involves a militarisation of the self, that is, a further intensification of the ideal of autonomy and self-reliance. For some, economic crisis might be no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It might become even more necessary to forge the self around the axis that cognitive psychology has given us: editing out the negative, the (so-called) irrational and doing down all that constrains the effective working of the self.

There are powerful, newly emerging ‘resources’ to be marshalled in support of this option, with the person imagined as an ever better machine. Key are the ‘new pharmacologies’ – the so-called smart drugs – that are being designed to give the sovereign self a boost. Such concoctions promise that one can be ‘better than well’, that one can improve memory, mood, sexual performance, energy levels and so on – the steps on the way to total mastery over the subject’s being and presentation, the muscular logic: ‘Hey, lets just do it!’

Taken to its extreme, the manufactured identity reaches beyond ordinary vitality for a mythic, science-fictional form, with the human re-envisioned as a Terminator-type figure – a predatory, indestructible survivor. As David Hirst noted in the *Age* on 23 October 2008, one option is to try to be phoenix-like in the post-crisis milieu. This option repackages the inscriptions with which the motivational experts have already marked us so powerfully.

After all, in the pre-crash life-world, it was already highly inappropriate to be negative. It follows that the injunction ‘be positive’ is likely to be even more assertively policed in the post-crisis environment, since being a ‘downer’ when the whole gestalt is itself a giant let-down risks bringing

the entire game into disrepute.

One can also imagine a third possibility that merges the two dispositions discussed above into an unstable amalgam where one face looks to 'being positive', recycling all those motifs from the self-help slogan-pool, while the second face looks the other way, perturbed by pessimism and deregulated by insecure attachments and rising anxieties that are difficult, if not impossible, to suppress. Precariously built on these antagonistic moments, identity would be pushed towards the superstitious and the un-social (the autistic, the narcissistic, the psychopathic, the disassociated).

Most importantly, there is a fourth option: a selfhood which valorises inter-dependence and personal accountability. Although it may seem absurd to those who have naturalised the norm of autonomy, such a form would have an ecological ethic and – in the Jungian sense – a prominently feminine profile. More a vision of sociality than a particular form of subjectivity, it would be based on an accountable, deliberately inter-dependent vision of humankind, in which an irreducible sociality is given an honoured place alongside a more de-limited attitude to autonomy.

We are entirely comfortable talking about 'her' or 'him' or 'me'. We have naturalised the practice of thinking about individual people, as if it is axiomatic that a person is a stand-alone site properly described with static attributes: what she is doing, what he is like, what it is I am thinking and feeling. We have the vocabulary, as we have the inclination, to frame our thinking in terms of individuals.

This seems entirely natural, since separating people from their contexts and their relationships is second nature to us. The generalisation holds at each of the different levels of western practice: psychiatry classifies individuals; gossip magazines focus on 'Rachel's fat shame'; social science academics examine subjectivity and identity; motivational spruikers inspire ordinary citizens to achieve success; I try to make the best of my talents and minimise my exposure to 'downside risk'. Ours is a culture that – more and more – privileges separation above connection.

In an extended/interminable milieu of financial crisis there is the option of doing the opposite to that to which we have become accustomed: reversing the pattern organising our thinking from one where 'the individual' is placed at the centre to an alternative organised around an ethical and aesthetic practice privileging relationship and context.

In the case study described above, Ben had several stop/start contacts with Rose before deciding to see a general practitioner (with a view to receiving anti-depressant medication). In his final contact with Rose, he asked, 'How can [this] talking help me get over it, get me to move forward? I know you mean well [and] are good at your job and, in a way, it has been good to talk to you. Well, I don't think it has been practical,

has not really been practically useful, but I guess it was good to check out the option. It is now up to me to get on with it.'

Rose was not surprised. The vulnerability Ben would need to recontextualise his depression was inconsistent with his dominant fantasy that he could be an autonomous subject.

Marx said, more or less, that each person can be considered an ensemble of social relations. This manner of framing personhood – that each human entity is essentially social rather than private – tends to make an immediate, intuitive sense to Indigenous Australians. Yet, to properly acculturated western citizens, to those who apprehend themselves and the world as occupying different realms where the former is the active agent and the latter is the inanimate site for action, the idea that 'the person' is a collective noun probably sounds odd, even bizarre. Insofar as we are well adjusted to the realities of a globalisation and individualisation we will see a unitary setting, a single place that is understood in terms of its resources and its difficulties, its uses and its challenges. If we want a subjectivity that contests this pattern, a starting point is to inspect our language and to ask: how sufficient is our vocabulary for envisaging ourselves as inter-dependent rather than as independent?

Rather than chasing our tails like dogs – raising the dust only to then complain we can't see – perhaps we can paint ourselves into the picture as essentially relational entities. To that extent, the future of subjectivity offers us a wonderful mirror in which to see how we are right now.

1. This vignette is a fictionalised case study based upon two real-life examples.

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Overland 194-autumn 2009, p. 38
