Perverse Social Structures

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Introduction

This paper is a tribute to the concept of the 'social defence' introduced by Isabel Menzies Lyth. Given my role in helping to create the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies at UWE my focus on this concept is particularly apt as the social defence is a mediating term, occupying the hyphen, the transitional space between the psycho and the social.

In this paper I want to explore one particular kind of social defence, one that is becoming known as the 'perverse social defence'. Susan Long (2008) has explored the nature of perversity in contemporary corporate life, I wish to examine some of its traces and resonances within society, politics and government.

My argument is that this defence draws upon both a relatively universal aspect of the human condition and upon recent social changes, changes which, along with Susan and others, I believe may have generated a perverse culture in contemporary capitalist societies.

In her case studies of Enron and Long-Term Capital Management, Long suggests that we are dealing with a set of wider social and cultural processes of which the new practices of corporate governance are simply an expression. She lists five dimensions of the perverse structure:

> "It has to do with individual pleasure at the expense of a more general good…(it) acknowledges reality, but at the same time, denies it…(it) engages others as accomplices to perversion…(it) may flourish where instrumental relations have dominance in society…perversion begets perversion." (Long, 2008, 15)

Like Long I believe that we may be witnessing a series of shifts in the psychic economy of capitalism, from instinctual repression (Freud 1929), to repressive desublimation (Marcuse 1966) and narcissism (Lasch 1978), and to a culture of perversion.

Narcissism and perversion are adjacent and overlapping states of mind. For example, regarding the first of Long's five dimensions, as Elisha Davar tellingly put it, `narcissism is about the perverse state of mind in which an individual serves his own pleasure whilst mistaking it for the general good' (Davar 2004). Under neo-Liberalism this was expressed above all in 'trickle down theory' – the dogma that wealth creation and the development of the super-rich was a virtuous phenomenon because the benefits of this wealth would inevitably trickle down to less well off sections of society. This process of inversion and distortion, whereby selfishness becomes generosity, enslavement to credit and consumption becomes freedom, public accountability becomes totalitarianism, and so on, was seen as a characteristic of the perverse state of mind by Margot Waddell and Giana Williams (1991) where they examined the perverse in Shakespeare's Macbeth ('fair is foul and foul is fair') and Orwell's 1984 (newspeak). This kind of propaganda, the desire to wilfully misunderstand, the celebration of philistinism and cynicism, they linked to Rosenfeld's thoughts on the nature of destructive narcissism (Rosenfeld 1987).

I believe that it is the spread of collusion and organised self-deception which is the hallmark of a distinctively perverse as opposed to a straightforwardly narcissistic culture. Long's 'five dimensions' implicitly or explicitly express this. What Susan Long glimpsed but perhaps didn't dare articulate was that this perverse structure was not simply a characteristic of a few aberrant corporations but was the defining characteristic of an entire sector of the economy and thus of the neo-Liberal form of capitalism itself.

It is this form of capitalism which is now in crisis.

Government and the perverse defence

Government has not only been the agent of neoliberal reforms it has also been its object. Market discipline has been applied to public bureaucracies through reforms which have attempted to increase competition within government itself, the idea being that via such reforms it would be possible to "get more for less". These reforms, originally referred to as the New Public Management (Hood 1991), were first applied to Western governments and then exported to developing countries via the structural adjustment funds imposed by the IMF as the price for economic assistance. Whilst in the UK successive Thatcherite governments laid the foundation for NPM this so-called process of reform found its most thorough articulation under New Labour.

Through the Orwellian mantra 'private is good, public is bad', neo-Liberalism propounded the progressive deregulation of markets whilst, paradoxically, it prescribed the very opposite (ie. less trust, more regulation, no risk) for the public sphere.

NPM advocated both more competition and more regulation in the public sector, the latter corresponding to the "audit explosion" – the development of the vast array of inspectorates and performance management systems (Power 1997). This focus on performativity increasingly extended beyond the new business units right down to the service professionals themselves where it increasingly took the form of intensified surveillance. The work of teachers, social workers, police officers, academics, medics, etc. became increasingly subject to the detailed specification of standards and targets.

This wasn't entirely new. In a more half hearted way such strategies had been introduced by modernising public bureaucracies before the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Studs Terkel (1974) noted one of the immediate effects. His study of the Chicago Police in the 1960s revealed how officers on the beat responded to the introduction of performance targets in two ways, by changing the pattern of their behaviour (including the kinds of arrests they made) to conform to the new targets, and by developing the arts of impression management so that they appeared to be meeting the targets prescribed even if they weren't. What was recordable and measurable became what was good. And this is precisely what happened in response

to the introduction of far more comprehensive performance management systems forty years later.

But New Labour took things much further. Performance in relation to standards and targets was then subject to supervision via comprehensive performance monitoring systems whilst the introduction of risk management and quality control systems introduced an intensified proceduralism. The combined effect of these different aspects of formalisation was to radically alter the nature of professional work. Direct face-to-face engagement with clients and users as a proportion of working time decreased considerably as professionals became tied up in the exhaustive recording of activities, the completion of monitoring returns and so on. Moreover, increased proceduralisation ensured that where face-to-face work did occur the encounter was itself highly regulated and subject to standardised behavioural repertoires. In some areas of professional practice, such as working with offenders, the very concept of the professional who carried a personalised case load disappeared altogether as offenders become the objects of a programme of standardised, off the shelf, intervention packages such as CBT and Anger Management, undertaken by a team of human service "technicians". What progressively disappeared was the idea of an encounter between two separate subjectivities in which the client/user is recognised as a unique locus of experience, a subject to be understood rather than an object to be acted upon. Here, then, we see the spread of instrumental relations in welfare.

Not only did the new systems encourage conformance rather than performance but they also encouraged the creation of a virtual reality, an "auditable surface" (Cummins 2001) which then got confused with the reality that it represented. This auditable surface of signifiers (output and outcome indicators and returns, inter-organisational comparators, activity plans and reports, risk assessments and reviews, etc.) acts as a proxy or stand-in for the customer in the absence of the price relationship, something Daniel Miller (2005) refers to as "virtualism". According to Miller (2005) audit cultures draw the attention of professional staff away from the experience of actual service users to the demands of their virtual counterparts (auditors etc).

As a general rule what we find today is that the further removed observers (i.e. managers, policy makers, politicians) are from the reality of the front-line the more they are likely to be taken in by the illusion they themselves have been instrumental in creating. Labour's capacity to be taken in by its own illusions, first perfected in the run up to the invasion of Iraq, now finds another theatre for demonstration.

To give a contemporary example, the independent national research review of Primary Education at Cambridge University (www.primaryreview.org.uk) indicates that British schoolchildren and their teachers are subjected to more testing and monitoring than anywhere else in Europe. And the test results look good with more children year on year reaching required standards in English, science and mathematics. And yet when compared to children in other countries, through OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, the abilities of British children in these subjects are actually in decline. The point is that British children (and their teachers) have improved their skills in passing tests whilst at the same time their basic intellectual competences have declined (partly as a result of this obsession with testing).

Increasingly, then, welfare governance takes on the form of a virtual reality. But again perhaps this should not really surprise us for is this not another manifestation of the way on which wider cultural and social developments find expression in the practice of governance itself? In social theory the concepts of virtualism and simulation are particularly associated with the work of Baudrillard (1994). For Baudillard one of the features of post-modernity is that the boundary between image and reality, between signifier and signified, becomes increasingly blurred. Reality, or what he calls the "hyper-real", takes on an "as if" quality, it is *as if* what we see is the real thing. For Baudrillard the image, the representation, threatens to become more vivid, immediate and real than that which it represents.

A Perverse Relation to Knowing

It is the spread of the virtual which now provides the social basis for organised denial, something John Steiner (1985) saw as a perverse form of knowing in which what is known becomes split off from emotional experience. In such cases, knowledge is

divorced from understanding. The knowing remains abstract and disembodied, and is therefore a form of knowing which lacks motivational consequences.

I think this pretty accurately describes the relationship of contemporary Western democracies to the social suffering in their midst, and perhaps particularly those countries such as the USA and UK which have been at the forefront of introducing neoliberal policies. On the one hand the facts of greater social inequality, like global warming, are there for all to see but whilst the suffering is known about it produces at best an *as if* response. Like Andrew Cooper and Julian Lousada in their book *Borderline Welfare* (Cooper & Lousada 2005) my argument is that new technologies of performativity created a "thick skin", a virtual reality, which increasingly mediated between the state, its managers and policy makers on the one hand, and the many seas of social suffering characteristic of increasingly socially polarised democracies, on the other. This meant that the experience of suffering was increasingly unable to "get through" this skin as the state and its institutions created an "as if" relationship with its object. Government surrounded itself with a screen of performance indicators, it looked as if things were okay or getting better. This was not primarily cynical, government and the political elites which circulated through it, believed in the illusion that they had created.

Conclusion

What we have seen therefore, in both commercial and public sectors, is the generation of an 'as if' relation to reality, a process which itself is an expression of the emergence of a wider cultural formation in which image and reality have become increasingly confused. Behind the virtual reality of the hedge funds and investment banks lay an actual reality of hubris, parasitism, corruption and greed. Behind the virtual reality of Labour's screen of performance indicators lay an actual reality of increased social suffering and Britain's long term economic and social decline.

In a simulated world it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is false and it is this very ambiguity which provides the space for doubt and therefore for that part of us which, in Vaclav Havel's (1986) famous phrase,

prefers to 'live within the lie'. It is this which provides the backdrop and structural support for the perverse social defence that Susan Long has examined.

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