

You're Not Crazy, You Live in a Society

"Mental Illness" & The Logic of Capital

Punch Up * Kick Down Distro

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Author's Note

This is the second edition of this zine

I am not a “mental health” professional. I am not a doctor or academic, nor do I have any credentials in the “field.” I am a college drop-out and a punk. I am a traveler, a community organizer, and I live in a van. So, if you’re looking for “legit” credentials, this zine may not meet your standards.

I am, however, someone who “has depression.” I go to therapy and I take SSRIs. I’m from a working class family. I have experienced the physical, mental, and emotional toll that poverty takes on individuals, families, and communities, and those struggles have been a motivation for this writing.

Sometimes, I feel like I’m *crazy*, like I’m gonna freak out. I’ve wrestled with intrusive thoughts and self-harming ideation since I was in middle school. Back then, listening to Nine Inch Nails helped. As I got older, getting blackout drunk became a regular coping mechanism, which was normalized in both the subcultural and mainstream worlds I inhabited. Lately, I am better at managing those feelings. A meditation practice, decent diet and exercise, and getting sober helped with that.

Since I am not an academic, this is not an academic work. I have done my best to cite references and credit resources. The numbers you see next to quotes or excerpts - like this¹ – correspond numerically to the list on the reference page in the back of this zine. For sources, refer to that reference page. I am highly indebted to the source materials that I cite and refer to within, and want to acknowledge those works for inspiring, shaping, informing, and building this piece.

By no means is this an exhaustive or definitive work. I don’t claim to be breaking new ground here. My goal has been to gather and collect some ideas, distill and organize those ideas, and to present them in a way that is (hopefully) coherent and accessible. I hope this can help folks think critically about these topics even though they may be complex, uncomfortable, or activating. If you identify with a mental health diagnosis and feel invalidated as you read this, I hope you’ll recognize this is not my intention and engage with the work in good faith. I don’t claim to have any “correct” answers or insights, and simply wish to speak from my own experiences and observations.

Mental Health is an endemic social issue, but we are generally discouraged from thinking about problems beyond individual symptoms and expressions. Popular discourse and analysis on the subject of mental health tends to deflect from one of its primary factors: capitalism. This is not to suggest that capitalism is the *only* reason for wide spread “mental illness,” but if we are to meaningfully confront people’s emotional and psychological wellbeing, we must acknowledge that organizing our society around capitalist logic is antithetical to our nature and antagonistic to our basic needs – both materially and emotionally.

Capitalism is an all-encompassing social paradigm which shapes our desires, behaviors, and social outlooks. According to the logic of capital, profit is the utmost imperative. What is economically “rational” is often materially destructive and ethically indefensible. Ecological devastation, mass exploitation, and the loss of human and non-human life are all acceptable, so long as profits rise in the upcoming fiscal quarter. “That fundamental dynamic toward accumulation is definitional. It will always be stronger than any other tendency.”¹⁸ Food is not grown in order to feed people; it is manufactured for profit. Housing is not understood as existing for the purpose of sheltering people, but as a means by which individuals or real-estate conglomerates with abundant capital can make financial investments. Healthcare is not a system designed to make sick people well, it is an enterprise provided (or denied) for the profit of insurance companies and pharmaceutical corporations.

Capitalism is “a political...system that categorizes groups of people for the purposes of exploiting, excluding, and extracting their labor toward the profit of another group.”¹⁴ Beyond an economic model inherently reliant on class division, capitalism is a totalizing ideology which structures our lives, shapes our “orientation to reality ... Capitalism is a fundamental way of being, first of all, and then a society build around perpetuating that way of being.”⁵ This pervasive ideological framework is referred to herein as “the logic of capital.” This not only refers to the prioritization of profit, but all the ways this ideology effects our lived experience – how our neighborhoods are built, how our relationships form, how we perceive our own self-worth, how we shape our political ambitions, how we engage with the natural world. The logic of capital is invasive in almost all aspects of our lives, yet is so ubiquitous that it goes largely unexamined.

No matter how violent or unnatural they are, the ideologies and activities that maintain the status quo will be “enshrined as human nature, while deviations from them (are) seen as abnormal.”³ The logic of capital serves the interests of the ruling class. Therefore, hegemonic social and political structures insist this logic is natural. “Under a capitalist system, notions and expressions of human nature will both mirror the individualized competitive ideal and justify it as being the status quo.”³

However, the impersonal financialized economy of neoliberal capitalism is a historical abnormality. An analysis of what it means to be “healthy” or what is “natural” requires a basic understanding of the biological and social conditions under which our species evolved. These conditions formed our social and emotional needs. In *The Myth of Normal*, Gabor & Daniel Maté propose:

Insofar as it is possible to speak coherently about human needs, we have to consider how they developed eons before oral or written history ... If one wants to know what is ‘correct’ for a species, one must know the inherent expectations of that species. An inherent expectation

is a wired in need, something that, if denied, interferes with our personal and physiological equilibrium, leading to poor health outcomes physically, mentally, and socially.³

Our species evolved as small band hunter-gatherers. The material reality of these societies required social collectivity to meet basic needs of food and shelter – these bands had to work together to survive. Most human societies throughout history depended on collective and social obligations which “expressed the nature and priorities of the community and the network of relationships between its members.”¹⁸ It is not as if prehistoric societies or preindustrial peoples were more morally righteous, more concerned with ethics, or maintained some angelic quality that was lost in a biblical fall from grace. Rather, it was by *material necessity for survival* that people depended on mutual aid and reciprocal networks of cooperation. In this way, meeting our *physiological* needs collectively is what shaped our higher *psycho-emotional* needs for social belonging within a community.

Humans have a hard-wired expectation for a life fundamentally oriented around cooperation and collective belonging. The logic of capital inhibits this “natural” way of life and perpetuates the falsehood that competition and self-interest is inherent to human nature. But it was collectivism, not competition, which gave our species the evolutionarily edge, and cooperative communal relationships are what shaped our minds, bodies, and social expectations. Our psycho- emotional health is dependent on these evolutionary expectations – these social needs – being met.

In contrast, the logic of capital creates a society that is highly alienated. *Alienation* serves as a sort of catch all term for a kind of social detachment – an isolated and individual social environment totally hostile to our evolutionary expectation. In an economic context, alienation describes labor relations in which the bosses profit from the toil of the working class, but alienation also articulates the ways the logic of capital orients our relationships and social structures towards an indifference to other people. Social bonds become instrumentalized. Relationships are valued only in terms of their usefulness (in an exploitative, capitalist context) to our personal interests. Happiness comes to be defined through the lens of consumption rather than connection. The working class’s relationship to their work, the natural environment, and how their time is spent are all determined by an exploitative capitalist model that denies us autonomy. Therefore, these are relationships of alienation.

Alienation is the “precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problems today. People feel alienated by society.”²⁰ The sense of existential separation – the “vague perception that something is missing”⁹ experienced in a capitalist society can also be labeled as alienation. Under tremendous financial stress, physically overworked, emotionally drained, and detached from meaningful connection with community, impoverished peoples struggle to attain the basic dignities of life. Being so alienated creates a tension in people. Advertisers are fully aware of the emotional longing and existential dissatisfaction that people experience in our culture. It is their job to convince the masses that the void can be filled by the purchase of their products, which of course only leaves people feeling empty and estranged.

Individuals and communities cannot be psychologically, emotionally, or spiritually healthy in a social system that exploits labor, degrades relationships, and destroys the natural environment on which their lives depend. Our interconnectivity means we also share in one another’s suffering – from our financially struggling neighbors to oppressed populations on the other side of the globe. We experience mental distress when we deny or repress our mutuality, when we atomize and close ourselves off. However, because we are fundamentally social creatures, it *feels good* to behave in pro-social ways. In recognizing that our own wellbeing is tied up with the wellbeing

of those around us, acts of solidarity and service are mutually beneficial. To connect with others interpersonally and communally is a reinforcement of our biological evolutionary expectation and a *necessity* for psycho-emotional health.

A society that fails to value communalism, our need to belong, to care for one another and to feel caring energy flow towards us, is a society facing away from the essence of what it means to be human. Pathology cannot but ensue. To say so is not a moral assertion but an objective assessment. When people start to lose a sense of meaning and get disconnected, that's where diseases come from. That's where breakdown in our health – mental, physical, and social health – occurs.³

The logic of capital forces people to arrange their lives in a particular way. In order to survive, we have to act in opposition to the natural conditions that are conducive to our wellbeing. In the process we jeopardize the health and flourishing of the environment and alienate ourselves from meaningful social relationships.

What is understood as *normal* or *healthy* is determined by the social conditioning and cultural norms under which behaviors and emotions are formed. Mainstream mental health discourse standardizes normalcy as adequately adhering to capitalist logic. Deviation from the standard of the behavioral, emotional, or intellectual norm is pathologized on an individual level and deemed in need of individual “fixing.” But, a society that worships opulence while it normalizes millions of people sleeping in the streets is deeply sick. A value structure of competitive and self-aggrandizing consumption undermines the deep, caring relationships that people need to feel happy and healthy. Under a crumbling economy within a falling empire, judgment of worth based on material success leaves a majority of the population deeply resentful and distressed. We lose sight of the socially dysfunctional and morally reprehensible nature of our culture when a mentality of dehumanization is constantly reinforced, normalized, incentivized and, in a sense, *required* by capitalist society.

The consequences of being forced to structure our lives under the pressure of market forces, profit motive, and capitalist ideology are mental, physical, social, and political dysfunction. Depression, anxiety, and various other diagnosis are the “illnesses” we assign to the reactions the human creature has when subjected to such inherently unnatural social conditions. But these are not neurological malfunctions or emotional sicknesses - they are the direct and inevitable result of a culture of extreme alienation, an economic structures which make the basic necessities inaccessible, and a social reality which denies large swaths of the population fundamental human dignity.

In her book *Warp & Weft*, Lisa Fannen challenges the term “mental health” itself for its framing of a phenomenon taking place explicitly in the brain/mind of the individual. Fannen elaborates:

I tend to use the term psycho-emotional health ... to acknowledge the deep relational and contextual dimensions (of) experience ... I think it steers away from the dominating narratives we're given that distress is caused by individual personal mental health issues which are located in the brain/mind. I think it describes what's usually being spoken about (when referring to “mental health”) i.e. how we feel. And that feeling happens in the body and soul, not just the head, mind, or brain.²

I find Fannen’s perspective helpful in exploring the question of why people are distressed and making sense of how to transform the conditions that cause the distress. So, I use the language of *psycho-emotional health* throughout this work.

Psycho-emotional distress, then, is not simply the result of an individual pathology or imbalance of brain chemistry, but rather the natural human response to threatening, unnatural, and dangerous conditions, both material and psychological, individual and social. Therefore, this dysfunction can be understood not just as “expressions of individual pathology, but as living alarms, directing our attention toward where our society has gone askew.”³ Joanna Macy drives home this point in her book *Active Hope*:

How would we notice if we were straying off course, as a society? We would start to feel uncomfortable. If we were heading in a dangerous direction, we might feel alarmed. If something unacceptable was taking place, we might feel outraged. If parts of our world that we loved were dying, we would expect to grieve. These feelings are normal, healthy responses. They help us to notice what’s going on. They are also what rouses us to respond.²²

People are made to believe their emotional or mental instability is their own fault, a lack of strong character or perseverance. In fact, instability is the inevitable result of being subjected to a capitalist society which is antagonistic to our fundamental needs. Materially and socially immiserated people are far more likely to struggle with mental health, *because of their material and social conditions*. Individual expressions of psycho-emotional distress in all its various forms can’t be ignored or dismissed. However, our collective focus should not be only on mitigating symptoms, but also on improving the conditions that cause the distress to begin with.

Biomedicine

“Biomedicine” is a term assigned to the dominant process of diagnosing and addressing “mental health” which focuses on individual brain malfunction or chemical imbalance. It is a framework “primarily concerned with biological processes and looks at symptoms rather than addressing their root causes.”² “Alternative” or “holistic” counselors or practitioners may go a little deeper in their inquiry regarding psycho-emotional health, asking patients about stress or trauma. But, to get a full understanding of a person’s physical, emotional, and “mental” health, requires consideration of *systematic* causes of distress, particularly the “manifestations of that inequality and injustice, like the reality of damp housing, having to work long hours without any time off, the experience of social isolation or threat of police aggression, etc.”²

Psycho-emotional distress or discomfort can be understood as a sort of alarm system, our bodies and minds alerting us to situations in our lives that aren’t good for us. To blame anxiety or depression on mere imbalance of brain chemistry or individual pathology ignores the circumstances that cause the distress, flattening the complex realities and struggles people face. Mental health diagnoses often pathologize the inevitable reactions people have to living under social conditions which are antithetical to their basic physical, emotional, and social needs. Moreover, the concept of “Neurotypical or neurodivergent … has a tendency to suggest a binary, an ‘either, or’ rather than a more diffuse and sometimes fluctuating range or spectrum of experience.”²

It is true that many people find personal value, social validation, and genuine healing through biomedical diagnosis and treatment. The relief and support that therapy, medication, or peer groups have the potential to provide cannot be disregarded. Given this, La Marr Jurelle Bruce suggests, “we might approach [biomedicine] with critical ambivalence, rebuking its malicious modes while embracing its therapeutic insurgent potential.”⁸

While medication can certainly be helpful, and sometimes even vital, claiming that prescription drugs are a “cure” can encourage people to “view themselves as powerless victims of their

biology. At another level, it allows governments and institutions to ignore the social and political reasons why so many people feel discontented with their lives.”² A prescription to anti-depressants may help alleviate debilitating intrusive thoughts or destructive behavior, it can also avert people from seeking a broader understanding of the source of their pain or a more genuine and effective means of addressing their discomfort.

The logic of capital insists that “suffering is not a social or systematic problem, but a medical problem requiring intervention at the individual level.”⁴ To attribute “mental illness” to faulty brain chemistry, abnormal physiology, or independent pathology focuses our attention entirely on the individual and the measurable. These claims assume that our mental health can be fully understood according to scientific models and “solved” through medical intervention. This limits our understanding of how to help people while simultaneously undermining the larger social solutions to the problems people face. Those who suffer from psycho-emotional “illness” are separated not by neurology or genetics, but by the social context of their lives, the conditions of their upbringing, their access to basic resources, and their interpersonal relationships, among other things.

It bears repeating – there are no measurable physical markers of mental illness ... Like all concepts, mental illness is a construct - a particular frame we have developed to understand the phenomena and explain what we observe. It may be valid in some respects and erroneous in others; it most definitely isn’t objective. Unchecked, it becomes an all-encompassing lens through which we perceive and interpret. Such a way of seeing can say as much about the bias and values of the culture that gives rise to it as about the phenomenon being seen, whether a religious concept, like ‘sinful’, or a biomedical one, like ‘mentally ill’.³

“Normalcy” is established solely through social context and the value structure of a given society. Cultures that function under the logic of capital will define health not as a fulfillment of needs or balance with social and natural environments, but only in terms of utility as units of labor and consumption. Inability or refusal to adapt to the material and social conditions of capitalism is therefore labeled as “laziness” casually, or “mental illness” clinically.

We can notice how the symptoms and challenges associated with “mental” conditions are real and affect people’s lives while also pointing out that they are socially and politically constructed, as are the ways we understand and conceptualize them. Instead of compulsively defining psycho-emotional distress as a sickness that must be fixed, what could we learn from this discomfort?

Conscious or not, our psycho-emotional distress might be understood as a sort of refusal to twist ourselves into the distorted shapes required of us to be obedient consumers, breaking our bodies and spirits in service of the logic of capital. Pain and discomfort are not always something to escape from - they can have value as a signal of our longing for change. In a systematic paradigm which attempts to numb our emotions, despair is a sign of our desire for something better. It shows that we still have the capacity to feel. Grief and joy are intertwined – the ability to feel one is dependent on the ability to feel the other.

It is an oversimplification to attribute psycho-emotional discomfort to the malfunctioning of the brain. Under conditions that are antithetical to the biological and social needs of human health and wellbeing, the mind/body’s natural response is psycho-emotional distress and discomfort. Diagnostic models that revolve around genetics or chemical imbalances help to justify the social injustices that cause psycho-emotional pain and that deny the fulfilment of non-negotiable social and material needs. The insistence that existential sadness or debilitating stress or social anxiety

are caused genetically or can be solved by a simple jot of the prescription pad ignores the social environments that shape people's thoughts, emotions and behaviors, and physical health.

To be clear, someone effected by a severe personality disorder wouldn't just be "cured" if we abolished capitalism. By no means do I intend to deny or invalidate the very real struggles of people living with mental distress, emotional dysregulation, or those debilitated by trauma. However, when such a large percentage of the population experiences "illnesses" like depression and anxiety, these are *fundamentally social problems*, not cases of individual neurological malfunctioning.

There are limitations to the biomedical methodology of diagnosis and treatment, and the current discourse around "mental illness." Psycho-emotional health cannot be fully understood if its social context is ignored. Incomplete assessment of the causes of psycho-emotional distress that obscure factors like social inequality or political dispossession lead to treatments that can be unhelpful, or even harmful.

Trauma, Tech, & Childhood

Trauma is a widely discussed topic in today's mental health discourse. Gabor Maté describes trauma as an "inner injury, a lasting rupture or split within the self due to harmful events. By this definition, trauma is primarily what happens within someone as a result of a harmful event, not the events themselves."³ Throughout his book *The Myth of Normal*, Maté refers to trauma as a fracturing, a loss of connection to ourselves and the world. He also differentiates between "Capital T and small t trauma."

...capital-T trauma occurs when things happen to vulnerable people that should not have happened, as, for example a child being abused or violence in a family [...]There is another form of trauma - and this is the kind I'm calling nearly universal in our culture - that has sometimes been termed small t trauma.³

Daniel Maté elaborates on small-t trauma:

It's not bad things happening, but good things, necessary things, not happening. Humans have non-negotiable needs – not that we will die without them, but we will experience abnormal development without them. When these needs aren't met, we have to adapt in unhealthy ways.¹¹

"Capital T" Traumas, such as physical violence, highlight specific experiences of childhood, while the "little t" trauma of neglect might refer to more constant structural injustice like insecure housing or food scarcity or the threat of racial violence. Conversations about trauma seem to have broken into the mainstream, and that may well be a good thing. However, public perception of trauma usually refers to the individual experiences of "Capital T" Trauma, and has less consideration for the systematic traumas, despite their long-term detrimental effects on health.

While understanding trauma is essential to understanding psycho-emotional health, "it often stays very individuated." Lisa Fannen continues:

There can be a strong focus on transforming your life and healing from trauma, which doesn't tend to come overtly interlinked with how we also need to transform and heal the relational world we live in. Of course, tools and healing practices we can use and share personally are profound, but they need to sit within wider practices of collective care, social change, and systematic transformation for them to have more or real meaning or efficacy.²

As significant as trauma is to our psycho-emotional health, we should avoid totalizing trauma as the sole cause of our distress. An over-identification with traumatic experiences as an essential and unresolvable part of our character misses potential opportunities for healing. Engaging

trauma through a process of growth requires speaking to resiliency, building upon a person's strengths in a process oriented towards breaking free from trauma's grip on their life. Too often our conceptualization of trauma is pacifying and defeating rather than liberating. People regard trauma as an essential part of their character, rendering them forever broken.

Neurological and emotional development depend on a complex network of social and interpersonal factors, from the stress level of parental figures to the air pollution in the neighborhood. Working class people are increasingly strained in attempts to provide the basic necessities for their family. Anyone who has experienced the skyrocketing cost of housing and groceries understands this challenge. Financially stressed and overworked parents have little time or energy to provide the attentive and emotionally stable caregiving that children require for healthy brain development and emotional attunement. Without these nurturing environments, children cannot properly develop emotional regulation or learn healthy social interaction.

The isolated nuclear family has weakened community relationships, narrowing the possibilities for children to attain the healthy and stable environments they require. Consider the dramatic shift in how children interact with each other over the last 20 years. Today, far fewer children gather in real life to participate in the collective play which is so important in social and emotional development. Relationships between families in a neighborhood (or village, or city block) which used to be common created tangible and cohesive communities. Now, it seems, each individual household is shut off behind locked doors.

Young people today mostly socialize online, mediated by screens in some way. We have all seen the pacifying power of the ipad in a toddler's hands. Advertisers recognize children as the hyper exploitable captive market of their dreams. Developing minds are bombarded by ads reinforcing a "relationship with products, with things – not people...Fast food and toy companies, not parents and teachers, know what's best for them."³ Because they are designed by -and work in service of - the logic of capital, these technologies exist to profit corporations by exploiting neurology, opening portals to unending advertisements and disembodied social interaction. The psychological effects of these devices - particularly on the developing minds - are coming into focus.

Human neurology is highly adaptable, but it does not evolve as fast as technology and the density and complexity of high speed transmissions overwhelm the organic human being's receptive apparatus causing pathological effects - panic, overexcitement, hyperactivity, ADD, dyslexia, information overload, and the saturation of neural circuitry.¹⁰

When children and young people react to the highly unnatural social conditions of modernity with hyperactivity or emotional instability, they are often diagnosed with mental illness or disorders which are then treated with psychoactive drugs that have potential long-term effects. Interfering with the physiology of a developing brain is incredibly risky, and we know it's adverse consequences, yet it continues because it forces adherence to a version of "normalcy" that better facilitates the consumption of marketable commodities, and the training of an obedient workforce in our nation's classrooms.

I don't mean to sound like an old man shaking my cane at "these damn kids", but a conversation about mental health in the modern world must confront these issues. Tech companies facilitate more and more of our social interactions, shaping our reality and understanding of the world around us. Our time is increasingly given up to our devices, our relationships dictated and mediated by multinational conglomerates who seek not to connect people, but to profit from them. This is not to say that technology is *always* harmful to social engagement, but that it simply

cannot replace the deep emotional connection that is an undeniable human need. The internet can be a great tool of communication and information, but it cannot provide transformative and nurturing relationships – those are found in physical spaces, in doing things with other people in real life.

By now it is common knowledge how the developers of social media intentionally designed their platforms to be highly addictive in order to gain higher profits from advertisers, with no regard to the social or cultural implications. The language of neurology is often utilized in these discussions – how social media's "likes" or "comments" supply a dopamine "hit" for their users. It would be an oversimplification to critique social media solely in terms of "neurological manipulation", though.

Our innate human desires for connection, to be understood, to be a part of something larger than ourselves are all exploited by profit motivated algorithms. Our experiences and personalities transform into brands to be bought and sold in the attention economy. People shape their behaviors and identities to be desirable on the personality market. In this way, social media helps to transform yet another aspect of our lives – our sociality, our relationships, our very sense of self – into just another commodity. This degrades one of life's great joys. Communal belonging and social connection are necessary for emotional health and mental stability. The logic of capital replaces embodied relationships that reinforce social cohesion with egoic worship of identity mediated by an algorithm of profit extraction. A digitized reward system that incentivizes self-aggrandizement results in loneliness, isolation, and "mental health" issues. The emptiness and alienation only deepen.

Psychosis of the Status Quo

Without sufficient human connection, we experience a real, deep loneliness that cannot be shaken. Loneliness may be a part of any human experience, but "there is a capitalist form of loneliness that we must confront as such."¹⁸ Loneliness is compounded through economic desperation. Working people who are physically and emotionally exhausted often lack the time and energy and capacity to invest in deep, loving relationships.

Though we have made some progress in social equality and cultural inclusion over the last few decades, we have also experienced dramatic shifts in communal relations and the natural environment. The effects are being expressed through epidemics of psycho-emotional distress and reinforced through pathological beliefs and behaviors. Meaningful connection cannot thrive in such a toxic environment. The seeds of compassion struggle to germinate in the soil of domination. Immiserated by the conditions of our world, we become less socially equipped to love or connect, emotionally dulled and relationally adrift. There is, perhaps, no time in human history when this level of loneliness has been felt so deeply and persistently.

Stephen Harrod Buhner in his book *Earth Grief* defines psychopathic personality disorder as "an inability to feel love, a lack of empathy and remorse."¹³ Accepting the assumptions of capitalist ideology and adopting of the values of its logic reproduces beliefs and behaviors that lack consideration for the wellbeing of others. Adhering to this logic normalizes harmful, violent behaviors and demands a callousness to vast suffering. It could be said that the logic of capital creates a distorted, perverse, even psychopathic culture. The logic of capital is inherently anti-social in this way. Stepping over dying people on a daily commute or passively scrolling through images of genocidal violence among curated ads and cat photos are standard activities in our

society. This is psychologically tormenting to anyone with a functioning heart. It does something to the human spirit, or psyche, or soul to live in a social environment so disconnected from basic dignity.

We are all, in one way or another, complicit in the violence that is inextricable from a capitalist society. Forced to adhere to the logic of capital, we become dissociated from the world, from life itself – hypnotized by ideology and conditioned to normalize grave atrocities. According to Richard Gilman-Opalsky, this results in a population that

will go along with the most insane social relations, will view generalized insanity as perfectly sane and will identify a sick state of affairs as healthy and good. All this is cultivated in capitalist society. It becomes cemented as a psychological disposition.¹⁰

The logic of capital is maintained through systems of mass consumption, political corruption, militaristic violence. Perhaps most pervasively, though, it is the hidden but deeply persuasive characteristic of *ideology itself* that enables the violent and oppressive processes of capitalism to continue. A society dominated by the logic of capital rewards (and therefore reproduces) the sorts of individual behaviors and social policies that best conform to and perpetuate its logic. The behaviors that are rewarded and incentivized under capitalism are anti-social, destructive – indeed, psychotic. “Ideology and psychology are inseparable.”²¹ Those who “make it” in this society, who are considered successful in capitalist terms are those most equipped, able, and willing to engage in the structural violence that is incentivized by the logic of capital. The rest of us are given no choice but to comply to this logic, face the punishment of the carceral system which protects it, or starve.

Throughout history and into the modern day, it has been adherence to the status quo that has perpetuated the most egregious violence the world has ever known. People behaving reasonably according to the logics and ideologies of their social context have carried out genocide, chattel slavery, and the bombing of innocent people en masse. This “reasonable” behavior continues today. It is psychopathic to continue to extract fossil fuels from the earth when we know that doing so threatens human civilization. To waste literal tons of food everyday while people starve down the street or across the globe is fundamentally anti-social behavior. To justify the bombing of hospitals or the deaths of thousands of children as “collateral damage” is to give up your humanity. Michael Parenti says these are not

irrational departures from a rational system. It’s not that this is an irrational or ‘crazy’ time. It’s the converse. They are the rational outcomes of a basically amoral and irrational system. When you’ve got that kind of system, this is what you’re going to get.¹⁹

It’s not that members of the ruling class set out to perpetuate destruction and violence for the sake of it. Rather, they set out to make as much money as possible and protect their own interests, because they are materially and socially incentivized to do so according to the logical framework of capitalism. Destruction and violence are simply means by which to achieve these ends.

The top brass at a fast-food corporation, for example, aren’t twisting their mustaches while hatching diabolical plans to poison the population. Rather, the increasing rates of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity are not a consideration in their business model – pursuing the highest possible profit margin. The wealthy and powerful ruling class “elites” are not evil, *per se*. They simply act in accordance with capital’s logic. Those with their hands on the levers of power aren’t interested in killing you, they just don’t care if you die.

These complex and brutal structural injustices are not merely pernicious plots, they are the result of the capitalist paradigm of *social relationships and material incentive structures*. Matt Christman points out that we refuse to

talk about or point to those structures, (instead we) only talk about a culture that results from those relations, and then reverse engineer it – as if it is the culture that is making these things happen, (rather than) the structures that created the culture.⁶

Who is a bigger threat to society: the populations who crowd the prisons, or the energy companies who pollute the air, poison the water, and degrade the soil? Who is more likely to be responsible for the deaths of large numbers of people: the “mentally ill and deeply disturbed” lone gunman, or the weapons manufacturers who build 2,000 pound bombs? Who is violent and dangerous: the houseless person experiencing a manic episode in the town square, or the powerful media figures who espouse xenophobic and racist rhetoric?

While it is obvious that poverty and structural oppression can cause or exacerbate psycho-emotional distress, it is also abundantly clear that power, “success”, or material wealth do not guarantee mental or emotional stability. Wealthy people are just as likely to struggle with addiction, be prescribed medication for depression, or suffer childhood abuse. Charles Eisenstein states that while the poor may suffer through sheer deprivation,

the rich suffer poverty of another kind: lack of community, connection, meaning, and intimacy, which can cause severe psychological stress even in conditions of material plenty.²¹

Following the logic of capital, those who rise to the top are so deeply corrupted by ideology that they have forgone their own humanity to a degree that could be described as a distinct sort of psychosis. The hyper wealthy and politically powerful minority of the population live in an entirely different material and social reality than the rest of us. Billionaires’ inconceivably disproportionate access to wealth and power essentially disconnects them from the basic framework the rest of us exist in. To be so captured by delusion that you are able to justify such extreme exploitation occurring on your behalf results in a moral and mental perversion beyond human reason which cannot be easily articulated.

This is not to attribute some supernatural villainhood to the powerful, but rather to articulate how the pernicious ideologies of a capitalist society can so thoroughly contradict basic dignity, and yet somehow be culturally justified and fully naturalized. The logic of capital is so antithetical to what it means to be human that even those who benefit from this social arrangement suffer from such psychological depravity and social isolation to such a point “that they become incapable of love.”¹⁰

Conclusion

From day-to-day activities to our conceptualization of life’s purpose, everything is dictated by the logic of capital. People are forced to take part in alienating activities that will obtain them money and therefore the necessities of survival. What we do with our brief time on earth is determined by social forces that have no regard for our health or happiness. Deep entrenchment of this logic persuades us to accept it as natural. To live beholden to the logic of capital requires either numbness through consumption or ideological brainwashing. Ordinary people are estranged from autonomy or power. Instead, most people struggle through life at the mercy of political and economic forces beyond their power to effect or control, essentially running along a track predetermined by the logic of capital. “Disempowerment is at the heart of poor health – mental,

physical, and emotional.”¹ Capitalist social conditions make psycho-emotional instability all but inevitable.

In a sense, it is easier to accept that we are “mentally ill” or suffering from complex biochemical imbalances than it is to face the reality of the violent and oppressive conditions of our world. It is discomforting to acknowledge how much injustice we have normalized, how internalized the oppressive norms of a capitalist society have become. Without this recognition, though, we fail to properly address the conditions which oppress us all, and instead we blame ourselves or each other for our collective misery.

Our social structure requires that we subject ourselves to exploitation and disregard the suffering of others. These conditions are guaranteed to cause stress, loneliness, and feelings of existential sadness. The only options we are given to soothe this psychological and emotional suffering are the creature comforts of consumer goods which ultimately leave us hollow and disconnected, spiritually starved. Manipulated into the belief that the purchase and consumption of commodities will bring us purpose and belonging, we forgo legitimate social interaction, cohesive social realities, and collective rituals of meaning. We have all but replaced the pursuit of love, friendship, or joy with the shiny veneer of a new product’s plastic packaging.

The current mental health epidemic is an indication of capital’s perverse logic, a signifier that we are not living how we should be. The logic of capital and the high degree of alienation it causes is creating social, emotional, and mental collapse. Our inability to conform to its demands is a sign not of our failure, but a sign of our humanity. Our mind’s rejection of these logics provides evidence of their antagonism to all it means to be human – biologically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. “The meaning we give to our emotional responses are of central importance. The perception of radical interconnectedness … helps us recognize how healthy a reaction this distress is.”²² You are not *wrong* to be feeling depressed or anxious. Given these conditions, it would be weird *not* to be depressed and anxious.

This is not to say that diagnosis is an inherently bad thing. Sometimes a diagnosis can be a catalyst to pull a person out of helplessness and despair and into a supportive community of people with similar experiences. Medication can help avoid constant mental torment.* Any means by which someone can come out of unbearable despair or debilitating psychosis is a positive in both the individual and social sense.

There is nothing inherently wrong with individual diagnosis *if that diagnosis leads to a larger conversation* that acknowledges all the factors that contribute to our psycho-emotional health - including the social and structural ones. A collective understanding that *all people* are affected by the logic of capital can free us, individually, from the idea that there is something “wrong” with us.

Diagnosis can be flattening, leading people struggling with their psycho-emotional health away from any further investigation into the cause of their distress. “Why do I think/feel/behave this way? Because I have ‘mental illness’” – end of story. This reductionism reinforces the falsehood that a “disorder” is the result of individual malfunction and can be fully resolved with medication or lifestyle changes.

Feel sad about having no meaningful control over the conditions of your life? Take this pill! Find the endless cycle of unfulfilling work and mind numbing consumption to lack meaning? Time to get into therapy and “do the work.” Have no close friends or supportive community? Maybe a \$700 yoga retreat will help.

Without this wider analysis, diagnosis can easily lead a person struggling with their psycho-emotional health down a path of defeated passivity or a resigned victimhood which mutates into a sort of cultural signifier. Trauma can become something around which we build our entire identity. With a profound human need to be seen and understood gone unfulfilled by healthy, embodied relationships, identification with diagnosis or the reification of traumatic experience is an attempt to feel a sense of belonging or shared identity. Trauma can be essentialized as a catch-all explanation for the suffering that people experience. Neurodivergence can become fetishized, particularly among young people, serving as a sort of symbol of disenfranchised authenticity. For a generation already so disaffected by their social reality and grappling with justifiable despair about the future they've inherited, there are consequences to internalizing the idea of being irreparably damaged, broken people who cannot make basic positive changes for their lives, much less come together in the collective pursuit of meaningful, radical social change.

If neurodivergence is depoliticized and dysfunction is attributed solely to the peculiarities of the individual, the logic of capital is taken for granted as natural and unchangeable, which it is not. Antidepressants are fine, but a society that did not drive so many people into such unmanageable despair would be better. Therapeutic inquiry may give us insight into personalized nuances of why we are the way we are as individuals, but it alone does not adequately confront social problems. Tools for emotional regulation may help us get through the day and build healthier relationships, but they are not a solution to institutional oppression. A disciplined mindfulness meditation practice can help us to become happier and more engaged people - we cannot uproot structural injustice if we are in a state of constant distress - however, let's acknowledge that we need more than individuated self-care routines to put an end to the unjust conditions which create mass suffering.

While our personal overcoming of emotional dysregulation should not serve to pacify our righteous outrage, working towards transformation on the personal level does not necessarily counteract or negate the struggle for radical systematic change. These transformations can and must and *do* work alongside each other, inform each other, strengthen each other. This process "allows us to share and evaluate our subjective experience in solidarity with others. The structures that will enable this are not therapeutic, but political."¹⁶ Donald Rothberg writes,

Examining concerns about care for oneself and others, we may see more clearly how the roots of suffering, as well as the possible responses to such suffering are indeed personal, but also relational and collective.¹⁵

With social needs met, and worldviews freed from the distortions of the logic of capital, the types of mental illnesses now so prevalent would be far less so. It is not a radical demand or utopian dream to insist on a way of organizing society which does not require and perpetuate exploitation on a global scale and vast systematic violence – which doesn't make us feel so crazy.

Our feelings of fear, grief, rage, and panic are fully justified and appropriate, given the capitalist world we're all subjected to. Individuating these feelings denies an opportunity for a sort of collective recognition of the alienation we all experience. This kind of solidarity is a prerequisite for the profound changes necessary for both personal well-being and collective social change. Losing sight of the structural causes of our mental and emotional dis-ease means a failure to recognize our mutual enemy – the logic of capital – and to unite in struggle against that logic.

Addendum: Radical Madness

Any attempt to internalize, normalize, rationalize, or adapt to the world we live will drive you to delusion, detachment, or madness. It is impossible to adhere to “normalcy” in this society, and also be *healthy*, or *well* according to our evolutionary needs and hard-wired social expectations. In the same breath, we are disempowered to do anything differently either by material constraints, emotional capacity, or fear of carceral punishment.

To believe in and embody values like compassion and love for humanity, or an insistence on justice and environmental sustainability leads a person to madness, either in action or affectation. To “go mad” can be a sort of rebellion against an anti-social, violent social reality. “If you don’t go crazy at regular intervals,” says Alan Watts, “you’ll eventually go insane.”²³

A rejection of normalcy in such a violent society doesn’t equate to a romanticization of madness. Certainly, dealing with outbursts of delusion, struggling with intrusive thoughts, or experiencing mental breaks can have detrimental effects on one’s life. That being said, La Marr Jurelle Bruce in his text *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind* shines a light on the ways madness can “harness mad feelings like obsession and rage as stimulus for radical thought and action.”⁸ Madness can be an expression of our civilization’s grave injustices. This madness has the potential to be harnessed towards movements of liberation.

Behaving “reasonably” in a capitalist society perpetuates and complies with a logic that is antithetical to all that is beautiful, all that makes life worth living. It is time, then, to be unreasonable.

Let the [capitalists] find us confusing, or better, totally incomprehensible. If the sense and sensibility of capital is what we oppose, let us become capital’s nonsense.⁸

A refusal of the logic of capital means embodying beliefs which are antagonistic to normalcy. A life dedicated to the rejection of the profit motive in favor of radical, loving connection and pro-social values requires we break from consensus reality. Therefore “madness might be desirable amid a corrupt world order that deems itself reasonable.”⁸

It takes a kind of crazy faith to believe in a future which might be less violent & exploitative, with social conditions more conducive to material and emotional wellbeing. The complex and deep-seated matrix of vast exploitation, crumbling social structures, political instability and existential ecological threats which result from the hegemonic capitalist ideology demands a total overthrow of normalcy - a reorientation of what we deem “crazy.”

“The fact is, madness has a spiritual component and touches on the same ontological problems as spirituality, for both are for going out of mind”⁵ Recognition and acceptance of the undeniable interconnectedness of all life drives us to a spiritual awareness which does not placate the ego’s incessant need to categorize, differentiate, and make sense of everything. “True compassion is ruthless, from the ego’s point of view, because it does not consider the ego’s drive to maintain itself”¹⁷

Liberation from normality may entail a sort of collective “ego-death” – an experience which spiritual seekers describe as dissolving the boundaries of separation to reveal the interconnectedness of all life. A collective overcoming of the self - this is the divine madness.

To see beyond social constructs of normalcy and madness, to deny our conditioning and reject the logic of capital completely, to embrace the insubstantial and impermanent nature of social and mental paradigms is to call upon a madness that is liberating. Art is one way to harness, practice, and express this madness in an embodied fashion. Love, in its vast conceptualizations and forms, is another way to break free from the logic of capitalist exchange relations. Love, as a social ethic, can be channeled towards collective liberation.

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** Author's note: a prescription to Lexapro was definitely a factor in helping me to get out of a cycle of self-destructive thoughts and behaviors, and finally addressing my alcoholism*

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