

CHAPTER 8

TOWARDS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

It seems that humanity is at the cusp of a transition from a dominant ‘free market’ economy into an all-encompassing ‘market society’ (Sandel 2013). In the 1980s and 1990s, deregulation of government functions and services was the rage, and in less than twenty years, in many countries, the global marketplace has successfully absorbed large parts of what formerly was the realm of the government, including mass transportation, utilities and telecommunications. As Jeremy Rifkin notes, the global economy has turned its attention to the last remaining independent spheres of human activity: culture itself, cultural rituals, community events, social gatherings, the arts, sports and games, social movements, and civic engagements are all being encroached upon by the commercial sphere (Rifkin 2001: 10). After making these observations, Rifkin concludes:

The great issue in the coming years is whether civilisation can survive with a greatly reduced government and cultural sphere and where only the commercial sphere is left as the primary mediator of human life (*ibid*).

In his remarkable study of American life, Robert Putnam documents the atrophying of public purpose (Putnam 2001). He shows how social activities and public purposes are in dramatic decline. To employ an analogy with wildlife, the ‘global warming’ of globalisation is destroying the social ecology at a dramatic and unprecedented rate. These changes have come within one generation, an incredibly short time span in human history.

Middle-aged and older people are more active in organisation than younger people, attend church more often, vote more regularly, both read and watch the news more frequently, are less misanthropic and more philanthropic, are most interested in politics, work on more community projects, and volunteer more (*ibid.*: 247-8).

Putnam notes the change effects, the range of passions, purposes and meanings:

Not all social networks have atrophied. Thin, single-stranded, surf-by interactions are gradually replacing dense, multi-stranded, well-exercised bonds... Large groups with local chapters, long histories, multiple objectives, and adverse organisations are being replaced by more evanescent, single purpose organisations (*ibid.*: 183-4).

These changes reflect a transformation in our social purposes and in the vehicles traditionally used to carry those purposes. It is, as with global warming, a destruction of unprecedented speed and range. Established social and community bonds and purposes are dissolving. Alongside this, the meaning of work, career, love, commitment and overall purpose are subject to seismic change. Since the implications drive into the heartland of personal meaning, mission and motivation, they are likely to transform our understandings of what it

is to be a human being. In doing so, they will revolutionise core concepts, such as what constitutes ‘a life’ besides having similarly potent effects on other notions such as ‘love’, ‘commitment’, ‘community’, ‘democracy’, ‘society’. even ‘God’.

Given this, we would expect that our understanding of human flourishing and well-being are also being subsumed by this all-encompassing model of the self and society, which for the moment we can call ‘neoliberal’ (Davies 2015).¹ The question is: can one provide an account of human well-being that doesn’t succumb to this totalising influence? In this chapter, we aim to show that the characterisation of well-being provided in this book escapes being neoliberal. We will argue this, first, by demonstrating how the conception of well-being developed in this book can be employed to provide a deep and principled critique of contemporary neoliberal society, and second by uncovering the features that a neoliberal account of well-being would have and how our account avoids them.

NEOLIBERALISM AND CAPITALISM

Let us briefly define the nature of the so-called ‘neoliberal model’. Essentially neoliberalism pursues the constant widening of existing markets and seeks wherever possible to colonise new areas for market organisation: hence those arrangements formerly serviced by public agencies as part of a citizens’ rights or through personal interactions in family or community settings, are increasingly transformed into for-profit market transactions by companies selling services in a market setting. The dominant model involves the ‘privatisation’ of public or common assets and services, what David Harvey calls capital ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003). Everything is open to be commodified and marketed: water, our genes, body parts, social work and social welfare generally.

This marketisation is problematic for well-being because, in a capitalist economy, it involves an inherent tendency towards instrumentalisation. An economic system is capitalist insofar as it exists solely for the maximal accumulation of capital for its own sake (Marx 1976). In such an economy, all other aspects of social life tend to become only instrumentalised means for the maximum accumulation of capital. It is the capitalist imperative of maximum accumulation that drives what is loosely called ‘neoliberalism’. Under such a regime, all use value ultimately serves exchange value, and markets become instrumentalising and commodifying. This means that markets *per se* needn’t be inimical to well-being; it depends on the axioms of the system that governs them.

The privatisation of public assets and services is associated with a drive to reshape cultural and institutional organisations in accordance with the instrumentalising imperative of capitalism. Beyond even this, the form and content of knowledge and narrative becomes lined up with free-market ideology, and this includes its misunderstanding of human well-being. For instance, the profit-seeking corporation is presented as the role model for not just the public sector specifically, but also for civil society and the human being generally. The market colonises human consciousness, and even the unconscious, such that augmenting well-being becomes conceived as a kind of psychological profit-making. For instance, as we saw in Chapter 3, when well-being is envisaged as a preference function, it becomes akin to an internal market in which we trade less for more preferred options in order to maximise.

STARTING POINTS

In this book, we deliberately begun with a philosophical description of the ingredients that comprise well-being. We supplemented this with a splattering of real-life examples, garnered from an empirical study of peoples' subjective experiences of living. The argument up to now suggests that many theories of well-being succumb to neoliberal ideological pressures, and it provides a way to show how a properly framed account might escape such invasions and establish standpoints from which we can see them as such. This is what we need to show now.

Before we systematically review this argument, we need to set the stage with some preliminary points. First, if well-being doesn't need to be conceived in the image of neoliberalism then it can be employed not only to criticise society but also to *positively* evaluate aspects of living in a capitalist society. We can employ the concept of well-being to investigate and think about what is good about living within a capitalist system. The evaluation doesn't have to be only critical. For example, compared to feudal societies, or compared to state-planned economies, for many people (although not all), a capitalist market economy would constitute an improvement along several of the dimensions of well-being. Criticism is more pertinent for our specific purposes, however, because this more vividly illustrates how the account of well-being given here avoids the neoliberal trap.

When the concept of well-being is employed to assess critically life in a capitalist market society, of course, such assessments typically don't indicate what a better alternative would be. However, given that evaluations are comparative, even if only implicitly so, when writers such as Bauman, Sennett, Rifken, Stiglitz, Mirowski and Sandel, point out how work has become instrumentalised, how our lives are becoming more commodified, how increasing levels of competitiveness provoke greater anxiety, there is an implicit comparison with an undefined society that lacks those ill-being features (Freud 2010).

This point is significant because it indicates that social critique of contemporary society requires the imaginative work of constructing functionable alternatives. Such critiques are the attempt to indicate something better, even though diagnosing the illness is easier than designing the remedy. The envisaging of better alternatives requires, however, an analysis of the ills and their causal conditions, and this bring us to another interesting point. When people disagree in their evaluations of capitalist society, their base comparisons might be different. For instance, one might think that a society based on a capitalist economy would be better in many regards than one based on a state-planned economy. But such a thought wouldn't negate the idea that there is an alternative future economic system that is better than a capitalist one (if it had yet to be envisaged based on some unspecified set of principles or axioms).

Third, these points highlight the nature of the comparative and aspectual nature of evaluative judgments: X is better than Y (comparative) with respect to F (aspectual) (as emphasised in chapter 1). This means that our assessment of a social institution from the perspective of well-being will be multi-dimensional and nuanced. It rules out the polarising for-and-against judgments that pollute political polemics. It is this all-or-nothing approach to evaluations that turns critical assessments into ideological wars.

Fourth, we have rejected the subjectivist approach to evaluative judgments that is apparently inherent in contemporary scientific and economic thinking. One can make mistakes and be

ignorant in one's judgments about what is valuable, including about one's own well-being; subjectivism of this kind is erroneous. This means that "this feels good" is not an adequate criterion for well-being, even though good feelings constitute part of our well-being, as well as being conducive to it. It also means that we live in a world of untapped value-possibilities about which we might be ignorant. One might feel good in conditions that are limited, when there are other highly valuable possibilities about which one is ignorant.

Fifth, we have avoided a tendency that is arguably present in some positive psychology: to treat the individual as the main cause of her well-being or ill-being, thereby ignoring structural features of society (Davis 2015:18). This predisposition culminates in the tendency of the so-called 'new science of happiness' to assume a liberal political framework and a market economy in which individuals are social atoms who pursue their own happiness (Abbinett 2013). We are arguing that the notion of well-being can be liberated from such assumptions and when it is, it becomes an indispensable part of critical theory. In this regard it can be employed not only to criticise actions, practices and institutions, but also the ways in which institutions are systematically related to each other, or in other words, the structural features of society.²

The tendency to ignore the structural features of society and to assume that the individual is the main cause of her well or ill-being can adopt a scientific garb. For example, according to psychological set-point theory, each person has a set point of happiness determined by genetics and personality and objective life circumstances have a negligible causal role (Easterlin 2005: 3). We have avoided this kind of discussion by insisting that the framework advanced here is not an empirical theory about the causes of well and ill-being.³ This means that we haven't tried to address the complex relationships between individual and systemic causation.

Finally, there is a plethora of critical commentary of contemporary society; these tend to be disparate and fragmented, and not based on an explicit theory of well-being. For example, Oliver James describes the 'Affluenza Virus' which blights those who highly value money, possessions and appearances and who are consequently at a greater risk of being emotionally distressed - depressed, anxious, substance-abusing and personality-disordered (James 2007: xiv) In his earlier book *Britain on the Couch* based on data from more than a decade and a half ago he showed that in the case of British people nearly one quarter suffered from 'serious emotional problems such as depression, anxiety or psychosis' (James 2010). He attributes such phenomena to a "nasty form of political economy" that he names "selfish capitalism".

From our point of view, this kind of analysis has two major shortcomings. Because it is not based on a holistic account of well-being, the diagnosis is partial; it focuses on emotional well-being. And because of its partial nature, there is no attempt to map such ills systematically. Furthermore, James' portrayal of selfish capitalism doesn't trace well the causal route from political economy to personal ill-being. He characterises selfish capitalism in terms of four features: privatisation, deregulation, the idea that business success should be defined in terms of current share price and the conviction that market forces can meet human needs of almost every kind (James 2007: xviii). This definition doesn't explicitly include the defining, and hence offending, features of capitalism and because of this it doesn't pin-point the main problem.

THE ARGUMENT

The exercise that we are about to indulge in is merely a prolegomenon to a properly constructed empirical investigation. Our aim is to identify the stress points at which a capitalist market economy is likely to systematically produce ill-being. In so doing, we want to show that the conception of well-being argued for in this book isn't subsumed by neoliberal thinking. The evidence for this is that it can be employed in a robust, systematic and principled critique of the key features of a capitalist economic system.

The concept of well-being developed in this book can be used as a basis for a comparative evaluation, and if we are right in this contention, then it would *not* involve imposing neoliberal conceptions implicitly on a non-capitalist society. Furthermore, the comparative assessment wouldn't involve the covert move of taking neoliberal criteria to try to substantiate a positive evaluation of a neo-liberal society.

1) Instrumentalising

The instrumentalisation at the heart of a capitalist society involves overwhelming 'opportunity costs', an ironic term for the systematic draining of meaning from our lives. This malaise applies to all the dimensions of well-being, but the instrumentalisation of work is at the heart of the problem. We are accustomed to the idea that the value of what we are doing is fundamentally the results that we attain. But, as we have seen, this idea cannot be correct (p.11). This isn't merely a question of the nature of the results or ends that we pursue, for example, that we increasingly tend to substitute financial goals and performance targets for social and artistic ends. Rather, the point is the very relationship between our goals and activities inherent in capitalist-conceived production: namely, because the action is for the sake of a goal, we wrongly assume that the goal has primary value. But, as we argued in chapter 2, this normal supposition is back to front: it is the activity of that has non-instrumental value because it is part of someone's life; it is the results have instrumental value. We don't need to let our goals instrumentalise our activities and hence our life.

This diagnosis touches the heart of a pervasive social disorder. Many people admit they feel alienated, burnt-out and often profoundly unhappy, and we are hypothesising that a root of such maladies is systematic instrumentalisation. We propose this because activity merely for the sake of results comprises an anti-appreciative mode of awareness. Insofar as one instrumentalises, one is incapable of appreciating the non-instrumental value of activities and consequently, its non-instrumental value cannot become part of one's well-being (because one is connected non-derivatively only to the result). It is like attending a banquet at which one cannot eat.

Capitalist neo-liberalism ineluctably habituates us to regard our working lives through these instrumentalised lenses and hence shepherds us towards increasing self-instrumentalisation and deeper ill-being. Neo-classical economic thinking, and its managerial derivatives, essentially regard work as grim soulless manufacturing, as a mere factor of production, even when it is sweetened with psychological incentives.

Such states are illnesses or afflictions. This is because, in such modes of being, we have fundamental value relationships the wrong way around. It is akin to not being able to distinguish emotionally between the dinner and the cook, or more subtly the role of the cook and the person. When such mistakes characterise important sectors of one's way of living and

one's relationships to oneself, then the person herself is *ipso facto* subject to a form of ill-being (p.21).

This type of ill-being is endemic in a capitalist system insofar as a capitalist mode of production is directed by the maximisation of the accumulation of capital for its own sake. This means, first, that capitalism instrumentalises all that it touches, including most obviously both work and consumption and, second, that it is driven by an imperative to encroach upon an ever-increasing number of aspects of human life, as we see in its neoliberal phase. The machine has a need to constantly grow and everything it touches becomes part of the machine.

Instrumentalisation can be found along each of the four dimensions of human living. It transmutes why we do what we do, the desires that motivate our activities, and thereby, it pollutes our sense of what matters. It enters our awareness, and hence severs our capacity to appreciate the processes of living. In this way, it stunts our capacity to relate to other people as people and reduces lived communities to shopping clubs. Finally, insidiously, it can pervade our sense of ourselves, of what and who we are.

2) Desirable activities

It ought to be viewed as one of the greatest conceptual scandals of our time that consumption is traditionally defined in terms of expenditure or purchasing. For this shows that what matters economically is only the transaction, the handing over of money. It establishes consumption essentially as a source of income, and thereby throws to the ground any idea that the capitalist economy is for the sake of bettering lives or for the good of consumers. The environmental consequences of this conception are calamitous; the human outcomes, tragic.

This instrumentalisation of consumption underlies the claim that advertising shapes and directs our desires. Both phenomena indicate that well-being cannot be well understood in terms of desire or preference satisfaction. We cannot assume that the satisfaction of desires defines well-being (even after cognitive therapy). Such a view surrenders to an impoverished and truncated vision of human possibility. There are enumerable ways that societies can live, and in the face of these anthropological alternatives, the desire theory unimaginatively fixes on idealised versions of our actual desires as the evaluative criterion for defining what counts as a possible better.⁴ It leaves us logically unable to ask: "would be better off having quite different desires?" and "would our state of being be better in quite different social conditions?" The idea 'getting what one wants' is too limited a notion to capture the value possibilities before us.

For these reasons, we need to define well-being in terms of the criteria that would allow us to evaluate desires from the point of view of well-being. This turning point or fulcrum, we have argued, consists in abstract features of our motivational make-up, namely relatively inescapable *deslogo* interests. These define the kinds of activities that comprise being well. They stand to the human life roughly as running to a horse, flying to a bird, pack-hunting to wolf, and eating and other activities to all animals. Insofar as she is not engaging in one of the relevant types of activity, then a human person would *ipso facto* have a lower level of well-being.

It is possible that, in capitalist societies, we are numb to the fact that may be missing out on parts of life, akin perhaps to an enclosed horse that can't run enough or a bird in cage, unaware of what they are lacking. When a person's life is institutionalised, or chained to routine, or overworked, or stilted by poverty, or restricted by social mores, then he or she

may be unable to engage in the kinds of desirable activities that partly comprise well-being. This inability needn't feel like a deprivation. Furthermore, the lack needn't be manifest directly in the actual desires the person has; the enchained horse may not want to run and the bored bureaucrat may not feel any curiosity. Indeed, the person may desire things that prevent her from, or are incompatible with, engaging in the relevant activities. Therefore, we can be living in conditions of ill-being without knowing or even feeling it.

Furthermore, in such circumstances, typically, the person will want false substitutes. As we suggested earlier, social status may stand to belonging roughly as sometimes chocolate stands to the need to be loved: the first is a false substitute for the second. Normally, the content of our desiring expresses the inherent *deslogo* interests, but cases of false substitutes constitute a breakdown of this expression: the non-instrumental reasons for desire do not match the relevant object of desire. Consumerism encourages and thrives on the formation of such false substitutes, and market ideology makes the very notion nonsense. For example, consumerism profits when a *deslogo* interest for intimacy is substituted by a desire for success, especially when this general desire expresses itself more specifically as wanting brand-name clothes and other emblems. The very social forces that cause the splintering of families may well also cause the desires for such splintering.

An account of well-being must have the conceptual resources to be free of such harmful systematic distortions. Desire-based theories aren't, and in this sense, they form part of the neoliberal conception of well-being.

3) Appreciative Awareness

Market ideology has an interest in overlooking the subjectivity of awareness as a defining component of well-being. It profits it that our purchases systematically outstrip our capacity to appreciate them. For many people, their wealth systematically surpasses their attentive and appreciative ability to enjoy its fruits. Indeed, the central defining role of awareness tends to be overlooked by utility-based theories that evaluate well-being solely in terms of preferences.

This stands in stark contrast to the fact that merely having a good isn't sufficient for an increase in well-being. If one cannot appreciate it, it is as if nothing. Moreover, thus, what counts towards well-being is limited by one's capacity to absorb it or attend to it. A plethora of material goods and desirable activities will have little or no well-being-meaning because, simply in terms of their volume, they outstrip our capacity to appreciate them.

Capitalism can insidiously invade our awareness thereby comprising a whole other set of distinct forms of ill-being. One's well-being depends *directly* on one's capacity to appreciate. This simple point provides the starting point of a whole catalogue of potential stinging criticisms of capitalism.

First, strong desires typically undermine appreciative attention and in an economy that relies on growth and hence the constant stimulation of desire, it may be very difficult to fully appreciate the value of what one is now doing. A person whose attention is constantly nagged by desires will *ipso facto* suffer from a diminished well-being. As one's levels of desire increase, appreciation drops. In a similar vein, appreciation is often destroyed by high and definitive expectations, which help breed feelings of disappointment and complaint.

Second, appreciative awareness is undercut by negative feelings, especially anxiety and worry, which tend to become a permanent feature of our inner landscape in a capitalist system that needs some unemployment to thrive and that benefits from the status anxiety of potential customers.

Third, a capitalist economy requires an ever-decreasing turnover time, and this means that at work we tend to live in an augmented haste that is usually inimical to proper appreciation. The rushed psychology is likely to spread out from the work-place into other areas of daily life and it is likely to unwittingly train our attention to be more splintered with decreasing span.

Fourth, most importantly, as we have already noted, one is unable to appreciate the valuable features of activities insofar as one instrumentalises them because this involves treating an activity as a mere cost, to be minimised rather than cherished. As we showed in chapter 2, because economic rationality is purely instrumental, this way of thinking tends to pervade our understanding of life's activities: daily living tends to become an instrument for the realisation of plans and projects.

Arguably these apparently disparate phenomena amount to three ingrained forms of ill-being at the level of consciousness. First, there is a systematic degradation of appreciative awareness. Consciousness can be diminished. For instance, insofar as a person is incapable of focusing and has a fragmented awareness, her well-being will be systematically decreased. As our attention spans shrink, we can appreciate less. As our awareness becomes more intense, our capacity for well-being increases.⁵ Second, there is the ill-being that consists in feeling anxious, depressed, angry or rather being in moods that express themselves as such feelings. The quality of one's day is a direct function of how one feels: emotions enter well-being in that they partly constitute it. Evidence suggests that both poverty and affluenza tend to cause anxiety. Such feelings colour awareness, and in so doing paint the phenomenological 'world' that we inhabit. Third, capitalist neo-liberalism lends itself to the construction of certain kinds of phenomenological 'worlds' that are adverse to well-being. The ways we focus our attention constructs a phenomenological world built of the predominant contents of our awareness (p.23). A social world based on an economy that needs constant growth and that, consequently, has an instrumentalising Midas touch will facilitate that people construct a social phenomenological world in which, for instance, other people are viewed more or often than not instrumentally. As we said earlier, a person who constructs a lonely world through repeated acts of attention cannot expect to be able to appreciate friendship as such and cannot expect to enjoy the feelings associated with such a relationship.

4) Relationships

Our well-being would be undermined by a depersonalised idea of work, a lack of intimacy in personal relationships and a vacuous conception of community-life. Since these points were expounded earlier (in chapter 5), we can revisit them briskly. The idea now is to indicate how a neoliberal conception of these three types of relationships comprises a misunderstanding of well-being.

Work has instrumental value only in relation to people or other conscious beings. A capitalist economic system necessarily frames it in radically differently and completely depersonalised terms: work is systemically directed towards the augmentation of capital *per se*, and this means that we produce brushes to make profit that can be reinvested in the system. One's work-relation is to the produced article, the meaning of which is defined in terms of the

financial system. It isn't an accidental and revisable feature of the system that work is so conceived: as we just seen, customers are non-derivatively only a source of revenue.

This misconceives the relation between exchange value and use value of articles, but, more importantly for present purposes, this feature of the system deprives people the possibility of connecting to the meaningfulness of their work.⁶ The instrumental meaning of one's work is how it improves the lives of other people by bettering their activities. In a system that depersonalises and instrumentalises work, one cannot connect to this meaning except perhaps abstractly. Furthermore, in such a system, the institution of work does not facilitate that people connect to the non-instrumental meaning of their work, i.e. working as an activity valuable for its own sake (even though it is also a means). This tends to make work drudgery. Work is defined around this instrumentality rather than being designed to be appreciated as a non-instrumentally valuable activity that is also a means.

Turning to relationships, in chapter 5 we stressed that other people become a part of one's life as beings of non-derivative value through appropriate connections. Let us call this 'intimacy'. Therefore, if one lives in a pattern that prevents one from being intimately with others fully as persons then this is a form of ill-being. Since this is a such an important component of well-being, the seeping of market forces into relationships is a serious form of ill-being, even when it remains largely unrecognised as such because, for instance, we are accustomed to think of relationships largely in transactional or give-and-take terms. This would constitute evidence that socio-economic conditions are not conducive to our understanding close relationships in terms of 'we' i.e. as a part/whole rather than as an instrumentalised means/ends relation.

Such a diagnosis indicates that neoliberalism is antithetical to intimate human relations in at least two ways: instrumentalisation and individualism. Having discussed the former at length, let us turn to individualism, the idea that the primary social unit is the individual person. As Hobbes observed, individualism must construe all relationships on the model of a contract or pact: we remain separate and we trade. This picture is profoundly alienating of intimate relationship for which we require the idea that the person becomes part of one's life.

Turning now to community, one of the defining features of such an inclusion is a 'we'-awareness. Such awareness transforms the bonds between people from the interpersonal (as a relation among persons) to the collective intrapersonal (as a relation between members of a group). This permits the idea of doing things together as a unit; it allows communal activity, as opposed to the concept of co-operation between separate individuals. It permits that a person belongs to the life and history of a community.

Robert Lane argues that the main sources of happiness in western market societies are friendships and family life but that there is an erosion of such relationships and of community solidarity in more prosperous market economies (Lane 2001). Lane also discusses the erosion of public trust. In a similar vein, Richard Sennett speaks of 'his own epiphany at the Swiss mountain resort of Davos where, for the last few years, he has attended a winter meeting of the elite of business and political leaders. The World Economic Forum at Davos 'runs more like a court than a conference. Its monarchs are the heads of big banks or international corporations' (Sennett 1999: 66). But Sennett finds a dilemma at the heart of the proceedings, namely that the regime is 'losing the battle for the hearts and minds' of ordinary people. In a peculiar and deeply disheartening manner, it is almost a re-run of the way that the defeated communist regimes first lost the engagement and commitment of their own people before

losing the global battle. Sennett argues that having studied new social and workplace patterns a range of contradictions and unforeseen dilemmas are beginning to emerge which challenge the power of the dominant economic model:

One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, arousing a longing for community. All the emotional conditions we have explored in the workplace animate that desire; the uncertainties of flexibility; the absence of deeply rooted trust and commitment; the superficiality of teamwork; but most of all, the spectre of failing to make something of oneself in the world, 'to get a life' through one's work. All these conditions impel people to look for some other scene of attachment and depth (*ibid.*: 138).

5) Self-Awareness

Neoliberal capitalism tends to reshape our sense of ourselves in ways that constitute yet another kind of ill-being.

To take pleasure in one's present consciousness is to have appreciative self-awareness. It is like being joyful to be an I. This serene happiness can be drowned out when our attention is drawn elsewhere by unsatisfied desires and feelings of anxiety, anger and sadness, and especially by self-conscious awareness motivated by such phenomena. In this sense, a capitalist economy can drive out joyful immediate self-awareness.

Concerning self-awareness of our past, ill-being consists in a general tendency to subsume one's narrational understanding of one's past into socially-defined templates that may be more misleading than illuminating. For example, our understanding of ourselves may be framed in terms of success and failure that distort our perception of our lives through an instrumental prism. Likewise, wellness concerning one's perception of one's future consists in appropriate openness and acceptance, and we can evaluate the influence of capitalism in this regard.

The general criterion for well-being concerning self-awareness is one's experiential appreciation of one's non-derivative value as a self. Many people have problems with their experiential feeling of self-worth because they make it contingent on something else, such as being successful or being liked by others (Chapter 6, p.12). Capitalism has a strong interest in making our sense of self-worth contingent on productive performance, and so we should not be surprised that the educational system tends to work against well-being in this regard. The same point from a slightly different angle: self-awareness that classifies oneself as an object constitutes an instrumentalisation or a commodification of oneself. We would expect this kind of ill-being to be endemic in a society that systematically fails to treat economic activity *per se* as having only derivative value.

A rather different point is that well-being constitutively requires that we identify ourselves as a person among others, who are equally valuable as oneself (Chapter 6, p.16). This feature of well-being is vital as the root of an equilibrated sense of self. It is part of our well-being that we have a sense of self that doesn't deny the reality and equal value of other people. Arguably capitalism inherently tends to violate this aspect of well-being. This would be so if it inescapably tends to set up antagonisms between groups of people, such as race, nationality and class, which involve regarding the others as less (Gill and Thomson 2019: Chapter 9).

In conclusion, we have shown how a normatively robust and subjectively rich conception of well-being can provide a platform for critically assessing the socio-economic system and institutions one lives in. We have navigated between two dangers: on the one side, views of well-being that are assimilated into the current neoliberal and neoclassical paradigms, and on the other, the idea that the whole notion of well-being is ineluctably a damaged product of capitalism. We have tried to show how a conception of well-being can be normatively sturdy enough to be a basis for critical evaluation of cultural practices and socio-political institutions but without becoming a free-floating evaluative concept untethered to some facts about us. It needs the elements that we have introduced, such as a rich notion of subjectivity and the idea that instrumentalising can constitute a form of harm. It needs them to be a faithful account of the concept of well-being, and once they have been acknowledged as such, we have a concept that is robust enough to serve as a basis for radical social critique: it matters how we live. In short, properly conceived, the concept of well-being needn't succumb to a neoliberal paradigm.

NEOLIBERAL CONCEPTIONS OF WELL-BEING

What features would a distinctively neoliberal account of well-being have? How does the account in this book evade these characteristics? We have already implicitly provided in-depth answers to these questions, but a quick consolidation is in order.

We have just seen the various ways in which a capitalist market economy might systematically profit from superficial understandings and misapprehensions of well-being. For instance, it benefits the economy that we instrumentalise ourselves especially at work, that we view desire and consumption as key determinants of well-being, that we ignore the limitations and central importance of awareness, that we treat relationships as deals and that we peg self-esteem to success. Such misconceptions bolster GDP defined growth. Asserting this point doesn't require a conspiracy theory, but only the observation that a capitalist market society would tend to focus on aspects of human life that directly concern it. That these misconceptions sustain economic growth doesn't make them misconceptions but it is part of what makes them neoliberal.

A neoliberal account of well-being would tend to portray persons in terms of the general model, *homo economicus*. This model depicts humans as beings who act rationally, and defines rationality in terms of the maximisation of self-regarding preferences (Hollis 1977). This last part (that defines rationality) is pernicious in complex ways that need unravelling.

Maximising *per se* is perhaps the most malignant frame of such a definition. Indeed, since maximisation is at the core of both capitalism and neo-classical economics, any definition of rationality in such terms warrants a probing evaluation, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this work (see Gill and Thomson 2019: chapter 10). Nevertheless, we can glimpse how such a definition is harmful for well-being by contrasting it with what it excludes. It rules out satisficing conceptions according to which what is rational can be defined in terms of obtaining sufficiency or enough of something good. Simply, it bans the thought 'this is enough'. The definition of rationality in terms of maximising bars the idea that well-being requires only a sufficiency of a desirable activity or experience. It forces us to maximise. Thus, it forces us to pursue policies that provide material goods beyond even the most generous conception of need. It compels us to ignore the distinction between needs and desires. Second, the definition leaves out all aspects of well-being that aren't numerical, that which can't be maximised or optimised. In this sense, as we explained in chapter 4, such

definitions tend to glide glibly over the hidden intricacies of the intentional and aspectual nature of our mental lives. This is much worse than it might sound because effectively it means that such definitions ignore the phenomenology of life.⁷ Finally, the definition eliminates all non-consequentialist conceptions of rationality, such as the idea of respect for persons, which formed an evaluative basis of the account of well-being argued for in this book (in chapter 2). These three alternative conceptions of rationality are deeply inimical to neoliberalism, and the definition of rationality in terms of maximising supports neoliberalism. (Gill and Thomson 2019: chapter 10).

Furthermore, the definition of the rational also contains the instrumental view of rationality described in chapter 2, which commits the seductive and grave error of not separating means/ends from instrumental/non-instrumental. This failure instrumentalises human life and subjectivises the good by making it always a goal. This fetishises efficiency and achievement as primordial values, both of which support market-capitalist thinking.

Another shortcoming of the *homo economicus* definition of rationality is that it assumes that behaviour and preference is always self-regarding. The mathematical theory, called ‘the Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium (DSGE) model’ dictates that decisions of one individual cannot be influenced by the behaviour of others and without this assumption, the whole mathematical edifice of the DSGE model comes crashing down like a house of cards, and with it some of the tools of contemporary neoclassical economics (such as marginal analysis, constrained optimisation techniques) (Gowdy quoted in J. Rowson 2010: 14-15).

As we saw in Chapter 3, a preference-based account treats desire as the ultimate ground of value; one of the deep flaws with this account is the fact that it doesn’t allow for a critique of one’s preferences except in superficial way. Because it tends to treat existing preferences as a given, the theory cannot substantiate a radical critique of the patterns of desire that prevail in market societies. Desires can only be critically assessed in terms of other desires that the person has.

As we have argued, the preference model internalises the idea of a market: there are alternatives for the person to trade off as he tries to maximise his return.

Another way to construe the well-being of *homo economicus* is in terms of the maximising of pleasure and minimising of pain. We dedicated a whole chapter to overcoming this view (Chapter 4), arguing that it both objectifies and subjectivises mental states. It objectifies them by ignoring their intentional nature and treating them as objects. Pleasure is mistreated as if it were like a mental entity. It subjectivises them by overlooking the cognitive nature of appreciating. Experiential evaluative perceptions can be instances of error or ignorance. The pleasure conception cannot take that one board and to this extent it involves a subjectivist understanding of value. In sum, this view turns pleasure into the ultimate commodity.

Third, a neoliberal theory would adhere to a scientific account that tries to avoid robust evaluative judgments. This means that it would tend towards a reductive or minimalistic view of well-being, for example, in terms of preference functions or pleasure and pain. Other factors, such as friendship, would be treated only as causal conditions of well-being, and hence would be instrumentalised. Such a causal analysis would render well-being more readily measurable, but it would make it less robustly evaluative: the relevant causal patterns would tend to reflect and reproduce existing conditions rather than providing evaluative criteria for a critique. Additionally, such an analysis would also tend towards meta-ethical

subjectivism, meaning that evaluative claims have no truth-value; such a view would bar the idea that things can have value independently of our valuing them, therefore, ultimately depriving us of the possibility of there being a ground for a critique of neoliberal valuing.

A neoliberal account would be in keeping with some version of individualism, which is the idea that because only individuals exist, all social institutions are reducible to the individuals that compose them. Such an account would require seeing all relationships and institutions as contracts or pacts between autonomous individuals. We have combatted this view in our construal of how relationships and community are constitutively important for well-being, rather than merely being external causal influences. A claim such as ‘close social relations cause happiness’ externalises such relations, as if their importance were only like that of a product. In opposition to this, we have argued that they must be partly constitutive of our being well. We also overcame individualism by insisting on the intentional nature of mental states: such a claim embeds mental states in the world by understanding them as ineluctably relational.⁸ In contrast, as we just saw, the DSGE model is individualistic.

The concept of well-being isn’t individualistic *per se*. It can be employed individualistically when it is used to frame social policies that imply individualism, for example, by ignoring cultural and structural features of communities and society. However, as we have argued, individualistic deployments of the concept ignore the public and relational nature of mental states, such as emotions, and the social nature of well-being generally.

SILVER BULLETS

The idea that the notion of well-being can be deployed to help frame political policies that improve the well-being of individuals is a two-edged sword. On the one side, within and given the framework of a capitalist market society, this approach is to be welcomed. It can alleviate some of the severely harmful consequences of neo-liberal policies and improve the life situation of individuals. On the other side, the new order produces degraded services and demeaning work as a common and everyday reality, and social well-being cannot be pursued in an *ad hoc* piecemeal fashion: something which affects the whole person will be reflected in the whole system of living and working of a society. If we do not grasp the pervasiveness of the invasion, we will continue to assume the fallacy propagated in many western governmental circles that one can isolate specific issues of well-being and pursue their development as some kind of ‘silver bullet’. This is to profoundly misrepresent the nature of the current period of social change; silver bullets do not reconfigure general features of socio-economic systems.

Add to this the following point. Our social imagination is being circumscribed within the narrow confines of a capitalised market society. This means that it is increasingly difficult to imagine social life outside of such a society and to experience moments of consciousness and activities free from such influences. This parsimony of vision is reflected in much work on well-being, which assumes a neoliberal and individualist conception. This indicates that a truncated conception of well-being is inadequate to re-envision the social institutions that human well-being requires. We need to rebuild human well-being from the foundations; it involves more than silver bullets; it requires new institutions and appropriately shaped spaces.

The main problem with silver bullets is the failure to distinguish between reforming and transforming. The structure of a social system consists in the systematic organisation between

cooperating institutions as defined by a set of principles. One can reform an institution or even the relations between institutions without changing the structural features of the system, the fundamental operating axioms that define what that system is doing and for whom. In contrast, to transform a system is to change the fundamental operating principles or assumptions (Thomson 2017). In this regard, we might compare the state educational system with alternative schools. Roughly, the state system consists in the synergetic interrelations between schools, the government as a policy body, inspection bodies and examination boards insofar as they are governed by an implicit set of assumptions and principles. Among these axioms would be the assumption that learning activities are performances that should be measured and governed by assessment targets. An alternative educational system might reject that defining assumption. A move to such an alternative system would constitute a transformation, whilst a change that, for example, makes the execution of the principle less punitive would constitute a reform (Gill and Thomson 2013). In a similar vein, a capitalist system embodies the idea of corporations as profit-maximising institutions for the sake of capital accumulation (Thomson 2015). A transformation would reject that axiom, while in contrast a reform would impose legislation or practices that might make the symptoms of the axiom less onerous or harmful.

If the offending cause of ill-being is the system itself, silver bullets are ineffective because they are aimed at reforming an institution or a practice, while leaving the system itself intact. For example, recognising the need for a more holistic approach to education, schools have introduced courses in emotional intelligence and even mindfulness. Such introductions are welcome; they are good. But they don't amount to a transformation of the system. At the secondary level, young people are still subject to horrendous stress and to feelings of failure and low self-esteem; schools themselves can be impersonal and unfriendly institutions; the system still tends to perpetuate class divisions and income inequality and at best, it is primarily directed towards preparing young people for the workforce. At its post-modern worst, it is like a machine aimed primarily to attain grade and performance targets.⁹ Thus, it is no surprise that these courses become quickly instrumentalised as useful for meeting a multitude of performance targets more efficiently. From such examples, we might hypothesise that silver bullets tend to become assimilated by the system. Even silver bullets fall victim to the Midas touch of instrumentalization. Even if they are intended to effect localised transformations in the system or to alleviate some of its effects, they soon become absorbed into it.

Perhaps we must face up to the disarming thought that the early 21st century view of human nature does yet lend itself to clear policy levers, because the very idea of 'policy levers' is grounded in a worldview of individual conscious agents rationally responding to financial incentives. If individuals are constituted by evolutionary biology, highly sensitive to social and cultural norms, embedded in and shaped by complex social networks; if their behaviour is largely habitual, if they care about relative rather than absolute value, are bad at forecasting, and are more rationalising than rational, policy-making appears to become even harder than it already is. Perhaps this means we should consider other ways of making good use of this knowledge in the meantime? (J. Rowson 2010: 15)

CONCLUSIONS

The critical analysis of this chapter leaves us with some deeply important questions.

1) The five pressure points identified earlier are locations of possible self-improvement. For instance, we can de-instrumentalize our lives and ourselves. We can try to broaden the activities of our lives; we can strengthen appreciative awareness, deepen relationships and clean our self-awareness. Or at least, we can try.

2) Such self-improvement needs special social sites to be possible. We need practices, relationships and institutions in which we can escape the instrumentalizations that normally atrophy, constrict and harm the dimensions of well-being. For instance, consider work. It usually demands at least half of our waking lives. Most work environments are thoroughly instrumentalised along all four dimensions of life: activities, awareness, relationships and self-consciousness. And these kinds of instrumentalization usually spread into the rest of our lives outside of the work context and become part of the culture we inhabit. For example, everything becomes a deal. This raises the question of the possible sites of decompression and coexistence in a society. Sites of coexistence are havens in which the people can *be* well even though surrounded by neoliberal forces. Sites of decompression are institutions or spaces in which people can recover from the detrimental effects of intense instrumentalization.

3) We have seen albeit informally in this chapter that the political-economic system in which we live has profound effects on our well-being. For reasons explained earlier, we charted the critical pressure points and we didn't map out the positive. As we saw, such criticisms invite us to imaginatively construct better alternatives systems and modes of life. Although this becomes increasingly difficult as we become more absorbed into the capitalist market system, this re-envisioning of social possibilities might constitute the second volume of this work.

¹ Davies (2015). To answer a challenge implicit in Davies' critique of the happiness industry, we need to have specified an account of well-being that isn't neo-liberal.

² Reader 2007: 28-29 ignores structural features of society in her definition of 'practice'.

³ See Chapter 4, page 10

⁴ In this sense, even the hypothetical desires or preferences that we would have if we were more fully informed about what we want are cognitive amended versions of our actual desires.

⁵ In chapter 4 (page 16), we separated these two points: general capacity to be aware and the capacity to attend to the desirable features of an activity, experience or process. In chapter 7 (page 6) we also separated them. Now, for the sake of brevity, we lump them together.

⁶ It misconceives the relation between exchange value and use value because it makes use value servant to exchange value, which can be capitalised.

⁷ Intentional mental states can't be counted because their identity conditions depend on how they are described. The question 'How many beliefs do you have?' is senseless not because beliefs are things that can't be counted but rather because beliefs aren't things at all.

⁸ For instance, an account of seeing that respects its intentionality would treat 'A sees X' as an extensional statement of a relation between a person and an object such as a tree. It would treat 'A sees that p' as an intentional statement of how (or the way that) A sees X. As we saw in Chapter 4, this allows us to embed mental states in the natural and social world but affirm their subjectivity.

⁹ 'Postmodern' because the grades act as simulacra.