

For an emancipatory materialism of the brain

Katja Čičigoj

Abstract:

Does cognitive capitalism suffer from pathologies that demand attention and cure? Or does it induce pathological reactions in the psyche of its subjects? Whose pathologies are we talking about (individual subjects', those of the socius or of the economic system itself?) and against what standards of "health" or normality are they measured? The fact that such fundamental questions are not explicitly addressed in the present collection points to what remains one of the core problems of this otherwise most relevant and engaging project: the need for additional, rigorous conceptual work that would elucidate the meaning and function of its core concepts, such as pathology and cure, norm and deviance, and therefore attend to their ontological or biological foundation as grounds for political action.

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I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. If you've been drawn to reading the review of a book the title of which begins with "psychopathologies", I'm positive it's not your good-night read or post-dinner internet relaxation. Supposing you are, one way or another, implicated in academia (or art or activism), perhaps you are biting your nails trying to catch a deadline looking for a further references; perhaps you're trying to figure out how you'll manage to finish your project from your bed since what used to be your utmost passion doesn't help you get up in the morning anymore; or perhaps this review is just the next piece of junk information adding to your brain feeling like a saturated sponge. Yes, this book is about you - and me and everyone else who might be bored by moralistic debates around psychopharmaceuticals, yet wonder if starting to take Ritalin in elementary school, getting through high school with Prozac and trying to finish your studies on Xanax really is normal, just because it is so widespread. And if a vacation really is all we need, it better be life-long.

How did they manage to survive before these drugs came into circulation? Might it be that the pathologies they treat were out of the circuit too? While anti-psychiatry books abound and the number of voices pointing to the cultural and historical roots of psychic malaises are growing, there's not much work that would both engage psychiatry on its own terrain – neurology – and provide a political analysis of the impact of regimes of labour on the psyche. This is precisely the broader project this book aims at. Initiated by Warren Neidich (editor) and Chiara Figione, later joined by Arne de Boever and Jason Smith, it instantiated in workshops, international conferences (CIA Los Angeles, Goldsmiths College London and ICI Berlin) and one earlier, post-conference book of collected articles. The present book is the result of papers presented at the second conference in London.

One of its key contributions to critical theory lies in pushing further core concerns of Italian post-Marxist theory, particularly its focus on subjectivity and its embracing of poststructuralism. All in all this opened the doors for a realist epistemology and critical engagement with natural sciences – here with critical neuroscience and evolutionary biology.

The contributions rest on the neo-Marxist thesis according to which capitalism subsumes cognitive faculties – the power of abstraction (Pasquinelli), affection (Wolfe), speculation and imagination (Reed, de Boever) – for the creation of surplus value. Their biological and neurological explorations go towards explaining how this process of subsumption and valorization unfolds, what the consequences for the psyche are and how these faculties could be wrestled

from capital and turned into levers of resistance. The reason for turning to neurobiology is thus given in the title concept itself: when capitalism becomes cognitive (according to Yan Moulrier Boutang in the latest phase of late capitalism, after its semiotic phase in the 70s and its communicative phase in the 90s), it operates directly on the materiality of the brain as what Neidich calls "neuropower" and therefore calls for a neuro-biological analysis. Whether regimes of power have always been operating on the materiality of our brain and subjectivities or whether this really is a peculiarity of the latest late capitalism: contemporary scientific tools enable a non-reductionist view of contemporary power which does away with traditional dualisms (mind-body, nature-culture, brain-environment, genetics-history, individual-collective, subject-world etc.). They also reject either determinism or voluntarism, and offer a dynamic view on how neuronal processes interact with the natural and cultural (social, political, economic) environment, which both shape neuronal processes and functions and is shaped by them. This also enables a more informed view on the stakes and possibilities of political action. Yet what remains under-conceptualized is precisely the normative ground for such action: the supposedly pathogenic nature of contemporary power and the supposedly pathological adaptations of our brain. Without a conceptualization of pathology, there is no normative ground to call for different, supposedly less pathological cultural (political, economic) environments. What we perceive as contemporary "pathologies" could be provocatively considered only stages in the evolution of our brain, adapting to contemporary regimes of labour and their techno-environment. Whether such grounds can be found in neurobiology or not remains an open question, particularly considering that what is supposed to ground notions of norm and pathology (the neurobiology of the brain) is itself changed by our very understanding of normativity (culture). Can normativity be grounded in ontology?

Such fundamental questions remain unaddressed in the present publication. What follows should be taken as a proposal for further research on this topic of intimate relevance to us all: subjects of contemporary (cognitive) capitalism. Apart from the need for further conceptual clarification, ground-breaking research could be conducted on the side of critical neurology and evolutionary biology – for instance by investigating neuronal modifications induced by contemporary regimes of labour and technologies, thereby elucidating what changes could be considered pathological and what political or cultural changes would be needed to re-direct them. In the present volume, this kind of "emancipatory materialism"(p. 27) remains a stated intent.

For though contemporary pathologies (anxiety, burnout, autism, attention deficit disorder, panic etc.) are empirically diagnosed, potential "therapies" remain abstract propositions, like Patricia Reed's proposition to engage our power of speculation and abstraction to invent affirmative fictions of alternative futures. This might be due to what Reed calls the inherently speculative and performative nature of all future propositions: before carrying them out, we cannot know what shape they will take; and this shape will recursively be influenced by our imagining it this or another way. Yet we might need some more concrete speculative political fictions than these meta-speculations, which merely end with the proposition that we need such propositions; the more so if we want to recursively validate and performatively bring into existence something more than this permanent need itself.

Instead, most contributions' political stakes remain swaying between a determinist techno-paranoia and an almost teleological eschatology of capital. They rehearse once more the autonomist belief that the driving force of contemporary exploitation ("general intellect" or the social brain) is also the condition for revolution. And if these are recursive speculative fictions too, we can only hope they will recursively bring about the liberation of brain from capital and not its further exploitation.

These open questions point to the fact that the "psychopathologies" project is by no means exhausted by the present publication, but on the contrary provides fecund terrain for all-important questions to be raised which call for further research and engagement.