

## Book Review

### WHO ARE WE TODAY?

*Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age.* By Frank Furedi. London: Routledge; 256pp, £19.99.

*The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalisation.* By Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert. London: Routledge; 232pp, £70 hbk, £17.99 pbk.

Both these books identify individualism as the biggest psychic challenge of our time. Thanks to globalization, the Internet, the rise of tolerance, the decline of community and whatever else, we are free to try and build from scratch our sense of who we are. If we so choose, we can use plastic surgery to reshape our bodies and escape into life as an avatar in the imaginary world of the Internet's Second Life. But the likelihood is high that we will turn around one day and find ourselves without sufficient sense of self to achieve happiness and fulfilment.

By taking the opportunity to avoid the challenges involved in engaging with other people, grappling with agreed values and social codes, resolving the conflicts of political life, belonging to a community that is larger than ourselves and our nuclear families, we find ourselves lacking in self-efficacy, the belief that we can have an impact on the world. Hell may be other people, as the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre once urged, but the solitary life is far worse.

Despite agreeing on this fundamental point, these authors take radically different stances towards the practices and conceptualizations of psychotherapy – the 'therapy culture' of Frank Furedi's title. Elliott and Lemert never question the value of the therapeutic process, its capacity to help us by understanding, for example, why a self-made entrepreneurial character like Larry, one of several case studies in their book, feels so fragmented and decentred. Furedi, on the other hand, considers therapists to be largely responsible for his condition.

The task of understanding why the two books adopt such diametrically opposed positions is not helped by the differences in their style and tone. Each positions itself as a scholarly contribution to sociological literature. But while Elliott and Lemert put forward tentative arguments, holding themselves always open to the possibility that some other perspective might be a useful one, Furedi is intent – from first word to last – on annihilating his target.

And while the first two authors tell us that they wrote the book out of a wish to understand what sort of world their daughters will live in, Furedi shares nothing about himself or the experiences that inspired him to write the book. There are no Jeffrey Masson style stories of unsuccessful encounters with therapists, no reports of falling out with friends or relatives. To give us such information, of course, would be to risk revealing vulnerabilities, and revealing vulnerabilities is what Furedi is against.

As director of an organization working to promote ‘emotional literacy’ in schools – and therefore a representative of the culture that Furedi thinks he is attacking – I read this book in the hope of finding arguments I could engage with, critiques in which I might find some value, something useful that I could take back to sharpen and improve my own work. I didn’t want people to read my review and end up saying: ‘you would say that, wouldn’t you?’

But, hard as I tried, I found it impossible to engage seriously with a book which asserts that the therapeutic profession:

- is determined to protect children’s emotions from virtually any form of challenging experience;
- insists that the management of life requires the continuous intervention of therapeutic expertise;
- is characterized by a ‘deep-seated aversion towards family and informal relations’;
- posits no values higher than the self;
- attempts to avoid the problem of how people can be bound to a shared view of the world;
- contains an inherent tendency towards intensifying the erosion of the personal bonds that link people to one another;
- acts on the assumption that it has the authority to dictate how people should feel.

I am not saying that you could not find, somewhere in the self-help literature, an asinine statement or two which could be taken as supporting each of these propositions. Nor am I asserting that every psychotherapist speaks wisely on these topics. But these assertions bear no relationship to anything that I say and think, even though my words are quoted – entirely out of context, of course – in the book. I could no more accept such statements as being an indictment of ‘therapeutic culture’ than I could allow someone to argue from every stupid remark uttered in the House of Commons and then picked out of Hansard that our political culture was the cause of everything that was wrong about our society.

What Furedi has done is to confuse the things that apparently concern him about the modern world and the therapeutic culture that has grown up in to ameliorate the challenge of living in it. He would not deny that we are exposed to a much wider array of choices than our forbears and have to negotiate them without the support that they found in religious institutions, communal organizations and value systems that more homogeneous cultures could sustain. But he refuses to accept that, at times, some people need help in negotiating this challenging situation or that the ideas and practices that help them have some broader relevance to living well in our times. But they do not, in themselves, shape those times.

Elliott and Lemert describe a world where, amidst the ‘seductions of individualism’, we are all ‘entrepreneurs of our own lives.’ They talk about how the culture of narcissism has ‘hollowed out people’s emotional intimacies’ so that there seems to be little stable ground in which an individual to lodge his or her anchor. They are careful not to exaggerate from theory, acknowledging that even those apparently most lost in the contemporary wilderness are hunting for something that will bring lasting emotional value in their lives, ‘something of meaning in their relations to others.’

Furedi sees therapy as a wicked dance of celebration for our lives in an atomized culture. For Elliot and Lemert, as for most of us involved in its practice, therapy is a tool for enabling individuals to engage more effectively in relationships, to enter social networks so that they can forge with others some idea of common action. We recognize that, unless individuals can find a good way in, they will not be able to play a positive part in the lives of their communities.

It is hard to describe fully the world in which we live; there is so much diversity within and between our different cultures and such powerful, contradictory forces – social, technological, economic – bearing down upon us. Elliott and Lemert's is the better book for attempting to describe – not always with total clarity – how those pressures are experienced internally and how people respond to them.

If we want to deal effectively with the changes in the world around us, we need to understand what is happening in our own inner worlds, to be able continuously to inflect our sense of who we are. The only alternative, say Elliot and Lemert, is to deny the changes that are happening, or to plead for a return to some simpler past. I suspect this helps us to understand where Furedi's fury comes from.

I once thought that the attacks on therapy and other 'shibboleths' mounted by Furedi and his colleagues in the so-called Institute of Ideas were all got up to win the sort of easy access to newspaper column inches that polarizing opinions help to secure. After reading these two books I began to wonder whether it was not rather a simple expression of dis-temper with our times, a forlorn plea to escape the challenges and complexities of living in this historical moment – the sort of thing one is more likely to associate with crusty generals writing to the *Daily Telegraph* than with academics who claim to be at the cutting edge of intellectual debate.

Furedi might have written a useful book if he had tried to explain the real reasons why he feels so strongly about therapeutic culture. He would undoubtedly be irritated by my assumption that there is anything useful about his views on therapy that is not already in the text. The paradox is that he probably wrote the book to convince us that writing such a book was not only impossible for him but absolutely the wrong thing to do. Let's hope, for his sake and ours, that he changes his mind about that some time soon.

James Park  
james@antidote.org.uk