

## Social Distancing and its Discontents

By Matthew Flisfeder

Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* is often read as a text about unnecessarily privileging the needs of the dominant culture and the society over those of the individual. The book describes how, for individuals to get along in society, we all must agree to give up, or repress, our own immediate individual pleasures and desires. For theorists ranging from Herbert Marcuse to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, liberation depends upon casting off the demands of the overarching culture to liberate our desires.

This tie between an individual and a culture is one way to understand what psychoanalysis – a discourse centred on the individual psyche of the subject – has to say about culture and society more generally. Culture, we might say, is a mechanism that provides the (historically defined) rules and regulations, to which we must submit in order to produce social bonds that aid in our mutual survival. The need to rethink Freud's text becomes much clearer today against the background of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

We have all, by now, watched online videos of American teenagers going to Ft. Lauderdale for Spring Break, more or less boasting about their rejection of the new demands for social distancing, and their raging desire to just go out and party. Many state quite openly that they have been waiting all year for Spring Break, and nothing, not even the coronavirus, is going to stop them from having fun. Some have posted videos on social media expressing their disappointment when, arriving in Ft. Lauderdale, all of the shops and bars were closed, barring them from all the fun they were promised. We can, maybe, give these kids a bit of leeway, be sympathetic to their youthful rebelliousness, and be somewhat understanding of the need for young people to just go out and rip up the town, especially when apocalyptic proclamations are coming from every direction. But, on second thought, what might appear strikingly counter-intuitive is that these ultimate transgressors, far from disobeying the general social obligation towards physical distancing, are in fact obeying the dominant neoliberal and consumer culture commandment to enjoy!

The young transgressors, the ultimate *jouisseurs*, are in fact nothing of the sort. They are, on the contrary, I claim, symptoms of the neoliberal and consumer culture ethic of the past half century. They prove that there is nothing inherently emancipatory about a politics of transgression. The kids on Spring Break in Florida help us make sense of the contradictions ingrained into the demands of neoliberalism and consumer society, particularly where a culture *privileges* the individual over society.

Neoliberal discourse is contradictory since its ethics prioritizes the individual over society, while it nevertheless still relies on the social to make possible its individual needs. To put this point differently, to be an individual today is to *transgress* the social.

Transgression always requires some figure of authority that needs to be transgressed. This is what propels its desire. Kids want to rebel against the parents who say: "No!" Thus, in order to transgress the social, it is necessary to build up the latter as the primary form of authority. A postmodern and neoliberal culture that enjoins us towards the pursuit of individual desires posits the social as a figure of domination needing to be transgressed. The demand to obey the commandment for social distancing is perceived, in this respect, as a parent assigning curfew.

This, of course, makes sense when we consider the way much of the neoliberal rhetoric, defending the idea of minimum state interference, operates by way of chiding the big state apparatuses of a planned economy of socialism. But we should also consider the fact that, looking at this from a reverse perspective, there *is* no individual – the individual does not exist – without the existence of society, even in the form of the market. There is no pure individual, we should say, without the support mechanisms or even the context of the broader society. Margaret Thatcher got it wrong: individuals don't exist, there is only society. Or, the individual is only guaranteed its existence insofar as we create the conditions for the existence of society. If we kill society, so, too, does the individual go the way of the dodo egg. If you kick at society, you kill the individual. The fight for the interests of society, however, helps *preserve* the individual.

The apparent transgressors are, in fact, also *obeying* the interpellative call of the consumer culture, what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the superego injunction to “Enjoy!” Whereas modern culture was organized around the patriarchal *prohibition* to enjoy, postmodern consumer culture is driven by a commandment/*obligation* to go out and enjoy. We are often, in consumer culture, even made to feel guilty when we are not enjoying. Spring Break transgressors, are not, then, transgressing anything at all. They are, on the contrary obeying the ideology of the postmodern and neoliberal order to be individuals mocking society by going out and having fun.

The same explanation helps us grasp the popularity of someone like Donald Trump. Trump reflects the very same attitude. We may recognize this, for instance, in the way that he is also responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Reports have circulated that Trump is trying to procure a vaccine for Americans only, fully in line with his “America First” attitude. There are also rumours that he delayed making big pronouncements about the virus to the American people in order to give himself and his close friends an opportunity to pull their money out of the stock market before the big market collapse. Trump kicks at the social and comes out looking like a transgressive punk hero.

But, to return to my previous claim about the contradictions of neoliberalism and postmodern consumer culture, here we again find that the transgression of the social is ultimately harmful to the individual. I'm not in any way suggesting that this logic cannot lead to a new domination of the social over the individual, likely in some new form of authoritarianism. My claim, however, is that the best assurance for our mutual survival is to prioritize the social (the collective interests of the people) over the individual. To do this, rather than attempt to transgress a limit – what some might regard as an external prohibition –, we need to start thinking about ways to universally impose our own *self*-limitations.

This is what I find problematic about a libertarian response from Giorgio Agamben to the COVID crisis. Drawing, as he does, on the Foucauldian conception of biopolitics, Agamben has argued that the ethics of social distancing is nothing more than state attempts at regulating bodies as bare life. He argues that we should be weary of commandments to regulate our bodies as this may result in ever more control from the capitalist state.

What I find difficult about a political ethics centred on biopolitics is that it only ever seems to treat power as something externally imposed. As Peter Dews once commented about Foucault, his view of power and emancipation is largely backwards looking. That is, it imagines emancipation based on a model not unlike the libertarian attitude of the subject completely free from state mechanism. We should realize, though, that there is nothing inherently capitalist about biopower. In fact, in the context of the current outbreak, we start to understand just how

necessary it is for individuals to universally self-regulate our bodies as a sign of solidarity with others. This is not merely a matter of self-imposition since it comes from a general discursive formula produced collectively by society and adopted by the state – that is, as Marx wrote in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, we do not need to eliminate the state mechanism but to subordinate it to the needs of the people. We may recognize in this moment precisely how state mechanisms can enable a democratic socialist program that we have been told for decades is impossible.

As both [Astra Taylor](#) and [Naomi Klein](#) have recently argued, what we are seeing in the midst of the crisis is that everything we had been previously told about the impossibility of the state mechanism to meet the social needs of the people can be thrown completely out the window. Now we know that the state can and should be used to provide for the equitable needs of the people, rather than those of capital, and not only in times of crisis. We should reverse the “shock doctrine” described by Klein and use this moment to push even further toward the building of socialism. Instead of criticizing the biopower of social distancing, what we should be doing is continuing our struggle towards emancipation from capitalism. To use the state mechanism that’s being applied to the crisis, in other words, as a model for a socialism for the twenty-first century.

It’s in this way, then, that we can see how Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, far from being a text about the restrictions imposed by a dominant culture, might, in fact, be one of the most emancipatory texts we can read today.

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