

## **On the new discontents of civilization. Paul Verhaeghe**

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Most West-European countries have witnessed a sharp increase in the prevalence of mental disorders during the last decade, both in children and in adults. The contemporary scientific discourse focuses on the underlying neurobiological and genetic factors. As a result, we tend to forget that Freud's conceptualization of mental illness concerned above all morality. The often pseudo-medicalizing English translations of his work have to some degree obscured this (Bettelheim, 1983). I understand morality as the implicit and explicit set of rules that determines the relationship of man with respect to the body and to pleasure in the broadest sense. This attitude attests, to say the least, of a contradiction. With some exaggeration it can be said that everything we desire is either forbidden, unhealthy, or immoral, and more often than not, all three together.

This is also the essence of Freud's earliest division of psychic functioning, starting with his so-called 'antithetical representations', over the splitting of psychological functioning till his first topology (Freud, 1892-93; 1893). In this conceptualization the unconscious contains defensively averted ideas because of their unacceptability to the dominant consciousness. Despite this defense, this morally reprehensible group still has a clear influence on psychic functioning, with the dream, and broader, all psychoneurotic symptoms as examples. People become neurotic because they try to be morally more high standing than they really can. In this regard Freud formulates the aim of his treatment method as follows:

'... The instincts which were formerly suppressed remain suppressed; but the same effect is produced in a different way. Analysis replaces the process of repression, which is an automatic and excessive one, by a temperate and purposeful control on the part of the highest agencies of the mind. In a word, analysis replaces repression by condemnation' (Freud, 1909b, pp. 541-42).

From this quotation it shows that Freud considers repression as excessive and therefore pathogenic, but at the same time as something that is necessary as well, albeit preferably in a deliberate way.

This will remain the basic premise of psychoanalysis: mental illness concerns the collision of the desire and its prohibition. This confronts us with two questions. Where does this collision come from? And which forms can it adopt?

The most obvious answer to the first question brings us to a traditionally Freudian idea. Above all, the conflict concerns the demands of society that go against the desires of the individual, which results in the typical discontents with this civilization. In quite a number of texts Freud concludes that this relation is out of balance, as is evidenced by titles as "'Civilized" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness' (1908d) and especially 'Civilization and its discontents' (1930a). Victorian society is too prohibiting, hence the profusion of neuroses. In terms of the second topology: the Ego is being oppressed between the drives of the Id and the demands of the Super-Ego, resulting in fear and guilt.

This comprehensible representation nevertheless disregards another idea which Freud formulated quite early, without ever thoroughly developing it. According

to him, the difficulties with satisfaction indicate that there has to be an independent source of unpleasure in sexuality, detached from shame, morality or disgust. (Freud, 1985c, p.292). At certain times, he muses about an organic repression (Freud, 1930a, p.492 n32 en p.497 n35), but finally he attributes this to the tension between Eros and Thanatos (///ref).

Consequently, a naive opposition between an excessively demanding and forbidding society versus an individual which is solely focused on satisfaction is indeed naive. Towards the end of Lacan's oeuvre we find an analogous idea, by which he himself undercuts an important part of his previous theory. Before, he consistently understood *jouissance* as a transgression of the law, which at the same time signified that enjoyment is an effect of the Law itself. Lacan leaves this notion to replace it by a radically different one: enjoyment erupts as a potentially deadly outburst against which the subject has to protect him- or herself. The Oedipus complex is a very necessary social construction to install a prohibition on something that threatens us (for an elaboration, see Verhaeghe, 2009).

The answer to my first question – where does the collision between desire and prohibition comes from – is evidently more complex than expected. Both Freud and Lacan start from the idea that there is originally an internal contradiction at work, which only at a later stage obtains an external, socially determined form. Because of this social determination, the form it takes can be quite different. Both for Freud and for Lacan, this social form giving of the internal conflict is obviously indispensable as a defense against a threat that comes from within. The advantage of this social mould for the individual is that an internal dissension can now be elaborated externally, in which the prohibiting position is attributed to something or someone. As a bonus, one can in addition complain about this prohibiting institution, although one secretly really needs it. In other words: the human discontent in civilization is structurally built in.

The implication for our analytical practice is rather important. It means that on the basis of these assertions an analyst can never make a naive choice in favor of the individual and against society, or vice versa, in favor of society and against the individual. This would indeed be very naive, because we know that the apparent opposition between both constitutes a covering of a mutual dependence. That does not alter the fact that contemporary analysts, like Freud, can indeed take up a clear ethical position concerning certain relations between society and the individual. I will return to this in my conclusion.

Still, this does not thoroughly answer my first question, because at least one fundamental fact is missing. Due to a lack of space, I will directly state a proposition that has been elaborated elsewhere (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009). The way in which the internal conflict is represented in an individual, completely determines his or her identity, together with his or her basic stance towards the external world and towards the other. This can already be read in Freud, but the main explanation rests with Lacan's theory on the mirror stage and on the formation of the subject. A more cognitive version is elaborated in contemporary attachment theory

In short: we acquire our identity by adopting certain images and words from significant others, in combination with rejecting other images and words, often enough from the same others. According to Freud this is called identification and repression, Lacan speaks of alienation and separation, in attachment theory it is referred to as mirroring (for a more extensive elaboration, see Verhaeghe, 2008, part 2). On top of this, the elaboration of our identity completely coincides with what is called drive regulation in Freud and Lacan, and which is modestly referred to as

'affect regulation' in attachment theory. Indeed, the images and words that we adopt from the outside world and from the other, contain injunctions and prohibitions concerning the way we are supposed to deal with our own body and that of others. The Super-Ego constitutes the internal remnant thereof. In case we don't live up to our duties, a feeling of guilt arises that goes back to the original fear of authority (see Freud, 1930a, especially the first chapter). Neurotic disorders are deformed enlargements, in which both the experiencing of enjoyment as well as the identity are involved – examples are the oral character and hysteria, and the anal character and compulsive neurosis, both with the accompanying guilt management.

Based on these elaborations, it is possible to address the second question, namely are there different moulds conceivable for this conflict between desire and prohibition, and consequently different forms of discontent with society? The answer is affirmative, because this mould is thoroughly socially determined, and societies are not unchangeable entities. The most important implication for us is that if society changes, both identity and drive regulation will likewise change, together with the accompanying disorders. In this line of thought I distinguish three different societies with three different impacts on identity, discontents, and pathology. I refer to them as the Victorian, the post May 68, and the Enron society. An alternative, more ironical name would be respectively the era of the right orgasm, the era of the obligatory free love, and finally, the era of enjoyment on installment system. For the sake of clearness: these delimitations and tenors are to a certain degree arbitrary and apply only to the West-European culture.

#### THE VICTORIAN MODEL OR THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT KIND OF ORGASM

Concerning the Victorian model I can be brief, because we are best acquainted with it. This is a thoroughly patriarchic society in which all emphasis is on obedience and prohibition. In addition it is explicitly related to a traditional class society and to a dominant religious discourse. There is scarcely room for the individual, which is only a part of a coercive society. Just think of the thousands volunteers during the first W.O. who marched mostly voluntarily towards their own deaths. It is also no coincidence that psychoanalysis originated in such a society, and that Freud considered a surplus of morality as the pathogenic factor by excellence. This is all the more striking, since at the outset of psychiatry, as evidenced by the name "*le traitement moral*", morality was considered indeed as health restoring.

Freud takes without hesitation a clear ethical stance concerning this relation society - individual. Psychopathology is considered to be caused, at least in part, by a too strict morality, resulting in a sexuality that has to find all kinds of pathological outlets by means of neurotic symptoms. Consequently the implicit norm for a successful treatment is that the patient reaches orgasm in the right way, beyond neurasthenic masturbation, anxiety neurotic abstinence, hysteric frigidity and obsessional neurotic fear of contagion. Freud indicates that out of therapeutic considerations the analyst often has to run counter a too strong Super-Ego, and the same goes for what he calls the cultural Super-Ego (1930a, p. 529). At the same time he is convinced that the analyst should never occupy the position of savior or guru<sup>1</sup>, let alone that psychoanalysis should become a *Weltanschauung*. The objective of treatment is that the patient acquires enough freedom to make his or her own ethical

choices. It is this conviction that lies at the basis of analytical neutrality and of the rule of abstinence.

Solely on the base of this neutral position Freudian psychoanalysis has had a distinctive subversive effect, precisely because a suchlike position makes it possible to question what seemed to be the established norms and values of the first half of the previous century. It is indeed no coincidence that from its very outset our profession was under suspicion by the establishment, and that Freud's theory also lay at the root of the undermining of the all too crippling patriarchic morality.

#### THE POST MAY 68 MODEL OR THE OBLIGATORY FREE LOVE

This brings us to the post May 68 model, of which the effect is an inversion of the former. This is aptly reflected by an evolution concerning human rights. The declaration of human rights from 1948 was in first instance intended for certain groups. It addressed the rights of workers, of women, of children, ... and in doing so also addressed some joint interests: the right to education, health care, and so on. From the years 1960 on, these rights became more and more directed towards almost any kind of authority. It were no longer certain groups, but the individual itself had to be liberated. It was the era of the "autonomous ego" and the "authentic personality" with preferably as many rights as possible. The obligations were passed on to the community.

The problems with which people at that time came to consultation, did not differ substantially from those from the previous era, but they expected different answers and received them as well. These were the golden days of hysterics and the guru. Psychotherapy focused on a general liberation, and traditional post-Freudian - psychoanalysis had to suffer dearly because of its elite middle-class character and its overtaken points of view on for example female sexuality and the obligatory vaginal orgasm. Ronald Laing and colleagues (ref.?) presented a psychodynamic liberation psychotherapy, out of the conviction that in every man a *noble savage* - see Rousseau - was hidden.

Many therapists at that time took up the position of being explicitly non-neutral and non-abstinent, while preaching free love. Lacan strikingly summarised and criticized a suchlike position in a short passage, not coincidentally in his lectures on ethics. It is the therapist who speaks out of his liberation urge, in my own free translation: 'I, the therapist, only wants what is good for the other, after my own image and likeness, and on condition that the other does not depart from my image.'<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, we can say that the Victorian repression became replaced by the post May 68 obtusion, and everything what used to be forbidden became obligatory.

As such, in a relatively short period of time, the patriarchal emphasis on prohibition was replaced by what Peter Sloterdijk (2007) called the big indulgence paradise. Its effects became especially clear in the 1980ties, during which in Western Europe the indulgent society consisted of a collection of individuals that each considered their own rights as self-evident. This became the basis of the welfare society, which was referred to by Margaret Thatcher as "the British disease", in which most part of the obligations were passed on to the community.

Today it is fashionable to point the finger at the May 68 period as an explanation for the contemporary social problems. The pendulum has swung too far, with as a result contemporary egoism and the disappearance of community sense, we have to return to the good old days, with decent norms and values, and so forth.

This wide spread contemporary reaction represents a typical pendulum movement, in which a revolution in accordance to its cosmological etymology makes a complete rotation and returns to its starting point, which in this case is an authoritarian society. Theodor Dalrymple (2004) is the most well known and eloquent advocate of this idea. His proposition is very straightforward: the present deluge of psychic disorders is a consequence of our indulgence society and is at the same time maintained by all those therapists who keep people too long in treatment, making them believe that there is nothing they can do themselves. His books are filled with juicy anecdotes that come across as very convincing to laymen.

Anecdotes however do not contain scientific conclusiveness and the man also is not in touch with social-political evolution. The welfare state, which he considers to be the cause of all evil, has especially in the United Kingdom been carried off from the 1980ties onwards. It is undoubtedly correct that a welfare society is taken advantage of, but profiteering and secondary sickness gain cannot possibly explain the ever increasing West-European rates of suicide. In my line of reasoning both phenomena – the profiteering as well as the increasing suicide rates – are not the result of an indulgence society, but quite the contrary. Together with the obstinate individualism these are the consequences of a *third* model of society, which is in many respects new, and which I term the Enron model or the enjoyment on installment. From my point of view it is this model that causes the contemporary discontent, although the term ‘discontent’ is a much too euphemistic expression.

## THE ENRON MODEL OR ENJOYMENT ON INSTALLMENT

Not so long ago society was governed by the interaction between at least four dimensions: the political, the religious, the economical and the cultural – of which the political and the religious ones were decisive. Today three of these dimensions have disappeared: politicians have lost their credibility, religion is connected with sexual scandals and terrorism, and everyone has become an artist. There is only one dominant discourse left, namely the economical in a very particular form: neo-liberalism. One of its particularities is that is presented to us as a political system, which it is not, on the contrary, it has gobbled up politics. We live in a neo-liberal society in which everything has become a product. This is endorsed by a contemporary form of meritocracy, telling us that everyone is responsible for their own success or their own failure. This is the myth of the selfmade man. If you succeed, you owe it to yourself, the same goes if you fail, and the most important touchstone is profit. You have to ‘make’ money, that’s the message.

In social-economical terms we speak of a neo-liberal meritocracy. The neo-liberalism refers to the idea that every market regulates itself, and should therefore best be steered as little as possible, in order for everyone to get equal opportunities. This sounds admirable but the end result of this model is almost the contrary: inequality is increasing steadily, and so is the amount of rules. Instead of the *citizen* as part of the *community*, we are now confronted with the *individual* who stands in diametrical opposition to the *organization*. The identity of this individual is moreover affected, as is evidenced by the nature and frequency of certain disorders.<sup>3</sup> These are the points that I want to make in the second part of this paper, after giving some explanation concerning this new social order.

### *Meritocracy and the moral fiction*

Meritocracy was described in a prophetic novel “Down with Meritocracy” published in 1958 by Michael Young, a British Labour MP. Literally, it means power, *kratos*, based on merits. Those individuals with the best intelligence and the highest commitment should receive the highest positions. As long as meritocracy is limited to the boy or girl who is first of his or her class, and who thereby receives the coveted scholarship, followed by a good salary later in life, all is well that ends well. Today, however, meritocracy is totally imbedded in a digitally quantified and globalized pseudo-liberal market, and it is this combination that is lethal to a society as a community.<sup>4</sup> This becomes especially clear when we look at its effects on the field of tension between individual and society. Until recently this field was governed by the traditional ethics which were without exception based on a large unifying narrative, be it a religious or an ideological one. Today, these ethics have disappeared together with the unifying narratives, and the ideals of former days are nowadays dismissed as ‘fuzzy’ and old-fashioned.

Already in the 1980ties, Alasdair MacIntyre has given a striking description of this disappearance together with its consequences. According to him, instead of being subject to the former ethics, at present we live under the yoke of a moral fiction, namely that of a systematic effectiveness. He refers to it as *moral*, because in order to obtain this effectiveness people are constantly being manipulated to achieve an external objective. He moreover calls it a *fiction* because it is not at all effective, but on the contrary it is nothing less than a mask for an ever growing social control (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 73-79). It is not very difficult to discover the external objective behind that mask: namely more profit.

Within this model everything has become a *commodity*, an object that can be traded, and this goes especially for what used to be the object of former ethics, namely enjoyment. The ever present publicity illustrates how nearly everything is being eroticized. Enjoyment in the true meaning of the word is an important medical commercial aim, in the pursuit of which pharmaceutical companies have successfully studied how they can convince healthy men into taking viagra.<sup>5</sup> It also applies to issues that until recently belonged to the rights of the West-European citizen, such as health care, education and free press. Ultimately considered it also applies to us: we have also become a tradable product, since digital data concerning our consumption behavior are being sold for big money to the retail industry.

In this social order, the individual is left with one obligation and one right: he has to make it, and he has the right to enjoy himself almost without limits. The trouble is that he has to make it in a never ending competition with the other. On top of that, the presumed right on enjoyment has become an obligation. According to Lacan the command of the post modern Super-Ego reads as follows: ‘Jouis’, enjoy (Lacan, 1966, p. 821). The only restraint on this command is a financial one, because we have to pay for it, meaning that for most people, the neoliberal enjoyment comes with an installment plan.

The obligation to make it tallies with a new conviction that stands diametrically against the neurobiological and genetic determinism of contemporary psychology and psychiatry: everyone is responsible for himself and if you work hard enough, you will succeed. Failure is just a matter of choice. Within the meritocratic system succeeding inevitably takes place in competition with colleagues. This trend was initiated by the American Enron company, under the term ‘*Rank and Yank*’. Every employee’s efforts were competitively measured, on the basis of which 20% of the employees were laid off on a yearly base, after having been publicly humiliated by

putting their names, pictures, and failures on the company website (De Waal, 2009). Before long merely every employee started to falsify his or her performance, which ultimately led to the company's bankruptcy. That does not alter the fact that diluted versions of the Enron model are nowadays practiced everywhere.

The question remains what the effects are on the new discontent, or, broader, on the tension field between citizen and society, and the resulting identity and disorders?

### *From citizen as a member of society towards the individual versus the organization*

Until the 1970ties there existed a unifying ethics that regulated the tension field between citizens and the society. From the 1980ties on, ethics are gradually replaced by sets of rules and regulations, and the classic field of tension between society and the subject shifted towards an opposition between the individual and the organization – from companies and soccer clubs to hospitals and universities. These changes took place within a generalized management culture in which effectiveness is what counts most, and actually is *all* that counts.

This shift replaces the classic tension between the part and the whole by an opposition, because the individual no longer identifies him- or herself with that organization and certainly is not willing to sacrifice him- or herself for it.<sup>6</sup> The only thing of interest is what profit it brings in. Diametrically opposed to the individual stands the organization, that wants to restrict the individual rights – in more accurate terms: the demands – of the individual, and this in name of the benefits of a hypothetical general interest, which is in reality the interest of that organization itself. For both sides the lack of a unifying ethics implies that everything is permitted, as long as it is not explicitly forbidden by a contract. That is the kernel of neo-liberal morality.

Indeed, the contract has taken the place of ethics. Since there is no convincing common ethics that expresses the general interest, the new moral standard becomes purely utilitarian. In practical terms, this means that everything is measured, preferably literally, in terms of production, growth and profit. In order to keep this measuring process updated, every organization has to implement frequent evaluations, which before long put on the outlook of inspections. Every individual is being suspect, because everyone has their own profit in mind. Ironically, the organization itself is being managed by individuals, who as an individual are looking for their own profit, and therefore are all the more being suspect. As such they themselves have to be inspected and evaluated, but the question is who evaluates their inspection, and so on. In a suchlike society the former authority as it was being represented by identifiable persons disappears and is replaced by a bureaucratic power within an anonymous organization.

This way a downward pull occurs between individual and organization, who trust each other lesser and lesser. Due to the disappearance of the common ethics, the organization has to introduce all the more detailed sets of rules, in combination with ever growing registration systems to determine whether these rules are indeed applied. Hence the exponential growth of both public and concealed evaluation systems, effectiveness interviews and so on. The final goal is a contemporary version of Bentham's panopticon, i.e. omnipresent camera surveillance in order to observe all the time absolutely everyone and everything.

From his point of view the individual sees his rights attacked, and distances himself all the more from the organization. Consequently, he tries to escape as much

as possible from the increasing rules and registration systems. This is not even that hard, because the possibilities to tamper with the registration- and measurement systems augment proportionately to their growth. As a result, the measurements become less and less reliable, leading to still more registrations and inspections. Finally, an inevitable climate of fear and insecurity arises.

From my point of view the most important result is a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic. In the former model every professional could determine to a certain degree for himself what (s)he did or did not consider of importance. This implies a motivation coming from within, namely an intrinsic motive to do well, combined with a sense of responsibility.

Today quality criteria are being imposed from the outside, without much consideration for possible local and individual differences, hence leading to a standardized product, a McDonaldising so to say. Imposing external criteria implies that the internal motivation to do well disappears gradually and is replaced by an external motivation, that is meeting those externally imposed norms. Virtually all psychological research studies on motivation show the negative consequences of such a shift, both on the quality of the work that is produced as on the work satisfaction and well being of the employee.

After a number of years this ends in the disappearance of labor ethics, and next in the disappearance of ethics per se. They are replaced by an external set of rules that is guarded by all kinds of efficiency manuals and camera surveillance. Indeed, if I can no longer determine the quality of my work because the criteria are imposed from the outside, then I hardly feel involved and consequently no longer responsible. The next step is that I don't care anymore, as long as I can get away with it. Just think about the British MP's who defended their abuse of public money by saying that it was not against the rules. At that moment, ethics have largely disappeared.

## CONCLUSION: IDENTITY AND ANXIETY

Every culture determines both the identity formation as well as the drive regulation of its members. Under the yoke of an utmost severe Super-Ego, Victorian society produced neurotic oedipal citizens that were always willing to fight as a group in favor of their own patriarch against the patriarch of another group. Individuality and subjectivity were a rare luxury. The Enron society produces consuming individuals that compete among themselves. The discontent of the Victorian group concerned a lack of enjoyment and a surplus of group formation. The present discontent has to do with a surplus of enjoyment and a lack of group loyalty. We are obliged to enjoy ourselves to pieces, or, more precisely, to consume ourselves to pieces, and in comparison with not so long ago the contemporary drive regulation is reduced to a minimum. However, there is a big snake in the grass: we have to earn it, literally and proverbially, by becoming a success – that is our duty. As a consequence, such a competitive meritocracy materializes the anxiety of Thomas Hobbes, namely *Homo homini lupus est*.<sup>7</sup>

A neoliberal meritocracy will privilege certain personality traits and reprove others, resulting in an endorsement of its own premises. A competitive attitude is a must, thus individualism takes the upper hand. Flexibility is highly in demand, favoring a superficial and instable identity. Solidarity becomes an unaffordable luxury and profound personal ties with colleagues are negative for the own career



development. Emotional connections to the job are superficial, and absent for what concerns the company or the organization. The fact that people can't or don't want to engage themselves anymore explains a typical contemporary mechanism of defense: cynicism. Under the surface, anxiety rules, ranging from fear of failure to a more general social anxiety. This category has known a spectacular increase in recent decennia. It received its own mention in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., text rev., 2000) and is a financial success for the pharmaceutical industry. I recognize the same social ground in the increase of the diagnose of 'autism' in youngsters. In most cases, this diagnosis has little in common with the traditional autism according to Konner (ref///) and refers mainly to an increasing form of social isolation, away from the all too threatening other.

In addition, the omnipresent evaluations and increasing number of rules cause a decline in autonomy, in the so-called sense of *agency*. Zygmunt Bauman (1999) has expressed this very aptly: never have we known so much freedom, and never have we felt so powerless. From my point of view this freedom is an all too optimistic term for the present indifference that took the place of the ideological and religious convictions. The powerlessness is the result of the opposition between an isolated individual versus an anonymous and therefore non-addressable organisation.

A decline in autonomy and a growing dependence on external evaluation criteria cause what the sociologist Richard Sennett (2003, p. 46; pp. 102-7) terms an infantilising of the employees. Adults exhibit childlike tantrums, are jealous because of trivial matters, tell little lies, often succumb to deceit, have malicious pleasure and brood small-mindedly on revenge. Bullying used to be a problem in schools, now it is ostensibly present at the work place, as a typical symptom of powerlessness in which frustrations are reacted off on the weakest.

Together with this decline in agency, our self-respect becomes problematic. Both depend to a large degree on the recognition one gets from the Other. This is a message we find starting from Hegel until Lacan. According to Hegel the recognition by the other forms the basis of our self-consciousness. Lacan puts in the phrase *Tu es cela* ('This is you', Lacan, 1966, p.100) the starting point of our identity development. One of the leading motives is the fear that the other does not need us any longer, expressed in the wording *Veut-il me perdre?* ('Does he want to lose me?' Lacan, 1973, p.194). Unknowingly Sennett voices the same anxiety in the question that he puts in the mouth of the contemporary employee: '*Who needs me?*' (1998, p.146). For an increasing group the answer is: nobody. They are part of the *quantité négligable*, redundant and more and more invisible.

The result is humiliation, guilt and shame, because one did not make a success out of life, because one is a *loser*, which has become one of the most frequently used new terms of abuse. This tallies with the contemporary myth of the self-made man – your success or failure is solely your responsibility and just a matter of choice. This myth neglects the growing class of the working poor and the fact that burn out is not as much caused by a too heavy work-load, but rather by a lack of appreciation and respect, both horizontally as vertically (Vanheule et al., 2003; Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2005). This is not limited to the bottom of society, quite the contrary, it is visible at every level. Likewise, stress and disease in academics are not the consequence of a too high work pressure, but of a combination between that pressure and a lack of autonomy within the work (Berg et al., 2004).

On account of this system itself, after a number of years a clear polarization between winners and losers arises. The losers are also being told that they themselves are to blame. Opposed to this are the winners, of which naughty sociologists claim that the most successful persons in a full-bodied meritocracy are those with a psychopathic profile (Babiak & Hare, 2006). The self-perpetuating character of this trend is caused by the advantaging of the winners – in a relatively short period of time this leads to a *'winner takes it all'* system, in which the middle group tends to disappear and the distance between the upper-class and the lower group becomes increasingly larger. A growing social inequality correlates noticeably with increasing social problems, ranging from children failing at school to serious crime, and with a whole lot of illnesses from diabetes to depression and personality disorders. The recent studies of Richard Wilkinson (2010 en 2007) provide astonishing figures on the subject.<sup>8</sup> This is quite important, because it refutes the widespread idea that our contemporary problems – individualism, profiteering and a number of mental disorders – are a result of the indulgent mai 68-society. This is a very short sighted explanation, especially as the accompanying solution is a call for even more neo-liberalism. Our contemporary problems, both on the subjective and the collective level, fit the Enron model to a much larger degree than they fit a so-called indulgent society.

### *Psychoanalysis and ethics*

If we look at our own profession, psychoanalysis and especially psychotherapy, it is obvious that this evolution has a serious effect on our work. Alasdair MacIntyre predicted twenty years ago what is happening now in mental health care: psychotherapists and managers merge to a hybrid character who has to guard social adjustment and efficiency. He adds : 'Neither manager nor therapist, in their roles as manager and therapist, do or are able to engage in moral debate' (o.c., p.30).

For analysts, this is the breaking point, because we owe it to our training and our ethics to become engaged in this moral debate. At the time of the Victorian double morality Freud took a stand against the all too repressive society. During the post May 68 period most analysts shared a sensible silence. Today, this is not an option anymore, not only because the present evolution makes our profession more and more impossible, but also because it is an ethically reprehensible and dangerous system.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘...on whether the personality of the analyst allows of the patient’s putting him in the place of his ego ideal, and this involves a temptation for the analyst to play the part of profet, saviour and redeemer to the patient. Since the rules of analysis are diametrically opposed to the physician’s making use of his personality in any manner, it must be honestly confessed that here we have another limitation to the effectiveness of analysis; after all, analysis does not set out to make pathological reactions impossible, but to give the patient’s ego *freedom* to decide one way or the other’ (S. Freud, 1923b, p. 412, n66).

<sup>2</sup> In the original version: ‘C’est un fait d’expérience - ce que je veux, c’est le bien des autres à l’image du mien. Ça ne vaut pas si cher. Ce que je veux, c’est le bien des autres, pourvu qu’il reste à l’image du mien. Je dirai plus, ça se dégrade si vite que ça devient - pourvu qu’il dépende de mon effort’ (J. Lacan, 1986 [1959-1960], p. 220).

<sup>3</sup> An accurate description can be found in the following publications: R. Sennett, (2007 [2004]). *De cultuur van het nieuwe kapitalisme*. R. Sennett, (2003). *Respect in a World of Inequality*. R. Sennett, (1998). *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*.

<sup>4</sup> According to a number of economists, our so called free market is anything but free; instead it is directed towards the benefits of the economic concerns; for examples, see R. Sennett (2007), and G. Akerlof & R. Shiller (2009).

<sup>5</sup> In an officially published article (O. Bradfield et al., 2009), and not by coincidence in the ‘Journal of Medical Marketing’, this strategy – or rather demagogy – is being admitted, together with an applause of the financial success. A few quotes: ‘Although a standardized “functional” or “dysfunctional” erection does not exist, Pfizer has reclassified and pathologized “normal” sexual changes as sexual dysfunctions (p.347) (...) By including a “mild” category of erectile dysfunction, Pfizer was able to expand the market from 10 million men with “impotence” to 30 million men with “occasional erectile dysfunction” (p.348) (...) Moreover, the publication and dissemination of these high rates of dysfunction gives the impression that normal sexual decline is now a serious public health “epidemic” ’ (p.348).

<sup>6</sup> The most important contemporary communities are what Z. Bauman (Z. Bauman, 1999, p. 47) strikingly called ‘*peg-style communities*’: these are communities that arise relatively sudden on the basis of a shared anxiety, for example a pedophile that comes to live in the neighborhood, the extension of a highway, the establishment of a chicken breeding farm,....

<sup>7</sup> The main difference between is that this ‘war of all against all’ at the times of Hobbes was motivated by religious and political ideals, and that there was also a clear shortage of survival supplies. In a neo-liberal meritocracy competition is entered into solely because of personal profit. Survival is no longer the issue, in contrast to the inequality which is best measured by the differences in income (see R. Wilkinson, 2007). Following the example of the U.S. during the last decennia these differences have increased severely in western Europe, in such manner that we can almost speak of a disappearance of middle class.

<sup>8</sup> Based on an impressive amount of research, Wilkinson (2007) shows that physical and mental health and longevity significantly correlate inversely with three central factors: low social status with a connected lack of agency, limited social relationships, and negative early childhood experiences. The most important predictor of those three factors is undoubtedly social inequality based on income. Ironically this is precisely the objective of a neo-liberal meritocracy. Two examples from among many. Lower British clerks have a stress-based higher blood coagulation factor which leads to a fourfold mortality on the basis of hearth failure (p.163). Experimental research showed that lower social status in primates installs insulin resistance, which is a precursor of diabetes (p.73). The psychological consequences of inequality are perceptible in increased aggression in men, depression in women, behavioral problems in children and addictive behaviors in all categories (chapters 5, 6 en 7).