

ΨΥΧΟΛΟΓΙΑ

*hoc est,*

DE HOMINIS

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## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PSYCHOLOGISATION?

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### *Abstract*

*The term psychologisation refers to psychology's variegated imprints on late modern Western society. In this paper, we argue that over the last few decades, psychologisation has become such a pervasive phenomenon that it is almost no longer possible to speak of psychologisation as something distinct from other systems of meaning that can be subjected to critique. We draw on the French contemporary author Michel Houellebecq's novel *Whatever* that examines the personal consequences of living under an individualised, psychological regime. To be a human being today is first and foremost to be a psychological being. A comparison of several influential critics of therapeutic culture leads to a seemingly recurring theme—the loss of alternatives—which now seems to have become a reality. Psychologisation has, therefore, disappeared in the sense that it has evolved into a monotheistic ontology of late modernity.*

*Keywords: Psychologisation, psychological space, therapeutic culture, irreversibility*

## Introduction

The notion of psychologisation literally means: ‘to make something psychological’. Psychologisation implies that moral, political or social categories are willingly, or unwillingly, reduced or transformed into questions of psychological factors (e.g. well-being or self-development). Psychologisation is usually linked with the exponential growth of psychology throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jan De Vos, for instance, defines psychologisation as: “the phenomenon of how the psy-sciences became a hegemonic discourse delivering particular signifiers and discursive schemes for looking upon oneself and upon the world” (2010, p. 1).

Originally, the notion of psychologisation stemmed from a debate in the nineteenth century, concerning, in particular, the field of logic, and involving early academic psychologists such as Wilhelm Wundt on one side, and philosophers like Edmund Husserl and Gottlob Frege on the other (Kusch, 1995). Frege and Husserl reacted to the psychologism expressed, for example, by John Stuart Mill, who argued that logic “is a part, or branch, of Psychology; differing from it, on the one hand as the part differs from the whole, and on the other, as an Art differs from a Science” (1979, p. 359). The problem, as Frege and Husserl saw it, was that we in fact evaluate our psychological operations, the ways we think and reason, in the light of logic, so it seems impossible to study logic as a branch of empirical psychology. Logic is a normative and deductive discipline, concerned with how we ought to think, whereas psychology, at least as conceived by Mill and later empiricists, is a descriptive and inductive discipline, concerned with how we *de facto* think; thus, Frege and Husserl deduce we cannot understand one in light of the other.

Frege and Husserl reacted to psychologism, not just in logic narrowly conceived, but, more broadly, in theories of meaning, truth and epistemology (Mohanty, 2003). For example, both argued that meanings are not psychological entities “in the head”, but are ideal objects that transcend the subjective life of persons (p. 117). Meaning is thus not a psychological notion, but a normative notion, connected to epistemological notions such as logic, knowledge and truth. A further reaction concerned a whole naturalistic outlook on the world, which, as Emmanuel Levinas once put it, “places subject and object in the same world, which it calls nature, and studies their relation as a relation of causality” (1973, p. 15).

Today, there is a similar worry among critical academics that the biological parts of psychology, in particular, promote a naturalisation that might change what it means to be human. Evolutionary, neuroscientific, and experimental psychologies take part in seeking to map the human mind in ways that, in many respects, resemble the pioneering psychologists’ dream of psychology becoming an exact science like the natural sciences— espe-

cially physics— concerned with studying causal relations between individual minds and the world.

Psychologism was originally a normative theory that held the view that the operations of the mind were best explained by causal factors, whereas psychologisation was a descriptive notion meant to capture the increased presence of psychology within Western society. However, under neo-liberal governance, psychologisation appears to have gone back to its normative roots— albeit in a new sense: according to the prevailing psychologised mentality, we simply ought to think about our lives, and explain human action, in terms drawn from an individualist psychology (we will provide an example that explains what we mean by this in due course).

The question of psychologisation can be related to the question of empowerment. Returning to De Vos's analysis, we can say that psychologisation must be seen as part of the modern Enlightenment idea that information and knowledge bring empowerment. The downside, according to De Vos, is that psychologisation also brings derealisation and an absence of desire. The capability of psychologisation to give meaning to everything means, in the long run, a loss of meaning. The psychological enchantment of the mind that followed the scientific disenchantment of the world, wears out and risks leading us to a more thorough and depressing disenchantment. This paradoxical effect can be understood through Lacanian theory: psychologisation appears to lead to less and less mystery outside the self, hence the individual loses interest (desire) in the on-going world. The result of all this is that the psychologised subject is left without any firm ground to stand on. The contemporary epidemics of psychological problems may be a result of being made ill by a psychologised and medicalised society, which promises happiness and well-being (De Vos, 2008). This paradox can be explained through psychologisation. De Vos describes this situation in terms of the *a priori* psychological subject— the child of the Enlightenment is a reflexive subject by definition. Its job is to be more assertive, develop its personality, enhance its coping capabilities, and strengthen its social network.

Psychologisation can thus be used as a cluster-term that addresses psychology's place in today's power-nexus, in connection to other processes such as medicalisation, humanisation, sociologisation and depoliticisation—we will expound upon these connections forthcoming. Traditionally, psychologisation has been examined in a critical context: typically the author pinpoints and criticises negative consequences of psychology's increased presence and impact in almost every walk of life— from macro-systems in the public sphere to the tiniest recesses of the private sphere. This means that the critiques of psychology over the last half of the 20th century are as varied as psychology itself. For instance, sociologist Eva Illouz (2003; 2007; 2008), who has analysed therapeutic culture, claims that the critique of psychological culture now exists in such a wide variety that it literally covers the whole sociology, and critique, of modernity. Illouz lists the following themes: "bureaucratization, narcissism, the construction of a false self, the control of

modern lives by the state, the collapse of cultural and moral hierarchies, the intense privatization of life caused by capitalist social organization, the emptiness of the modern self, severed from communal relationships, large-scale surveillance, the expansion of state power and state legitimation and ‘risk society’ and the cultivation of the self’s vulnerability” (2008, pp. 1-2). Nevertheless, Illouz (2008) also argues that, even if all of the critics of the psychological discourse agree that it has ‘triumphed’, there is still little knowledge concerning *how* and *why* it has triumphed. A study of the nature and consequences of psychologisation could therefore be said to cover this unknown territory.

The related notion of medicalisation has historically received much more interest than psychologisation, probably because of the much longer history of medicine as a science and profession. Medicalisation means that more sick people receive help, at the same time as more healthy people are perceived as sick (Lian, 2006). Arthur Barsky (1988) calls this *the paradox of health*: the more disease we can cure, the unhealthier the population becomes. The same critical concern applies to psychologisation apropos well-being: more people get help, at the same time as psychological diagnoses, such as depression and anxiety, become ever more common. As we increasingly come to talk about life issues and problems in psychological terms, the more depressed and anxious the population becomes. Of course, it is no simple matter to decide if the psychologisation of society can be said to cause a happier or unhappier population; indeed, this in itself is a question that may reflect a psychologised society.

### *Houellebecq against psychologisation*

Towards the end of Michel Houellebecq’s first novel *Whatever*, the main character, who is suffering from depression, is finally admitted to a psychiatric institution. Here, he receives therapeutic treatment, first by a psychiatrist and then by a psychologist. The psychologist records their conversations, as she is compiling data for a thesis on anxiety. The narrator agrees to participate:

Naturally, I said yes. I rather liked her chapped hands, her bitten nails, as she pressed *Record*. Nevertheless, I’ve always hated female psychology students: vile creatures, that’s how I perceive them. But this older woman, who looked like she’d been through a wringer, face framed by a turban, almost inspired my confidence.

At first, though, our relations were not easy. She took me to task for speaking in general, overly sociological terms. This, according to her, was not interesting: instead I ought to involve myself, try and ‘get myself centred’.

- But I’ve had a bellyful of myself, I objected.

- As a psychologist I can't accept such a statement, nor encourage it in any way. In speaking of society all the time you create a barrier behind which you can hide; it's up to me to break down this barrier so that we can work on your personal problems (Houellebecq, 1998, p. 145).

This paragraph from Houellebecq's novel effectively illustrates the problem often referred to as psychologisation, and, simultaneously, the difficulties associated with raising concerns over its consequences; indeed, trying to stop talking about psychologisation is becoming ever less possible and meaningful. The problem in *Whatever*, and in our culture in general, is that the psychologisation of society is leaving no vocabularies or alternative discourses untouched by psychology. Not wanting to talk about our problems in a personal, psychological language means to stop being human in a 'normal' way. Indeed, not wanting to talk about the self in psychologised ways can be conceived as a psychological problem in itself, thus meriting psychological analysis as such. This applies, both, to the nameless protagonist in Houellebecq's text (to whom we return below) and to critical researchers writing on the topic of psychologisation. How did it come to this? And, moreover, is this something that warrants extensive concern, particularly in these tumultuous times with important global issues at stake, such as the financial and climatic crises?

In the paragraph cited above from Houellebecq's *Whatever*, the psychologist encourages the patient to psychologise his problems. Or, phrased otherwise, it is part of the treatment process that the patient accepts that his problems are psychological, and can be stated in psychological terms. Thus, the barrier protecting the patient from the world must be broken down. However, the narrator of the novel tries to resist such psychologisation. In line with the book's author, he prefers a sociological or cultural anthropological perspective on his problems. Human problems, such as depression, arise, according to Houellebecq, not from individual psychodynamics as such, but from the wholly marketised consumer society, saturated as it is with demands for new, unique, and passionate experiences that few people can live up to. Ultimately, we learn from Houellebecq, living in this society leads to exhaustion, bitterness and hopelessness. In this kind of society, psychology is simply part of the entertainment industry, selling self-development to consumers who crave new experiences and evermore intense relationships, particularly concerning sex. In other words, psychology is presented as a symptom of society's problems, rather than as part of their solutions.<sup>1</sup>

However, the psychologist in the book is not convinced and does not give up so easily. After listening to a short text written by her patient, she tries again:

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Houellebecq's possible contribution to the social sciences, see Brinkmann (2009).

But I'd prefer that you spoke directly of your problems. Once again you're being too abstract.

- Maybe. But I don't understand, basically, how people manage to go on living. I get the impression everybody must be unhappy; we live in such a simple world, you understand. There's a system based on domination, money and fear – a somewhat masculine system, let's call it Mars; there's a feminine system based on seduction and sex, Venus, let's say. And that's it. Is it really possible to live and to believe that there's nothing else? Along with the late nineteenth-century realists, Maupassant believed there was nothing else; and it drove him completely mad.

- You're mixing everything up. Maupassant's madness was only a classic stage in the development of syphilis. Any normal human being accepts the two systems you're talking about.

- No. If Maupassant went mad it's because he had an acute awareness of matter, of nothingness and death – and that he had no awareness of anything else. Alike in this to our contemporaries, he established an absolute separation between his individual existence and the rest of the world. It's the only way in which we can conceive the world today (Houellebecq, 1998, p. 147).

Through his narrator— who most likely is modelled on the author's own biography— Houellebecq gives us a precise description of what it is like to live in a psychologised world. Guy de Maupassant, who is referred to in the conversation, was himself an early observer of nineteenth-century psychologisation and followed Charcot's lectures at the *Salpêtrière*. According to the narrator in the novel, Maupassant “had an acute awareness of matter” and of the separation between individual existence and the world. This, itself, is a quintessentially modern, psychologised form of awareness, generated historically by the dual rise of mechanistic science and subjectivist psychology. Before modernity, whether in law, art, politics, religion or philosophy, there was a concern with “the total drama of all reality” — to borrow a phrase from Whitehead— a concern that later yielded to the contemporary psychological “preoccupation with the individual subject of experience” (Whitehead cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009, p. 14). The modern period, Steve Brown and Paul Stenner argue, cannot be adequately comprehended “without recognition of the seemingly infinite value it accords [...] to the individual human psyche” (2009, p. 14). This modern development was partly a consequence of the emergence of the modern physical sciences, which had promoted their “methodology (of atomism, mechanism, and quantification) to an exclusive ontology”, and psychology, accordingly, “was a pretty obvious mistake just waiting to happen— an essentially derivative science modeled on physics, yet having as its subject the very realm that physics rendered utterly obscure” (Costall, 2004, p. 184). In modern times, when nature became reduced to bits of Newtonian matter with nothing but ‘primary qualities’ attached, a new space had to be created for values, purposes, intentionality, and norms; this new space became the psyche. Modern psychology thus

became the science of everything that scientific materialism could not explain, which, as it happens, was almost everything about human beings, including meaning, morality, and, more or less, life as such. This meant that psychology became, not just the science of everything human, but also a prism for experiencing life; or, as Houellebecq tells us: "the only way in which we can conceive the world today". Human life was thoroughly psychologised. Today, as a consequence, psychology—broadly defined as the study of what it is to be a person—is everywhere (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p. 5).

Mark Jarzombek (2000), an architect who writes about the impact of psychology on modern art, similarly talks about the "everywhereness" of psychology within Western culture. He argues that psychology is for the modern age what 'perspective' was for the Renaissance: something, which, after its emergence, has left no aspect of our world untouched. The West has been thoroughly psychologised, he argues, and psychology's main field of operation has not been "in the controlled environments of the scientific laboratories of Wundt and Lipps, but in the more free-wheeling discursive practices of philosophers, historians, avant-garde artists, cultural reformers, and politicians" (Jarzombek, 2000, p. 16). This is currently a familiar line of thinking, expressed, for example, in Roger Smith's (1997) thesis that modern societies have become Psychological Societies. In such societies, according to Houellebecq's literary analysis, there are two main symbolic systems that govern the ways that humans understand themselves and each other: Mars and Venus, competition/aggression and sex/intimacy; both systematically linked to an individualist psychology and consumer capitalism. This, in any case, is the main message of the book *Whatever*: "in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions quite as mercilessly" (Houellebecq, 1998, p. 99). The original French title of *Whatever*, is *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: literally, "the extension of the battle zone", with the battle zone being the sphere of the market, extended from economical transactions to human life as such, including the soft, intimate sides represented by 'Venus'.

Houellebecq gives us literary descriptions of the despair that may strike humans who live in the battle zones of Psychological Society. Like a postmodern Sartre, Houellebecq presents the downside of an existential psychologism, of perceiving the world in a way that reduces it to the experiences of individuals, of the realisation that meanings, values and purposes are subjective, psychological properties, which, therefore, could be completely different. This recognition of contingency, however, does not afford Sartrean existential anxiety as a way to resolutely take responsibility for life, but, rather, depression—arguably the predominant social pathology of postmodern consumer society. Depression, according to one recent sociological analysis, is a real risk when individuals are "psychically overburdened by the diffuse but widespread demand that they must be themselves" (Honneth, 2004, p. 475). This, more than anything, is a demand that was articulated by

twentieth century humanistic psychology: be yourself — yet engage in constant change, development and lifelong learning (Brinkmann, 2008).

At this stage, it is possible to draw a distinction between *psychologising* and *psychologisation*. Psychologising used to be a way of depoliticising social antagonism, but now psychologisation is connected to a *de facto* depoliticisation: “Psychologising was about making the socio-economic and political aspects invisible, psychologisation is about making itself invisible: it is a theoretisation which asserts itself as a pure and direct reality, turning everybody into a psychologist“ (De Vos, 2008, p. 11). Psychology’s effects have shifted into a new dimension and made itself even harder to detect, problematise, and criticise. It thus qualifies as a process of depoliticisation, which, as philosopher of science Sandra Harding purports, is something that in its very nature is immanent, and to a large extent hidden: “In contrast to “intrusive politics,” this kind of institutional politics does not force itself into a pre-existing “pure” social order and its sciences; it already structures both” (1992, p. 567).

Christopher Lasch (1976) famously wrote about *the culture of narcissism*: the therapeutic outlook, having drawn religion from the American consciousness, now threatened politics as ideology’s last place of refuge. De Vos (2010) maintains that Lasch’s fundamental insight is that the psychological and subjective dimension already had infused the public sphere. Resultantly, when the late-modern citizen thinks politics, she thinks in already established psychological terms and structures. Psychology has become society’s only compass. Christian Klesse (2007) points out that the psychologising process has itself become normative today. If so, one must ask whether the notion of psychologising, under neoliberal governance, has come full circle: from originally being the antithesis to normative logic in late 19<sup>th</sup> century debate on psychologism, to functioning as a sociological process that described psychology’s increased presence in society from the 1960’s, before ending up as a highly effective governmental strategy, that is normative in the sense that it provides people with clues about what they *ought* to do.

The notion of psychologism — the normative ideal that phenomena are best explained psychologically — is often linked to the *neoliberal project*, which holds the conviction that optimal conduct is obtained by letting people govern themselves. Here, the psy-sciences, and psychology, have predominantly developed through powerful institutions because of their capability to penetrate into the private sphere, making it both governable and part of individualised freedom. Psychology has become the preferred method of neoliberal policy makers, and society en masse, to explain an individual’s destiny in society. Psychologisation should therefore be identified as an ideological tool or apparatus. However, it too often operates under the ideological radar as neoliberal government’s foremost structuring principle of individual autonomy. As a consequence, psy-expertise inhabits the role of the souls’ foremost expert. The old saying: “Those who can heal can also make sick” appears long forgotten.

Through an examination of relationship manuals aimed at gay men leading non-monogamous relationships, Klesse (2007) has studied how governmentality is conducted. Rather than drawing upon ethical justifications, the manuals tend to provide explanations that focus on the self in a psychologising language such as: lack of personal maturity; the absence of a capacity for healthy intimacy; and inability to care in responsible ways for oneself or one's sexual health. Therefore, the author can rightfully claim that these manuals, both, represent, and work through individualising and psychologising discourses. This, again, represents one of the efficient strategies neoliberal governments use against their citizens. Foucault's concept of governmentality means that these governmental tactics do not necessarily come across as an intrusion into the private lives of homosexuals, but, conversely, function more as a life-strategy, one that suddenly shows itself as a strong will, within these communities, to copy heterosexual relationship rights and bonds.

A central feature of sociologist Nikolas Rose's (1996; 1999) *oeuvre*, concerns how psychology came to shape the modern self. Although Rose never uses the phrase psychologisation directly, his documentation of how psychology makes up late-modern life nonetheless provides an important documentation of the various forms it takes. Rose's proposal is that the psy-sciences — psychology in particular — have made us who we are today. The psychological self is how subjectivity, freedom and autonomy are conducted under neoliberal government in all Western democracies. This is a fact we cannot reduce to a classical false/truth understanding of ideological processes connected to exploitation or reification, but is rather an unavoidable consequence of modernity's development along individualised and psychologised lines, which has contributed to the making (up) of the modern subject. This means that subjectivity is constituted on a level under public and critical awareness that reacts against ideologies and even psychologisation. In this sense, the term psychologisation is almost losing its meaning, because we are no longer able to imagine ourselves, society and politics without psychological categories.

But the pressing question that is left unanswered is: What are the human consequences; what are the possible effects of psychologisation for society? Traditionally we are used to thinking that more psychology means better care for the individual. Indeed, if we take health-politics into account, we would find that the psychology profession, in addition to different interest groups and care groups for people with mental health problems, and politicians and policy makers, all agree that mental diseases are an exponential problem in modern day society. Hence, we therefore need more psychologists, more research, and more money spent on building the required apparatus that can help people. Interestingly, 'the official version' of the ever increasing need for psychology, unlike psychologisation, which fully, or partly, implies that psychology itself might be part of the problem, leaves out psychology's own role. Psychology comes into the picture when the 'problem' is al-

ready framed in its vocabulary; therefore, the only relevant question seems to be how psychology can best be of help.

### *To live with psychologisation*

A way to operationalise the status of the psychologised society is to ask whether its inhabitants are happy. Needless to say, perhaps, such operationalisation is always already psychologised. Still, studies of happiness in Western countries have shown an increase in the decades following World War II, but the rate seems to be flattening out in recent years. In fact, happiness is not the first term that comes to mind if one were to describe the sad and impotent universe Houellebecq depicts in his novels. Houellebecq's novels show us what happens 'after the party'; or, in other words, what happens when everything is won, and we no longer have anything to strive for. As we recall, the nameless protagonist of *Whatever* suffers from depression. His state of despair is, arguably, the result of loneliness. The novel portrays the sad lives of lonely men who are cut off from the world of intimate relationships. As we saw above, Houellebecq identifies *economic liberalism* (Mars) and what he calls *sexual liberalism* (Venus) as the two fundamental doctrines in a consumer driven culture that leaves the social world a battle zone of individuals, regardless of age and social class. The protagonist and his colleague Raphaël Tisserand are both winners in the economic realm, but, nevertheless, losers within the sexual territory.

However, to explain *Whatever* solely as a story about modern loneliness would perhaps be to play straight into Houellebecq's fundamental critique of individualised Western liberal democracies. In the conversation with the psychologist, the protagonist claims that Maupassant's madness is similar to the modern individual's discontent, resulting from the loss of an awareness of something other than nothingness and death. The separation between self and the rest of the world, that Maupassant was forced to acknowledge, has become democratised in the modern world. The nameless character therefore represents modern man's metaphysical and transcendental yearning that cannot fully be dealt with in psychological-emotional terms. The novel ends with a paragraph supporting this interpretation:

I feel my skin again as a frontier, and the external world as a crushing weight. The impression of separation is total; from now on I am imprisoned within myself. It will not take place, the sublime fusion; the goal of life is missed. It is two in the afternoon (Houellebecq, 1998, p. 155).

What Houellebecq raises, here, are concerns regarding the chances of the individualised Psychological Man to connect with something outside himself. Early in the novel Houel-

lebecq tells the story of the Bretonian cow who, in certain periods during a year, desires to be 'filled up'. Of course, this means that the cow has a natural instinct for coitus and insemination, but it can also be read as a fable about the nature of existence for man, who has a longing, not only in sexual terms to be filled or fill, but to connect to something outside one's own nature. Houellebecq appears to be saying that, both, casual sexual encounters and monogamous relationships are the only remedies in our culture to achieve this longing for something outside ourselves. But neither offers any relief of the individual transcendental yearning.

The nameless protagonist's only real friend is a priest whom he occasionally sees. On their last encounter the priest has become depressed. We learn that he got mixed up in a relationship with a woman. Even though he didn't act on this, he was tempted and this leads him to a crisis of faith where he declares that: "The closure is lost". Hence, in our secular age, religion, which historically played the part of connecting people with something outside themselves, no longer has as strong a grip as it used to on the believers, and even the propagandists.

This is similar to French philosopher Dany-Robert Dufour's (2008) critique of what he calls "the new servitude of the liberated in the age of total capitalism". In his study, Dufour argues that the neoliberal project not only must be understood as an ideology, but also as a way of thinking that is rapidly changing the very nature of human character. Neoliberalism brings with it desymbolisation, which means that the subject must ground itself upon itself, rather than in relation to a third part (the Other) — as has historically been the case. Resultantly, neoliberal subjects are increasingly cut off from the bonds to traditional authorities, giving them— for better or for worse— more freedom.<sup>2</sup> For many in the West, this extensive freedom is unbearable, and therefore responsible for much human suffering. With this in mind, Dufour argues that the substantive increases of psychological disorders— such as depression— in the Western world should be understood not only as a positive sign of better methods and means, but, rather, as psychological damaging consequences of the neoliberal project, itself.

Concern for the (im)possibility of modern man to connect to something outside of himself, is, itself— as the reader may well have noticed— a therapeutic concern for the well-being of modern man. The critique of modern day psychologisation, is, alas, motivated by a broader psychological concern. Fighting fire with fire, whilst an effective strategy, nev-

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<sup>2</sup> Whether neoliberalism and the consumer culture in general really provides the individual with more freedom is of course highly disputed. Many contemporary cultural critics will, for instance, object and argue that neoliberalism and consumerism's "freedom to choose" is a narrow and trivialized understanding of freedom.

ertheless shows how difficult, if not outright impossible, it has become to escape the psychological as our common reference point. For are we not humans with certain needs?

In other cultures, the creation of something perceived as being outside human control was thought to be divine. It was, both, outside the human sphere, and, concomitantly, created for man's sake. A culture that didn't understand itself through psychologised terms, paradoxically, was representative of a somewhat more healthy psychology. Psychology functions most effectively when it is indirect and works through another instance of authority, and is not the goal in itself. Psychology and man appear to be in need of something else to draw on. Ironically, Sigmund Freud—the father of modern psychology—wrote in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that, for the organism, a lack of contact with the Other leads to death, as a result of suffocation on one's waste products.

### *Reversing psychologisation?*

If we want to ask whether psychologisation can be resisted, we need to raise the question of whether an opposite process can be effectuated in society. The opposite of psychologisation, often associated with individualisation, is, perhaps, sociologisation:<sup>3</sup> the process and wrongdoing of making something originally individual and personal into a collective affair. In relation to this, it is noteworthy that Houellebecq's intellectual hero is Auguste Comte, the inventor of classical positivism, and like Comte, Houellebecq resists psychologisation by analyzing it sociologically, by way of Comtean 'social physics'. Houellebecq more or less echoes Comte's verdict that psychology can never attain the status of a genuine science, but must forever remain, in Comte's words, "the last transformation of theology" (1830, p. 20). Famously, Comte argued that human knowledge passes through three different stages: the theological; the metaphysical; and the scientific or positive stages. In the first theological stage: "the human mind directs its researches mainly toward the inner nature of beings", rather than "abstract forces" (the metaphysical stage) or "the connection established between different particular phenomena and some general facts" (the positive stage) (1830, p. 2). But, in Comte's eyes, psychology—along with theology—belonged to the first stage, by explaining the observable via recourse to mysterious and unobservable (mental) mechanisms and entities. Comte presaged behaviourism in his

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible to argue that sociologisation does *not* represent the possible reversal of individualisation and psychologisation, since all these concepts are academic terms and products. Perhaps radical movements with their foundation in collective thinking and solidarity across its members are more antithetical and ultimately a more fruitful way of reversal.

view that: "direct contemplation of the mind by itself is a pure illusion", and "the human mind can observe all phenomena directly, except its own" (1830, pp. 20-21). Like Comte, Houellebecq believes in the power of 'social forces'— or laws of 'social physics' in Comtean parlance— that govern human lives under conditions of advanced consumer capitalism (Varsava, 2005). Social forces and conditions, rather than individual psychological properties, explain human behavior: "Like Zola, Houellebecq places his characters in certain social contexts and then portrays their reactions to various stimuli" (p. 153). In the novel *Atomised*, Houellebecq lets the main character Michel reflect upon the life of his half-brother Bruno:

Was it possible to think of Bruno as an individual? The decay of his organs was particular to him, and he would suffer his decline and death as an individual. On the other hand, his hedonistic world view and the forces that shaped his consciousness and his desires were common to an entire generation (2001, p. 212).

Evoking Comte, what we need in order to understand human life— including the psychologisation of human life— is physiology (charting bodily needs and desires) and sociology (analyzing social forces). Houellebecq is thus interesting, and dangerous, for psychologists because he poses a challenge, which, although formulated through literary novels, threatens the explanatory power of psychological science: What if we can explain human behavior entirely by looking at how historical forces (capitalism, consumerism) shape social situations, which in turn determine human behavior? What need do we have, then, for a mentalist and individualist psychology? Houellebecq's answer is: *none*. Not that his books are devoid of psychology; on the contrary, they are full of psychology. Pop-psychology, in particular, is prevalent: such as, for example, in the pervasive self-realisation discourse that some of the characters have tapped into; but, crucially, this functions mainly as a form of secular religion that provides entertainment and a possible intensification of pleasure for the people involved— not unlike Comte's verdict that psychology represents the last transformation of theology (see also Kvale, 2003). Psychology has no explanatory power, but must itself be explained by its historical situation. Instead of individualist, psycho-religious explanations of human behavior, what we need in order to understand human life, Houellebecq argues, are careful descriptions of the concrete situations in which humans act, and of the historical conditions that shape these situations.

What, then, of Houellebecq's Comtean dream of another society, founded on science? Can science, positivism, and genetic engineering function as surprising avenues towards emancipation in our consumption driven society? Houellebecq's dream, of a more scientific language of the self, fits in with the biological turn that one can understand as a logical consequence of the mind-blowing field of biotechnology, and all the scientific possibilities it has opened up in recent years. But psychologisation has nevertheless something that other processes lack. Both medicalisation and sociologisation are impersonal

processes. Reducing the individual to the sum of his genes or neurotransmitters, or deducing him into social structures and thereby erasing his unique individual signature, won't wash with people's desires. Psychologisation is the only process that literally takes *care* of the individual. Not being personal, as observed in the aforementioned paragraph from Houellebecq, is not being human.

Furthermore, it appears that even the recent biologisation of life— fuelled by neuroscience, genetics and biomedicine— operates on ground already well laid out through psychologisation. In his latest book on *The Politics of Life Itself*, Rose contends that the deep interior psychological space, through which human beings came to understand themselves in the first half of the twentieth century, “has begun to flatten out, to be displaced by a direct mapping of personhood, and its ills, upon the body or brain, which then becomes the principle target for ethical work” (2007, p. 26). In spite of this process, Rose argues that the dynamics and structure of human development remains largely unaffected by the discursive shift from “the inner self” to “the brain”, from psychotherapy and self-development books to Prozac and Ritalin. Like the psychologised ideal of becoming one-self, the recent “somatic ethics”, with its idea of “the neurochemical self”, is bound up with psychologised ideas about self-fulfilment, an “ethic of authenticity”, and a “realization of the true self” (2007, p. 100). Thus, for example, children are given medication for ADHD, not to suppress their personalities, but in order for their true selves to emerge.

Although, with a few exceptions, the concept of psychologisation is associated with something negative and critical in relation to psychology's wanted or unwanted consequences, psychology's hugely influential position within Western culture must stem from the fact that it contributes positively to today's society. The idea that psychology represents humanisation is perhaps the most central of all underlying beliefs concerning the essential mandate it has received. An illustration of this, today, can be found in the way criminals are treated with rehabilitation rather than punishments, in addition to the fact that their misconduct is often understood as deriving from a damaged childhood, rather than an evil will, for example. Consequently, the way we treat abnormality has simply become more humane. For instance, people suffering from dyslexia 50 years ago were seen as unfit for higher education, or simply stupid or retarded, whilst, today, it is understood and treated as a disorder that should not hinder dyslectics doing whatever they want to do. Against particular cases like this, it is hard to take the position that psychology has led to worsened conditions for its subjects *per se*. The question now concerns whether the downside of psychologisation is vastly exaggerated? Is it, in fact, much better than the reputation which precedes it?

In order to raise a critical examination of any system of meaning, it is necessary to have at least one other system of meaning to draw upon. The main problem when confronting psychologisation, is the lack of a point beyond, or outside, the psychological reality in which the research and critique is fundamentally embedded (De Vos, 2008). The same

dilemma has been raised within the study of medicalisation. According to Robert Nye (2003), investigations on the long-term development and present effects of medicalisation, specifically concerning the allegedly suspicious close alliances between medical power and the state, leaves a lot to be desired. Investigators frequently find, in the modern welfare state at least, no genuine cause of concern. Therefore, Nye (2003) poses the question of whether we must imagine that the neoliberal criteria of citizenship has come full-circle, and that we have internalised its duties and responsibilities through good health, or whether we have simply overestimated the historical development and current dangers of medicalisation. Of course, another perspective is to say that it represents a problem if it is no longer even possible to raise the question about psychologisation— psychology's negative consequences— in a meaningful way? This aspect has been addressed by scholars writing on the nature of the therapeutic framework and psychology's special logic, ever since Wittgenstein remarked on Freud and psychoanalysis:

Analysis is likely to do harm. Because although one may discover in the course of it various things about oneself, one must have a very strong and keen and persistent criticism in order to recognize and see through the mythology that is offered or imposed on one. There is an inducement to say, 'Yes, of course, it must be like that.' A powerful mythology (1966, pp. 51-52).

The problem Wittgenstein raises in this insightful passage concerns the mythological nature of psychoanalysis. Within the field of folkloristics, a myth is conventionally defined as a sacred narrative that explains how the world and humankind came to be in their present form. We interpret Wittgenstein, here, to prophetically see the dangers inherent within the logic of psychoanalysis, and, later, psychology in general. It can potentially explain everything; it is psychology's very nature to be capable of transforming almost any field into psychological categories and language. And, potentially, we are all under its spell, as we come to say: 'Yes, of course, it must be like that'. This worrying tendency, which Wittgenstein addressed just before therapeutic culture had its formidable outbreak in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has since become a central concern in some of the most influential works on therapeutic culture and psychologisation over the last decade (Rose, 1996; 1999; Illouz, 2008).

### *There is no alternative to psychologisation*

Perhaps the most important critique of psychologisation is the tendency to exclude the possibility of discussing its negative consequences and the impossibility of raising alternatives. Indeed, Foucault famously said, that it is of the greatest importance for the social

critic to know that one can think differently (Zondervan, 2005).<sup>4</sup> This is no longer the case, at least according to the analysis we have provided above.

On the very last pages of two of Rose's works on psychology (1996; 1999), he closes by discussing the possibility of escaping the psychologisation of society, and, in turn, inventing different selves that are not made up of psychological knowledge and language. Rose (1996) describes the psychological self as a subjective space that attracts as many burdens, anxieties and divisions as it inspires projects of emancipation. Could it have been different? Rose's answer is, theoretically speaking, 'yes', but, realistically, 'no': We can perhaps, begin to discern the cracking of this once secure space of interiority, the disconnecting of some of the lines that have made up this diagram, the possibility that, if we cannot disinvent ourselves, we might at least enhance the contestability of the forms of being that have been invented for us, and begin to invent ourselves differently (Rose, 1996, p. 197).

Interestingly enough, the final sentences of Rose's last book, which is explicitly concerned with psychology and the shaping of the self throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also addresses the same concern. This implies, perhaps, that it is the most important question that simultaneously lacks any proper solution. This is understandable because it concerns a reconfiguration of the question of freedom that does not prefigure the psychological subject, and his forced project of administering this freedom through his ability of self-realisation:

For in the choices one makes, and in the obligation to render one's everyday existence meaningful as an outcome of choices made, one's relation with oneself is tied ever more firmly to the ethics of individual autonomy and personal authenticity. To question the costs of this is not to deny its benefits nor to suggest the possibility of a form of existence which can radically escape from the nexus of power and subjectivity in which the very possibilities of contemporary experience have been formed. But it is to pose, at least as an experiment for thought, the question of what an ethic of existence might be that did not refer itself to that psy shaped space which has been installed at the heart of each modern individual. Could one not imagine another kind of freedom, whose ethics were resolutely 'superficial'? An ethics whose vectors did not run from outer to inner, and did not question appearances in the name of their hidden truth, but which ran across the outsides, between, among persons, where subjectivities were distributed, collective and oriented to action? An

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<sup>4</sup> "There are moments in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all" (Foucault quoted from Zondervan, 2005, p. 90).

ethic, that is to say, that did not seek to problematize, to celebrate or to govern the soul? (Rose, 1999, p. 272)

The difficulties concerning the processes of individualisation and psychologisation— as Rose is no doubt fully aware— will increasingly strengthen as societies more and more rely upon, and organize themselves around, the principle of the self-governed individual.

Illouz (2008), who, like Rose, takes an ambivalent stance toward the consequences of the therapeutic ethos upon Western culture, describes her position as an *immanent critique*. This implies that her approach to the therapeutic culture is pragmatic: psychology has arrived at its current situation not only through institutionalisation, but also because it helps people 'do things' — such as cope and resolve practical questions. But, even if we can find good reasons for therapeutic culture, such as, for instance, that it upholds and contributes to individual freedom and autonomy, it also, undoubtedly, has some worrying features. As the very last sentence of Illouz' book reads: "In the therapeutic ethos there is no such thing as senseless suffering and chaos, and this is why, in the final analysis, its cultural impact should worry us" (2008, p. 247).

This provides another perspective on Rose's thought-experiment. The lack of alternative signs in a thoroughly psychologised society and culture seems to be worrying in itself. Illouz, here, writes in the context of Weber's theory on theodicy: clinical psychology is the first cultural system that really disposes of the problem of theodicy (Why do the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper?), that religious systems have struggled to solve. The aim of religions has been to justify both suffering and good fortune — one has to feel that one deserves it in comparison with others (Illouz, 2008). This, according to Illouz, is the most powerful form of preservation of the status quo there is; a system that perfectly explains everything, leaves no room for non-explainable suffering and chaos that might start a new grand narrative, and, hence, no chance of a revolt.

Postmodernity has been called the period of 'the loss of absence'. Everywhere one looks, global capitalism appears to fill every space and sphere of difference, and commodify it (McGowan, 2005). The Other loses its allure for the individual, according to Lacanian theory, which means that the individual in consumer-society— like the men in *Whatever*— are doomed to be enclosed in themselves like no other Self in the history of man. And is not the number of the beast psychologisation? For when empty spaces no longer exist, as Illouz remarks is the case within therapeutic culture, the space for the Lacanian *objet petit a* (a 'radical extraction' which is not an *actual* object, nor can it be attained, but, nevertheless, works to activate desire's interest), and for desire, closes up, leaving the subject alone and isolated with himself, uninterested and unable to connect to the Other (McGowan, 2005). After one hundred and fifty years of psychologisation something is perhaps lost on the way. The modern subject is literally left with something to be desired.

## Conclusion

We saw above how the psychologist in Houellebecq's story accused the nameless protagonist of creating a barrier between himself and the world. But the nameless character's problem is precisely the lack of connections with this world and something *other*; what can psychology possibly prescribe which would help him in this instance? Wouldn't it simply prescribe more of the same, and more of himself? A more existential view of the patient in question would reflect on his loss of transcendence: "Is it really possible to live and to believe that there's nothing else?" Maupassant went mad, according to the nameless protagonist, because of his awareness of this, "he had no awareness of anything else" (Houellebecq, 1998). He was thus foresighted enough to understand that the age in which he lived was the coming of a time without hope. The only solution, then, was to establish a separation between oneself as an individual existence and the rest of the world, as Maupassant did. Today, Houellebecq maintains, it has become the only possible way of conceiving the world. Will this eventually drive us all mad?

But, once again, we find ourselves talking in psychological terms: invoking happiness, madness, the prevalence of psychological diseases, and self-aware modern subjectivity. Perhaps even the questioning of the lack of alternatives itself is a result of psychologisation. Perhaps the fact that psychologisation has gone full circle: from a normative theory; through to a sociological fact; and, finally, to a normative theory under neoliberal government, means that one should be more optimistic regarding future rebellions against it. But, just as likely, psychologisation might simply be remembered as a normative theory without any debate. For, indeed, who was the oppressor or wrongdoer here again? Are we not victimised in an on-going Stockholm-syndrome-esque situation? And there was psychology, once again... Perhaps, rather than Wittgenstein, it was the poet W. H. Auden who understood the impossibility of rejecting psychology already at the time of Freud's death, which for psychology was its coming of age, when he wrote:

to us he is no more a person  
now but a whole climate of opinion  
under whom we conduct our different lives  
Like weather he can only hinder or help (2007, p. 109).

Although this paper has provided more questions than answers, this is our meta-theoretical conclusion: even the critical tools themselves are psychologised. Therefore, our examination of psychologisation can best be surmised in the old saying: resistance is futile. As authors of this text, we are, of course, in no privileged position to make claims about how the paper should be interpreted, but, personally speaking, we don't support this conclusion. What we have called the possible disappearance of psychologisation, only

means that critique is made more difficult, and, thus, that this task is more important than ever. Social criticism has always been difficult. But, as philosopher Michael Walzer (2002) has pointed out, it is absolutely necessary for the critic to believe in some sort of utopia (possible better outcomes) in order to go on. One utopia depicts the psychological subject as a subject with critical potentials. As people have acquired psychological modes of self-understanding, including the capacities to reflect and evaluate life possibilities, they may put these acquired skills to use in criticising debilitating conditions, including those conditions under which their psychological self-reflective skills were cultivated and disciplined in the first place. A version of this argument was put forward by Foucault, who thought that “new human capacities may come into existence as effects of forms of domination, only to then become bases of resistance to those same forms of domination” (Foucault cited in Patton, 1998, p. 71).

In the famous, and endlessly repeated, last interview given by Heidegger to *Der Spiegel*, published in 1976, he said that philosophy, or any other purely human reflection—which surely includes psychology—is now unable to effect the current state of the world, which is why “only a god can save us”, in Heidegger’s memorable words. Heidegger, too, saw the need for something *wholly other* that we have also addressed in this text. The additional question we have raised is simply: Do we really want to be saved from humanisation and psychologisation? Certainly, there should be a space for critique and utopian thinking; but rather than being saved from psychologisation, shouldn’t we be worrying about being saved from global warming, flooding, and hunger? Nature—and her Carbon gases, waters and sun rays—may be that ‘wholly other’, which forces us to reconsider our ways of life and possibly de-psychologise our relationship to the world. Should we thank *God* for the financial and climate crises?

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