Somatic Pedagogies: 
Mapping, critiquing and resisting the affective discourse of the neoliberal state from an embodied anarchist perspective

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Summary

- Context: Neoliberal Anxiety
- Affect and the conformist subject
- Well-being, resilience and ‘therapeutic education’
- Critical alternatives and the neglect of the body
- Pedagogies of the body: Wilhelm Reich, Somatic therapy and pedagogies of theatre and the dancefloor.
Neoliberal Anxiety

The Institute for Precarious Consciousness (*in press)*:

- The rise of industrialism was characterised by *misery* (Marx & ‘immiseration of proletariat’)

- The Fordist period was characterized by *boredom* (secure but monotonous jobs, ‘universal’ but bureaucratic welfare).

- The contemporary period is characterised by *anxiety* (precarious work, zero hour contracts, withdrawal of benefits, impossible ‘targets’, global outsourcing and migration...)
Affect and the Conformist Subject

- Affect refers to emotion, relationships, feelings, desire, the interaction of bodies (human & non-human) and the relations between them (Spinoza; Deleuze 1988).

- The state uses ‘discourses of affect’ to harness bio-power: to (re)produce compliant subjects able to deal with (or, unable to look beyond) neoliberal precarity and anxiety.

- At the same time there has been a ‘turn to affect’ in critical academia. Such theories attempt to produce critical pedagogies that resist state affective discourse.

- However, these often elide or diminish the role of the body in effective resistance.
Well-being, resilience and ‘therapeutic education’


- They cite a ‘deluge of interventions throughout the education system assess the emotional needs and perceived emotional vulnerability of children, young people and adults and claim to develop their emotional literacy and well-being.’ (p. ix)
Examples:

Primary: Philosophy for Children classes, interventions to assess emotional needs and perceived vulnerability, interventions to develop ‘emotional literacy’, aspects of citizenship education and PSHE.

Colleges and Universities: induction programmes, module claims to build self-esteem and confidence, student satisfaction surveys.

Workplace: Activities to deal with stress, harassment, bullying, appraisal and performance reviews that focus on emotional wellbeing.

Cultural Pedagogies: Abundance of online/magazine psychology tests, self-help books.
Recent examples

- One might think that the emphasis on ‘well-being’ died with New Labour, to be replaced by an emphasis on discipline and securitisation.

- Nonetheless, recent speeches and policies by Gove place emphasis on ‘emotional intelligence’ and ‘resilience’ (see Walker 2013; Williams 2010).

- ESRC strategic priorities (2011-2015): The theme ‘influencing behaviour and informing interventions’ explicitly calls for research into the effectiveness of different strategies including ‘coercion through legislation, persuasion via incentives or social marketing’ for promoting ‘well-being’. Well-being is left undefined but elsewhere in the document is linked to willingness/ability to work, and the desire to reduce welfare expenditure.

- Furthermore, discourses of discipline and securitisation also mobilize affect in the form of fear. They also rest on the same assumptions of vulnerable subjects in need of state protection.
1. Metropolitan police counter-terrorism campaign.

2. ESRC Delivery Plan

3. UK Resilience Programme Project Report

We will concentrate on investments that help society, government and business improve delivery of future public services so that they are both affordable and meet society’s needs at a local, regional and national level. Our investment in the RCUK programme on Lifelong Health and Wellbeing ensures social science and interdisciplinary research in this important area.

The UK Resilience Programme (UKRP) aims to improve children’s psychological well-being by building resilience and promoting accurate thinking. Three local authorities launched it in the academic year 2007-08, with workshops delivered to Year 7 pupils in secondary schools. This report presents findings from the UKRP evaluation, commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education).
Critique of pedagogies of well-being, resilience and therapeutic education.

- They rest on assumptions of a ‘diminished self’ that requires assessment and intervention; it is a kind of ‘social engineering’ (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009: p. xiii).
- They can create a culture of narcissism, vulnerability and isolation, and diminished agency (Ibid: p. 19)
- It is an insidious means of surveillance and control (p.117)
- It is an individualised discourse that channels subjects towards narrow neoliberal desires (Amsler 2008) and conceals the social and material causes of anxiety, rendering them a public secret (Institute of Precarious Consciousness, *in press*)
Critical Pedagogy and the politics of affect

- Therapeutic education raises some specific issues for critical theorists and educators.

- If students are trained to accept, adapt to and ultimately desire precarious life in neoliberal societies, how might we persuade them otherwise without also assuming a ‘diminished subject’ or attempting to impose critical/radical desires?
Existing alternatives:

- Developing critical awareness of the role of emotions and affect, problematizing emotional responses to critique (Amsler 2011).

- Opening non-hierarchical spaces for discussion and engagement with otherness (Motta 2012).

- Acknowledging a role for unpleasant affects and emotions in class, e.g. ambiguity and discomfort (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013; Zembylas, 2006; Boler, 1999)
Neglect of the body

- Critical pedagogies are based on discussion, dialogue, critical thought.
- Assumption that emotions are discursive, rather than physical in origin and effect.
- Maintain a mind/body dualism and hierarchy (Shapiro 1999).
- Perhaps due to constraints of classrooms and institutions. My wish is not to supplant these ideas but to supplement them. I also wish to maintain emphasis on non-hierarchy and openness.
- Non-hierarchical, liberatory pedagogies that that invert or transgress the MIND > BODY dynamic by beginning from the (reconceptualised) body are rare, but they do exist.
Somatherapy

- Invented by a Brazillian psychiatrist, Roberto Freire (see Freire and da Mata 1997)

- Anarchist therapy that draws on the radical psychology of Wilhelm Reich and the Brazilian martial art Capoeira Angola.

- Uses physical movement and dance to ‘un-learn’ the ‘musculature armour’ that capitalist life and work imposes on us.

  - Not develop athletic bodies but rediscover bodily difference, autonomy and build collectivity.

  - Aims to mobilize affects of creativity, trust and feelings of freedom, starting from the body. Sessions also end in critical discussion.
Theatre of the Oppressed

• Aim is ‘to change the people – “spectators,” passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action’ (Boal 1979: 97).

• In order to ‘control the means of theatrical production, man [sic] must, first of all, control his own body’ (Ibid: 102).

• Alienated and repetitive labour imposes a ‘mask’ of behaviour, whereby work governs the body – the first task of a liberatory theatre is to raise this to the level of consciousness and to study and analyse the different forces that act upon participants’ bodies.

• Uses a variety of exercises and games to help participants know the limits and possibilities of their bodies and work towards ‘making the body expressive’.
Psychogeography

- Exploring the effects of the geographical environment on human behavior and feelings through a variety of playful strategies, walking and mapping (see Debord 1955).

- ‘In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities and all other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.’ (Debord 1958)

Jeremy Gilbert (2013) argues that Djing in dance clubs and teaching are very similar activities: both aim to mobilize affect to assemble a collective and empowered body.

Sherry Shapiro (1999) Dance has emancipatory potential because it brings our bodies and minds together in the present, and reasserts our capacity for agency in shaping the world. However, professional/taught dance in our current culture is commodified and sexualized/gendered. Need to link dance education with critical pedagogy in order to reflect on how our bodies are shaped by the larger culture in which they live.
Conclusion: Key themes

- The state, in attempting to produce compliant neoliberal subjects, uses discourses and affects designed to capture the affective force of fear and anxiety, cloaked in discourses of well-being.

- Critical pedagogy attempts to resist this in educational and cultural settings through a counter-discourse of affect.

- What is missing is a somatic understanding of affect that takes into account the whole body and its relationships at a disalienated level. This opens up possibilities for pedagogies that begin from movement, dance and play rather than language.
References


Further sources

- Documentary on Soma: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMTk4QazKOA