



Weariness of the self

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review of:

Alain Ehrenberg (2009) *The weariness of the self: Diagnosing the history of depression in the contemporary age*, with a preface by Allan Young. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. (HB, pp. 345, \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-7735-3625-6)

The contemporary phenomenon of depression

Is the increase in depression that has taken place over recent decades in Western societies a result of a fundamental shift in the way we understand ourselves? This is the question raised by French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg in his thought-provoking work *The weariness of the self*. According to Ehrenberg, depression is more than just a disease. The syndrome also provides us with a language in which we formulate and recognize ourselves, particularly when we fail to meet our own personal expectations and the demands for autonomy and personal freedom placed on us by contemporary society. In the Western world, Ehrenberg argues, the phenomenon of depression has become part of an internal grammar that assists the articulation of the challenges and boundaries of a new set of norms, whose ideals of individual sovereignty we are just getting used to. The rise of the disease, from its status as a secondary phenomenon often associated with other mental illnesses to a challenge that applies to everyone, is a symptom, not necessarily of an increased social pressure on the subject, but of a fundamental transformation in the way individuals understand themselves. Placing Ehrenberg's work somewhere in the field between the critical tradition of Axel Honneth and the problematizing work of late Foucault, this hypothesis offers to the reader not only a provocative perspective on depression but also an interesting contribution to a contemporary philosophical anthropology.

Ehrenberg's claim is that the threshold, which in the Rousseauian tradition of social philosophy can be said to mark the difference between the individual and the social, has shifted over the last century from being formulated primarily in terms of *conflict* to being put in terms of *insufficiency*. In the Freudian perspective on the individual psyche, which our age has partly inherited from 19th century, the individual was structured by the same conflict that held together the world of the social. Just as idea of the social was conditioned by the struggle between classes, the Ego in Freud's model of the personality was structured by the individual's ability to control impulses and guilt

complexes in the face of societal demands. This fundamental tension, which dominated the first half of the 20th century and resulted in neurosis and anxiety, has been replaced by the notion of a self that is ceaselessly challenged by its own sovereignty, faced with endless opportunities to realize and become itself. In other words, the sovereign individual of whom Nietzsche expected so much has conquered the West to the extent that it suffers under the burden of its own success. The democratized version of the Übermensch struggles with the anxiety caused by its own anticipation of complete autonomy. It is such a Kierkegaardian despair at the liberty to 'choose oneself' that, according to Ehrenberg, is formulated in the vocabulary of inhibition, exhaustion and dejection – in short, in the language of depression.

Depression is a functional pathology

Together with Ehrenberg's earlier works, which have unfortunately not yet been translated into English, *The weariness of the self* is a major contribution to the anthropology of modern individuality. Ehrenberg demonstrates an impressive knowledge of his field and seeks to reveal the tensions between the arguments that make up the contemporary phenomenon of depression. As Ehrenberg himself acknowledges, such an objective is more politically than scientifically motivated. *The weariness of the self* is not, nor does it pretend to be, a treatise on clinical depression. Instead it aims to demonstrate and discuss what the syndrome may tell to us about modern society. Serving as a fundament for this exploration, it has at its centre a psychiatric-historical analysis of the dispute between Freud and his less well-known predecessor Pierre Janet, who is nonetheless considered by many to be the true father of psychotherapy. Engaging also with the historical development of the disease in popular media, Ehrenberg's study connects this dispute with social philosophical interests and contextualizes the work in a critical discussion of contemporary individualism. The conclusion that he reaches is that depression – as we know it today – is a *functional pathology*. Rather than describing a state of being, it refers to a mode of acting that defines the limits of the individual body and soul, beyond which normative demands are rendered illegitimate. This understanding of depression, which places the disease firmly within the psychosomatic tradition that perhaps began with the nerve illnesses of early industrialism, is both the strength and the ultimate weakness of Ehrenberg's work. Ehrenberg's argument is strong, because it allows for an original and critically provocative perspective on one of the greatest challenges to the health of the contemporary individual. His perspective goes beyond the neurobiological trends that dominate not only medicine and therapy but also the markets for anti-depressants. But this perspective is also one of the weaknesses of the work, because placing depression in this tradition runs the risk of conflating it with today's more obvious candidate: stress. The phenomenon of stress not only has firm roots in the contemporary organization of work and life; it also historically draws more evidently on the tropes of fatigue and exhaustion than depression does. Treating depression as an individual reaction to the ever-recurring question about how much good is good enough, Ehrenberg's analysis leaves this perspective on stress unexplored. As he is at the same time very careful not to adopt a normative position, the normative criteria for his analysis sometimes appear obscure.

Is depression really a language?

Not engaging directly with his contemporaries in a normative fashion is no doubt the consequence of a methodological choice that illustrates Ehrenberg's indebtedness to Michel Foucault. Yet the social critical implications of arguing that contemporary depression is primarily a language spoken by those who succumb to social pressure, and their own expectation to live up to it, are so far-reaching that they ought to be addressed. Whether or not such an articulation necessarily consists in a justification of the distinction between 'normal' and 'pathological', or in a stronger focus on accounting for the social conditions that make up a good life cannot be clarified here. But that depression in Ehrenberg's social diagnostical perspective is treated along the lines of fashionable complaints like neurasthenia and hysteria in the late 19th century may be taken to imply that the disease should be treated less as an individual malady and more as an intricate means for the contemporary individual to formulate social critique. While such an assumption may certainly be valid, it is also in danger of cutting short the complexities of mental disease. Suffering, in such a perspective, is the response to an unarticulated problem in society, of which the researcher has the social critical privilege to bring to light, to articulate, interpret and explicate. To the individual dealing with this problem, the challenge becomes one of self-regulation within the context of a personal oikos. The phenomenon of depression, in other words, is entered into the sphere of the faculties, where well-being and health are the primary results of active and rational choice regulated by moral qualities, rather than being merely individual capacities. Disease, in such a perspective, is a signal of the insufficiency or mismanagement of the will. The question that arises from this position, of course, is whether depression can be reduced to a state that the modern individual escapes into, when it all gets to be too much, and whether it should be treated as a functional pathology along the lines of stress. My personal feeling is that most people who have known severe depression themselves or have met anyone who suffers from it would tend to disagree. Ehrenberg's focus on the grey area between normality and pathology in the case of depression permits him speak with a clinical vocabulary that may make us shudder; but it does not commit itself earnestly enough to the work that medicine has achieved in the field, when he concludes that psychiatry does not know what it is dealing with and that depression thus has only a strategic position in the field. Such shrill statements not only lack in credibility, they are also in danger of making hostages of the very people that they aim to speak on behalf of, by having them subscribe to a critical position that they did not choose. The depressive subject in *The Weariness of the Self* is too easily lost in a political struggle between classical, sociological positions (like the tension between system and life-world) that are not well equipped to explain let alone ease the invalidating psychical pain that severe depression causes.

'The weariness of being a self'

In spite of this critique, *The weariness of the self* is beyond doubt one of the most interesting publications on depression in recent years. A curiosity that may also have an influence on its reception is the subtle change of reference found in the title of the book. The original French title was *La fatigue d'être soi* (1998), which may be roughly translated into something like 'The weariness of being a self'. This title nicely captures

Ehrenberg's message about the self-identical individual's sense of inadequacy in a setting where the ability to articulate a self has become a social imperative. It also set the stage for Ehrenberg's important critical discussion of inhibition and the role of anti-depressants as initiative regulators. The English title, on the other hand, does not seem to me to contain the same subtle meaning. In this it follows the German edition of the book that was published with a very programmatic foreword by Axel Honneth under the title *Das erschöpfte Selbst* [*The exhausted self*, 2001]. Given the differences between Honneth's critical theoretical project, within the context of which Ehrenberg's work was first introduced to a wider public outside of France, and the more diagnostic perspective of the Foucauldian tradition that is also a strong influence on it, one is tempted to conclude that *The weariness of the self* has already gained a reputation that makes it worthy of a position as a must-read for anyone with an interest in social philosophy.

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