



Adapting the Xanax Generation: Meditations on Catastrophic Precarity and Postdigital Melancholia

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In the spring of 2018, I taught a senior capstone seminar in sociology at my former institution, a 4-year, largely working-class college in the State University of New York system. The theme I developed for the course was Sociologies of the Future. As elaborated in the course description:

The literary theorist Fredric Jameson is famous for observing that is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Jameson made this observation at the tail end of the 1990s when thinkers in the social sciences and humanities were responding to a supposed ‘end of history’ and ‘death of grand narratives’. These ideas signaled an emerging malaise concerning the future, including the waning of utopian dreams and projects that had once proliferated in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, we might wish to extend and modify Jameson’s observation. Today, in mainstream culture, it seems easier to imagine that we live in a hyperreal computer simulation, where our every movement, thought, feeling, sensation, and action becomes an optimizable data point, than to imagine we can make basic modifications to capitalism. This state of affairs reflects a paradox of possibility where radical visions of technological change proliferate, including concerns that advances in super-intelligent artificial intelligence threaten to render large swaths of workers redundant, yet we still seem stuck in imaginative inertia when it comes to political economy. This is the sociological problem that we will be deconstructing in this capstone sociology course. We will be engaging readings and concepts that point toward sociologies of the future, through a cognitive mapping of our present historical condition.

In the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump, I had had Jean Baudrillard on my mind. My general outlook on my institution during this time was that, like the USA itself, campus life had come to resemble a collective hallucination. A

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simulacrum. An unreality. On the surface, everything appeared normal enough. However, there was an underlying mood. A tone, or vibration: a pervasive affect of denial and displacement. One afternoon, a student in the seminar succinctly captured this sensation: ‘We are the Xanax Generation.’ This occurred during a conversation regarding the nature of late modern control societies, their networked digital circuitry, and the way they organize space, time, and consciousness through our active participation in ubiquitous systems of information, commodification, and surveillance.

To assist our exploration, we were analyzing concepts meant to extend and complicate notions of ideology as a screen, or filter, thought to cloak reality in a veil of unreality, rendering subjects into objects and objects into subjects (i.e., commodity fetishism, reification, and alienation in the Marxist tradition). *Interpassivity*, for instance, describes how ideology manifests in our everyday actions, while simultaneously functioning as a hyperreal form of action, based on pseudo-participation in pseudo-events, such as signing a Facebook petition, hurling insults at neo-fascists and clueless liberals on Twitter, or consuming a meme with an anti-corporate or anti-capitalist message. These modes of subjective action have little or no impact on objective conditions, yet present the illusion of participating in consequential events (Dean 2009). *Cynical rationality* is similar, but with a twist. It is also how ideology saturates our everyday behaviors and practices, but marks how, rather than embodying a state of false consciousness, we are typically fully aware of our own complicity in systems of power and domination (Žižek 2009). For instance, I know full well that I should not buy books on Amazon as it represents an oligopolistic mega-corporation with abhorrent labor practices. I should buy books at a local independent book store. However, paradoxically, my knowledge of Amazon’s greed and exploitation of workers serves to absolve my conscience. I can take an ironic distance to my actions. I am still a good person because I am fully aware of how bad Amazon is. I see through the illusion even while I participate in expanding Amazon’s market dominance. This is cynical rationality. At the other end of the spectrum, Amazon’s megalomaniacal CEO Jeff Bezos investing his billions on space colonization is also representative of cynical rationality. In his words, ‘we are destroying the earth.’¹ Yet, he fantasizes of planetary escape rather than countenance even minor changes to the current grotesque distributions of wealth and power.

Students are often savvier than we give them credit, and interpassivity and cynical rationality are in the air they breathe, and as such, they recognize these stultifying patterns of complicity in late capitalism in the most immediate and intimate of ways. However, particularly for working class students, like the majority of students that were in my seminar, there is very little sense that anything can change, or that they might be the agents of change. Control societies have absorbed opposition through creative and affective means, seizing our desires, dissimulating our protests, and fragmenting our energies. They do not so much render us passive or even depoliticize us (although they do have these

¹ See Catherine Clifford, ‘Jeff Bezos: I spend my billions on space because we are destroying the Earth.’ CNBC, July 18, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/17/why-jeff-bezos-spends-billions-on-space-technology.html>.

impacts as well), as they render us enervated and atomized. Thus, ‘We are the Xanax Generation’ represents more than simply a playful ironic gesture. Rather, it names a deep existential condition of *catastrophic precarity*: an acknowledgement that even with the very real and present danger of planetary extinction in this century, there appears that there is little that can be done to derail the train of history. Things are out of control, the fix is in, and we all know it. Capitalism and technology are immutable. Power is absolute. The proclamation, ‘We are the Xanax Generation,’ is thus an effort to shield the self, while coming to terms with complicity—to numb the spirit as all that is solid melts into air.

Mark Fisher (2009) writes, ‘capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and relics’ (4). This is the Xanax Generation. While youth are persistently sent the message that they need to develop their capacities to become enterprising and innovative twenty-first century global problem solvers, they are in fact being systematically adapted to accept their own nullity. According to Fisher, the idea of *reflexive impotence* internalizes these ideas, stitching them together within an integrative onto-affective vector. It is a negative void, a psycho-social condition of atomized claustrophobia, a malaise on consciousness, particularly afflicting the young and the precarious in late capitalism. *A feeling there is no escape*. It is an ‘unstated worldview’ correlated with ‘widespread pathologies’ (21). Fisher elaborates:

They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it. But that knowledge, that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy ... Many of the teenagers I worked with had mental health problems or learning difficulties. Depression is endemic. It is the condition most dealt with by the National Health Service, and is afflicting people at increasingly younger ages. The number of students who have some variant of dyslexia is astonishing. It is not an exaggeration to say that being a teenager in late capitalist Britain is now close to being reclassified as a sickness. This pathologization already forecloses any possibility of politicization. By privatizing these problems - treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background - any question of social systemic causation is ruled out. (Fisher 2009: 21)

The collapse of the political into the psychological feeds into short-term coping strategies: (1) Dopamine Escapes—video games, pornography, Instagram-ready lifestyle projections (keeping up with the influencers). (2) Therapeutic Liberation—cult of wellness, mindfulness, psychotropic relief (benzos and lorazepam). Reflexive impotence is a state of being marked by *nihilistic churn* (fleeting news cycles, info-saturation, historical amnesia, opportunism, mendacity and lies) along with *grinding stasis* (the prevailing sense that the only thing that really changes is that everything appears to be getting worse). Reflexive impotence is thus *manic activity* (multitasking and micro-dosing) combined with *irrational redundancy* (the promise of online conspiracies like QAnon is that they offer a simulacrum of historical participation, mastery, and control; someday, we can all be the one to raid Comet pizzeria and save the

children!).² Reflexive impotence is *epistemic implosion*: the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that AI algorithms are being trained to transform digital space into a psyop war-zone of manufactured illiteracies.³ Reflexive impotence is the cultural logic of control societies: a banal signpost of societal fatigue and exhaustion. Film and television, for instance, have devolved into an endless mill of computer-generated dullness (Captain America will not save us!) and recycled reboots (recently, I spotted the new Magnum P.I. at a park in Waikiki). Innovations in music are likewise reduced to hip hop and emo hybrids (Lil Peep) or kitsch cowboy-hop crossovers (Lil Nas X). The sound cloud of the Xanax Generation is downtempo and fueled by lean and molly, drugs designed to neutralize consciousness and simulate empathy. Reflexive impotence is too much noise. Virtual sex replaces sex. Nostalgia replaces experimentation.

Within our current predicament, which is especially acute for the young, social powerlessness coincides seamlessly with a proliferation of choice—the freedom to redefine the self, to modulate our identities and lifestyles, to retreat into our chosen reality fields. Freedom becomes a superego injunction to *enjoy*. Personal therapeutic needs that erupt from the overdetermination of anticipatory uncertainty and the privatization of risk, collide with nihilistic resignation. This is not the One-Dimensional Man that Herbert Marcuse (1991) described as the quintessential reified subject of high Fordism. *Power is not hiding behind a veil of illusion*. We gaze on in horror as a neo-fascist security state openly kidnaps migrant children and tosses them into cages. Politics melts into esthetics: MAGA.⁴ Please pass the Xanax! Slavoj Žižek (2019) elaborates:

We live in an extraordinary era in which there is no tradition on which we can base our identity, no frame of meaningful universe which might enable us to lead a life behind hedonistic reproduction. Today's nihilism—the reign of cynical opportunism accompanied by permanent anxiety—legitimizes itself as the liberation from the old constraints: we are free to constantly re-invent our sexual identities, to change not only our job or our professional trajectory but even our innermost subjective features like sexual orientation. However, the scope of freedoms is strictly prescribed by the coordinates of the existing system, and also by the way consumerist freedom effectively functions: the possibility to choose and consume imperceptivity turns into a superego obligation to choose. (Žižek 2019: 4–5)

² QAnon is neo-fascist conspiracy theory prevalent among supporters of Donald Trump in the USA. Part of the conspiracy often referred to as 'pizzagate' postulates that Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party run a ritualistic satanic pedophile ring out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong, a pizzeria in New Jersey. In 2016, a heavily armed man 'raided' the pizzeria and fired off a few rounds from his machine gun with the aim of saving the children. No one was injured.

³ Cambridge Analytica was a company funded by far right-wing donors that harvested personal data, most notably from Facebook, to target populations by micro-targeting specific individuals with social media disinformation to change mass psychology and behavior, such as voting patterns. The company worked on behalf of both Brexit and the Trump campaigns and likely influenced the outcomes of the referendum and the 2016 US election.

⁴ MAGA, or Make America Great Again, is the rallying cry of Trump and the neo-fascist Right in the USA.

Not all forms of reflexive impotence are created equal, of course. There are vast chasms that divide the Xanax Generation. The working-class students at my former institution almost all possessed a sense of social conscience. They also placed a high value on work, learning, and success. Even if they themselves were failing, they dutifully blamed themselves. However, a combination of personal burdens (debt, health problems, family troubles), an infantilizing culture of anti-intellectualism, and prior experiences of abandonment, effectively rendered, for many, their status as college students unworkable in any traditional sense. Many had attended high schools that had left them ill-prepared and alienated from academic reading, study, and conversation. Many held two or three jobs, while taking four or five classes a semester—a feat of time management and personal discipline that few adults would be capable of replicating. Most had been taught that the only purpose of higher education was to enhance future employment, yet, higher education was seen as a risk rather than any guarantee of economic stability (and thus, who could blame them for a cash-for-degree-for-jobs-mentality, when the price tag of even my ‘affordable’ state institution was an economic albatross for them and their families?). Many of these students, particularly first-generation college and racial minority students, drop out, leaving them with debt, but without anything to show for it, except perhaps anger and regret.

Despite a lack of basic familiarity with literature, economics, philosophy, history, civics, and art, students still listen to the Wu Tang Clan and have correctly internalized the basic truth of late capitalism: Cash Rules Everything Around Me. Working class students know the deck is stacked. The system rigged. Futures mortgaged. Owning a home, affording health care, getting married, starting a family—these aspirations do not appear congruent with objective reality. In such a context of alienation and compulsory debt, higher education is rendered a simulation. It becomes Disneyland. Books and articles are assigned. Lectures are given and papers are written. But the underlying reality is the vast majority of students simply do not have the time or inclination to perform the *real* work required, particularly the reading, the essential building block of thought (online forums provide advice to gaming professors and courses with the goal of optimizing time-labor-grade ratios—minimization of effort and maximization of return).

Of course, all of this functions as a kind of Lacanian Big Other: the underlying, unspoken, unspeakable Real underwriting the hegemonic symbolic-order of higher education today. For those who might feel I am exaggerating, let me be clear, I have found that students are eager to render these existential-sociological issues into objects of critical analysis and that they are capable of doing so with wit, empathy, and keen insight. Despite what they are educated to believe, catastrophic precarity is not their fault. Reflexive impotence is artificial and imposed. It has been historically produced. It is not a spontaneous or natural state of being. Furthermore, there are, of course, heroic social movements and struggles being waged by young people across the USA and the world. Moreover, it must be noted that any pedagogy that *unreflexively* suggests the dire problems of the world are up to students to solve, even as they have no responsibility for creating them, is a *neoliberal pedagogy* that collapses into false generosity (i.e., classic Baby Boomer gas lighting). Think of it from a student’s perspective. You are paying the entry fee (essentially a lifetime of debt) for access to a college classroom, a minimum requirement for accessing even the lowest strata of livelihoods, while

concurrently working two or three jobs, with no guarantee of attaining future security, only to be informed by your professor that your generation is responsible for fixing all that ails contemporary life. What might your response be?

With this said, one of the paradoxes often discussed with students and colleagues at my former institution was why students were not more politically active on campus and beyond. This was an era of revived campus protest, Black Lives Matter, and of right-wing hysteria regarding safe spaces, trigger warnings, macroaggressions, intersectionality, free speech and political correctness. From our vantage point, these phenomena might as well have been taking place on a different planet, or at least on campuses worlds away, like Middlebury College that serves youth overwhelmingly from the very top of the class structure. These are young people, regardless of race or ethnicity, who, having attended the most elite K-12 schools, are taught at a young age that they have voice, agency, and power. Taught that the world belongs to them. I once hosted the New York writer and activist Michaela A. Davis in one of my undergraduate sociology classes. She was on campus to give our 2016 Martin Luther King Day speech. During our open-ended conversation, which revolved around issues of race, power, and inequality in Trump's America, she asked the forty or so students in the room, the majority of whom were working class students of color, how many had attended the Women's March after Trump's inauguration. This was the single largest public demonstration in the USA since the 1960s. Ten million participated globally. Not a single hand went up. Many were seemingly unaware a protest had even taken place. She was gobsmacked.

Yet, where the new campus activism has flourished, it is often difficult to detach from the sad passions of reflexive impotence. For instance, safe spaces and Twitter call-out cultures reduce politics to individual psychology, personal branding (woke virtue signaling), and bad faith recrimination against enemies both real and imagined. As those like Judith Butler and Wendy Brown have observed, identity politics is often just liberalism at its worst. It assumes that political veracity coincides with individual experience of ontological injury, and that politics is a matter of personal redress via the state and/or better inclusion into the corporate economy. This is what Brown (1995) refers to as 'wounded attachments' to power that inscribe injury as essentialized identity, fixing injustice as private interest to be ameliorated/regulated through the state as opposed to an individual and collective will to freedom, power and transformation. In other words, rather than emancipation from domination (the freedom to recreate the present state of affairs in relation with others, including state and corporate power), politics is reduced to making claims on the liberal state and/or the corporation (e.g., 'lean in feminism'). 'Centrist' parties such as the Democratic Party in the USA have likewise offered little more than token symbolic gestures of liberal inclusion and diversity, while openly serving oligarchic power.

To be clear here, dismantling the historical, interpersonal, and institutional basis of systemic violence afflicting persons and communities is a crucial imperative. However, we must recognize that late capitalism thrives on incorporation of difference and proliferation of identity-based distinctions. It also produces catastrophic precarity (ontological and ecological crisis) that fuels a desire for stable foundations and a retreat into the protected psyche. Racism, ethnic hatred, homophobia, sexual violence, and misogyny have thrived in this environment. As has

white nationalism and neo-fascism. None of these phenomena can be reduced to capitalism or resolved through a reinvigorated class politics alone. However, pursuing anti-racist, anti-colonial, or anti-sexist projects without a critique of capital, state power, and class power is neoliberal. It either vanishes class altogether and/or wrongly codes the concept of the working-class as white and male. Keenga-Yamahata Taylor (2016) offers some ethico-political clarity:

No serious socialist current in the last hundred years has ever demanded that Black or Latino/a workers put their struggles on the back burner while some other class struggle is waged ... the American working class is female, immigrant, Black, white, Latino/a, and more. Immigrant issues, gender issues, and antiracism *are* working-class issues. (Taylor 2016: 216)

As a crisis of institutions, fragmented individualism, and the devolution of class solidarity into the private navigation of catastrophic precarity become the norm within control societies, the private logics of identity, therapy, and self-help displace class solidarity among workers (there is class solidarity today, of course, it is just among the interests and ideologies of the oligarchs). This is a disaster that plays right into the hands of the neo-fascist right-wing. Racism, xenophobia, scapegoating, and nativism have always been tools to divide working people.

The Xanax Generation swims in these waters. And young people from the elite and professional class are not immune. While given every conceivable advantage in society, they are subjected to the grueling and often sadistic pressures of achievement culture. Elite parents can, of course, buy their children the requisite resume enhancements required to gain entry to elite universities and therefore the symbolic capital and networks required for high status jobs, or they may simply buy admission, as we learned in the recent celebrity admissions scandal in the USA. Importantly, children of the rich participate in cutthroat achievement culture not so much because they must reproduce their economic position (that's what trust funds and inheritance are for), but because the status networks of their families demand elite university pedigrees. Children of the professional managerial class are not as fortunate. Their parents know that the emerging AI-economy will be defined by steroidal competition and the superfluity and disposability of large numbers of workers (Means 2018). Such are the grim metrics of a winner-take-all future. There will be no mercy. It is thus totally unsurprising that suicide rates, eating disorders, depression, and opioid abuse have spread like wildfire among children of the well-to-do.

Self-medicating, resignation, and/or resentment are not going to make catastrophic precarity go away. The earth is melting. While reflexive impotence acutely afflicts the Xanax Generation, I have found that when rendered into an object of analysis, students are eager to think, to read, and to learn. Acknowledging the material and psychological conditions of student life, abstracting from the given set of realities, can indeed help interrupt, or short-circuit the atomized collapse into the hyperreal classroom. The students in my Sociologies of the Future seminar were well aware of many of the issues discussed above. They know interpassivity and cynical rationality quite well. They see it all around them. They certainly schooled me. This was written more by them in some ways. The question becomes where are the pressure points, the gaps in the socio-symbolic order, through which a new collectivity of the young might emerge?

How might we learn to feel, learn, and live differently amid the ruins of control societies? How might we create a culture, a new Real for socialist futures beyond the relics of late capitalism?

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