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ARE OUR DIRECTIONS BECOMING INCREASINGLY SOCIALISED?

Mick Cooper

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'As the century has progressed,' argues Gergen (1991), 'selves have become increasingly populated with the character of others' (p. 71). Here, with the exponential growth of social media and digital forms of communication, it might be argued that we are becoming increasingly bombarded with—and infused by—the directions of others. A 'friend' on Facebook, for instance, posts a picture of their idyllic holiday with their idyllic partner over an idyllic bottle of prosecco; YouTube video shows us endless images of 'perfect' bodies in 'perfect' clothes. And then, of course, there is the infiltration of marketing into every corner of our lives, unconsciously shaping our wants in the most insidious of ways (Fromm, 1942, p. 111). Smail (2005) writes: 'What we *think* should be inside ourselves seems to be a kind of anodyne pastiche of the model of humanity fed us by the advertising industry' (p. 65). Particularly for young people, perhaps, it is no longer possible to reconnect with any genuine, 'intrinsic' desires. Any wanting, any wishing has already been overrun by a thousand competing—and often conflicting—fantasy images of what we should and could be. And, for authors like Irving (Irving & Cannon, 2000) and Cannon (2000), this dominance of cultural values can lead to severe psychological problems.

To make matters worse, it could also be argued that, in our contemporary neoliberal world, we are increasingly bombarded with the narrative that we are free and autonomous: 'Just do it', 'Because you're worth it', 'Dream bigger.' Increasingly, then, the modern human being may live, 'under the illusion that he knows what he wants, while he actually wants what he is *supposed* to want.... We have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willed individuals' (Fromm, 1942, p. 218, emphasis in original).

In our contemporary western world, what may make desires even more chaotic and fragmented is the loss of traditional sources of meaning. May (1953) writes, 'the values and goals which provided a unifying center for previous centuries in the modern period are no longer cogent. We have not yet found the new center which will enable us to choose our goals constructively, and thus to overcome the painful bewilderment and anxiety of not knowing which way to move' (p. 55).

Conversely, however, it could also be argued that the vast array of possibilities available to people in our digital age supports a far greater freedom and opportunity for choice. Here, people can find meanings and purposes that are right for them, rather than being straightjacketed into traditional social roles. Four hundred years ago, for instance, I would have needed to strive for financial security, male authority, and religious piety. Today, I can desire to be a loving father, a budding photographer, a respected film rater, an aspiring folk-indie playlist maker, and so much more. For Gergen (1991), then, if we can properly manage our identity, our contemporary 'multiphrenia' does not need to lead to madness. Rather, life can become 'a candy store for one's developing appetites' (p. 150).

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