

## How *Not* to be a Happy Homosexual

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As he was entering a lift in a New York building, Slavoj Žižek<sup>1</sup> once commented when he saw that there was no thirteenth floor, 'you can't fool god' (Hanlan 2001: 2). This is a neat example of his version of the Lacanian Big Other at play. Everybody knows there is a thirteenth floor but it is called the fourteenth floor—one of the convenient myths we use to keep things in order, so that we don't fall apart.

'A Child is Being Beaten.' Such a statement sends shivers down my spine and in this day and age has a different kind of meaning than it would have had when Freud wrote the paper of which it is the title. Nonetheless, it is with this paper as a backdrop, that I want to explore what it might mean to be a miserable homosexual.

There are three separate moments that this exploration is based upon. Firstly, I was wondering about this kind of compulsion to be happy which seems to have become more and more pervasive over the past decade or so, what that might mean and what it is covering over. Secondly, I was struck by an article Slavoj Žižek wrote about psychoanalysis in which he argued that, far from psychoanalysis being dead, its time has probably arrived in so far as it seems as if it is the only place where one doesn't have to pretend to be happy, the only place where you can actually *be* miserable (Žižek 2006). Thirdly I was given a paper written by Wendy Brown who is a professor of political science at the University of California, entitled, 'The Desire to Be Punished' from her 1991 book *Politics out of History*, which makes a connection between Freud's paper 'A Child is Being Beaten', subject formation and the construction of political identities. It is these three strands that I wish to link together, to explore why it is that a significant number of gay men who pass through my consulting room are thoroughly miserable and unhappy.

According to Wendy Brown:

'A Child is Being Beaten' offers one of Freud's clearest statements of the slippery and perhaps misnamed (as sadism and masochism) configurations of the complex of desire to punish and to be punished, to subordinate and to be subordinated, to deliver and to receive pain. (Brown 2001: 52)

I wouldn't dream of supposing that all homosexuals are miserable or that misery is constitutive of homosexuality itself. However as Freud said, 'satisfied perverts don't tend to seek analysis' (Freud, 1919: 298). I want to explore the place this misery has in the lives of some of my patients, to look at the impact of unacknowledged external social forces and make them meaningful; to build a picture for those who are miserable, or faced with the potential for becoming miserable, of what their misery is a product of or a substitute for—in short, to find its value for the individual.

The play on words in the title of the 1986 book by Terry Sanderson, *How to be a Happy Homosexual*, serves to mark a moment in time where the idea that happiness is what we are all after and that there can be a codified way of getting it, is installed. No doubt the practical and political message in the guidebook served, and might still serve, a very useful purpose, but the promise of happiness—well let's see. I am amused to discover that, such is our preoccupation with happiness, there is a 'world map' of it.

As the analytic social psychologist, Adrian White, has remarked:

The concept of happiness, or satisfaction with life, is currently a major area of research in economics and psychology, most closely associated with new developments in positive psychology. It has also become a feature in the current political discourse in the UK. (White 2007)

And Slavoj Žižek has this to say:

Now that we are bombarded from all sides by the injunction to 'Enjoy' psychoanalysis should perhaps be regarded differently, as the only discourse in which you are allowed *not* to enjoy: not 'not allowed to enjoy; but relieved of the pressure to enjoy.' (Žižek 2006)

It seems that this thing called 'happiness' has become just that, a 'thing', a 'thing' that we can have as long as we do 'the right things'. In the scenario outlined by Adrian White, we can have it if we live in the right part of the world, earn a living, are educated, and possess good health—it's called 'health, wealth and education'.

It is not so much that people want to be happy that bothers me, it's the kind of fakery that surrounds its promulgation and then the attendant distress caused by not being happy once you have got whatever it is you think will make you happy. Indeed, it is at the site of such false hope that I want to pinpoint the blame for our 'miserable' lives. Happiness isn't a commodity that you can buy but it is presented as one and has become part of the Žižekian Big Other, that ordering mythology which says, 'If you do it like this, strive for the right goals, live the right kind of life, then you will be happy.'

In the world of mental health we have Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which is going to make us all happy—from the depressed to the chronic schizophrenic. Just replace positive thought ('things') for bad ones and hey presto—'happiness'.

(Adam Mars Jones once said that Adam Phillips is, 'The closest thing we have to a philosopher of happiness.' One Adam may very well make the other happy, but I doubt if happiness was the name of the game for Adam Phillips. It somehow registers as a 'good thing' to say and equally we somehow assume we know what is meant. The Big Other knows.)

Continuing the story of the Big Other, here is an example of the kind of games we unwittingly play with politeness. If asked, 'How are you?' my automatic response is to say, 'Fine thank you—and you?' without any reference to how I really might be feeling. This is what's called for. It would be regarded as impolite if I were to respond on a sunny day in Islington, 'Well, actually I'm thoroughly depressed; I don't really know why but...'

We have long been steeped in the notion of identity politics.<sup>2</sup> This situation can be construed as emerging from the failure of our Liberal democracy and/or the liberal social order within which we expect to live. More specifically, liberal democracy has spectacularly failed to deliver its promise of equality: one of the symptoms of this failure is the appearance of groups needing to identify the specific nature of their oppression and fight their own corner. The production of identity politics out of this kind of injurious situation is relevant to the picture I want to paint today. I have borrowed Wendy Brown's formula for psychologising political theory and want to see what it would look like if we politicise psychoanalysis and this particular topic along the same lines.

Let's start with Lacan's 'Big Other', as understood by Slavoj Žižek. For Žižek the Big Other is a non-existent entity, a fantasy in which, nonetheless, we all believe or at the very least we act as if this were the case (Žižek, 2006:3). This fantasy serves to provide us with a set of unwritten rules, our communal network of social institutions and our customs and laws. The Big Other is a kind of collective lie to which we all individually subscribe. The discovery for lesbians, gay men, women and people of colour that the liberal world to which they presumed they belonged and to which their allegiance and passion were originally directed, did not in fact hold them in esteem, felt humiliating to them in their need of that same liberal world. A more obvious example is the story of the emperor's new clothes. We all know that the emperor is naked but nonetheless we collude in the fiction that he is wearing new clothes. This is similar to my opening example about the thirteenth floor. However it goes much deeper. Wendy Brown writes:

The modern subject, insofar as our primordial passion is thought to centre on individual license to do what we will, has to be converted to the benefits of being governed and ordered by rules: we have to be persuaded to sacrifice our originary impulse to freedom and self-satisfaction in order to gratify our long-term interests in survival, property and security' (Brown 2001:47)

We are dealing here with a symbolic fiction, a fiction which possesses performative power, the power to inform our actions. It is socially operative and structures the 'reality' in which we participate.

The patients to whom I refer below, no less than all of us, are caught up in this symbolic fiction; yet for them there is something amiss which torments them. There is a life out there that they ought to be living, an aspect of symbolic fiction which they just can't 'get'. This is an imagined life built around their own specific cultural demands but nevertheless, unachievable. There are rules they should be obeying yet they are not doing so. At one and the same time this dilemma is agonising yet, as I hope to demonstrate, also pleasurable. These are the ideas evoked by patients in analysis; however what is immediately presented is, of course, resistance to them. 'If identity formed at the point of injury', writes Wendy Brown 'is identity formed in part out of trauma, then there would also be a certain reassurance, and possible even erotic gratification, in restaging the injury...' (Brown 2001: 55)

These patients seem to be in a constant fight to, 'LIVE MY OWN LIFE', 'DO MY OWN THING'; but they are plagued by someone, something, some other, the Big Other, pulling them back, making them do the 'right thing'. This is what makes them so miserable. This ideal, 'the right thing', is where their love is directed because it is the initial frame of hope and possibility for them as liberal subjects. The rubric of happiness is that one should be free from oppressive forces and your equanimity should afford you the opportunity to live this ideal life. However, it becomes illicit (since the love remains) once the falseness of the founding frame is revealed.

Here are two dramatised versions of a patient's view of himself and his life

*Well, I suppose it's almost like there is an alternative me that never reads a book and never goes to the gym but just eats badly, sits and watches television and doesn't have any friends and I am petrified that that's what I am going to become, so all the time I have to force myself to do things to stop me turning into the alternative me.*

And

*That person who is sitting on my shoulder is telling me, that it's self-indulgent to be doing things on my own. It's either self-indulgent or it's terribly lonely and I should be out there with friends doing things. So to avoid those feelings, I tell myself I am only going to do things if they have got a purpose and are worthwhile and eventually somebody else will see me doing it and commend me. Therefore I can't do something as extravagant as watch television or just do nothing but of course I do and I feel guilty.*

This represents a broken solidarity with himself at the very heart of his desire. The fantasy represents a constraint on his urge for freedom represented by the pursuit or practice of his desire. But then it becomes necessary to repeat the injury and he becomes the one who is beaten—by his own desire

In 1919 Freud wrote a paper entitled 'A Child is Being Beaten'. He was curious as to why a number of his patients, whom he was treating for hysteria and obsessional neurosis, confessed to indulging in the fantasy of a child being beaten. I don't think it is necessary to go into a detailed analysis of this paper. A summary will do at this point. Suffice it to say that Freud gives an account of how masochism develops, how pain can become sexualised and thus ambivalently intolerable, yet desirable. The fantasy has three stages. Firstly, a child is being beaten. The second stage is the thought, 'I am being beaten by my father'; this thought is never made conscious and is only available in analysis. In the third stage, the father, the class of fathers (or the liberal state) becomes a punishing authority.

Wendy Brown summarises his ideas as follows:

The erotic or pleasurable fantasy of 'a child being beaten' begins as a jealous love-fantasy but soon undergoes a combination of repression and regression that turns it in a masochistic and sexual direction. Guilt, overdetermined in its sources, is the mechanism of the turn.

While calling this masochistic moment of the fantasy the most important one (albeit later repressed and generally inaccessible to the conscious mind of the adult analysand), Freud reminds us that it is already engaged in managing another repression: incestuous desire. This masochism which sites its own distress and guilt, generally produces a third phase in which the masochistic desire to be punished as a means of confirming and preserving illicit love is distributed onto others with whom we identify while appearing to passively 'look on'. The third phase seems at first to convert the masochism of the second phase into sadism once again. However, Freud does not argue that such a transformation occurs; rather, this phase operates as an artful cover for an enduring masochistic resolution of illicit love. In fact all the apparently distinctive phases of the fantasy resolve into one familiar Freudian Story: Oedipal conflict is managed by substituting punishment for love and is lived in the form of punishment as love. (Brown 2001: 51)

If we bring this idea into play with political and cultural identities that inform our psychical make-up, then we are looking at kinds of punishment that are not for crimes as such but for the 'social crimes' of being female, of being black, and of being queer in a racist and sexist and homophobic social order that is also very conscious of and has created a sophisticated set of critical thinking about these injustices. Thus, what I am saying applies to all sorts of people in all kinds of ways—not just gay men—but this is where my particular focus is today. What is installed from a very early age amongst some gay men is that they are always 'less than', they are failed heterosexuals, and this

view is transposed into every kind of eventuality, outlook, or interpretation of life events. Ironically, the social order from which our defeat is fashioned is, alas, the very same social order that we hoped would deliver us from our state of worthlessness. Thus the illicit love in Freud's paper can be a love of and for the very institutions/social order/liberal democracy that is supposed to deliver our equanimity.

Brown writes:

The moment at which inequality or subordination is first apprehended is inevitably ambivalent, involving loss on the one hand and a certain relief from a previously unnameable suffering on the other. In the process of politicizing one's identity as a woman, as black, as a lesbian, in the process of losing the world one imagined to be fair, good, and replete with self-affirming recognition, one also comes to know why one has suffered rejection or invisibility and can thus depersonalize, indeed politicize, that suffering. (Brown 2001:55)

My patients seem unable to decouple themselves from their tie to this illicit love, a love for a liberal social order that has failed to deliver them from the pain of oppression. At the same time as this social order is the cause of their pain, they have taken on this pain as evidence that *this* love is still there, is still a possibility. They yearn for justice to be done, for a glimmer of a hope that the social order will eventually deliver. At the same time, this inculcates a double edged guilt, on the one hand a guilty wish for the illicit love of the social order; and on the other guilt at not pursuing other fantasised dreams and hopes of wholeness and completion, usually linked to this same social order through its negation. Even as one rebels against the social order, one is intrinsically tied to its terms. Not least, you can only rebel in the language that oppresses you.

Some patients are almost always miserable, perpetually interpreting everything that happens to them through a notion of complete failure. Everything they think about is a failure. This is a way of beating oneself up. In order to sustain this attack, one has continually to repeat this vicious circle of self-inflicted pain, experienced as psychic trauma in the present. One has to establish that the injury lives. This is how one turns the survival of homophobic oppression into an identity in itself. In the production of political identities, the injury from which they sprang informs the production of ourselves as 'queer', as 'black' or as 'a woman'.

In this era of identity politics there is another standard that is set (a little Big Other if you like). It goes like this: you can be a complete homosexual if you identify yourself as one (hence books with titles like *How to be a Happy Homosexual*). I am a gay man if I say, 'I am a *gay* man'. However this statement implies that you are supposed to meet a certain set of criteria that constitute being 'a *gay* man'. This is of course another ideal, another myth that is, in fact, impossible to attain.

On the one hand, we grow up in a culture which deems homosexuals to be 'failed' men; on the other hand we also grow up in a world where a different group of people disagree—homosexuals are as 'complete' as heterosexuals. Can one simply impose one set of rules, which install one as a heterosexual man, and another set of rules, which say, 'I am a complete man, but *gay*'? Or is the influence of the past much more powerful than we realise, so that the questions for modern life are whether or not we can choose our rules at all. This, it seems to me is what psychoanalysis is really asking, 'Can we choose our rules or not'? Swapping one set of rules for another doesn't resolve the problem, which is, 'I'm *still* miserable'.

Identity politics is a failed attempt at providing the conceptual frame for the creation of idealised life. What identity politics suggests, is that you don't have to believe all the myths, you don't have to take on in a self-hating way, all the oppression; you can say, 'I am a gay man and I am proud of it and I am still just as much a man as anybody else'. This is the identity I want to wear, but unfortunately, this ends up just like another commodity. We have lots of kinds of soap powder; we have all sorts of identities.

Patients who are wedded to this myth, that there is a perfect place to be, a code or schema that says they should be doing certain things, beat themselves up because these kinds of patients feel that they cannot deliver. Here is an example from a patient who rarely complains about the timing of his sessions:

*He is finding the timing of our sessions a bit of a problem. (Where I live is between where he lives and his work.) He complains that he can't leave work before six o'clock, because nobody leaves before six. Nobody has ever said that he can't leave before six, but nobody seems to and he has only just started and he is finding his way. So he gets home and just sits down for half an hour and then he's got to get up and come out to therapy again and if it was an hour earlier it would be much better etc, etc.*

All this is fair enough but it was odd to hear him say this because he doesn't say things like this generally. The patient's story continues:

*He is getting really anxious about, this 'other Steven' over there who, if he did all these things,(in this particular case he has been going to rock climbing classes for years with two friends and now has become obsessed with extending it to outdoor climbing and mountaineering. He has bought mountaineering books, studied them obsessively and he gets anxious because, if he isn't climbing Mount Everest he's not 'complete'. He imagines that there is this 'other Steven' over there somewhere who will be 'complete' if he does x, y, and z; but he finds that when it comes to Friday, he dreads the weekend because he spends all his weekend saying 'I should be doing this, and I should be doing that, and it's sunny this weekend. Why can't I just go and sit in the park and read a book? He can't because he gets so anxious about all the things that he should be doing.*

*Then he would say 'Look at me, I haven't achieved anything. Has all my life come to this? I was skinny as a boy so I wasn't man enough. I went to Cambridge and I shouldn't have been there; everybody thought I shouldn't have been there; I haven't achieved anything, and I have my own flat and I don't like it and I can't take anybody there because I am ashamed of it. I have achieved nothing.'*

In this brief example I could see that the timing of the sessions represented yet another way in which he had to fail. I was this punishing authority that was making him suffer.

*He is saying this because he wants to be a man, not a macho man, but a man and doing these things, such as completing an art history course that he has been interested in. That would make him a man. But he can never do it because he's so anxious about it. It is always over there, where there is this 'other Steven' that he's trying to get to, a phantastical place called 'the perfect man'.*

To me this is a clear example of beating oneself up, just like the child in 'A Child is Being Beaten'. It is as if he has recruited these ideas in order to humiliate himself. The project seems to be about feeling a failure and finding standards that he can continually fail to reach. Later he went on:

*It all started with us being a failed family, a mutated family from the time of my father leaving. From that moment on, my mother reiterated that we were spoiled goods. This is her family myth. If only my father had been there, I would have been fine'.*

Whichever way you look at this scenario, this man has taken up the family mode of being and also transposed this view of life onto what he perceives as the established social order. Not only has he taken on the punishing dynamic of the family, he has also taken up the punishing liberal state thereby ensuring that it still exists. Thus, on the one hand he identifies with his mother, but on the other he is identified with the father or rather, the mother's version of the father. The father has left, he's a failure; he doesn't do the right thing. The kind of self-reflexivity permitted in psychoanalysis can sometimes seem empty. For this particular patient, the question becomes this, 'That's all very well, but how can I stop it?' Of course it is all very well to say, 'step outside of it' or 'uncouple yourself from that to which you are so bound.' Put simply, this is a way out of such a dilemma, involving leaving one's mother/liberal state/ and at the same acknowledging the fact that you have a real craving for a mother/ a just liberal state. For this patient at least, it seems as if the only way to protest is through failure. The only access to freedom is through failure. Ironically, one perversely adapts yet still plays within the parameters of the game.

I see examples of the above in many gay men. They all have a version of 'not being quite right'. Here is another quotation from Wendy Brown who puts it better:

However of importance here is not only the 'easily offended' nature of this personality formation but also the way in which being offended stands for being punished—the 'offence' activates 'the imagined situation of being beaten by[the loved object]' and thus provide reassurance that the illicit and problematic object of desire is present.

In short, reliving a certain punishing recognition reassures us not only of our own place (identity) but also of the presence of the order out of which that identity was forged and to which we remain perversely beholden. (Brown 2001:59)

Psychoanalysis is about the individual's capacity to improvise. Identity formation is based on a need to keep the place of the liberal social world as a love object: even if the so-called 'liberal social world' has fallen from grace, its love is still desired despite the pain it produces. The patients that I am talking about want this relationship, want their attachment to the liberal state, which they want to love them and look after them and they believe in this relationship as an ideal. In order to keep this fantasy alive, one has to experience the punishing state as a loving state at the same time. 'When I am being punished, I am also being loved.' The patient to whom I have referred is always in a place of being punished either by himself, by his mother, by the work place or by his friends.

One of the ways out of this kind of dilemma is to find a way of uncoupling oneself completely from that which imposes these rules and regulations upon you. If you can step outside of them then, you can find a place of autonomy where you don't have to be made miserable by them. You can know their deficiencies as such if you want to involve yourself in these rules and regulations. However, they are not going to cloud your every move. Can you imagine a situation where your best friend, who has just listened to your most intractable problem and says, 'Just get over it': well, just getting over it is never

enough. It might be more than enough to say, 'This vision of my life is crippling me; how do I shift my daily thinking from what my mother would do to what I want?' Well, one way of uncoupling oneself would be to recognise that you are not your mother's dream and she can just fuck off. Being able to realise that as a possibility is a way of uncoupling, as with rolling stock.

What is interesting for me in the consulting room is the radical nature of psychoanalysis. You can enable somebody to think differently about what their possibilities are when they feel trapped in a series of impossibilities that don't feel helpful to them. You are able to open that door for somebody and think about what different relationships there might be to the liberal social order. Psychoanalysis can be the catalyst which enables the patient be more ingenious in his engagement with the Big Other. Should psychoanalysis also be the vehicle to find a way of facilitating a mourning of the Big Other?

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj \_i\_ek, for those who don't know, is a Slovenian theorist, philosopher, and cultural critic, who interprets almost everything he sets eyes on through a Lacanian lens.

<sup>2</sup> A conference entitled 'Homosexuality: Why Psychoanalysis?' bears witness to this idea.