

Singing gently to my soul: on youth alienation and precarity under late capitalism

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Published: 2024-11-04

Dear friends,

What the heck do I have in store for you today? Well naturally I have been enjoying pop music and thinking about the “climate” that the youth of today are experiencing. Okay, so, I can’t exactly claim to be vibin’ with the zeitgeist but I can give you a copy-paste of some song lyrics:

They say these are the golden years

But I wish I could disappear

Ego crush is so severe

God, it's brutal out here

Let’s go hard, or go home, straight out of the gate. The contradictions of youth culture under capitalism present themselves starkly in the simultaneous valorisation and exploitation of “youth rebellion” . Just think about popular (youth) culture. What begins as authentic resistance [1] –in music, art, fashion, or digital spaces –is rapidly co-opted by capital and transformed into commodified aesthetic facsimiles stripped of transformative potential. You only wanted to participate in consumption, right? The process is depressingly predictable: genuine expressions of alienation and resistance emerge from young people’s lived experience of capitalism’s brutality. As quickly as they are ideated, they are sanitised, packaged, and sold back by corporations that profit from the discontent. From punk to hip-hop to digital countercultures, capital demonstrates an remarkable ability to hollow out youth movements and render them safe for consumption. Amazing. This also dovetails with our previous discussions of mental health and wellbeing, where commodified versions of self-care leap into frame to obscure any authentic sense of wellness [2].

As we know, commodification of revolutionary thought serves a dual purpose for the capitalists. First, it neutralises genuine resistance by redirecting revolutionary energy into consumerist channels –indeed, why organise when you can buy a mass-produced sweat-shop t-shirt with a hot slogan on? Second, it creates new markets and opportunities for profit extraction from the very demographic most likely to challenge capitalist hegemony. Don’t you hate the built-in anti-revolutionary spirit our society has cultivated? With this spirit, young people’s natural inclination toward rebellion and reimagining social relations becomes nothing more than another vector for accumulation. Rebel, reintegrate, retain, reform, “you’ll vote for the Liberals when you get older and are sensible” . What a joke of a narrative. Except it’s worse, because as those who may have been rebellious reach stardom –and clusters of other characteristics come with the territory, here –they become the very oppressor and commodifier they sought to destroy with music, art, and restive communications. The marketing department works overtime, because the expropriation is being done by the counter-culture to itself. Capitalism’s predatory nature so infects our ontological perceptions that this predatory, vicious, and anti-human behaviour is completely rationalised. Even in those who believe they are “changing the world” –rather, lateral violence, peer-aggression and other treachery emerge. And yet, capitalism remains utterly indifferent, as it continues to grow like a cancer identifying movements, gutting them, and capitalising on each new expression of discontent. Forever forestalled from developing into something threatening to the hegemony [3].

From this twisted epistemology, a range of psychological (or, I suppose, epistemological)

responses emerge. From the ruling class's increased interest in employing bona fide psychopaths, to the role of social media in manufacturing vapid narcissists, there's a capitalist benefit to personality disorders that make treating psychological issues much less interesting for the corporate bottom line. But this isn't the only expression of despair and exhaustion at capital. Indeed, the psychological toll capitalism has manifest in an epidemic of anxiety and alienation. This is particularly acute among younger generations facing unprecedented precarity in their material conditions –and straight from the mouths of my 19-something-year-old students, this is a real fear. And it is far from accidental –the very mechanisms of capital depend upon maintaining a permanent state of insecurity and atomisation among the working class. In particular amongst younger people, to manufacture fear, division, distress and disengagement –this, again, forestalls revolutionary potential. And in answer to this, every aspect of life has become commodified and subject to market logic. Capitalist ontology strikes again. Even our most basic needs become sources of constant stress. Housing insecurity, crushing student debt, gig work, and the collapse of traditional career paths create a perfect storm of psychological warfare against (young) workers. I still, though my students laugh, consider myself one of those.

Importantly, the growing use of psychological warfare against the working class to continually manufacture divisions, social disorders, and anxiety and fatigue *is* relatively novel, at least in the historical materialist sense. Some recent psychological research demonstrates how precarity and exploitation create “the privatisation of stress” –where systemic issues manifest as individual mental health crises [4]. Studies consistently show rising rates of anxiety and depression among young people [5], with researchers highlighting how economic instability and the gig economy create persistent psychological strain [6].

Rodrigo's lyrics (circling back, lol) capture this contradiction –the simultaneous pressure to be grateful for youth while that very youth is being commodified and exploited. The line “who am I if not exploited?” reflects a devastating awareness of how capitalism shapes identity formation itself. If we consider that capitalism so fundamentally shapes how we think, who we are, and what we are able to become (i.e., privilege) we start to see identity development as intrinsically connected to the conditions of the market (at least amongst the working class), where stable identity formation is systematically undermined by market demands for constant reinvention and “flexibility”. Theorisations about identity precarity abound [7], but ultimately these new economic challenges manufactured to ensure the working-class keeps fighting each other, rather than for liberation, trigger significant developmental difficulties in creating coherent self-narratives amid constant economic instability –this is both a good and bad thing. Identity tied to values rather than production –win. Identity tied to instability, grief, fear and doubt –loss. And that's the chasm we stand over particularly as new generations enter the “workforce” and are exploited, fucked over, and manipulated by despots, sociopaths and narcissists top to bottom.

The commodification of youth mental health itself represents yet another dimension of this exploitation. The same system that creates mass anxiety and depression then profits from selling individualised “solutions”. As we've discussed previously on mind reader, therapy apps, wellness products, and self-help guides that frame structural violence as personal failing –all this delusionally peddled as “we can think ourselves out of materially-created distress”. Meanwhile, genuine collective responses to psychological suffering are undermined by the continued reinforcement of atomisation that creates the crisis. The isolation that Rodrigo captures: “I don't stick up for myself” becomes both symptom and perpetuating factor of capitalism's psychological warfare. Maybe I'm giving Olivia's words a little too much meaning. Okay, let's zoom out a bit.

The neoliberal imperative to continually reinvent oneself as an entrepreneurial subject, to treat one's identity as a product to be optimised and marketed, only deepens this alienation. How many times have you been told in a seminar by an over-paid under-qualified marketing

“guru” that you need to “build your personal brand”? Yet any acknowledgement of privilege, cultural capital, disability, and so on –i.e., the material basis for any stable sense of self –is systematically undermined. The ever proliferating bullshit jobs, meaningless bureaucratic labour, and psychological torture exacted upon us only ever serves to further separate workers from any sense of genuine purpose or connection to our work. Meanwhile, the atomisation of society and erosion of collective institutions (publics) leaves us to face these struggles in isolation, each person expected to bootstrap their way out of systemic problems through individual effort and “resilience”. Sweet –but we haven’t even arrived at the gnarliest end of this.

Perhaps capital’s greatest ideological victory has been convincing us that systemic problems require individual solutions. The self-help industry, wellness culture, and various forms of “lifestyle activism” perpetuate the fantasy that we can individually optimise, mindset-shift, or purchase our way out of capitalism’s contradictions. And people vehemently believe this –to their very core, the fact they’ve never tried illustrates the contradictory nature of this bullshit. All this does is enable militant individualist thinking, particularly on the part of the middle manager –forever suggesting a “wellness retreat” to their burnt out staff, while they manipulate, psychologically torment, and otherwise screw over their employees all while ignoring their conditions –I don’t know any worker with the expendable capital to purchase a wellness package, let alone get approval to attend such a retreat. Naturally, psychopathic middle management are more than adequately remunerated for such farcical “healing”, but can’t recognise their own twisted psychological issues in the first place. Of course this then culminates in the redirection of potentially revolutionary energy into an endless cycle of personal development and consumption that poses no threat to existing power relations. Hegemony protects its own. The very notion of personal success under capitalism has been constructed in opposition to collective liberation –we are taught to view others’ advancement as competition rather than solidarity.

This individualist framework obscures the fundamental truth that no amount of personal optimisation can resolve contradictions deliberately foundational to the economic system itself. The economic system to which we are collectively, the 99% of us, literally slaves. A worker cannot mindfulness-meditate their way out of exploitation, nor can ethical consumption choices address the fundamental unsustainability of capitalist production. The promise of individual solutions serves as a pressure release valve, allowing people to feel they are “doing something” while leaving structural power relations untouched. Real transformation requires collective struggle and the development of class consciousness –precisely what individualist ideology works to prevent. The path to liberation cannot be walked alone –but they’ll happily tell you it can, because the “middle class’s” demented existence is just amplifying and redistributing their own pain onto others around them. What a cool group of people.

I honestly don’t even have solutions thinking today. I’m just constantly struck by how utterly demented and dehumanising “work” is in 2024. How have we not progressed past this, folks? Has everyone just been asleep at the wheel?

In *real* solidarity,

Aidan

-
1. <https://mndrdr.org/2024/assimilation-and-rebellion>
 2. <https://mndrdr.org/2024/on-burnout>
 3. Gramsci, A. (2007). Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Trans.; Reprinted). Lawrence and Wishart.

4. Fisher, M. (2011). The privatisation of stress. *Soundings*, 48(48), 123–133. <https://doi.org/10.3898/136266211797146882>
5. though this is often blamed on “technology” nebulously: Twenge, J. M. (2020). Why increases in adolescent depression may be linked to the technological environment. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 32, 89–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.06.036>
6. Petriglieri, G., Ashford, S. J., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2019). Agony and ecstasy in the gig economy: Cultivating holding environments for precarious and personalized work identities. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 64(1), 124–170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839218759646>
7. c.f. Hancock, P., & Tyler, M. (2025). Precarity, identity, and the meaning of cultural and creative work. In P. Hancock & M. Tyler (Eds.), *Performing Artists and Precarity: Work in the Contemporary Entertainment Industries* (pp. 83–95). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66119-8_7; Nelson, J. (2018). Identity performativity and precarity. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(14), 1522–1523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1461395>; Pichler, S., Kohli, C., & Granitz, N. (2021). DITTO for Gen Z: A framework for leveraging the uniqueness of the new generation. *Business Horizons*, 64(5), 599–610. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.02.021>