

Book Reviews



Edited by **Manu Bazzano**, Book Reviews Editor

Happy-Clappy Economics

Thrive: The Power of Evidence-based Psychological Therapies

By: Richard Layard and David M. Clark
Allen Lane, London, 2014, 374 pp
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Reviewed by: Manu Bazzano

Once upon a time, humanity lived in profound ignorance. People didn't have the faintest idea about mental health. Consequently, they wasted their precious time, energy and money in credulous pursuits. For years on end they would talk about their childhood – of how Mum & Dad, with all their best intentions, thoroughly fucked them up. Lying on a couch or sitting opposite their therapist, they nattered on about their dreams and nightmares, their relationships with partners, friends and colleagues. They would harp on and on about their feelings and emotions – how they perceived the world and their own place in it. They were truly obstinate: they wanted to explore, describe and clarify, but this only made matters worse. They did peculiar things, such as talking about what was happening in the counselling room, in the hope of shedding light, so they said, on their pains, dramas and dilemmas. They were exceedingly fond of picturesque notions: transference, archetypes, edge of awareness, the unconscious, relational field, free association, felt sense, embodiment, attachment, congruence and similarly quaint and archaic ideas. They said they wanted 'emancipation' and hankered for 'meaning', whatever they meant by these vague words. They clamoured for renewal, transformation and (let's face it) an easy way out of an existence they petulantly saw as stultified by their professional duties. They even claimed, borrowing from obsolete socialist phraseology, that they

had been made spiritually bankrupt by social degradation, poverty and squalor. On and on they went. Predictably, things went from bad to worse. Psychological theories got more flowery, more cerebral (and awfully un-scientific). Yet the people's misery increased. A deep sadness fell on planet Earth.

Then one day, sometime in the 1950s, something began to stir on the distant horizon. A faint but propitious ray of hope: mental health began to be considered *scientifically*. It was about time! Until then, as Layard & Clark buoyantly assert, 'there were no scientifically validated treatments for mental illness' (p. 8). Those first auspicious stirrings did not flourish, however, until the 1960s and 1970s, when something truly numinous happened, the equivalent of which has very little comparison in the history of our glorious and twisted species.

For what felt like an eternity, a mighty thunderstorm cleansed the ether, freeing the minds and hearts of Earth-dwellers of all medieval dregs and irrational froth. Then, as the sky cleared, in the glorious sunset three blazing letters appeared, one by one. The first letter was C. The second was B. And the third was T. Millions of sufferers across the globe kneeled in silent gratitude. And when the final meaning of the Event became clear, the people in the North and the South, the people in the East and the West, rejoiced. They joined hands and gave thanks to the bearers of Glad Rationalist Tidings, the very blossom of the Enlightenment. No more depression! No more personality disorders! No more agoraphobia or suicidal ideation! The end of human suffering was near, for this time truly scientific psychologists, moved by tremendous compassion for humanity, had found a name and a formula for happiness, which would make happy workers of us all.

That name was CBT, which Layard & Clark see as the only truly scientific orientation in psychology: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. It did not matter in the least that many CBT practitioners claimed humility, integrity and wholeheartedly acknowledged the validity of other approaches alongside theirs. It did not matter that they were willing to work with colleagues from other orientations

as well, and test the validity of their approach in their everyday practice. Tough times require tough measures. And if tough measures are seen by critics as pig-headed, that's because these critics do not grasp the magnitude of the task Layard & Clark have embarked upon.

Never mind the critics: the first battle against the forces of obscurantism had been won. Yet a mighty struggle lay ahead: people were still unhappy; people still suffered. They felt bad, and they let Layard & Clark know of their suffering: they wrote heart-felt letters and emails about their sleepless nights; they conveyed their melancholy and their low moods at posh dinner parties. Could they not do *something*? Were they not willing to step forward and answer to the heart-felt call of a suffering humanity? Wasn't there something good, something solid and scientific out there?

Layard & Clark were deeply moved by the people's plight, and even more so by their own sense of timely historical consequence. They listened attentively to the people's complaints, before committing their momentous struggle to print. They did so in the writing style of an obliging twelve year old, for the message was of great significance and it could not afford nuances, intricacies, and certainly none of the mind-boggling pseudo-profundity of much psychoanalytic and humanistic jargon. Didn't all the prophets of mankind speak simply? Moreover, people are mostly simpletons, so you need to speak to them in the language of a simpleton. 'Extremely easy and pleasurable to read. It is the most comprehensive, humane and generous study of mental illness I've come across', coos Melvyn Bragg in the back-cover blurb.

The people were right, Layard & Clark reflected. The people demanded to be happy. Above all, they demanded to go back to work. They were so eager to set their depression aside and with a spring in their step contribute to an economy entirely geared for the privileges of the pampered elite. The people wanted to do their bit for the country, and Layard & Clark would make damn sure it would happen.

What, exactly, was the people's problem? Moved by this deep question, singled out by their unique vocation, Layard & Clark ('the Dream Team of British Social Science', according to another blurb on the back cover) were ready for action: 'One of us is an economist and the other a clinical psychologist. We met ten years ago and at once began discussing one of the great injustices of our time.' (p. ix) You have to admit it: only a chosen few are endowed with that mighty sense of calling. In duly answering that calling, they do so without beating around the bush. You

won't find in them any of that psychoanalytic, archaic soul-wrenching self-doubt nonsense, nor any of that humanistic self-effacing, wimpy false modesty. Think of founders of religion, of great statesmen, of groundbreaking artists and inventors. They simply do what needs to be done. Think of Tony Blair, a man thanks to whom Layard became *Lord* Layard, appointed by the notorious warmonger and permanently tanned former prime-minister as 'Happiness Tsar' in support of New Labour's IAPT programme, a programme Layard supported because depression and mental distress are so damned expensive and inefficient, are they not?

It must be frustrating to an economist such as Layard to see that people under late capitalism feel a malaise, a deep hunger that remains dissatisfied, no matter how many doughnuts you throw in their direction. To be sure, the very task of the market is to maintain consumers in a state of continuous dissatisfaction. It's just that (after a series of financial crises provoked by the elite's covetousness and the taxpayer's subsequent bailout of banksters), the level of dissatisfaction has reached very high levels indeed. The people whom Layard & Clark are so munificently willing to educate are not happy. Many of them are depressed. And what is depression, this iconic malaise of our age, if not, amongst other things, *weariness of the self*, and the refusal to dance merrily to the happy-clappy tunes of neo-liberalism? And what, if anything, will help people overcome their chronic weariness? In the early, innocent Weberian days of the market, it used to be 'rest and recuperation'. Now, it's 'back to work after six CBT sessions'. No one can deny the fact that Layard & Clark have expertly captured the *Zeitgeist* – whether by intellectual acumen or perhaps because they have been feted by other benefactors of humankind such as Blair, Sarkozy and Cameron.

The authors are worthy candidates to the post of Last Man's preservers and embalmers. Allow me to explain: we have perhaps reached what Nietzsche envisioned as the inevitable course of Western civilization, the stage of what he called the Last Man, or the last human being – a droopy individual entirely devoid of great passion and involvement; devoid of vision, merely seeking security, comfort and a stupid and stupefied 'happiness' – a being whose only religion is *work*. In a world devoid of values, work has become our religion. Weber's Protestant ethic needs an update, and Layard & Clark provide useful footnotes. And so does Britney Spears, whose latest hit is 'Work, Bitch', and it goes something like this: 'You wanna Lamborghini/Sip Martinis/Look hot in a bikini?/You better work, bitch/You wanna live fancy/Live in a big mansion/Party in France?/'

You better work, bitch.' That's what you'd expect from a singer, the anagram of whose name is *Presbyterians*. And she's not alone: there is a new wave of motivational work music that uses the rhythms and timbres of rave, techno and ambient (far more imaginative forms, if you ask me), but this time as a soundtrack to a new aggressive work culture that alternates speed, amphetamine salts and great consumption of alcohol to work round the clock in places such as the financial City.

Motivational work music uses the template of rave music in the same manner, perhaps, as Layard & Clark utilize a therapeutic template originally devised for human emancipation. Layard & Clark re-brand 'the psychological therapies' in the service of regimentation, and in so doing they end up misconstruing CBT by presenting it reductively (mainly drawing on Beck and Wolpe) and dogmatically (as the only game in town). Do all CBT practitioners feel that way? Early in my career I worked beside a CBT practitioner at the Priory Hospital. He was competent, humane and deeply committed. I learned a great deal from him. He never said, or remotely implied, that CBT was a superior form of therapy, like Layard & Clark assert, passing on their advice to government bodies in a language that people in power understand: simple, driven by economics, hot on factoids and obsessed with targets, quantifiable measurements and targets – all in the name of 'happiness'.

For work is apparently what keeps people happy. What kind of work, Layard & Clark do not care to say. No distinction is drawn between alienated work and creative endeavour. No mention, god forbid, of class divide. No discussion, in their simplistic appeals to 'happiness', between *eudaimonic* and *hedonic* 'happiness'. The happiness they so eagerly promote is the hedonic gratification that leaves us wanting more and becoming more enslaved in cheap consumerism: a doughnut now and then, followed by a 6-week CBT programme to deal with the frustration any intelligent individual is bound to feel. And, to top it all, a blessing from the Buddha who, in Layard & Clark's version, eerily appears as an ancient edition of Aaron Beck, with both of them suggesting one aim for common folk like you and me: 'to achieve control over your thoughts, and in this way achieve control over your life' (p. 121).

The type of unhappiness the authors appear to combat is, at closer scrutiny, breakdown of consumer choice. The best thing the Buddha did, the authors tell us with the straight face with which all leaders of humankind are endowed, is having developed Mindfulness, 'one of the oldest forms of psychological practice' which miraculously

'increases the grey matter in the brain areas critical for learning and the regulation of emotion' (p. 231). This brought to mind an interesting project recently undertaken by a Buddhist writer, a compilation of what the Buddha did *not* say, a list of quotes various peddlers love to attribute to the unsuspecting Gautama Siddhartha in order to supply their products with a halo.

There is another name for Nietzsche's 'Last Man': *homo psycho-economicus*, an unco-operative individual whose only concern is to be happy. By pursuing his ever-elusive happiness, he maintains the foundations of an economy based on instant gratification, false needs and disregard for the ills that befalls its fellows. Layard & Clark provide this new type of human being with enough psychological signposting to keep him going for a while longer — until the next economic crisis. ⑤

A Philosopher Who Is Willing to Observe

The Child as Natural Phenomenologist: Primal and Primary Experience in Merleau-Ponty's Psychology

By: Talia Welsh

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Reviewed by: Richard House

...Merleau-Ponty's psychology is... a compelling and unique account of the human condition.

(Talia Welsh, p. xiv)

...perhaps accurate theorizing is not a hallmark of normal human interaction. Something much more primary and less intellectual underlies the natural connections we form with others.

(Welsh, p. 98)