



Book review:

Cederström, C. & Spicer, A. (2015). *The Wellness Syndrome*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

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The book *The Wellness Syndrome* focuses on “wellness as a moral imperative” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 4). The authors build on Alenka Zupančič’s use of the term “biomorality” based on the axiom that “a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person” (Zupancic, 2008, quoted in Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 5). Presented as the “moral demand to be happy and healthy” (Cederström & Spicer 2015, p. 5), the concept of “biomorality” is also mentioned by Slavoj Žižek in relation to the “super-ego injunction to enjoy” (Žižek, 2008, quoted in Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 5). The authors’ hypothesis is that wellness has become a moral obligation rather than a choice. When the drive to be healthy, happy and flexible becomes an imperative command in a society, then we are confronted with the paradox of the wellness syndrome. On the one hand, we are confronted with an idea of actively choosing to pursue health and happiness beyond external conditions as free individuals and autonomous beings who strive towards self-improvement and are “able to choose [t]he[i]r own fate” (Cederström & Spicer 2015, p. 6). On the other hand, the wellness mantra takes the form of a moral imperative, a command that does not leave any room to personal choice. It is this ambiguity between choice, chance and command that characterises the quest for wellness and generates the worst symptoms in modern citizens: an overwhelming sense of responsibility, anxiety, self-blame and guilt.

Each book chapter reveals different facets of the fundamental ambiguity and paradox within the social trends that actualise the wellness command: the individual responsibility for self-optimisation (Chapter One), for being healthy (Chapter Two), for being happy (Chapter Three), for changing life (Chapter Four) and finally, attempts to resist the wellness syndrome

(Chapter Five). Each chapter focuses on one of these aspects and poignantly analyses ambiguities in rhetoric and practices around wellness, offering a wealth of examples and ultimately showing their dark side and shallowness.

Chapter one describes the “perfect wo/man of now” as portrayed in commercial and corporate rhetoric and analyses the business around the quest towards self-optimisation. The growing offer of life coaching consultants and self-help programmes share the idea that there is an inner self whose potential needs to be unlocked. Single individuals bear this responsibility (“wellness is a choice –my choice”, Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 13) and this pushes the “anxiety back onto the individual” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 14). This culture of self-optimisation seems very much embraced by the Silicon Valley corporate culture offering mindfulness courses to their employees as well as recreational activities within the workspace. Building on Boltanski and Chiapello’s work (2007), the authors suggest that these flexible working spaces in a seamless relation with daily life are a quintessential representation of the new spirit of capitalism. In opposition with the alienated workers of the Fordist era, the wo/men of now live in a “fluid work-home hybrid” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 18).

Corporate wellness programmes are further discussed in *chapter two*, as one of the trends that champion the “healthist” philosophy according to which “better equals healthier”. Corporate wellness programmes promote a “work-out ethics” through bicycle - or treadmill - desks and walking meetings. The authors argue that also these initiatives – aiming at blurring the boundaries between leisure and labour, work and self-care – are not about making the workspace better, but about making the employee more productive. Food-centric health initiatives as fasting and dieting gurus and programmes (like Adam-and-Eve-inspired frutarianism, the Palaeolithic diet or the biblical “Daniel Plan”) are another item in the contemporary “health bazar”. While preaching a return to a more authentic lifestyle these programmes propose ways to exercise control and regulation on our bodies. The increasingly frequent TV shows displaying fat and lower classes people, often on benefits (the so called “chavs” and “chavettes”, the British acronym for “council housing and vulgar”) seem to the authors an easy way to escape the inevitable guilt that rises from the incapacity to live up to the dieting regimen. As Hancock (2004) points out, these shows promote a “politics of disgust” as they provoke a “judgement from the gut” when the viewer is exposed to the way the fat and lazy chav eats, drinks, dresses and has sex (referred in Cederström & Spicer 2015, p. 59). This moralising attitude releases the middle-class viewer from the sense of guilt for missing their spinning class while satisfying their need to reform the lower class unhealthy lifestyle. But this also means that some social issues are removed from the remit of politics: if there is Jamie

Oliver who is teaching low class British children how to eat through his educational programmes, then there is no need for political intervention.

Chapter three is a critical reflection on the quest for authentic happiness, which underlies many discourses on wellness. In particular it focuses on Martin Seligman's positive psychology (2002) whose "quest for true authentic happiness" falls according to Ehrenreich "under the remits of the individual's action" and mixes in this way the magical, Hindus, naturist thinking with "the insistence on personal responsibility of Calvinist religion" (Ehrenreich, 2009, quoted in Cederström & Spicer 2015, p. 64). The authors show the paradox of happiness in the age of biomorality: on the one hand, happiness gurus focus on the use of will power to change attitude, thus calling into play personal responsibility; on the other hand, the choice of the individual is limited to one form of truly authentic happiness, that is moderate, mindful and balance. The lack of scientific evidence of positive psychology has not stopped Prime Minister David Cameron to use its framework to justify a national happiness survey in 2012. Such initiative, according to the authors, legitimise cuts to welfare state based on the idea that proactive people should themselves change their own situation and hold an entrepreneurial spirit rather than relying on governmental help.

Positive thinking and self-help philosophy is also evidently playing a role in the discourses and practices around "employability". This is discussed in *chapter four*, where Tony Blair's New Bill and Bill Clinton's New Welfare Reform Bill are presented as a legitimation of a system in which the individual is considered as responsible of her employability. Malleability, adaptability and proactivity are the characteristics expected by the new employee in this capitalistic age. Unemployed people during counselling courses learn that "if I can't find a job is because of me" and not because of "external obstacles, such as the bleak labour market" (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 96). The increasing flexibility of labour relationship produces a sense of vulnerability in individuals. Such uncertainty, however, "is combined with an ethos of self-actualization, self-development, self-growth and self-help" (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 99). In a similar fashion, members of the quantified self-movement, continuously engaging in practices of self-measurement, seem to be driven by a logic of productivity according to which you are a product that needs to be continuously upgraded.

Chapter five describes some attempts to resist the wellness command. If illness has often been romanticised as a form of "escapisms from real life" now, it is often considered as the only "good" reason that allows us to be lazy and not to be productive. While this still mirrors a faith in the "listen to your body" mantra, typical of the wellness syndrome, more poignant forms of resistance are offered by the "fat acceptance movement" and the "bug-chasers" (gay men

having unprotected sex to be infected with HIV) that publicly reject the mainstream idea of wellness and propose examples of communities that tie together around different values.

With the goal of describing the dark side of wellness the authors show how its drivers, despite the reference to New Age, Buddhist and oriental cultures, are not as alien as they seem to a Western capitalist culture, on the contrary they reinforce it. Cederström and Spicer' argument is that the "corporal obsession" for healthy, well-fed, exercised, balanced bodies goes beyond the realm of wellness and medicine, entering the domain of the labour market and corporate organisational principles, under the principle that "healthy bodies are productive bodies" (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 4). This appears for example in the fact that wellness is not about enjoyment and fun but about moderate pleasure, balanced wellbeing, healthy eating and exercising, mindfulness. Wellness is maximised through mundane activity, not too much of anything, but routinary small tasks. As the authors remark, this is very different from what Zadie Smith (2013) refers as "joy", an extreme feeling an "admixture of terror, pain, and delight" and that cannot be included in a person's life in large quantity: falling in love, being a parent, experiencing the effects of some drugs. Mundane, boring pleasures, not extreme terrific moments of joy, are what are preached by the wellness gurus. They are the pleasures that can be integrated in our working life, that make us more productive, that blur the line between lifestyle and work and are compatible with contemporary work ethics.

Throughout the book the authors emphasise the political implication of this quest for wellness. First of all, we are increasingly withdrawing in ourselves and disengaging from the world. It is this inward, "narcissistic" look that detaches us from others and removes us from the political sphere. Secondly, social issues become a problem of the individual that is required to find solutions inside her rather than expect or demand any political action or reform. Such depoliticization happens through the appeal to morality: anti-smoking claims, for example, are passing as legitimate under the banner of morality and lifestyle choices, escaping in this way an examination through political deliberation.

"Such depoliticization is absolutely central to the wellness syndrome, whereby happiness and health become the fundamental criteria for what passes as a moral life. Morality, here is not just to do with your relation to other people; it is concerned with the relation to yourself and especially to your own body" (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, pp. 29-30). When "the political is played out in the *moral register*" (Mouffe, 1996, quoted in Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p. 29) politicians can reduce the list of the issues in their remits while corporations benefit from the increase in middle-class employees' productivity. However, the focus on the individual choice and responsibility connected to the maximisation of wellness carries a load of frustration and guilt, which seems to contradict the very concept of wellness.

A catchy, sarcastic read, this book sheds critical light on what is otherwise presented as a positive discourse, showing its inner contradictions and ambiguities as well as its uses for less positive goals (increasing employees productivity and reducing welfare policies) and its implications (anxiety, uncertainty, guilt). The presented thesis, although populated by numerous examples of current initiatives, calls for empirical research to substantiate it. Despite the attempt to highlight a critical aspect of our culture, the wellness syndrome remains a too general a container of different trends which risks to caricaturize certain practices and obscure complexities, nuances and diversity in motives and actions. Recent sociological qualitative studies on the quantified-self movement (Sharon and Zandbergen, in progress) and corporate wellness programmes (Till, 2015), for example, have shown such richness. Chris Till conducted interviews with HR and other senior managers of companies involved in the development of digital self-tracking as part of wellness programmes. His discourse analysis highlights that employers do not simply want to control or enhance productivity; instead they maintain affective relationships with employees and show some form of "care through data". Sharon and Zandbergen's ethnography among members of the quantified-self movement shows that these practices are not sheer performances of the productivity must. Instead, other moral values are enacted in their practices: the value of solidarity, for example, that emerges in the practice of sharing experiences with others, but also deeper creative practices of identity-construction. These are just two examples of how qualitative data collection and analysis could help in further exploring the complexities of these initiatives and adding ambiguities and nuances beyond an all-encompassing dystopian view, which at a closer look may reveal to be too consistent to be true.

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