Taking Medication or Taking Action

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Our society today is obsessed with the idea of infinite growth. On the surface, this may seem like a natural evolution of progress, but, in reality, it bears a striking resemblance to the death cults of old—complete with sacrificial rituals. In the past, people believed that prosperity required appeasing their gods. If a nation faced drought, sacrifices would be made to the rain god. These gods were seen as directly responsible for different aspects of life, including the economy.

Today, we no longer worship pantheons of gods, but we haven't rid ourselves of this ritualistic mindset. Instead, we worship the economic mode of production in different forms: we call it "laissez-faire," "the invisible hand," or "infinite growth." We retain the sacrificial elements as well—but now, when our economic growth falters, we sacrifice jobs and livelihoods to appease this modern god.

What does this mean for people like us, for everyday individuals? The philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes it best: we have become obsessed with the idea of infinite growth, to the point of reshaping ourselves and society into something almost unrecognizable. We have become an achievement-oriented civilization with three key pillars: excess positivity, imperative to perform, and the illusion of freedom. Together, these elements push us to endlessly crave more, to avoid contentment, and to measure our worth by productivity alone.

The god of "infinite growth" has warped humanity into a monstrous form. We willingly exploit ourselves, mutilate our health, and subject ourselves to pain to appease this god. Look around: how many of our colleagues take pride in their sleep deprivation, in spending more time working than with their families? We sacrifice everything that makes us human—every chance to build community—just to meet obscure metrics of productivity. In doing so, we have reduced ourselves to mere cogs in the economic machine. We've stripped away our social safety nets, which once provided relief and healing for our mental and emotional distress. What remains is a hollow husk of what we used to be.

Byung-Chul Han calls this the "burnout society," and it is a fitting term. It captures the toll that the cult of infinite growth takes on us. We are alienated—pushed away from our innate selves by the unending pressure to achieve. Artistic expression, once a natural outlet, is now out of reach for many, discouraged as "economically unviable." Constant performance leaves us so drained that isolation becomes the only cathartic reclamation of the self we can find. For many, loneliness feels like a numb comfort in a world that offers little else.

The expansion of neoliberalism, the ideology underpinning late-stage capitalism, has gone hand in hand with the rise of mental health issues. This is no coincidence. Self-exploitation, burnout, and the ceaseless pursuit of "infinite growth" have eroded communal structures that were vital to our well-being—community, family, a sense of belonging. And even where these things still exist, they come with a price tag.

Community and leisure have become commodities: we simulate connection through consumer activities, like going to malls or browsing bookstores instead of libraries. Real relationships are increasingly replaced by transactional interactions, and mental health professionals fill the void once held by friendships and family ties.

The very conditions of late-stage capitalism, driven by the pursuit of infinite growth, are what lead to the prevalence of mental illness. This brings us to the central thesis of this article: capitalism has created the perfect social conditions for a worsening mental health crisis, where therapy and psychology serve to sustain this social order. In a society plagued by isolation and alienation, mental health services act as coping mechanisms that help us continue functioning—essentially keeping us sacrificing at the altar of infinite growth.

This observation is not just theoretical. A press statement from Malaysia's Ministry of Health highlighted a significant increase in mental health problems. The prevalence of mental health issues among individuals aged 16 and above rose from 10.6% in 1996 to 29.2% in 2015. This alarming trend indicates a growing mental health crisis, with financial difficulties, unemployment, work-related stress, and family issues cited as major contributing factors. These factors are symptomatic of the neoliberal policies that have become increasingly prevalent worldwide.

Neoliberalism emphasizes free markets, privatization, and individual responsibility—all of which have direct consequences on economic security. Job losses, reduced social safety nets, and heightened financial pressures are just some of the side effects of these policies. The emphasis on individual responsibility and competition has created a constant pressure to succeed, which directly correlates with the rising levels of stress and anxiety that the Ministry of Health attributes to work-related stress.

Furthermore, neoliberalism erodes social capital by prioritizing individual gain over collective well-being. The decline in social support systems and community ties leads to greater social isolation, worsening mental health outcomes. This mirrors the Ministry's mention of "poor social support" as a contributing factor to the mental health crisis. In such a climate, therapy and psychology are used not to address the root causes of distress but to help individuals adapt to an inherently damaging system—maintaining the status quo and ensuring that we continue to function within the confines of late-stage capitalism.

The field of psychology, psychiatry, and therapy has also been used as a tool for social control, pathologizing deviance, and distracting from the root causes of oppression. Rather than addressing the systemic origins of social ills, therapy often encourages individuals to internalize social problems, framing them as personal deficiencies to be medicated rather than sources of collective action.

The use of psychiatry to control individuals who deviate from societal norms is not new. Historically, diagnoses have been used to suppress political dissent and control marginalized groups. For example, the Soviet Union used "sluggish schizophrenia" to institutionalize political dissidents, while in the US, schizophrenia was overdiagnosed among young Black men involved in the civil rights movement. Today, diagnoses such as Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder are often used to pathologize children and women who challenge authority, reinforcing existing power structures and silencing dissent.

The concept of "concept creep" illustrates how definitions of psychological harm have expanded over time. While increased awareness of issues like abuse and bullying is positive, overly broad definitions can lead to the pathologization of everyday experiences, silencing dissent and punishing those who express their frustrations.

Moreover, the medicalization and individualization of social problems distract from the broader social and political factors contributing to widespread distress. Neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility and competition contributes significantly to the mental health crisis, and by framing mental health as an individual problem, the fields of psychology and therapy inadvertently reinforce oppressive systems and discourage collective action.

The commodification of therapy and mental health also plays a role in this process. The increasing commercialization of mental health services has led to the marketing of products that exploit vulnerability for profit, using shame and guilt tactics to pressure individuals into participating in a consumerist system that benefits corporations. This commodification makes therapy inaccessible to many, further marginalizing vulnerable populations.

Additionally, the globalization of Western mental health practices has been described as a form of cultural imperialism, marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and imposing Western understandings of mental health on diverse cultures. This erodes the richness of alternative approaches to healing, further entrenching the dominance of neoliberal ideologies.

This is a sign of the expanding pathologization of the oppressed. We have indulged ourselves in building landmarks, yet we are destroying our community and society.

The pursuit of infinite growth has led to a society where productivity is valued over humanity, where mental health crises are symptoms of systemic oppression, and where neoliberal ideologies continue to erode the foundations of community and well-being. The tools of psychology and psychiatry, instead of addressing the root causes of distress, often serve to maintain the status quo, encouraging individuals to adapt rather than resist. The commodification of therapy and the pathologization of dissent have only further entrenched the power structures that exploit us. To reclaim our humanity, we must challenge the very systems that demand our sacrifice and work towards building a society centered on collective well-being rather than endless growth.