

The war on ordinary people | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi January 24, 2022

The self-help industry is another — which seeks to outline a set of principles that allegedly lead to prosperous life

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From hunter-gatherers to pastoralists and then industrialists — the human species seem to have arrived at a point where it has stopped looking forward. Au contraire, it seems to have fallen into a cycle of regression. Our mindsets have somehow reverted back to primitive survivalism: vacuously trying to make it into the next day. We have abandoned lofty ideals and refuse to dream of a better world — as though civilisation has reached its apex. Despite extraordinary economic growth the world over, it is every man for himself. Why?

Years ago, philosopher and political activist Michel Foucault wrote about governmentality — the idea of self-regulation as a means of social control. Locating it within Christianity, he speculated about how the concepts of Heaven and Hell may have functioned at a psychological level to orient people's behaviour in desirable ways without necessarily having to keep watch over them.

With the basic 'rules of the game' in place, all that remained was to populate each of the categories: X leads to Heaven, Y to Hell. The ingenuity of the framework, he postulated, lied in the illusion of choice at its core. Wherever one ultimately ends up in the afterlife is the result of all the decisions they opted to make. In other words, the burden of responsibility for attaining 'salvation' and 'happiness' is cleverly transferred from those in power to the individual citizen — conceived as a 'free agent'. In the secular age, governmentality is premised on the same principles. A combination of inspirations makes this possible.

Libertarianism, for one: which seeks to eliminate the 'footprint' of the government (except when it comes to protecting private property) — leading to a free-for-all, in which those who earn the most, spend the least, and invest the best will emerge on top. Your move, bucko — the world is your oyster.

The self-help industry is another — which seeks to outline a set of principles that allegedly lead to a prosperous life. These include the importance of networking, optimising one's diet, regularly exercising, getting enough sleep, journaling, having a morning routine, taking vitamin supplements, the list is endless.

Next, spirituality. Parallel to traditional faith systems, a new industry has propped

up to help people discover ‘inner peace’. Through a series of meditation practices, yoga routines, and self-affirmation techniques, secular spirituality seeks to painstakingly eliminate a sense of desire in people. Never mind material conditions – true fulfilment comes from within, claims the guru. Live in the present. Empty your mind of thoughts. There is no you, only the collective.

Finally, therapy. Not feeling your best? Totally normal, visit your nearest psychotherapist. Have a heart to heart. This is a trained expert, after all. They can identify all the errors of your ways, both in terms of the thoughts you generate as well as the actions you pursue – and how to correct course. In fact, they may even hand you some pills to help. Anyway, enough chit-chat. Paying through cash or credit card?

Regardless of the merits of each of these categories, and there are several, the common thread is a concentrated focus on the individual. If things aren’t going well, it is because of personal shortcomings rather than societal-level failures. Focus on what is under your immediate control, and refrain from demanding too much – what are you, a hedonist? Just breathe. Be grateful. Stay hydrated. All will be well.

Structural critique is absent from popular discourse, replaced by petty one-upmanship games at an individual level – triggering endless fragmentation and warring cliques. Rather than blaming civil authorities and the incentive structures guiding their behaviour, we instead target the vulnerable – asking them to ‘pull themselves up by the bootstraps’ and get their act together. All this in spite of having full-blown, tax collecting states firmly in place.

Nothing can be more convenient for despotic rulers than to have subjects that either blame themselves or one another for the troubles they experience. Rather than our neighbours, let us critique our systems and institutions.

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