
Did someone say ‘well-being’?

Nick Stevenson

During a strike about pensions in the winter months a few years ago, I struck up a conversation with the person standing next to me on the picket line. It is often said that it is only when you go on strike that you get to meet the people you work with. In the modern university most people (myself included) are often too busy to spend time talking to colleagues. There is always something that urgently needs doing. Lectures to prepare, emails to write, administration to do and of course research to worry about. What I heard in this conversation was deeply familiar: that work was becoming too much; that people were haunted by a constant feeling of failing; that people had not written enough; that they did not spend enough time with their children; that they had done poorly in teaching scores or had been given an enormous administrative job that they were finding difficult to navigate; that such was the anxiety this caused that it led them to ‘crash out’ with a ‘mental health problem’.

On returning to work, I struck up a conversation with a UCU branch officer. We both agreed that something should be done about this, and I formed the ‘UCU Nottingham Mental Health Campaign Group’. I am not sure why I called it this, only I initially thought we should ‘do’ something about this situation, but I did not know what. This is now four years ago. At this point I would love to tell a story about how the formation of this group had led to a heroic crusade that led to real gains for the members. However, this is not true; so here is what happened.

I talked to a few like-minded people and ran a few open meetings. I was surprised by how many people turned up. Mostly people talked about impossible targets and how little time they had to do the things that made their lives meaningful. The tone was often quite sombre. Every now and then I would try and introduce a conversation that asked ‘what are we going to do?’. This was usually met with silence.

This confused me at first, but I thought more, and decided I was acting too soon. Over the years, without any clear objectives, I kept running the meetings and people kept coming. A few people started to come regularly, but mostly people came along once and then disappeared. Often, I wondered whether what I was doing had any value, but then someone said to me that the act of listening itself can be very valuable.

There is often an idea that goes around activist circles that meaningful action is about confrontation or noisy protests. While I don’t want to suggest that this is not important, perhaps there are different kinds of activism that can be gentler and more generative, such as the capacity to listen. This is also related, I think, to the problem that anyone who works on ideas of ‘well-being’ has to face. The first thing academics often want to do with ideas like this is to carefully define them. I have lost count of the number of times people have asked me to define what I mean by this term. I often feel reluctant to do so, as it would seem to impose a ‘theory’ on something which seemed to be emerging out of an ongoing conversation. My short answer, however, is that it has something to do with free time and the struggle for a less institutionally-defined autonomous life. Some people had specific problems like feeling precarious, or they could not get an appointment at the counselling service, or they felt pressured into taking on a new role to which they felt ill-suited. As I listened, the phrase that kept coming into my mind was human dignity - that people were being treated as if they were expendable and that if they didn’t or could not fulfil their role then they were simply not up to the job. This is not surprising.

David Greaber writes that one answer as to why it has been so difficult to mobilise people for change after the crisis of capitalism in 2008 has been an insistence on productivism. This has come from corporations, governments, and institutions.

Productivism assumes that our problems are solvable if we can just get people to work harder; that such is the value of work (by which we always mean waged labour) assumed by almost everyone that if they could be said to have 'worked hard' this makes them deserving.

I think we can stretch this idea even further. I note when I ask people in general about the fate of people who don't go to university that the assumption is that they are not deserving as they did not work hard enough. People usually back down when I ask whether a nurse or care assistant is somehow less deserving than a corporate executive. They usually say no, because the assumption is that they too probably must work hard. However, the people who are seen as entirely undeserving are those who don't work. That many people now in a neoliberal economy find themselves only partially employed or with insecure work automatically makes them people who are assumed to be less valuable.

Flat out

To return to my discussions on well-being: the problem emerges in a context where working flat out is taken as the assumed good. Thus if the UCU (which it frequently does) produces a report saying that academics work 50 hours a week, most people probably think, well, that is what you would expect in a professional job. To quote Margaret Thatcher, 'sleep is for wimps'. Today everyone should work hard as we have become a culture that simply normalises hard work. Most often in the office (perhaps over the photocopier) the most often heard conversation is 'How are you; busy?' Notably, I have never yet heard anyone say, 'No, not really, I am just doing a lot of walking, dreaming and reflecting right now'. It's not hard to think why. Firstly, because work is so intensive that this is extremely unlikely, but also if they were to make such an admission then people would think they were not pulling their weight or joking.

If we seriously want to think about well-being, I would suggest we should think about how this became the new normal. How is it that the minute you publish an article no one is that interested in what it is about and is usually more concerned with what you are working on next. Someone I work with recently told me to read a book called *The Slow Professor*. The first thing I must admit is that I skim read it, which of course goes against the idea of the book in the first place. It is full of good advice about slowing down and taking your time. But the problem is that the assumptions of the culture we move

about within are precisely the opposite of this book. This makes the book a bit like a self-help book, in that you read it, feel a bit better about things, then click back into trying to get by and do what needs to be done. This is interesting, as 'productivism' is quite an old-fashioned idea, that only old-style Marxists or uber-capitalists believe in. However, today it is the ruling ethos of academic departments. It is simply assumed that the more students we teach, the bigger the department grows, the more you write and the money you bring in, the better it is for everyone.

Much ecological thought has begun the process of questioning this idea, as if the economic system, and seemingly every other system, is addicted to growing ever bigger then it will inevitably do great harm to the surrounding eco-system. If we view workplaces as eco-systems, we might wonder what it is that busyness helps crowd out. What happens to open-ended conversations about the world in which we live, or discussions with a staff member or a student where we have cause for concern about their well-being? Also, think about conversations we might have about the joys and frustrations of teaching and getting young people to engage and think about the material. Notably, much of this would be immediately dismissed as 'unproductive'. Such views are thought not to add anything directly measurable or that might be seen to be of 'worth' if only we had the time.

Here I am proposing that whereas trade unionists in the past have fought for the right to better wages and working conditions, today we need to fight for the right to literally do less. In fact, the less relevant we can make ourselves to the efficiency engine the better. It is not about more exact measurements of our workloads, more that we stop sawing off the branch we are sitting on, that we need time when we are less busy to gather our thoughts and reconnect with our creativity. This is the struggle for a world that does not crowd our every moment with a new demand, where better does not mean simply 'more', and where we fight for the human right to be humane as well as autonomous human-beings. Our unions need to become places where we accept that this is every bit as important as pay and pensions. In this respect we have a long way to go.

