



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

Jimenez\_L\_2013

## **Social Catastrophe and Social Trauma Amongst Unemployed Working Class Men in a Post-Industrial Community**

Luis Jimenez

„Social Catastrophe and Social Trauma Amongst Unemployed Working Class Men in a Post-Industrial Community.“ Paper presented at the XVII International Forum of Psychoanalysis (Mexico City, October 2012). First published in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition – ISBN 1437-1189), 17 / 2013, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag), pp. 29-34.

Copyright © 2013 by DDr. Luis Jimenez, University of East London, UK., E-Mail: l.jimenez@uel.ac.uk.

*Abstract:* This paper explores psychosocially young unemployed men's resistance to work they describe as 'embarrassing' and 'feminine'. The context is the closure of a steelworks in a town in the South Wales valleys, in which their resistance is mediated by father-son relationships that dictate what counts as proper manly work. In this study, young men, as well as their mothers and (where possible) their fathers, were interviewed. The interviews reveal a community suffering the effects of intergenerational trauma and riven with complex feelings about masculinity and femininity. These feelings are projected onto the young men, who feel bullied and shamed by their families, peers and others in the community because they are unable to find gender-appropriate work. The implications of these findings for understanding youth male unemployment are considered.

### **Traumatic Loss and its Intergenerational Impact on Men's Worker Identities**

The aim of this paper is to think about the complex circulations of masculinity and femininity within the community during the era of the steelworks and to contrast this with the shifts necessary to accommodate the post-industrial new work situation. The psychosocial impact on the male worker identities after the loss of work for these ex-steel workers can be seen as a "social catastrophe" which is defined by psychoanalysts Davoine and Gaudilliere (2004) as a historical event which has catastrophic consequences for those at the receiving end of it. Although local conditions may mean that the fear, pain and anxieties produced by that event cannot be experienced immediately because of the need to survive and the defences brought into play to achieve this. Davoine and Gaudilliere argue that such anxieties might be transmitted silently across generations (e.g., intergenerational traumatic loss) so that the one who embodies the memory may not even know what the anxiety is that is being experienced and those who experienced it may be unable to talk about it.

While Davoine and Gaudilliere's work focuses on war, it seems relevant to place the closure of the steel works into this category because iron and steel production had been the centre of the community since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and while the community



had faced its share of redundancies, disasters and other problems, the closure of the steelworks could be understood as having a catastrophic impact on a town which depended upon it and which was in a geographical location in which other work was not easily reached. Besides this, the nature of available work changed. Basically, there remained in the area almost no heavy industry. Thus, men who had relied on the works and who had a history of poor school performance and even illiteracy, had nowhere to turn for similar work. Most of the work available to young men leaving school at 16 with no qualifications and poor literacy levels these days is unskilled service work, mostly in supermarkets, cleaning and food delivery (e.g. pizzas).

The story I want to tell here relates to the ways in which the conversations with the young men and their families, taken together with insights derived from the earlier fieldwork, begin to present a complex situation in which the difficulties faced by the young men is shown to be related to pain and shame experienced by older men and others in the community about the inability to do 'proper masculine' work.

### Shame and Embarrassment

An example of this type of situation comes from an interview with Tony, 24, who is already a father of three children and who has neither school nor work credentials. He tells me about his difficult experiences with his step father when he took on a pizza delivery and a cleaning job:

*... I was once a delivery driver for Dominos Pizza. I don't know whether you seen the uniform you got to wear cream trousers, a red t-shirt, a baseball cap, a bum bag and things like that and he (his stepfather) found that, well embarrassing. Urm you have to wear the full outfit you had a Dominos Pizza belt, and everything... If I was out doing a delivery, and he spotted me, he would purposely make out he didn't see me like, not be seen talking to me basically because of what I was wearing and what I was doing like. I then offered my brothers a lift home in the car and they all refused to get in the car with me and said, you look like an idiot basically, you know, what the hell are you wearing? You look a fool looking like that, and that was the attitude they had, they wouldn't get a lift home with me like, because of what I had to wear... They used to laugh all the time and they never once went to the shop as long as I worked there.*

*I don't know whether it was embarrassment or what they never showed their face at the shop, never once. Everybody, not just my father and my brothers but my mother too, they all used to laugh when I would go up in what I had to wear, that uniform, and my friends also used to laugh at me... My mother did say to me once, you know they are all taking the mickey out of your stepfather because of what you are doing, so basically get a proper job, my mother was basically saying... If I went to his house, like he'd go, you know, he'd go to the pub or something, you know he would go out to the pub every time I went there for a couple of weeks, as if he was physically embarrassed about, you know, too embarrassed to talk to his own son like or to be seen with me, and then I had to quit that job, and once I did that then he was back to normal, you know he'd stay and he would talk to me again and he'd say like come to the pub with us.*

This painful story struck me forcibly. In Tony's way of telling the story, all of his family



gang up on him to ridicule and embarrass him about the work and the uniform. So what he feels that he experiences is their shame at his work and his appearance, so much so that they will go out of their way not to be seen with him. Shunned, it seems by the whole family, he gave up the work. However, the kinds of jobs that the family appears to want him to get are no longer available, so we are left to wonder if they would actually have preferred him to be unemployed, a situation which he was trying to avoid in order to support his own young family. It seems as though he is caught in a pincer action but the pressure must have felt intense to give up the job rather than have the work, poorly paid as it doubtless was.

But in the next extract we see that Tony fared no better in another job he tried, working as a contract cleaner.

Tony:

*Yeah, once I was working as a cleaner on the factory floor and you know I had to walk past with a bin or perhaps a mop and bucket and you know they (female colleagues) would start talking to each other and laughing at me and things like that like, you know. Yeah, it was quite embarrassing for a boy; you know to be laughed at by a bunch of girls.*

Luis:

So can you remember, what did you say to those girls? How did you handle that?

Tony:

*Well you know, I asked them what was so funny like and they were saying Mrs. Mop and things like that and calling me names and you know, so well like I say basically round here it is classed as a woman's job being a cleaner and things like that, they class it strictly as a woman's job. There is lot of boys as myself that wouldn't apply for that kind of job again, and I know a lot of friends who wouldn't even think about applying for that kind of job, but at the end of the day it was all that was going on, and I had to bring in money for my family and I took it, but you know, three weeks I stuck it out for and I couldn't take no more. I was going home and feeling depressed you know because people were laughing at me and aggravating me all day for eight hours.*

We begin to see how Tony feels that there is nowhere to turn because he is not only shunned by his family, but by women cleaners to whom he is not related. We can begin to understand that the feelings of shame projected onto the young men are not simply confined to his family but are circulating around the community itself. Nor are they confined to men – his mother and female workmates also join in the ridicule. It is important to understand what is happening in the town that this shame is projected onto young men who have to bear the brunt of it and thus are placed in a kind of catch 22, where they need work but are ridiculed for taking the work that they can get. We can understand the women's reactions as the result of the resonance the young man doing cleaning had for them and therefore their own reaction to it.

Later on in the interview, Tony recalls other similar incidents that some of his male friends had to face whilst working in the checkout in their local supermarket:

*... I've got friends and if they see a boy working on the checkout in the local su-*



*permarket they kind of like call him all the sort of things, call him names and bully him. Like call him a woman and things like that and say you are doing a woman's job, you know. It is not a man's work it is a woman's job like, that is the way they see that kind of job, a woman's job like. They bully them and aggravate them. I know people who have and they tend to call them like gay and things like that you know and to some people it hurts being called that like. You know they call them a gay and mammy's boy working on the till and you know, there are a lot of things that they do say and a lot of it is using bad language like and not so polite words.*

We begin to understand the ferocity with which the shaming is emerging. If it is so ferocious, psychoanalysis tells us, there is a very large affective and energetic charge. In other words, there is a great deal going on, circulating toxically around the town. In order to understand this circulation within what we could call the community matrix, we will explore further the issues raised by Tony, including issues of femininity and heterosexuality, as well as thinking about the intergenerational transmission of trauma. However, first of all, let us try to understand what Tony's struggles with his stepfather tell us about the difficulty faced by young men like Tony in breaking free from the shame and bringing about a change for themselves and others.

### **Conformity as Compromise Formation**

I was struggling in the interview to understand why Tony didn't stand up to his father, family and others, given that he had his own family. So, I asked why he still needed the approval of his stepfather when deciding what job to take, he replied:

*I think it's because like I've always been his, like his closest son, really to be honest, I'm closer to him than the rest of my brothers and that's why he's sort of like picking on me to then follow him in his footsteps sort of thing and learn a trade like he has, and become a business man in that kind of way but, like I said yesterday, I'm not sure if that's what I want to do at the moment. I would rather make my own decisions, do what I want to do, not what others and my parents want me to do. I think instead of being against what I want to do, they should support me really in what I want to do.*

So it seems that the ridicule may be designed to force Tony to follow a path which his stepfather feels is not only more manly but with better prospects, but, perhaps it is because I asked a question which implied that he needed to stand up to his stepdad, that he tells me that he wants to find his own way, but he also tries to understand his particular treatment of him as a sign of specialness, closeness and love, rather than rejection. Thus, what seemed to be troubling Tony was the realisation that, although he could be critical of his stepfather, at the same time, he could not, at this moment, avoid being isolated from his parental family and by implication being isolated and ridiculed as an improper man or a loser by his local peers. So, Tony is caught in a pincer movement, one typical for young people, in which they wish to follow their own path, but are pushed and pulled by different parental expectations. This in itself marks a shift for young men like Tony in Steeltown, who would previously have gone to the works and there may well have been no question of their trying to do something different. But clearly here the conflict is extremely hard for Tony to bear, perhaps, not least because it is not only his stepfather who is shaming him, but, it seems, his entire family and other members of the community, an experience, so we hear, that is very familiar for



young men, who indeed reinforce it by ganging up on anyone who dares to do service work.

As we have seen, the ways in which fathers transmit to their sons their own difficult feelings of loss pain and shame that there is no longer manly manufacturing work, get enmeshed in a complex context of disappointment, lack of hope, despair and grief that then gets rationalised and projected to their sons as the need of fathers to make sure their own sons will not be subject to the same difficult experiences that their own fathers have experienced after the succession of redundancies that have taken place over many decades in the community. Furthermore, the way in which the sons assimilate and think about their own fathers' projected feelings of despair are also connected in complex affective ways with the sons' own needs to see in their fathers some kind of idealised strong supportive image that would also serve to consolidate their own masculinity and would make them feel safe. In this context, it can be difficult for the sons to disentangle the extent to which their own difficult struggles in trying to find jobs and their avoidance of service work belongs to them or is a combined effect of the relationship with their fathers' own difficult past and the associated expectations and values in relation to massive unemployment in their community.

The struggle to re-masculinize their sons might also give the fathers a further sense of moral purpose, agency and paternal authority.

### **Social Catastrophe and Gendered Trauma**

The intergenerational transmission of aspects of masculinity through shame, embarrassment and bullying experienced by these men thus entails recognizing the way in which these feelings defend a very rigid, gendered division of labour that is under threat from all quarters: the closure of the steelworks, the rise in 'feminine' work and the larger female workforce.

This in turn can be understood not as some individual pathology but as a painful and perhaps not conscious response to the inability of this generation to prevent the closure, to stop the catastrophe from happening (which of course they could not, it being driven by economic and political forces quite outside their control). In other words: What this work reveals is a social trauma which emotionally affects the entire community.

Our first idea was that because some older men had understandably great difficulty in accepting that manufacturing work had really gone, some young men, who had themselves not experienced this work, may feel conflicted about the lost industrial masculinity of their fathers and in some ways may be trying to protect that masculinity or to be able to embody what their fathers could no longer do. Conflicts around this work did turn out to be at the heart of conflicts between fathers and sons, but they did not end there and so we have also discussed how others in the community were just as important in keeping this sense of masculinity alive for the young men. What we gradually learned from our interviews was that fathers and sons were experiencing considerable conflict and distress over the sons' taking up of service work.

To further explore the circulation of the intergenerational aspects of the transmission of hard masculinity, I also want to turn to the point made by Tony about the way young men who undertook feminine and embarrassing work could be understood as women,



gays, or mammy's boys. In order to understand this we would then explore the production of masculinity as distance from the feminine.

All these terms are "other" to heterosexual masculinity and all demonstrate an anxiety with proximity to the feminine or the feminised. This suggests that what has been hailed as a 'crisis in masculinity' (Kimmel, 1987; Hearn, 1999; Mc Dowell, 2000) possibly presents this crisis in too realist a way. That is, it presents masculinity as a possession of an anatomical male, whose masculine identity has been threatened by changes in work.

What we begin to see here is rather that the problem is not a problem with the masculine per se, but a problem with the feminine. Or, indeed, we could argue that all problems of the masculine are indeed problems associated with proximity to the feminine. These three terms appear to articulate the problem as concerning too much proximity to, or not enough distance from, the feminine. This suggests to us that the problem is not the work per se but the proximity to the feminine it represents, which must be repudiated at all costs. In the days of the steel works, the feminine was kept in a domestic space, from which men were distanced by their working lives, but could always come home to. In other words, what we are saying is that in order to withstand the rigours of heavy and dangerous work, it was necessary to become 'hard'. This hardness meant an attempt to keep at bay all aspects of softness and dependency, which might impede withstanding the harsh conditions. 'Mammy's boys' are of course boys who are close to their mothers. If repudiation of the feminine was necessary and the pushing away of all that might be considered close to it, in order to survive, then all signs of weakness must be kept at bay. What we are proposing therefore is that alongside the material conditions there were sets of bodily dispositions, manly practices, ways of organising, modes of affective relations and unconscious defences, all designed to maintain a situation which was extremely difficult, but which had to be maintained in order to withstand the work. As we have shown in the interview extracts, at the heart of this matrix is anxiety – anxiety about the feminine mixed with anxiety about survival. Since mothers are central to the raising of children and to the nurturing of dependent beings within our culture, these two anxieties come together.

Similarly, ideas about survival and annihilation anxiety can be related to early experience. In this instance, we are attempting to understand a set of historically produced practices and defences which become normative in a historical context in which their appearance is necessary to the feeling of the possibility of survival and which can ultimately lead to the production of pride in the hardness sustained, which we can find in demands for increased productivity as well as successful union and political militancy and resistance. I am not wishing to undermine these very important victories or resistances, nor to pathologise or to psychologise them. But I feel that it is necessary to understand the difficulties and anxieties which relate to the coping with difficult (or perhaps we should say almost impossible) work conditions for 200 years, that is the experience of exploitation, in order to understand just what the young men are telling us in the present.

The new work context available to them demands much greater proximity to the feminine, with its notions of service (and indeed low pay!) in a historical context in which the shift away from a macho masculinity towards a different view of the masculine. Of course, this form of masculinity has indeed oppressed women for many centuries but it



is our view that nothing is helped by its pathologisation or de-historicisation. What is needed is to understand it. It is a form of masculinity which is itself historically specific. To understand this, we suggest, we have to understand it as having an enormous energetic charge, which we have explained by use of the idea of the place of the feminine in producing anxiety about dependency built so strongly into practices that even when the reason for the practices in the form of the works are gone it is the affective charge, the 'unthought known' (Bollas, 1987) which has become the community's holding pattern, as its matrix. If this is a projection onto the young men, it hits home. The young men are a vulnerable target, at the cusp of adulthood – struggling to break free of the family. What we need to understand therefore is about the transmission of these anxieties to the next generation. This has been described in clinical terms as the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

We suggest then that it is not the young men who are ashamed, but that they are made to keep the place of shame, a place passed down through the attempts of the previous generation to hang onto work and masculinity (often expressed through unresolved grief and melancholic longings), through various setbacks, redundancies, closures and its effect on their sons.

Freud's (1917) paper "Mourning and Melancholia" was an attempt to understand ways of dealing with and understanding the effects of loss and war neurosis. Within it, he proposed the idea that unresolved grief was caused by the survivor's internalized image of the deceased becoming fused with that of the survivor, and then the survivor shifting unacceptable anger toward the deceased onto a new complex self image. Judith Butlers (1997) has also re-read Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" in order to produce an understanding of heterosexual gender development as melancholy. Butler has argued that gender identification is founded on, and is the expression of, forsaking the same-sex object choice (e.g. parents of the same sex as the first love object). Some of the implications of this mean that such a closing-off interrupts our inherent bisexuality such that identification with heterosexuality expresses but one aspect of our sexuality. What is lost or repressed through the early formation of a heterosexual identification is the loss of possibilities, the loss of what could have been. To Butler, this process represents a loss of possibilities that is generally unacknowledged in culture. Butler also suggests that heterosexual culture creates a dichotomy between male and female, and between masculinity and femininity, dictating that what one can "be" and what one can "have" are different (Jay, 2007). Thus, a boy ought to desire the feminine and be the masculine; for him, gender identity rests on the foreclosure of desiring men. Because early childhood homosexual attachments in heterosexual boys are never quite realised, they are quite never lost. Thus, Butler's re-reading of Freud's notion of melancholia as heterosexual gender also resonated with our data, although in a different way. It could be argued that for the young men these fears, reservations and the shaming and bullying that they produced, also constantly indirectly highlighted the presence of conscious gendered conflicts that, in turn, create an unconscious tie with homosexuality because the increased proximity to the feminine compromises and questions their whole sexual orientation. As we have outlined, collectively shared but unavailable to be acknowledged gendered conflicts cannot easily be mourned or resolved, thus creating an unconscious tie between heterosexuality and melancholy. It is in this context that Butler (1997) has reckoned that heterosexuality is a melancholic compromise and how gender is a symptom of this melancholy.



## Conclusion

From the history that we have recounted, it seems that the closure represents the latest in a long line of work and family related suffering, which has its own complex affective impact. As I mentioned earlier, women were seen as the emotional bedrock of the community and we have argued elsewhere (Walkerline & Jimenez 2012) that the place of women provided for many a sense of ontological security and safety, assuring the sense of the possibility of continuity of being and a defence against fears of annihilation that may have been endemic in a community beset with dangerous work in poor conditions.

What characterises most clinical work on trauma is the typical psychoanalytic gaze which wanders no further than individual development and parental relations, but what we were interested in was the way in which such complex unconscious gendered dynamics can operate as 'a frantic effort to bring a foreclosed social connection into existence'. Davoine and Gaudilliere (2004) have discussed these socio-historical dynamics in terms of the way in which the social link becomes a central aspect of a micro history which conveys and connects, forming the social. If the social link is broken, then a connection cannot be maintained and the link across generations is lost. Regaining a foothold in history, obviously, is not reducible to adaptation to social conformity. It involves the inscription of a dissociate truth, an "unthought known" (Bollas, 1987), known through impressions that have been split off and the awakening of a subject of history (having nothing to do with his de-subjectivized homonym of historical materialism).

These processes do not simply operate with repressed experiences, so much as embodied, known by the body but unable to be brought to thought. Just because these cannot be thought does not mean that they are not transmitted. They can be enacted, just as in the interview examples I have described above. The lesson we want to draw here is the centrality of history for understanding that which might be transmitted down generations even if it cannot be spoken. We suggest that the young men and their families and fellow townspeople are trying to communicate something of great importance to each other and to us. I also argue that these complex issues must be addressed – not just as an individual clinical issue, but rather to acknowledge its social and historical context and evolution for any possibility of regeneration to work.

## References

- Bollas, C. (1987) *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. London: Free Associations.
- Butler, J. (1997). "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification". In: *The Psychic Life of Power*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, pp.132-150.
- Davoine F., & Gaudilliere, J. M. (2004). *History Beyond Trauma: Whereof One Cannot Speak, Thereof One Cannot Stay Silent*. New York: Other Press.
- Freud, S. (1917). "Mourning and Melancholia". In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV (1914-1916), London: Hogarth Press, pp. 243–58.
- Hearn, J (1999). *A Crisis in Masculinity, or New Agendas for Men? New Agendas for Women*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoggett P., Beedell P., Jimenez L., Mayo M., & Miller C. (2010). "Working Psychosocially and Dialogically in Research". In: *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15 (10 June 2010), pp. 173-188. DOI:10.1057/pcs.2009.36.



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

- 
- Jay, M. (2007). "Melancholy Femininity & Obsessive Compulsive Masculinity: Sex Differences in Melancholy Gender". In: *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* Vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 115-135.
- Jimenez L., & Walkerdine V. (2011). "Shameful Work: a Psychosocial Approach to Father/Son Relations, Young Male Unemployment and Femininity in an Ex-steel Community". In: *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*. 2011/07/28/online. DOI: 10.1057/pcs.2011.14.
- Jimenez, L. & Walkerdine V. (2011). "A Psychosocial Approach to Shame, Embarrassment & Melancholia amongst Unemployed Young Men and their Fathers". *Gender and Education*, Vol. 23 (No.2, March 2011), pp. 185-199. DOI: 10.1080/095440253.2010.490202
- Kimmel, M (1987). "The Crisis of Masculinity in Historical Perspective" in: Brod N. H. (Ed.), *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Mc Dowell, L. (2003). *Redundant Masculinities? Employment Change and White Working Class Youth*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Walkerdine V. & Jimenez L. (2012). *Gender, Work and Community after De-Industrialisation: A Psychosocial Approach to Affect*. Palgrave Macmillan.