

## **Between Bethan and Me: A dialogue on the uncertain promise of education, precarious employment and what it means to be productive**

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### **Abstract**

*The experience of precarious employment is growing across the occupational spectrum and some scholars have predicted that there will be a corresponding rise in anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation amongst those affected. Exploring more intimately how precarity might be differently experienced and confronted, this paper bases itself on a dialogue between “Bethan”, an underemployed youth looking for full-time employment and me, a university-sponsored academic advisor in a disadvantaged suburb in Sydney approaching the end of my fixed-term contract. From our very different positions, we reflect on our respective experiences of the employment market; the promises of formal education; and against the backdrop of the present reality, our feelings about the future. Drawing on the work of Erich Fromm and Bethan’s approach to life hitherto, this paper also offers a reconsideration of what it means to be ‘productive’ in the face of unemployment and uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** Education, Erich Fromm, Existential Phenomenology, Precarity, Youth Studies

## **From consultation to dialogue**

‘What about you?’ She asked. ‘Do you ever get worried about what the future is going to be like for you?’

Her ears were still ringing in my ears when I drove home that day. I had successfully deferred responding to it in the moment. I remember shifting uncomfortably in my seat, the familiarity of my office chair suddenly becoming alien to me with its rough, fibrous texture. It didn’t keep one cool in the summer at all, and it didn’t help that Bethan (pseudonym) had turned the heat of the discussion on me.

‘I, ha! Well, I...’

I remembered stammering, which was not my usual manner. ‘Can I sit on that one? It’s a really good question and to be honest I’d like to give it more thought. Can I respond to that later? I promise I will.’

‘Yeah, no probs. We can keep chatting via email or instant messenger.’ She replied, being less interrogative than I can be sometimes in my capacity as an academic advisor. Bethan had come to me for a consult on post-school study options, but her main prerogative was to find fulltime work, which was increasingly appearing as an impossible undertaking. Over fifty applications and four months later, her money and confidence diminishing to new lows, she decided to drop in to the Mount Druitt University Hub – a project for widening participation in higher education amongst disadvantaged youth co-founded by the Australian Catholic University and Loyola Senior High School in Mount Druitt – where I worked.

We chatted for the usual 40 minutes it takes to relate study and work possibilities to a cursory map of a client’s educational achievements, interests and passions, extra-curricular activities, work experiences, personal strengths and limitations, community involvement and environmental considerations such as familial, social and cultural commitments. This was the procedure I had picked up from Patton and McMahon’s (2006, pp.19-48, 292-298) ‘systems approach’ to career and learning development, which sought to advance a more holistic practice

beyond 'trait and factor' approaches to advice that were based on redundant person-occupation matching. While Patton and McMahon's (2006, pp.317-318) approach taught me to be open to the 'connectedness' of my own story with the story of others, I must admit I still felt very taken aback at the shift in attention effected by Bethan's questioning. This was not because of my unwillingness to share aspects of my personal history, which I often do in practice. What was jarring about her question was that it was not about the past, but the relation of this past that I had lived to the future I envisioned for myself.

What I felt as I sat there restlessly was the experience Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989, p.260) describes as 'being pulled up short'. This occurs when my lived understanding of how to conduct myself in the world in the usual ways – that is, my everyday 'know-how' as an academic advisor– is disturbed in an encounter with the lived understanding of another and consequently, 'my assumptions and expectations fail to materialise, are thwarted, or reversed' (Kerdeman 2003, p.295; also Gadamer 1989, p.260).

So as I drove home that day, I contemplated Bethan's question: Do I worry about how the future will turn out for me? Yes, of course I do! But why? I had completed five degrees including recently receiving my PhD. I had a job as an academic advisor. Yet all these things seemed suddenly shaken: Were my degrees and PhD merely a road to nowhere, perhaps a pathway to becoming what *The Economist* (2010) calls the 'disposable academic'? Was my job, being a fixed-term contract for two years, merely a stopgap between being 'cheap, highly motivated and disposable labour' ('The Disposable Academic' 2010) and the abyss of unemployment? Suddenly, I wasn't so sure anymore.

I dropped my satchel as soon as I got home, unsheathed my iPad and clicked on the instant messenger application without going *en route* my coffee machine, as was the daily homecoming ritual. Staring at the screen as the cursor blinked at me, it took me three or four minutes before typing:

Hi Bethan! I just wanted to continue our conversation today about work. You posed a question to me about how I felt about my future. I've given it a bit of thought

and geez, I've never been asked this before. Are you still keen to chat?

I hit the icon to send the message. As the aroma of coffee began to reignite my mind, I reflected on how the terrain of this conversation with Bethan had shifted from a consultation to a dialogue. To 'consult', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014), is to '[s]eek information or advice from someone, especially an expert or professional'. Bethan wanted to know about my perspective on the future, and on this I could neither pretend expertise nor promise. Gone were the days when the experience of a precarious future was limited to an underclass trying to 'make it' and where those, like myself, who managed to climb the educational ladder were granted a reprieve. As Lauren Berlant (2011, p.3) has argued with acuity, the assurances of upward mobility and social equality are dissolving:

The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment.

In light of this, Bethan deserved an honest answer to her question in a spirit of dialogue. A dialogue, by contrast to a consultation, implies that participants are open to what the other says. 'Starting from their own story', as Widdershoven (2001, p.257) describes it, 'participants will have to be open to the possibility that other stories may shed a new light on the situation'. This in turn means that one party should neither behave in such a way that 'he [*sic*] sees the other from above, and thus oversees him' (i.e. put oneself above the other), nor 'to execute blindly what the other wants [for a] person who acts in such a way is called slavish, but rather an '[o]penness towards the other [that] entails the recognition that I myself will have to accept things that are against me, even if no one else pushes me to do so' (Gadamer 1989, p.343). What this means, in short, is that by entering into a dialogue, I should be prepared to hear what Bethan has to say and to acknowledge that it may be necessary to change my own views (Widdershoven 2001, p.257). For

unlike a consulting relationship, in a dialogue I have to risk being changed by it: ‘To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of asserting one’s own point of view, but a change into a communion in which one does not remain what one was’ (Gadamer 1989, p.379).

And changed I was to be.

### **An excursus on style**

Why am I writing about the problems of precarious employment and life in contemporary capitalist societies in such a particular (and peculiar) way? Are these issues not better tackled by a systematic analysis of broader social trends? Writers, Sartre argues, standing in the midst of the suffering of others, cannot do otherwise but attend themselves to the ethical and political questions of their time by unveiling the “human situation” – that is, of persons’ lived experiences within a specific historical conjuncture (Flynn 2012, pp.234-235). Writing should thus be seen as “action by disclosure” because the “committed writer knows that words are action. He [*sic*] knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change” (1993, p.14). By writing a storied account of a dialogue between Bethan and me, therefore, I have set forth to the reader an exhortation:

[F]rom this point on we may conclude that writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare... the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about. (Sartre 1993, p,.15)

In making a case for narrative accounts of particular human situations, I am not denying the importance of other forms of educational scholarship that may focus primarily on statistics, structures, policies and the state, which are of paramount importance in redressing systemic injustices that produce such pernicious outcomes. Rather, it is to remind us that there is an irreducible human dimension that dwells underneath large-scale social trends and news headlines. At the same time, I acknowledge that

the words I deploy will appear pale in relation to the affective density of the situation I am trying to capture, not to mention anaemic in its appearance in relation to the types of discourses that seek to effect systemic change. It is, nevertheless, an attempt to write from the field in a way that is “adequate to the situation”, as fictocritic Michael Taussig (2010) puts it.

In what follows, then, I will offer a first person narrative over the course of a day in dialogue with Bethan. I have also chosen to use narrative as a vehicle for communicating the situation because of the power narrative has for “bringing to life” experiences traditionally conceived of as hard to articulate (Clough 2002, p.15). Here, in the context of the seemingly unstoppable economic machine and its impact on young people in Mount Druitt, I am reminded of De Certeau’s (1980) characterisation of recollected stories as “intense singularities” that erupt “noiselessly and surreptitiously” within the very scene where technical rationalities are dominant (p.42). For the reader, then, such stories also offer a “portal” through those ruptures into different worlds of experience (Connelly & Clandinin 2006). As far as possible, I have used dialogue unchanged from my notes, but ultimately it remains a self-narrative encompassing my interpretation and memory of another person’s story (see Hayler 2011, pp.5-31). It is, in short, an attempt to restage my encounter with Bethan: the to and fro of our discussion; how it felt to hear of her experiences; and confronting her questions – and myself, no less – on that day.

## **Being precarious**

So I walked back to my armchair from the coffee break and glanced at the tablet screen. Bethan had already replied:

Definitely I want to keep chatting! I applied for a few more jobs this afternoon and was really discouraged when like no requirements for the jobs suited me based on my age, gender and qualifications. This always happens. It's getting really annoying!

Bethan’s plight reminded me of my own not too long ago as a migrant to a city where I didn’t attend school and without my family. I thus lacked

what Putnam (1995) would call the 'social capital' required to find work in this bewildering metropolis, though I didn't think of it in those terms back then. I typed back:

I understand how you must be feeling. I think I applied for over 30 jobs when I was looking for my first job, and that was a few years ago before the GFC [Global Financial Crisis]! I imagine it's a lot harder now. I remember watching my savings dwindle to single digits, but I think the worst thing was how depressed I got and how my I could feel my self-confidence bleed away slowly. How are you going in that department, by the way?

I hit the send button and less than a minute later, the flashing icon on the screen informed me that Bethan was already typing up her response. It came quickly:

I feel like I have applied for so many also! I have a job now, but it is just not enough. I can't justify only 4 hours a week of work whilst I'm not studying... I'm feeling really defeated and embarrassed, which sounds a little over the top to people because I get to stay home all day and be lazy but it's really hard to not socialise and feel like everyone is doing something great and I'm not. It's actually not fun having that much free time. The wait is very annoying and the requirements and experience they expect me to have when no one is employing me to get that experience really frustrates me!

As I read that, I wondered to myself how many others were like Bethan in the Mount Druitt region where she lived. In Mount Druitt and its surrounding suburbs of Bidwill, Blakett, Whalan, Emerton, Tregear and Lethbridge Park, the youth unemployment rates are 21.6 percent, 30.5 per cent, 30.6 per cent, 28.9 per cent, 36.1 per cent, 40.5 per cent and 45.6 per cent respectively (Blacktown City Council 2011). This situation worried me. According to British political economist Guy Standing (2011), what we are seeing globally and especially in OECD countries like Australia is the rise of a 'new dangerous class' called 'the precariat'.

The precariat, according to Standing (2011, pp.7-13), describes those who fall below the traditional and now shrinking industrial 'working class'. They are those without any secure employment and indeed, include a growing number of youth who may never have experienced full-time employment (Standing 2011, pp.65-67). These 'urban nomads' are flanked by an army of unemployed and those detached from society, whose ranks they may join at different points in their lives. If these young people are not jobless, then they are definitely career-less.

This trend towards precarious employment is exemplified by Bethan's job entailing '4 hours a week of work'. This is particularly worrying because, according to Standing (2011, pp.19-24), the precariat experiences 'four A's' – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation: *Anger* arises from frustration at the seemingly blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life and from a sense of relative deprivation; *anomie* (or hopelessness) comes from sustained defeat and is compounded by the condemnation they may get of being 'lazy' or 'irresponsible' from various quarters; *anxiety* is a result of the chronic insecurity of knowing that one mistake or one piece of bad luck could tip the balance between a modest dignity and being a bag lady; and *alienation* is brought on by a lack of purpose and social disapproval for their separation from the world of work and consumption. These were all evident at different moments in what Bethan had written. As these broader thoughts occupied my mind, she went on:

Also sounding a little bit silly to not apply for every job I can find, but I heard of a chemist job and I'm really wondering whether I should keep applying for admin and reception jobs rather than chemist and retail or just apply for any jobs advertised. I'm just unsure after working hard on getting a decent education if I want to do a retail job...

Was she wrong to feel this way, I asked myself? The policy rhetoric of some politicians in Australia would certainly suggest so. In measures proposed by the Federal Government in 2014, the age eligibility of full unemployment benefits (called 'Newstart') will be raised to 25 and young people will be denied any social security payment for six months unless



they are working or enrolled in fulltime study in an institution (Churchill 2014). The basis of this scheme, which has been labelled as a move that ‘unfairly targets and punishes young people’ by welfare groups such as the Australian Youth Affairs Commission (2014), is premised on the assumption that unemployed youth ‘just sit on the couch at home and pick up a welfare cheque’ (Andrews in Hartcher 2014). This characterisation seems like an ill fit for someone like Bethan, who had just completed twelve years of schooling and sought to find work that matched her skills and interests. After all, was this not the promise for accumulating more years in post-compulsory secondary education?

According to a widely cited report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Blondal, Field & Girouard 2002, pp.42, 44), there are two purported motives for undertaking an upper secondary education such as the one completed by Bethan: firstly, ‘[a]n important motivation for individuals to invest in education is that the acquired knowledge and skills tend to raise their productivity and hence earnings potential’; and secondly, ‘[a] further important motive behind acquiring more education is to lower the risk of unemployment. The reduction in risk is particularly large for those investing in upper-secondary education’. Indeed, this argument from ‘human capital theory’ was the rationale behind the New South Wales (NSW) State government’s raising of the school leaving age to traditionally matriculation levels (i.e. the NSW Higher School Certificate): ‘Because all the research shows that if students either get their Higher School Certificate or an equivalent vocational qualification, then their employment opportunities in later life are far greater and so is their income-earning capacity’ (‘NSW Govt considers raising school leaving age’ 2006).

Acknowledging the circulation of such promises and their failure to materialise, I made it clear to Bethan that I was sympathetic to her situation. ‘You are right to feel ripped off!’ I wrote. ‘I find it incredible how much you have to do just to survive, considering you’ve also just finished 12 years of full time study, which is a lot!’ She replied:

Even if I apply I may not get the job and sure, I may find something better in a few months, but desperation is really getting the best of me at the moment. It's so

hard I can't imagine what it's like for someone older with more people to look after... I'm 18 and currently have \$9.00 in my bank account. Which is ridiculous when there is so many necessities in everyday life that you have to pay for!

'I agree. I'm 32 now and I don't find myself coming off on top by very much every month, especially after paying rent, food, petrol, bills, etc. Stuff I need to do my job.' I think I drew on my own position in an attempt to reassure Bethan, but immediately remembered that in comparison, my position was enormously better off than hers. 'Mind you', I continued in cognisance of this:

I have more than \$9, so it must be so much harder for you. While I don't feel like it would take much for my head to sink below the water and it's hard not knowing whether I'll have a job when my contract expires, it's nothing like what you must be going through. You must feel so battered and bruised by it all.

'It's stressful thinking about the future when it's so uncertain. I think the world offers so many opportunities but they are really hard to grasp, especially job opportunities.' Bethan added very insightfully. She went on to confess:

Getting by is really hard. Each week I help my parents with food or give a little extra money for anything we need that week that we just can't afford and can't get by without. I get about \$68.00 a week and that goes fast when giving money to my parents, so I just survive on that by not going out often or buying myself things.

'Do you feel like you can't live properly?' I asked, recalling Berlant's (2011) point that in the present time, widespread precarity has meant that the 'good life' is experienced as a waiflike ideal haunting the present.

'Yeah for sure,' were the words that first appeared on screen, followed not long after by:

I feel as though I miss out on a lot because on my money situation. But I mean I'm grateful for what I have and I'm sure it's harder for others. It's scary to think families have to scarp by on the small amount of money they get each week. It's just a bit stressful for us at the moment. It's tough when even my mum isn't able to find a job and my dad doesn't earn are large amount of money. Finding jobs is shit for everyone.

'No doubt it is harder for some people, but that doesn't lessen your problems.' I immediately affirmed in admiration for her empathic sensibility. 'Besides', I continued, 'I'm sure it's no less tough for your family.'

There was a cessation in typing for several minutes. Had I upset her? Had she gone to the bathroom? It's hard to tell when one is conversing in this way. More minutes went by before two words appeared on my screen: 'So tough...'

I didn't want to gloss over this difficulty, which I sensed Bethan felt quite acutely. The ellipsis she'd typed suggested as much. I think for her, not being able to contribute more to her family was a source of deep frustration and shame. As I pondered the balancing act of Bethan and her family on the financial razor's edge, I recalled that this type of experience was not uncommon in the Mount Druitt region and in many parts of western Sydney. Indeed, such stories had just a year ago been prominent in the news media, providing a focal point of discontent that had received a lot of attention during a Federal Government election year. However, in that instance, the anger and resentment that were given voice were not directed at the economic institutions of Australian society, but rather at a recurrent scapegoat purported to be competing for already scarce jobs: the immigrant and more specifically, the refugee seeking asylum (see Taylor 2013; Green 2013). Indeed, the two major parties in Australian politics campaigned heavily in western Sydney on a platform of 'economic patriotism' – that is, 'to stop foreign workers being put at the front of the queue with Australian workers at the back' (Gillard in Grattan 2013). Having encountered some of this sentiment in my work with young people in Mount Druitt, though remarkably rare, it had always

made me particularly uncomfortable not only politically, but also as a non-white migrant who keenly feels his own 'visible racial difference' (Ang 2001, p.113). I wanted to gauge Bethan's feelings about this issue in light of her difficult circumstances, so I picked up my tablet again and typed:

It sounds extremely difficult for you and your family right now. I'm so sorry to hear that and of course, if I can offer any help, let me know.

You know, sometimes speak to young people who are having trouble finding a job, getting into university and whose families are also doing it tough. Few have expressed a sort of unhappiness towards migrants or foreigners or refugees for 'taking jobs' or employers not hiring 'Australians'. Have you ever heard this type of thing expressed? What do you think as someone who is in a similar position?

Bethan's answer was quick and acerbic:

Absolutely not! I don't feel resentment, just desperation sometimes. I've heard so many people resent migrants and refugees and it kind of pisses me off. Put in your best and get over it! You shouldn't resent other people for what jobs you don't have. I think I just feel desperate to get a job so I don't really think about other people's jobs... haha! So no, definitely not.

And thanks for the offer of help. I appreciate it and so do my family.

Apart from an instinctive feeling of relief from reading this, I was also comforted by the strength of Bethan's assertions on this issue despite the opinions of others she encounters. For according to Standing (2011, pp.66-67), there is a growing tendency in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States to demonise 'illegal migrants' as part of a populist reaction to the insecurities visited on the precariat in general: 'They [i.e. migrants], rather than labour flexibility policies and shrinking social

assistance, are blamed for the tribulations of local workers'. As I basked in her resistance to the trend of migrant scapegoating, Bethan quickly filled the breach of my silence:

Do you think having your PhD makes finding a job more or less stressful for you? Do you feel as though you have resentments or regrets?

And there it was. The turning point in the conversation that I knew was coming. Bethan had this way of seeking reciprocal disclosure with sensitivity and earnest desire to learn that made her questions compelling. Over time I would come to learn that with her, it is almost always a push toward dialogue over consultation. At that moment, sitting on that chair, it took a significant marshalling of my mental resources to unbind the knotted emotions I felt in response to her questions centred around the PhD, whether it was harder or easier to get work, and particularly around the question of regret. I took over ten minutes and a deep breath before I punched away:

I think without a family close by and as a migrant with no extended family in Sydney, it definitely makes finding a job and having a job much more urgent, which can be a good thing and a bad thing. It may be good because I've learnt to constantly be aware of money issues, but it may also be bad because at some point, I just have to work even if the job is not suitable or even unpleasant! So say if I'm unemployed for a few months, I would definitely start to apply for jobs that I know I'm not suitable for. Ironically, this usually ends in even more rejection.

In terms of the PhD, I don't regret doing it. I've learnt so much about the world, the lives of others and myself in the process. But I do think that the employment reality for PhDs is dreadful at the moment. There are a vast number of underemployed PhDs on casual or short term contracts working at universities with no long term prospects.

I must admit typing those lines made me feel vulnerable. I am not accustomed to baring my anxieties for the world to see. It was, after all, my job to placate others' anxieties about the future. It brought to mind those countless post-PhD horror stories of prolonged unemployment I'd read in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (e.g. Benton 2009), the higher education supplements of *The Guardian* (e.g. 'The unemployed young academic' 2012) and *The Australian* (e.g. Bellamy-McIntyre 2012), as well as on hundreds of blogs online (see Dunn, 2013). If Bethan typifies the precariat experience, many of my fellow PhD graduates and I feel like what Berardi (2012) calls the 'cognitariat':

[T]he concept of the cognitariat has something to do with cognition, with the activity of knowledge, intellectual production... but it also contains the idea of proletarian in the Marxian sense. Who are proletarians? They are the people who have nothing to lose, because they have no property. The cognitarians have only their intellectual work...

'I would find that so hard.' Bethan replied about a minute later. A few seconds after that, she tried to bring our situations closer together:

That's scary that even people with PhDs and good degrees find it hard to get a job when someone like me with no post-school study is looking for jobs. It just shows how bad the employment situation in Australia is getting if people that are qualified, trained or have a degree cannot find a job either. That's just ridiculous!

I appreciated her sympathy, but I must admit it was a destabilising moment for me as one who spends most of his day offering sympathy rather than being on the receiving end of it. Besides, Bethan had her own anxieties about unemployment to deal with, let alone expend emotional energy on me. She was quite right, for example, to intuit the precarious employment climate in Australia. Yet in my instinctive urge to close myself off, I realised that had clearly not yet reached the state of modesty required for a true dialogue. For as Gadamer puts it, 'modesty consists in the fact that for it there is no higher principle than this: holding oneself open to the conversation' (in Hahn 1997, p.36). I wonder

whether I was genuinely concerned or merely deflecting when I inquired in return:

In a way, you must feel similarly about high school. There's all this push to have Mount Druitt students finish high school and after it's done, jobs are hard to come by. Do you ever think: 'What's the point?'

Bethan fired off an answer to this at such a speed that I wasn't sure exactly what to be impressed by – the velocity of her thinking or the fury of her typing:

So I often wonder what the point is. There is this big deal made about Mount Druitt students doing well, but the last two employers that have called me went silent when I mentioned living in Mount Druitt. Imagine all the thousands of people who get rejected like this. It's bullshit!

On this she was quite right to be upset. Mount Druitt gets such bad press on a regular basis and popular perceptions of the place are overwhelmingly negative. The controversial far-right columnist of the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph* Andrew Bolt (2010), for example, cites Mount Druitt as a case study in the failure of Australian immigration policies, portraying migrant populations there as disposed to criminality. Yet despite his extreme views, Bolt does not stand alone in characterising Mount Druitt as an exemplary case of social failure. A cursory search on the internet using the keywords 'Mount Druitt news' will uncover up a trove of reports across the media spectrum about a chronically disadvantaged neighbourhood with 'toxic effects' on those who live there ('Pick Your Neighbours with Care' 2004); a region beset by violent crime (e.g. Danks 2011; Howden & Ralston 2011; Gardiner 2012) and outlaw gang activity (Coote, Cuneo & Klein 2012; 'Bikie links' to torched industrial unit' 2011). On the internet, 'Mount Druitt memes' that invoke the neighbourhood as fuel for humour relating to social welfare claimants and criminal violence has become a popular sub-genre amongst Sydney's residents (see Figure 1). The net effect of all this is clear; the very name of Mount Druitt, as Morgan (2005) points out, has almost become a metonym for social disadvantage. In Bethan there

was a young woman who struggled to move beyond the two-dimensional image of Mount DrUITT prevailing hitherto, and yet was placed squarely back into that frame by some employers.



Figure 1 Some widely-circulated memes on Mount DrUITT (memegenerator.net 2014)

The icon on the screen of the instant messenger informed me that more was forthcoming. It was clear that Bethan's anger hadn't burnt out with the issue of discrimination against people from Mount DrUITT. She continued:

Also something that made me so frustrated yesterday a job ad for a sales assistant asked for a photo for the application. That sounds so ridiculous to me that they are going to base their decision by what the applicants look like, not only do they want either experience, a degree, higher education or capability, they want to see if you look good enough for their store. It turns me off even applying for their job.

Reading this, I must admit I was shocked but unsurprised: shocked because decades after it has been made unlawful for employers to discriminate on the grounds of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin under the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and of sex under the *Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Department



of Police and Justice 2005), photographs of job applicants were still being requested in order to assess their 'suitability' based on appearance; unsurprised because in a retail market where those hired as workers are obliged to induce others to buy products by the power of their presentation, what psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1955, pp.141-142) describes as the 'marketing orientation' becomes the imperative:

In this orientation, man [*sic*] experiences himself as a thing to be employed successfully on the market [...] His sense of value depends on his success: on whether he can sell himself favourably... His body, his mind and his soul are capital... Human qualities like friendliness, courtesy, kindness, are transformed into commodities, into assets of the 'personality package', conducive to a higher price on the personality market.

Bethan returned the attention to me: 'Hey, do you feel as though your job was a big investment? I mean, by the time you did your PhD, you had already studied so much and done so much work. Did you feel burdened by studying so much?'

'It's interesting you ask me this in light of your earlier question about regrets.' I said after a thirty second pause. I went on to mention how a week prior to our conversation, I had attended the launch of Ruth Barcan's *Academic Life and Labour in the New University* (2014), a book that casts an incisive eye over the realities of contemporary academic work ranging from such broad trends as the pressure of market-driven performance measurements to individual feelings of perpetual inadequacy. Despite the brutality of this emergent landscape in addition to the harsh state of the post-PhD employment, I informed Bethan that:

I have no regrets for the time I've spent studying. I've learnt so much about the world I live in and also some skills I can use to make it a little better. My journey through education has also taught me a lot about myself, which hasn't always been pleasant, but it's always been good. That's why I love learning new things. I find it opens up the world to me, and it opens me up to the world.

It wasn't five seconds before I felt a sudden self-consciousness about what I'd just written. Perhaps it sounded a little too much like a typical liberal-humanist sound bite about self-enlightenment through education, which wasn't what I was aiming for. Having read Bourdieu (1984), I was well aware of the elitism that can lurk behind the ethos of a 'liberal education' that hold itself aloof from allegedly vulgar material and economic matters. 'Does that sound like a wank?' I asked in the most straightforward, self-negating way I could. I felt a slight shame about giving her what may be read as a trite response in light of her honesty.

'Doesn't sound wanky at all... Haha!' Bethan replied. Whether she did out of genuine sentiment or charity I am uncertain. In any case, I recoiled for a moment and stayed silent in contemplation about the costs and benefits of my educational journey. Again, in her empathic way, I sensed she really tried to connect her experience of neither being in fulltime employment nor fulltime study with mine:

I totally understand although in I am in a different place. I feel so good having this year off and working on myself, my ideas, my interests and doing some short courses that just push me a bit to still study! I've already learnt so much about my abilities and myself from doing just one short course online. It has been totally worth it.

I mean, there's a lot to be thinking about. It's so crazy that there will always be more and more change and everything we already know will need to be updated all the time!

I think it was after reading this that two things about Bethan became clear to me, and which made sense of a lot of what she'd expressed up to this point: that somehow, in the midst of experiencing a precariat's anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation, Bethan maintained both a tenaciously independent mindset and a sensitivity to the lives of others: her concern with the financial stresses within her family or other families; her rejection of migrant scapegoating; her sense of injustice at discrimination based on where one lives or one's appearance; or her

sympathy for the vagaries of an academic life so distant from the realities she faces.

According to Fromm (1955), there are two broad responses to the feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and futility generated by modern (capitalist) societies – what he calls the ‘non-productive’ versus ‘productive’ orientations to life. A non-productive orientation is one that is characterised by narcissism, destructiveness, retreating to the safety of closed group identities (labelled ‘incest’ by Fromm 1955, p.38ff.), conformity to norms and adherence to irrational ways of seeing others and the world, which is most clearly manifest in a fear of future possibilities and a nostalgia for some ‘lost Edens’ – some more primitive state of unity with the world and security with a group (Fromm 1955, pp.30-66; also Clinebell 1981). A productive orientation, by contrast, is embodied by a person who displays love beyond oneself, transcendence beyond passivity toward creativity and purposefulness, solidarity with others while maintaining one’s individuality and seeking a reasonable understanding of others and the world (Fromm 1955, pp.30-66). Such a person approaches the future as an opportunity to express their intellectual and emotional potentialities, as well as striving for ideals that are not yet accomplished, but which are desirable for the growth and happiness of people (Fromm 1942, pp.222, 229). In short, they ‘develop the bonds of solidarity together with unrestricted individuality and independence’ (Fromm 1968, p.67).

In light of this, I believe Bethan can be said to exemplify a productive orientation despite her difficult financial and employment circumstances while living in a deeply maligned region of Sydney. It is important to note that the word ‘productive’ does not refer primarily to ‘material production’ (i.e. formal employment) in Fromm’s (1949, p.84) definition – in which case Bethan may be judged as ‘unproductive’ – but rather to ‘a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience. It refers to mental, emotional, and sensory responses to others, to oneself, and to things’. In addition, ‘orientation’ refers to an underlying attitude rather than activity and, as Ahmed (2006, p.545) asserts, not a strict categorisation of a personality type but ‘about how we begin, how we proceed from here’. Bethan’s productive orientation

can thus be implied from the manner of the responses she'd already given. It became more evident, however, as our dialogue moved on to topics such as definitions of success, her chosen post-school path and our views on the future.

## Being productive

If one of the conditions of contemporary precarity is its spreading throughout class and population loci such that everyone has to experience the unreliability of the world's commitment to continuing 20th century forms of reciprocity... it does not follow that people feel in the same way their abandonment or the archaism of their attachment to certain styles of identification, fantasy, and pleasure to be shamed. Even in the face of shaming negation they could feel nothing, numb, disbelief, rage, exhaustion, *ressentiment*, hatred, dissolving anxiety, shame – or even feel free to be cut loose from the old repetitions. (Berlant, 2010)

I was impressed by Bethan's perspective on learning more about herself through self-reflection and action (i.e. seeking work, doing short courses). I also wanted to know more about what she hoped to achieve, especially given her present situation and as a young woman in a deeply stigmatised region not only with social disadvantage, but also with soaring rates of domestic violence against women and children (Hitchings 2014, p.13).

'What would you consider success?' I put to her before adding: 'Also, do you feel as a young woman from Mount Druitt that your chances of achieving success (however you define it) are worse than others?' Bethan's response was swift, suggesting she had thought about this before:

I think everyone has their own idea of success and each person's success is different, so I would probably consider success to be reaching where you want to be and who you want to be. I feel that if I truly want to be successful I will be and I need to work hard, but I guess opportunities being hard to get does make me wonder how hard it will be.

She then posed similar questions to me pertaining to my own situation: 'What do you think success is? Do you think you've reached where you want to be or do you still want to go further?' It took me several minutes to formulate a response. I tried not to be cynical about the future, especially in conversation with a young woman who had every reason to be, but remained determined in her pursuit of self-defined success. Cynicism, as contemporary philosophers Peter Sloterdijk (1987) and Slavoj Žižek (1989, pp.29-30) have variously pointed out, is a posture that trades up fortitude for a chastened 'realism' and conformist melancholia. Yet my response betrayed my best efforts:

I don't know what I think about success. I guess it's tied up with the individual in relation to their place in family, culture, values and whatever societal fantasies are in the mix. However, do you think we will ever arrive at the time/place we each think of as 'success'? It seems like a cruel game: when one reaches point A, success turns out to be at point B, and when one summons more energy to get there, it's now at point C, and so on? Maybe I'm being a grumpy bastard...

Bethan remained obstinate in the face of my unsubtle despondency at the state of the world, and indeed of other people's capacity to be self-determined. Apart from being a rebuke to me, her response serves as a good demonstration of her independence of mind and belief in the possibility of realising potentialities in the future: 'Not really! I think we will always think of something more that we want to be and then we'll aim for that. I think it's a good thing that you will forever aim for more if you are motivated.'

There were courageous words for a young woman who was underemployed, struggling financially and not formally undertaking fulltime study at an institution. She lacked all those outward signs we commonly attribute to success: a highly regarded and well-paid job; the ability to consume products or services freely and conspicuously; and the sanction of a conventional educational establishment. So I put it to her directly:

I guess what's hard is that success is defined so narrowly by most. I mean, you must get that a lot. When people ask what you do and when you tell them you're not in fulltime work or university or college, they must be bewildered! You have got to be one of the most intelligent young people I know, yet to beat your own path in the face of what society expects 'success' to look like, people must think of you as a 'waste'. Do you often get that?

Bethan didn't respond as quickly as I had been accustomed to expect. Again, I started to worry if I had pressed the wrong buttons. Had I pushed her too hard? After all, things hadn't been going very well for her on a number of fronts. Had I just cut the thread that held her together? I began to feel guilty about the possibility that I may have sucked her vitality into my pessimistic black hole. I stared at the screen for what must've been ten minutes waiting for the instant messaging application to give me some indication that Bethan was still with me. Then a rejoinder arrived. It was long. I read it hastily with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation:

I completely agree about the narrow view of success. I think it's difficult because I get the sort of response you said from almost everyone and no matter how I explain what I am doing, they just focus on the fact I'm not at uni! So yes, it's hard for me to feel good about what I'm doing when no one else understands. Most people probably do think that I am a waste and it's sad because there is so much as young people that we can do and achieve. There are so many different ways! I think it should just be a given that people choose different paths and should be encouraged! I get shit all the time and it's really tiring answering the same questions to the same people who are confused with the idea of trying different options and going different ways.

My initial reaction to reading this was relief that I hadn't caused damage to her resolve, but as I read it again (less selfishly) I came to see the profound courage that Bethan had expressed, a courage to defy waves

of expectation that I did not think I possessed. Underscoring a productive orientation of individuality over conformity despite her frustration, she defies the attempt by others to define her as someone who 'lacks' the correct direction (i.e. towards a university course), instead returning the critical attention back on social norms and those who presume there are very limited possibilities for human (and especially youth) potentiality. This attitude is even more remarkable in light of her precarious financial and employment status. For as Fromm (1942, p.116) points out, in efforts to escape anxiety and futility, we tend to be 'ready to get rid of our individual self either by submission to new forms of authority or by a compulsive conforming to accepted patterns'. Bethan's resolve, which entailed holding herself open to explore the possibilities of her potentiality in the face of emotional frustration and hurt from others' expectations, was in stark contrast to an escape to authoritarianism and conformism. Eager to affirm her courage yet feeling inadequate to it, I drew upon one of my favourite poems in response:

I am so impressed by your determination. You've got guts! I guess part of my job is to help you remind people that there are different roads to walk that are equally valid. As the Brazilian poet Antonio Machado once wrote in a poem that I love:

Traveller, your footsteps are  
the path, and nothing more;  
traveller, there is no path,  
the road is made by walking.  
By walking one makes the path,  
and upon glancing back  
one sees the path  
that will never be trod again.  
Wanderer, there is no path –  
Only wakes upon the sea.

Bethan replied to this at her more usual breakneck speed. She first responded to the poem, and then laid out her hopes for the future along the path she is walking. It mustn't have been easy to do so. One is liable to be judged as foolish, naive, irresponsible or utopian whenever one expresses a sentiment that deviates from the norm as Bethan does:

I really like that poem! I think it's a huge reminder that people go their own path and that the path is justified and good enough and that we don't even know the exact path we are taking until we start. That's part of the worry, fun and stress of it all... haha!

I'm not 100% sure where I want to end up or what I want... I guess I really want to do well in whatever I choose to do, become something I'm proud of. I want to excel at what I do and I feel that I can if I really try. I would love to have enough money and not to worry... that's a hope! My frustrations make it hard for me to hope for these things, I guess, because I let them get the best of me sometimes and I choose to focus on things that piss me off about the world and employment and careers. I'm not quite sure of where I will end up other than always achieving what I want and getting there on my own strengths. I haven't given myself a time limit or any other limit but my emotions sometimes make me feel like everything needs to happen right away and everything needs to work right now, do you get that sometimes?

'I do feel like that all the time,' I replied, 'then I get depressed by the way the world is and why I am not really making an impact on it. Talking with you has been so uplifting though. You are so determined and yet so open to possibilities.' Not wanting to take up anymore of her time, I indicated that this was probably a good time to sign off. 'Thank you, Bethan, for your time!' I keyed in, adding: 'I really appreciate what you have to say and how you go about life. We should probably both go and get on with our lives, but I want to say that I've learnt so much from you.'

'That's ok! No worries. Thank you for chatting. It's been helpful for me too.'

## **Giving and taking advice**

Both the person asking for advice and the person giving it assume that they are bound together in friendship. Only friends can advise each other or, to



put it another way, only a piece of advice that is meant in a friendly way has meaning for the person advised. (Gadamer 1989, p.323)

It was already getting dark and blustery as it does by mid-afternoon in winter. With my daily walk looming, I felt a gnawing sense of dread. By the time I closed the front door behind me, I was in a state of full-blown melancholia. It wasn't just the cold. As I'd put my walking shoes on – not the most usual of contemplative activities – I thought about Bethan's situation and wondered how long it would be before the delicate balance of her productive orientation would be thrown off kilter. With youth unemployment at astronomical levels in the Mount Druitt and reports of surging youth unemployment in general (e.g. International Labour Organisation, 2013), I was disquieted by the thought that the seemingly unstoppable tendencies in the present day economy may soon overwhelm the feisty, intelligent and obstinate young woman I had learnt so much from. If, as Butler (2009, p.2) asserts, "precarity" designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death', then what good is a productive orientation against such overwhelming forces?

By the time I'd returned from my ponderous walk, I was feeling dejected yet again. I thought about the connection between youth unemployment and the nihilistic outbursts of looting in London (see Žižek 2011). Even more, I could not erase my nervous thoughts about the rising popularity of xenophobic far-right movements amongst the jobless in the UK, France and Greece in recent times (see Kissane 2012; Tzafalias 2014). How can one person push against the congealed density of the present social, political and economic situation? And was my work as an academic advisor in Mount Druitt futile, dispensing paracetamol-strength solutions to those who face the daily lashings of a brutal employment market? I found myself picking up the iPad again, conscious that I was baring my nihilistic streak to another.

'You know, I'm feeling quite depressed by how big the problems are.' I wrote. 'I feel like I can't even properly help you in your situation. I'm really not sure what my job is supposed to accomplish.' I hit the button

that sent the message into the ether, turned off the tablet and retired to some dinner.

I arrived at my office at 8am the following morning with the instant messenger application displaying a '1' beside it. Like those who send all too emotionally honest messages to others via their mobile phones when in a state of drunken stupor, I was slightly embarrassed about what I'd written in a moment of weakness the night before. Clicking on the icon with apprehension, I was delivered a message from my young interlocutor:

You are right to feel anxious and down about the future. It's really draining! I really like that when you speak to others about their hopes and futures, you reveal what you truly feel as well. You help me and others to stay open and feel ok because this is a big problem everyone faces, but we can't give up.

I'm still not sure whether Bethan meant this as reinforcement of what I actually do or as a piece of advice for how to orient others in productive individuality and solidarity. In any case, as I sunk myself into my usual seat in readiness for the first appointment of the morning, I felt the knots of dejection loosen sufficiently to roll on with the Sisyphean task before me.

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