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Going Public

Carl Cederström and André Spicer

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It began over a decade ago. André was visiting Lund, a university town in southern Sweden. Carl was a PhD student there. We were introduced by a mutual friend. Quickly we discovered a shared interest in a fashionable political theorist of the time. After comparing notes, we decided to work together.

Within a few months we had produced a full paper. We presented it at a conference that summer. After Receiving some encouraging feedback, we returned to the paper, and submitted it to a journal. We got some tough but hopeful reviews. We did what they asked us to do, then sent it back once more. More comments, more work. Then we sent it back again, and again, until we were asked to do some minor amendments. When we sent off the fourth version of the paper - two years down the line - we were confident. This should get published, we thought.

One week. Two weeks. Three weeks. Then we received the editorial letter. No, we're sorry, it said. We've decided not to publish your paper.

Most academics have had this experience. But it was the first time for both of us. Putting thousands of hours

into writing an article only to have it rejected knocked our confidence. Why were we doing this?

We pushed the article to the side and got on with other things.

A year later we returned to the paper, like a wound you can't stop picking. At the time, Carl was working in a British University and was under pressure to 'perform'. He needed to publish in journals. So we resubmitted the article. Rejected once. Twice. On the third attempt, we received a slightly more positive response - a revise and resubmit, of the major kind. Another long process of convincing reviewers and editors followed.

And so, ten years after we completed the first version, the paper was finally published. Was it better than our first version? We couldn't tell. All intellectual excitement had been beaten out of us. It no longer felt like our words. It was now just an assemblage of what the reviewers wanted us to write, thinly disguised as an academic article.

This is disturbing. Like signing a false confessions. But not as disturbing as the thought that we too have been part of beating intellectual excitement out of others. Forcing others into making false confessions. We've not just been captors; we've also been guards. To be fair, we've not enjoyed administering pain to our captors. Knowing what it feels like to be on the other

end of the stick, we've always hoped to go easy on our victims. As if that would make a difference.

What is going on here? It seems like some kind of double captivity. Authors feel as if they're trapped, destined to write things they don't find interesting. And reviewers and editors feel the same way, forced to comment on papers they find pointless. Hundreds of hours spent writing. Dozens of hours reviewing and editing. For what?

There must be an alternative, we thought. And yes, there sure are. In his address to the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy proposed that social scientists could pursue the role of the public intellectual - a role which is diametrically opposed to the professional sociologists, who Burawoy describes as someone who may produce rigorous research, but speaks and writes exclusively to other researchers.

Public intellectuals are not the same as policy-oriented sociologists. Sure, policy researchers speak to alternative audiences, but in a non-critical fashion. They hope to "improve" businesses or institutions, as though they were hired consultants. They have instrumental questions in mind. Public intellectuals share the skeptical impulse of critical scholars, but they part from their fellow critics in their disinterest in the professional academic community. Public intellectuals are amateurs, not professionals. As Edward Said put it in his 1993 Reith lecture, the amateur

refuses "to be tied down to speciality". They care "for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession"

Public sociology, then, addresses extra-academic audiences, in a critical and reflexive fashion. They are not restricted by professional rules. The intellectual is moved by pressing public questions, and does not fear rocking the boat.

Where is this public intellectualism in the university?

Everywhere!

It's just that we often fail to see it.

With these thoughts in mind, we started writing *The Wellness Syndrome*. Our hope was to address public issues in a critical and reflexive way. Soon enough we had to ask: do we need organisation theory – or even social theory more generally? We weren't quite sure. We wanted to write in a scholarly way, but avoid being subsumed by scholarly logic.

You don't have to look far to find intellectual outlets – all of which address issues of public importance without evoking a smug voice of certainty. We looked in that direction for inspiration: long and informative essays which were intellectually vivid without being academically constipated.

Reading articles from *n+1*, the *Baffler*, *Aeon*, or any other intellectual magazine, made us realise two things. First, there is a thriving intellectual culture out there, and it is by no means closed to academics. Second, these outlets blend documentary, fiction, non-fiction, academic work, poetry, art and more. They aren't neurotically attached to genre and constraints. The most important thing is that the text lives, bites, and says something.

So it may not sound too strange then that our book began with an image. Not a ready-formed argument; not an aim or purpose; not a research question. An image.

The image was from the Danish short film *The Perfect Human*, made by Jørgen Leth. Filmed in black and white, like a fashion shoot by David Bailey. It opens with a neat and tidy man – short hair, black dinner jacket, bow tie – looking straight into the camera. The perfect man is in a white empty room, alone. He looks away from us, his face in profile, lighting a pipe. Music starts. Cut to the perfect woman, fixing her hair, putting on make-up.

The voice-over starts. 'Here is the human. Here is the human. Here is the perfect human'. The voice is soft and formal, as though recorded for a wildlife documentary.

We follow the perfect human as it performs ordinary human tasks. 'Now we will see how the perfect human

looks, and what it can do'. He ties his shoes, she paints her lips, he jumps, they eat. The perfect humans make love.

Jørgen Leth's film was made in 1967. You can tell. Had the film been made today, a few things would be different. Perfect humans would not eat a dish consisting of salmon, boiled potato and hollandaise sauce. Too many carbs, not enough Kale. He would not smoke a pipe. He probably wouldn't wear a bow tie either - although this item has made an unexpected comeback with some hipster.

So that is what we wanted to do: write a book about the perfect human today. We weren't interested in contributing to a particular academic field, and we didn't think too much about convention. We just wanted to explore this image. It was an image that we had both come across, as much in what we experienced everyday.

We were not interested in defending the perfect human. Neither did we want to completely ridicule her. Our wish was to question the shared ideology which shapes how she lives. We were already familiar with this ideology. Its message - to be happy and healthy - had been around us for a while.

Just to give one example: A few years ago, before we had started writing the book, Carl was waiting for the bus, with a dog next to him, enjoying a cigarette. Suddenly an elderly lady came up. She began shouting. She was clearly upset about Carl smoking so close to a dog.

We don't know how conclusive the evidence is on second-hand smoking for dogs, and we doubt that the dog was going to follow Carl's bad example and pick up the habit herself. Yet that seemed to be entirely beside the point. Carl had committed a serious wrongdoing: smoking in front of a dog was quite clearly a morally despicable act.

So there was an image which interested us, and there was a lived experience which nagged us, and there was an intellectual curiosity which we followed.

But how to proceed? We started off as two dutiful academics, reading the work on bio-power by Foucault, Agamben, Rose, Esposito, and Hardt and Negri. Then we counterposed these texts with a set of other works on 'bio-morality' by Zupan•i•, Salecl, and Žižek.

First we critiqued the existing work on bio-power, then developed our own theoretical argument about biomorality.

Then we stopped. Or *it* stopped. The text died. Or rather: we realized it had been dead from the start. We couldn't move on.

20,000 words. Lots of work. But what exactly had we said?

Nothing, it seemed. It was hard to admit. But it was just text. Masturbation with our backs proudly turned against the public. It wasn't easy, but in the end we decided to discard our text. Out it went. All into the garbage bin.

It was at this point we realised we did not want to write a book just for those keenly interested in the debates about biopolitics. Others had done it, and they had done it better than we could.

Instead, we wanted to engage with questions that a wider public had on their mind.

We wished to write in a direct and graphic manner, and we already had an image in mind: the perfect human today. We took our theoretical musings and turned them into a series of images. Some of these were borrowed from novelists such as Karl Ove Knausgaard (who examines the wellness obsessions of middle class Swedes), journalists such as Barbara Ehrenreich (who has revealed the dark side of positive psychology) and film makers like Steve McQueen (who has pictured destructive pleasure seeking). But we have also collected numerous images elsewhere - including life-loggers tracking their wives' menstrual cycles and investment bankers going to the gym in the middle of the night. We did not want to cautiously file these images into an already existing model. Neither did we want the images to speak entirely for themselves. We were more interested in the work of composition, and what would happen when mixed with other images.

In doing this, we followed Tom McCarty's suggestion that a writer is a 'receiver, modulator, retransmitter: a remixer'. It is not for the writer to come up with something new, McCarthy claims, because he or she has nothing to say. 'If you've got something to say, send a

letter to The Guardian, or stand on a crate in Speakers' Corner'. The writer is a listener, McCarthy continues. 'Not a casual listener, but an obsessive one, devoted to their task right up to the point of their own, and the task's annihilation'. By surrendering to the task of 'reading, tracing, reconfiguring', the writer is no longer trying to create a distinct and original voice. Instead, they are displaced, morphing into a transmitter.

This is a useful image to explain what we've tried to do in this book. We've listened to the signals of biomorality and received the messages from the wellness industry. We collected, reconfigured and modulated these images, remixed them - and the book was our transmission.

While composing and remixing these images, we returned, again and again, to a particular riff: the violently unpleasant background of the life of the perfect human. In Jørgen Leth's original version of *The Perfect Human* there is no background. We remain in a white room seemingly without walls. But in 2003, Lars von Trier forced Leth, his former teacher, to remake this short film, five times, each time with a new constraint. In one version, Leth was instructed to go to "the worst place in the world" and remake the film with himself cast as the perfect human. Leth goes to a slum in Bombay. In the finished film we can see him jumping, shaving and enjoying his fine meal - just like in the original film - but in this version, behind him, visible only through a

semi-transparent screen, we can see the people who dwell in this slum.

This is the image that runs as a leitmotif throughout the pages of *The Wellness Syndrome*: the malady lurking beneath the thin facade of the wellness cult. Behind the great drama of wellness, we have tried to point out, lies a distinctly unwell world.

A few years later, as the book was published in the United States, we're sitting in the back of a book store on New York's upper west-side. This was our official book launch in North America. There are ten people in the audience. Which by all official measures was a failure. Yet it was the best audience one could hope for. There was a PhD student from Columbia, a stylish editor of a woman's magazine, a shaved philosopher, a food critic from the New York Times, a wearable device designer, a best-selling fiction author, a Cambridge don specialised in French literature, two teenage girls and a crazy woman with a cat on a leash, occasionally interrupting the conversation, informing us about the name of her cat's personal trainer. Not an organizational theorists in sight. These were our readers. And we were overjoyed.

Our finished book was quite different from the book we first intended to write. And we received attention from places we didn't expect, let alone knew existed. There were reviews in national newspapers, women's magazines, health and fitness websites, as well as literary magazines, philosophy journals, and now also an

academic journal, in the field of organizations. We were asked to talk about the book on radio, television, at literary festivals, in churches, at the alcohol anonymous, corporations, and health congresses.

We had clearly struck a nerve. But, of course, not everyone liked the book. Not everyone agreed with our argument.

Academics complained about the lack of historical context and the shortage of canonical theoretical reference points. We were also mute on issues of feminism.

All of this was true, of course. The critique was justified.

So what do we have to say in our defence? Well, not much to be honest. For those interested in the historical context, we could recommend William Davis's *The Happiness Industry*. Those who want to read a more theoretical book, with longer discussions about the nature of biopolitics, could easily find such accounts in their local university library. The point about feminism was harder to address. Our honest answer is that we'd love to read that book.

These are our short and perhaps unsatisfactory answers. We appreciate the comments we've received over the years, not least those published here, all of which are written in a spirit of generosity. But we don't want to defend our stance, and fight back, point-by-point, as we're constantly expected to do in our professional

academic roles, when wrestling reviewers. Instead we've used this space to take a step back and reflect on the process of writing this book. Which is something we rarely do. We hope you don't see this as overly defeatist. Writing this book was a short break from the academic everyday, where you have to defend a position, often to the very last. Compared to the often humiliating experience of writing academic articles, we found work on this book both liberating and rewarding.

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