

*on impossible questions / healing intimacy against the symptoms of neoliberal capitalism /
a language of possession / love as continuous act of forgiveness / language failing in dealing with the
process of forgiveness / rehabilitation therapy / creating a problem to provide a solution / depressive
realism / artificial intelligence learning from pain / destroying capitalism by answering questions we
cannot yet think to ask*

with Paul Robert Sloan
22 June 2021

*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Paul Robert Sloan, Matteo Zoccolo – 22 June 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

MZ: Yeah. So, we are here sitting in Südbahnhofmarkt in Linz, straight after your performance. That was very interesting and unexpected, I have to say. A very little thing, a little action. Now it's finished and it would be nice to reflect on it.

PRS: Certainly! Let's start by suggesting a couple of books: 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' by Fredric Jameson and 'Relational Aesthetics' by Nicolas Bourriaud.

MZ: Cool. Would you like to put the microphone here in the middle?

PRS: Is it strong enough to sit between us?

MZ: I have some doubts, because many people are talking here around.

PRS: That's fine. Up this close? Brilliant. Yeah, the performance is six or seven years old. The original materials for it are somewhere in the US and a large book collection that I have, that's due to be shipped here at some point. And yeah, the idea of intimacy in public spaces comes from my grappling with mental health, and working with that. Because, if you look at society and the development of culture, usually, in previous societies, the group helped the individual, right. There's this old saying, 'it takes a village to raise a child', meaning that every single person took on a different role in the development of a person. And now, in today's society, we expect our partners to carry all of our emotional baggage. And that emotional heavy lifting is particularly huge on individuals. And so I looked at things like therapists and doctors, and what their role is. It's to have a level of conversational intimacy that we no longer have within our friendships without those friendships becoming romantic. No longer have within our romantic relationships, without them becoming tense and difficult and hard. And back to the performance, in it I encourage people in sitting down, storytelling, and then finding a very hard or impossible question to answer; so that you could think about the levels of intimacy that you shared with a stranger, and then compare and contrast that into your levels of intimacy with friends and then with your partner, and see how they would be different by comparison. It's this relational activity that I feel was so important in past societies. So, yeah. What do you think?

MZ: It's fucked up, I think.

PRS: What's fucked up about it?

MZ: I think there is a certain struggle to try and re-define those things, even though you don't really have an agency to do that.

PRS: Why?

MZ: I mean, there is a structure we act within. And for an individual, it's difficult to re-define it. It's not even possible, probably. There has to be a collective effort to re-define the neoliberal capitalist structure we live in. I don't really see a way out of starting from individuals, and not from collectivity. In that structure, even participation and collectivity are about the individual. It's still about finding in your partner or close friends an ally. As you said, 'it takes a village to raise a child'. What if it's a city instead? It cannot take a city to raise a child. I think it only works on a small scale. But at this point in history, it's difficult to go back and think on a small scale, you know.

PRS: Um... Yeah. It's difficult to think about things in terms of a small scale. And taking things from a city to a small scale is a difficult way to think about it. If you're going to frame it and look at the structure of neoliberal capital and capitalism, there's a lot going on there that's interesting, and also problems upon problems upon problems. But if you look at, for example, Jameson's work, he argues that depression and mental health issues are an outcropping of capitalism. And so, that the causes of depression and mental health problems like bipolar disorder, are actually side effects of capitalism. Right?

MZ: I guess.

PRS: Is intimacy a form of treatment for capitalism? If yes, how does this treatment works? What's the dosage? How does it function and how does it operate? So, if you have a broken bone, as an example, we give you three roentgens of radiation to figure out how your bones are broken. We don't put you into a nuclear vat and kill you, right? We give you just enough to get the diagnosis to figure out what's wrong. And then, we set the bone in place, we put a cast on it and we're good. So, if we're looking at intimacy in relation to neoliberal capitalism, intimacy is an antidote when it's treated as intimacy, rather than when it's treated as possession. And one of the problems with English as a language is that it is entirely possessive. It is the language of the market, the language of trade, the major language of commerce. And so, within that, it takes this possessive quality. When it comes to love, it takes possession as well, right? Go ahead.

MZ: Thanks. I think you touched a crucial point. One of my unanswered questions is, "How to build a shared vocabulary?" A vocabulary in which we can twist the meaning of some words and find new ways of speaking about things, shaping reality the way we want to. I think the question of language is a tricky one. And I agree about intimacy used as a sort of cure, as a therapy. It's pretty sad, right? It's not intimacy for the sake of itself. It's intimacy to fix some disturbance of a system that yes, it works for Western society, but maybe is also destroying individuals?

PRS: Sure... OK, there's definitely a way to see it like

that. But then you have to define what love is, right? And you have to define how that works, and how intimacy works. And my definition of love is: love is a continuous act of forgiveness. Because the more you get to know someone, the more you realize that they are nothing like what you thought they were. And you have to forgive them for that. And you have to forgive yourself for having these preconceptions about that person. And then, one day you'll have a fight and you forgive them if you want to figure out how to move forward. And so, it's this continuous act of forgiveness that becomes something else. And that's where language fails.

MZ: Where?

PRS: Language doesn't have a set of words for the process of feeling forgiveness. We have words for forgiving. We have words to say you have been forgiven. We have words for saying, "I am past it, I have dealt with it." There is not really a lot about dealing with that emotional range. We have like the five or seven stages of grief, which people feel in a different and random order, it's not linear. And so, within that realm, we're outside of the neoliberal capitalist realism, if we want to put Mark Fisher's term onto it, as in his book 'Capitalist Realism, is there no alternative?'. Because there's not a way to linguistically codify that. So, there's not a way to process it. There's not a way to package it. There's not a way to sell it. And so, it's outside the purview of the norm. And because of that, then love, intimacy and forgiveness become something else, entirely. And then, as a treatment, it's different.

MZ: What do you mean?

PRS: So, I went with the broken bone idea. Treating a broken bone has a very set linear structure. But if you've broken your foot, an ankle or wrist, you are very aware that the rehabilitation of the muscles takes a certain amount of attention, and that can take years. So, if you break your ankle, you have to retrain your ass muscles to fire in sequence when running or when moving. And you get that from myofascial release, stretching, physical therapy. But its real use comes through moving effortlessly. With jogging, running, martial arts, sports, making love. All of these things, all these activities, are the therapy itself. It's the living that is the therapy. It's the treatment, the setting of the bone, the fixing of it, the firing of the muscles... These are just additions to that therapeutic recovery. It's like going to therapy and taking medication. You do it so that you can offset the emotional disturbance of being heavily depressed or absolutely manic. Wow, that's loud!

MZ: Ambulance gone.

PRS: But you also go to therapy with a set goal, which is, "I want to deal with *something*." You go to physical therapy with a goal, "I want this muscle to work, so that I can

do A, B and C.” And so, figuring that out, is the way that I believe that that works and that functions. And building on that takes a lot of time, and it takes something outside of what we would call normal in terms of ability to buy that product, sell that product or work with it. You really have to discover it. And it’s a pain in the ass to get to.

MZ: As you said, the system we are living in creates the problem. We can say that a symptom of the system is, let’s say, depression. And then the system itself also tries to heal those mental issues, providing psychologists through our care system, for example. Do you actually believe that this system of creating an issue and then providing a solution is something positive? Because to me, it seems a bit like a strategy analog to the one of those advertisements that create a need and then provide a solution. Which is buying a product.

PRS: Yeah. So, when you have a problem and you create a solution, your solution creates another problem, and then that problem creates another solution and bla bla bla. In terms of something like capitalism or capitalist realism creating a problem like depression... Capitalist realism and capitalism, generally, have also created the most massive technological and social advancements human beings have ever seen, right? That *that* is a massive plus. And things like mental health as a disorder is massively negative, as well. But arguing it as positive or negative, I think is reductionist and too much of a problem to go into. But if you look at depression, there’s a line of research called ‘depressive realism’, which argues very convincingly... That was loud.

MZ: That was loud.

PRS: It argues very convincingly that people who are depressed see reality more clearly than anybody else. And so, you could look at capitalism creating this negative of depression as a problem, and then argue well enough that that depression has given us a view of reality that is... very clear. And so, then we can say what is the nature of reality as close to real as we can get. There’s a benefit to that, too. With regards to this system of making and creating problems, I think it’s a question of what can you pull from those problems that negate the previous problem to it, and work your way backwards, solving problems based on the solutions you’ve gained. Right?

MZ: But in the end, I don’t think the goal of the average human being is to understand life. I guess the main and first need of a human being is to not feel pain, is to feel good. Right?

PRS: I don’t agree. Then- then you step into the world of artificial intelligence. If we want to create a singularity, an intelligence equivalent to humans in a machine, we have to teach it to feel pain. Because most human understanding

is in relation to pain. It’s one of our first major emotional changes, right. And so, when you look at the singularity, we understand that level of intelligence and ourselves in understanding that we would never want to create a machine that initially feels pain, and then try to convince it that joy and happiness are worth feeling in relation to that, right. We can’t do that because morally, none of us really want to do that. At least I hope so. But that’s a moral and ethics question, which is a different argument entirely.

If you look at films about the rise of machines or the rise of, quote-unquote, ‘artificial intelligence’ to defeat humanity, that’s not, in my opinion, an argument against artificial intelligence, or a fear of artificial intelligence. For me, that’s a presentation and a representation of our fear of capitalism. And our fear is what that will do to us. And our fear that capitalism will turn us into automatons, not machines. But into human beings without feelings. And so, this is again that cyclical loop. If we can follow it around and use it to see around the corners, we can use it to see ourselves better.

MZ: Um...

PRS: And I think capitalism has done something wonderful in that it has given human beings such a view of ourselves, that we are both terrified and disgusted by what we are. But even in that disgust, we have some hope about what we could become, and how good we could be. And it’s not a sense of finding out the nature of reality. I think it’s a very small amount to people who care enough about that to get into it. But those few who do, can then work to create a world that is inherently, socially helpful, and socially wonderful. A world where if you need medical care, you can get it. If you want an education, you can get it. If you decide in your 40s you want to change careers, “Cool you can do that. We’ll send you back to university and retrain you.” You’ll get better results and you’ll be a happier person, or more content person, or more likely to discover what you want from life. And so, I think that this system exists for a reason, and playing within it, you can find things that have never been found. But if you choose not to go into it, you’re just gonna see it as a structure that will ultimately try to destroy you. And you’ll let it.

MZ: ...

PRS: There’s a really great story to finish that argument, which always comes to my head. Whenever the US government were coming up with the Park Service and keeping Yellowstone and all these other national parks as national parks, the Congress asked these people, “Why should we preserve nature? What’s the point?” Their answer was, “We have to preserve these spaces so that our children can answer questions we cannot yet think to ask.” That, for me, is really beautiful. As we live through capitalism, as we live through this era of time... We, you and I and the generations ahead of us, can answer questions that

we are only just beginning to ask. And from that, we can begin to predict the future. And from that, that's how we ultimately destroy neoliberal capitalism. Because the neoliberal capitalist's idea is that it steals the future from us. Under that, we can't imagine a future. We can imagine the end of the world, but not the end of capitalism. But if we can encourage our generations to answer questions that we cannot ask, then we destroy it immediately. Because then we build a future together.

MZ: Sounds good.

PRS: I've got to go get a haircut.

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