

We need a paradigm shift in thinking about humanity

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To paraphrase and distort Dave Hickey (where he uses beauty and the beautiful, I am using normality and the normal):

Normality is a ◻ ◻ ✕ ◻ ● ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ and a set of ambient community standards. "Normal" is what we do and we are, whether we like it or not, or what we are, however voluntarily or involuntarily. [The original quote appeared in *Bomb Magazine*, Spring 1995]

How do we measure normality? We can use statistics. But that, depending on what methods we want to use, means that I have more legs than the "average person". Is the average normal? If so, then normality is just a mathematically contrived statistic/status and nothing else. Not that I am having a pop at mathematicians.

Let's look at the much-peddled idea of human nature. I think it's nonsense. There is a way humans behave in certain situations that seems to display a common trait. Yet if we compare this to the way sociologists believe our hunter-gatherer forebears lived, during the greater period of modern human existence, then human nature reads very differently. Have we evolved, or have we been coerced into believing a compelling hierarchical/capitalist narrative in relation to what is normal? I believe we have been coerced, but there you go. My beliefs mean nothing other than that they are my beliefs.

In terms of my own normality... well, I don't consider myself a psychopath. But normal is obviously a disputed term. I'm normal in some senses since I am married. We have a mortgage on a house that we live in. We have to work for a living and we use public transport. We buy food in our local shops and make dinner for each other. We both have middle-class jobs.

You can decide which parts of that are normal. There is nothing inherently odd there, depending on one's ambient community standards.

Yet my own normality hasn't remained the same. I grew up in a working-class community in North East London. All the houses were pretty much the same. We were all pretty much white and from the East End of London. Very few of our parents had a great deal of "formal" education. Both my parents left school at the age of 14 but this does not mean they are uneducated. Not many of my peers went on to higher education.

We ate English food, often the same dinner on the same day of the week. We watched football: the main division was whether one was Arsenal or Tottenham Hotspur; no-one else was supported. This was before the globalisation and mass capitalisation of football; if anyone said they did not support a local London team they would have been kicked out of the playground. My parents worked in Hoxton, which was an area of grinding poverty. You can still see the shop if you want to: 90 Hoxton Street. I think it is now called Fags and Mags.

What one needs to remember is that going into higher education was a big thing. That was one leaving one's social/cultural background behind. Whereas it is normal for middle-class kids to go to higher education, it was not for the ◻ ◻ ✕ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻ ◻. When I left to go to art school my mother said to me, "Don't ever forget where you come from." I have tried not to. I still consider myself working-class. It is claimed that one's class is instilled very early on in childhood. I think I agree with that.

It is a real tragedy that the present government's policies make it harder for the current generation of young people to go to art school or university. If I were to be saddled with the debts that they have, I doubt I would ever have gone. It is an attack on culture and knowledge and it's an attack on the working class. Class warfare has never stopped and it is mainly prosecuted, on many different fronts, by the affluent on the working class: housing, education, healthcare, etc. It is claimed that there are enough empty houses in Europe to house all of our homeless people twice over, which means we have about five million empty homes left over to house the people who make up the increasingly desperate refugee crisis.

In my opinion this crisis is notably impacting society's view on normality. My fear is that these scenes will become normal. Neo-conservative capitalism, failed foreign policy, environmental degradation and media manipulation will see the images that we are witnessing at the moment become all too common. Worldwide, we currently have the largest displaced population since World War II.

In the short term we have two possible responses: build fences or open doors. In the long term we need to address the massive difference between rich and poor, the secure and the threatened. We need to address the military-industrial complex that props up our national economy and then causes catastrophes.

We need a paradigm shift in thinking about , where we come from and where we need to live, both politically and environmentally. To do this effectively, humanity needs a radical stance, a structural change in how we organise our world and how we think about ourselves, our fellow humans, the other animals we share the planet with and all our human and non-human habitats.

I'm not sure that this is going to happen until it all gets a lot worse. Until then we will open a couple of doors and build a whole lot of fences. But I will say this: fences (both physically and conceptually) are just obstacles. We can jump over them, pull them down or dig underneath them. The more of us who do this, the better place we shall all end up in.

I lived in Brixton for 13 years and when I left it was a changed place. I loved it for what it was and not for what it had become, and many of my friends loved it too. To quote Oscar Wilde (who was talking about America) the area went from "barbarism to decadence without the intervention of civilisation". Obviously Brixton was not barbaric but it was very anarchic; the shift happened quickly without many of us noticing, until we saw the prices of renting accommodation go up.

It had become a "go to" area as opposed to a "no go" area. And that is when we, like many others, moved to another South London suburb, this time without squatting; and we have become part of another gentrification of another community. In the local shop I overheard a white working-class man saying to the Pakistani man behind the counter, "I used to know everyone around here but all those bastards from Brixton have moved in."

I read recently that something like one in 65 people in England is a millionaire. I know two millionaires and they do not conform to my stereotypes of millionaires but they bought fairly cheap houses in the 1970s and these houses are now worth more than a million pounds. They both agree that this is disgusting and very problematic for London and its future.

So is that normal, simply the way of things? It is at the moment but surely it cannot last. Essentially London is being "socially cleansed" and this will destroy what makes London great and re-frame what is considered normal.

My idea of normality is no different from when I hung around in squats, helping to organise art exhibitions, making food for the café and helping feed people a decent meal when they hadn't had one. I am older now and so the way I act is practically different; but if large enduring squats were still legal then I would still be involved (not that I am saying that legality should be a bar for involvement, just that it seems to be a lost cause at the moment). I'll leave that to the young people who know what is going on. As Ian Bone, the designated leader of the anarchist organisation Class War, wrote in his autobiography, "My brick-chucking arm is not as good as it used to be", although those may not be his exact words.

I have a dog and walk her every day and she is my constant and loyal companion. Except that she is an Irish Terrier, a breed that, shall we say, has its own mind. She knows right from wrong but does not worry about doing "wrong". Her behaviour is normal to me but not to other people who have a different breed of dog.

And this is the thing, she is a pedigree dog and so conforms to breed standard. She is normal but not natural, as she has been bred by humans to be what she is. The question about normal and/or natural is here, if indeed there is such a thing as natural, or indeed normal.

I have a problem with the concept of the . I am not natural as I have been inoculated against various diseases, and thus I'm a product of medical science. I have had teeth fixed in the same way, although it may not look like it. There is little in the way of landscape that has not been made or "curated" by mankind.

I find our relationship to animals odd. We are, supposedly, a nation of animal-lovers (it is claimed that one in four households has a dog, although again I do not know what form of statistical analysis was used) but we eat animals everyday and use them for "scientific" tests, whether to find a cure for cancer or to test cosmetics or tobacco.

Arguably, our relationship to the landscape is based on class and ownership. It is generally accepted that we are facing an environmental catastrophe, yet capitalism continues as if we can carry on using the earth's resources with abandon and creating a possibly uninhabitable planet. We could escape to other worlds. However, we have left so much "space junk" in near-space that launching small satellites is increasingly difficult, let alone the science fiction dream of colonising other planets.

So that is why I have a problem with the concept of nature: humankind has fucked that well and truly. But is that what humans naturally do?

I believe that humans creating large conurbations (cities) is natural in the same way that bees create hives. But as far as I can understand, a beehive does not expand due to short-term capitalist investment. I could be wrong. It has been a while since I had a conversation with a bee about politics.

Or is the question we're asking, "Am I 'abnormal'?" I must be if I am not "normal". So one has to say that we are all normal, every single one of us. It is just that some are more normal than others. Or we are all abnormal. It is just that some of us are more abnormal than others. (I'm paraphrasing George Orwell here, but I am sure you know that.)