



The Selfish Capitalist: Origins of Affluenza

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In the bestselling **Affluenza**, world-renowned psychologist Oliver James introduced us to a modern-day virus sweeping through the English-speaking world — how our obsessive, envious tendencies make us twice as prone to depression, anxiety and addictions as people in other developed nations.

Now **The Selfish Capitalist** provides more detailed substantiation for the claims made in **Affluenza**, and outlines the political, economic and social climate in which the virus has grown.

A modern-day *The State We're In*, the book's argument will chime with a public deeply disenchanted with all the main political parties. James points out that, since the Seventies, the rich have become much, much richer, yet the average person's wage has not increased at all. He provides a wealth of evidence to show that we have become more miserable and distressed during this time, and suggests that this is a direct consequence of Thatcherite/Blairite "Selfish Capitalism," whose most significant act has been to rob the poor to give to the rich.

The Selfish Capitalist is a rallying cry to reduce levels of distress by adopting a form of unselfish capitalism. It is a hard-hitting and thought-provoking work that tells us why our personal well-being must take precedence over the wealth of a tiny minority if we are to cure ourselves of this disease.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

The Selfish Capitalist: Origins of Affluenza Details

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Author : Oliver James

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Stefan says

great example of fitting data into a theory (and terrible example of using 'data science' / statistics, when you don't seem to even understand how linear regression works. I don't think I've spotted one counter-argument (which then could be refuted of course), almost as if applying critical thinking would render the book worth reading but much, much harder to write ;-). To be clear, IMHO it's a bit in a style and level of a rant at a Islington pub, performed by an erudite and well read academic. That is we have it all: repetitions, opinions, hearsay, mixing dated (70's) research with recent results made on small population of students with fictional histories (e.g. referring stories depicted in movies isn't too convincing for me). Clearly we are onto something, i.e. we seems to have more mental issues (or maybe we just started diagnosing more of these?) and that might be caused by purely hedonistic / materialistic live-style (or by access to communication tools allowing us to see clearly how we have always been?), but to discuss that is one thing, whilst blaming politicians and 'reach' for coordinated and deliberate actions to drive society into that ditch sounds to me a bit to far fetched.

Anyhow, was worth a very quick scan, some source research papers aren't to old and quite interesting.

Rydh says

Oliver James, who is a psychologist turned writer and social commentator, sets out in this book to persuade the reader that the economic policies practised over the past thirty to forty years by the governments of the English speaking nations have caused a considerable increase in the levels of emotional distress experienced by the peoples of these nations.

While the author presents much interesting information in support of his views, I felt that his grasp of the intricacies of economic theory and practice was weak and often naive. Also, I frequently felt oppressed by the sense that I was being harangued by a demagogue with a political agenda reminiscent of Chairman's Mao's Cultural Revolution.

"Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under communism it's just the opposite." John Kenneth Galbraith

"It makes no difference who you vote for - the two parties are really one party representing 4 percent of the people." Gore Vidal

Ivory Rose says

I too have a psychology degree and for the first half of the book Mr. James just takes something with a grain of truth in it (the basis of what he says, it is in those psychology journals) but then expands it to something beyond, and then expands yet further so it becomes ridiculously fanciful and I wonder who is taken in by it,

had I not studied psychology before, I fear it would have been me!

The Daily Mail reviewer on the back of the book says we must listen to what Oliver James is trying to tell us, after finishing the book, I am wondering what that is?! His message to us?

He seems to be anti CBT but pro Freud (now take that scientific community!)

Teetering on the edge of vilifying Dawkins..

Some sense in this book (Norway's oil vs. Scottish sea oil) but also quite a lot of nonsense. The two get muddled in and I wonder what the overall message was intended to be?

Ty says

I'm still processing this book. On the one hand I loved how it included feminist issues and language in his analysis. On the other, it made a few too many broad stroke claims with too many elements that I don't think can be as easily established, agreed upon and tested as he suggested. As with anyone who does the same, I appreciated his own self-criticism, reflection on the shortcomings he could account for, it strengthens one's argument more often than not.

I'm not springing to read the prequel given that this one is suppose to explain much of the even broader strokes of the prior one, so I'm reasonably confident I won't find in it the pieces I find missing from this one. But there's a better than good shot I'll read the follow up if he tackles it on. It certainly gave lots of food for thoughts and expressed ideas that have floated around my own mind (always nice to know I'm not the only one with such insatiable knee-jerk reflections on certain aspects of the English speaking dominated world.)

I'd love to discuss it with others who have read it.

Kathryn Beek says

I gave it three stars because it is a little overly academic and because it has failed to change the world. Then I considered how long I will be mulling these ideas over for and upgraded the book to four stars. Really interesting research but to be honest, if you've willingly picked this book up then Oliver James is probably preaching to the converted. Highly recommended for swing voters.

Dan Dove says

The central tenet of this book seems to be on firm ground and it makes some excellent points e.g. those in power only really have an interest in women working to swell the labour supply and force down wages, but it's a real shame the author wastes pages pushing a 9/11 conspiracy theory because a 'friend' he knows in the intelligence services told him so (might as well have been a bloke in the pub). Ditto the attack on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy seems very tacked on and a complete tangent as CBT and other therapies are there to treat the symptoms of 'Affluenza' and aren't the causes. Other stats such as Spanish workers are happier partly because of their protective labour laws seem a little pointless in 2012 when that country has almost a quarter of it's labour force out of work.

Jonathan-David Jackson says

After reading this book you'll likely want to move to western Europe, where you'll have better public infrastructure, a more representative government, less risk of mental health problems, better healthcare, less inequality and more vacation days.

Simon Wood says

NEO-LIBERALISM MAKES YOU NUTS

Well one thing for sure, Oliver James must be doing something right - he's obviously irritated some individual enough for them to post five 1-star reviews of his book. Needless to say not one of which would appear to have resulted from an actual reading of the book - well maybe they read the blurb on the back cover?. "The Selfish Capitalist" is a post-script to his earlier "Affluenza" and contains further thoughts and data related to the effects of what James calls "selfish capitalism" (more or less a synonym for Neo-Liberalism) on our societies. He also reflects on what other writers and political thinkers from Karl Marx to David Harvey have had to say about his area of investigation: the links between the mental health of individuals and the economic organization of society.

In line with more orthodox thinking on Neo-Liberalism, James asserts that selfish capitalism is a phenomenon that has risen to prominence in the English-speaking world since the 1970's. While it has been a growing phenomena in other developed and non-developed countries, it is in the developed economies of the English speaking world that it goes deepest into the fabric our societies. Using data from WHO studies and other sources he demonstrates a clear correlation between income inequality (one of the pertinent and pernicious features of Neo-Liberal economies) and emotional distress. For the English-speaking world (Britain, U.S., Canada, New Zealand, Australia) the average incidence of emotional distress in the last 12 months is 21.6%, nearly double the level of other countries (Japan, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Netherlands and France) that average 11.5%.

James questions the standard shoulder-shrugging view that is disproportionately popular amongst those on the right: that mental health problems are in large part of genetic origin. The evidence he cites seem to indicate that this link is greatly exaggerated and environmental factors are of crucial importance. He also presents a variety of data on related issues that raises serious questions about how our society is structured vis-à-vis materialism and how this effects our mental well being. One interesting fact he brings up is that the greater part of the growth of economies and household income in the Selfish Capitalist world results from an increase in second earners and hours worked.

The few people whom I have known that work in Psychology seem to get bogged down in their own speciality for a whole variety of reasons. They appear to be shy - certainly in their professional capacity - about making explicit links to the bigger picture of how society is organized. With that in mind, it is refreshing to hear a professional psychologist discussing these issues in a holistic manner and not avoiding issues that are generally seen to be in the political realm.

James makes clear that there are elements of his thinking that he is pretty convinced of, and others that he is

fairly sure of, but does appreciate that more research is needed to confirm his and others hypothesis and provide a more detailed picture. Despite the, in part, tentative nature of his findings this is a fascinating book. A strong case is made for the need to question the manner in which our society is developing and the values it promotes if it is serious about the mental well being and real development of all people, rather than peculiarly attending to the interests (to quote Adam Smith) of the few whose wealth has risen geometrically while for most earners wages have barely risen at all. In common with his earlier works it is written in an accessible manner for those who are not academic psychologists. For those with a phobia of statistics they should be reassured that they are explained in a clear and straightforward way and have been leavened with a healthy dose of anecdotal material for further clarity. Well worth reading.

Charlie says

It's alright but it descends into ridiculous conspiracy theories.

Douglas says

The clinical child psychologist Oliver James is an enemy of evolutionary psychology and CBT among other things. In this book he considers how the English-speaking countries are experiencing much greater mental problems in their populations than their European neighbours at a time when their material desires are part of the neo-liberal revolution that has overtaken them the past thirty years. Only the rich get richer and the public sphere is privatised. He believes that the project was initiated thirty years ago by Corporate America to promote neo-liberalism. An entertaining read detailing the thinking behind his bestseller *Affluenza*.

Jane says

I have not read *Affluenza* or any of Oliver James previous books. James tests the theories of *Affluenza* which he refers to as the 'virus'. He looks at why there are more depressed and anxious people since the 1970's. His theories include our childhood, whether we were brought up by a single parent or dual parent family, divorced parents, poor or rich background. Also, whether love was freely shown or if parents were aspirational and gave love as a reward for good behaviour or academic achievement. He also looks at the tendency to more mental health problems in urban rather than rural areas, which he claims are due to stresses of burglary, crime and a need to "keep up with the joneses". James does not just test the socio-economic climate but also politics, particularly highlighting the Reagan/Thatcher years where radical privatisation, demolition of the unions and cuts were made. When the rich became richer and the poor, poorer. He also throws in some conspiracy theories eg. 9/11, 7/7 and how the economy and leadership in South American countries can be falsely managed. It is interesting food for thought.

Rebecca says

Complete rubbish! James has basically decided that materialism the biggest cause of emotional distress in the world today and has pieced together whatever evidence he can to support this theory. He doesn't actually

seem to care that most of the evidence he presents doesn't prove what he says it does - I think he thinks his readers will be too stupid to notice. You've also got to love (not) the flippant attitude with which he makes such statements as 'being a low-income, uneducated mother makes you more likely to hit your children' or the way he pretty much dismisses the entire Human Genome project as a waste of time. There simply isn't enough room here to critique all the things I seriously dislike about this book!

Sarah says

Half of the book is references, but they aren't cited in the actual text. So you see things like "A study found that ..." with no citation, and little information on the research.

The writer doesn't seem to have much knowledge of feminism. He seems to be under the impression that feminism is pro-capitalism, and states that feminists wanted women to "aspire to be like men in skirts".

"I put the view that men and women have never got on worse in the history of the world"
More nonsense.

"In two-thirds of cases it was the wife (now more assertive) who filed for divorce, with abusive behaviour by husbands probably increasing"

Another possibility: divorce becoming easier to obtain and more commonplace means women can more easily divorce abusive husbands now. The rate of serious intimate partner violence against females declined by 72% between 1994-2011 (source: <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/i...>)

The basic argument behind this book is this: People in the UK and the US are more likely to suffer from emotional distress than mainland Europeans in part due to Thatcherite and Reaganite politics. eg. the loss of job security. That, alone, sounds like an interesting topic for a book. Unfortunately the writer jumps from topic to topic and sometimes they don't seem to have much relevance. For example, there's a section about girls with absent fathers starting puberty earlier. What? This is not what I signed up for.

Sentences like this are eye-roll worthy:

"The travails of post-feminist modern womanhood are many and irksome, from the role strain created by motherhood and careers, to the pressure to look like Maria Sharapova."

This made me pause.

"Male American secondary school and university teachers have higher divorce rates than primary school teachers. The higher rate was ascribed to the contrast the men were experiencing between the nubility of their pupils and the relative undesirability of their wives, causing dissatisfaction."

There's a lot to unpack with this paragraph. Firstly, correlation \neq causation. I found this whole idea dubious at best (how can they possibly come to this conclusion with any assuredness? did they ask male teachers about this?)

The study isn't cited so I just googled it for more information:

"although male high school teachers and college professors may or may not be more likely to get a divorce than others"

What? So they're not actually more likely divorced.. "may or may not be more likely"

"- they are statistically significantly slower to remarry or more likely not to remarry subsequent to their divorce. We believe that there are two possible interpretations for this finding. First, subsequent to divorce, male teachers and professors may remain unmarried because they prefer to pursue a series of affairs with female students without marrying them. Second, they may remain unmarried because, due to the cumulative contrast effect, any adult woman they might meet and date after their divorce would still pale in comparison to the young attractive women with whom they come in daily contact."

Sounds like a lot of nonsense and guesswork, "male teachers don't get married because they're too busy having sex with their students". Then, I noticed the name Satoshi Kanazawa

After the talk of "studies" in the first 60% or so, we get to casual conspiracy theories, which are again jarring because they seem unrelated to the topic of the book:

"Given the number of other books by ex-agents since then suggesting such things did and do go on, it is at least possible that Roldós Aguilera was bumped off."

There are some reasonable ideas:

"Consumption causes the pathology partly because it holds up the false promise that fixing an internal lack can be done by an external means, and partly because the process of working, by which we earn the money to pay for the goods, is itself alienating."

It would have been nice to see this expanded upon.

There's a large section devoted to the effects of materialism. Materialism is linked with depression, low-self esteem, unrealistic goals, poorer relationships etc. Again, a lot of the claims seemed exaggerated, it wasn't clear where this research was coming from so there was no chance to check it independently.

Richard Graveling says

Read this after Affluenza. Maybe I've got a bit of James-fatigue, but I thought it was a bit 'samey'. Didn't really add anything that wasn't in They f*** you up or Affluenza.

Interesting enough read, makes you think about approaches to life.

Stewart Home says

James attempts to critique positive thinking but concludes his book with something that looks rather like it: "Sooner or later a politician or party will emerge who offers a radical alternative to the hollow materialism of the present lot..." This isn't dialectics because James understands nothing of negation. He doesn't want us all organising against capitalism now - he wants everyone to passively wait for some hierarchical leadership to emerge from somewhere (perhaps from Bakunin's 'lower depths') to tame the excesses of capitalist system in order to save discredited capitalism. So like a 19th century Russian nihilist or 20th century Bolshevik (but with even less panache), James gives us the old idealist fallacy of Holy Spirit descending into unconscious matter, of 'consciousness being brought in from outside'. His poorly written nonsense is designed to appeal to the same status threatened, anxious and reactionary middle-class morons who waste their time on cretins like

Alain de Botton.
