**The Paradox of Prosperity**

## Background

We live in societies that are freer, safer, healthier, wealthier, and more open than ever before, yet mental suffering appears not to diminish but to proliferate. Anxiety, burnout, depression, loneliness, and exhaustion have become defining features of affluent modern life. This symposium explores this paradox from two complementary perspectives. Speaker 1 will examine how autonomy, one of modernity's highest ideals, has become a cultural imperative that turns freedom into burden. Speaker 2 investigates how a volatile, uncertain, complex, and unpredictable world becomes embodied as anxiety. Together, the talks ask how prosperity, freedom, and instability reshape psychic life.

## Why We Are Crumbling Under the Weight of Our Freedom

We live in an age of unprecedented freedom and prosperity. We are freer, healthier, better educated, and less dependent than previous generations. We are expected to shape our own lives, define our identities, realize our potential, and pursue happiness on our own terms. Yet, despite these achievements, mental suffering appears to be increasing rather than receding. Burnout, anxiety, depression, loneliness, exhaustion, and confusion are not disappearing as life becomes more comfortable. On the contrary, they seem to flourish within the very societies that promise the most freedom. This talk explores the possibility that the source of this paradox lies partly in autonomy itself. In modern societies, autonomy has become more than a political or moral principle; it has become a cultural imperative. We are not only free, but expected to make something exceptional of that freedom. Prosperity has made this possible, but also inescapable. What once was a privilege has become a mass project of self-realization. I argue that modern psychological suffering cannot be understood solely in individual or medical terms. It must also be read as a response to a civilization in which freedom has become obligation, self-realization a norm, and failure an intimate form of guilt.

## How a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Unpredictable World Gets Under Our Skins: The Case of Anxiety Disorders

We are living in a time marked by accelerating change, instability, and unpredictability. Ecological crisis, geopolitical fragmentation, technological disruption, economic precarity, and social insecurity have eroded many of the assumptions that once made the future feel navigable. At the same time, anxiety disorders appear to be increasing, particularly among younger people. This raises a pressing question: how does a volatile, uncertain, complex, and unpredictable world become lived as anxiety? This talk begins from the hypothesis that the rise in anxiety disorders cannot be understood without reference to the wider social environment. Claims about anxious ages and anxious generations are not unique to the present, but they have renewed force today because anxiety is especially sensitive to changing conditions in the world around us. My aim is to bring together philosophical reflection and contemporary neurocognitive research to show how our nervous systems are entangled with the environments we inhabit. Rather than treating anxiety as merely an internal dysfunction, I argue that it can also be understood as a mode of responsiveness to a world experienced as unstable, opaque, and difficult to predict. Anxiety reveals how deeply society gets under the skin.

## References:

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