

The Sociological Problem of Suffering: Ever More Exacerbated and Confounding

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For most of my sociological career I have been involved in an attempt to understand how ‘the problem of suffering’ is configured and experienced under conditions of modernity, and how, moreover, it operates as an innovative force within processes of social change. I argue that the main ‘founder fathers’ of sociology - Marx, Weber and Durkheim – are all preoccupied with this matter, and in the contexts of their theoretical projects, offer perspectives on particular components of human suffering and their wider political and cultural significance.

Marx holds an ambiguous standpoint on the problem of human suffering. Scholars readily identify him as committed to the attempt to document the ways in which capitalism renders people as docile bodies for exploitation, and thereby subjects them to experiences of ‘physical deterioration’, ‘intellectual degeneration’ and ‘moral degradation’. Yet, Marx does not appear to have arrived at a settled account of how individuals are prone to respond to this; or rather, when reflecting on this matter it seems that he is in two minds over what takes place. On the one hand, in the famous passage where Marx identifies the ‘opium’ of religion as ‘an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering’, he places an emphasis on the potential for human affliction to inspire people to take flight from ‘the truth of the here and now’ in favour of the ‘illusory happiness’ of life in the hereafter. On the other hand, there are passages where he identifies the experience of suffering as a ‘sensuous knowledge’ that works to make individuals more consciously alert to the material conditions of their existence, and which holds the potential to inspire them to join together as a class committed to abolish capitalism. In this regard, Marx appears to be arguing that the problem of suffering operates both to disable and enable ‘class consciousness’, but he does not offer us any guidance when it comes to understanding how destructive and painful experiences that work to enforce and consolidate human alienation might be transfigured so that they operate to release our ‘essential powers’ and human potential.

Weber is largely preoccupied with explaining how experiences of suffering are set to be encountered and understood as involving us in a painful deficit of moral meaning. He assumes that human reason is never adequate to match and vanquish ‘the irrational force’ of suffering. Weber holds that the problem of suffering consists in the fact that it always retains a capacity to appear senseless and morally outrageous. Moreover, his overwhelmingly pessimistic assessment of our cultural fate, and of the presiding forms of social psychology shaped under the influence of modern rationality, leads him to conclude that the existential scale and volume of human suffering is set to grow along with conditions of modernity. On his account, the problem of suffering operates to inspire an insatiable quest for ever more intellectually coherent and practically relevant rationalisations of reality, which have the unintended consequence of making us yet more tormented by the apparent ‘senselessness’ of human affliction. Weber holds that ‘the more highly rationalized an order, the greater the tension, the greater the exposure of major elements of a population to experiences that are frustrating in the very specific sense, not merely that things happen that contravene their interests, but that things happen that are ‘meaningless’ in the sense that they ought not to happen’ (Parsons 1966: xlvii). Accordingly, it might be argued that the normative expectations created by modern medicine for our health, and by technological advancements that ensure greater levels of public safety, have some unanticipated and deeply troubling side effects. On occasions when medicine cannot protect or save us, or where safety systems fail and ‘disaster strikes’, we are left feeling more painfully exposed than ever before to ‘the irrational force of life’ and more existentially traumatised by the fact that we have no means to escape our fate. Weber appears to conclude that we are set to inhabit a cultural reality where it is made increasingly difficult for us endure the inherent antinomies of human existence, and especially when it comes to the task of bestowing this with sufficient moral meaning.

Durkheim also shares in the view that under social conditions of modernity, the problem of suffering is set to become a more morally perplexing and intellectually frustrating component of human experience. At one point in *The Division of Labour in Society*, he asks ‘Is it true that the happiness of the individual increases as man advances?’, and

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answers his question by declaring that 'Nothing is more doubtful'. Durkheim contends while 'there is a host of pleasures open to us today that more simple natures knew nothing about...on the other hand, we are exposed to a host of sufferings spared them, and it is not at all certain that the balance is to our advantage...If we are open to more pleasures, we are also open to more pain' (Durkheim [1893] 1964: 241-2). With a focus brought to experiences of egoism and anomie, Durkheim is particularly concerned by the emotional and psychological consequences of social conditions that result in us having no choice but to choose who we are, how to live and what to be. On this account, the problem of suffering is greatly intensified through processes of individualisation that leave us more anxiously preoccupied with questions of moral meaning and feeling painfully bereft of belonging. Yet, at the same time, at least when compared to Marx and Weber, Durkheim is alert to the potential for the social forces that produce egoism and anomie to also involve us in moral sentiments whereby we are inclined to be more sympathetically oriented towards the suffering of others. He identifies what we feel for our ourselves and for others as belonging to the 'the same moral state' (Durkheim [1897] 1952: 360). In this regard, in his later work he is increasingly preoccupied by a paradox for which there is no adequate social, cultural or political solution. Durkheim portrays our social psychology as inherently inconsistent and contradictory. Arguably, moreover, while exposing the polarities of the moral conflicts we inhabit, his analysis works more to set problems for sociological investigation than to advance practicable solutions.

I argue that in the twenty first century we are living under social, cultural and economic conditions that are intensifying the problem of suffering. I further hold that the analyses of the above-mentioned classical theorists remain useful as guides for those working to understand how this is set to take place. Over the last fifty years or so, considerable advancements have been made in the documentation of the social determinants of health inequalities, and unprecedented amounts of evidence are now accumulated to accompany theoretical insights with empirical analysis. In this regard, the deteriorating physical health conditions of lower income households serve to underline the ongoing importance of studies that profile the structural violence of class conditions and

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experiences. Moreover, I suggest that some of the dimensions of the problem of suffering explored by Durkheim and Weber are particularly useful for locating the worsening crisis in our mental health within a sociological frame - although these are more fitted to alert us to the social and cultural contradictions of our existence than to provide us with moral guidance on how to live and or what to do to make this better.

Moving beyond the classics, I am also inclined to argue that in seeking to better understand how modern people are disposed to experience and respond to the problem of suffering, we are also set to engage with the fact that a great deal of contemporary sociology is now embroiled in conjecture. On many accounts, new communication and information technologies are operating to radically transform our visual culture and experience in ways that were unknown to previous generations. Social media are reconfiguring our networks, associations and attachments in ways that are without precedent, and which hold many uncertain consequences. In these conditions it is widely held that people are undergoing new experiences of self-formation and that our social subjectivities, value commitments and affective ties are being reconstituted in ways that confound traditions of sociological conception and evaluation. More than ever before, and with greater volume and intensity, it seems that 'all that is solid melts into air' and many judgements and opinions are made to appear outmoded before they are adequately formed. In these respects, there are many elements in our experience and response to human suffering where we are challenged to make sense of domains of agency and affect that are changing our moral experience of self and society in ways that are not readily comparable to anything encountered in our past, and which remain barely understood now. Human suffering is being made more publicly visible; and especially that of distant 'strangers'. Arguably we are witness to new possibilities for the founding and extension of 'empathic civilization'; yet at the same time, what is often made more immediately present to us is the apparent dearth of social sympathy and the scale of 'compassion fatigue'.

References

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