

Systemic Suffering as a Critical Tool

Alessandro Pinzani

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC/CNPq¹

Abstract: In this paper, I defend that the concept of systemic suffering represents a useful tool for social criticism. I first make some preliminary methodological remarks (1) and present different meanings that have been attributed to the concept of social suffering (2). I then suggest that we adopt the concept of systemic suffering instead (3). The next step consists in showing how this form of suffering is connected to the existence of non-material aspects that contribute to social reproduction and that can be defined as systemic doctrines (4). Finally, I offer some remarks on possible strategies for criticizing systemic suffering (5).

Keywords: *Social Suffering*; Systemic Suffering; Systemic Doctrines; Critical Theory.

¹The research leading to this paper was funded by CNPq with grant nr. 302590/2018-8.



1. Preliminary Remarks

Focusing on suffering with the aim to develop forms of social criticism always risks of conflating a psychological perspective centered on individual suffering and a sociological perspective centered on social suffering. For this reason, there has been a considerable debate on the risk of “psychologization” that is allegedly inherent in social philosophy, particularly when it uses concepts such as “social pathologies” (FRASER & HONNETH 2003; ZURN 2011; PINZANI 2013). In this context, I will limit myself to presenting different definitions of social suffering that have been proposed by some authors, in order to suggest that we adopt a different concept, namely that of systemic suffering. Before discussing these concepts, however, I would like to stress – following Jaeggi’s analysis of the concept of alienation (JAEGGI 2005, p. 14ff.) – three dimensions that explain their relevance. Firstly, they refer to an ethical problem², i.e. to something that has gone terribly wrong in the lives of individuals, but for reasons mostly unrelated to their personal actions (they are social causes); secondly, these concepts take a central role within social philosophy, since they permit the identification of relevant social issues and the elaboration of specific diagnoses; finally, they are useful from the point of view of social theory as analytic-explanatory tools to aid in understanding how society works. Like alienation in Jaeggi’s work, social and systemic suffering are diagnostic concepts that have a simultaneously normative and descriptive nature, while also allowing us to interpret and ethically evaluate certain social phenomena (JAEGGI 2005, p. 44).

From this point of view, my approach follows a specific way of thinking about society and its problems that differs significantly from the perspective traditionally adopted by normative political theories. Proponents of this different theoretical approach have dubbed it social philosophy to distinguish it from traditional political philosophy (HONNETH 1994, p. 9ff.; FERRARA 2002; GEUSS 2008; HRUBEC 2012). Social philosophy combines empirically based descriptions of economic, political, and cultural phenomena with their normative evaluation. Its objects are not only individual actions (as in moral philosophy) or political institutions (as in traditional political philosophy), but social institutions and practices in general (JAEGGI & CELIKATES 2017, p. 8f.). It conceives of persons not as isolated individuals, but as members of an intersubjectively constructed world (ibid.) in which they build their identities, acquire their worldviews and values, engage in social practices, and exert their freedom (namely, their social freedom, which can be realized only within a context of social interaction; cf. HONNETH 2011). Most of all, it has as its main object those aspects of social life that provoke the negative phenomena mentioned above. In other words: it concerns social suffering.

2. Social Suffering

In recent years, social suffering has become an object of analysis for social critics, although only a few authors openly use this term (e.g., KLEINMAN, DAS & LOCK 1997; DEJOURS 1998; FROST & HOGETT 2008; RENAULT 2008, 2009 & 2010; SOULET 2009; WILKINSON & KLEINMAN 2016, HERZOG 2020, SEMBLER 2020). Nevertheless, it is possible to register a renewed interest in topics of alienation, reification, social pathologies, and social invisibility (HONNETH 2000, 2003, 2005 & 2011; JAEGGI 2005) as well as a growing concern for the epidemic of malaises such as depression and burnout (EHRENBERG 1998 & 2010; KEHL 2015). Even the various analyses focusing on the flexibility expected (or demanded) from individuals in the contemporary labor market (DEJOURS 1998; SENNETT 1998; BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO 1999; DUBET 2006 & 2010; STANDING 2011) end up stressing some form of social suffering.

² Jaeggi is using the term “ethical” in the sense introduced by Habermas for distinguishing ethical from moral questions. While the latter concerns what individuals owe to each other and establish universal normative principles and norms (in other words: they are questions of justice), the former concerns the kind of life that specific social and cultural communities deem worth being pursued (they are questions of good life). I follow her in adopting Habermas’ categories (see HABERMAS 1990).



Although the term dates back to the 18th century (with the first use often attributed to William Wordsworth)³, it has a relatively recent history (differently from, say, the concept of justice) and has been used systemically only since the last decades of the 20th century. Like any other concept, its meaning has changed over time, but it has maintained a certain hard core, without which it would cease to be a proper concept. These changes reflect the wider social and political conflicts in which it was used instrumentally as a tool to specific ends (WILKINSON & KLEINMAN 2016, p. 38ff.). Although it is neither possible nor necessary to reconstruct all these shifts of meaning in this paper, it is necessary to take them into account when discussing the use of the concept in the present philosophical and sociological debate. In the 20th century, the concept was used mainly to indicate forms of human suffering that have their roots in social *behavior*. In his studies on “human misery” (1970) and on obedience and revolt (1978), Barrington Moore used the term “*socially avoidable suffering*” to indicate a form of suffering that could have been avoided if certain social actors (individuals or institutions) had acted differently or had not omitted specific actions to prevent it from occurring (MOORE 1978). Classical examples include wars, racial or religious persecutions, and the unjust distribution of resources during natural catastrophes. Humans doubtless provoke all these examples. However,, not every form of man-made suffering deserves to be considered “socially avoidable suffering:” since not every suffering is avoidable, and not every avoidable suffering is socially avoidable suffering. Judith Shklar (1990); echoes Moore’s definition, though she substitutes the term “suffering” with the classical term “injustice,” distinguishing that in turn from the concept of misfortune. If, for example, a disaster ‘is caused by the external forces of nature, it is a misfortune and we must resign ourselves to our *suffering*.’ If, however, the disaster is brought about by ‘some ill-intentioned agent,’ then we can say that ‘it is an injustice and we may express indignation and outrage’ (SHKLAR 1990, p. 1; my emphasis). Shklar offers the imaginary example of an earthquake in which ‘many buildings do collapse because contractors have violated construction codes and bribed inspectors;’ (SHKLAR 1990, p. 2) but one could also mention real-world cases such as the damage provoked by hurricane Katrina in 2005 (which were magnified by problems in the design and maintenance of the levee system) and the poor response by local and federal authorities in the aftermath of the catastrophe (KLEIN 2007, p. 406ff.). It is not always easy to distinguish misfortune from injustice, particularly for cases in which it is difficult to ascertain precisely the man-made reasons for a disaster or a situation that causes people to suffer. A central issue for a theory of social suffering is therefore that it must be possible to find objective criteria to define it.

In the case of Moore’s idea of socially avoidable suffering and of Shklar’s definition of injustice, the criteria can be found in the values and norms adopted by a specific society and in the corresponding expectations, they produce in the members of that society, particularly concerning the behavior of public officials or representatives of public institutions. There are difficulties connected with this view. Even within a single society, different perspectives and sensibilities exist on what counts as an acceptable norm or as a value.

³In his *Descriptive Sketches*, written in 1792–93 in recollection of a summer spent traveling around post-revolutionary France and the Swiss Alps, William Wordsworth refers to social suffering in a passage that records his encounter with destitute and sick peasants living in the forest along the banks of the upper reaches of the Rhine. He writes:

The indignant waters of the infant Rhine,
Hang o’er the abyss, whose else impervious gloom
Hang o’er the abyss, whose else impervious gloom
His burning eyes with fearful light illumine.
The mind condemned, without reprieve, to go
O’er life’s long deserts with its charge of woe,
With sad congratulation joins the train
Where beasts and men together o’er the plain
Move on a mighty caravan of pain:
Hope, strength, and courage, social suffering brings,
Freshening the wilderness with shades and springs.

In this instance, Wordsworth’s encounter with social suffering draws him to reflect upon the stoic attitudes adopted by people struggling to survive in conditions of extreme adversity’ (WILKINSON & KLEINMAN 2016, p. 25f.).



This is particularly true of our pluralist, post-conventional, or post-metaphysical societies (HABERMAS 1994) in which there is no absolute consent on this point. This difficulty in identifying shared norms and values misleads Shklar into affirming that every social change is unjust to someone (SHKLAR 1990, p. 120). In advancing this claim, Shklar falls into a dilemma that she had previously warned against, namely, that of relying on individuals' subjective sense of injustice rather than on objective criteria.

Thomas Pogge (2002) identifies different *institutional* causes of social injustice. First, this kind of injustice can stem from of specific social institutions, that is, from a shared institutional order that is put into place or shaped by the better-off and that creates or reproduces inequality. Additionally, the respective positions of the better-off and the worse-off can be seen as the result of historical processes marked by violence and wrongs. However, it is frequently impossible to observe and immediately identify the social or institutional causes of human suffering. They may lie so far back in the past that the question of responsibility remains unanswered. Or they may be deeply rooted in the structure of a society (as with slavery in the modern Americas). In these cases, one can say that the suffering is institutionalized: it is provoked not by individuals through their actions but by institutions (MARGALIT 1996). The social character of suffering resides therefore in its institutional roots, not in the behavior of specific social actors.

The category of "social suffering" has also been used by anthropologists, sociologists, and even literary critics to indicate the injuries that social forces (not social actors) can inflict on specific social groups (KLEINMAN, DAS, LOCK 1997). In this sense, the concept differs from Moore's or Shklar's usage: social suffering is opposed here to individual suffering not only because of its social (impersonal) roots but also because it is *experienced* socially. From this point of view, according to some authors (SCOTT 1990; KLEINMAN, DAS & LOCK 1997; WILKINSON & KLEINMAN 2016) suffering as a social experience may lead to social and political transformations when it redefines and reshapes the dominant symbolic and moral system of society. Even if only a circumscribed group of people feels the pain inflicted upon it by social forces, its suffering might be observed by a larger number of individuals, by society as a whole, or even by mankind at large, thus giving rise to processes of reaction and, possibly, of societal change. This capacity to be an instrument of transformation both on the symbolic and the moral level, means social suffering has been always a privileged object of cultural representation in art, literature, theatre, and, more recently, cinema and other media. For most people, mediatised suffering has become the main, if not the only, source for experiencing the suffering of others (BOLTANSKI 1993; KLEINMAN & KLEINMAN 1997; SONTAG 2003; BUTLER 2004, p. 63ff.). This is problematic as such representations tend to distort suffering or to highlight its more exceptional forms (e.g., after a natural catastrophe or during an armed conflict), while leaving literally out of sight other, more trivial, that is, less spectacular instances. These, therefore are not registered by those who are not directly affected by them. The routine suffering of poor people or millions of global refugees is eclipsed by individual cases singled out the media single out for being spectacular, for touching the viewers/readers more directly, or for guaranteeing a surge in audience ratings (as in the case of Aylan Kurdi, whose tragic death shifted the same European public opinion which until then had been and largely still is indifferent to the countless deaths of refugee children around the world).

Finally, one could claim (DEJOURS 1998; EHRENBERG 1998 & 2010) that by using the adjective social in connection with suffering, one is referring not only to some etiological explanation but is adopting an epidemiological criterion, according to which, if a vast number of society's members goes through the same experience of suffering (say, depression or burn-out), then this suffering concerns society as a whole and deserves to be called "social" (as with drug addiction, alcoholism or teenage pregnancy when they are so common in the population that they are defined as social problems). From this point of view, the social character of the suffering refers to its diffusion among the members of society, not to its social causes.



These different ways of defining the concept of social suffering show that, although authors use it to describe and criticize the social conditions they consider to be unacceptable, the concept itself is still too ambiguous to offer a reliable tool for social criticism. In the following, I will explain why the concept of social suffering (better: a specific version of it, which I call systemic suffering) should still be considered useful despite its abovementioned vagueness. This more specific version should also serve as the starting point to sketch a theoretical approach for thinking society that avoids both the abstract normativity of many traditional theories of social justice and the merely descriptive attitude of most social theories. In the traditional language of social philosophy, it might seem that the main concern here regards first an immanent or internal critical moment in which social actors denounce what they consider to be an unacceptable situation, for example, a situation that provokes their suffering, and second a diagnostic-explicative moment, in which social theorists formulate their explanation of that situation, for example, by bringing to light the social causes of the suffering. However, such a diagnosis does unavoidably reveal intrinsically normative aspects that can be used to elaborate a more proactive moment that aims to find ways to put an end to socially provoked suffering. These three moments (the critical, the explicative, and the normative) cannot be fully separated, not even analytically, since asserting a diagnosis based on the social criticism of social actors represents in itself a way of formulating a normative demand (WALZER 1980 & 1988; BENHABIB 1986, HONNETH 1994 & 2000; STRYDOM 2011 and HRUBEC 2012). To exemplify, the moment social critique describes how a specific condition (e.g., poverty) is naturalized, it already requires a de-fetishization of that condition, normatively demanding that the naturalization process stops. At the same time, however, it proposes an alternative explication for that condition, which for its part has normative consequences (e.g., demanding specific changes in material and conceptual social structures). Critique and explanation are to be formulated in light of a possible change in the situation that forms their object. This demand for change has a normative character and addresses the needs and demands expressed in the present by social actors who aim for a better, more human future (BENHABIB 1986).

Social philosophy (as defined above) always puts its objects in their historical context. Nevertheless, it often recurs to normative ideas that appear to be valid independently from their historical dimension. This is the case of Habermas' quasi-transcendental rules of discourse or Honneth's three spheres of recognition. The present approach also recurs to such an idea: that of society itself. This idea has an ineliminable normative aspect that allows for immanent critique, since we can understand society as an attempt to create the conditions under which human beings can live a "good" life (however this might be defined). Society can fail at fulfilling this task, but the reasons for the failure can be very different: some might be external (e.g., natural catastrophes), while some are intrinsic to the way society is structured. Societal structures are not to be understood only materially: social reproduction (which from the point of view of individuals means also social integration) happens within material *and* conceptual structures (WARREN 2000), i.e., under material and non-material conditions. The interplay of these two dimensions can give rise to what I call systemic suffering, that is, to a suffering whose social roots are not to be sought in some external conditions (e.g., the abovementioned natural catastrophes) but in the very way society is organized and *justifies* its organization (the concept of systemic doctrines plays a central role in explaining this aspect, as we will see).

3. From social to systemic suffering

As we have seen, there are many ways of defining social suffering. One can focus (as Moore and Shklar did) on socially avoidable suffering as a result of the actions of people (individuals or groups) who should be held responsible for it and who, therefore, could be forced to repair the harm they provoked when this harm is the result of a wrong. One can also (as Pogge does) consider social suffering as the consequence of power asymmetries among social groups or classes and call for a more equal distribution of those

resources that might prevent or repair the suffering. Alternatively, one can concentrate on its *structural* dimension and claim that it cannot be eliminated simply by holding some specific actor responsible for it or by redistributing power within society; rather, its elimination demands that we change the very societal structures that cause it. It is this latter strategy that interests me.

By using the concept of suffering as a key to understanding society, I am not aiming to develop some kind of moral criticism, that is, to criticize social injustice as the result of morally unacceptable behaviors or morally untenable social arrangements based for example on exploitation or oppression (as Moore, Shklar, and Pogge do). I am instead trying to develop an *ethical* criticism, whose goal is to show that a specific society is structured in such a way that it *unavoidably* provokes suffering. In other words, I am interested in the negative consequences of societal structures on the lives of their members, independently of whether these structures or the behavior of the institutions they create may be deemed unjust. Injustice is of course an important consideration for a critical social theory, but I would like to expand the scope of such a theory to those aspects that are not the result of practices or power relations that can be considered to be unjust or unfair. This theory would also permit the questioning of aspects that are widely considered to be acceptable by the members of that society or that some theories of justice would hold not only as morally defensible but even normatively demanded, such as human rights or the principle of individual merit. Social suffering is like an interface between the subjectivity of the suffering of individuals (i.e., their private experience, their biographies, etc.) and the objective character of the social structure that causes the suffering. It substitutes more traditional notions such as “domination” or “alienation” when in naming the paradigmatic relation between individual and social structures in contemporary society. While domination can be the object of normative theories that have the concepts of freedom and of rights at their core, social suffering does not need these concepts. While the idea of alienation presupposes the existence of some unspoiled state of mind, the idea of social suffering is not grounded on a positive definition of healthy social relations (in this it differs also from the idea of social pathologies). For my purposes, we do not need a positive concept of good life either: a negative concept of bad life (or, alternatively, a definition of a decent life as a life that is as free from social suffering as possible) will suffice. However, because of its ambiguity, the concept of social suffering should perhaps be substituted with a more specific notion, namely that of systemic suffering.

To define this notion, my starting point will be a distinction first made by Strange (1989) and later developed by Azmanova (2011). They distinguish respectively between relational and structural power and between relational and structural domination. Relational power refers to the capacity of an actor to influence directly the behavior of others and is based on the control of resources; structural power refers to an actor's capacity to affect outcomes by changing the environment where interactions take place (AZMANOVA 2011, p. 155). Relational domination arises from the existence of power asymmetries within society and calls for a re-distribution of power; structural domination, however, depends on the very logic of the system and calls for its radical transformation. In the following, I will use the concept of oppression instead of domination, since the latter implies that there is no space for any form of resistance; otherwise, I will adopt Azmanova's conceptual pair, since it highlights the negative aspect of oppression (while power is in itself a more neutral concept). Relational oppression has been the main object of social criticism in the last decades. Issues of race or gender oppression, cultural imperialism, and lack of recognition for minorities have long represented the front line on which social theory and social movements have fought and won important battles. As relevant as those victories have been, they have not eliminated negative phenomena such as exploitation, discrimination, subordination, and exclusion (MIKKOLA 2019, especially pp. 186-222). As Nancy Fraser pointed out in her debate with Axel Honneth, although issues of recognition deserve attention both from theorists and activists, issues of redistribution have not lost their centrality for theorizing about and pursuing social justice (FRASER & HONNETH 2003). This points to the existence of a deeper, structural form of oppression, which remains untouched by changes



in power relations within the structure itself. This form of oppression is systemic insofar as it is rooted in the structure and, at the same time, guarantees its subsistence.

While the concept of “structural oppression” refers to a static dimension (a structure), the idea of “systemic oppression” refers (a) to the interplay of relational and structural oppression and (b) to the dynamic moment of maintaining or rebuilding the structure alongside new internal power relations (a process seemingly close to autopoiesis, as understood by Systems theory, although in this context I do not want to commit myself to a Luhmannesque explanation of it). Relational oppression refers to relations among persons (whether groups or individuals), but structural oppression can be exerted by institutions or even by ideologies or religious creeds and is maintained through social practices and norms based on these ideologies and creeds. These two forms of oppression can intermingle to produce systemic oppression, that is, a form of oppression in which relational oppression always ends up enforcing structural oppression, and thus this structural oppression sometimes (but not in every case) reinforces the kind of relational oppression that characterizes society in that specific moment.

Furthermore, the concept of structural oppression, in contrast with a relational one, seems to place two perspectives in opposition: in the first, impersonal forces are at work to create suffering; in the other, it is social actors who provoke it. Against this opposition, the concept of systemic suffering should highlight the interplay of these two dimensions and the fact that impersonal forces and social actors interact and can both provoke suffering. This permits consideration of an alternative, in which actors can change social structures. As Benhabib argues, unlike functionalist social theories, a critical theory of society is not exclusively interested in impersonal forces that act behind the backs of social agents; rather, it aims to show how such forces *generate* experiences of suffering, humiliation, aggression, and injustice, which in turn can lead to resistance, protest, and organized struggle (BENHABIB 1986, p. 226).

It is often extremely difficult to reduce systemic suffering to a single cause or category of causes. Neither relational nor structural oppression is based simply on an unbalanced distribution of power or on impersonal economic or political mechanisms (on the material structure of society). Rather, they rely heavily on a non-material dimension (its conceptual structure), which I shall refer to in the following as systemic doctrines. Without this ideological or doctrinal dimension, systemic oppression would not occur.

4) Systemic Suffering and Systemic Doctrines

In the previous section, I claimed that systemic suffering is the result of systemic oppression. This implies firstly the existence of a specific material structure for social reproduction and the distribution of power and social positions within society. Moreover, it implies the existence of a specific conceptual apparatus that offers this structure legitimacy and normative orientation. I suggest calling this apparatus *systemic doctrine*. This term indicates a specific system of (1) *beliefs* about the world and (2) *values* based on these beliefs. The system needs to be coherent enough to describe and explain potentially every aspect of human life (human beings' relation to nature and to other human beings as well as to a preternatural, transcendent dimension); but it also offers the basis for a system of (3) *norms* and (4) *social practices* that aim to shape or reshape human life according to the abovementioned beliefs and values (PINZANI 2019).

I call this kind of doctrine “systemic” precisely because its logic applies potentially to every dimension of human life, leaving no space for alternative explanations or values. A better term would probably be “totalitarian,” as introduced by some (including Gentile and Mussolini) to indicate a characteristic of the Fascist state, namely its intention to shape, control, and regulate every aspect of its citizens' lives (GENTILE et al. 1932). However, while these authors used the word in a positive sense, the term has assumed an extremely negative meaning through its association (e.g., by ARENDT 1951) with Fascism, Nazism,

Stalinism, and other forms of absolutist state that negate any value for individuals. Although “totalitarian” represents a technically adequate characterization of the doctrines we are discussing, its use could be misleading, inducing readers to attribute a specific political essence to such doctrines or to assume that they are to be found only in totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany. For this reason, I introduce the term “systemic,” to indicate the fact that these doctrines tend to or actually pervade and permeate every aspect of the lives of the individuals who are submitted to them. Furthermore, they are systemic insofar as they are essential to establishing and maintaining mechanisms for systemic oppression.

Likewise, I use the term “doctrine” for lack of a better alternative, although “ideology” would also be a strong candidate. However, my use of the term resembles more Rawls’ concept of ‘comprehensive doctrine’ (RAWLS 1971 & 1993) than Marx’s concept of ideology (MARX & ENGELS 2017), since the beliefs in question are held sincerely, not just feigned by their representatives: they are not used as a way of concealing underlying interests but as a way of openly justifying the legitimacy of those interests. Differently from both Rawls’ comprehensive doctrine and Marx’s ideology, however, the term “doctrine” indicates here not only a set of beliefs but also a set of norms and practices (based on said norms), thus coming close to Foucault’s concept of *dispositive* (FOUCAULT 1980). Similarly to the latter, it indicates both a specific form of knowledge and specific forms of acting according to this knowledge: a “knowing that” which refers to the human being’s position within nature and within society (often also concerning a transcendent dimension) and a “knowing how” which orientates people in their behavior. It resembles also Jaeggi’s concept of “form of life” (JAEGGI 2014; cf. PINZANI 2019), with which it shares the attention to attitudes and practices as well as the principles that inspire them. At the same time, it aims to indicate not just individual or collective forms of life, but the blueprint of social structure, which determines how society is organized and reproduces itself. Finally, it is connected to Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” (GRAMSCI 1992 & 1996; PINZANI 2020). But I cannot explore these connections in this context.

Examples of systemic doctrines are most (if not all) religious creeds, since normally they do not limit themselves to explaining the relationship between the individual and a transcendent dimension (some deity or spiritual sphere), but aim at regulating every aspect of the individuals’ life in their relation to nature as well as in both the private and the public sphere. These distinctions become meaningless and can be seen just as different forms of relating to the transcendent dimension through one’s relation to other individuals, to society, to the environment, etc. In the believer’s universe, no space is left free from control and regulation through religious norms.

Another example of systemic doctrine is what in recent years has been called neoliberalism, and one could claim that somehow capitalism itself might represent a systemic doctrine, although this is debatable. The reason for this uncertainty is that – differing from religion – capitalism did not emerge with the explicit proposal of becoming a dominant, systemic doctrine. There were no founders, no defenders of orthodoxy, and no fight against heretical views or heterodox forms of the main doctrine. Capitalism was born as a way of producing and exchanging goods; only later did it develop into a full-fledged economic system armed with a specific system of beliefs, values, norms, and practices necessary to guarantee its survival and its global diffusion. However, it has always had a specific logic immanent to its essence. Most Marxist authors tend to think of this logic as an external, objective constraint for individual and institutional behavior. In doing so, however, they have reified this logic; they have fallen prey to the very mechanism of fetishism denounced by Marx and Lukács among others. My claim is that the logic of capitalism is held in place by a belief in its objective validity and therefore it is the expression of a doctrine, not of systemic necessity.

For it to cause systemic suffering, the systemic doctrine must first become dominant within a specific society, according to mechanisms well described by Gramsci (1992 & 1996) and Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976). Of course, a doctrine may provoke suffering when it is still held by a minority or by a small group



– as shown spectacularly by some infamous examples involving religious sects. In such cases, even if the suffering remains limited to the circle of those who share the doctrine, it is tied nevertheless to the systemic character of the doctrine, which leaves no space for members of the group to engage in criticism and free-thinking. However, since society at large is untouched, the phenomenon remains circumscribed. It does not affect the basic structure of society, but only the smaller societal institutions, within which group members live their everyday lives (family, community). Everything around the group follows a different logic and the group itself forms a sort of island within a foreign sea, such as (at least in part) in the case of the Amish or similar sects. Studying these cases might be interesting to understand how systemic doctrines work: how they take hold of every aspect of their followers' life, how they immunize their followers against alternative ways of thinking and living, how they become unquestionable for their followers, how they sometimes succeed in convincing also outsiders and neutral observers to consider them to be unquestionable and legitimate doctrines (this is particularly evident in the case of religious creeds, which seldom if ever are subject to open criticism). Nevertheless, it is always possible for followers to disengage from their group and join the larger body of society outside it, notwithstanding the high price they would probably to pay from an emotional and social point of view (they might be forced to abandon their families, which in turn might consider them apostates and turn their back on them; they might have to leave the environment in which they have grown up; they will have to face a completely new social environment, often one they have been taught to despise and to hold as being morally wrong or evil). This may still apply when the systemic doctrine has taken hold of society as a whole, since its members may have the option to emigrate⁴, but it becomes impossible when the doctrine has become globally dominant or when its use by powerful social actors has global consequences, like in the case of capitalism in its present form.

Although every systemic doctrine tends for its own nature to expunge from the doctrinaire reservoir of society all other doctrines or absorb them to make them compatible with itself, society is not necessarily organized around a single systemic doctrine. The coexistence of different systemic doctrines within a single society can be relatively smooth and peaceful or incite internal conflicts, which may even lead to the disaggregation and collapse of that society. More often, after a period of social unrest, which may last for a long time and is often characterized by violence, one doctrine emerges from the turmoil as the winner, modifying the structure of society according to its beliefs, values, norms, and practices (as happened, e.g., with the Christianization of the Roman Empire or with the globalization of capitalism). The dominant systemic doctrine (in its pure or hybrid variants) permeates and shapes the basic structure of society, its main institutions (family, clan, tribe, community, church, market, state, etc.), and, of course, the lifestyle of its members. As it influences the legitimate distribution of social, economic, political, religious, and epistemic power among groups (on epistemic power see FRICKER 2007), it also exerts power itself. Its impersonal character makes it difficult to ascribe to such a doctrine the responsibility for the harm and suffering it provokes. On the contrary, it promotes the naturalization and rationalization of these negative phenomena, which appear to the members of that society as unavoidable consequences of “the way things are” or even of “the way things have always been.”

Even apparently autonomous systems such as the economy and bureaucracy obey the logic of some systemic doctrine, as shown by the fact that there is not, and never has been, only one kind of economy or bureaucracy. These systems impose their logic on the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), according to Habermas' colonization thesis (HABERMAS 1984), but this depends solely on the circumstance that the latter is obeying a different systemic doctrine, which, in the battle between doctrines, succumbs to the more powerful one that drives the systems. Since a doctrine comprehends not only beliefs and values, but also norms for action and practices, it has a direct transformational effect on reality, establishing new frames in which

⁴In any case, the choice of emigrating is not an easy one even when taken freely; when emigration becomes the only option, it can be considered as a further form of suffering provoked by the correspondent systemic doctrine.



individuals and institutions are supposed to act and excluding alternative possibilities of behavior. For example, once the belief that there should be a market for everything has established itself as a part of the systemic doctrine of society, any attempt to defend specific areas from the market logic is doomed to fail, since it can no longer be justified by appealing to alternative beliefs. While this process, which represents what we called above systemic oppression, might be slowed down or even brought to a partial halt, it will either continue until it has reshaped the whole fabric of society according to the systemic doctrine that inspires it, or it will be stopped and undone by a symmetrical process in which another systemic doctrine triumphs. In any case, once such a doctrine has managed to exert systemic oppression, resistance (i.e., holding to a defeated doctrine) is futile in the long run, while only revolt (i.e., actively striving for the success of an alternative doctrine) makes sense.

The removal of the vestiges of defeated doctrines and the imposition of the new one causes, unavoidably, harm and suffering. This is not only because the ensuing shift of power relations means that certain groups or individuals will lose their previous social position, but also because the new situation demands from them a material and spiritual effort to adapt to the winning systemic doctrine. This process of adaptation justifies the use of the term “oppression,” since it is not voluntary, but imposed upon society. The reshaping of society towards a stronger free-market economy, for instance, did not only provoke major economic, social, and political changes but also caused immense suffering among all social classes and groups by forcing them to adopt new beliefs and values and follow new norms and practices. Advocates of the free market believe firmly in individual responsibility and this belief has both a descriptive and a normative dimension. It attributes to individuals the responsibility for their own economic or social condition, and, at the same time, it demands that they actively assume this responsibility, without any help from the state or other social institutions (with exception of the market). It convinces people that only a “free” life is worthy of being lived and that “freedom” means assuming exclusive responsibility for one’s life (which is of course an appealing and morally inspiring idea). It informs institutional reforms that have *forced* individuals to increasingly take responsibility for every aspect of their lives (being employable and getting employed, choosing a healthy lifestyle, caring for their education and professional development, making provision for illness and old age, etc.). The result has been a surge in performance-related disorders such as burnout, stress, etc., and an epidemic increase in forms of psychological suffering such as depression and drug addiction, as observed by many authors (EHRENBERG 1998 & 2010; SOULET 2009; MENKE & REBENTISCH 2010; KEHL 2015). The interplay of different systemic doctrines within a society can give rise to peculiar societal structures, in which elements of two or more doctrines coexist or intermingle. Sometimes, this happens even when some of these elements are incompatible with those of other doctrines, as in the case of Brazil during the 19th century, that is, of a society organized around slavery and according to a strictly hierarchical social order which tried to adopt a capitalistic economic system (SCHWARZ 2000).

The suffering produced by a systemic doctrine is not always easy to detect. On the contrary, since its roots lie in a widespread belief in that doctrine, people are often unable to connect their suffering with the doctrine they otherwise accept as valid or even to perceive their situation as somehow harmful to them. Marxists recur usually to the problematic notion of “false consciousness” to designate this phenomenon: its victims are not even aware of the oppression or the “alienation” they are suffering and believe there is nothing wrong with their lives. It is not that they have been coercively indoctrinated, but rather that they have been socialized within an environment in which the systemic doctrine is deemed unquestionable (this is typically the case with religion) or has been naturalized. That, for example, the market unavoidably produces winners and losers without anyone carrying the blame or responsibility for the resulting inequalities and suffering is something people who live in societies characterized by a free-market economy tend to accept as a natural law. They have been educated into believing that the market is a sort of natural force and into obeying its unchangeable logic, so that questioning that logic or holding its results as unjust



would appear to them as absurd as questioning the law of gravity or morally condemning an earthquake. They do not connect directly the functioning of a free-market economy to the *harm* inflicted upon them in terms of poverty, unemployment, precariousness, or stress – or if they do, they think that something is not working properly within the specific economy of their society. In reality, however, their problems are caused precisely by the fact that the economic system is working properly and according to its logic (that is, a logic which aims to minimize costs for the owners of capital while maximizing their profits). This leads to greater exploitation of workers (and to a consequent reduction in their quality of life) and creates a race to the bottom among states with regard to the labor market. It weakens workers' rights and permits bigger profits for companies and corporations, while at the same time increasing the pressure on all those who work for and within the system, including managers or freelance professionals, provoking, in turn, the abovementioned forms of psychological suffering. The latter example shows how multifaceted systemic suffering can be: it can affect people from the lower ranks of society as well as those who apparently profit most from the existing social arrangement (in this example: workers as well as employers). In a sense, it is self-inflicted suffering, even if not intentionally so, of course. When faced with such suffering, systemic doctrines deny it altogether or rationalize it. For their part, the mechanisms leading to these different strategies for coping with suffering provoke or intensify the suffering itself, creating a vicious circle that explains why and how societies that cause suffering among their members remain nevertheless stable and are incapable of eliminating the suffering even when it appears evident (i.e., when poverty is clearly visible, when labor-connected forms of psychological suffering are undeniably widening, or when a specific religion is provoking violence and open discrimination).

5) On criticizing systemic suffering

I would like to end this paper with some remarks on the strategies to adopt when criticizing systemic suffering. A critical social theory should show how so-called social “pathologies” are due to the very way a given society is organized and reproduces itself (the diachronic dimension is essential). The concept of suffering should allow for a better understanding of the mechanisms for social reproduction and social integration, and, at the same time, offer a litmus test for ascertaining whether and up to what point these mechanisms are biased in favor of specific social groups and deleterious to other groups. The internal critique of society formulated by social agents and picked up by social theorists in their attempt at an explanation can be thus understood foremost as an ethical, not simply as a moral critique. While the latter targets some unjust features of society, the former tries to show when and how society is forcing a form of life on its members (Jaeggi 2014) that unavoidably provokes suffering. A major difficulty in diagnosing suffering, however, is that its victim might not be aware of its systemic causes or its social nature. This leads to a further difficulty, namely that of identifying objective criteria for diagnosing systemic suffering. It is the same difficulty Shklar mentions concerning injustice.

A first step to tackling these difficulties might consist in distinguishing between harm, suffering, and wrong. Harm is objectively ascertainable, while suffering seems to indicate a more subjective way of perceiving a possible (but not necessarily actual) harm. People can be harmed without noticing it and therefore without suffering, e.g., when they are exploited as workers but are convinced that they are being treated fairly. Conversely, people can suffer without being harmed, if they are delusional or oversensitive to certain actions or states that they hold to be harmful, but are not – such as people who believe in conspiracy theories concerning vaccines or chemtrails. To make things more complicated, harm is not always the result of a wrong. To recur to Shklar's example, the harm inflicted by an earthquake does not represent a wrong or an injustice, while the harm inflicted upon its victims by unresponsive or inefficient officials does. Moreover, in the case of a wrong, one has to ascertain whether there is an objective ground to claim that one is facing an objectively wrong action or situation (e.g. when it has been proven that the responsible officials intentionally failed to rescue the victims of an earthquake), or whether one is dealing with a



subjective perception of a specific harm as being the result of a wrong, but with no objective reasons to come to this conclusion (e.g. when the officials did all they could, but the victims are wrongly convinced that they could and should have done more and better). When applied to the results of systemic doctrines, this distinction leads to five different constellations:

I) Harm results objectively from the application of the systemic doctrine and is perceived both as a wrong and as suffering by its victims, causing indignation and possibly provoking claims against the supposedly responsible actors or even demands for a change in power relations;

II) Harm results objectively from the application of the systemic doctrine, but its victims do not consider it to be a wrong done to them and experience it just as unavoidable suffering (this leads to the naturalization of the harm and the suffering);

III) Harm results objectively from the application of the systemic doctrine, but its victims are not aware of it (therefore they do not perceive it as a wrong, nor as suffering);

IV) No harm results objectively from the application of the systemic doctrine, but some people think nevertheless that they are suffering for reasons tied to the doctrine;

V) No harm results objectively from the application of the systemic doctrine, but some people think nevertheless that they are suffering for reasons tied to the doctrine and consider this to be a wrong done to them. In both the latest two constellations the suffering is the result of psychological problems or pathologies (mild or severe persecution complex, blind belief in conspiracy theories, or even serious psychiatric disorders).

From the point of view of Critical Theory, constellations II and III are the most relevant, since they are cases in which people are not (partially or totally) aware of the wrong inflicted upon them by the systemic doctrine (in constellation III they are not even aware of some harm being inflicted upon them). Constellations I, IV, and V are more likely to provoke some form of protest and civil unrest, therefore igniting a process of confrontation with the defenders of the systemic doctrine who hold power positions and – possibly – modification of the power relations within society. Constellation V is interesting, nonetheless, since being prone to believe in conspiracy theories can be a symptom of social suffering. When people feel that they are not in charge of their life as they are supposed to be, they might experience uneasiness and look for a simple answer to their problems, instead of accepting the complexity of reality. In a sense, they are right in the assumption that they cannot really control their lives and that they are victims of superior forces, but they are wrong in connecting these forces to specific individuals or groups (Jews, the Illuminati, etc.), instead of seeing them as impersonal mechanisms like those of the global market or global finance.

Constellations II and III are explainable only if one attributes to the systemic doctrine the capacity of obfuscating both the harm and the systemic oppression that causes it. This happens by denying the existence of the harm, or its cause, or of both; by masking them through ideological tools; by naturalizing or rationalizing them. The task of a Critical Theory should be to reveal these mechanisms and make transparent both them and the harm they provoke. The problem is that harm is more easily detected if experienced and denounced through the suffering it provokes; but, as we have seen, sometimes harm goes unnoticed or suffering does not result from some real harm. Finally, one should be aware that the elimination of a specific harm may result in causing a different harm, due to the coexistence of systemic doctrines within society.

Critical Theory has traditionally adopted the method of immanent critique as opposed to external criticism. While the latter adopts an external point of view concerning its object and uses its own normative



criteria to criticize it (e.g., when criticizing the wearing of a burqa in the name of an abstract principle of individual autonomy that does not consider other gender-related issues), the former represents a critique from within and pursues its normative criteria among the values and principles currently accepted in the very society it aims at criticizing. In this sense, a twofold form of immanent critique is possible with regard to the dominant doctrine of a specific society. The first is only apparently immanent and should rather be called “internal.” It arises from the co-existence within a society of different doctrines. For instance: the capitalistic logic that leads to the reification of social relations can be questioned and opposed by groups that try to maintain or create social spaces, in which that logic does not apply. The range goes from anarchical attempts at living in communes to workers’ cooperatives. This resistance might become an active opposition and open revolt, as in the case of the Russian or Cuban revolutions. The same happens when a religious minority tries first to establish a religious ghetto and then to impose its views as the socially accepted orthodoxy. In all these cases, the resistant or revolting groups defend a different doctrine from the capitalistic one and try to live according to it or to establish it as the new dominant doctrine of society as a whole. This does not eliminate systemic oppression and systemic suffering; it just establishes new forms for both.

The second form of immanent critique fully deserves its name, since it does not oppose the dominant doctrine by defending a different one, but aims at showing its internal contradictions and at highlighting the mechanism provoking suffering. In this case, the critique takes the form of a “critique of ideology” in the sense used by the first generation of the Frankfurt School (and, partly, by Marx, who, however, focused more on the internal contradictions of capitalism as a system of production and exchange of commodities than as a doctrine or as a form of life). It does not oppose doctrine to doctrine, creed to creed, but limits itself to analyzing and criticizing the “knowing that” and the “knowing how” produced by a specific doctrine, whether dominant or not. This second kind of immanent critique can be moved by a pure spirit of negation (like Goethe’s Mephistopheles)⁵ or by a more positive intention, namely that of eliminating systemic suffering. Its main task (which presents great, but not insurmountable difficulties) is to diagnose this suffering. This seems to me to be the most effective and urgent strategy to address the most relevant social issues. However, I shall not discuss this task and its difficulties in the present context.

Bibliographical References

- ARENDRT, H. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books.
- AZMANOVA, A. 2011. De-gendering Social Justice in the 21st Century. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 15, 143-156.
- BENHABIB, S. 1986. *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. Nova York: Columbia University Press.
- BOLTANSKI, L. 1993. *La souffrance à distance*. Paris: Métailie.
- BOLTANSKI, L.; CHIAPELLO, E. 1999. *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.
- BOURDIEU, P. (ed.). 1993. *La misère du monde*. Paris: Seuil.
- BOURDIEU, P.; BOLTANSKI, L. 1976. La production de l’idéologie dominante. *Annales de la Recherche Scientifique*, 2-3, 4-73.

⁵ Cf. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, 1st Part, Chapter 6 (“Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint!”)



- BUTLER, J. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London & New York: Verso.
- DEJOURS, C. 1998. *Souffrance en France. La banalisation de l'injustice social*. Paris: Seuil.
- DUBET, F. 2006. *Injustices. L'expérience des inégalités au travail*. Paris: Seuil.
- DUBET, F. 2010. *Les places et les chances. Repenser la justice sociale*. Paris: Seuil.
- EHRENBERG, A. 1998. *La Fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- EHRENBERG, A. 2010. *La Société du malaise*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- FERRARA, A. 2002. The Idea of a Social Philosophy. *Constellations*, 9/3, 419-435.
- FOUCAULT, M. 1980. The Confession of the Flesh. In Id. *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. by Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon Books, 194–228.
- FRANK, A. 2001. Can We Research Suffering? *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(3), 353-362.
- FRASER, N.; HONNETH, A. 2003. *Redistribution or Recognition?* London: Verso.
- FRICKER, M. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FROST, L.; HOGGETT, P. 2008. Human Agency and *Social Suffering*. *Critical Social Policy*, 28/4, 438-460.
- GENTILE, G. et alii. 1932. Fascismo (dottrina del). In: *Enciclopedia Italiana*. Roma: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, vol. XIV, 835-840.
- GEREMEK, B. 1994. *Poverty. A History*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- GEUSS, R. 2008. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- GRAMSCI, A. 1992. *Prison Notebooks. Volume I*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- GRAMSCI, A. 1996. *Prison Notebooks. Volume 2*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- HABERMAS, J. 1984. *Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- HABERMAS, J. 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.
- HABERMAS, J. 1994. *Post-metaphysical Thinking. Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.
- HERZOG, B. 2020. *Invisibilization of Suffering. The Moral Grammar of Disrespect*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- HIMMELFARB, G. 1984. *The Idea of Poverty*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- HONNETH, A. 1994. *Pathologien des Sozialen*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- HONNETH, A. 2000. *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- HONNETH, A. 2003. *Unsichtbarkeit*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.



- HONNETH, A. 2005. *Verdinglichung, Eine anerkennungstheoretische Studie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- HONNETH, A. 2011. *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- HRUBEC, M. 2012. Authoritarian versus Critical Theory. *International Critical Thought*, 2/4, 431–444.
- JAEGGI, R. 2005. *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems*. Frankfurt: Campus.
- JAEGGI, R. 2014. *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- JAEGGI; CELIKATES. 2017. *Sozialphilosophie. Eine Einführung*. München: Beck.
- KEHL, R. M. 2015. *O tempo e o cão*. 2ª edição. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- KLEIN, N. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Holt.
- KLEINMAN, A.; DAS, V.; LOCK M. (eds.). 1997. *Social Suffering*. Berkeley: UoC Press.
- KLEINMAN, A; KLEINMAN, J. 1997. The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images. In: KLEINMAN, A. et al. (eds.). *Social Suffering*. Berkeley: UoC Press, 1-23.
- MARGALIT, A. 1996. *The Decent Society*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- MARX, K.; ENGELS, F. 2017. *Deutsche Ideologie. Manuskripte und Drucke*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- MENKE, C.; REBENTISCH, J. (Hg.). 2010. *Kreation und Depression*, Berlin: Kadmos.
- MIKKOLA, M. 2019. The Wrong of Injustice. Dehumanization and Its Role in Feminist Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 186-222.
- MOORE Jr., B. 1970. *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- MOORE Jr., B. 1978. *Injustice. The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*. White Plains (NY): Sharpe.
- PAUGAM, S. 1991. *La disqualification sociale*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991.
- PINZANI, A. 2013. Os paradoxos da liberdade. In: MELO, R. (org.) *A teoria crítica de Axel Honneth. Reconhecimento, liberdade e justiça*. São Paulo: Saraiva, 293-315.
- PINZANI, A. 2019. Critique of Forms of Life or Critique of Pervasive Doctrines? *Critical Horizons*, 27/2, 140-149.
- PINZANI, A. 2020. Redistribution, Misrecognition, Domination. In: CELENTANO D.; CARANTI L. (eds.). *Paradigms of Justice: Redistribution, Recognition, and Beyond*. Abingdon: Routledge, 46-64.
- POGGE, T. 2002. *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- RAWLS, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard: Belknap.
- RAWLS, J. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- RENAULT, E. 2008. *Souffrances Sociales. Philosophie, Psychologie et politique*. Paris: La Découverte.



- RENAULT, E. 2009. The Political Philosophy of *Social Suffering*. In: DE BRUIN, B.; ZURN C. (eds). *New Waves in Political Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 158-176.
- RENAULT, E. 2010. A Critical Theory of *Social Suffering*. *Critical Horizons*, 11/2, 221-241.
- SCHWARZ, R. 2000. As ideias fora do lugar. In: Id. *Ao vencedor as batatas*. São Paulo: Edição 34, 9-31.
- SCOTT, J. C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- SEMBLER, C. 2020. *Soziales Leiden. Zur zweiten Natur unserer Freiheit*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- SENNETT, R. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: Norton.
- SHKLAR, J. 1990. *The Faces of Injustice*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- SONTAG, S. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.
- SOULET, M.-H. (ed.). 2009. *La Souffrance social*. Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg.
- STANDING, G. 2011. *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- STRANGE, S. 1989. Toward a Theory of Transnational Empire. In: CZEMPIEL, E.-O.; ROSENAU, J. (eds.). *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges*. Lexington: Lexington Books, 161-176.
- STRYDOM, P. 2011. *Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology*. London & New York: Routledge.
- WALZER, M. 1980. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- WALZER, M. 1988. *The Company of Critics*. New York: Basic Books.
- WILKINSON, I. 2005. *Suffering. A Sociological Introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- WILKINSON, I.; KLEINMAN, A. 2016. *A Passion for Society*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- ZURN, C. 2011. Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorder. In: PETHERBRIDGE, D. (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, Leiden: Brill, 345-370.