

Understanding suffering

The psychic and the social in the experience of work

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Abstract: This article examines the contemporary experience of work as a source of harm and our changing understanding of suffering. The bonds between work, subjectivity and suffering are presented around three milestones: 1) the evolution of the psychodynamics of work and its explanation of the impact of competition upon workers, a discipline developed in the heat of Christophe Dejours' research and the exchange between psychopathology, sociology and philosophy; 2) the difficulties of interdisciplinary approaches to the phenomenon of suffering that have marked its reception in philosophy; 3) the disappearance of the idea of conflict in the adaptation to social imperatives, a central notion in the dialogue between critical theory and psychoanalysis, but absent in the evolution of psy knowledge and contemporary psychotherapeutic alternatives.

Keywords: Psychic Suffering; Suffering at Work; Psychodynamics of work; Psy Knowledge; Critical Theory.

1. Introduction: the privatisation of distress

Work, as a central social activity, has a strong capacity to determine our living conditions. Being an activity that occupies most of our time in adult life and often subject to unchosen conditions, it has power to shape subjectivity, as well as its possible disruption. The increase in diagnoses and mental pathologies related to work has increased dramatically in recent years, to the point where contemporary work environments are often considered pathogenic. Whether this problem is attributed to working conditions (time pressure, ruthless competition, exhaustion) or to the breakdown of the collective solidarities that characterised the Fordist work culture, a strong individualisation of labour relations contrary to collective frameworks can be identified. Neoliberal reform projects have carried out a direct attack on labour, solidarity and union cultures, producing a rupture in the social norm that characterised the fordist labour culture and which linked training and occupation, which associated the status of worker with

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access to social rights and which allowed for the construction of a coherent biography around one's own job.

Neoliberal rationality imposes a framework of individualisation, which penalises expressions of solidarity and mutual support for their anti-competitive and inefficient nature. Besides, expressions of unhappiness are under suspicion as an obstacle to performance. The discussions on the privatisation of stress (or 'distress' in a broad sense) and the promotion of forms of obligatory individualism are a possible avenue of reflection on the impact of competitive relations on the formation of subjectivity at work. To this end, this paper explains key elements of the *psychodynamics of work*. This discipline has placed the problem of work-related suffering at the centre and aims to provide an answer beyond the strict framework of psychopathology, offering a theory of subjectivity full of philosophical dimensions. Finally, the discussion is narrowed down to the scale of psychic suffering in the light of debates on suffering as a borderline phenomenon between the psychic and the social.

Suffering poses some difficulties in establishing the scope of its different determinants (social, psychological, external or internal). A discussion that cannot avoid an essential chapter in the history of critical theory: the dialogue with psychoanalysis and the rise and fall of some of its fundamental approaches. On that point, that shouldn't result in the mourning of a deeper lost theory in the face of the rise of the neurosciences and biologicistic explanations. On the contrary, it is about studying the effects of the erasure of notions of anguish, conflict and contradiction that place the phenomenon of suffering in the gap between the psychic and the social, which make it a complex problem that cannot be reduced to an exclusive disciplinary field. By extension, it is a question about the challenges of a multiform object of study such as suffering, and about the social and political consequences of the levelling of the mental space, tending to be reduced to the strict materiality of the brain, which leads the subject to choose between a pharmacological response or a framework of strict individual responsibility.

Mark Fisher coined the expression 'privatisation of stress' to describe the process by which the subject is held responsible for their own failures or their inability to adjust to the growing demands for performance and productivity. Both neoliberal rationality and policies aimed to shape all social spheres as spaces of competition. Hence the imposition of a framework in which subjects understand themselves to be maximally free where they establish competitive relationships. However, the neoliberal project does not end with the generalisation of these principles; the other side

of this process was also an attack on labour, a strong anti-union culture and the aspiration to transform life into a business¹. The imposition of this framework is rooted in political defeats and in the disassembly of the collective power that the working class could still have in the post-war context. Subsequent forms of corporate management met with less resistance and were able to impose a discourse aimed at recovering productivity rates prior to the post-war social pact, weakening the “the autonomy of workers as part of a project to restore the historical conditions of power and wealth of the hyper-privileged classes”².

After decades of neoliberalization, subjects learnt to understand themselves from these parameters, which is to say: forced to be free in a particular way. From a neoliberal framework individuals must constitute themselves as if life itself were a question of business management. Coincidentally, the extension of the vocabulary of *psy knowledge*³ spread a grammar that leads subjects to individualise distress, to disconnect it from social causes and to govern themselves according to an aspiration to happiness and responsibility. Such principles would operate by producing environmental effects, creating atmospheres that promote a repertoire of behaviours, in work environments and beyond, associated with competition, the primacy of individuality and the absence of solidarity.

Narratives that reinforce the idea of ‘magical voluntarism’⁴, according to which the subject could always extricate himself from any kind of conflict by his own means, are in direct contradiction with a materialist understanding of distress. It is worth asking whether we are facing a simplification of our understanding of psychic suffering when it is stripped of its social determinants. This dilemma cannot be avoided by the debates around the concept of suffering in philosophy and the social sciences. Disputes in psychiatry confront the same divide: between biological explanations of distress, which reduce the genesis of disorders to a strictly biological problem (often reduced to neurochemical imbalances) and explanations that are more attentive to the social determinants of health. Although in the psychic sphere we can understand “disorders” or forms of psychopathological decompensation as a biological possibility, that is, as a

¹ See López Álvarez (2023).

² Fisher (2018, 132).

³ *Psy Knowledge* in the sense that it has been conferred by critical studies in psychology and psychiatry. Authors such as Nikolas Rose discuss the power and the capacity of determination of the forms of subjectivity acquired by psychology, human resources and fitness cultures. Psychological topics spread to everyday life and shape our understanding of health and illness. See Rose (2019 [1996]).

⁴ Fisher (2018, 136).

state coherent with the psychophysiological possibilities of bodies, nothing says that the contours of “mental illness” should be those conferred by hegemonic psychiatry, the rigid delimitation between adapted and maladapted behaviour and the reduction of the diverse forms of distress to a neurochemical imbalance. Only from a strictly individualistic framework could suffering or distress be understood as a maladjustment of the subject or an ‘abnormal’ neurophysiological state in the face of ‘stressful’ factors. As David Smail suggests, any kind of distress must be understood at the intersection between the body and the environment, as well as in the framework of power relations that result in an inequality of resources when it comes to dealing with it. As individuals inseparable from their bodies and from the web of relationships that constitutes their subsistence, their constitution as subjects, the learning of language and a long process of acculturation, our understanding of suffering cannot be reduced to a strictly individualistic or biologicistic framework:

A human body abstracted from its environment is not a person: it is merely a collection of all the biological bits and pieces which go to make up bodies. A person only comes into being when a body is placed in a social world which interacts with it (...) a person is by no means identical with the material structures of his or her body, but is a construct of the interaction between body and environment. A person is partly body, certainly, but is also partly environment. Or to put it another way, the world outside extends its social institutions and practices into “me”: “I” am the hatched area which is neither body nor world, but a complex interaction of both⁵.

We face a depoliticization of distress and a separation of the phenomenon of suffering from its social determinants. The epistemological implications of such an individualistic reduction are inseparable from the difficulty of articulating the psychic and the social. The growing appearance of the problem of suffering in philosophy and the social sciences echoes the effects in terms of injustice that can be identified in its reduction to the individual sphere. In the debates around the problem of suffering, in line with critical theory, there’s an attribution of political value to the expression of suffering, insofar as it is an invisible reality, a reality that must be connected to the series of social processes that produce it⁶.

However, some suspicions may arise regarding the analytical usefulness of this concept due to the risks of psychologization. This is answered by philosophy and psychodynamics of work arguing that a certain degree of

⁵ Smail (2015, 62-63).

⁶ See Zamora (2021) and Renault (2010).

suffering (or distress) is inherent to human existence⁷ and that the political problem would lie in determining under what social conditions suffering is avoidable, at what threshold it becomes intolerable —or a question of injustice— and what social conditions produce an inequality of means when it comes to facing suffering. Assuming certain levels of psychological distress inherent in the friction between the individual and their adaptation to society does not necessarily commit us to an ontologisation of suffering, a theory that would make suffering an “original and fundamental condition”⁸. On this point, suffering is one element, among others, of the heterogeneity and ambivalence of social experience. The key point of this discussion is to distinguish the extent to which the contemporary organisation of work is producing an unprecedented amount of suffering and, on the other hand. Subsequently, distress and suffering as natural dimensions of psychic life appear as a question we should address. These are conflicts absent in a thinning model of psyche in psychotherapeutic discourses, managerial discourses and self-help frameworks that promote compulsory happiness and the individualisation of malaise.

2. Suffering and competition from the standpoint of psychodynamics of work and critical theory

Psychodynamics of work sheds light on the link between work and subjectivity. A bond that is not only that of pathology and social domination, but that of a possible enrichment of the subject at work (through *sublimation*). What began as a set of studies on the *psychopathology of work*, centred on the causes of psychopathological decompensation with clear origins in working conditions, ended up transforming itself into a theory of subjectivity, where the relationship between subject, intersubjectivity, social world and work occupies the central stage. Both psychopathology and psychoanalysis suffer from a lack of interest in the centrality of work (like most psychotherapeutic interventions). For this current of thought it is highly significant that during the second postwar period the main union discourses, the main parties of the left and the main public policies on labour rights did not take into consideration the subjective dimension of work or the impact it can have on the psychic life and mental health

⁷ See Cukier, Genel and Rolo (2022).

⁸ Renault (2008, 345).

of individuals⁹. Suffering at work was often considered a petty-bourgeois concern.

The psychopathology of work initially focused on the effects of workplace harassment, working under time pressure, the effects of fear (due to dangerous tasks or fear instilled by the hierarchy) and the consequences of repetitive work on the body and the psyche. Dejours wondered “what state is the psychic life of the worker in, when he is deprived of his intellectual activity by the scientific organisation of work”¹⁰. The variety of cases studied showed that the experience of work is always ambivalent. Faced with exhaustive standardisation and routinisation of tasks, there are workers who manage to escape and others who suffer severe cognitive and psychosomatic exhaustion. The use of fantasy during the performance of repetitive tasks provides relief in some cases. However, states of constant psychomotor tension have consequences for the worker, during the working day and in his free time off, since “it is the whole person who is conditioned to productive behaviour by the organisation of work, and outside the factory he still has the same skin and the same brain. Depersonalised at work, he will continue to be so at home”¹¹. Suffering, as an affective state of the body and, therefore, invisible, is not objectifiable according to any concrete metric. We always run the risk that an apparently immeasurable affective state may be considered politically or scientifically irrelevant¹². However, suffering can be experienced as something intolerable and as an intense experience throughout the person’s body, regardless of where we draw the line between the normal and the pathological, between bearable suffering and an intolerable reality for the subject.

Due to the attention paid to the formative power that the experience of work can have on the whole person, on the subject understood as the instance that experiences suffering (which is an affective experience and a state of the body, not always translatable into discourse), these studies ended up illuminating a theory of the relationship between work and subjectivity. Consequently, the psychodynamics of work takes as its object of study not so much the specifics of management or the principles that govern each organisational model but rather “the processes that underlie the experience of working”¹³: the capacity to transform the world, the possibil-

⁹ Dejours (2009a, 57). See Molinier (2008, 87-89).

¹⁰ Dejours (2009b, 50).

¹¹ Ivi (53).

¹² See Dejours (2009a, 43).

¹³ Molinier (2008, 88).

ity of appropriating one's own intelligences and, ultimately, the possibility that the subject has of transforming himself.

Taking their questions beyond the strict aetiology of the pathologies produced by work, they pose the enigma that underlies *normality at work*, not a passive subjectivity that receives the demands of work in the form of an impact but a subjectivity that engages dynamically with the elements at play: the content of the task, the tools, the skills and the workspace, the demands of the hierarchy and the demands and needs of coordination with co-workers. In this way, subjective commitment to work was revealed as an active effort by the subject to achieve psychic normality in work situations. In other words, the psychodynamics of work came to deal with the process of building psychic defences and the dynamic negotiation of the subject in the face of the demands of the work environment of the task, of the work collective and of the reality of work. As their authors said: "normality results from the compromise between suffering and the defences developed to endure that suffering, a compromise that can always be destabilised, which justifies its designation as a *normality that suffers*"¹⁴. *Normality at work* is understood as a constant subjective effort when confronted with demands and constraints, the difficulties of the task and the risks of psychopathological decompensation. Bringing the framework of research from pathology to *normality*, with the underlying efforts and contradictions, was the decisive step in the evolution of this discipline:

We had achieved a theoretical shift that now seems to be the very basis of the nascent discipline. We acknowledged the dead ends and failures of research on the mental pathology of work. We recognised that most workers managed to avoid madness, despite the pernicious limitations of work organisation. So we resorted to defensive strategies. And at the same time, what emerged as the central enigma of research and analysis was 'normality': normality that appeared from the outset as an unstable and inherently precarious balance between suffering and defences against suffering; but which also seemed to be the result of strategies that were both complex and rigorous, and therefore not as a mechanical consequence of an accumulation of actions and reactions¹⁵.

Psychodynamics of work attempts to show that there is an ergonomic truth of work that neither neoliberal management nor the scientific organisation of work are willing to recognise and that, nevertheless, it is the subject who, in the experience of work, discovers that truth: it is the distance between the prescribed work and the reality of work. The distance

¹⁴ Dejours, Gernet (2014, 35).

¹⁵ Dejours (2011, 212).

between the standardised steps of the work and what the subject must add to overcome obstacles and face the unexpected is a challenge that the worker faces and resolves through the coordination of diverse intelligences and cunning. First, the subject experiences the reality of work affectively, in the modality of effort and suffering, from which he must defend himself through various individual and collective strategies. In the confrontation between the reality of work and subjective effort, what Dejours calls “poietic subversion”¹⁶ takes place, an exercise in creative response to the obstacles offered by the experience of work. A positive result in the appropriation of the environment, the task, the contents of the work and the challenges, results in an expansion of sensitivity that can be understood as a sublimation of experiences that the subject initially experiences in the form of suffering.

Already in *Souffrance en France* (1998) Dejours showed that the libidinal bond with work moves between suffering and pleasure. Working always has an individual dimension, of overcoming the obstacles that reality places in the subject’s path, which is to say, it involves an effort and a challenge from which the subject can emerge stronger. Inevitably, it also has a collective dimension, which requires the collaboration of the entire work environment, the recognition of peers and the judgement of procedures and results. If the efforts made do not manage to be sublimated into pleasure or there are blockages in terms of recognition, a sense of usefulness or a silence about dangerous conditions, immorality or competition, the suffering can end up generating psychopathological imbalances. On this point, the psychodynamics of work assumes, with psychoanalysis, an idea of the subject’s constitutive fragility. Furthermore, they understand that psychic normality is built through the efforts of the subject, which means it is not given beforehand. What is disturbing in the case of work is how a “normality in suffering”¹⁷ comes to be constituted and the process by which the subject becomes blind to the exercise of harm or situations of injustice. The construction of defences in environments that produce excessive demands on the subject (competition, intensification or performance metrics) are of the utmost importance. They desensitise us to the suffering of others and can even inhibit our sense of justice, producing a moral anaesthesia. However, Dejours insists on the ambivalence of defences, which do not always have pathogenic effects. The question at a political and psychosocial level

¹⁶ See Dejours (2025b).

¹⁷ Dejours (2009a, 51).

is that the process of normality in suffering, in conditions of competition, leads to active collaboration in the process of harming others.

Adaptation to the imperatives of competition generalises relationships of suspicion and mistrust between workers, which brings into contradiction two dimensions: the individual and the collective. The psychodynamics of work emphasises the fact that collaboration is necessary, as far as many tasks cannot be carried out if the coworkers do not collaborate in their achievement. However, individuals subject to individualised performance evaluation, as well as to a context of no guarantees of job security, necessarily compete and actively engage in the process of hindering each other. In other words, in many work contexts, submitted to evaluation and competitive pressure, individual success and promotion depend on the failure of one's peers¹⁸. In competitive contexts where the improvement of each worker's personal situation depends on the lower performance of their peers, the logic of social darwinism that has always characterised capitalism is intensified.

In this sense, the acts to which the individual is led in a context of competition do not respond to the inertia of the banality of evil, which cannot be understood solely as the passivity of those who follow orders in a context they do not fully understand¹⁹. The relevant problem at this point is how normality is constructed in the damage and distortion of our criteria of what is fair, as well as our reactivity to situations that, under other conditions, we would qualify as unfair: "the banality of evil has nothing to do with psychopathology, but with normality, even if the characteristic of this normality is that of being disastrous and sinister"²⁰. Continuing along these lines, it is worth pointing out that the position of the *normopath* is constructed based on an external threat and a resulting psychological conflict, in which fear plays a central role. That is, it responds to a defensive strategy and not to a character flaw. Another possibility is to consider the position of the normopath as a hyper-adapted individual who does not experience any kind of conflict with social demands, even if they demand passivity in the face of violence. Then it would be a way of avoiding the suffering that would be caused by a psychic elaboration or an awareness of the acts of violence or injustice at stake in a social or work situation. Identification with authority, the expression of positions of power unattainable for the subject, obeying orders that compromise the worker's ethical sense,

¹⁸ See Catalina (2021).

¹⁹ See the whole critique of Arendt in *Souffrance en France* and the deeper notion of *banalization of injustice* coined by Dejours (2009a).

²⁰ Ivi (114).

the demand to commit acts that moral sense disapproves of and that can produce a type of ethical suffering, are partly explained as a saving of the work of psychic elaboration.

In an introductory work on the psychopathology of work, Christophe Dejours and Isabelle Gernet presented normopathy in the field of individual defence strategies. Normopaths would be an example of “hyper-adaptation to reality, an extreme conformism with the norms of social and professional behaviour. They manifest themselves as being rarely willing to engage conflictive movements, particularly guilt. For clinicians, normopathy would represent a specific solution to fight against the work of elaboration triggered by the experience of suffering”²¹. The cognitive saving involved in hyper-adaptation, similar to how stereotypy, resentment and the structure of prejudice are considered in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, can be understood as a way to avoid thinking about a painful reality. Here the possibility of distinguishing between defence mechanisms and adaptation mechanisms is of the greatest interest, as the psychoanalyst Paul Parin remarked: “defence mechanisms require energy (a counter-investment) to free the Ego from instinctual demands, while adaptation mechanisms relieve the Ego of this duty”²².

The acceptance of conditions that lead to enduring and inflicting harm in a coercive context has been described as a type of ‘*adaptation à n’importe quoi*’²³. The contemporary experience of work, due to the prevalent doses of coercion and competition, forces to consider the violence on which normality is based. On this point, the trivialisation of injustice and harm at work, as it has been considered from the psychodynamics of work, can be read in the light of the notions of *coldness* and internalisation of social violence approached by Critical Theory:

The struggle of all against all materialises in an attitude of aggression and permanent self-defence, in which others are perceived as competitors or adversaries and the logic of devouring and being devoured appears as ‘natural’ and inevitable. The guiding principles of what Primo Levi called the ‘grey zone’ are therefore already incubating before the camps, although only in the camps do they reveal their most ruthless features. The ‘normal monsters’ that Adorno spoke of are constituted in the everyday banality of capitalist forms of socialisation: what will be revealed as atrocity is forged in the grey and apparently innocuous day-to-day²⁴.

²¹ Dejours, Gernet (2014, 39).

²² Parin (1998, 71).

²³ Pagès (2022, 145).

²⁴ Maiso (2016, 58).

Philosophy, although it has been interested in the sources of social violence, has not paid enough attention to the problem of suffering, nor to the close relationship between this and the construction of forms of virility that are a defensive response and a denial of a reality that produces harm. Starting from Dejours' proposal, we could identify two scales of suffering. On the one hand, the level of suffering inherent in any subjective activity of confrontation with the real and of material transformation of the environment, that is, a type of psychic test linked to the efforts and the confrontation between the subject and the real, from which the subject could emerge successful and strengthened, or harmed and ill instead. On the other hand, a second scale of suffering in terms of subjective damage and predisposition to the exercise of damage. In this way, certain manifestations of suffering are presented as a subjective experience in which, whether in the maintenance of normality or in the triggering of a psychopathological decompensation, the psychic process mobilised by the work situation does not have a sublimating result and produces damage (whether it is noticed or not).

Certain ways of building defences against this suffering, pathological or not, can engender violence, "defences can be extremely dangerous, because of their capacity to generate social violence"²⁵. In this way evil is normalised in work practices. Competition and fear turn us into 'diligent collaborators' of evil, in the process of inflicting harm on others, hindering peers and lying about one's own results and procedures²⁶. The collaboration in evil of all the agents in the system, not only of the managers or authority figures (whose image presupposes the passivity, inertia and innocence of the subordinates) raises moral and political implications.

Psychodynamics of work allows us to consider the extent to which competitive work environments are a breeding ground for an *anti-democratic ethos*²⁷. The voluntary exercise of harm at work also demands an investigation into the forms of social sadism or indifference towards the weakest groups. The possibility of loss of one's own social position and its clash with the experience of competition sheds a different light on the bonds between work and subjectivity. Work experience and subjectivity shape each other, both in terms of its pathogenic possibilities and the capacity to shape the dispositions of the subject, towards several forms of strengthening of the self or towards ruthless competition. If adapting to the imperatives of competition produces resentful individuals, incapable of perceiving social

²⁵ Dejours (2009a, 115).

²⁶ Ivi (105).

²⁷ See Renault (2018).

injustice or of fighting it, it is worth asking to what extent the experience of work influences the subject beyond the strict working day. Conflicts at work do not only have to do with the values held by the individuals who come together in these relationships: “there is no clear boundary between the sphere of work and the broader social sphere. The transmission of social values does not only occur from society to the workplace. It also goes in the other direction”²⁸. Therefore, what the individual is and does when working permeates the constitution of his psyche and character.

In *The Freezing Point of the Self*, Götz Eisenberg discusses how the subject becomes “accustomed to seeing the other as a hostile competitor, to their successes coexisting with the suffering of others, in a context that forces individuals to expend their psychic and cognitive energies in the struggle for their existence, their status and their private privileges, and they are forced to live in a universe of permanent defence and aggression”²⁹. Along the same lines, Adorno insisted on the effect of the introjection of social violence on the subject. Thus, the negativity of the contemporary experience of work can be considered in terms of violence. No one emerges unscathed from constant socialisation in competition, since, as noted in *Minima Moralia*, “the interiorisation of a ruined exterior exerts violence on the inner”³⁰. The theoretical and political challenge posed by the interweaving of subjectivity, the internalisation of violence and the experience of work requires us to shed light on the traces left on subjectivity by socialisation in competition, constant fear and existential risk. Competitive environments produce subjective damage, not only in the sense of distress originating in work. The damage also extends to the psychological life of the subjects, also threatening the possibility of stability and the formation of an autonomous subjectivity.

Competitive pressure and the demands of performance prevent a critical distance from being taken from social injustice and from the exercise of damage. The diagnosis of the *weak self* in Critical Theory aimed to the impoverishment of experience, related to the elimination of a possibility of distance which constitutes the condition of autonomy and critique. The coercion with which social imperatives present themselves is installed even in the most intimate part of the psychic constitution of subjects, in such a way that “the omnipotence of the apparatus suppresses the distance and the tension between the individual and the collective, as well as between

²⁸ Dejours, Deranty (2010, 176).

²⁹ Eisenberg (2016, 404).

³⁰ Adorno (2004, 264).

the subject and reality”³¹. An experience of work marked by the obligation to constitute ourselves as performance operators, and a coextensive psychotherapy aimed at alleviating the maladjustment of subjects, “erases all reference to individuals who have socially produced conflicts”, thus eliminating the traces of “social violence in our understanding of psychic suffering”³². The effects of this split between the social and the psychic present us with two problems that we will address below: the difficulty of theoretically articulating both dimensions and the danger of simplifying the understanding of suffering.

3. Between the psychic and the social: social determinants at a crossroads

Two opposing tendencies weigh upon the history of contemporary philosophy: is inescapable: the reduction of explanations of phenomena to the exteriority of social practices, to surface effects and, on the other hand, the tendency towards the interior, to seek the depth and complexity of the subject. It is a question of a disjunction between the outside and the inside. The problem of suffering does not escape this bifurcation. It is a multicausal and multidimensional problem, whether it is considered social, work-related or strictly psychological. It is a political problem in philosophy and the social sciences insofar as it raises a question: what happens when suffering is made invisible, when it is difficult to express it publicly and, therefore, what happens when the subject cannot mobilise against something that is not perceived. Because of it being a phenomenon at the crossroads between the psychic and the social, it challenges disciplinary boundaries. The difficulty lies in capturing the social experience in all its aspects, to the impossibility of building from a single discipline a whole image of the forms of social experience. Therefore, the problem is also epistemological: what form should take the knowledge of the social and the dialogue between disciplines.

This is what the philosopher Claire Pagès asks herself when reflecting on the contributions of the psychodynamics of work. What is the weight of the “exteriority determinant”³³? Is it possible to establish a social aetiology for some disorders or is there an internal and autonomous causality of the psyche that cannot be reduced to the social? The difficult task is

³¹ Zamora (2004, 108).

³² Safatle (2023, 50, 61).

³³ Pagès (2014, 152).

approaching *mixed causality*. Any discipline concerned with suffering or subjectivity must be careful not to reduce the social to the psychological or the psychological to the social.

The difficulty lies in combining the interdependence between the two dimensions with the assumption of autonomous causality at certain moments. There would be a social aetiology, but also an internal and autonomous functioning of the psyche. Distinguishing boundaries in such cases is a constantly recurring difficulty. Following the adorning idea of the *weak ego*, Emmanuel Renault warns that the impotence of the individual testifies to an “irreducibility of the social to the psychological”³⁴. The anguish of the individual in a context of social coercion and heteronomy cannot be reduced to psychogenic factors. However, when accounting for phenomena such as suffering or the transmission between harm suffered or inflicted at work and forms of social violence, we cannot avoid the risks of reducing the social to the psychological and the psychological to the social. It is necessary to continue the prevention of turning sociology into applied psychology, which raises the problem of the division of disciplines, while at the same time an attempt is needed to reunify them to do justice to the heterogeneity of social experience. The horizon would be a social theory that problematises the difficult articulation of psychic and social dimensions.

The intersection between the psychic and the social, between the dimensions of praxis, collective experiences and frameworks of meaning, and intimate, psychic and individual reality is a central debate in the developments of social theory throughout the 20th century (both the conflict between objectivism and subjectivism in sociology and the debates on the weight of agency and structure in contemporary philosophy). In a context of invisibilization of lived experience, it is crucial not only to give voice, but also to incorporate further study of the subjective triggers of suffering and experiences of social domination. It is necessary to incorporate the moment of subjectivity to understand social experience. Therefore, theory requires more inquiry into the ways in which subjectivity is constituted; that is, more interest in the subject, not less.

The dialogue between philosophy and the social sciences finds both justifications and limitations. Philosophy could incur in an “epistemological conservatism”³⁵ if it limits itself to commenting on the advances of the social sciences, while a philosophy that claims to have more authority than

³⁴ Renault (2017, 255).

³⁵ Renault (2010, 228).

the social sciences themselves to choose and justify the objects of study could be accused of “philosophical imperialism”. It is worth considering a critical social theory that keeps alive the moments of theoretical, epistemological and political self-reflexivity, aware of the social position of the theorist, attentive to the methods of philosophy and the social sciences, to the historical-social constitution of its objects of study and its analytical biases and gaps.

In Critical Theory, the dialogue with the social sciences took various forms. In foundational texts such as *Traditional Theory and Critical Theory* or *The Current Situation of Philosophy*, the aim was to overcome the descriptive and positivist moments and constitute an exercise in political, epistemological and social self-reflection, orienting theory towards social transformation. On this point, the dialogue between critical theory and psychoanalysis responds to the integration of social and economic determinants in connection with the study of the psychic and subjective dimensions. This was expressed in Horkheimer’s initial formulation as “the contemporary version of one of the oldest and most important problems of philosophy, namely the question of the relationship between the economic life of society, the psychic development of individuals and transformations in the field of culture”³⁶.

The evolution of interwar societies and the rise of fascism raised other questions about docility, voluntary servitude, authoritarianism and the tendency to vent aggression on the weakest social groups. The dialogue with psychoanalysis gained strength in the attempt to explain these tendencies. Drawing on psychoanalysis pointed to explain the manifestations of social violence, the potential for aggression that was expressed in the evolution of historical fascisms and the receptivity of subjects to ideologies contrary to their own interests. Here, the diagnosis of the loss of autonomy does not stem from a romanticisation of classical liberal individuality, but from an attempt to salvage an instance of autonomy that could also be understood as a conquest or a result of psychic maturation. The core of the appropriation of psychoanalysis was an attempt to reveal the causes of social domination doubled in psychic submission, in the scars of a forced adaptation to social imperatives contrary to the desires and needs of the subjects. As Jordi Maiso remarked, critical theorists tried to uncover the close links between material domination and subject-formation at a psychic level: “the tools of Freudian psychoanalysis permitted to identify violence in the imposition of socialization processes much better than any

³⁶ Horkheimer (2015 [1931], 221).

other revisionist sociological explanation; its theory revealed that negativity was not an exception, but the basic norm of a process of civilization which could only guarantee individual preservation at the cost of sacrifice”³⁷.

However, domination is not imposed entirely against the subject’s will but by taking root in their dispositions, in their desire and in subjective mechanisms that lead him to voluntarily compete in that which harms him. In the contradiction embodied by living subjects, suffering is also expressed as a principle of critique. The key is to understand the adaptation to social imperatives that harm the subject. Nevertheless, the socialisation of subjects is not total. It is neither entirely voluntary nor entirely imposed. In the negativity of damaged life, in the mark it leaves on the psyche and the body, critical theory identifies a principle of resistance linked to an idea of need. Subject’s scars resemble an unpacified conflict: “Suffering, general malaise, and so-called pathological symptoms are not only signs of the violence of social mediation; they are also the starting point for lived alternatives that do not conform to the current social order, and which still need to be articulated and politicized”³⁸.

4. The self and the contemporary understanding of suffering

By approaching the articulation of the psychic and the social, and specifically the phenomenon of suffering at work, it is possible to vindicate the epistemological and political value of negative social experiences. Posing suffering as an objectivity that weighs upon the subject expresses something of the friction between individuals and adaptation to social imperatives. The hardships caused by the adaptation to competition, suspicion and coercion at work are fraught with consequences. The social demand for a strong, independent individuality often produces immediate therapeutic and psychopharmacological responses. In the same way, the therapeutic discourse injected into the management of labour relations and some models of psychiatric intervention evolve intertwined, adapting to the needs of labour regulation and the prevalence of certain models of illness. For this reason, psychopathological constructs and their changes are not always the result of theoretical discussions and the internal evolution of their objects and methods, but rather, as the psychiatrist Alberto Fernández Liria explains, “they aim to justify the way of acting that mental

³⁷ Maiso (2013, 139).

³⁸ Zamora (2021, 48).

health professionals have had to adopt at all times in order to carry out the task that society has entrusted to us”³⁹. In this case, they respond to the growing demand for mental health care and the increasing incidence of pathologies related to working conditions.

Opposed to the dominance of the biological explanation for psychological suffering, there are critical positions in psychiatry in which epistemological and political self-reflection is proposed as a necessary ethic of clinical practice, conscious of its limits and its iatrogenic potential. In a context of proliferating diagnostic labels, it is necessary a careful consideration of the limits of the concepts used to understand realities as difficult as those of mental pathologies. By assessing mental illness, we use concepts that are necessarily limited and provisional. Any attempt to understand the reality of psychic suffering involves the need to use and develop concepts. There is no approach to reality that is not mediated by inherited concepts and languages, and there the work of the concept can start from the realisation of the limits of all scientific inquiry, of the bias of observations. All observation and practical intervention depend on theory:

Psychological facts are neither seen nor heard nor recorded without a specific conception that makes them stand out from the confused magma that is the history of each individual. There is no pure or exact description, as phenomenology and now scientific positivism used to dream of. They are all servants of the model that animates them. We hear what theory allows us, and we control from our practice what we can theorise, what we are able to highlight from reality in order to submit it to the rigours of reason⁴⁰.

Every clinical practice and every theorisation of the psychic is indebted to inherited concepts or theories and requires concepts to understand. As a result, in the study of psychic suffering it is difficult to leap over the knowledge accumulated by the different psychopathological models. As long as they are just that, models, imperfect ways of explaining the channels of psychological suffering, they can serve as a heuristic for the forms of contemporary distress, not detached from the self-awareness of the violence that any concept can inflict on things. Not because we place ourselves in opposition to the forms of violence of the psychiatric institution should we renounce psychopathology as a scientific corpus (theoretical and practical). Observations are theory-dependent, as are the choice of object and the concepts applied. In short, the constitution of a field of discussion depends on the state of conflicts in theory and in practice, on the victories

³⁹ Fernández Liria (2017, 135).

⁴⁰ Colina (2020, 137-138).

of certain currents, as well as on the defeats of previous paradigms. The displacement of the limits of the tolerable or of bearable suffering, as well as of the confines of illness, on the complex and undifferentiated background of distress, is a constant dispute. The thinning of forms of distress in line with an impoverishment of the understanding of psychic suffering and illness, increasingly understood as neurochemical imbalances or dysfunctional states explainable by psychogenic factors, runs parallel to the evolution of contemporary forms of individuality.

Since the implementation of “psychotechnics” in the workplace at the beginning of the 20th century, and in the same way as the disciplinary training of the gesture and the working body, the psyche was considered an element of work management that could be rationalised among others. The original ambition of a scientific organisation of labour and a maximally efficient management of time, movements and tasks demanded that subjective aspects be considered, aspiring to a psyche that is “disciplined in such a way as to contribute to improving the organisation of labour and production”⁴¹. The flexible subject promoted by neoliberal rationality does not suffer the same type of wounds as the fordist subject and in contexts of infinite demands for productivity, efficiency and self-improvement of the self as a personal brand (whose corporeal existence is inseparable from its labour force), numerous conditions arise for which the different theories that address subjectivity have no clear answers.

The introduction of psychological content in an alleged humanist shift in labour relations is in line with changes that have affected the understanding of the subject in the second half of the 20th century. As Vladimir Safatle emphasizes, management techniques and psychotherapeutic tools at work aimed to a mixture of discourses of the self and a grammar of business: “labor relations were ‘psychologized’ to be better managed until the point where the clinical techniques of therapeutic intervention began to obey, in an increasingly evident way, standards of management assessments coming from the universe of business”⁴². The new terminology used to address suffering influenced the understanding of psychological normality and is related to the usual way of pathologizing or infantilizing critical attitudes towards the neoliberal context. This hybrid discursive space between economics and psychology managed to normalise a business vocabulary and a need for quick and individual responses to complex psychological and social problems. In this respect, it is necessary to emphasise that un-

⁴¹ Zamora (2013, 155).

⁴² Safatle (2023, 54).

derlying the modes of government and economic regulation there are also forms of social management of subjectivities. In other words, they are associated with a standard of psychology. If it had always been understood that psychic suffering expresses an individual's malaise with respect to the social order, a friction between social needs and possibilities, that is to say, a certain dimension of criticism and rebellion against the established order, the unfolding of neoliberalism identifies a progressive simplification of the "social grammar of suffering" and an elimination of the dimension of psychic conflict between individuals and social imperatives.

In the evolution of psychiatry, the substitution of the prevailing framework of neurosis for that of depression is linked to the compulsory individualism promoted by the neoliberalization of all social spheres. Behaviour is related to the expected performance of individuals, in working life and in their private lives. The psychopharmacological response to suffering multiplies a series of diagnostic categories applicable to any behaviour that is deviated from social standards and normal work performance. Hence it no longer recognises individuals who have conflicts that are the result of contradictions in the socialisation process⁴³. Under the predominant prism of depression manifestations of suffering are increasingly seen as a problem of the subject's incapacity. Thus, "the individual is confronted with pathologies of insufficiency and dysfunctionality of his own action, rather than pathologies associated with prohibition and the law"⁴⁴, as in the classical framework of psychoanalysis and neuroses. The centrality of work in shaping the affective states of the subject also permeates the variations of suffering, in the feeling of personal worth or fragmented biographies. Whereas the subject was once confronted with social standards and guilt, today they are confronted with the inability to meet work performance standards, with the impossibility of being up to the mark.

Guilt and feelings of inadequacy are the dark side of a culture that promotes responsible autonomy which, although it is expressed in the language of business, it has not been produced exclusively in managerial discourse or in the ways of organising work, but also in a psychotherapeutic vocabulary, focused on the constant self-improvement of the individual. It outlines different lifestyles and has been strongly fuelled by the evolution of psychology and the extension of its notions to everyday life.

Every construction of the self and of distress is already mediated by psychological vocabularies and the history of the uses of psychology as a

⁴³ Ivi (58).

⁴⁴ Safatle (2023, 60).

technique for managing labour, as a technique for rationalising the human factor and as a “public science” at the service of biopolitics⁴⁵. Nikolas Rose’s research has shed light on the process by which we have become ‘psychological creatures’, not by virtue of an essential interiority but of the constant influence of psychological discourses (psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and various instances with the capacity for social or therapeutic intervention) and the epistemic authority we have granted them. In the mutual reinforcement of the forms of inner life and the discourses we draw on, as “culturally available narratives”⁴⁶, there is a convergence of the instances with the capacity to define normal and pathological states, the disciplines that intervene in the social body and, ultimately, the social practices that have brought about the emergence of modern individuality.

In modernity, the inner life of the subject shaped distinct ways of experiencing distress or depression that cannot be reduced to a universal way of experiencing anguish. What is more, accessing the narrative of oneself is neither pure nor occurs in conditions of absolute transparency. The self gets access to language and develops agency in a body in unchosen conditions, being acted, held and spoken for by others before even a minimal instance of critical autonomy can develop: “our incapacity to account for ourselves is based on the fact that we are animated by others, in whose hands we are born and, with luck, we are sustained. Thus, we are always, in some way, being made even as we make, being subjected even as we act, and, as Merleau-Ponty insisted, we are touching even as we are touched”⁴⁷.

Contact with otherness is the requirement for the emergence of the self. To that extent, discursive practices give rise to the ways of being a subject, to the styles of care available in each historical moment or to the incipient practices (of work, of leisure, of socialisation) in a changing social environment. The development of psy knowledge, its clinics and diagnostic categories channel the access routes to the socially rewarded ways of being a subject.

The flip side of an individual forced to be free, autonomous and proactive is the guilt for the inability to meet performance standards. Within this framework lies the growing search for help. Individuals are trapped in the circularity of guilt, while being offered discourses of proactivity and self-improvement. In the end, individuals cannot escape states of passivity, helplessness, or the need for external application of a label that confers the causal reasons for the incapacity: a diagnosis. The debates surrounding the

⁴⁵ Rose (2019, 143).

⁴⁶ Ivi (311).

⁴⁷ Butler (2021, 86).

epidemic of mental health problems are not resolved either by pharmacological response or by reducing them to social determinants, even when these are essential to explain the inequality of resources when it comes to dealing with suffering. Without denying that “the road to poor mental health for many does not begin in the brain but in social life”⁴⁸, in view of the lack of distinction between biological and social explanations, it is pertinent to question the need for diagnosis that can be incurred and the limits associated with a welfare approach. The need that subjects experience, amid helplessness, to adhere to an awareness of illness that appeases states of distress, shows a difficulty that affects both the freedom and agency of subjects and the available alternatives to hegemonic psychiatry.

At this point it makes sense to ask whether the omnipresence of psy discourses forces us to investigate the tendency to understand ourselves in medical language. The growing demand for therapeutic care, expressed as a need for diagnosis, suggests the possibility that we may have incorporated a psychotherapeutic common sense which, although it allows us to give voice to the broad spectrum of distress, limits our access to the complexity of the problem of suffering. The fact that the expression of suffering is reduced to a demand for individualised medical assistance prevents us from seeing the importance of other assets in mental health such as the feeling of belonging, the sense of having purposes, as well as a series of material, social or affective resources. The inevitability of grief and distress, as non-pathological states that coexist with desire, seems to have reduced the socio-symbolic universe through which, throughout history, we have been able to reflect on anguish or melancholy, now reduced to simple depression. In a context in which those who experience suffering demand individualised responses that, in turn, are functional to the needs of reproduction and exploitation of the workforce, any health initiative faces unprecedented difficulties.

The changes in the grammar of psychic suffering are in solidarity with the loss of influence of psychoanalysis in psychiatry, inseparable from its fall into disrepute and its replacement in the field of psychotherapy by a different conception of the relationship between the narrative dimension of therapies and the subject’s capacity for action, the rise of the neurosciences and pharmacological responses. These incur in a physiological reductionism when it comes to explaining suffering, and the generalisation of cognitive-behavioural therapies, which act on habits or symptoms with-

⁴⁸ Rose (2020, 179).

out investigating the origin and context of the emergence of the symptoms themselves.

In this vein, the lack of interest in the complexity of psychic conflicts not only responds to functional needs for social and labour regulation. The loss of the idea of *depth*⁴⁹ when it comes to studying the form of the subject (as a social form and as a level of problematisation more complex than the strict scale of the individual and their preferences) and the disinterest of the prevailing models of therapeutic and pharmacological response in investigating the origin, erasing the weight of biography, they are both related to a simplification of subjectivity. On that point, the dialogue between psychoanalysis and critical theory⁵⁰ is an unavoidable chapter in the history of contemporary philosophy and the specific history of critical theory.

Amy Allen, in an attempt to vindicate that very relationship, recovers Melanie Klein's model of 'psychic maturation' and tries to reconcile it with the adornian critique of the constituent subject. Assuming that there is no such thing as a complete cure and that the subject always deals with certain doses of grief, loss and anguish, the author relies on a well-known maxim of Freud: a minimalist approach to psychoanalysis, in its clinical aspect⁵¹ which aspires to "transform states of psychic misery into mere ordinary unhappiness"⁵². Starting from this assumption would make it possible to uphold a realistic philosophical anthropology, which does not elude the centrality of anguish and fear, as opposed to excessively idealistic normative models.

The friction between objective social reality and the needs of the psyche produces hardened individuals whose psychological strategies of adaptation have consequences on the subjective and political dispositions. For this reason, critical theory has always raised the need to study "the traces

⁴⁹ See Zaretsky (2017, 196).

⁵⁰ See Safatle (2023) and Maiso (2013).

⁵¹ By "clinical" here we mean the strict tools and the psychotherapeutic framework, which does not exhaust the explanation of culture in Freud's later work or of philosophical considerations that can be drawn from metapsychology. Psychoanalysts such as Jean Laplanche, when studying the forms that anxiety takes, explain that certain types of neurosis are related to a deficit in psychic elaboration, that is, with difficulties posed to the subject on the work of psychic elaboration. The cure is seen as a process of elaboration: "For Freud, and from the beginning, the cure consists of re-establishing links, connections, between systems or groups of representations that are separated: it consists, consequently, of re-establishing communications within the psychic life" (Laplanche 2013, 52). In this sense, the achievement of autonomy is linked to understanding freedom as knowledge of the conditioning factors that weigh upon the subject.

⁵² Allen (2020, 149).

that the internalisation of social coercion produces in the psychic constitution of subjects”⁵³.

5. Conclusions

The effects of work organization on subjectivity should be investigated by the different disciplines interested in the study of suffering. Therefore, an attempt at a critical theory of work should be rooted in the co-determination between work organisation, individual suffering and expressions of social violence. Assessing the damage of the experience of work compels us to examine the internalisation of the imperatives of competition as a coercive social principle. This would also contribute to nuancing our understanding of the subject and of the consequences that adaptation to social demands has on psychic life. When work seems endless, the limit is set by the body and the psychophysical consistency of the worker⁵⁴. The privatisation of stress is the combined result of the destruction of collective frameworks and individual accountability, and the elimination of a series of explanatory factors, always in a complex connection, such as the social determinants of health or internal psychic causality as the substrate of a subjectivity always immersed in a network of relationships and not circumscribed to the neurophysiological sphere. The language of business management, extended to the relationship between work and life, only sees “performance operators”⁵⁵, not subjects with needs (bodily, affective) and psychic conflicts, who face the mismatch between desire and reality and, in response, construct defensive adaptations.

Difficulties to achieve awareness of the ambivalences involved in adapting to competition go hand in hand with a critique of an omnipotent subject. To exist is to depend on others. The experience of work raises a confrontation between the fantasy of self-sufficiency of the neoliberal individual and the recognition of interdependence, assuming that freedom is inseparable from “the relationship with the material conditions of existence” and that “the body is inscribed in networks of power and counter-power, but also in a network of dependencies that precede any example of autonomy”⁵⁶. The centrality of work for subjectivity illuminates the impact of the contemporary experience of work on the subjectivity

⁵³ Maiso (2022, 272).

⁵⁴ Catalina (2021, 250).

⁵⁵ Safatle (2023, 50).

⁵⁶ López Álvarez (2023, 120).

and the body. The grammar of competition and enthusiastic engagement is related to the spread of individualising psychotherapeutic frameworks. In the space between the biological understanding of suffering and the exhortation to individual self-improvement, a sense of critical autonomy has been lost. Research on subjectivity and work must confront the negative experience of the latter, which means work being a possible experience of damage. The notions of conflict and harm (psychic or somatic), compel us to balance their relations with subject formation and social violence, making the problem of work also a matter of political philosophy. It makes it, then, a problem in the sphere of power.

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