

## ***Souffrances sociales. Philosophie, psychologie et politique***

***Emmanuel Renault***

DOI: 10.3395/reciis.v2i2.220en

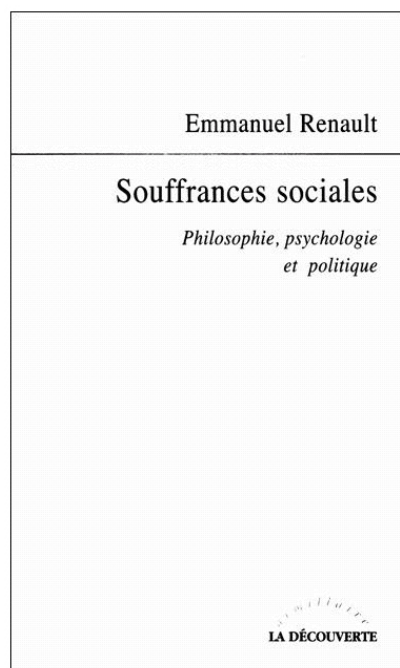
***Michel Thiollent***

Coppe, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
thiollent@pep.ufrj.br

The book by Emmanuel Renault, professor of philosophy of the École Normale Supérieure of Lyon, presents an interesting and wide-ranging survey of recent studies of the concept of social suffering, based on philosophy, psychology and political science.

The term social suffering (in the singular or plural) is widely used today in the social sciences, covering different aspects related to a loss in the quality of life, experienced both at individual level (psychopathological symptoms deriving from inhumane working conditions, unemployment or job instability, for example) and collective level (social unease, degradation of the living conditions of communities, situations of domination, social exclusion, violence, psychological harassment, etc.). The term is also evoked in political debates on the actions taken by society or public policies to identify the problems related to the living conditions or social exclusion of certain sectors of the population. In these debates, social suffering is frequently associated with the recent effects of neoliberalism, in particular increased job instability and the limitations imposed on social security for wage-earners and the unemployed.

Although social suffering has existed in various societies and historical periods (suffering linked, for example, to the situation of workers with the onset of industrialization in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, slavery in colonized countries, forced labour or other authoritarian practices), the intensive use of the corresponding concept in the social sciences is fairly recent. In the French context, one author who contributed considerably to its divulgation is Christophe Dejours, a work psychologist who at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century investigated the



***Paris: La Découverte, 2008***

**ISBN: 978-2707154019**

disturbances caused by industrial work on the worker's mental health and who inaugurated a vast program of research studies in the psychopathology of work, later adapted to the psychodynamics of work. Following a similar line of research, we can highlight the studies by Michèle Salmona on social suffering in the rural world (a context less frequently examined than the industrial world), in particular among small producers from declining farming regions in France, where the incidence of depression and suicide is extremely high.

Emmanuel Renault provides an important review of the international literature on the theme of social suffering. Among the prominent books responsible for developing the concept of suffering, aside from the work of Christophe Dejours, the author highlights the collective study edited by Pierre Bourdieu, based on interviews among the new poor who emerged as a result of the wave of industrial restructuring prevalent over the period in question. Shifting further back in time, F. Engels, in 1845, had described the situation of the working classes in England in terms that revealed the harshness of their existence, while S. Freud, in his essay on discontent in culture or civilization, described a situation very similar to social suffering.

However, according to E. Renault, the term social suffering has been criticized or even avoided by authors following Foucault who argue that using the concept risks 'psychologizing' or even 'medicalizing' social reality. Marxist authors, for their part, have seen social suffering as a way of masking "the importance of structures of domination and exploitation" (p. 6).

The author also refers to important contributions published in the United States on the theme, such as those of A. Kleinmann, V. Das, M. Lock, N. Scheper-Hughes and I. Wilkinson. Works by German authors are also taken into account, beginning with those by the philosopher Axel Honneth (*Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*), an heir of critical theory, and the classic work by H. P. Dreitzel on social pathology.

The articles by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, in particular, draw the attention of Brazilian readers since the author refers specifically to social suffering in Brazil, describing phenomena such as living conditions in favelas, poverty and hunger in rural areas, police violence, the failure to meet basic social needs, and child mortality in the Northeast, sometimes tolerated by certain sectors of the population. Such situations have already been widely described in Brazil, but rarely to illustrate the concept of social suffering in the social sciences. In the area of political debate, the term still seems to be fairly unknown.

E. Renault's book is organized into six chapters. In chapter 1, entitled 'Obstacles and problems,' the author shows how the concept of social suffering is becoming consolidated within the social sciences and philosophy, despite the objections of various schools of thought. In chapter 2, 'A political vocabulary,' the author shows how the term in question entered political discourses in the recent past, especially in arguments denouncing social injustices or critiquing the capitalist system. Here the

author points out "the constraints imposed by work on subjectivity, the ways in which these constraints are experienced and internalized [...] as indicated by the emergence, as a public concern, of stress, harassment, the harmful nature of working conditions and the suicides these provoke. The vocabulary of suffering also helps reveal the unbearable aspect of the experience of insecurity and exclusion" (p. 138). In chapter 3, 'The current controversy,' the author shows how suffering, as a political term, forms part of the discourse on neoliberal policies, seen as primary causes of insecurity and social exclusion. The term has also become institutionalized as a key concept of public policies targeted at underprivileged populations. In the French context, both Dejours and Bourdieu had an active voice in this debate. In chapter 4, 'Four models of social pathology,' the author dialogues with some of the major exponents of classical sociology (Durkheim), social medicine (L.R. Villermé, J.R. Guérin, G. Rosen) and social pathology linked to psychoanalysis (S. Freud) in order to problematize the social pathology of which suffering, in diverse forms, is found to be an expression. Based on a review of this extensive literature, the author sets out his own view in chapter 5, 'The outlines of a conceptualization.' The concept of suffering acquires greater complexity when physical and psychological aspects are combined. Psychological suffering is divided into psychic and psychosocial suffering. The latter, in turn, is divided into ethical and moral suffering (p. 310). At a wider scale, social suffering is conceived from a dynamic point of view and explained by different social factors responsible for suffering, related to living and working conditions. In chapter 6, 'Suffering and social critique,' the theme is re-examined as part of a theoretical-critical discourse concerning the effects on society, as well as questions of justice, self-realization, alienation and disrespect, which, in a recent context, are generally associated with the predominance of neoliberalism from the 1980s and 90s onwards.

In summary, Emmanuel Renault's book provides an excellent introduction to studies of the concept of social suffering as comprehended by a variety of philosophical, psychological and political approaches. It presents the state of the art, taking into account the range of studies covering issues related to the psychology of work (the harmful effects of industrial labour on the worker's mind and body) and the moral sociology of politics (the concept of injustice denounced through the evocation of social suffering). The critical use of social suffering provides a source of arguments for political discourse, highlighting the negative consequences of certain economic and social policies on the living and working conditions of underprivileged populations, as well as the risks to which individuals are exposed, particularly at a psychic level. Showing the suffering in a society with powerful forms of mass communication, which usually work to mask the phenomenon, can provide the grounding for political and intellectual action. Finally, the book is above all theoretical and conceptual, since it makes no use of case studies, though various concrete situations are mentioned, including examples from Brazil.

## Sources consulted

- Benasayag M, Schmit G. *Les passions tristes. Souffrance psychologique et crise sociale*. Paris: La Découverte; 2003.
- Boltanski L. *La souffrance à distance*. Paris: Métailié; 1993.
- Bourdieu P. *La misère du monde*. Paris, Seuil; 1993. [Brazilian translation: *A miséria do mundo*. Petrópolis: Vozes; 2003].
- Dejours C. *La souffrance en France. La banalisation de l'injustice sociale*. Paris: Seuil; 1998. [Brazilian translation: *Banalização da injustiça social*. Rio de Janeiro: FGV; 2007].
- Dejours C. *Travail, usure mentale*. Paris: Bayard; 2000. [Brazilian translation: *A loucura do trabalho*. São Paulo: Cortez; 2003].
- Dejours C. *Conjurer la violence. Travail, violence, santé*. Paris: Payot; 2007.
- Dreitzel HP. *Die Gesellschaftlichen Leiden und das Leiden an der Gesellschaft. Vorstudien zu einer Pathologie des Rollenverhaltens*. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag; 1972.
- Engels F. *La situation de la classe laborieuse en Angleterre*. Paris: Éditions sociales; 1975. [Brazilian translation: *A situação da classe laboriosa na Inglaterra*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial; 2008].
- Fassin D. *Des maux indicibles. Sociologie des lieux d'écoute*. Paris: La Découverte; 2004.
- Freud S. *Le malaise dans la culture*. Paris: PUF; 1995. [Brazilian translation: *O futuro de uma ilusão; O mal-estar na civilização*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 2006].
- Furtos J, Laval C. *La santé mentale en actes. De la clinique au politique*. Toulouse: Érès; 2005.
- Honneth A. *La société du mépris. Vers une nouvelle théorie critique*. Paris: La Découverte; 2006.
- Ion J. *Travail social et souffrance psychique*. Paris: Dunod; 2005.
- Joubert M, Louzon C. *Répondre à la souffrance sociale*. Toulouse: Érès; 2005.
- Kleinmann A, Das V, Lock M. *Social suffering*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, Berkeley; 1997.
- Renault E. *L'expérience de l'injustice*. Paris: La Découverte; 2004.
- Salmona M. *Souffrances et résistances des paysans Français*. Paris: L'Harmattan; 1994.
- Scheper-Hughes N. 'Mourir en silence. La violence ordinaire d'une ville brésilienne.' *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 1994; 104.
- Scheper-Hughes N. 'Small wars and invisible genocides.' *Soc Sci Med* 1996; 43(3): 888-90.
- Vergely B. *La souffrance. Recherche d'un sens perdu*. Paris: Gallimard; 1997. [Brazilian translation: *O sofrimento*. São Paulo: Edusc; 2000].
- Wilkinson I. *Suffering. A Sociological Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press; 2005. 