First-Order and Second-Order Suffering

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In this paper I aim to discuss the complex relation between different forms of suffering that go from the most intimate and individual ones to those shared within social groups (in this case: the poor). I will first try to define suffering and discuss the relation between it and violence (1), intended not only as physical or psychological violence, but also as epistemic violence and as epistemic oppression. This latter concept will help discussing forms of suffering that can be deemed to be of second order, since they are deeper forms of suffering that hinder that first-order suffering can be really addressed (2). I will adopt different methods. In Part 1 I will use a phenomenological method in describing the experience of first-order suffering and of violence. In part 2 I will refer to some results of empirical social studies in order to build a hypothesis on the cause of second-order suffering.

1. Suffering and Violence

Suffering is a basic human experience – one that defies any attempt at a definition precisely because of its fundamental character (in this it is similar to pain and its opposite, pleasure). It cannot be reduced to physical or psychological pain, although it more often than not implies both. When pain crosses a critical threshold with regard to its intensity and duration (a threshold that varies from person to person) and becomes so dominant to relegate to marginality any other experience, it deserves the name of suffering. Even when it is felt as a physical, "embodied" experience, it is always at the same time a psychological, mental experience; similarly, psychological suffering "translates" often into bodily symptoms. In this sense, it is an experience that affects the whole person and can be said to constitute the key to understanding the continuity between body and mind. Even when it remains in the background, we are aware of its ghastly presence. It haunts our everyday life, it hovers above our familiar environment, it cast its shadow on our actions, feelings and states of mind. We may forget it for a moment, but only to feel it next with renewed force. Its causes are the most diverse: the loss of a beloved person, a professional failure, a chronic physical pain, or a generic sense of the futility of our life. Even when its causes are social, it remains a personal experience, actually one of the most personal ever. Arthur and Joan Kleinman observe: 'there is no single way to suffer; there is no timeless or spaceless universal shape to suffering. […]

Individuals do not suffer in the same way, any more than they live […] in the same way.'[1] These words remind us of the intrinsic peculiar character of suffering. It is peculiar with regard to the fact that individuals who experience it do this in their personal way, and it is peculiar with regard to its cultural representation and interpretation, which is specific for any given context (e.g. the suffering of a religious martyr has a different meaning for the believers than the suffering of civilian "casualties" for those who oppose war: in the first case the suffering experienced by the martyr is trumped by the "prize" that awaits him in the afterlife, in the second case the civilian's suffering is held to be unacceptable and unjustifiable).

Its individual character makes it very difficult for those not involved to really understand the suffering of other people. At best, one can grasp *that* they are suffering, but not *how* they are feeling.[2] Furthermore, people do not always show that they are suffering; sometimes they even try to conceal it, so that it becomes almost impossible to recognize their pain. In this sense one could distinguish a *transparent* suffering from an *opaque* suffering: while the former can be detected by others, usually triggering a reaction on their part (they may try to help the suffering person or they can simply feel touched and moved), the latter tends to remain hidden, without soliciting an answer by other people (and this can possibly imply that the affected person will suffer longer and/or deeper). But dissimulation or stoic bearing is not the only way in which suffering remains opaque: it can be that its victims are not aware of some of its peculiar dimensions – particularly its social one. In other words, they can experience it as their own private suffering, without seeing in it the symptom or the manifestation of a wider, more general social problem.

Suffering is often considered to be unspeakable or at least to defy language.[3] As Arthur Frank puts it: 'Suffering is the unspeakable as opposed to what can be spoken; it is what remains concealed, impossible to reveal; it remains in darkness, eluding illumination; and it is dread, beyond what is tangible even if hurtful. […] At the core of suffering is the sense that something is irreparably wrong with our lives.'[4] It resists conceptualization, but it is not completely clear whether this is something peculiar to suffering. If this resistance should be understood as the consequence of its private character, that makes it inaccessible to others, the same could be said of love or any other intimate feeling. They all should be seen as unspeakable and as resisting conceptualization (who can really *explain* love in the sense of giving objective reasons why person X fell in love with

[1] Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman. "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times." In: *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman et al., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 2.
[2] This characteristic is commonly highlighted by modern philosophers like Hobbes, Smith and Hume, who consider it to be a basic feature of individuality.
[3] Iain Wilkinson, *Suffering.A Sociological Introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2005, 16 ff.
[4] Arthur Frank, "Can We Research Suffering?" *Qualitative Health Research*, 11 (3), 2001, 353-362.

person Y and not with person Z?).[5] Rather than silence, it seems that suffering creates in its victims a sense of impotence and passivity that faces them with two alternatives: either retiring themselves into a self-imposed silence (for any word would only deepen their pain), or talking about their experience in order to feel some relief, independently from the fact that their hearers do in fact understand them and fully grasp or share their suffering (lovers – both happy and unhappy – tend to choose this option and often talk a lot about their feelings).

When we say that suffering defies language, we mean rather that it tends to seem meaningless to its victims, who therefore deem it impossible to conceptualize it. In this it is different from pain, which can be sometimes seen as necessary to reach some superior goal (like when one fasts to obtain some religious insight or to cleanse one's body, or like when one submits to some painful medical treatment to heal from a major ailment). Suffering can even be seen as inspiring by artists or mystics, but artistic creation or religious revelation are mere consequences of it (they do not reveal its roots), and the fact that the affected people or some observer attribute some higher meaning to it represents rather a rationalization that aims either to explain how artistic inspiration (or religious illumination) works or to extol the value of the art work (or of the spiritual enlightenment) by highlighting the price paid by the artist (or by the religious person) in order to reach it. In both cases, suffering is considered to be merely functional to achieving specific results (artistic inspiration, religious revelation) and its meaning is superimposed ex post on the basis of such results. Normally, though, suffering appears to be deprived of any positive meaning to those who experience it. According to Wilkinson, it is bound with 'an overwhelming and deeply antagonistic sense of senselessness,' so that 'a vital part of "the problem of suffering"*consists* in a compulsive struggle to reconstitute a positive meaning for self and society against the brute force of events.'[6] In other words, 'the great discomfort and distress of this experience take places in a desperate search for interpretation and understanding.'[7] This search find expression in questions such as: 'Why am I suffering? Why me? Why so much?'[8]

There have always been, of course, attempts at answering these questions. The biblical book of Job is a paradigmatic example of such attempts. Interestingly, Job's desperate lament does not receive an answer that gives proper meaning to his sufferings. God simply affirm his privilege to impose suffering on his creatures because he has created them; for this reason, he expects and openly demands full submission from Job. The latter's plight has therefore no objective meaning

[5] Even attempts at considering love from a merely physiological point of view, e.g. in neuroscience, can merely describe what happens when a person falls in love, but cannot explain why she falls in love.
[6] Wilkinson, *Suffering*, 11.
[7] Wilkinson, *Suffering*, 42.
[8] Ibidem. Wilkinson quotes also Paul Ricoeur, "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 249-261.

other than reassessing God's arbitrary power on humans. Job has to accept his fate and bear it with patience (a patience that has since then become idiomatic). A similar answer to the question of the meaning of suffering can be found in Greek tragedy: also its heroes and heroines are expected to show acceptance and submission to Fate or to the will of the Gods, even if they often claim their innocence or piety (just as Job does) and clearly perceive their suffering as something unjustly imposed on them without their fault.[9] Other cultural traditions offer different answers: Indian religions e.g. recur to the concept of karma in order to explain suffering in terms of a punishment for past deeds (similar explanations can be found in other cultures too). This highlights once more that the question of the meaning of suffering is answered differently in different cultural contexts, as we claimed above.

Finally, suffering is experienced as something that disrupts the individuals' life and threatens both their personal and social world.[10] The individual feels passive against it and rapidly gains the impression that she or he cannot do anything to hold it. Suffering overcomes its victims with brutality; even when it takes a long time to brew in the dark, it always catches them unprepared. It comes to them with irresistible force and cause a shock that often leaves them speechless, as we have seen. When individuals go through experiences of loss and mourning, of illness and death, of physical and psychological harm, of bodily impairment and depression, they have the impression that some external force is raging against them, smashing and shattering their body and psyche. Suffering manifests itself as a *violence* done to its victims.

Violence characterizes our life and our being-in-the-world, but this does not mean that it is always unavoidable, nor that it is omnipresent. We should never come to naturalize or accept it as something normal. We should never surrender to it. By the same token, its "familiar" character, i.e. the fact that it constitutes a phenomenon that everyone comes to experience with more or less frequency during her or his life, cannot lead us to relativize it up to the point that we judge it to be irrelevant. We have no reasons for coming to the conclusion that if everything is violence/violent, then nothing is really violence/violent.

Like in the case of opaque suffering, there is in our life and in our society a hidden violence, and the social critic has the task to let it emerge. To this end, violence needs to be qualified, so to say. There is a natural, unavoidable violence like the one connected to both extremes of our life,

[9] There is often a dispute between the hero or the heroin, on the one side, and, on the other, another figure or the choir about the fact that the suffering might be the consequence of someone's fault, even if it is another person, like in the case of Oedipus's father Laius who tried to "cheat" the oracle and so unwillingly helped its fulfillment.

[10] "While it is clear that suffering takes place within the most intimate dramas of personal life, at the same time it almost always encompasses attitudes and commitments that comprise our wider social being." (Iain Wilkinson and Arhtur Kleinman. *A Passion for Society. How We Think about Human Suffering*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016, p. 8).

namely the moment of birth and the moment of death. With birth we are put into this world and exposed to its suffering and misery (but also to its joy and beauty);[11] through death we are removed from that world, and even if many persons come to cope with their death and to accept it, it remains an act of violence against our body, if not our mind. In this first, natural sense, violence is inextricably connected to human life.[12]As natural as birth and death might be, these phenomena can be also caused by human-made violence. A birth can be the result of rape, of a forced marriage, of an imposed pregnancy. A death can be the result of medical negligence, of lack of material resources due to social injustice or to austerity policies,[13]and, of course, of plain killing.

There is also another kind of natural, unavoidable violence, namely the one resulting from natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods etc. However, here as well as in the case of birth and death, we may be faced with the combined action of humans and nature: the flooding may be caused by poor urban planning, the earthquake may be particularly calamitous because the available anti-seismic technology was not used in the construction of buildings etc. In those cases, we may claim that violence and the suffering it provokes are not unavoidable and not completely natural, but also human-made. It is in such cases of human-made violence that we may affirm that the suffering was unjust, that injustice was committed on the victims of violence.[14] Nature in itself is of course neither just nor unjust – only humans can assume these characteristics. The circumstance that humans can "contribute" to natural violence occasionally blurs the boundaries between natural and human-made violence. Sometimes it is virtually impossible to discern the human contribution since it may lie far away in the past. In other cases, however, it is quite unproblematic to detect purely human-made violence – both in the case of individuals and in the case of institutions. Accordingly, one can speak of social violence, of social injustice, or of social causes of suffering.

Furthermore, there is violence in the world that surrounds us, insofar as it is the result of the purposeful action of human beings. Manufactured things are the result of the negation of the intrinsic value of natural objects (be they alive or not) in order to submit them to the satisfaction of our needs. This represents in itself an unavoidable violence, since our survival depends on it; but this process of nature's submission to human necessities always runs the risk of becoming an end in

[11] Kant observes in his *Anthropology* that the first cry of the baby can be seen as a cry of indignation for having being brought into this world without having being asked (AA 07: 268 f. and 07: 337; see I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*. Translated by M. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 369 and 423), but it can also be seen as expressing the shock for having been torn out from the mother's womb and its blissful, all-encompassing coziness.

[12] On this topic see J. Clam, *Aperceptions du présent. Théorie d'un aoujourd'hui par-delà la détresse*. Paris: Ganse, 2010, p. 289 ff.

[13] I do not need to point out the avoidably deaths caused by poverty; it is however worth noticing that the austerity policy adopted by the Tory government after 2006 are considered to likely be responsible for over 100,000 deaths in the United Kingdom, one of the richest countries on Earth (but also a country characterized by very high levels of economic inequality). See Watkins J, Wulaningsih W, Da Zhou C, et al Effects of health and social care spending constraints on mortality in England: a time trend analysis, *BMJ Open,* 2017;7:e017722. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-017722.

[14] On this point see J. Shklar, *Faces of Injustice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

itself, with marginal results in terms of human flourishing, as it happens when the production of goods serves primarily or exclusively the valorization of capital and only secondarily and contingently the satisfaction of human needs. When manufactured things are produced as wares, like in the prevailing capitalist system, they result from a double violence: of humans on nature and of humans on humans. Environmental destruction as a result of the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources represents a form of man-made violence that affects both nature and humans, becoming a prime cause of social suffering along with social injustice.[15]

Finally, there is a form of violence which is subtler and more difficult to be detected, namely epistemic violence, which might lead to epistemic oppression. This brings me to the second part of my paper. Before discussing epistemic violence, however, I would like to briefly discuss a concept that is often connected to suffering and violence, namely vulnerability. As Judith Butler rightly asserts, 'suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence.'[16] The fact that we are faced at least with the possibility of violence in our everyday life makes us feel vulnerable. This corresponds to the feeling of impotence that falls upon us when we are overcome by suffering. In this sense, vulnerability is a central feature of what it means to be human. We could, therefore, talk of an ontological or existential vulnerability. On the other side, the use of the term "vulnerability" to refer to social groups is questionable, because it seems to indicate that these groups are subjected to violence as an inevitable consequence of being human. This is insofar misleading as the violence they are subject to is mostly a man-made violence that depends on the behavior of some social actor or on the way society is structured (e.g. on the way power and wealth are distributed in society). From this point of view, their vulnerability is not existential, but is the result of external factors on which they have not control, i.e. of social factors. The so-called "socially vulnerable groups" are actually the victims of social injustice and systemic oppression. Their alleged vulnerability has nothing to do with the existential vulnerability that characterizes our lives. The poor are disproportionally subject to suffer under the violence of state agents, to be exposed to illness and epidemics, to see their homes destroyed by natural catastrophes because they are not considered to be proper rights-bearers by officials, because they have not the material resources for living in a healthy environment or for accessing a functioning healthcare system, and because they are forced to live in places that are more exposed to the fury of the elements or in inadequate dwellings. Their condition is socially produced and should be labeled as marginalization

[15] Environmental destruction actually deepens existing social injustices, since its effects affect poor countries and poor people more severely and more often than wealthy nations and individuals (see E. Skoufias; M. Rabassa; S. Olivieri. *The poverty impacts of climate change: a review of the Evidence*. Policy Research Working Paper 5622. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011).

[16] Judit Butler. *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004, p. 149f.

or discrimination, not as vulnerability.[17] The use of the latter term is often expression of an attempt at whitewashing, i.e. at presenting their situation as something natural or unavoidably human, so denying its social roots. This is also part of the epistemic violence and oppression suffered by the poor, which I will discuss in the next session.

2. Epistemic violence and epistemic oppression

As I mentioned before, sometimes people experience their suffering as being a strictly individual matter and seem to be blind to its social character. The causes for this "blindness" or selective perception of one's own suffering are themselves social. In the first place, they can be of cultural nature. Cultural representations and interpretations of suffering may represent hindrances for detecting it (in a specific culture people might be discouraged to show openly that they are suffering) or for understanding it (what provokes suffering within a specific culture might not cause it within another). Some cultures may attribute a positive value to certain forms of suffering, while other may consider them to be shameful – and this attitude may vary with time within the same society. Poverty, for instance, was considered in medieval Europe a pitiful condition that should elicit a charitable reaction on part of the non-poor; according to the Christian doctrine, which dominated society at that time, the poor played a significant social role by enabling people to exert charity and therefore to fulfill their duty of good Christians; furthermore, the poor were considered to be closer to God than the rich, whose wealth was seen with suspicious eyes, since it could mislead them easily to sin and to eternal damnation; in other words, in medieval Christian Europe poverty, although considered a wretched condition, was not thought of as a situation that should provoke shame and guilt in those who lived in it.[18] Things changed with the Reform and the prevailing of an interpretation of earthily wealth as a sign of God's benevolence and as a premonition of future heavenly beatitude; correspondingly, poverty began to be considered to be the punishment for previous sins or as a sign of God's wrath, and the poor were therefore labeled as sinners; one started holding the poor responsible for their situation and to attribute their poverty to their alleged viciousness, laziness, stupidity and weakness of character. Poverty became a shameful condition, because it proved the moral wretchedness and personal flaws of the individuals who lived in it.[19] The anti-rich rhetoric of the Middle Age was substituted by an anti-poor rhetoric that at

[17] On this point I disagree from Butler, who claims that 'we cannot understand vulnerability as a deprivation' (Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 31). This might be the case with what I called existential vulnerability, but it certainly does not apply to what is usually called social vulnerability.

[18] See Bronislaw Geremek. *Poverty. A History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

[19] See Gertrud Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty. England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Alfred Knopf 1984; Margaret Somers and Fred Block, "From Poverty to Perversity: Ideas, Markets, and Institutions over 200 Years of Welfare Debate," *American Sociological Review*. 70 (2005): 270-287.

the same time served to justify economic, social and political inequality within society and to deny that the poor had a right to be helped by the state (or by their co-citizens). They were abandoned to private charity, which was granted only to the "deserving poor," adding another humiliation to their plight.

The very ways in which poverty has been seen and differently interpreted in time have influenced the way it was perceived and experienced by the poor themselves: to the suffering provoked by material want supervened the suffering caused by humiliation, shame and guilt, which arose from the idea that one is responsible for one's own situation and therefore deserve to suffer if one does not amend and change one's way of life.[20] This leads firstly to the rationalization of poverty, which is not seen any longer as a social, but as an individual problem, so that its solution is not to be expected through the action of society but through the personal initiative of the poor themselves; and it leads further to the internalization of the stigma connected to poverty, adding suffering to suffering and making it very difficult for the poor to claim for their rights or to demand that society helps them to come out from their situation. In this case, they experience suffering, but do not experience injustice and do not see their suffering as having a social dimension: its causes remain opaque to them. This makes it impossible for them to address the real causes of their situation. It represents, therefore, a second-order suffering that hinders the fight against the causes of the first-order suffering (in this case: of poverty).[21]

For social critics, opaque suffering is not only as important as transparent suffering when it comes to elaborate a critical analysis of society; it is even more relevant from a methodological point of view, since it allows diagnosing forms of domination that might not be immediately perceivable even to those who are their victims. In the abovementioned case of poverty, one has to do not only with the open suffering provoked by material deprivation, but also with subtler forms of suffering provoked by the social and moral stigma attached to poverty by the dominant anti-poor rhetoric and by what can be called epistemic violence. This kind of violence is not always easy to be detected, not even when social scientists face it in their research. In order to explain this difficulty, I shall recur to a concrete example connected to poverty studies.

The social investigation of poverty faces a major problem: it is forced to take as its source of knowledge the depositions of individuals whose epistemic reliability it tends to question or even to deny. The social scientist is aware that the poor do not give evidence on their situation from the

[20] See Robert Walker. *The Shame of Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
[21] I adopt this terminology thinking of what Christopher Zurn has deemed second-order disorders in order to refer to those deeper phenomena (see Christopher Zurn. "Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders," in D. Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, 345-370.),

objective standpoint of an impartial observer.[22] They refer to their subjective experience, that is, to the way they experience their poverty. In doing so, however, more often than not they adopt a language that is not their own and that reflects rather those assumed by the socially dominant view on poverty. During some field researches on the life of poor Brazilian women, my sociologist colleague Walquíria Leão Rego and I were puzzled by the discrepancy between, on the one side, the way in which the person we interviewed talked us about their plights, giving voice to their suffering and, on the other, the way they tended to explain their situation, usually blaming themselves. In order to understand this phenomenon, I would like to recur first to Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic oppression[23] and, second, I will refer briefly to Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

In a first attempt at roughly defining epistemic oppression, Fricker references the fact that 'the powerful have some sort of unfair advantage' over the powerless 'in "structuring" our understandings of the social world.'[24] In doing so she mobilises vague, generic categories (the powerful, the powerless) that need some clearer definition.[25] Individuals have a plural, intersectional identity and can belong to different social groups. They might face their social world in different ways according to which aspect of their identity is more affected by a specific experience (their ethnicity, their gender, their sexual orientation, their social status, etc.). On the other hand, notwithstanding the intersectional character of the personal identity developed by the members of society, one can identify specific social experiences that are shared by those who belong to a specific group, for example, the racial discrimination suffered by black people independently from their gender or social position. This is not tantamount to claiming that they share the *same* social experience. As Fricker points out with reference to the feminine standpoint, 'it need only depend on the idea that some of women's social experiences have *similarities* in virtue of their subjects being women.'[26] This allows us to define the standpoint of a specific social group without falling into the opposite mistakes of either assuming an essentialist concept of it (as if there might exist something like a feminine nature opposed to the masculine) or denying the possibility of identifying a common experience shared by the members of the group (as if every social experience were essentially individual in its character and could not possibly lead to any kind of generalization). Against this view, Fricker claims that it is possible to circumscribe social

[22] Of course, one could object that almost nobody is able to assume such a standpoint; but the poor appear to be less likely to do it for reasons that shall be explained below.
[23] Miranda Fricker. 'Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 29, 1999, 191-210; Id. *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
[24] Fricker, Epistemic Oppression…, p. 191.
[25] This vagueness echoes the way in which Howard Becker in his famous essay "Whose Side are We On?" distinguishes between subordinate and superordinate parties (Howard S. Becker. 'Whose Side Are We On?', *Social Problems*, 14(3), 1967, 239-247).
[26] Fricker, Epistemic Oppression…, p. 201.

experiences (e.g. experiences of discrimination or silencing) that are similarly lived by members of a social group. This allows us to identify the specific standpoint of that group despite the individual differences among its members. It should be possible therefore to talk of the social experience of the poor notwithstanding the fact that poor individuals differ from each other in many respects. From this point of view, it is possible then to speak of the standpoint of the poor as opposed to the standpoint of economically and socially privileged groups of a specific society, so that the categories of 'powerful' and 'powerless' become less vague.[27]

It is now possible to claim that the standpoint of the poor is marginalised in the sense that the poor's social experiences are not deemed relevant in order to understand how a specific society is structured. It is rather the standpoint of more privileged groups that is considered to represent an objective or even a 'true' interpretation of the social world. These groups need not be represented by the highest echelon of the social ladder, by the wealthiest strata of society. More often than not all groups that gain advantages from present social arrangements (from the economic elite to the lower-middle class) tend to share a number of beliefs, values and social practices that can be seen as forming a specific standpoint through which they see and experience their social world. In taking this standpoint, they marginalise and disqualify alternative standpoints; that is, they negate the relevance of the social experience of those who suffer under present social arrangements. This hermeneutic discrimination can affect the poor for no other reason than their being poor and can be therefore called hermeneutic injustice. Hermeneutic injustice becomes epistemic injustice when, by silencing the social experiences of specific social groups, it hinders our ability to gain knowledge of society. This is, for instance, the case when poverty is reduced to a lack of material resources and explained by the poor's alleged lack of initiative, education or intelligence. This prejudiced view prevents us from having a more realistic view of society. When a group 'suffers epistemic injustice in a systematic way, then it will be appropriate to talk of epistemic oppression,' as Fricker remarks,[28] and it is undeniable that the poor suffer such oppression. Actually, one could even talk of epistemic domination, since they often lack the capacity to articulate an alternative epistemic standpoint. To epistemic domination corresponds of course an 'epistemic advantage' for the 'powerful.'[29] Their standpoint is considered to offer the only legitimate view of society, so that their narrative becomes the only acceptable one and ends up being accepted also by the 'powerless,' even though it might go against their personal experience. This happens mostly when the privileged standpoint is incessantly repeated in the political arena by dominant parties and by governing politicians as well as in the public sphere by mass media that uncritically accepts it. This happens,

[27] The same of course can be said of Becker's categories of subordinate and superordinate parties.
[28] Fricker, Epistemic Oppression…, p. 208.
[29] Ibidem.

for instance, in Brazil with *Rede Globo* and the other commercial broadcasting and publishing corporations that dominate the market in the absence of an effective public broadcast corporation.[30] This is not tantamount to claiming that the Brazilian media wilfully spread an ideological view that blames the poor, although this may well be the case up to a certain point. I would rather assume that we face here an epistemic bias.

Social groups may have an epistemic bias that leads them not to see social injustice in their society. This is not a form of cynicism or an ideological attempt to conceal the real power relation; rather it shows a certain inability to grasp how their society is actually structured and how its institutions reproduce social injustice. When middle-class Brazilians blame the poor for their own poverty and see the poor's alleged laziness, lack of intelligence or sheer irresponsibility as its main causes, they are not necessarily being cynical. They are simply judging the poor's situation by using the same parameters they use to judge their own lives, that is, individual responsibility and individual merit. Of course, they are wrong in applying these parameters to themselves in the first place, for individual autonomy is actually the result of external social factors on which individuals have hardly any influence, particularly when it comes to the conditions under which they are born (which social class, which social group, which family, etc.) and under which they have been educated. Further, they are also wrong because they think it is legitimate to judge someone's social position or economic condition simply by looking at their individual choices and actions without taking into account the social context in which those choices and courses of action were pursued. They do not seem to consider the role of family, social groups, education, etc. in which those individuals *happen* to live (not by choice, *nota bene*).

On the other side, this epistemic bias regarding how to evaluate one's life, has for the middle-class the positive effect of justifying in their eyes their own privileged position, which they do not attribute to the social conditions under which they have come to the world, but exclusively to their individual merit. It is then easy to see how this epistemic bias crystallizes in a view of social reality that justifies the status quo they profit from. It is at this point that this specific standpoint (the privileged standpoint) is presented to society as a whole as the only valid one and becomes hegemonic.

As it is well known, hegemony is an ambiguous concept. Gramsci uses it in different contexts and with reference to different phenomena.[31] For our purpose, it suffices to say that,

[30] On the dominant view on poverty and the poor in Brazil see Lena Lavinas (ed.). *Percepções sobre desigualdade e pobreza. O que pensam os brasileiros da política social?*. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Internacional Celso Furtado, 2014 and Mani Tebet A. Marins. *Bolsa Família. Questões de gênero e moralidades*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora da UFRJ, 2017.

[31] Antonio Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks. Volume I*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992; Id. *Prison Notebooks. Volume II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. According to Gramsci, "hegemony" can be "cultural," "intellectual," "moral," "social," "political" or "economic;" the corresponding adjective "hegemonic" is applied to such

generally speaking, the concept refers to the way a social group conquers and exerts power – be it social, political, economic or intellectual. One of its main mechanisms is to formulate a specific view of society and of social relations that is presented as the only objective and true one, although it represents a partial point of view in which, basically, the interests of the hegemonic class or classes are presented as the general interests of society as a whole.[32] In order to impose this standpoint on all other classes, different instruments are mobilized; academic discourses, school curricula and mass media, however, play an eminent role in its spreading.[33] In the case of Brazil, the dominant narrative has remained basically unaltered through all the regime changes: from colony to independent state, from monarchy to republic. It claims that society is naturally hierarchically structured and that those on the bottom (i.e. slaves and, after abolition, which happened very late, in 1888, former slaves and their descendants) occupy their position because of their ethnical, intellectual and moral inferiority. The narrative has been repeated for centuries in schools and academia, newspaper columns and church pulpits, by politicians, preachers, and pundits.[34] This goes some way to explaining how racism became so ingrained in the dominant view of social reality that most members of the dominant classes (the elite and the so-called middle-class)[35] claim that Brazilian society is not racist.[36] The naturalization of racial, economic and social inequality (not to

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heterogenous things such as "nation," "position," "point of view," "apparat," "action," "system" etc. (see Giuseppe Cospito. "Egemonia/egemonico nei *Quaderni del carcere* (e prima),"*International Gramsci Journal*, 2(1), 2016, p. 59).

[32]Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks. Vol. II*, p. 179ff.

[33] Gramsci *Prison Notebooks. Vol. I*, p. 152ff. and Id. *Prison Notebooks. Vol. II*, p. 199ff. One can observe this with the so-called neoliberal revolution that allegedly took place in the 1980s. As a matter of fact, the ground for this momentous shift in the social view that was dominant in Western capitalist countries was prepared through decades of patient, incessant intellectual efforts by academics, journalists, politicians and pundits, whose history have been already told by many authors (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu; Luc Boltanski. "La production de l'idéologie dominante." *Annales de la Recherche Scientifique*, 2-3, 1976, 4-73; Michel Foucault. The Birth of Biopolitics. Basinkstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Philip Mirowski; Dieter Plehwe (eds.). *The Road from Mount Pèlerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2009; Daniel Stedman Jones. *Masters of the Universe. Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). This shift happened often through apparently neutral governmental decisions, like when the French government stopped building social housing and started offering citizens low interest credit that it had dealt with private banks (Pierre Bourdieu. *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). In doing so, what was seen as a social right of citizens (the right to a decent housing) became a matter of individual responsibility (citizens were allowed using the borrowed money to build a house or a mansion, if they wanted, although this might involve their impossibility to payback their debt).

[34] With regard to preachers, I would like to refer to the so-called "theology of prosperity," which is widespread within Pentecostal Evangelical churches and claims that God wants us to become rich and despises those who do not make the corresponding effort.

[35] What Brazilians call middle-class represent actually a small parcel of society and would be considered middle-high class elsewhere. It is composed by free professionals and high rank public servants (judges, university professors, bureaucrats etc.) and comprehend the fiscal classes A and B, although class A (formed by those, whose income is more than ten times the legal minimum wage) includes also the billionaires and the economic elite (this gives to people earning slightly more than 10.000 *reais* the illusion that they belong to the elite, whose monthly income measures in the hundreds of thousand or in million).

[36] When the Lula government introduced affirmative action policies for public universities, it was common to hear from pundits and common people that it was such policies that created racism. Probably many made this claim in good faith. This peculiar blindness toward racial issues found an ideological justification in Giberto Freyre's concept of "racial democracy" (Gilberto Freyre. *The Masters and the Slaves. A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964; the book was first published in Brazil in 1933).

mention the strong gender inequality that characterizes South American societies) is the result of the hegemonic view according to which social positions are the result of the intellectual and moral superiority of the better off and the corresponding inferiority of the worse off. In recent years, this narrative has been partly substituted by a more neoliberal one, according to which social positions are the result of individual merit. The latter view is only tepidly defended by the elite, since their privileges are based mainly on inheritance and since most of its members are rentiers rather than entrepreneurs. However, it is strongly present in the public discourse, from media to academia, and it has also been internalized by the poor, particularly thank to the aggressive preaching of Pentecostal churches that spread what is called "theology of prosperity," according to which God wants us to become rich and despises those who do not make any effort to this goal. Rich people deserve therefore their wealth because they own it to their personal effort – a narrative that is blatantly contrary to historical facts and socio-economic analyses.

There are of course differences in the way the hegemonic standpoint is de facto accepted and internalised by the subordinate groups. There might be forms of resistance that manifest themselves in different ways. These can take the form of what James C. Scott has called 'hidden transcripts;'[37] that is, they can result in a discourse that disallows the official one, but too often remains circumscribed to small circles: to local communities, to friends and family, sometimes to the individual herself. Or they can surface through attempts to expressly voice alternative standpoints via independent media, social networks or forms of cultural expressions that have escaped the mainstream mechanism of producing culture, information and entertainment (in Brazil this might be the case with *favela funk* music). As important as they obviously are, these forms of resistance do not however subvert the epistemic privilege of the standpoint of the powerful and its dominance over the standpoint of the powerless. The latter therefore tend to remain under the spell of the interpretation of their own situation offered by those who created it in the first place.

Of course, one could question whether and to which point the poor *really* incorporate the dominant discourse into their own worldview and interiorize it so that they interpret their personal experience according to it. The fact that the women we interviewed gave us the dominant explanation when it came to discuss their situation could be a sort of reflective attitude that would not resist to a deeper analysis. Or one could think that they were telling us what they imagined that we expected to hear from them. On the other side, we heard the "standard" explanation from *all* the interviewed persons, also in the cases in which we repeated the interviews a couple of times every one or two years. In those cases, the women felt comfortable enough to tell us the most intimate

[37] James C. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

details of their lives and I doubt very much that they were not being honest when discussing their situation. More relevant would be the case that they were just repeating the dominant discourse without really believing it. It is of course difficult to exclude with certainty that this might be the case. However, the adoption of the "standard" point of view emerged not only in direct discussions of their condition, but also when discussing many other issues: from their relation to their parents, their family and their neighbours to the school performance of their children, from their belonging to a specific church to the political situation in their town.

The result of the hegemonic view within Brazilian society is that poor people tend to believe that they have no possibility of modifying their situation because they lack the resources that are necessary to attain this goal. They consider themselves to be too uneducated, too dumb, too weak, too incapacitated to find a way out of the mess of their lives.[38] They face, in Honneth's use of the terms, both a lack of self-esteem and lack of self-respect.[39] They do not believe that they are able to meet their own needs (not to mention the needs of their family), to develop their own talents (if they believe they have any at all), to pursue some long-term life plan (presuming that they manage to see their own lives in a long-term prospective). In this sense, they have no self-esteem because they internalise a dominant discourse that individualises the responsibility of poverty and attributes its causes to some personal fault of the poor, not to structural problems. The lack of self-esteem makes them furthermore endure different forms of humiliation imposed on them by officials (social workers, teachers, school directors, police officers, etc.) or by persons who exert some power on them (shop owners, bank clerks, doctors, etc.). This leads to a lack of self-respect, with its cause in the refusal of their social and legal equality, which is not acknowledged by those agents who occupy a socially higher position and claim for themselves not only a privileged epistemic standpoint, but also a superior moral status.[40]

Loss of self-esteem and loss of self-respect are therefore caused by forms of misrecognition, the causes of which are social, even when they depend apparently on the individual behaviour of some authorities or power holders. It is mostly individuals who deny them their rights, but this happens because society condones such a denial, so that its perpetrators have nothing to fear. Quite on the contrary, within society their attitude is justified for being grounded on the alleged moral inferiority of the poor: they are lazy, stupid, sneaky and deserve therefore to be treated badly. Conversely, these individuals think that their superior position of power entitles them to act as they do towards the poor. Their personal attitude rests on a social culture that justifies both

[38] See Lavinas. *Percepções…* and Marins. *Bolsa Família…*
[39] Axel Honneth. *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1996.
[40] Adela Cortina. *Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre. Un desafío para la democracia*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2017.

discrimination against the poor and the very social structure that provokes and maintains poverty. When they despise, discriminate against and humiliate the poor they act in a sense as representatives of society. The resulting loss of self-esteem and self-respect on the poor's part is therefore provoked by the dominance of the epistemic standpoint of the powerful, that is, by the way in which it explains poverty and identifies its causes in the alleged personal faults of the poor.

All these circumstances explain why it is so difficult for the Brazilian poor to understand their condition as a result of social injustice and not of individual failure or misfortune. This has relevant practical consequences because it represents a powerful hindrance for the poor to fight the social causes of their poverty and because it makes it almost impossible that they come to protest or revolt against their situation. From this point of view, epistemic oppression and the resulting lack of confidence, self-esteem and self-respect represent forms of a second-order suffering that not only reinforces the first-order suffering represented by poverty itself (in its material and immaterial dimensions),[41] but, at the same time, makes it difficult for the poor to have an adequate understanding of their own condition. As long as they accept the dominant narrative and consider their poverty to be the result of lacking individual resources, they will either sink into a state of despair and hopelessness, or seek for the empowerment promised by churches, private educational institutions, NGOs etc. Even when these social agents act in good faith (which is to be doubted in some cases), they have a misleading view on poverty, which they tend to conceive of as an individual problem that can be solved by empowering individuals, while leaving its structural causes unchanged. To use Nancy Fraser's vocabulary, they offer affirmative, not transformative remedies.[42] For this reason, a critical theory of society should assume the task of deconstructing the dominant narrative on poverty. This is not tantamount to exerting a mere critique of ideology. As claimed above, dominant narratives are not necessarily ideological; society's members can genuinely believe in their validity. From this point of view, Freud's psychoanalysis and Marx's analysis of ware production are good examples of what a critical theory of society should provide, namely unmasking and debunking the socially dominant narratives that hinders social change.[43]

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[41] On both dimensions see Peter Townsend. 'Deprivation', *Journal of Social Policy*, 16(2), 1987, p. 125-146 and Walquíria Leão Rego; Alessandro Pinzani. *Money, Autonomy and Citizenship. The Experience of the Brazilian Bolsa Família*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2019, p. 81ff.

[42] Nancy Fraser; Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso, 2003, p. 72ff. Transformative remedies, i.e. solutions that tackle the structural causes of poverty and introduce a real social change, can be result only from governmental action, even if, in the case of states that are too poor to dispose on the necessary resources, domestic governments might be seek the help of other governments or of supranational institutions. Unfortunately, present supranational institutions like the IMF or the World Bank do not seem too keen to endorse the policies that might be necessary to structurally overcome poverty in poor countries.

[43] This had been recognized already by Jürgen Habermas in his early masterpiece *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

They should focus on the opaque systemic suffering that haunts society[44] and call the attention for the hidden violence in society. In other words, they should fight epistemic oppression.

[44] On systemic suffering see my "Systemic Suffering as a Critical Tool."