Systemic Suffering as a Critical Tool

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

1) Preliminary Remarks

By focussing on suffering in order to develop forms of social criticism,one always runs the risk of conflating a psychological perspective focused on individual suffering and a sociological perspective focused on social suffering. For this reason, there has been a wide debate on the risk of "psychologism" inherent in social philosophy, particularly when it recurs to concepts such as "social pathologies" (Fraser &Honneth 2003; Zurn 2011; Pinzani 2013). I have already tried to map the grey area where individual and social suffering seem to merge, and to understand the mechanisms through which persons do not perceive the possible social dimension of their suffering (see my "First-Order and Second-Order Suffering"). In this context, I will limit myself to present different definition of social suffering that has been proposed by some authors, in order to suggest that we adopt a different concept, namely that of systemic suffering. Before discussing these concepts, however, I would like to stress – following Jaeggi's analysis of the concept of alienation (Jaeggi 2005, p. 14ff.) – three dimensions that explain their relevance. Firstly, they refer to an ethical problem,[1] i.e. to something that has gone terribly wrong in the lives of individuals, but for causes that are mostly independent from their actions (they are social causes); secondly, these conceptstake a central role within social philosophy, since they permit identifying relevant social issues and elaborating specific diagnoses; finally, they are useful from the point of view of social theory as analytic-explanatory tools that help understanding how society works. Like alienation, then, social suffering and systemic suffering are diagnostic concepts that are simultaneously

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

normative and descriptive, while also allowing us to interpret *and* ethically evaluate certain social phenomena (Jaeggi 2005, p. 44).

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

2) Social Suffering

In recent years, social suffering has become an object of analysis for social critics, although only a few authors openly use this term (e.g. Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997; Dejours 1998; Frost &Hogett 2008; Renault 2008, 2009 & 2010; Soulet 2009; Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016). Nevertheless, it is possible to register a renewed interest in topics of alienation, reification, social pathologies and social invisibility (Honneth 2000, 2003, 2005 & 2011; Jaeggi 2005) as well as a growing concern for the epidemic of malaises such as the depression and burn-out (Ehrenberg 1998 & 2010; Kehl 2015). Even the various analyses focusing on the flexibility expected (or demanded) from individuals in the contemporary labour market (Dejours 1998; Sennett 1998; Boltanski&Chiapello 1999; Dubet 2006 & 2010; Standing 2011) end up stressing some form of social suffering.

Although the term dates back to the 18th century (apparently it was first used in a poem by William Wordsworth),[2] it has a relatively recent history (differently from, say, the concept of

[2] 'In his *Descriptive Sketches,* written in 1792–93 in recollection of a summer spent traveling around post-revolutionary France and the Swiss Alps, William Wordsworth refers to social suffering in a passage that records his encounter with destitute and sick peasants living in the forest along the banks of the upper reaches of the Rhine. He writes:
The indignant waters of the infant Rhine,
Hang o'er the abyss, whose else impervious gloom
His burning eyes with fearful light illume.
The mind condemned, without reprieve, to go
O'er life's long deserts with its charge of woe,
With sad congratulation joins the train

justice) and has been used systemically only since the last decades of the 20th century.Like any other concept, its meaning has changed over time, but it has maintained a certain hard core, without which it would cease to be a proper concept. These changesreflect the wider social and political conflictsduringwhich it was used instrumentally as a tool to specific ends(Wilkinson &Kleinman 2016, p. 38ff.). Although it is neither possiblenor necessary to reconstruct all these shifts of meaning in the present context, oneshould take this fact into account when discussing the use of the concept in the present philosophical and sociological debate.In the 20th century the concept was used mainly to indicate forms of human suffering that have their roots in social *behaviour*. Its first full-fledged formulation might be found in the descriptionof "socially avoidable suffering" offered by Barrington Moore Jr. in his studies on "human misery" (1970) and on obedience and revolt (1978). Moore used the term to indicate a suffering that could have been avoided if certain social actors (individuals or institutions) had acted differently or had not omitted specific actions to prevent it occurring (Moore 1978). Classical examples are offered by wars, racial or religious persecutions, the unjust distribution of resources during natural catastrophes, etc. While all these examples are doubtless provoked by humans, not every form of man-made suffering deserves to be considered "socially avoidable suffering:" not every suffering is avoidable, and not every avoidable suffering is *socially* avoidable suffering.Moore's definition isechoed by Judith Shklar (1990); however,she does not use the term "suffering" but the classical term "injustice,"which she distinguishes from the concept of misfortune. If,for example, a disaster 'is caused by the external forces of nature, it is a misfortune and we must resign ourselves to our *suffering*.' If, however, the disaster is brought about by 'some ill-intentioned agent,' then we can say that 'it is an injustice and we may express indignation and outrage' (Shklar 1990, p. 1; my emphasis).Shklar offers the imaginary example of an earthquake in which 'many buildings do collapse because contractors have violated construction codes and bribed inspectors,' (Shklar 1990, p. 2) but one could also mention concrete cases such as the damage provoked by hurricane Katrina in 2005 (which were magnified by problems in the design and maintenance of the levee system) and the poor answer by local and federal authorities in the aftermath of the catastrophe (Klein 2007, p. 406ff.). Often it is not easy to distinguish misfortune from injustice, particularly in cases when it is difficult to ascertain precisely the man-made causes of a disaster or a situation in which people come to suffer. One needs

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Where beasts and men together o'er the plain
Move on a mighty caravan of pain:
Hope, strength, and courage, social suffering brings,
Freshening the wilderness with shades and springs.
In this instance, Wordsworth's encounter with social suffering draws him to reflect upon the stoic attitudes adopted by people struggling to survive in conditions of extreme adversity' (Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016, p. 25f.).

objective criteria, but how are these to be defined? This is a central point ina theory of social suffering: it must be possible to find objective criteria to defineit.

In the case of Moore's idea of socially avoidable suffering and of Shklar's definition of injustice, the criteria can be found in the values and norms adopted by a specific society and in the corresponding expectations they produce in the members of that society, particularly with regard to the behaviour of public officials or of the representatives of public institutions. There are difficulties connected with this view. Even within a single society, there are different views and sensibilities regarding what counts as an acceptable norm or as a value. This is particularly true of our pluralist, post-conventional or post-metaphysical societies (Habermas 1994) in which there is no absolute consent on this point. This difficulty in identifying shared norms and values misleads Shklarinto affirming that every social change is unjust to someone (Shklar 1990, p. 120). In advancing this claim, Shklar falls back into a dilemma that she herself had warned against, namely, that of relying on individuals' subjective sense of injustice rather than on objective criteria. One does not have to be a communitarian, however, to claim that injustice (or justice) is an institutional, not just an individual matter. Even a liberal thinker like Thomas Pogge (2002), for instance, tends to adopt this view. He identifies different *institutional* causes of social injustice. First, it can be the result of specific social institutions, that is, of a shared institutional order that is put into place or shaped by the better-off and that creates or reproduces inequality. Additionally, the respective positions of the better-off and of the worse-off can be seen as the result of historical processes marked by violence and wrongs. However, often it is not possible to observe and immediately identify the social or institutional causes of human suffering. They may lie so far back in the past that the question of responsibility remains unanswered. Or they may be deeply rooted in the structure of a society (asin the case of slavery in Antiquity or in the modern Americas). In these cases, one can say that the suffering is institutionalized: it is provoked not by individuals through their actions but by institutions (Margalit 1996). The social character of suffering is to be found therefore in its institutional roots, not in the behaviour of specific social actors.

The category of "social suffering" has also been used by anthropologists, sociologists and even literary critics in order to indicate the injuries that social forces(not social actors)can inflict on specific social groups(Kleinman, Das, Lock 1997). In this sense, the concept differentiates itself from Moore's or Shklar's usage: social suffering is opposed here to individual suffering not only because of its social (impersonal) roots, but also because it is *experienced* socially. From this point of view, according to some authors (Scott 1990; Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997; Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016) suffering as a social experience may lead to social and political transformations when it redefines and reshapes the dominant symbolic and moral system of society. Even if only a

circumscribed group of people feels the pain inflicted upon it by social forces, its suffering might be perceived (even if not felt) by a larger number of individuals, by society as a whole, or even by mankind at large, thus giving birth to processes of reaction and, possibly, of societal change. For this capacity of being an instrument of transformation both on the symbolic and the moral level, social suffering has been always a privileged object of cultural representation in art, literature, theatre and, more recently, cinema and other media. For most people, mediatized suffering has become the main, if not the only, source forexperiencing social suffering. This is problematic as such representations tend to distort suffering or to highlight its more exceptional forms (e.g., after a natural catastrophe or during a specific armed conflict), while leaving literally out of sight other, more trivial, that is, less spectacular forms of suffering. These,therefore are not experienced by those who are not directly affected by them. The routine suffering of poor people or of millions of global refugees is eclipsed by individual cases singled out by the media for being spectacular, for touching the viewers/readers more directly or for guaranteeing a surge in audience ratings (as in the case of Aylan Kurdi, whose tragic death shifted the same European public opinion which until then had been, and largely still is, indifferent to the countless deaths of refugee children around the world) (see Boltanski 1993; Kleinman & Kleinman 1997; Sontag 2003; Butler 2004, p. 63ff.).The different ways of defining the concept of social suffering show that, while authors use it to describe and criticize the social conditions they consider to be unacceptable, the concept itself is still too ambiguous to offer a reliable tool for social criticism.

In the following, I will explain why the concept of social suffering (better:a specific version of it, which I call systemic suffering) should not only be considered useful despite its abovementioned vagueness, but should also serve as the starting point for sketching a theoretical approach for thinking society that avoidsboth the abstract normativity of many traditional theories of social justice and the merely descriptive attitude of most social theories. In the traditional language of social philosophy, it might seem that the main concern here regards first an immanent or internal critical moment in which the social actors themselves denounce what they consider an unacceptable situation, for example, a situation that provokes their suffering, and second a diagnostic-explicative moment, in which social theorists formulate their explanation of that situation, for example, by bringing to light the social causes of the suffering.However, such a diagnosis does unavoidably reveal intrinsically normative aspects that can be used to elaborate a more proactive moment that aims to find ways to put an end to socially provoked suffering. These three moments (the critical, the explicative and the normative) cannot be fully separated, not even analytically, sinceasserting the diagnosis on the basis of the social criticism formulated by social actors represents in itself a way of formulating a normative demand (Walzer 1980 & 1988;

Benhabib 1986, Honneth 1994 & 2000; Strydom 2011 and Hrubec 2012). To exemplify,the moment social critique describes how a specific condition (e.g., poverty) is naturalized, it is already requiring a de-fetishization of that condition;that is, it is already normatively demanding that the naturalization process stops while, at the same time,proposing an alternative explication for that condition, which for its part has normative consequences (e.g.,demanding specific changes in material and conceptual social structures).Critique and explanation are to be formulated in light of a possible change of the situation that forms its object. This demand for a change has an obviously normative character and addresses the needs and demands expressed in the present by social actors who aim for a better, more human future (Benhabib 1986).

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

3) From social to systemic suffering

As we have seen, there are many ways of defining social suffering. One can focus on socially avoidable suffering as a result of the actions of people(individuals or groups) who should be held responsible for it and who, therefore, could be forced to repair the harm they provoked when this harm is the result of a wrong (as Moore and Shklar did). One can also consider social suffering as being the consequence of power asymmetries among social groups or classes and call for more equal distribution of those resources that might prevent or repair the suffering (as Pogge does). One could also claim (Dejours 1998; Ehrenberg 1998 & 2010)that by using the adjective social in

connection with suffering, one is referring not only to some etiological explanation but is adopting an epidemiological criterion, according to which, if a vast number of society's members goes through the same experience of suffering (say, of depression or burn-out), then this suffering concerns society as a whole and deserves to be called "social" (as happens with drug addiction, alcoholism or teenage pregnancy when they are so widespread among the population that they are defined as social problems). From this point of view, their social character refers to its diffusion among the members of society, not to its social causes. Or one can concentrate on its structural dimension, so that it cannot be eliminated simply by holding some specific actor responsible for it or by redistributing power within society; rather, its elimination demands that we change the very societal structures that cause it. It is this strategy that interests me.

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

of its ambiguity, the concept of social suffering should perhaps be substituted with a more specific notion, namely that of systemic suffering.

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

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

oppression always ends up enforcing structural oppression, and thus this structural oppression sometimes (but not in every case) reinforces the kind of relational oppression that characterizes society in that specific moment.

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

Often it is very difficult to reduce systemic suffering to a single cause or category of causes. Both relational and structural oppression are not based simply on an unbalanced distribution of power or on impersonal economic or political mechanisms (on the material structure of society), but rely heavily on a non-material dimension (its conceptual structure), which Ishall refer to in the following tentatively as systemic doctrines. Without this ideological or doctrinal dimension, systemic oppression would not occur.

4) Systemic Suffering and Systemic Doctrines

In the last section I have claimed that systemic suffering is the result of systemic oppression.This implies firstly the existence of a specific material structure for social reproduction and for the distribution of power and of social positions within society; but it implies also the existence of a specific conceptual apparatus that offers legitimacy and normative orientation to it. I suggest to call this apparatus *systemic doctrine*. This term indicatesa specific system of (1) *beliefs* about the world and of (2) *values* based on these beliefs.The system has to be coherent enough to be mobilized for describing and explaining potentially every aspect of human life (human beings' relation to nature and to other human beings as well as to a preternatural, transcendent dimension); furthermore, it offers the basis for a system of (3) *norms* and (4) *socialpractices* that aim at shaping or reshaping human life according to the abovementioned beliefs and values.

Icall this kind of doctrine "systemic" precisely becauseits logic applies potentially to every dimension of human life, leaving no space for alternative explanations or values. A better term would probably be "totalitarian," as introduced by some (including Gentile and Mussolini) to

indicate a characteristic of the Fascist state, namely its intention to shape, control and regulate every aspect of its citizens' lives (Gentile et al. 1932). However, while these authors used the word in a positive sense, the term has assumed an extremely negative meaning by being associated (e.g. by Arendt 1951) withFascism, Nazism, Stalinism and other forms of absolutist states that negate any value for individuals. Although "totalitarian" represents a technically adequate characterization of the doctrines weare discussing, its use could be misleading, inducing readers to attribute a specific political essence to such doctrines or to assume that they are to be found only in totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany. For this reason,I introduce the term "systemic," to indicate the fact that these doctrines tend to or actually pervade and permeate every aspect of the lives of the individuals who are submitted to them. Furthermore, they are systemic insofar as they are essential to establish and maintain mechanism for systemic oppression.

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

Examples of systemic doctrines are most (if not all) religious creeds, since normally they do not limit themselves to explain the relation between the individual and a transcendent dimension (some deity or spiritual sphere), but aim at regulating every aspect of the individual's life in her relation to nature as well as in both the private and the public sphere. As a matter of fact, in the end these distinctions become meaningless and can be seen just as different forms of relating to the

transcendent dimension through one's relation to other individuals, to society, to the environment etc. In the believer's universe no space is left free from control and regulation through religious norms.

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

In order to cause systemic suffering, the systemic doctrine must first of all become dominant within a specific society, according to mechanisms well described by Gramsci (1992 & 1996) and Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976). Of course, a doctrine may provoke suffering when it is still held by a minority or by a small group – as showed spectacularly by some clamorous, appalling examples involving religious sects. Even if, in such cases, the suffering remains limited within the circle of those who share the doctrine, it is tied nevertheless to the systemic character of the doctrine, which leaves no space for criticism and for free thinking to the members of the group. However, since society at large remains still untouched, the phenomenon remains circumscribed. As such, it does not affect the basic structure of society, but only the smaller societal institutions, within which group members live their everyday lives (family, community). Everything around the group follows a different logic and the group itself forms a sort of island within a foreign sea, like (at least in part) in the case of the Amish or of similar sects. Studying these cases might be interesting in order to understand how systemic doctrines work: how they take hold of every aspect of their followers' life, how they immunize their followers against alternative ways of thinking and living, how they become unquestionable for their followers, how they sometime succeed in convincing also outsiders and neutral observers to consider them to be unquestionable and perfectly legitimate doctrines (this is particularly evident in the case of religious creeds, which seldom if ever are subject to open criticism).Nevertheless, it would be always possible for followers to disengage from their group and

join the larger body of society outside it, notwithstanding the high price they probably will have to pay from an emotional and social point of view (they might be forced to abandon forever their families, which in turn might consider them apostates and turn their back on them; they might have to leave the environment in which they have grown up; they will have to face a completely new social environment, often one they have been taught to despise and to hold as being morally wrong or evil). This may still apply when the systemic doctrine has taken hold of society as a whole, since its members might still have the option to emigrate, but it becomes impossible when the doctrine has become globally dominant or when its application on the part of some powerful actors have global consequences, like in the case of capitalism in its present form. And, in any case, the choice of emigrating is not an easy one even when taken freely; when emigration becomes the only option, it can be considered as a further form of suffering provoked by the correspondent systemic doctrine.

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

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

comprehends not only beliefs and values, but also norms for action and practices, it has a direct transformational effect on reality, establishing new frames in which individuals and institutions are supposed to act and excluding alternative possibilities of behaviour. Once the belief that there should be a market for everything has established itself as a part of the systemic doctrine of society, for example, any attempt at defending specific areas from the market logic is doomed to fail, since it canno longer be justified by appealing to alternative beliefs. While this process, which represents what wepreviously called systemic oppression, might be slowed down or even brought to a partial halt, it will either continue until it has reshaped the whole fabric of society according to the systemic doctrine that inspires it, or it will be stopped and undone by a symmetrical processin which another systemic doctrine triumphs. In any case, once such adoctrine has managed to exert systemic oppression, resistance (i.e., holding to a defeated doctrine) is futile on the long run, while only revolt (i.e., actively striving for the success of an alternative doctrine) makes sense.

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

elements of two or more doctrines coexist or intermingle. Sometimes, this happens even when some of these elements are actually incompatible with those of other doctrines, as in the case of Brazil during the 19th century, that is, of a society organized around slavery and according to a strictly hierarchical social order which tried to adopt a capitalistic economic system (Schwarz 2000).

The suffering produced by a systemic doctrine is not always easy to detect. On the contrary, since its roots lie in a widespread belief in that doctrine, people themselves are often unable to connect their suffering with the doctrine they otherwise accept as valid or even to perceive their situation as somehow harmful to them. Marxists recur usually to the problematic notion of "false consciousness" to designate this phenomenon: its victims are not even aware of the oppression or the "alienation" they are suffering and believe there is nothing wrong with their lives. It is not that they have been coercively indoctrinated, rather that they have been socialized within an environment in which the systemic doctrine is deemed unquestionable (this is typically the case with religion) or has been naturalized. That, for example, the market unavoidably produces winners and losers without anyone carrying the blame or responsibility for the resulting inequalities and suffering is something people in who live in societies characterized by a free-market economy tend to accept as a natural law. They have been educated into believing that the market is a sort of natural force, obeying its own unchangeable logic, so that questioning that logic or holding its results as unjust would appear to them as absurd as questioning the law of gravity or morally condemning an earthquake. They do not connect directly the functioning of a free-market economy to the harm inflicted upon them in terms of poverty, unemployment, precariousness or stress – or if they do, they think that something is not working properly within that economy– while in reality their problems are caused precisely by the fact that it *is* working properly and according to its own logic (that is, a logic which aims to minimize costs for the owners of capital while maximizing their profits). This leads to greater exploitation of workers (and to a consequent reduction in their quality of life) and creates a race to the bottom among states with regard to the labour market – weakening workers' rights and permitting bigger profits for companies and corporations, while at the same time increasing the pressure on all those who work for and within the system, including managers or freelance professionals, and provoking, therefore, the abovementioned forms of psychological suffering.The latter example shows how multifaceted systemic suffering can be: it can affect people from the lower ranks of society as well as those who apparently profit most from the existing social arrangement (in our example: workers as well as their employers). In a sense, it is a self-inflicted suffering, even if not intentionally so, of course. When faced with such suffering, systemic doctrines may deny it altogether or rationalize it. On their part, the mechanisms leading to these different strategies for coping with suffering provoke or intensify the suffering itself, creating a

vicious circle that explains why and how societies that cause suffering among their members remain stable and are incapable of eliminating the suffering even when it appears evident (i.e., when poverty is clearly visible, when labour-connected forms of psychological suffering are undeniably widening, when religion is evidently provoking violence and open discrimination).

5)On criticizing systemic suffering

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

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

result of a wrong, while there are no objective reasons to come to this conclusion (e.g. when the officials did what they could, and the victims are wrongly convinced that they could and should have done more and better). When applied to the results of systemic doctrines, this distinction lead to five different constellations:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Furthermore – and more importantly – one should be aware of the fact that the elimination of a specific harm may result in causing a different harm, due to the coexistence of systemic doctrines within society. Using a burqa can be considered to be a harm for the women who have to wear it, even if they might not be aware of it and might not be suffering. The harm consists in the fact that they submit to a doctrine, according to which women are seen as potential sexual preys that should be protected from male predators. This implies (1) that women are supposed to maintain their sexual modesty and integrity, while the same is not expected from men; (2) that men are supposed to restrain their predatory behavior only in presence of external signs of modesty like the burqa, the nihab etc.; (3) that a woman who does not adopt such external symbols signalizes to men that she is not modest, or not interested in maintaining their modesty, or interested in sexual intercourse with them (depending on how men will interpret this lack of a textile hindrance to their appetites). In any case, the doctrine establishes a clear asymmetry in gender relation, creating a strong unbalance of power in favor of men. The women who use the burqa are therefore victims of male oppression, even if they choose to wear it "freely." Either they choose to submit to male oppression, or they do not see their adoption of the doctrine as a form of submission. In both case, they bow to the systemic doctrine that demands from them something that is not demanded from men and that gives men a superior power on women. On the other side, they might choose to wear the burqa in order to escape another form of submission, namely that of secularized women, who, while free to wear what they like, including provocative clothes, and while free to choose whether through their look they want to arouse the sexual interest of men or not, are nevertheless victims of an over-sexualized environment, in which men will consider them as possible sexual preys, although exerting a greater restrain on their appetites. The burqa offers then a protection from the intrusive, aggressive male gaze, creating a precious space of freedom, in which they do not have to care for the impression that their body, their face or their hair will make on the men they encounter on the street. The burqa relieves them from the weariness of looking good or desirable. In both cases, however, it is a false freedom. The freedom to arouse male sexual desire and the freedom to hide from the male gaze are both faces of male oppression (which is a classical case of relational

oppression), but have a significant impact on the structure of society (not only in the case of family, but in many other aspects: the property of assets, women's participation in public life, their juridical position, etc.).[3] A woman who comes from a cultural tradition, in which she is supposed to wear a burqa, and who lives in a society in which women are expected to decide "freely" what they wear will face unavoidably the choice between two different forms of oppression (and the respective harm), while maybe at the same time thinking that only one of them does harm her. If she renounces the burqa she may be vulnerable to sexual harassment both by the men of their cultural group and by the men of other social groups, as well as to the stress provoked by the expectations that society puts on women with regard to their sexual appeal. If she keeps wearing the burqa she will remain subject to the view of male superiority dominating in her culture and she will bow to the unequal demands this culture puts on women, who are expected to me modest and true to their husband. Which of these alternative will be seen by her as a harm and experienced as suffering – or whether she will see them as a harm at all – these are questions that no social theorist can answer a priori and that need to be discussed with the very persons involved, rising a new series of problems with regard to the status of social critique and to the position of the social researcher.

Critical Theory has traditionally adopted the method of immanent critique as opposed to external criticism. While the latter adopts an external point of view with respect to its object and uses its own normative criteria to criticize it (e.g. when criticizing the wearing of a burka in the name of an abstract principle of individual autonomy that does not consider other gender related issues), the former represents a critique from within and pursues its normative criteria among the values and principles currently accepted in the very society it aims at criticizing. In this sense, a twofold form of immanent critique is possible with regard to the dominant doctrine of a specific society. The first is only apparently immanent and should rather be called "internal." It arises from the co-existence within society of different doctrines. For instance: the capitalistic logic that leads to the reification of social relations can be questioned and opposed by groups that try to maintain or to create social spaces, in which that logic does not apply. The range goes from anarchical attempts of living in communes to workers' cooperatives. This resistance might become an active opposition and open revolt, like in the case of the Russian or Cuban revolution. The same happens when a religious minority tries first to establish a religious ghetto and then to impose its own views as the socially accepted orthodoxy. In all these cases, the resistant or revolting groups defend a different doctrine from the capitalistic one and try to live according to it or to establish it as the new

[3] If e.g. private property can be inherited only by male relatives, women will be relegated to specific kinds of jobs and professions.

dominant doctrine of society as a whole. This does not eliminate systemic oppression and systemic suffering; it just establishes new forms for both.

The second form of immanent critique fully deserves its name, since it does not oppose the dominant doctrine by defending a different one, but aims at showing its internal contradictions and at highlighting the mechanism provoking suffering. In this case, the critique takes the form of a "critique of ideology" in the sense used by the first generation of the Frankfurt School (and, partly, by Marx, who, however, focused more on the internal contradictions of capitalism as a system of production and exchange of commodities than as a doctrine or as a form of life). It does not oppose doctrine to doctrine, creed to creed, but limits itself to analyzing and criticizing the "knowing that" and the "knowing how" produced by a specific doctrine, be it dominant or not. This second kind of immanent critique can be moved by a pure spirit of negation (like Goethe's Mephistopheles)[4]or by a more positive intention, namely that of eliminating systemic suffering. Its main task (which presents great, but not insurmountable difficulties) is to diagnose this suffering. However, I shall not discuss this task and its difficulties in the present context.

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[4] Cf. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, 1st Part, Chapter 6 ("Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint!")

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