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Special Section: “The Politics of Social Suffering”

Introduction to the Special Section

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Abstract

Social suffering has become in the past decades a key topic in various disciplines of the humanities, leading to a number of debates on its (still contested) status within social analysis and normative philosophy. Problems of this sort are especially relevant in view of the fact that experiences of suffering have become a central figure of political life in many parts of the globe. This introduction provides an overview of these discussions and presents the articles included in this special issue.

Keywords

social suffering, social pathology, social struggles, diagnosis of the present, critical theory, social philosophy

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Introducción a la sección especial

Resumen

El sufrimiento social se ha convertido en las últimas décadas en un tema clave en varias disciplinas del área de humanidades, lo que ha llevado a una serie de debates sobre su estatus (todavía controvertido) dentro del análisis social y la filosofía normativa. Problemas de este tipo son especialmente relevantes teniendo en cuenta que las experiencias de sufrimiento se han convertido en un asunto prioritario en la agenda política de muchas partes del mundo. Esta introducción proporciona una descripción general de estos debates y presenta los artículos incluidos en este número especial.

Palabras clave

sufrimiento social, patología social, lucha social, diagnóstico del presente, teoría crítica, filosofía social

Social suffering has become a key topic in sociological and political debates in the past decades. Increasing attention has been dedicated to the growth in diagnoses of depression and burnout, leading a number of social analysts to take them as symptoms of wide-ranging transformations in society (Ehrenberg 1998, Honneth 2002, Rosa 2011, Neckel and Wagner 2013). In the same period the idea gained traction that the social question, notably in its contemporary forms, cannot be properly described without taking into account the psychological experiences and feelings of malaise attached to it (Bourdieu 1993, Castel 1995, Dejours 1998, Gaulejac 2011). As a result, the notion of *social suffering* appears in the forefront of different but converging approaches in sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and social philosophy (Kleinman et al. 1997, Wilkinson 2005, Renault 2008).

This signals an important turn insofar as it leads to explicitly addressing the – still contested – status of suffering within social analysis and normative philosophy. While the social sciences avoided for a long time to bring such a question to centre stage in the face of an alleged risk of ‘psychologizing’ society, political philosophy often regarded suffering as an inadequate or at best insufficient foundation for normativity, given its purportedly individualistic, contingent, and subjectivist nature (Fraser 2003, Kompridis 2004). In contrast to these perspectives, new approaches to the subject rely on the assumption that the explanation and assessment of social processes deemed unjust or pathological (Honneth 1994, Zurn 2011, Laitinen et al. 2015) cannot be properly carried out without referring to the negative psychological experiences involved and the ways in which they are morally articulated at the individual and collective levels (Deranty 2009, Keohane and Petersen 2013, Freyenhagen 2015). In a similar vein, the ambivalences of the human openness to suffering have been taken up in recent debates on categories such as vulnerability and precariousness (Butler 2004, Gilson 2011, Murphy 2012, Ferrarese 2016, Petherbridge 2016).

Problems of this sort are relevant in view of the current political situation in many parts of the globe where experiences of suffering and psychological malaise have become a central figure of political life. Of particular significance is the fact that movements not only traditionally linked to a left-wing agenda – against state violence and different forms of discrimination, for the expansion of social and human rights – draw their legitimacy from discourses and practices on suffering, often leading to ambivalent outcomes (Das 1995, Mbembe 2003, Fassin 2010, Jansen et al. 2015, Bargu 2014). A similar trend can be observed within right-wing movements claiming for the strengthening of national borders, stricter anti-immigration policies, and stronger repression against criminality and terrorism (Hochschild 2016, Rosa 2017).

That these very different tendencies are often linked – by observers or the participants themselves – to underlying experiences of social malaise raises a number of important issues: In what sense the social struggles of our time can be regarded as articulations of collective experiences of suffering? What connections can be established between contemporary political processes and diagnoses of the present centred on the notion of social suffering? How are feelings of malaise mobilised and channelled by social movements or by those who claim to represent them in the political arena? What sort of normative standpoint must be developed in order to make relevant distinctions between progressive and regressive forms of politicised suffering?

Such were the questions that prompted the proposal of this special section of *Digithum*. The articles received and published in this volume, however, reach a much wider range of issues, both on a metatheoretical and a diagnostic level.

On the level of metatheory, the notion of *social suffering* is analysed by **Onni Hirvonen** in relation to scientific *understanding* as the normative source of social struggles. By way of a comparison between John Dewey’s scientific optimism and Axel Honneth’s phenomenology of suffering, Hirvonen

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argues in “Grounding Social Criticism” that both suffering *and* understanding, experience *and* reason, are vital elements of a critical social theory, claiming that a critical social ontology should satisfy normative, diagnostic and descriptive functions in order to gain explanatory force over structures and social suffering while preserving the room for emancipation and freedom. That the negative experience of suffering, while not the sole foundation of a critical social theory, is however a productive starting point is a stance shared by **Rúrion Melo** in “Experiences, Struggles, and Recognition”. Proposing a middle way between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, Melo argues for the possibility of reconciling the reconstruction of negative experiences with the articulation of public discourses – as long as recognition is regarded as one among the many moral grammars of social conflicts, and the phenomenology of suffering is linked to the study of social movements. Fraser’s criticism of social analyses based on a phenomenology of subjective experiences is also addressed by **Gustavo Lima e Silva** and **Felipe Gonçalves Silva** – not as it was directed against Honneth’s theory of recognition, but against Iris Young’s critical theory of justice. In “Between Experience and Structure”, the authors point out that, although inaccurate from a descriptive viewpoint, Fraser’s critical stance towards Young might have prompted her to engage more consequently in her later work with the structural dimension of social criticism, while still articulating it with the phenomenological consideration of subjective experiences. In her contribution to the special section, “What’s the Trouble with Humanity?”, **Ingrid Cyfer** provides us with a feminist critique of Judith Butler’s ethics of vulnerability. Also taking a criticism by Nancy Fraser as a starting point – namely, that Butler’s approach in *Gender Trouble* would lack the normative criteria necessary to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable forms of power exercise, fair from unfair forms of exclusion, and so on –, the article shows how Butler’s more recent works do develop a normative account of the human vulnerability to suffering. Cyfer additionally points out, however, that Butler’s newly adopted normative stance is surprisingly too abstract to be able to ground a specifically *feminist* ethics. Still on the metatheoretical level of analysis, **Olga Sabido Ramos** proposes in “El análisis sociológico de la vergüenza en Georg Simmel” (“The Sociological Analysis of Shame in Georg Simmel”) a study of the relational and performative character of emotions. Starting from a reinterpretation of Simmel in light of Ágnes Heller’s and Sara Ahmed’s works, Sabido Ramos argues that what is experienced in a personal, painful way is related to social conditions of possibility; she also champions the idea that emotions produce effects in the forms of social relation with corporal anchorage. Experiences such as shame, for example, are thus not limited to a psychological analysis in an individualistic sense, but are also of great significance for a properly *sociological* inquiry.

On the diagnostic level, three articles explore the thematic of this special section by way of empirical analyses. Concrete examples linked to immigration or forced displacement are drawn from Argentina, Spain, and Colombia with a view to investigate the political dimensions of social suffering. In “Dolor social, conflictividad y pobreza” (“Social Suffering, Conflictivity and Poverty”), **Victoria D’hers** and **Ana Lucía Cervio** draw on the experiences of immigrants from neighbouring countries who live in slums in Buenos Aires in order to discuss the links between sensibilities, conflictivities, and social policies. The authors highlight the ambivalent nature of social relations between subjects in the context of extreme material deprivation, showing on the one hand that social suffering shapes a landscape of negations and a generalised state of disaffection, but also, on the other hand, that the affective proximity with others strengthen “interstitial practices” as ways of challenging resignation and resisting the normalisation of social exclusion. In “España, frontera de color” (“Spain, Color Border”), **Roberto Gil Hernández** argues that the functionality of *social symptoms* imply the unconscious satisfaction of a disturbing suffering that cannot be escaped, and that social phenomena are maintained over time at the expense of the denial of such symptoms. By analysing the recent impact of illegal immigration in the media and social networks, Gil Hernández shows that racism in Spain *imitates* a social symptom and its impact on the emotions, ideas, and norms that participate in the historical construction of national identity. The country would thus play the role of a boundary separating the populations from Africa and Europe through the exclusion of racialised otherness intrinsic to coloniality. The depoliticising effects of social suffering occupy the forefront of **Diego Meza’s** and **Alessandra Ciorlo’s** contribution to the special section, “La ‘espera’ en la población desplazada de Colombia” (“The ‘Waiting’ in Colombia’s Displaced Population”). The authors argue that, to the extent that they are forced to wait patiently for the help of the State in order to mitigate their vulnerable condition, victims of forced internal displacement tend to be reduced to passive actors – which, in turn, reinforces the asymmetric relationship between them and the Colombian State. The social suffering implied in waiting appears, then, as intimately connected to a form of social domination that turns its objective conditions into a subjectively lived tragedy.

As the reader will notice, not all contributions to this special section share the same philosophical premises, methodological tools, or theoretical frameworks. But they are all evidence that, far from being a merely subjective matter – a field ruled by individualism, arbitrariness and relativism –, experiences of social suffering are rather a fertile soil for social theorists to unveil structural tendencies and counter-tendencies of past and present forms of life.

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