A Critical Theory of Social Suffering

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Abstract: This paper begins by defending the twofold relevance, political and theoretical, of the notion of social suffering. Social suffering is a notion politics cannot do without today, as it seems indispensable to describe all the aspects of contemporary injustice. As such, it has been taken up in a number of significant research programmes in different social sciences (sociology, anthropology, social psychology). The notion however poses significant conceptual problems as it challenges disciplinary boundaries traditionally set up to demarcate individual and social phenomena. I argue that philosophy has a role to play in the attempt to integrate the diverging perspectives stemming from the social sciences. I attempt to show that, as it engages with the social sciences to account for the conceptual and normative issues thrown open by the question of social suffering, philosophy in fact retrieves the very idea of critical theory, as a conjugated critique of social reality and of its knowledge. I conclude by showing how the question of social suffering then becomes a useful criterion to distinguish between the different existing approaches in critical theory.

Keywords: Social suffering, critical theory, social sciences, Adorno, epistemology.

Today the issue of social suffering has a twofold, political and theoretical relevance. It has political relevance in so far as some contemporary forms of the social question are difficult to describe in all their seriousness without taking their psychological consequences into account. It has a theoretical relevance in so far as in sociology, in social psychology as well as in anthropology, social suffering has become a significant research programme. In this paper, I will argue that this contemporary relevance is a challenge that philosophy has to try to take up. I will argue also that if philosophy wants to take up that challenge, it encounters many of the classical questions that are associated with very idea of critical theory.

Let me briefly recall some of the features of the initial programme of critical theory, as it was elaborated in the 1930s in Horkheimer's writings,

such as "Traditional and Critical theory"[1] and as, it has been rejuvenated in the 1960s by Marcuse at the beginning of his *One Dimensional Man*.[2] First, this programme tries to associate a theory of society with a social critique, both of which are aware of their social position and political implications. Second, the social critique is adopting the point of view of those who are practically interested in the transformation of society. Third, the theory of society is developed in an interdisciplinary programme in which economics, sociology and psychology try to identify emancipatory potentials as well as obstacles to emancipation. Fourth, in this interdisciplinary programme the role of philosophy is to connect this social critique and these theoretical approaches in a coherent whole, from the point of view of a social philosophy, as well as from the point of view of an epistemology of the human sciences.

My claim in this paper is that the twofold relevance of social suffering is giving a new relevance to this idea of critical theory. Let me briefly sketch my argument. The point of departure is that sociological, psycho-sociological and anthropological research programmes dedicated to social suffering are clearly questioning the disciplinary boundaries: they raise questions that cannot be addressed by sociology, psychology, or anthropology alone. In other words, the issue of social suffering shows that the human sciences sometimes fail to tell the truth about what one experiences in one's social experience. This problem is theoretical since it deals with the very nature of social experience. But given that social critique is at stake in social suffering, this problem is also a political one. Since none of these disciplines is able to solve these theoretical and political problems on its own, it seems quite natural to call upon philosophy for help. However, these problems also belong to the kind of issues that philosophy cannot address alone. If philosophers want to take up the challenge of social suffering, they have to combine theoretical and political approaches in an interdisciplinary mode. And to do so, philosophy has to intervene as epistemological reflection on the limits of the disciplinary boundaries, but also as a social philosophy capable of providing a general framework for the combination of the psychic, social and cultural dimensions of social experience. Therefore, a philosophical discussion on social suffering cannot but have affinities with the initial programme of critical theory, and also, as we will see, with its reformulations by Adorno during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the *Positivism Dispute* and in

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1. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory", in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Seabury, 1972).
2. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1964).

Negative Dialectic. There are surely other ways to advocate the contemporary relevance of critical theory, and there are surely other programmes of critical theory than the initial ones. But the issue of social suffering provides a good way to show that the very idea of critical theory does not belong solely to past history. This topic also provides an interesting way for an appraisal of some contemporary orientations of critical theory as a social philosophy.[3] Indeed, the critical approach to social suffering does belong to the common principles of the Frankfurt tradition of critical theory where suffering is generally considered as a symptom of social pathology and a practical incentive to overcome it.[4] But what is at stake in the new issue of social suffering is more specific and perhaps more demanding: it is not only an interpretation of society from the point of view of the negative social experiences of suffering but a *knowledge* of its social and psychic components; it is not only a response given to the psychological demand to overcome suffering but also a way to offer a *public expression* to it. As we shall see, in this case also, these issues bring us back to Adornian themes.

In what follows, I proceed in three steps. In a first step, I describe various aspects of the contemporary issue of social suffering in order to draw consequences for critical theory as social philosophy and as epistemology. In a second step, I distinguish various programmes in social philosophy: strong ones, weak ones, and mixed ones. In a third step, I try to determine which of them is the more appropriate for a critical theory of social suffering. Indirectly, this critical survey of contemporary debates about social suffering and social philosophy gives me the opportunity to present the main lines of my own contribution to a critical theory of social suffering.[5] More generally, it gives me the opportunity to advocate a renewal of interdisciplinary approaches, as well as social theoretical and epistemological discussions in critical theory.

In his article "On the Contemporary Situation of Social Philosophy and on the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research",[6] Horkheimer pointed out

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3. See Axel Honneth, "Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy", in Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 3–48; and Franck Fischbach, *Manifeste pour une philosophie sociale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).
4. Axel Honneth, "A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory", in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, J. Ingram (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 19–42.
5. Emmanuel Renault, *Souffrances sociales. Sociologie, psychologie et politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).
6. Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1993), 1–14.

that political philosophy should no longer understand itself as an autonomous theory. Instead, he outlined the project of a "dialectical combination" or mutual influence between social philosophy on the one hand, and sociology, psychology and economics on the other. As we know, this interdisciplinary project was criticized for opposite reasons. Since it claimed that social philosophy should give orientation to the empirical researches, it was accused of reproducing a *philosophical imperialism*. Conversely, since it claimed that social philosophy should depend upon the human sciences, authors like Foucault accused this interdisciplinary project of *epistemological conservatism*. I would like to suggest that Adorno's idea of social theory as a constellation of models as well as his epistemological reformulations of the relationship between social theory and human sciences (sociology, economics and psychology) can help us to reply to such objections.

Social Suffering as a Challenge for Philosophy

I have referred above to the contemporary relevance of the issue of social suffering. Let me now describe this twofold relevance more precisely. The political stake of the question stems from the fact that some contemporary forms of the social question raise issues that cannot be convincingly addressed without combining sociological and psychological approaches. The current phase of capitalism, a phase that can be labelled neoliberalism, is characterized, among other features, by the emergence of new conditions of work as well as structural trend toward social exclusion.[7] These new conditions of work are producing new subjective difficulties that can be labelled "suffering at work". Such suffering at work has a double implication for social critique: on the one hand, suffering at work is part of what seems pathological in these new working conditions; on the other hand, it is also producing individualization and guilt complexes that are obstacles to any practical dynamic of social transformation. Neoliberalism is also characterized by a general process of social exclusion where the social and psychological dimensions are again intertwined. For those who are victims of long-term unemployment for example, feelings of shame and depressive affects are consequences of a social situation as well as factors that make their situation worse. Here again, it appears that the consequences of neoliberalism cannot be described in all their seriousness without taking the

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7. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (London: Polity Press, 1999); Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*, R. Boyd (trans.) (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001).

subjective effects of the new social context into account. And here again, the social suffering due to exclusion is an obstacle to social critique and social transformation since self-attribution of responsibility or depression are not compatible with social critique and political action.

The other side of the contemporary significance of the issue of social suffering is theoretical. For almost twenty years, the very notion of social suffering has been playing a significant role in a number of sociological, psycho-sociological and anthropological programmes. The most famous sociological illustration is that of Pierre Bourdieu's *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Here, the notion of social suffering intends to capture the painful part of the lived experience of social domination and exclusion, and to describe the subjective effects of various conflicts between dispositions (or *habitus*) and social contexts.

In France, the notion of social suffering has also become important in social psychology, more precisely, in what can be termed clinical psycho-sociology. Authors like Vincent de Gauléjac in *The Sources of the Shame*,[8] or Christophe Dejours in *Worn down by Work: The Psychic Cost of New Forms of Work*[9] study the psychic consequences of new working conditions and of exclusion. Their approaches are more psychological than that of Bourdieu since they consider negative social experiences not only as subjective effects of given social contexts, but also in their very psychic dimension (that of a subjectivity not only defined as internalization of social processes, but also as psychic processes of drives, psychic defences, unconscious, etc.). A second contrast with Bourdieu's reference to suffering is due to the clinical approach they advocate. Here, the clinical approach means paying attention to the individuals in their particular biographical and social contexts. The methodological claim is that it is possible to learn something general about our societies, about their nature and their value, via a detailed inquiry into individual reactions to social relations, institutions and structures.[10]

A third research programme is that of anthropologists of poverty, illness and extreme violence. Authors like Veena Das or Arthur Kleinman have written several books and edited several collections of essays dealing with the ways in which societies try to cope with the suffering they produce and define legitimate discursive and practical reactions to this suffering. The most representative and interesting collection of essays of this kind,

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8. Vincent de Gaulejac, *Les sources de la honte* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996).
9. Christophe Dejours, *Travail, usure mentale* (Paris: Bayard, 2000).
10. For a defense of the clinical approach in social sciences, see Michel Legrand, *L'approche biographique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995).

entitled *Social Suffering*,[11] is a real manifesto for this new orientation in anthropology.

Admittedly these different programmes diverge in their goals and their disciplinary location and principles. Nevertheless they are commensurable from at least two points of view. First, they are all aware that the notion of social suffering defines a significant problem for each of these disciplines, which none of them can solve on its own: sociology fails to explain suffering as individual experience; psychology fails to give due consideration to the social processes and cultural meanings that are involved in this individual experience; and anthropology fails to describe the part of the experience that cannot be explained solely as a social construction. Therefore, these research programmes are engaged either in deep transformations of their disciplines (Bourdieu, Das, Kleinman) or in interdisciplinary approaches (Dejours, de Gaulejac). Second, all these authors are also aware that the theoretical obstacles to the study of social suffering have a political meaning since they tend to reproduce in academic discourse the various forms of invisibility, spectacularization or euphemization of social suffering that are also present in the political public sphere. Stanley Cavell for instance comments on Veena Das' accounts in these terms:

> I understand Veena Das' more or less implicit claim to be a double one, namely, that the study of the social suffering must contain a study of a society's silence toward it (or, say, the degree of its incapacity to acknowledge it), and that the study of that suffering and that silence must contain an awareness of its own dangers in mimicking the social silence that perpetuates the suffering.[12]

Hence, a complex interplay of political and theoretical problems is coming into light. On the one hand, we have seen that the new social question gives a highly political significance to social suffering. Since every suffering can be understood, in an Adornian way, as a critical comment about what is going wrong in our world,[13] a study of social suffering seems to make human

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11. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock (eds), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

12. Stanley Cavell, "Comments on Veena Das's Essay 'Langage and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain'", *Social Suffering*, 94–95.

13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, A. B. Ashton (trans.) (London: Routledge, 1990), 203: "The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. 'Woe speaks: "Go"'. Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice. It is not up to the individual sufferer to abolish suffering or mitigate it to a degree which theory cannot anticipate, to which it can set no limit.

science compatible with our hopes to solve the problems encountered in our social experience and to make our world better. When Adorno wrote that the "need of giving to suffering its expression is the condition for all truth",[14] he didn't mean only that theory should express all that is unsatisfying in our social experience but also that it should try to establish an appropriate knowledge of suffering. According to him, the knowledge of the subjective aspect of our suffering is a way to understand its social component,[15] just as the knowledge of this component is necessary to interpret this subjective aspect.[16] Such a dialectical account of the interrelation between subjective and objective components of our negative social experiences is the very condition of the knowledge of what is "untrue" in our societies. Ian Wilkinson concludes his book *Suffering: A Sociological Introduction*, a general survey about the sociology of suffering, in a similar mood: "A critical sociology of suffering is a necessary part of the attempt to engage sociology in the struggle to tell the truth about our world so as to imagine how it can be made to change".[17] And since various psychological and social processes tend to maintain social suffering in invisibility, there is a special responsibility for sociology, psychology and anthropology, not only to struggle against the reproduction of this invisibility in the academic discourses, but also to use their own public legitimacy to struggle against social invisibility as such. It is precisely in this sense that Bourdieu wrote that the political function of the study of suffering is that of a spokesperson.[18] And in Adorno also, the critical function of the knowledge of social suffering was associated with a public struggle against its social denial or euphemization.[19]

This job is up solely to the species, to which the individual belongs even where he subjectively renounces it and is objectively thrust into the absolute loneliness of a helpless object".

14. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17–18.

15. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 40: "In sharp contrast to the usual idea of science, the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs not less subjectivity, but more. Philosophical experience withers otherwise".

16. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17–18: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed".

17. Ian Wilkinson, *Suffering. A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 164.

18. See Emmanuel Renault, "Political Philosophy of Social Suffering", in Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher Zurn, *New Waves in Political Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

19. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 41: "If a stroke of undeserved luck has kept the mental composition of some individuals not quite adjusted to the prevailing norms – a stroke of luck they have often enough to pay for in their relations with their environment – it is up to these individuals to make the moral, and, as it were, representative effort to say what most of those for whom they say it cannot see or, to do justice to reality, will not allow themselves to see".

This interplay of theoretical and political problems opens up interesting avenues in epistemology as well as in political philosophy. In the contemporary epistemology of the human sciences, only two methodological stances seem possible. The first is to study the whole architecture of the human sciences, as in the last chapter of Foucault's *The Order of Things*.[20] The second possible stance consists of epistemological studies of some hegemonic research programmes such as neoclassic theories or game theories in economics. In both cases, philosophy appears condemned to a kind of reflexive justification of the dominant understandings of each discipline and of their boundaries. Afraid of being accused of arbitrariness or of an outdated philosophical imperialism, it cannot but ignore disciplinary heterodoxies as well as interdisciplinary undertakings and attempts to move disciplinary boundaries. In other words, philosophy is condemned to epistemological conservatism. The issue of social suffering is able precisely to throw such conservatism into doubt. Research programmes on social suffering are engaged in processes of subversion of the principles, methods and boundaries that are dominant in sociology, psychology and anthropology.

For philosophy, the methodological problems raised by these research programmes provide an opportunity to overcome epistemological conservatism without risking the accusation of philosophical arbitrariness or imperialism. It is also an invitation to adopt an original epistemological stance that has strong affinities with the epistemological stance Adorno is advocating in the *Positivist Dispute*. In this respect, four points deserve consideration. First, Adorno warns against what he calls the "terrorism of the division of the scientific labour".[21] Second, referring to the Hegelian relationship between understanding and reason, he points out that philosophy has to develop as an immanent critique of the theoretical and political limitations of human sciences and provide theoretical tools to help them overcome these limitations.[22] Third, in his criticism of their theoretical limitations, he refuses all attempts to unify the various human sciences in a global science and refuses to dissolve their disciplinary boundaries, but he nevertheless claims that in order to give an objective account of social experience, various disciplinary point of view have to be rationally interrelated.[23] Fourth, in his criticism of the political limitations of the human sciences, he claims that the

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20   Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 344-84.

21   T. W. Adorno, "The Logic of the Social Sciences", in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, G. Adey and D. Frisby (trans.) (London: Heinemann, 1969), 119.

22   See T. W. Adorno, "Introduction" to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 5.

23   See his accounts of the relations between sociology and psychology ("Zum Verhältnis zwischen Soziologie une Psychologie", *Gesammelte Schriften* [Francfort/M: Suhrkamp], 8, 43–92) and about sociology and economics (*Introduction to Sociology*, E. Jephcott [trans.] [London: Polity

social sciences should engage in self-reflection about their social and political dimensions, should not be afraid of studying all forms of damaged life and suffering that put society in accusation, and should establish the methods appropriate for such studies.[24]

These four claims are social-theoretical as well as epistemological. On the one hand, Adorno is trying to define a model whereby social theory could be informed, or influenced, by social sciences, but could also try to help them supersede their theoretical and political limitations, or influence them, without substituting social theory to human sciences. The definition of theory as a self-reflection of the social sciences (about their concepts and methods)[25] and the construction of ideal-types, or "models",[26] that could be useful in particular inquiries, or "micrologies",[27] are the two pillars of this reformulation of the idea of social theory. On the other hand, the self-reflection of the social sciences develops through epistemological discussions. It is worth noting that they are not only taking the form of a general theory of knowledge, for instance that of a general critique of the positivist understanding of science, but also that of a substantial epistemological discussion, through analysis of the methodology and of the procedures of given research projects in the human sciences in order to identify their apologetic content and define the way they could be transformed in a more critical way.

The problems raised by the issue of social suffering invite us also to an original conception of political philosophy. According to contemporary understandings, the idea of political philosophy is that of a critical refection on the normative assumptions of political judgement. According to these understandings, such critical reflection can only be achieved in the framework of a theory of justice (political liberalism), a theory of political participation (republicanism), or a theory of the good life (utilitarianism or communitarianism). It is true that the issue of social suffering can be addressed in all these contemporary understandings of political philosophy. The question will then be to decide whether or not a reference to suffering

Press, 2000], 141–43). Sometimes, this interrelation is labeled "sociology" (see "Introduction" to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, n. 60, 55–56).

24. See T. W. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America", in *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*, H. Pickford (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 215–44.

25. See T. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Francfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008). On Adorno's idea of social theory, see also Emmanuel Renault, "De la philosophie sociale à la théorie sociale", *Recherche sur la philosophie et le langage*, in "Histoire et définitions de la philosophie sociale", forthcoming.

26. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 28–31, 162–64.

27. Adorno, "Introduction" to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 39; *Negative Dialectics*, 28.

in social critique is legitimate. Each of the orientations just mentioned can provide a positive answer to this question: social suffering can be conceived as an injustice in so far as it means unequal distribution of suffering in society, and it can also be conceived as an obstacle to political participation and to self-realization. However, contemporary debates about social suffering are also inviting us to practice a different kind of political philosophy. They invite us to a double shift that, once again, echoes the Adornian conception of critical theory.

A first shift could be introduced by the notion of clinical approach, understood as the attention to the individual dimensions of social experience, as well as to social experience as a negative experience and as a complex interplay of psychic and social conditions. Since social suffering is always such a complex interplay of psychic and social conditions, and of practical and cognitive reactions to them, the only kind of approach that can take this complexity seriously is a clinical one. Political philosophy can refer only to phenomena of collective suffering (for instance in a utilitarian approach). But if it really wants to take social suffering as such into account, and if it wants to be able to criticize given social contexts from this point of view, that is from the point of view of their effects on individual lives, it has to adopt a clinical approach of the present.[28] If it adopts such a form of social critique, political philosophy would endorse a critical stance very similar to that of Adorno in *Minima Moralia*: a social critique grounded in a phenomenology of negative social experiences.[29]

A second shift results from the fact that the critique of social suffering invites political philosophy to connect with a theory of society. According to contemporary understandings, political philosophy should claim autonomy as a normative reflection on the principles of political judgment. But if political philosophy wants to take phenomena such as social suffering into account, and wants to establish a historical diagnosis, it has to connect its stance as philosophy, which is general and normative, with the particular and descriptive stance of the psychology, sociology and anthropology of suffering. Therefore, it needs a conception of social experience that enables it to mediate its specific account of the social with those of the human sciences. Interestingly enough, with the loss of influence of Marxism on critical theory, Adorno's philosophy has been understood less and less as a social theory and a critical epistemology, and more and

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28. Adorno clearly advocates for "clinical approaches" in social sciences. See "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America", 231–35, as an example of its "micrological" approach.
29. See R. Jaeggi, "'No Individual Can Resist': *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life", *Constellations* 12(1) (2005): 65–82.

more as a hermeneutic of damaged life. But for Adorno, the interpretation of negative social experiences is incapable of achieving its goals if it is not guided by a theory of the social and of the psychological structures of experience.[30] And no historical diagnosis is possible without a social theory of the general trends of our capitalist societies.[31] What is required for this theory and these diagnoses is a self-reflected mediation between philosophy and social sciences.

In the current debates in critical theory, this reference to historical diagnosis evokes the way Honneth has attempted to bridge the gap between contemporary political philosophy and the initial programme of critical theory. As we know, his strategy is to oppose political philosophy and social philosophy, the first of which is understood as theory of justice and the second as historical diagnosis about social pathologies.[32] Here, the notion of social pathology is not to be thought of in medical terms, as if it were a definition of the social component of medical pathology (in the sense given for example by Grotjahn).[33] Rather than in this medical sense, it must be understood as defining a particular form of social critique. According to this reference to social pathology, the specificity of social philosophy is twofold: instead of dealing with the norms that are embodied in social institutions, it deals with the effects of institutions on individual experience, and instead of assuming the normative point of view of justice, it expresses the claim for an undamaged individual and social life. Honneth is not just advocating a philosophical approach to society that is complementary with that of contemporary political philosophy. He is also showing that social philosophy understood as theory of social pathologies defines a tradition that can be traced back to Rousseau, and that notions such as "alienation", "nihilism", "anomy", "reification", "collective neurosis", are nothing but definitions of social pathologies. In my opinion, there is no doubt that social suffering could be added to the list. However, since this definition of social philosophy is only identifying a tradition, it can be specified in various ways and further developments are required in order to determine which of these specifications is appropriate for a philosophical critique of social suffering. Let me now distinguish three programmes of social philosophy (a strong,

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30. As it clearly appears in his reading of Kafka, see "Notes on Kafka", in *Prisms*, S. Weber and S. Weber (trans.) (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 243–71.
31. About the relation between diagnoses and trends, see *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft*, lecture 3.
32. Honneth, "Pathologies of the Social".
33. A. Grotjahn, *Soziale Pathologie. Versuch einer Lehre von den sozialen Beziehungen der menschlichen Krankheiten als Grundlage der sozialen Medizin und der sozialen Hygiene* (Berlin: Springler, 1923).

a weak and a mixed one), and try to determine which of them is the more appropriate for a philosophical critique a social suffering.

Three Models of Social Philosophy

In order to distinguish the various possible orientations of social philosophy, it may be convenient to rephrase Honneth's definition of social philosophy in the following way: social philosophy means a special branch of practical philosophy that is characterized by a close interconnection of a descriptive and a normative approach.[34] As said, the descriptive side deals with the nature of the social settings and with their effects on individual experience. The specificity of the normative approach is that it endorses a particular kind of social critique that rests upon norms that are particular to social experience. One can consider that it is the very combination of these two approaches that makes it possible to identify a social pathology.

It seems quite clear that the descriptive and normative components of social philosophy can be understood either in a strong or in a weak sense. The possible combinations of the strong and weak senses of these components define three types of social philosophy. In a strong programme of social philosophy, strong understandings of the descriptive and normative sides are combined with each other. Similarly, in a weak programme of social philosophy, weak understandings of the descriptive and normative sides are combined with each other. Mixed programmes combine a strong understanding of the normative side with a weak understanding of a descriptive side, or a weak understanding of the normative side with a strong understanding of the descriptive side.

Let me begin with the two possible understandings of the descriptive side of social philosophy. A weak understanding of the descriptive part of social philosophy would refer to arguments of philosophical anthropology whereas a strong one would be based on a social theory or on a theory of social experience.

In classical forms of social philosophy, say from Rousseau to Nietzsche, the descriptive side of social philosophy is developed via philosophical anthropology. By philosophical anthropology, I mean a theory of what human nature is, how it relies on institutions and how it can be transformed by them. The descriptive function of philosophical anthropology is therefore twofold: it describes a *set* of *institutions* that are *essential* for human life, and it analyses the *effects* of their presence or absence on *human life*. Here social

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34. Fischbach, *Manifeste pour une philosophie sociale.*

experience is reduced to human life and the social to the institutions that are required for a good life.

The description of the social is developed in a stronger sense in a social theory. By social theory, I mean a theory of the various determinations of social phenomena: (a) interactions, (b) institutions, (c) social structures (such as structures of class, gender and "race" domination; as well as systemic relations between institutions) and (d) general social processes (such as rationalization dynamics, capitalist dynamics, dynamics of precarization, and so on). Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*[35] provides the best illustration of this kind of philosophical approach of society. In such a theory, the descriptive function relates to the various combinations of social levels and processes, and to their effects on socialization and interactions. In comparison with philosophical anthropology, a double shift occurs: a shift from a general conception of the social to a *dynamic* theory of *levels* and *processes*; and a shift from a conception of human life to a conception of *social action*, that is a theory of the structures and features of socialization and interaction. It is quite obvious that in this second approach, various methodological problems emerge that the first one could ignore. Social sciences are developing for their own sake descriptions and theories about social interactions, institutions, social structures and general social processes, so that the philosophical discourse has to combine itself with these sciences and ground his synthesis of their accounts in a differentiated conception of the social and in an epistemology of the social sciences. Here again, Habermas illustrates an outstanding attempt to meet these requirements since he sets up a developed social theory informed by social sciences and grounded in a differentiated conception of the social (with the distinctions between system and lifeworld) as well as in an epistemology of human sciences (through confrontations with pragmatist, hermeneutic, positivist and system-theoretical epistemologies).[36]

It is possible to understand the descriptive side of social philosophy in an even stronger sense, since social experience is not fully analysed as long as it is reduced to social action, or in other words, as long as the sociological approach to socialization and interaction is not completed by a theory of their psychic dimensions. To achieve this shift from social action to *social experience*, one has to associate a social theory with a social psychology. It was clearly in this strong sense that the project of social philosophy was carried out in the *Studies on Family and Authority* in the

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35. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).
36. See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); *On the Logic of Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

1930s by Horkheimer, Marcuse and Fromm, or in the 1940s in the *Studies on Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno.[37] In the contemporary period, Castoriadis' *The Imaginary Structure of Society*[38] is probably the most notable attempt in this direction. But it is quite clear that in this strongest sense, the idea of social philosophy raises methodological problems that are even more serious. What is required is not only a model of social experience capable of combining sociological, psycho-sociological and psychoanalytic accounts, but also an epistemological intervention in such highly controversial disciplines as social psychology and psychoanalysis. These methodological problems remained largely unresolved in the first programme of critical theory or in Castoriadis, but there is no doubt that Adorno was aiming to work toward their solution in his contributions to the *Positivism Dispute*, as well as in his writings about sociology and psychology in the 1950s and 1960s.

The normative side of social philosophy also can be understood in a weak and a strong sense. It can be conceived of as a theory of the norms that are *specific* to social experience in the sense that they should govern our specific relations with given social institutions. In fact, it is possible to claim that all social institutions have to meet some normative conditions in order to play their normal role and that a society develops pathological tendencies as soon as this is not the case. It can be said for instance that economic institutions should satisfy the material needs of individuals, that family should offer affective support to its members, and that the education system should give a chance to each individual to develop their skills, talents and critical capacities, and so on. It can also be said that the various institutions have to produce effects on individuals that are compatible amongst each other, and avoid internal conflicts and suffering for them. A great number of normative approaches of society, from philosophical anthropologies to social medicine and pragmatist philosophies (especially that of Dewey) could be mentioned that have these two features in common: the first one is that the norms of the social are specific in the sense of an institutional *particularity* (they are not norms of the social life in general but of given institutions); the second one is that normative expectations are only *externally* associated with institutions. One can note that Honneth's theory is sometimes understood in this weak sense when it is reduced to a theory of the normative *expectations* that the family, law and economical institutions have to meet. But the theory of recognition relies upon a stronger understanding of the normative side of social theory.

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37. Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Norton and Co, 1996).
38. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

About the strong understanding shared by Habermas and Honneth, one might say that the norms of the social critique are not specific to social experience in the sense mentioned above but in the sense of *immanence*. Here, the model I am referring to is that of the "normative presuppositions" of social life. According to Habermas and Honneth, social interaction is loaded with normative expectations that condition social integration, and explain social evolution in the case they are not met.[39] What is essential for this strong understanding of the normative side of social philosophy is that normative expectations are *internally* associated with institutions. Now, it is worth noting that this strong understanding can again be interpreted in two different ways. The link between normative expectations and institutions can be conceived of in terms of a theory of social action, as it is the case in Honneth and Habermas. But it can also be reframed in psycho-sociological terms. In this latter case, one has to show that the satisfaction of specific normative expectations is crucial for the good functioning of specific institutions, and one also has to describe the practical and cognitive dynamics, as well as their individual and collective developments, that are at play when these expectations are not satisfied. When the normative side of social philosophy is understood in these strong senses, new methodological problems appear that could remain ignored as long as the normative side of social philosophy was understood in its weak sense. If practical and cognitive dynamics arise from a situation where the normative presuppositions of the social life are not satisfied, and if some of these dynamics contribute to transform social activity into social critique or social transformation, then a first methodological problem is to describe the relation between the philosophical approach of these critical dynamics with that of history, anthropology and sociology. Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, as well as Honneth in his *Struggle for Recognition*,[40] have attempted to face these challenges. A second methodological problem is related with the further development of these critical dynamics into theoretical critique. As we know, this methodological problem gives one of its incentives to the distinction made by Horkheimer between traditional and critical theory, and we could add that the Adornian idea of suffering as pre-rational ground for critique is another way to deal with it. But this methological problem has also been tackled by branches of sociology such as the sociology of

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39. See, for instance, Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003).
40. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

knowledge, or political sociology, so that it raises again the epistemological problem of the relation between political philosophy and the social sciences.

I hope that it will now become easier to understand how strong, weak and mixed programmes of social theory combine the descriptive and normative approaches to social pathology. There is no doubt that Habermas provides an illustration for the strong programme of social philosophy. His notion of "pathologies of the life-world" is derived from a social theory (that is, a strong understanding of the descriptive side of social philosophy) and from a theory of normative presuppositions of social integration (that is, a strong understanding of the normative part of social theory). There is no doubt however that other strong programmes of social philosophy could refer to a theory of social experience, rather than simply to a social theory, and to a psycho-sociological approach to the good functioning of particular institutions. Dejours' analysis of recognitive expectations as conditions of the good functioning of work as cooperative action, and his theory of the vicious circle between bad conditions of work and the damaged mental health of the workers, could be mentioned here as an example.[41]

Although he has been our point of departure, it is more difficult to locate Honneth's contribution in this taxonomy. His theory of recognition has developed not only as a philosophical anthropology, but also as a social psychology, and even if he has not elaborated a complete social theory, he has proposed many contributions in this field. Nevertheless, if one focuses on his definition of social pathology, it seems quite clear that the latter is more closely linked to a philosophical anthropology than to a social theory or to a theory of social experience. His notion of social pathology rests mainly upon the claim that recognition expectations are conditions of social validity, and upon the fact that when these normative expectations are not satisfied, individuals are interacting with their social environment in a way that damages not only their social life, but their very identity. Interestingly enough, the idea of the normative presuppositions of social life implies that the argument belonging to philosophical anthropology (some institutions are essential for human life) is associated with an argument that is belonging to social ontology (some behaviours are essential to institutions). In brief, Honneth's model could be interpreted as a mixed programme of social philosophy combining a weak understanding of the descriptive side (as philosophical anthropology and social ontology) and a strong understanding of the normative side (as normative presupposition of the social life).

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41. See Christophe Dejours, "Subjectivity, Work and Action", *Critical Horizons* 7 (2006): 45–62 as well as his contribution in this issue.

There is another kind of mixed model where, conversely, a strong understanding of the descriptive is combined with a weak understanding of the normative side. Foucault's political philosophy provides a good illustration since it rests on a social theory (dealing with power interactions and institutional structures) and endorses the normative stance of a critique of the institutional effects of subjectivation that are producing subjection and internalization of domination.

In order to find illustrations of the weak programme of social philosophy, one could have a look at the initial meaning of "social medicine", as it was coined by Jules Guérin in 1848.[42] In his view, "social medicine" has to criticize the social settings from the point of view of their effects on the health of individuals. Other illustrations could be found in attempts to establish a diagnosis about what is pathological in the framework of a philosophical anthropology understood as a conception of the basic expectations that the institutions have to satisfy. Dewey's diagnosis about the pathological aspects of the school system, in his article "Ethical Principles Underlying Education", for instance,[43] provides an illustration of such a weak programme of social philosophy.

Normative / Descriptive	Weak (normative expectations external to institutions)	Strong (normative presuppositions of social life)	Strong (normative expectations crucial for the good functioning of a given institution)
Weak (philosophical anthropology)	Dewey's pathology of the school system; Guerin's "social pathology"	Honneth's pathology of the social	
Strong (social theory)	Foucault's theory of institutional effects of subjectivation	Habermas colonization of the life word	
Strong (theory of social experience)			Dejours' pathogenic conditions of work

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42. See Emmanuel Renault, "Biopolitics and Social Pathologies", *Critical Horizons* 7 (2006): 159–77.
43. John Dewey, *Ethical Principles Underlying Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1903).

What Kind of Social Pathology is Social Suffering?

Let me now come back to my main topic, the relation between social suffering and social pathology.

It is possible to make room for suffering in a weak programme of social philosophy, as is proven by the many references to suffering in the social medicine of the mid-nineteenth century. In Guérin's writings for instance, the description of collective suffering (labelled "social pathology") is associated with the inquiry into its social causes (a "social aetiology"), in order to find solutions (a "social therapeutics"). Social suffering is hence part of a social critique that is also a social diagnosis and an attempt to find political solutions. But the limitations of this approach are obvious: it is not suffering as social experience but as disease that is considered in this case, and there is no social theory to justify the medical ascription of disease to social causes and the political therapeutics associated with the social pathology.[44]

It is also possible to take social suffering into account in a mixed model of social philosophy. Honneth's continuous reference to social suffering[45] gives plenty of evidence for this possibility. On the descriptive side, it is surely not necessary to develop a full social theory to identify situations where institutions are no longer playing their role and produce frustration and suffering for individuals. Nor is it necessary to describe this suffering from the point of view of a full-blown theory of a social experience if social suffering (or a new form of suffering)[46] is reduced to a "symptom" of a social pathology defined at the level of social action.[47] On the normative side, it seems possible to claim that a suffering structurally produced by the social context is a serious obstacle to good life and self-realization, without introducing the struggle against suffering in the normative presuppositions of the social life.

These accounts of suffering are perfectly coherent and sufficient insofar as the models of social pathology they operate with are considered from the

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44. See Renault, "Biopolitics and Social Pathologies".
45. Jean-Philippe Deranty has shown that this reference remains throughout Honneth's intellectual evolution; see his *Beyond Communication. A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009).
46. See for example, "Organised Self-Realisation: Some Paradoxes of Individualisation", *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(4): 463–78.
47. See especially, A. Honneth, "A Fragmented World: On the Implicit Relevance of Lukacs' Early Work", in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), 50–60; "A Social Pathology of Reason" and "A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno's Social Theory", in *Pathologies of Reason*, 19-42 and 54-70.

point of view of their own, self-defined purposes. But if one wants to tackle the problems raised by the theoretical and political relevance of social suffering, what is required is a stronger programme of social philosophy, that of a differentiated theory of social experience associated with a critical epistemology of the human sciences.

I have already pointed out that the current research programmes on social suffering attempt to identify the specific social causes, as well as the psychic dimensions, of social suffering. The distinction between social and psychic conditions of suffering is also crucial in relation to the political dimension of the debate, since the question at stake is to decide whether or not the suffering of individuals should be ascribed to a social origin and become a subject-matter for social critique. In order to tackle the theoretical and political issue of the articulation between the social and the psychic, it seems that philosophy has to develop not only a social theory (able to identify possible social aetiologies) but also a differentiated theory of social experience (able to distinguish and articulate social and biographical causes of suffering in various contexts). Equally, it is crucial to develop an epistemology of the social sciences that is able to justify the different programmes of research on social suffering that cross disciplinary boundaries or develop interdisciplinary programmes. Without a social theory associated with a theory of social experience and an epistemology of human sciences, all attempts to bridge the gap between the description of suffering and historical diagnosis will necessarily remain dubious.

To meet these requirements means to develop a strong model of social philosophy but not a strong reference to suffering in social critique. Social suffering cannot be more than one social problem among others, or more than one element of social diagnosis amongst others. Social suffering should be understood neither as the ultimate criterion of the value of our societies, nor as something that could be defined as bad or wrong by an operative criterion. It is important to argue that social suffering has to be taken into consideration in the political public sphere and to offer models that are useful for such consideration, but philosophy should not substitute itself to political deliberation and confrontations about suffering. The most philosophy can give is a political orientation. Here, there may be nothing more to add than what Adorno already wrote: our societies should be organized in such a way that the suffering of their members could be reduced as far as possible, but no one can say in advance to which degree this could be achieved.[48]

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48. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

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