The tensions of autonomy

The case of French society

Alain Ehrenberg

Keynote

American philosopher John Dewey wrote in 1930: "The problem of building a new individuality in consonance with the objective conditions in which we are living is the deepest problem of our time" (Dewey 1999, p. 16). Dewey had in mind the objective conditions of the mass society, urban society, and industrial society of his time. Has this question of a new individuality, or a new individualism, also arisen in our current era of globalization? If so, what does it consist of?

All tensions are not negative. There are structuring and destructuring tensions, and it can be difficult to determine which is which. By nature, democracy is based on the institution of conflict, an institution which enables the representation of different interests in a society of free and equal individuals, multiple expressions of individual and collective agents, and the peaceful resolution of disagreements. Considering this framework, how can destructuring tensions be transformed into structuring ones?

Today I will address the topic of society under tensions through the transformations of individualism characterized by the rise of ideas, values and norms of autonomy in the case of French society, in the context of globalization.

Let's begin with an image France gives of itself: a society characterized by pessimism, distrust, conflict, uneasiness, and division. Yet, what is particularly striking is the gap between pessimistic representations of public opinion and statistical data, on health, inequalities, standards of living, poverty, etc., which show that this society is, in fact, doing rather well. For example, in 2014, according to Eurobarometer, 87% of French people thought that anyone could fall into poverty, versus 63% of Germans. This data is even more striking given that the poverty rate is 13.3% in France whereas it is 16.7% in Germany (Eurobaromètre 2014 *in* France Stratégie 2016, p. 17). More generally, this gap between data and representations is bigger than in most EU countries. These statistical regularities indicate that there is in France a genuine collective sensitivity. This is what I call "the malaise society" (Ehrenberg 2010, 2011), that is, a way for society to collectively represent its problems.

The topic of malaise, which emerged with globalization during the 1980s, highlights certain tensions of French society. My goal is to describe a society which seems divided on its aims, and doubtful of its future, to present the reasons to explain this situation and indicate some ways to overcome it.

I'll first examine changes in autonomy, then I'll focus on the tensions of the "psychical economy", to use Norbert Elias's expression, which appeared in the wake of these changes, and have been used as evidence of a general malaise in society. Issues of psychic suffering and mental health play a major role in this malaise. I will combine collective psychology and sociology. Finally, I'll describe a core but

hardly noticeable tension between protection and capability, and will propose some reflections on the institutions to be reinforced in order to alleviate this tension of autonomy society in which we live, and which will develop more and more.

Autonomy as aspiration and autonomy as objective condition

The evolution of autonomy should be approached in two steps. It first became a collective aspiration in the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1960–1970s, then, has become a collective condition since the 1980s, that is, an "objective condition" of our time. Autonomy brings to the fore individual subjectivity in social and institutional life. It represents a personal turning point of individualism.

Autonomy has progressively become a collective aspiration since the 1960s in the context of welfare state protections regarding unemployment, old age, and health risks – what we call the "social model" – of strong growth, of the development of mass consumption, and of the emancipation of mores. It is characterized by values of independence, personal accomplishment, self-ownership, choice, innovation, and of gender equality, equality between women and men being the main issue. Social liberation movements (in France, crystalized by the events of May 68) bore these values in a society still permeated with republican morals of duty, obedience, conformity to various social rules. These movements undermined these traditional values.

Economic growth, social welfare, changes in the school system, and new housing policies – which improved domestic comfort – and collective infrastructures, radically transformed French society: the rigid class system, from which few escaped, gave way to new possibilities for social mobility. The future was wide open. Wellbeing was no longer a distant aspiration, but a potentially accessible reality for the working class. The idea that people have the right to lead a private life of their choice became predominant.

France left rural agricultural society, with its modest aspirations, behind, to enter urban industrial modernity. This period represents a "second" French Revolution (Mendras 1988), a revolution of material comfort and of mores. As a result, a hedonistic type of individualism developed.

Regarding social protection and relationships between economics and the social, a dynamic balance was established in which social spending fed economic growth, which allowed for the financing of social spending in a virtuous circle permeated by the idea of permanent progress under a strong state leading modernization and designing the meaning of change. This constituted the great common narrative during the whole period.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, autonomy progressively became a collective condition and started to permeate the whole of social relationships. Autonomy as a condition is primarily characterized by the deepening of the dynamic of the emancipation of mores. Then, by the valorization of action, initiative, and individual responsibility. Work organization in the workplace and the job market have been the epicenter of this valorization.

The strong valorization of freedom of choice and self-ownership, of individual initiative, innovation and creativity, all of these ideals emphasize the ability of the individual to act by himself or herself. Therefore, we have entered an individualism of capability permeated by ideas, values, and norms of autonomy.

Autonomy as a common condition means that it is certainly a mass aspiration, but also a system of collective expectation regarding every individual; autonomy today is normative; it is an imperative.

This is the great change of collective representations of individualism. The language of autonomy uses a vocabulary of capability, skill, responsibility, project, support, trajectories, and empowerment. Today, these notions have a transversal character. One can see them omnipresent in public action, therapeutic practices, education, work and employment policy, etc. The democratization of these ideals implies that not only does every individual have access to personal autonomy, but also *must* have access to it, whatever their handicaps or difficulties may be, because a minimum level of autonomy is always presupposed in the individual, a minimum of potential on which it is possible to act. It is largely about a change in personal equation in society.

These changes have taken place in the context of the development of globalization and the concomitant fall of industrial society, the weakening of the welfare state and social protection, which were instituted in Western society after the Second World War. Autonomy as a condition is tightly connected to these changes which have developed since the 1980s.

Globalization represents a change comparable to that of the industrial revolution. Our societies have all encountered these mutations. Although collective challenges are similar everywhere in the developed world, the paths taken by different national societies, and their respective representations to address them, differ somewhat.

I should say a word about the relationships of French society and globalization, because they are the expression of a tension between protection and autonomy, a tension which is very active in the realm of work and employment, as well as in social protection. Globalization has led French society to be confronted with a general context of liberalism, free exchange, and general increase of the place of the market in which it is not at ease and to which it is traditionally hostile. This context divides French society and is at the root of new tensions which have appeared since the 1980s. I say "confronted" because, in the EU, the French are the most hostile to globalization (second only to Greece) and the most reticent members of the Union regarding competition, the market, and free exchange (see Fourquet 2019). This hostility, which characterizes French society relatively to most other European societies, permeates collective representations; it has underpinned numerous contemporary conflicts and fed populism as much on the right as on the left. Globalization is the source of a new social cleavage between winners, open to globalization, and losers, hostile to it. Level of education is the main criterion of discrimination between these two categories.

Globalization is perceived by a large part of French society as something which has called into question the economic and social progress which went hand to hand during the what the French call the "Thirty Glorious" – the post-war era until the first oil crisis in 1973 – and constituted the great common narrative. Welfare states are under tension everywhere. In France, it has progressively been erected as a model, an ideal, and has been invested by a collective imaginary which goes far beyond its utilitarian functions: it is one of the foundations of collective identity. 90% of the French think there is a specific French model, and the percentage of GDP dedicated to social protection is the largest of the OECD. One must specify that France must be classified, if we follow Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare states, in the conservative, corporatist category (Esping-Andersen 1990). It allies statism (which goes with distrust regarding the market and competition) with corporatism, which implies rights associated with professional and social status. The French social model is conceived of according to reference to status, itself founded on the status of civil service – for instance, France has forty-two systems of health care insurance, that is, forty-two different statuses.

French society is both united and divided about the great change in individualism that autonomy has brought. It is a common value which unites it at the level of mores because it favors independence, that is the idea that everybody should lead their personal life according to their choices. Regular investigations about the values of the French show a consensus about mores and family liberalization

as well as choice culture, a major aspect of autonomy. But autonomy divides French society in other areas, notably on the issue of work. Flexible work and injunctions to autonomy and responsibility have brought the new topic of psychic suffering in the workplace to the fore. Autonomy divides French society because it is also associated with globalization and neoliberalism. Autonomy represents ideals of personal accomplishment, but also the increasing place of the market and the economy in social life, which comes with globalization. In this frame, autonomy renders the individual responsible without giving them the means to face it. It thus becomes oppressive.

These mutations modify the relationship between agent and action in a direction which increases the responsibility of the agent towards his/her own actions. A crucial point, then, is the place of personal responsibility in social life.

A new type of ordeal for the individual

In this context, the emancipated individual is facing a new type of ordeal, one which manifests itself in terms of mental health and psychic suffering, in which depression occupies a major place. These disorders would concern a quarter of the EU population. This point leads me to the second part of this speech, the path of the French malaise. This malaise is part of the type of individualism which has developed in the context of globalization.

The intricacy of mental and social questions is a salient feature of our society. Emotions, affect, moral feelings and, more generally, everything related to individual subjectivity are the object of massive preoccupations in contemporary society. This shift has notably taken place through mental health and psychic suffering problems which have become widespread since the 1980s. Mental pathologies can be defined as pathologies of freedom which undermine relational life and thus tend to desocialize people affected. For example, an excess of guilt can depress and inhibit the individual affected.

Mental health is a particular kind of health in that it concerns the sociality of the human being. Of course, cancer can complicate relational life, but this social dimension is not part of the diagnosis, only a consequence of the illness. Today, beyond specialized problems of psychiatry, we are faced with a general problem of social life, at school, with ADHD, school phobia or behavioral disorders which lead to disorganization of school relationships for the child affected, or in the company, with stress-related disorders, burnout, and mental pathologies which are considered as ways of expressing conflicts in the workplace. These problems are transversal to these different institutions. A manifestation of the intricacy between mental and social is that our social relationships tend to be described in a language of affect which distributes between the good of mental health and the bad of psychic suffering.

In France, worries like social suffering, malaise in society, weakening or disintegration of social bonds, etc. are widely discussed – all these qualifications are regularly used. Numerous sociologists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, etc. wonder to what extent we are witnessing a transformation of individualism which turns against both society and the individual. Autonomy and individualism are intertwined in the idea of malaise, which is a key word in French society: a collective representation that French society gives of itself, one which everyone can identify with.

This “malaise” can be summed up in the dual idea that social bonds are breaking down and, therefore, that the individual is overloaded with ordeals of responsibilities he/she never had experienced before. From this stems massive and widespread psychic suffering and the multiplication of medical, psychological, spiritualist techniques which deal with it. Do we not talk about the psychologization, pathologization, or medicalization of social life? In these processes, would reside symptoms of a crisis

of social links. The new ways of suffering are about self-image, narcissism, and self-esteem; they show anxiety of insufficiency regarding social ideals of autonomy.

In the field of psychopathology, new expressions of mental pathologies that psychoanalysis uncovered seem to have become generalized. They have been used as evidence to support the elaboration of the discourse of malaise.

Freud considered conflict between the superego (or moral conscience) and id (or drives) as psychic suffering necessary to civilization or culture. In his *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, published in 1930, he noticed that "collective superego [...] enacts a law and doesn't ask if it is possible for men to follow it." When they cannot, the effect of this is neurotic suffering, manifested in pathologies of the superego: neuroses are pathologies resulting from the conflict between what is permitted and what is prohibited, in which feelings of guilt predominate. In highlighting this, psychoanalysis, in its concepts and its language, crystallized the ideas, values, and norms of a society based on discipline, duty, frugality, and multiple social prohibitions, in which the question which must be asked is: What am I allowed to do? As you may recall – the superego relates primarily to interdiction, to what is forbidden.

Psychoanalysts, mainly Americans, have noticed changes in the psychic structure of their clients since the 1960s–1970s. These clients were less affected by pathologies of desire, that is, by conflicts between the allowed and the prohibited, than by narcissistic pathologies which are more about the ego ideal than the superego, and are characterized by feelings of emptiness and insufficiency. Whereas the superego prohibits, the ego ideal invites to action. In their characterization of their clients, psychoanalysis shifted the emphasis from Oedipal conflict to narcissistic insufficiency. Depression dominates the clinical picture, and patients now display more shame than guilt. Around 1970, depression became the most widespread mental disorder in the world, and epidemiologists forecast that this pathology will continue its expansion. Thus, numerous psychoanalysts today wonder to what extent these new pathologies result from the rise of values of personal accomplishment, independence, etc., which aggregate in the notion of autonomy, and bring to the fore the ego of the individual, his or her subjectivity, at a level never reached. During the 1970s, essayists would talk of the "Me Decade".

That is why depression can be understood to be an expression of a society in which norms are no longer founded on discipline, notably mechanical discipline in the workplace, but on autonomy. Yesterday, social rules required conformity of thought, and behavioral automatism; today they demand initiative, responsibility, and mental aptitude. The individual is more confronted with a pathology of insufficiency than one of transgression. Pathologies of contemporary individualism are more haunted by feelings of powerlessness and depression. They go with the individualism of autonomy, which enjoins individuals to be self-motivated, to define themselves by their projects, to be capable of change and of personal accomplishment. With these ideas and values have come new opportunity, but also, intricate into them, new ordeals.

Through these pathologies, it becomes apparent that the question which must be asked today is more: "What am I able to do?" than "What am I allowed to do?"

To summarize the dynamic of change, in a society of discipline and prohibitions, tensions of psychical economy tended to appear in pathologies of conflict. In a permissive society of autonomy, they tend to appear in pathologies of emancipation.

From these changes in psychopathology, psychoanalysts, philosophers, sociologists, and essayists of all kinds have extended narcissism to sociology; from this they have generated a model for understanding contemporary society. For them, these changes show that we have shifted from an individualism of personalization to an individualism of social unbinding, in which institutions lose their substance, and life tends toward privatization under the weight of values of choice and personal accomplishment. We would now be confronted with *The Fall of Public Man*, to recall the title of American so-

ciologist Richard Sennett's book (Sennett 1977), a fall which occurs in the name of the right to authenticity and for the benefit of private man. The famous *Culture of Narcissim* by Christopher Lasch published in 1979 (Lasch 1979) puts forward the idea that the contemporary individual has become narcissistic. He sees in this situation a crisis of self-reliance – a fundamental value of American society – and is nostalgic of the traditional "rugged individualism" of yesterday. In the US, the individual who had lost their sense of responsibility has been foregrounded, whereas, in France, on the contrary, it was more the individual overloaded with responsibilities in a context of neoliberalism. Formulas such as "remake society", "reunify society", etc., have begun to circulate widely. Contemporary individualism tends to be destructive of social links and collective belonging.

In what ways is this topic new? Actually, this illustrates the traditional obsessive fear of social unbinding, which Tocqueville had already described in the first half of the 19th century as a major trend of democratic societies but renewed within the framework of new collective representations of the individual. This unbinding is today formulated according to the Freudian label of "malaise in society". All these essays linked individual (narcissistic pathology) and collective (social unbinding) evil.

We must go beyond these representations. Fear of social unbinding is a common idea in our society, it is a social idea. Therefore, we must at once recognize this fear as a salient feature of our society, and go beyond it, to highlight what is at stake in the topic of malaise. My hypothesis is that, through the idea of weakening of social relationships, there is a change in the social status of psychic suffering. If one agrees with the simple idea that we are both the agents of and the patients of social life, my assertion is that changes in the way we act, permeated by autonomy, are linked to changes in the way we are affected, revealed by an extended use of the concept of psychic suffering. Autonomy consists of a shift of emphasis towards the activity of the individual, but it is also something by which we are affected: affect, affection, passion, passivity – all these terms indicate the fact of being affected. The new status of psychic suffering is the expression of a style of passion intimately connected to autonomy. Its expanded importance is the fruit of a context through which injustice, failure, deviance, dissatisfaction, and frustration tend to be evaluated by their impact on individual subjectivity. Here we see an intertwining of failure, misfortune, and illness, crystalized by mental health and psychic suffering. They express a form of passion in a society in which all values and norms go to action, to the activity of the individual. Autonomy logically highlights an affective dimension, the role of which was previously negligible – it represented neither a problem nor a value.

If human life appears to be more personal today, it doesn't mean that it is less social, less political, or less institutional. It is all of these, but in a different way.

The tension between protection and capability

The hypothesis I would like to develop now is that through the topic of "malaise," a central but marginally perceived tension has appeared between protection and capability, in a context of a crisis of equality *à la française*. Let's take the examples of the job market and the organization of work.

Contemporary forms of work organization are characterized by the shift of prescribed social relationships, in which it is enough to obey – the disciplinary obedience of Taylorism and Fordism – to contractual relationships in which negotiations play a major role, which implies the mobilization of individual subjectivity, and brings to the fore an individual able to rely on their personal resources. This is the omnipresent topic of social skills. We are faced with a sociality of the workplace in which initiative is expected more than mechanical obedience; a sociality in which work often involves a ser-

vice relationship rather than success at a specific task – a sociality which implies that everyone has the capability to take it upon oneself to act proactively in an uncertain temporality and an uncertain environment, and not that one would react by executing orders in a regular temporality and in a stable environment.

The digital revolution has accelerated the entry of work in the service economy, in which boundaries between services and industry fade to the benefit of the economic actors capable of furnishing personalized goods and services.

The management of human resources is organized according to flexible constraints. These are capabilities adapted to the vagaries of demand which work requires, and no longer the detailed prescription of execution. Moreover, work, including industrial work, being organized as a service relationship, necessarily possesses relational content. Compared to the concept of work in the Taylorist-Fordist organization, we have witnessed a normative inversion: personal accomplishment today is *the* value attached to the implication of employees to their work.

Along with flexible work and autonomy have come psychic suffering (stress, burnout, etc.) and, by extension, a sense of malaise in the workplace, the main evidence of which is the generalization of psychic suffering at work. It has become a common preoccupation among actors. Epidemiological investigations by French public health authorities confirms this generalization. They indicate that pathologies relative to psychic suffering are the second most common group of pathologies in the workplace; a quarter of men and more than a third of women show symptoms of work-related suffering (Solidarité-sante.gouv 2018). This is quite a recent and massive phenomenon.

Management publications are replete with instructions related to encouraging more responsibility and autonomy among their employees. Taylorist and Fordist work organization have not disappeared, however, but since the 1980s, we have witnessed an increase of autonomy in the workplace, which has gone hand with hand with an increase of control – control shifting from the execution of work to results. Autonomy is required more than granted; it is a constraint to satisfy the exigencies of performance in companies. Malaise rhetoric sees in this an aspect of neoliberalism which is transforming society into markets and individuals into entrepreneurs of themselves.

Through this collective psychology, the issue is to understand that we are facing a change in inequalities. This change is the social inequality of individual capability faced with exigencies of work and employment markets which demand social and cognitive skills more and more. As American economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman wrote: “It requires much more than being intelligent to succeed in life. Motivation, sociability (ability to work with others), aptitude to concentrate on tasks, self-control, self-esteem, health and mental health, all this counts”. Today, we live in a society which is very demanding in terms of the control of emotions and drives.

The fact of unequal distribution of individual capabilities implies a change in equality à la française, the core concept of which is protection, based on status. Why? Because equality today is an equality of autonomy, which presupposes an emphasis on the concept of capability and on the individual instead of status. It is not about opposing individual capability to status protection, but rather to reform the concept of protection with that of capability. In an increasingly fluid and entrepreneurial economy, relationships between protection and capability must evolve.

Towards a policy of capability?

The question of building a new individuality, to refer to Dewey's terms, thus consists of favoring, in terms of institutions, an individualism of capability, because it is linked to the objective conditions of our time.

Conditions of work and social protection have changed. The social protection of the 20th century responded to risks of a population working in industrial mass production within the framework in a context of strong growth. Responses to new risks, to the new tensions of work resulting from more uncertain trajectories, including in stable employment, represent an increased individualization or personalization. Social investment policies, of which Nordic flexi-security is a good example, are a case in point of this personalization. Instead of being built upon a logic of distinct risks, as in industrial society, it is conceived of in terms of people's trajectories which are thus personalized. This type of public action ensures security for individual trajectories, notably, by protecting transitions, that is, mobility, instead of protecting employment or jobs –it is a shift from the job to the individual. This system of support is indispensable to render the individual capable of protecting him- or herself to the widest extent possible through a set of services and support.

In France, such policies have started to develop; for instance, reforms of vocational training inspired by Scandinavian countries began under François Hollande's presidency and have expanded under Emmanuel Macron's. They provide the individual, whatever their status, with choice in and scheduling of training, thanks to the innovation of the "personal activity account" which grants rights to the individual and supports them throughout their life. It is a path towards lifelong learning. These support structures protect individuals with an active security of mobility by supporting them in their trajectory. During a speech about vocational training given in 2017, President Macron declared: "One must not say that we have to preserve yesterday's jobs, one must say that we are going to provide you with new tools to go through these changes".

Yet, understanding and perception of these policies of social investment by public opinion and in public debates on work and social protection remain marginal and confused. Flexi-security models occupy a subordinate position in French social ideals. Consequently, the perception of social protection has not been modified. Representations of the stakes of these changes in political and social contexts remain confused, notably because they seem "neoliberal", favoring individualism in the negative sense of atomization and privatization, reducing collective solidarity.

A policy of social investment is a policy of capabilities which could reduce the splitting of society between those, on the one hand, who are favored, and able to profit from the society of autonomy as a condition, the winners, open to globalization, and on the other hand, those who are excluded, the losers, closed to globalization. Such a policy could act on a central fracture of French society. The state should highlight the inclusive aspect of a capability-based policy. It does not aim to abandon individuals to their responsibilities in a neoliberal sense. On the contrary, it institutes a form of active protection, responding to responsibility-abandonment with responsibility-participation, a state which renders the individual capable of protecting him- or herself to the largest extent possible.

The concept of capability enables us to redefine the substance of social solidarity in the world of mobility and generalized competition which we live in today. In France, personal responsibility, a topic traditionally conceived of in relation to freedom, has shifted towards problems of inequality. The nature of new inequalities implies personal responsibility for a motive Gøsta Esping-Andersen summarizes as follows: "The irony is that social class may be less visible, but its importance is undoubtedly much more decisive. In economies of knowledge, equality of opportunity depends on

one's personal capabilities and one's accumulation of human capital. It is well established that the impact of social heritage is as strong today as it was yesterday—in particular, regarding cognitive development and education acquisitions" (Esping-Andersen 2001, p. 3). The capability approach renews practical and theoretical reflection on inequality and, perhaps more generally, on public good, thus, on our way of constituting society. Few topics are as decisive to clarifying the quest for common public good, in a global context in which concepts used for industrial society no longer apply to social and political dilemmas engendered by the trajectory of the world today. This approach constitutes the language of political action we need. It is likely to be the basis of a new social contract in a mass individualistic society permeated by collective representations of autonomy.

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