

## **Alain Ehrenberg : Autonomy and Empowerment**

**Abstract:** This article considers Alain Ehrenberg's extensive analysis of individualism in contemporary France. It shows how he has traced the emergence of autonomy as a key social value, and it goes on to analyse the distinctive features of Ehrenberg's sociological approach. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Ehrenberg does not regard the growth of individualism in France as a tragic process of anomie and isolation. In fact, he is critical of what he sees as a pervasive French discourse of 'declinology', and he has expressed his growing frustration with this perspective more recently in explicitly political terms. Although he acknowledges that autonomy can be burdensome for individuals, he feels that the state should respond to the sociological fact of autonomy by supporting and empowering citizens as autonomous agents. The article concludes by drawing attention to the limitations of this political position.

**Keywords:** sociology, individualism, autonomy, performance, empowerment

## Introduction

This article examines Alain Ehrenberg's highly distinctive analysis of the development of autonomy as a key value and organising social principle in the context of the shift that gathers momentum in the post-war era from a rigidly rule-bound and hierarchical disciplinary regime to more fluid social norms in contemporary French society. It will be shown that, in contrast to French commentators who associate the growth of individualism with a decline of social solidarity and a retreat into the self, Ehrenberg argues that individualism is a form of sociality. He insists ultimately that his sociology of individualism differs radically from what he calls an 'individualist sociology', according to which the relationship between individual and society is a zero-sum game in which *more* individualism means *less* society.

In the course of developing this sociological method and perspective Ehrenberg has challenged what he sees as some of the fundamental assumptions of French intellectual life. He is highly critical of what he identifies as a distinctively French mode of 'declinology': a melancholy French republican nostalgia for the protection and sense of order provided by a 'real' society in which there were 'real' jobs, families, schools and politics (2010: 15). He is also suspicious of what he views as a tendency in French intellectual life towards abstraction and the construction of philosophical approaches associated with individual thinkers who act as the 'high priests' of particular discourses. In response to this, he seeks to focus on the way ideas and conceptions of the social pass through individuals and are woven into everyday activities of the social field. Accordingly, he describes his 'anthropologie de la démocratie' thus: '[E]lle regarde les choses d'en bas, par le bout de la lorgnette d'un

supporter de football, d'un couple qui raconte ses problèmes sexuels sur un plateau de télévision ou d'un fumeur de joints' (1995: 29). The aim of these analyses of everyday social activities is not to reveal their function as ideological distractions but rather to show how they constitute a sophisticated, popular form of social thinking that is often marginalised or simply ignored.

As well as looking in some detail at the development of Ehrenberg's sociology the article will also consider the explicitly political stance that he has expressed and promoted. As an alternative to an adversarial and conflictual model of politics he has formulated an a broadly centre-left political position on autonomy, elaborating a critique of what he considers to be a nostalgic attachment to an outdated Fordist model of welfare and labour in which the state plays a largely protective role. He has argued that the state should focus on empowering individuals by providing them with opportunities to acquire skills and capacities that are required to thrive in the contemporary economy. There can be no going back, he insists, to a society in which autonomy is less central: social progress in contemporary society can only be pursued within the frame of autonomy. It will be argued in conclusion that the resistance to models of social conflict and contention that informs Ehrenberg's sociological perspective is politically problematic.

### **Individualisation v. a sociology of individualism**

In a recent article Liza Cortois provides a useful overview of the position that Ehrenberg occupies in contemporary debates on individualism (Cortois 2017). As she emphasises, his approach should be distinguished from the focus on 'individualisation' that characterises the work of commentators such as Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens. Ehrenberg considers individualism as a coherent and eminently *social* value

system. He insists that the growth of individualism simply means that social relations are mediated through a new set of personalised rules (2010: 16). His conviction that the social is increasingly inflected through the personal situates him, Cortois suggests, in a broad sociological tradition which includes David Bell, Émile Durkheim, Louis Dumont and Marcel Mauss. Pierre-Henri Castel has argued along similar lines that Ehrenberg is highly influenced by Dumont (1983) in viewing 'individualist societies' simply as those in which the importance and value of the individual is, in some circumstances, placed above the collective (Castel 2012: 130). In his recent work on the neuroscience Ehrenberg has indicated that his sociohistorical approach draws directly on Durkheim's view that the reality of social life lies in a collective consciousness of shared ideals. He contrasts this to the Foucauldian view that focuses on dynamics of domination and resistance and locates the underlying reality of society in relations of power-knowledge (Ehrenberg 2020).

For Ehrenberg, the development of individualism entails neither a growing psychological interiority nor a decline of social relations. Instead, it implies a change in the rules and codes that govern social interaction. He scrupulously avoids what he sees as abstract, uncontextualised moral or psychological speculation, focusing instead on the social rules that govern how individualism can be expressed. This perspective has evolved into a concern with language in the dual sense of the sociological and philosophical content of 'ordinary' language, and also a focus of the grammar of moral sentiments. He argues that a society consists of individuals interacting within the social field, but that social reality is not *in* the individuals (2011: 59). The individual is always socially constructed, and contemporary individualism cannot be reduced to an egotistical withdrawal into the self and a consequent withering of social relations. In short, he insists that the fact that life is now increasingly personalised does not make it any less social: it is simply social in a different way (2010: 16).

Ehrenberg refers to Marcel Mauss' 1921 essay, 'L'expression obligatoire des sentiments' (Mauss, 1969) to explain key aspects of his sociology of individualism (Ehrenberg, 2010: 18-19). In this essay Mauss considers the public expressions of extreme emotion, often taking the form of demonstrative weeping and wailing that accompany mourning rituals in some cultures. As Ehrenberg emphasises, an 'individualist' sociological account of these actions might assume that they are purely conventional, meaning that individuals feel coerced to express themselves in this way in a particular social context: according to this account, public weeping is a social construction grafted on to a natural and universal grief response. However, he emphasises that Mauss' sociological analysis is subtly, but significantly, different. Rather than resulting from coercion, these expressions of emotion constitute a collective *language* of mourning: they have a grammar that makes them socially comprehensible. At the same time, their conventionality does not mean they are not sincere: they are simultaneously compulsory *and* voluntary, conventional *and* spontaneous. Thinking along these lines, Ehrenberg points to the contemporary importance accorded to 'empathy' as a key social value. Empathy is neither an essential human trait nor a scientific 'fact' (although neuroscientific claims are an important element of the ordinary language of empathy). Rather, empathy needs to be understood primarily as in social terms as a capacity that has high value in contemporary society, which places emphasis on equality and interpersonal relations. 'L'empathie comme concept naturel de la socialité est surtout une variante du mythe de l'intériorité, en d'autres termes, de la croyance que l'on va trouver dans un ressenti intérieur le secret de la socialité' (2008, 95).

### **A sociology of individualism**

One of Ehrenberg's main aims is to pursue a sociological method that, as he puts it, takes social concepts down from their 'metaphysical heights' and puts them back into 'ordinary life' (Ehrenberg & Marongiu, 2010: 37). Ideas do not exist in a separate realm, but rather pass through us and inhabit our ordinary language and everyday lives. These ideas are articulated within the frame of 'realist illusions' (1991: 42) and 'credible fictions' (1991: 19) that constitute ways of thinking through and explaining basic social tensions. For example, in *Le culte de la performance* (1991) he argues that sport as a spectacle is not a reflection of fundamental societal conflicts and dynamics; nor is it a form of ideological distraction, a contemporary 'opium' of the people. He also rejects the idea that the popularity of sport constitutes a volatile, regressive form of mob mentality. Sport offers instead an imaginary resolution of the otherwise irreconcilable conflict between the inequality that is necessarily generated by competition and a strong aspiration to equality. Sport in this sense is a credible and coherent representation of meritocracy and social mobility, bolstering the notion that any individual can succeed if they have talent and dedication. In short, sporting competitions represent an idealised space of absolutely fair competition (1991: 42-43).

Ehrenberg deals with the theme of mental health from a similar perspective. He sees the emergence of the concept of 'la souffrance' in the late 1990s as both a new psychic reality and a new social language: 'Elle est aussi une façon de définir des problèmes, autrement dit un langage. Or, le langage est normatif, il montre la manière dont nous donnons sens à nos vies' (2002: 1047). Whereas a realist interpretation would claim that individuals are experiencing higher levels of mental distress in contemporary society and would point to a series of causal factors, Ehrenberg suggests that the realms of the subjective and affective constitute a new idiom in which we talk about and diagnose

ourselves and our social lives. Our contemporary experience of individualism is structured around the threat of psychic distress and the drive to maintain mental health: 'La souffrance psychique et la santé mentale semblent l'horizon de l'individualisme contemporain, comme le paradis et l'enfer étaient celui du Moyen Âge' (2004a: 78). In this way, the discourse of mental health is a new language game, a kind of social grammar and rhetoric, which provides ways of talking about and acting upon problems associated with autonomy (2010: 19).

### **Marcel Gauchet**

Before looking in some detail at Ehrenberg's major publications it is useful to consider the analysis of individualism articulated by Marcel Gauchet, given that the sense of social and political malaise he outlines stands in contrast to Ehrenberg's perspective. Writing in the early 2000s, Gauchet identifies the development of a new kind of privatised individualism in France which threatens the principles of solidarity and civility upon which the French Republic is built. As this dynamic unfolds, he argues that the anti-authoritarian demeanours of the 1960s combine with narcissistic and hedonistic values to produce a kind of paradoxically pacified insurgency of egotism: 'Il promeut un individu tranquillement en rupture avec l'ordre établi dans la poursuite de son accomplissement singulier' (Gauchet, 2002: vi). The individual is now, as he puts it, the only structure left standing after a tidal wave of social change (2002: vii). In contemporary society the individual becomes the privileged source of social meaning and transformation. This new focus on the individual radically changes the nature of democratic politics: the 'Promethean' search for revolutionary and transformative solutions to conflicts relating to both the self and society has been abandoned in favour of a more individualistic model of human rights and



dissidence. As the sense of identification with collective projects becomes weaker so the public sphere is to a large extent limited to functioning as an arena for the articulation of private identities. The increased capacity for multiple and temporary connections facilitates a more fluid, networked mode of selfhood, and the ideal of an engaged, coherent, self-reflexive individual is replaced by a more functional, instrumental mode of individuality: behavioural efficacy is favoured over integrity. This context of mandatory self-reinvention provokes a range of new pathologies. As well as a rise in symptoms of inner emptiness there is both a widespread fear of the other and a sense of anguish around the perception of a loss of connection. In summary, Gauchet describes exactly the kind of withdrawal into the self that Ehrenberg rejects as an analysis of contemporary individualism.

Gauchet has gone on to argue consistently that the focus on individual rights means that crucial political dimensions of democracy have been neglected. In a more recent set of interviews published in 2016 he points to what he sees as a widespread sense of disempowerment and disconnection in France that is a direct consequence of the dominant model of society as market. For Gauchet, France is in this sense experiencing a version of the malaise that afflicts Western democracies in general: the rights of individuals are protected, but this does little to provide a genuine sense of political agency and participation (2016: 349). He is critical of what he regards as the reductive neoliberal framing of the individual exclusively in terms of narrowly defined rights and economic interests, arguing that it threatens to undermine the fundamental assumptions concerning the connection between citizenship and politics (2016: 330).

### **Autonomy and *malaise***

As indicated already, in contrast to this perspective of malaise, decline and social atomisation, Ehrenberg has traced the growth of individualism in contemporary France as something more akin to a genuinely popular shift in thinking about the self. Over the course of a series of five major book-length publications he has focused on the various ways in which the discourses of economic, social and institutional life in France have been increasingly couched in a new language of competition, performance, entrepreneurialism and self-help. In broad terms, he identifies two distinct phases in the emergence of autonomy as a significant social value in France (2010: 178). The first phase, between 1960 and 1980, is marked by the growth of a demand for autonomy as a strong collective *aspiration*. Autonomy in this context is articulated primarily as a new set of demands for independence, devolved power and increased democratic self-determination as a reaction to a conservative social order, a technocratic state and a rigidly hierarchical workplace. In everyday culture there is a significant shift towards a new valorisation of the private realm, and the drive for autonomy is bolstered by new opportunities for the expression of personal choice and self-determination (2010: 243). The second phase emerges in the 1980s when new norms of competition and entrepreneurial behaviour mean that autonomy becomes a generalised *condition*. Taken together, these two phases mark a shift away from a disciplinary society – in a broadly Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1975) – in which individuals are required to conform to relatively explicit norms and prescriptions. In everyday discourse terms such as ‘changement’, ‘concurrence’, ‘responsabilité’ and ‘décision’ become more common, indicating a significant shift away from the disciplinary lexicon of ‘interdit’, ‘obéissance’, ‘sens du devoir’ and ‘autorité’: ‘L’individu contemporain est un type d’être social dont il est attendu qu’il décide et agisse par lui-même comme s’il était l’entrepreneur

de sa propre vie' (Ehrenberg 2004b: 154). This shift from a disciplinary society to a contemporary post-disciplinary condition of autonomy is central to Ehrenberg's work.

*Le culte de la performance* (1991) explores significant developments focused on sport, consumption and entrepreneurialism, focusing in particular on the way in which the world of business acquires more importance and legitimacy in France in the 1980s, becoming increasingly conflated with discourses of sport and adventure (1991: 172). The figure of the entrepreneur emerges as a model to be emulated in French society, and a key personality in this respect is the prominent celebrity businessman Bernard Tapie: 'Dans un avenir lointain, on se souviendra sans doute de Bernard Tapie comme étant l'homme qui, en France, a symbolisé l'entrée des chefs d'entreprise dans le *star-system* et la popularisation de l'action d'entreprendre' (1991: 203). In this emerging entrepreneurial environment 'performance' takes on a central importance in two ways. First, individuals are increasingly required to engage in an ongoing project of self-development, and to cultivate networks of social connections. Second, individual competence is increasingly expressed as a form of performance: inner life must be made visible and readable to others (1995: 303).

These themes are developed further in *L'Individu incertain* (1995), where Ehrenberg considers some of the ways in which this culture of performance and entrepreneurialism is accompanied by a growing preoccupation with psychic distress. In particular, he examines the role of drugs and the media as resources that are available to individuals who are attempting to cope with new norms of autonomy. He identifies the 1980s as a significant moment when drugs begin to be seen as a tool to support individuals in adopting a proactive, entrepreneurial approach to their lives (1995: 125). He also looks at the role that television plays in providing a new kind of accessible, popular therapy, identifying as a pivotal moment the appearance on French TV in 1983 of *Psy-show*, in which an ordinary

couple talked about problems in their sex life. Rather than seeing this either as an exercise in cynically prurient distraction or even primarily as a more sincerely motivated attempt to provide therapeutic guidance in a moment of confusion, he identifies the programme as a symptom of a wider, ongoing set of social negotiations in which individuals participate. As disciplinary, hierarchical structures have weakened, so the act of establishing a position within the social field has become a question of careful social interpretation and negotiation with others rather than simply respecting authority and obeying orders (1995: 169-170).

*La fatigue d'être soi* (2000) focuses on the rise of depression as a central preoccupation from the 1970s onwards. In France in the first half of the twentieth century the individual was still constrained within a normative disciplinary structure that emphasised social conformity and propriety: 'Les corps doivent être dociles, les familles respectables et les ambitions modestes' (2000: 70). As autonomy replaces discipline as a core social value the distinction between what is forbidden and what is allowed is superseded by a new emphasis on the ability of the individual to adapt, to develop new skills and to manage their own life. In this context, the depressed individual is seen as suffering from a deficit of action or capacity: depression expresses itself as a weariness and inertia provoked as a reaction to the requirement to be oneself in a dynamic sense: 'Le déprimé n'est pas à la hauteur, il est fatigué d'avoir à devenir lui-même' (2000: 11).

*La société du malaise* (2010) is a pivotal work for Ehrenberg. As he indicates in an interview that coincided with the publication of this lengthy volume, he had come to the realisation that his work on individualism had been to a certain extent misunderstood. It had not been his intention in his previous books to anatomise a tragic decline of the public sphere and the emergence of a burdensome, isolated form of individualism (Ehrenberg & Marongiu, 2010: 32). In response to this misunderstanding, he addresses directly what he

sees as the pervasive, erroneous notion that individualism has resulted in a condition of social malaise. He emphasises that it is important to analyse this anxiety in France around individualism and 'la déliaison sociale' since it is a theme which has wide social currency that goes beyond intellectual circles (Ehrenberg & Marongiu 2010: 33).

Ehrenberg's analysis of these issues is framed by an extensive consideration of the contrast between French and American constructions of the individual as a social unit. The French individual depends on the protection afforded by an institutional framework, which is embodied in the state. The distinctive status of this citizen-individual has its origins in the French Revolution, when the principle is established that the private realm is subordinated to the public sphere. The relationship between the individual and the state is characterised by a mixture of egalitarian and hierarchical traits, in the sense that the value placed on the production of equality presupposes both an ascetic renunciation of individual interests and an acceptance of the principle of a general will (2010: 233). In short, the state guarantees a particular kind of individualism in France: 'L'individualisme français s'est développé grâce à la protection de l'État. Pendant près de deux siècles, plus d'État et plus d'individualisme allaient de pair' (2010: 250). In contrast, in America the idea of the *self* is a core value that functions as a collective representation of society: the self is, in this context, an institution. That is to say, the basic unit of government is the self-motivated, self-reliant individual. In contrast to the French tendency to privilege the public realm over the private, for American individualism it is the self that articulates and mediates the links between the public and the private, the personal and social spheres. Whereas the American individual has a direct, quasi-religious connection to the idea of America as a nation, for the French citizen this relationship is mediated through institutions. These different constructions of the individual mean that basic economic and social relations are seen in very different ways in the two

contexts. Put simply, the American emphasis on equality of opportunity contrasts with a dominant French conception of equality as synonymous with protection, overseen and organised by the state. Similarly, whereas the idea of economic competition tends to be equated with choice in the American political imaginary, for the French republican mindset it is associated with the deleterious effects of the free market. In the social realm, the French legitimisation and acceptance of authority contrasts with the value placed on qualities of trust, confidence and self-reliance in America.

Ehrenberg's most recent book-length publication, *La Mécanique des passions* (2018) traces the growing interest in popular discourse on the brain and the significant influence of neurosciences from the 1990s onwards. He analyses this area as a language game that reveals much about what he calls the 'script' of individualism. As the psychoanalytic model of the talking cure has declined, so the brain has emerged as a privileged site of autonomy, potential and individuality: 'Le cerveau s'est fait individu' (2018: 163). The scientific exploration of the brain as a self-organising system that has the potential to transform itself – the concept of so-called brain 'plasticity' – and the portrayal of the brain as a source of hidden potential ['le potentiel caché'] correspond to contemporary ideals of autonomy and the capacity for self-transformation. A cognitive or psychological disability is no longer viewed as a deviation from normality: whereas disability and capacity once stood in opposition, they are now linked in a new economy of autonomy (2018: 212). In this context, psychiatric practice, which is now predominantly cognitive and behavioural, moves away from the model of a pupil-teacher relationship between patient and therapist to an approach that empowers individuals to be the agents of their own transformation (2018: 222). Ehrenberg identifies the high-functioning autistic individual as an emblematic figure in the popular articulation of ideas from cognitive neuroscience in a social and moral context.

The capacity to transform disability into an advantage encapsulates both the acceptance of individual difference and the moral imperative to take responsibility for one's own life, both of which are key features of autonomy-as-condition (2018: 305).

### **Critique and conflict**

In a broad conceptual sense, Ehrenberg's unease with critical analyses of individualism is informed by his rejection of what he sees as the French republican emphasis on models of critique and of conflict as fundamental ways of understanding social and political phenomena. As far as critique is concerned, he has frequently expressed frustration with the rigidities and abstractions of much French intellectual activity. For example, he points to the importance of psychoanalysis in France in the 1960s and 1970s as a particularly revealing instance of this taste for elitist abstraction. The field had its high priest, Jacques Lacan, styling itself as a form of 'meta-knowledge' and, in contrast to the pragmatic orientation of American psychoanalysis, it assessed the business of the world from a lofty intellectual perspective (2010: 225). Ehrenberg rejects Lacan's structuralist psychoanalysis on the grounds that it ignores the issue practical usefulness of analysis for the individual and instead seeks to demonstrate in an abstract sense that autonomy is an illusion:

À la focalisation de la psychanalyse américaine sur l'ego capable de s'adapter en supportant les frustrations s'oppose l'assujettissement français du sujet à une loi qui est sa vérité. Ce sujet y parle moins qu'il n'est parlé par des chaînes signifiantes. Sa vérité reside dans ce sur quoi il n'a pas prise. (2010: 226)

Ehrenberg also points to the importance of the idea of conflict as a fundamental dynamic that structures the conception both of politics and of the individual in the French republican imagination. According to the French republican imaginary, class struggle is the

foundational conflict that defines the political sphere, and the political compromise of redistributing wealth seeks to attenuate inequalities between classes in order to avoid violent confrontation. (2000: 272). He refers approvingly in this respect to François Furet's critique of the basic grammar of political action that is inherited from the French Revolution. For Furet, the Revolution establishes a dominant model of radical rupture with the past driven by militant action. In the revolutionary consciousness, all individual, moral or intellectual questions are ultimately susceptible to political solutions drawing on a clear set of choices in a world that is transparent and open to transformation. Furet sees this revolutionary version of politics as a false portrayal of a world in which the path to social progress and the adversaries of that project can be easily identified (Furet 1978: 43). In line with this, Ehrenberg favours what he considers to be a more pragmatic approach to politics: 'Aux idées générales qui unissent le mal individuel et le mal commun en cherchant à mobiliser dans une résistance à l'adversaire, il faut opposer une science politique qui entre dans les détails des obstacles' (2010: 403).

He summarises his non-conflictual, broadly centre-left view of politics in a short article that was originally published in the German daily newspaper *Die Zeit* in June 2016 (Ehrenberg 2016). The German title of the article, 'Kult der Widerstands', encapsulates his frustration with what he sees as an outdated 'culture of resistance' that characterises a distinctively French conception of society and equality. He argues that the emphasis in the French political imaginary on class conflict, class solidarity and the individual as citizen institutionalises politics as a kind of national religion, fulfilling an analogous role to concepts of *Kultur* and *Bildung* in German society. He suggests that this reactionary cult of resistance helps to explain the polarisation of politics in France between a 'culture d'extrême gauche' and a 'culture d'extrême droite', in that these two perspectives share a preoccupation with



resistance: to elites, finance capitalism, and globalisation. In this context, liberal reforms and the liberalisation of autonomy are seen as inherently negative phenomena, in that they rob individuals of their collective capacity to resist and to defend their material interests.

Ehrenberg is convinced that this mentality of resistance is neither appropriate nor adequate in the light of the challenges of a post-Fordist economy in which the protected status of the worker has been replaced by the requirement to be flexible, both in the sense of not being able to rely on relative job security and also having the capacity and resources to develop a new range of soft skills. Inequality is no longer essentially a question of class conflict, but rather of individual competences and capacities. He acknowledges that terms such as 'competition', 'capacity' and 'opportunity' are in many ways alien to the French political imaginary, but he insists that they must be embraced as routes to addressing inequality, and ultimately as a way of renewing ideas of solidarity.

### **The world of work**

Ehrenberg devotes the final two chapters of *La société du malaise* to discourses on work, unemployment and mental health in France. As he emphasises, there have been significant shifts in the organisation and economy of work. Individuals are now required to be proactive within a rapidly changing and uncertain work environment. In this post-Fordist context, the capacity to respond to unpredictable circumstances is more highly valued than the execution of narrowly detailed prescriptions. In addition to this, work now places a new emphasis on the relational, affective dimensions of labour (2010: 320). Whereas work in the era of discipline sought, in a relatively impersonal manner, to make individuals useful and docile, it is now a question of developing more personal qualities such as empathy and self-confidence. One's identity as a worker is no longer entirely dependent on status and job

title ('métier'), but rather on a more general assessment of personality and competency (2010: 346-347).

As Ehrenberg indicates, the demands that this post-disciplinary configuration of work places on individuals have been widely seen as symptoms of atomising individualisation and a decline in social cohesion. However, he takes issue with this political framing of 'la souffrance au travail', and he identifies Christophe Dejours' *Souffrance en France* (1998) as a particularly influential articulation of this new critique of the psychological effects of work.<sup>1</sup> Although Dejours starts from the assumption that work offers the possibility of personal fulfilment and collective solidarity, he argues that the contemporary reality of work and the demands that it places on individuals are denied by contemporary managerial culture, and also that individuals are isolated in the work environment. In order to explain how a system that generates suffering and injustice functions he draws on Hannah Arendt's observations on the 'banality of evil', provoked by her observation of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1962 (Arendt, 1963). Although senior managers may in fact display pathological symptoms (sociopathy, psychosis, etc.), the system as a whole does not need to mobilise the malevolent intentions of inherently 'bad' people. Instead, it relies on the 'zeal' of 'good' people to collaborate with lies and injustice. Dejours also highlights the role played by the paradox of organised autonomy in generating stress and isolation: that is to say, individuals experience the requirement to act autonomously as a psychic burden rather than a route to empowerment.

Although he acknowledges the force and impact of Dejours' work, Ehrenberg argues that it is framed within an overly dramatic model of conflict (2010: 339-340). He suggests that Dejours' perspective is premised on a dramaturgy of abandonment and victimhood that refuses to acknowledge the practical constraints and limits of the workplace. Dejours' drive

to lay bare power relations and to reveal the hypocrisy and cynicism that underpins them is a discursive strategy that can be traced back directly to the political model of the French Revolution discussed above: 'Démasquer l'hypocrisie des dirigeants ou des puissants et mettre en lumière la souffrance des dominés, c'est là une pièce de rhétorique dont l'origine et le modèle se trouvent dans la Révolution française' (2010: 326). For Ehrenberg, Dejours proposes an abstract, utopian sociology of purely ethical relations between individuals, and in doing so he fails to recognise that in a social context these individuals must engage in a variety of complex interactions (2010: 337-338). Dejours portrays the workplace purely in terms of intentional power relations, and the critique that he proposes is one of radical denunciation, framed in terms of manipulation, lies, injustice, violence, suffering and collaboration. It is for these reasons that Ehrenberg is more positively disposed to Marie-France Hirigoyen's *Le Harcèlement moral* (1998) which was published at the same time as Dejours' *Souffrance en France*. He suggests that Hirigoyen provides a more practical guide that aims to empower and enable employees to challenge dysfunctional scenarios in the workplace (2010: 358-359).

### **The politics of autonomy**

As indicated already, rather than engaging in a comprehensive critique of globalised capitalism, Ehrenberg favours a focus on equality of opportunity and empowerment. Individuals in contemporary society are now faced with the task of navigating a social landscape that is more complex and differentiated than that of a disciplinary society, and these demands require the individual to draw on a range of personal qualities in order to act autonomously. Social inequality is now a question of the unequal distribution of the personal qualities that make it possible to develop autonomy, and he favours a politics that

empowers individuals to benefit from opportunities. Investment in childhood interventions is particularly important, as this is the most significant point at which inequality is reproduced (2010: 403). Along these lines, he refers approvingly to Jacques Donzelot's suggestions for a reconfiguration of the relationship between individual, society and state in order to replace the outdated concept of republican 'solidarity' (Donzelot, 2006). For Donzelot, the Fordist/Keynesian model that underpinned France's *trente glorieuses* is no longer functional. The virtuous circle of increased wealth, welfare protection, the reduction of inequality and growing individual freedom is untenable in a globalised economy of mobile shareholder capitalism that renders sections of the population economically marginal and creates more diverse national populations. The role of the state can no longer be to guarantee equality, but rather to stimulate new forms of social cohesion by facilitating the growth of a dynamic, genuinely competitive civil society. Donzelot proposes an enabling state – 'un État qui rend capable'- as a third way between the minimalist neoliberal state and the open-ended demands placed on the protective welfare state (2006: 23).

Along these lines, Ehrenberg has in recent times aligned himself with a politics of 'flexisecurity' (Ehrenberg 2021). The term, first coined by Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen in the 1990s, indicates a commitment to a flexible labour market, in which employees will have 'portmanteau' working lives. Ehrenberg also points to Gøsta Esping-Andersen's influential argument that, in knowledge-intensive economies, the welfare state should focus on enhancing the life chances by providing access to education and training that enhances the capacity of individuals to accumulate 'human capital' (Esping-Andersen 2001: 3). Ehrenberg views the controversial French loi El Khomri (introduced in 2017) as a positive step in this direction. The law made it easier for employers to lay off employees and reduced the level of redundancy payments. At the same time, it allowed employees to

transfer unused leave entitlement between employers and introduced new support measures (professional monitoring, training, internships and professional experience) for young people with minimal training or qualifications. Along this lines, Ehrenberg refers favourably to President Emmanuel Macron's assertion that it is necessary to equip citizens for change rather than protecting 'les emplois d'hier' (2021).

Beyond the sphere of policy, Ehrenberg's commitment to a new politics of autonomy also has ethical and cultural dimensions. This is nowhere better illustrated than in his preface to Nicolas Marquis' *Du bien-être au marché du malaise* (2014). Here, he indicates his strong approval for Marquis' sociological analysis of self-help literature ('le développement personnel'). Rather than viewing the self-help genre, as many critics have, as a vehicle for an ultimately disempowering ideological agenda, Marquis focuses on the way in which readers engage with it actively and creatively as a tool for self-examination and genuine personal development. Ehrenberg points in particular to Marquis' suggestion that the practice of self-help is a form of 'moral perfectionism' with a positive social dimension (Ehrenberg 2014b, xiii).

### **Counter arguments**

As discussed already, for Ehrenberg the narrative of malaise and decline that is so common in France is fundamentally flawed in both methodological and political terms. He considers that is based on a zero-sum relationship between individual and society, and that it indulges in the comforting revolutionary fantasy of a downtrodden 'people', unified in their resistance to both systemic exploitation by the forces of capitalism and an array of readily identifiable adversaries. He suggests that the discourse of psychic suffering that has emerged in France in recent years should not be treated as a realist description of

pathologies caused by neoliberal capitalism and the burdens of responsibility, but rather as a language game that expresses a particular set of tensions that pertain to democracy. However, as Pierre-Henri Castel has argued, Ehrenberg's insistence that depression and 'la souffrance psychosociale' are simply idioms for expressing structural anxieties is problematic. The very fact that this idiom has instigated a new set of norms has a real effect and, viewed from this perspective, there does seem to be a real rise in depressive pathologies: 'De l'idiome à sa réalisation vécue, le pas est vite franchi. Les gens ne parlent pas pour rien dire' (Castel, 2012: 134). As Castel suggests, Ehrenberg appears somewhat reluctant to acknowledge that societal change is by its nature a dynamic and destabilising process that creates profound anxiety.

Following the publication of *La société du malaise* Robert Castel published a review of the book in the online journal *La Vie des idées* in which he directly challenged what he sees as Ehrenberg's political stance on autonomy (Castel 2010). Castel focuses on Ehrenberg's comparative analysis of the American focus on the self as the fundamental component of autonomy and the French conception of state and its institutions as the key guarantors of autonomy. In a purely descriptive sense, he is in agreement in many ways with Ehrenberg's analysis. In France, autonomy is associated with aspiration and emancipation: the state liberates the individual from the social groups that threaten to constrain and limit the full potential of the citizen. However, Castel departs from Ehrenberg essentially over the current role state as a protector, particularly through institutions of education, labour and welfare. For Castel, it is the case that individuals have been thrown into a privatised and deregulated environment that no longer seeks to provide a baseline of protection and equality as a solid basis upon which to build autonomy. He disagrees with Ehrenberg's reading of 'la souffrance sociale' as an antiliberal discourse of victimhood: he is

convinced that this 'suffering' is real and that mental health professionals are confronted with individuals who are simply unable to take advantage of possibilities for developing their level of autonomy. For Castel, the 'liberal' assumption that all individuals must be the agents of their own change simply does not fit with practical experience and empirical, historical evidence. As he emphasises, autonomy-as-condition has not prevented tens of millions of American citizens being deprived of healthcare cover. There are, Castel insists, basic requirements such as work and a place to live that need to be offered as protection for autonomy-as-condition to function (Castel 2010).

Although Thibault Le Texier's critique of the ideology of self-help summarised in a 2015 article for *Le Débat* does not reference Ehrenberg directly it is useful to consider it here in some detail as a counter position to Ehrenberg's generally positive view of self-help as a tool of empowerment (Le Texier, 2015). Le Texier identifies a distinctive form of the self-help genre that emerges in America in the 1990s, promoting individual responsibility, introspection, and healthy lifestyle choices as the foundations for positive action and personal success. As Le Texier notes, in the world of work management gurus portray the ethos of self-management as an empowering, dynamic shift away from the stifling bureaucratic inefficiency of the Fordist *entreprise*. However, in practice this means that the functions of organisation, surveillance, evaluation, motivation and reward that were previously carried out by management, are now devolved to individuals (2015: 76). He also shows how the managerialised universe of the *entreprise* has been exported to society as a whole. For example, a key theme in contemporary self-help literature is the idea that every individual should think of themselves as a 'brand' or company and act accordingly as the 'CEO' of their own existence. It is not simply a question of marketing the self, but also of the application of the managerial of principles of rationality, organisation, control and efficiency

to one's own life. It is necessary to cultivate a 'rational' sense of self-knowledge by learning to see habitual ways of thinking, feeling and talking as obstacles to efficiency and success. In this way, the managerialised self is constructed without reference either to personal history and inheritance or to genuine self-knowledge of one's internal life. As Le Texier puts it: 'Déshéritez-vous. Le management de soi se construit sur des tables rases' (2015: 78).

By analysing in such careful detail the managerial ideology that informs self-help, Le Texier shows how the promotion of a highly instrumentalised approach to the self is ultimately disabling and disempowering. The self is configured as a collection of components to be managed, and interaction with the world is a matter of executing a series of programmed scripts. Self-management's relentless focus on control, performance and self-production allows little possibility for collective action. As far as Le Texier is concerned, the successfully managed contemporary self is a hollowed-out subject, inhabited by logics that it might once have resisted. He portrays the managerialised self as the existential equivalent of processed fast food: bland, controlled and one dimensional (2015: 86).

## **Conclusion**

Ehrenberg has consistently analysed contemporary individualism as a new mode of sociality. In doing so, he has undoubtedly identified a significant series of shifts in the ways that individuals relate to society. One of the key insights that emerges from his work is that our contemporary language of psychological 'interiority' – of mental health, wellbeing, hidden potential, self-care, etc. – is eminently social. However, it sometimes seems that, in insisting that individuals are not passive, psychologically damaged victims, he runs the risk of reducing them to the role of players reading and performing from a limited social script. The central problem is his suspicion, in psychological, sociological and political terms, of



models of conflict. This means that he does not acknowledge sufficiently either the internal psychological conflicts experienced by individuals or the fact that social values are always contested. In seeking to free himself from the heavy intellectual and ideological freight of French left-wing critique and psychoanalysis in order to clear the ground for what he sees as an urgent consideration of individual empowerment, he neglects the issue of power relations. For example, He does not acknowledge that the focus on subjectivity and affect is an aspect of a wider, therapeutic politics of wellbeing that is designed to control employees and divert attention from critique. Whilst accepting the importance of Ehrenberg's insistence that individualism is a social formation, his reluctance to view society as a network of power relations means that he portrays autonomy in somewhat reductively consensual terms. The social world is folded into the individual in a variety of complex ways, and the capacity to identify and critique power structures is a crucial capacity in the drive to connect genuinely empowered individuals with collective projects of transformation.

### **References:**

Arendt H (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: The Viking Press.

Castel P-H (2012) Lire Alain Ehrenberg: une tâche impossible?', *La Revue Lacanienne* 13: 129-134.

Castel R (2010) L'autonomie, aspiration ou condition ? *La Vie des Idées*, 26 mars: <https://laviedesidees.fr/L-autonomie-aspiration-ou.html>

Cortois L (2017) The myth of Individualism: from individualisation to a cultural sociology of individualism. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 4(4): 407-429

Dejours C (1998) *Souffrance en France: la banalisation de l'injustice sociale*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Donzelot J (2006) Refonder la cohésion sociale. *Esprit* 330, décembre: 5-23.

- Dumont (1983) *Essais sur l'individualisme: une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*. Paris: Seuil
- Ehrenberg A (1991) *Le culte de la performance*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Ehrenberg A (1995) *L'individu incertain*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Ehrenberg A (2000) *La Fatigue d'être soi*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Ehrenberg A (2002) Le mot du mois: souffrance. *Médecine/Sciences* 18 (11): 1047
- Ehrenberg A (2004a) Remarques pour éclaircir le concept de la santé mentale. *Revue Française des affaires sociales* 1: 77-88.
- Ehrenberg A (2004b) Les changements de la relation normal-pathologique: à propos de la souffrance psychique et de la santé mentale. *Esprit* 304: 133-156
- Ehrenberg A (2008) Le cerveau 'social': chimère épistémologique et vérité sociologique, *Esprit* 341: 79-103
- Ehrenberg A and Marongiu J-B (2010) Entretien: la personne face à l'individu. *Revue Des Deux Mondes*: 32–38.
- Ehrenberg A (2010) *La Société du malaise*. Paris : Odile Jacob.
- Ehrenberg A (2011) La crise du symbolique et le déclin de l'institution. *Cliniques Méditerranéennes* 83: 55-66.
- Ehrenberg A (2014b) 'Préface'. In: Marquis, N, *Du bien-être au marché du malaise: la société du développement personnel*. Paris: PUF, pp. xi-xiv.
- Ehrenberg A (2016) Le drame français des grands souvenirs : un culte réactionnaire du passé' *Telos*, June 17: <https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/societe/le-drame-francais-des-grands-souvenirs-un-culte-re.html>
- Ehrenberg A (2018) *La Mécanique des passions*. Paris: Odile Jacob
- Ehrenberg A (2020), L'idéal du potentiel caché. Le rétablissement, le rite et la socialisation du mal », *Anthropologie & Santé* 20: <http://journals.openedition.org/anthropologiesante/6059>
- Ehrenberg A (2021) Les tensions de l'autonomie : la société française dans la mondialisation. *Esprit* 471 : 159-172
- Esping-Andersen G (ed) (2001) *Why We Need a New Welfare State*. Oxford: OUP
- Foucault M (1975) *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard.

Furet F (1978) *Penser la révolution française*. Paris: Gallimard.

Gauchet M (2002) *La Démocratie contre elle-même*. Paris: Gallimard.

Hirigoyen M-F (1998) *Le Harcèlement moral: la violence perverse au quotidien*. Paris: La Découverte et Syros.

Le Texier T (2015) Le management de soi. *Le Débat* 183: 75-86.

Marquis N (2014) *Du bien-être au marché du malaise: la société du développement personnel*. Paris: PUF.

Mauss M (1969) L'expression obligatoire des sentiments. In: Mauss, M, *Œuvres*. 3. Cohésion sociale et division de la sociologie. Paris: Minuit: 269-278.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dejours is a psychoanalyst who holds a Chair in the Psychopathology of Work at CNAM, and who founded the 'Souffrance au travail' clinic in 1995.