The Psychodynamic Analysis of Work
Abstract:

This article provides an overview of the psychodynamic analysis of work associated primarily with Christophe Dejours. It explores briefly the roots of psychodynamics in the psychopathology of work that emerged as a field in France in the 1950s. It then goes on to look at the ways in which psychodynamics has proposed a critical framework for analysing the damaging consequences of isolation, atomisation and the erosion of collective solidarity in the neoliberal era. One of the central premises of psychodynamics is the idea that ‘real’ work often remains invisible. Work is, in this sense, enigmatic, since the investments made by individuals in their work may be expressed in drives and forms of sublimation of which they are not consciously aware. Psychodynamics has been criticised for being complicit with managerial agendas that seek to promote wellbeing with the ulterior motive of depoliticising the workplace. However, psychodynamics is not a ‘victimology’, and Dejours has raised important questions about work as both a subjective experience and as the main socialising force in contemporary society.

Cet article présente une vue d’ensemble de l’analyse psychodynamique du travail, qui est associée principalement à Christophe Dejours. On va évoquer brièvement les racines de l’approche psychodynamique dans la psychopathologie du travail dans les années 50. Puis, on va considérer la manière dont la psychodynamique a proposé un dispositif critique pour l’analyse des conséquences de l’isolement, l’atomisation et l’effritement de la solidarité collective à l’ère du néolibéralisme. L’un des axiomes de la psychodynamique est la conviction que le ‘vrai’ travail demeure souvent invisible. Le travail est ainsi énigmatique, puisque l’investissement personnel dans le travail peut s’exprimer par le biais de pulsions et de formes de sublimation dont l’individu n’a pas conscience. On reproche à la psychodynamique d’être complice de la promotion managériale du bien-être avec pour but inavoué la dépolitisation du lieu du travail. Pourtant, la psychodynamique n’est pas une ‘victimologie’, et Dejours a soulevé d’importantes questions sur le travail en tant qu’expérience subjective et sociale.
Introduction

There has been a good deal of research and writing about work and work-related issues in France in recent times. In a general sense, as Nicholas H. Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty have noted, an intense focus on work has arisen in the context of a renewed critique of capitalism and the perception that work in contemporary society acts ‘as a chief source of psychic and social pathology’ (Smith & Deranty 2012: 4). This article will consider the ways in which psychodynamics, mediated primarily through the work of Christophe Dejours and associated clinicians and researchers,¹ has had a considerable impact on thinking and public discourse on work in France in recent years, introducing a new vocabulary of ‘souffrance’, ‘plaisir’ and ‘reconnaissance’. Taking his cue from psychoanalysis, Dejours has sought to reveal and articulate what might be thought of as the unconscious of the contemporary workplace. This analysis has identified a new set of symptoms that comprise ‘la souffrance sociale’, which would have otherwise have been passed over in silence. In addition to this analysis of work, Dejours has developed a broader social theory of work in the context of contemporary capitalism, and his work is now beginning to have an influence in the English-speaking world (See Dashtipour & Vidaillet 2017).

In the course of its development, which has its roots in the psychopathology of work in the immediate post-war era, psychodynamics has explored issues that are now considered central to the understanding of work. It has, for example, provided new ways of analysing what is known as emotional labour, as well as a coherent conceptual framework to consider the hysterical, often self-destructive tendencies of contemporary organisations. Rather than adopting a straightforwardly cognitive and behavioural approach to work, the psychoanalytic focus of psychodynamics facilitates a nuanced analysis of the enigmas and perversities of the individual and collective experience of work. Psychodynamics starts from the premise that work is enigmatic: ‘real’ work often remains invisible, and the investments that individuals make in their work may take the form of drives and forms of sublimation of which they are not consciously aware. The idea of an ‘erotic’ body is central to this focus on the importance of work as libidinal investment (Dejours 2001). This concept is founded on the psychoanalytic assumption that engagement with the world, whether intellectual, sexual or social, is mediated through the phenomenological experience of the body and its libidinal drives that have been constructed since early childhood.
The grounding of psychodynamics in psychoanalysis means that it finds itself in constant dialogue, and sometimes tension, with broadly Marxist concepts such as alienation. For example, the assumption that there is an unconscious component in the subjective experience of work is central to the analysis that psychodynamics proposes of the ways in which workers often collude with dynamics that clearly hamper their capacity to work well and to maintain their mental health. In a more general sense, issues of exploitation and alienation are analysed in the context of silence and invisibility. A good deal of emphasis is placed on the problems associated with the inability of individuals and groups to find a language in which to talk about work in order to make some sort of sense of the complex investments and miasmatic silences of the contemporary workplace.

For many commentators the psychoanalytic terminology of psychodynamics usefully supplements an older vocabulary of struggle and alienation, providing an analytical framework to deal with the affective and subjective dimensions of work that would otherwise remain unspoken and invisible. For others, this approach diverts attention away from the structural causes of isolation and exploitation in the workplace in favour of an overly-psychologised focus on individual suffering (See Piotet 2011). This article will attempt to show how psychodynamics has provided a critical framework for analysing the damaging consequences of isolation, atomisation and the erosion of collective solidarity in the neoliberal era.

The managerialist turn

In recent work Dejours has highlighted the significance of a ‘managerial turn’ [‘tournant gestionnaire’] that that he locates in the 1990s (Dejours & Duarte 2018: 237). He shares this analysis with a number of French commentators who have focused on the colonisation and instrumentalisation of subjectivity by a managerialist approach that refuses to acknowledge the complex lived experience of work (See De Gaulejac 2009 & 2011). Demands for improved performance, the disorientating effects of constant organisational change and restructuring, and the general sense that management is remote and disconnected have left many employees in France feeling that their work lacks meaning and that their efforts are not recognised by employers. This difficulty in experiencing work as meaningful is compounded by an increasingly individualised experience of labour. The promotion of an atmosphere of uncertainty, reinforced by regular changes of management structure and the geographical relocation of personnel, has emerged as a deliberate management strategy deployed to control individuals and to break down the protection afforded by collective networks (Linhart 2011: 12-14). In addition to this
generalised state of insecurity, it is clear that work in the context of neoliberal managerialism elicits a high degree of subjective investment and identification, and employees are often required to ‘manage’ the complex and sometimes contradictory demands of customers. For example, as organisations such as La Poste have adopted a hybrid rationale combining public service and commercial aims, so employees have had to negotiate the tensions arising from interactions with service users who are also viewed as commercial clients (Clot 2013: 41-45). Although this individualised organisation of work is presented as a route to empowerment, self-determination and autonomy, in practice the performance of these qualities simply becomes yet another burden on the individual employee as Dardot and Laval pithily observe: ‘Le management est un discours de fer dans des mots de velours’ (Dardot & Laval 2010: 426). The overall effect of this transformation of the workplace is a sense on the part of the employees that the significant subjective investment that is required of them is not recognised or reciprocated by management.

Somewhat paradoxically, given this pervasive discourse of autonomy, a key aspect of the managerialist framing of work is the intensification of an ongoing process of bureaucratic rationalisation. In particular, individualised evaluation has been widely adopted as a way of managing performance and constructing an ‘accountable’ working subject (Dardot & Laval 2010: 431-2). The supposed efficacy of individual evaluation is premised on the managerialist assumption that work can be quantified and measured objectively, and the rapid growth of information technologies greatly expands the possibilities for gathering data on employees. Clearly, data-driven performance criteria of this kind define work in narrow, one-dimensional terms, and the capacity of workers to negotiate and construct the meaning of their work is greatly reduced. Dejours has consistently pointed to the ways in which individualised evaluation undermines the spontaneous construction of ways of working that emerge from the collective experience of bridging the gap between the official prescriptions of work and its lived reality (Gernet & Dejours 2009). As Vincent de Gaulejac and Fabienne Hanique argue, in the contemporary era of neoliberal finance capitalism the employee is subject to the ‘paradoxical injunction’ to act autonomously whilst obeying bureaucratic rules and norms: ‘Apparemment encouragés à se projeter dans des activités nouvelles et innovantes, ceux qui s’y engagent sont en fait soumis à des objectifs, des normes, des délais et des prescriptions qui forment leurs projets’ (De Gaulejac & Hanique 2015: 103).

Much of the critical work on managerialism has focused on the perverse ways in which the managerialist entreprise requires and solicits identification from employees. The entreprise is seen as a new economy of desire, in which the employee is both the focus of power and, crucially, an active participant in the maintenance and diffusion of this power. As Dardot and Laval
suggest, the employee is inhabited by the desire of the *entreprise*: they are expected to work for the company as if they were working for themselves (Dardot & Laval 2010: 408-409). Nicole Aubert identifies this new model of managing the psyche as an emergent form of governance in the early 1990s, framing it in broadly Lacanian terms as a ‘système managinaire’ (Aubert 1992). In the context of the decline of traditional institutions (church, family, political parties), the pursuit of personal performance is established as a narcissistic social norm, and the *entreprise* mediates these new desires. Whereas desire was carefully policed in the disciplinary context of Fordism, with the organisation functioning as a vigilant and repressive superego, it is now constantly elicited and work is constructed as a vehicle for self-realisation (De Gaulejac 2009: 114). The new managerial individual is polyvalent, multifunctional, mobile and flexible: ‘un sujet flottant’ (Dardot & Laval, 448). This management of desire represents, as Dardot and Laval point out, a particularly insidious form of alienation: ‘Les nouvelles techniques de “l’entreprise de soi” parviennent sans doute au comble de l’aliénation en prétendant supprimer tout sentiment d’aliénation: obéir à son désir et à l’Autre qui parle à voix basse en dedans de soi, c’est tout un’ (Dardot & Laval, 409).

Psychodynamics adopts a distinctive perspective on desire, conceptualising it primarily in terms of drives ['pulsions'] and the process of sublimation, whereby libidinal drives are channelled into socially recognised objectives. In this way, sublimation can provide recognition and pleasure, but it can also be diverted, disrupted or even negated in work. For psychodynamics, it is not so much the case that employees internalise the desires of the company, but rather that the effect of managerialism is frequently to channel the drives of the working subject in potentially harmful and self-destructive ways. The rest of the article will look at the development and general principles of psychodynamics, and the ways in which it has been deployed as a critique of neoliberal managerialism. It will also consider the contribution that psychodynamics has made to social theory.

**The roots of psychodynamics - psychopathology**

Psychodynamics develops out of the field of the psychopathology of work that emerged in France in the 1950s. Starting from the premise that mental illness has social as well as organic causes, psychopathology had a dual focus on the therapeutic role of work as rehabilitation, and also on the potentially pathogenic nature of work (Molinier & Flottes 2012: 52). A key figure in the field was the clinical psychiatrist Louis Le Guillant, whose pioneering research raised issues relating to the psychological effects of work that continue to resonate in psychodynamics. As well as emphasising the problems caused by the increased intensity of work in the context of technological change, he focused on the ways in which the consequences of stress in the
workplace have a profound effect on individuals’ lives outside of work. His research on telephonists in the 1950s, for example, revealed that these workers frequently experienced symptoms of nervous fatigue, such as problems with sleeping and various somatic ailments (migraines, palpitations, etc.), as well as anxiety and sudden outbursts of anger and aggression. In addition to these symptoms he identified a set of Pavlovian responses, whereby environmental stimuli outside of the work sphere – such as a bell sounding in the métro – would lead to automatic, work-related responses in certain individuals (Le Guillant 2010).

Subsequently, Le Guillant expanded his research into the wider social and psychological context within which work takes place. He was particularly interested in the notorious episode of the Papin sisters (Le Guillant 1963), and his analysis of this case represents a significant moment in the development of thinking on the pathologies associated with work (Molinier 2005). The sisters were domestic servants who, in 1933, had murdered the mother and daughter of the family for whom they worked in Le Mans. Le Guillant saw the murders as a particularly extreme expression of the inherently pathogenic potential of their work, arguing that the position of the domestic servant was analogous to that of the colonised individual. For one thing, the nature of the sisters’ work meant that they experienced high levels of depersonalisation and alienation. Their employers would, for example, frequently talk in their presence as if they were not there, provoking feelings of extreme isolation and intense resentment. Consequently, the sisters were deprived of a language in which to articulate and make sense of their experiences. Viewed from this perspective, Le Guillant suggested that the murders committed by the sisters were a pathological expression of class revenge and self-assertion by individuals whose existence was denied by their employers. Crucially, his analysis also explored the issue of emotional and erotic investment in work. As Pascale Molinier suggests, care work cannot be reduced to a set of prescribed physical operations, since it involves an intimate interaction with the individual receiving care. The experience of close physical and emotional proximity with another individual inevitably provokes a complex blend of sympathy, disgust and desire, and it is extremely difficult to manage these demands whilst maintaining an autonomous psychic space (Molinier 2005: 25-6).

Jean-Jacques Moscovitz’s 1971 article (republished in the journal Travailler in 2007) summarising research carried out on SNCF train drivers marks a significant point in the psychopathology of work (Moscovitz 2007). Most notably, Moscovitz introduces a new psychoanalytic frame of reference in order to analyse symptoms that had up to that point been understood in terms of nervous exhaustion. The research was carried out at the request of unions in response to widespread malaise amongst train drivers who were forced to work with a
security system called known as VACMA. This new technology required drivers to respond every 55 seconds to a command to release the driving mechanism, removing the necessity for an assistant driver. Many drivers felt that the VACMA was the final straw that made an already stressful job intolerable, and they reported symptoms of nervous fatigue. Moscovitz analysed this reaction to the VACMA system in the broader context of the lived experience of the train drivers’ work as a set of libidinal investments located in unconscious drives. For example, he suggested that the choice of train driving as a job was motivated both by the dual myths of enclosure and appropriation, as well as an investment in the sexual symbolism of the train, and that the VACMA system engendered a fear of castration (Moscovitz 2007: 28). Part of the research was carried out through group meetings that were arranged between the clinical team and train drivers, and Moscovitz suggested that a psychoanalytic interpretation of these interactions helped the drivers to identify and articulate a profound existential and psychic malaise that lay behind the language of union militancy. In short, a key role for the psychiatrist in this context was to listen to the train drivers and recognise their distress. For Moscovitz, it was crucial that this developing field of psychopathology maintained a radical political approach by promoting the health of workers as an end in itself, rather than a means of achieving ever-greater technical efficiency (Moscovitz 2007: 38).

The issues raised by this early research into work have continued to resonate in the fields of psychopathology and psychodynamics. Psychopathology established the important principle that psychological and psychosomatic symptoms caused by work do not only affect those individuals with a predisposition to mental illness. It also showed that work entails complex affective relationships that bring together a range of social and subjective factors. The impact of work on health is not straightforwardly mechanical and, in order to understand the effect of work on an individual, it is necessary to place work within the overall gestalt of their affective life.

Psychodynamics: the social and psychic centrality of work

Dejours’ Souffrance en France : la banalisation de l’injustice sociale (1998) marks the point at which the psychodynamic approach achieved a significant influence on both the academic and public discussion of work and subjectivity in France. Psychodynamics takes psychopathology’s focus on the psychic effects of the organisation of work on individuals a stage further by exploring the intra- and intersubjective psychoanalytic dimensions of the psychic and libidinal investments that individuals make in work as a lived experience. In a general sense, psychodynamics moves away from psychopathology’s focus on illness and concentrates instead on the issue of normality in the context of work. As Pascal Molinier notes, a key reference in this
respect is Georges Canguilhem (1966), for whom normality is not a fixed, ideal state of perfect health that stands in opposition to the pathological, but rather a dynamic process in which illness is provisionally avoided, or attenuated, by a variety of strategies (Molinier 2006: 50-65). This attention to the fragile dynamics of normality – the enigmatic ‘normalité souffrante’ experienced by the majority of workers – is central to Dejours’ challenge to the neoliberal, managerial assumption that work is entirely transparent, ‘reproductible et formalisable’ (Dejours 1998: 52).

Psychodynamics focuses on the conflicts and tensions that result from the encounter between the working subject and the prescriptions of labour: work cannot be understood in isolation from the subject that undertakes it and the dynamics – both positive and negative – that emerge from this process (Gernet & Dejours 2009: 28). Work can provide a sense of empowered, enhanced subjectivity, and a positive experience of collective, cooperative activity (Dejours & Deranty 2010: 171; 175). It is, in this sense, fundamentally ambivalent: ‘Il peut générer le malheur, l’aliénation et la maladie mentale, mais il peut aussi être médiateur de l’accomplissement de soi, de la sublimation et de la santé’ (Dejours 1998: 140). Dejours’ focus on the subjective experience of work has its roots in his experience of 1968, and the failure of the established institutional left to understand and engage with these affective components of labour. He feels that the PCF and French labour unions were unreceptive to the issues of alienation and the qualitative experience of work that were widely expressed at the time. Concerns of this kind were dismissed as being overly psychologised and insufficiently materialist: psychoanalysis in particular was seen as reactionary and was associated with petit-bourgeois ‘navel-gazing’ (Dejours 1998: 47-8). This reluctance to engage with the subjective dimensions of labour left the ground open to management to define them in terms of ‘human resources’: perversely, unions effectively participated in the silencing of talk about ‘suffering’ (Dejours 1998: 49). Dejours points to the fact that it is now, somewhat paradoxically, the entreprise that has colonised the subjective sphere, offering promises of self-realisation and inviting identification from employees (Dejours 1998: 51).

‘Real’ work

For psychodynamics, work is fundamentally enigmatic in that there is always a gap between ‘travail prescrit’ and ‘travail réel’ (Molinier 2006: 66-78). The fact that workers do not follow prescriptions precisely is not the result of indiscipline or irresponsibility, but rather evidence that they are drawing on their expertise and intelligence in order to engage in ‘real’ work whilst balancing often contradictory demands and interests. Undertaking real work means grappling with the risks, unpredictability and intractability of the real in ingenious ways. If
workers were to carry out tasks by following prescriptions to the letter, their work would rapidly cease to be effective. This is, of course, the principle that informs the tactic of ‘work to rule’ [‘grève du zèle’], whereby workers seek to confront management with the unrealistic and often perverse nature of work prescriptions.

Since it is precisely the element of labour that cannot easily be prescribed and quantified, the ‘real’ components of work tend to be intangible and often highly nuanced, and so remain invisible or unacknowledged. Care workers, for example, often seek to protect the dignity and humanity of their patients, and they may do this by engaging in forms of emotional labour that are designed precisely to hide the fact of labour from the patient. This kind of ingenuity is illustrated by Pascale Molinier’s account of the practices adopted by nurses on a hospital ward who do not, as part of their prescribed duties, have the authority to convey details of a diagnosis to patients. However, when doctors are not available on the ward, patients will tend to call nurses and will attempt to draw information out of them. In short, the situation is potentially stressful both for the nurses and the patients. The nurses deal with this anxiety by systematically replacing each other and saying that the patient’s assigned nurse is temporarily unavailable so that they can legitimately say to the patient that they have no knowledge of their diagnosis. Although the nurses contravene the official prescriptions of their work by acting in this way, they manage to achieve some sort of workable compromise in order to address the contradictory demands that their work places on them (Molinier 2006: 72-73). This engagement with the frustrations and contradictions of the real means that the subjective experience of work is often fraught, but that it also offers the potential for a sense of meaning and satisfaction. The maintenance of health in the workplace depends upon the capacity of the individuals to make connections and develop a language in which to articulate the demands of real work in order to construct a form of ‘normality’ that enables them to continue working.

**Recognition**

Psychodynamics views work in the context of a fundamental dynamics of identity. In broadly psychoanalytic terms, the subject can successfully construct and maintain an identity if the Real, the Ego and the Other are linked together in a healthy, reciprocal dynamic. This triangulation between ‘l’ego’, ‘le réel’ and ‘autrui’ takes the form of reciprocal relations between ‘souffrance’, ‘travail’, and ‘reconnaissance’, and the recognition provided by the Other is a crucial factor in the smooth functioning of a dynamic that gives meaning to the ‘suffering’ that investment in work entails. For psychodynamics, recognition is provided by two different types of judgement: first, an evaluation of the technical, social or economic utility of work articulated
within the context of the formal hierarchy or through the interaction with a client group: second, the judgement of the ‘beauty’ of work carried out by one’s peers (Gernet & Dejours 2009: 30-31). The twin issues of silence and invisibility are crucial in this respect. Clearly, although the judgement of utility can be a valid source of recognition, it is the acknowledgement of work by peers that is crucial for the construction of a healthy and sustaining working environment. Significant problems occur if genuine recognition is replaced either by ephemeral expressions of gratitude and encouragement or, as is frequently the case, by formal procedures of evaluation. These problems can become particularly acute when evaluation by clients is substituted for recognition by peers, as is increasingly the case in caring professions. The managerial drive to evaluate work according to quantifiable and individualised criteria undermines the consensual, collective aspects of recognition, and it can lead to the silencing of informal discussion between employees (Gernet & Dejours 2009: 34). As Pascale Molinier and Anne Flottes emphasise, evaluation in the contemporary workplace imposes criteria that are frequently in conflict with employees’ intimate understanding of the value and utility of their work:

Nous cherchons plutôt à être reconnus pour travailler, c’est-à-dire pour pouvoir le faire selon nos critères et nos valeurs. La valeur du travail – au sens éthique du terme autrement dit, non utilitariste – n’est pas principalement conférée de l’extérieur par les autres. (Molinier & Flottes, 2012: 54)

This issue of recognition in the context of individualised evaluation is central to Duarte Rolo’s recent Mentir au travail (2015), in which he applies ideas from psychodynamics to a study of call centre work. The workers’ drive for recognition is directed by the management of the call centre towards narrowly defined performance targets:

Désireux de reconnaissance et prêts à tout pour l’obtenir, certains sujets risquent de tomber dans le piège qui leur est tendu : s’aliéner dans la volonté de l’autre. Leur quête risque même, dans des cas extrêmes, de conduire à la trahison de soi, engendrant de la sorte de véritables pathologies de la reconnaissance. (Rolo 2015: 91)

By exploiting the workers’ drive for recognition the call centre is able to exercise power on its employees through persuasion and participation rather than more direct threats and intimidation (although these may lurk in the background). Recognition lures the call centre workers into actively participating in the construction of a stressful, potentially pathological workplace
dynamic. It is not surprising that the call centre in question is not an ostensibly panoptical, Big Brother-type institution. Rather, Rolo suggests, the social and management structure of the workplace resembles the infantilising, soft totalitarianism of Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932).

*La stratégie virile*

Psychodynamics identifies a series of defensive reactions that enable workers to protect themselves and to continue working. Although these defensive strategies are often strikingly inventive and subtle, they can work as a trap, since they enable workers to endure potentially pathogenic conditions rather than challenging them. A key set of defensive strategies are articulated through the demeanour of ‘virilité’, by means of which workers manage their fears. Psychodynamics first identified virility as a collective defence strategy in the traditionally male domain of construction work. In order to protect themselves against the anxiety provoked by the unavoidable possibility of physical harm that construction work entails, individuals act as if they are not exposed to risk, showing no outward signs of fear. Virility as a defence mechanism is, in short, essentially a collective strategy of denial (Dejours 1998: 149-150).

These defensive strategies become even more problematic when they are deployed as a way of denying and compartmentalising what is known as ‘dirty work’. Unpleasant and morally compromising tasks are disavowed by the claim that ‘it’s just a job’ and that somebody must carry out these tasks. Even more perversely, a workplace culture may evolve in which individuals begin to compete in order to show that they have a particularly high tolerance for such distasteful work. For example, Dejours reports that, in his clinical work, he has attended meetings during which managers display, in a consciously ‘virile’ way, their lack of shame at imposing redundancies, and even boast of going further than they were required to do. These meetings are frequently followed up by raucous meals in conspicuously expensive restaurants. Clearly, as Dejours suggests, this behaviour has a ritual, quasi-anthropological function, serving to insulate the group against the potentially damaging psychological effects of carrying out this troubling kind of work. Along similar lines, the ritualised flouting of conventions and taboos around the body by trainee doctors serve to protect against fears evoked by their inevitable engagement with blood, suffering, illness and death (1998: 127). Perversely, virility has the effect of transforming denial and self-justification into a quality that the group recognises as a virtue:

La virilité, c’est le mal rattaché à une vertu – le courage – au nom des nécessités inhérentes à l’activité de travail. La virilité, c’est la forme banalisée par laquelle on
Two case studies

Dejours has alluded to real case histories in his published work and two of these in particular are worth examining in some detail as they illuminate the insights of the psychodynamic approach. The first is the case of Monsieur A, an Algerian aged around forty, who had worked in the construction industry for fifteen years when he consulted Dejours concerning his health issues (nocturnal dyspnoea and severe asthma) that accompanied a serious loss of confidence in his ability to work (Dejours 2010a). Dejours emphasises that these psychosomatic symptoms must be understood in the wider context of dynamics in the workplace and in Monsieur A's family life. This crisis is caused by the arrival of his family and children in France after years of being separated from them and living in a community of men. Reuniting the family has been a long-desired aim, and Dejours is struck by the fact that Monsieur A clearly has a good relationship his wife and is focused on the wellbeing of his children. The presence of his family makes his life much more enjoyable and rounded, and he is reassured by the fact that he can take an active part in their welfare. However, this new situation also precipitates a crisis precisely because it undermines his adherence to the distinctive, ‘virile’ collective defence strategy of construction workers outlined above. In order to devote attention to the health of his children he must in some way identify with them and the possibility that they might fall ill, and their presence forces him to acknowledge the possibility of fragility. A conflict is set up between his acknowledgment of vulnerability in the domestic sphere and the virile defensive strategies that operate in the workplace. Monsieur A is attached to his family, so it is at work that he becomes destabilised, and he apparently loses his nerve. This case shows how Monsieur A's psyche is structured in a fundamental way by work, and since his domestic life is resistant to this ethos, there will inevitably be effects of ‘decompensation’ in his work life.

The second case study concerns the suicide of Madame VB, a forty-three-year-old executive in a high-tech company (Dejours 2005: 53-73). She was highly valued and successful within her company until she asked to move to working part-time when she and her husband decided to adopt a child. This request was badly viewed, and from this point onwards she was gradually isolated: it seems that she was no longer considered to be a ‘team-player’. She was relieved of responsibilities, demoted twice, and numerous attempts were made to undermine her psychologically. Her mental health deteriorated and she ultimately committed suicide, leaving a note that directly accused the company of making her life intolerable. Dejours notes that
Madame VB’s case is just one example of the relatively new phenomenon of workplace suicides, which began to emerge in France in the mid-1990s. He is struck by two related features of this new experience of ‘souffrance’: silence and isolation. Both within the workplace where suicides take place and in wider society, the response – certainly at the point at which Dejours was writing in 2005 – is one of silence. Madame VB was widely acknowledged to be a gifted and highly competent employee, and on the surface there did not appear to be a high degree of alienation and dissatisfaction within the company. However, is striking that, of the six hundred people who attended her funeral, there was almost nobody from her company. A workplace suicide in these circumstances is clearly a tragic symptom of a general decline in solidarity and this profound affective solitude inevitably raises general questions about the quality of relationships within the company that Dejours attempts to tackle (Dejours 2005: 56).

Madame VB had worked for the company for ten years, and had participated in its development to the point where it employed round 1,200 people in 2003. At this point, 98% of the employees were ‘cadres’ who had graduated from prestigious business and engineering courses and the approach of management was relatively authoritarian, with very little solidarity between the staff. Although there was a certain degree of social interaction outside of work, Dejours describes this as merely a ‘strategic conviviality’: a way of jockeying for position within the company by building relationships with individuals who are identified as influential within the organisation. He goes so far as to say that this situation constitutes a new type of social configuration: a distinctive form of self-imposed conformity and ‘servitude’ that results in a conspiracy of silence. The expression of an alternative perspective would challenge unspoken, and perhaps even unconscious, rules of social behaviour within the company. It was precisely because Madame VB challenged this conformity that she was side-lined and scapegoated.

Dejours emphasises that the quality of Madame VB’s work played no role in her treatment by the company: rather, she was targeted because she insufficiently submissive (Dejours 2005: 72). Her ‘mistake’ was to assert her values of altruism and compassion against those of the company. Crucially, Dejours rejects any idea that Madame VB’s personality was the main reason for her suicide. She undoubtedly could have capitulated and left the company, but such a disinvestment on her part would have forced her to confront the fact that her subjective investment in the company was worthless: that she had been deceived by the company and that she had deceived herself.

**Psychodynamics as social theory**
Dejours’ analysis of the ways in which neoliberal managerialism elicits participation in dysfunctional and harmful workplace dynamics pushes psychodynamics in the direction of a more general contribution to social theory. In *Souffrance en France* (1998) he addresses directly the question of consent and ‘servitude volontaire’: how is it that so many individuals accept the suffering that they experience and, crucially, consent to inflicting this suffering on others? As discussed previously, the answer lies in large part in the way that employees have been robbed of their capacity to experience and define work in terms that are meaningful to them. This erosion of meaning leads to a ‘mutisme généralisé’, which not only silences talk, but also thinking about work. This stifling of thought may take the form of a kind of institutionalised cynicism on the part of employees, who respond to the reductive and contradictory managerialist prescription of work by rigidly and mechanically following protocols in order to protect themselves (Dejours 2015: 73-74). Employees may also engage in coping strategies of compartmentalisation [‘le clivage’] in order to avoid acknowledging contradictions between what individuals do at work and what they believe is to be morally justifiable. Dejours refers to such abnegation of thought in explicitly moral terms as an act of *acrasie*: a failure of will. This may be expressed as an unwillingness to focus on contradictions, or it may involve the wilful attribution of coherence to that which is contradictory. In both cases, active and reflective thought is replaced with ready-made banalities: ‘that’s just how it is’; ‘we don’t have any choice in the matter’; ‘we have to be realistic’ (Dejours 2015: 89-90).

It is also important to note that Dejours’ conceptualisation of ‘souffrance’ coincided with Marie-France Hirigoyen’s highly influential *Le harcèlement moral* (1998). In this book Hirigoyen provides a comprehensive account of various forms of emotional abuse in personal relations and in the workplace. In couples and families the emotional abuser [‘le pervers’] projects their own insecurities and vulnerabilities onto a victim in order to maintain a sense of control and distance. They do this by employing a range of manipulative strategies: remarks and behaviours designed to destabilise the victim; the denial of conflict; skilful concealment of the abuse to the outside world. Over a period of time the victim becomes increasingly disorientated, often blaming themselves and seeking ways to resolve a set of conflicts that are denied by the abuser. Since emotional abuse of this kind erodes healthy family bonds and a secure sense of identity for individuals, these patterns of abusive behaviour are frequently reproduced in future generations. Hirigoyen argues that elements of this model of emotional abuse in couples and families can be extended to an analysis of abuse and bullying in the workplace. For example, just as partners may be complicit with the emotional abuse of a child, so a manipulative, abusive individual in the workplace will seek to exert an influence over more docile individuals in order to create a power
base and exercise control. Any individual who refuses to be integrated into such a group will be
identified as a scapegoat who may be justifiably persecuted and marginalised. In this context,
Hirigoyen refers directly to Dejours’ discussion of ‘la banalisation sociale du mal’, according to
which ‘ordinary’, ostensibly decent individuals who are not inherently malevolent, are
nonetheless recruited into a pattern of abuse directed other, more manipulative individuals
(Hirigoyen 1998: 90).

The most provocative and controversial aspect of Dejours’ analysis of neoliberalism
draws on the Europe’s recent historical experience of totalitarian regimes, and in particular the
Nazi period in Germany. He suggests that the experience of totalitarianism raised questions
about participation, complicity and denial have been neglected in favour of an overly simplistic
distinction between oppressors and the oppressed. Totalitarian regimes offer a way of
understanding the dynamics of other forms of social organisation. He takes his cue in this
respect from Primo Levi’s attempt to analyse the ‘grey zone’, as he terms the space between
victims and persecutors:

Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is; it is studded with
obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously),
whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we only want
to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us,
or even if we want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory. (Levi 1998:
25-26)

The enigma of this intermediate zone in contemporary society raises the question of how and
why ordinary people [‘de braves gens’] come to ‘collaborate’ with misinformation, redundancies,
increasing intensity of work, and degraded work conditions (Dejours 1998: 108).

This collaboration is one component of a wider ‘banalisation du mal’ in the workplace:
suffering and injustice that might once have been considered exceptional have now become
routine and acceptable (Dejours 1998: 158). The idea of ‘banalisation’ is adapted from Hannah
Arendt’s analysis of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem in 1961, in which she coined the term
‘the banality of evil’ (Arendt 1963). What struck Arendt about Eichmann was the fact that he
lacked imagination and the capacity to think independently. These intellectual shortcomings,
together with his unreflexive identification with authority, meant that he showed little capacity
for critical thought, relying instead on set phrases and stereotyped utterances. The personality
traits that were expressed in Eichmann are, Dejours suggests, echoed at an intersubjective level
in the development of in a kind of collective ‘normopathy’ amongst employees that manifests itself in a suspension of critical thought and a relative indifference to wider questions (Dejours 1998: 168). Whereas Eichmann’s tendency to compartmentalise his capacity for empathy was a symptom of a pathologically limited and dangerously conformist personality, Dejours emphasises that for most people, the tendency to avoid empathy is a defensive strategy that is limited to the sphere of work.

It is not surprising that these references to Nazism are the most controversial and delicate point of contention for critics of Dejours’ work. At stake here is a wider debate on the legitimacy of drawing on the grim history of totalitarian regimes in recent European history as resources for contemporary social analysis. Any reference to the Holocaust as a source of reflection on contemporary organisations runs the risk of reducing and relativising the enormity of a phenomenon that in many ways resists analysis. Isabelle Baszanger, for example, argues that the parallels that Dejours identifies ignore the historic specificity of both Nazism and neoliberalism (Baszanger 2000: 328). However, in this respect it is important to note that Dejours does not suggest that the neoliberal workplace is a replica in miniature of totalitarian regimes. As he emphasises, there are clear differences: whereas totalitarian regimes routinely employ violence and terror, neoliberal systems function by means of collusion and consent (Dejours 1998: 183). This dynamic of collusion produces a general atmosphere of malaise, suspicion and isolation:

Tout cela aboutit à ce que la déloyauté s’insinue dans des milieux de travail qui fonctionnaient relativement bien jusque-là. Les coups bas, la rétention d’informations, les tuyaux pourris, les rumeurs, les gens qui se surveillent les uns les autres, la confiance qui disparaît, la méfiance qui s’installe, c’est un climat humain qui a complètement changé. (Dejours 2010b: 19).

It is precisely this atmosphere of collusion that evokes, and to a certain extent reproduces, the dynamics of totalitarian regimes. Dejours suggests that the neoliberal workplace can engender the kind of profound ‘loneliness’ – as opposed to ‘solitude’ – that Arendt identifies as a feature of totalitarian societies (Dejours 2010b: 19). Solitude for Arendt is the space in which thinking takes place in the form of a dialogue with the self. The solitary individual is not, in this sense, truly alone, because wider society and one’s fellow citizens are represented in this dialogue. If the solitary individual can make connections with others they can move beyond the equivocal ‘two-in-one’ condition of solitude to restore a sense of identity in society. Loneliness, in contrast,
occurs when there is a loss of self, a collapse of confidence in one’s own capacity for thought and the possibility of connecting thought to the world. In short, the individual no longer trusts their own thoughts and the world around them: the ground begins to shift beneath their feet (Arendt 2004: 612-614). In toxic workplaces, individuals who have witnessed injustice and bullying without intervening experience loneliness as a collapse of confidence and a sense of their own fragility: ‘Si, ensuite, vous êtes à votre tour attaqué, vous êtes beaucoup moins résistant parce que vous êtes déjà dans le doute sur votre propre valeur et votre solidité’ (Dejours 2010b: 14).

**The psychologisation of work**

The emphasis that psychodynamics places on the subjective experience of work and also the use of the term ‘souffrance’ have drawn a certain amount of criticism. Dejours is accused of psychologising the social and the political and, in general terms, as Marc Loriol notes, criticisms of ‘souffrance’ associate it with a certain miserabilism, evoking victimhood and marginality (Loriol 2015: 27) For Alain Ehrenberg, for example, the psychodynamic approach is problematic in that it reflects precisely the individualising tendencies that Dejours ostensibly criticises. The emphasis on suffering and recognition is based on an idealised social model of individual ethical consciences that ultimately fails to acknowledge challenging social and political tensions (Ehrenberg 2010: 337-8). Along similar lines, Jean-Pierre Durand suggests that Dejours’ approach is methodologically flawed in that it constructs a social theory from an aggregation of individual behaviours rather than engaging in a structural analysis of the conflict between capital and labour (Durand 2000: 316-18).

Michel Gollac points to what he sees as number of problems associated with an overly psychologised framing of ‘souffrance’ (Gollac 2011: 29). For one thing, it runs the risk of neglecting the physical burdens and strains of work, which have been exacerbated by precisely the same developments (intensity, isolation, etc.) that place a mental stress on employees. He also suggests that a preoccupation with the discursive expression of ‘souffrance’ means that attention is focused too much on middle class employees rather than ‘les classes populaires’, since the former have more resources at their disposal both to formulate their grievances and to voice them in the public sphere. As far as the treatment of individuals in the workplace is concerned, he is uncomfortable with the growing tendency of companies to buy in psychological services which aim to adapt employees to the demands of their work, rather than empowering employees with the means to construct their own ways of working: ‘Cet accroissement de la capacité d’agir
Yves Clot has expressed similar reservations regarding the phenomenon of psychologisation, pointing in particular to the phenomenon of ‘despotisme compassionnel’ in the workplace. Like Gollac, he considers that the idea of ‘souffrance’ has become a new doxa, and has been in many cases cynically integrated into the smooth functioning of the managerialist entreprise. A whole industry of consultants offering to promote wellbeing and ‘resilience’ has emerged, ‘listening’ to employees rather than directly addressing the sources of stress and alienation. Psychological support is provided with the sole aim of helping individuals to absorb stress and remain productive: ‘Le monde du travail qui vient est un hybride social : une sorte de néofordisme se met en place, monté sur coussin compassionnel. La pression productiviste se dote d’amortisseurs psychologiques’ (Clot 2010: 145). As Françoise Piotet notes rather drily, motivational bungy jumping and team-building wilderness survival weekends have been replaced with art classes and time spent in the natural environment: ‘pour évacuer le stress et devenir jardinier de votre vie’ (Piotet 2011: 28). The model that emerges is, as Clot put it, ‘toxological’: employees are monitored for signs of susceptibility to psychological fragility and are in this way discouraged from reflecting on the political dimension of their work (Clot 2010: 128-129).

However, Clot does not address his critique of this new ‘poussée hygiéniste’ directly at Dejours’ work, and he is wary of the claim that Dejours participates in the psychologisation of the social. It is more the case, he suggests, that Dejours seeks to politicise psychology, using his clinical insights as the basis for the development of a moral philosophy which is, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, preoccupied with the difficulty of sustaining critical thought in the context of social structures and power relations that stifle reflection (Clot 2010: 158). In this respect, Clot is uncomfortable with the fact that Dejours’ model of social analysis and clinical intervention positions the psychodynamic expert as the primary source of resistance to the abusive dynamics of the contemporary workplace: ‘Nous sommes surtout très près de la prophylaxie sociale. Car, finalement, l’anesthésie de la pensée d’autrui ne semble plus avoir d’antidote que dans le savoir des chercheurs’ (Clot 2010 : 161). He points in particular to Dejours’ conviction that a political philosophy must acknowledge that human beings are inherently fragile, and that ‘cowardice’ and ‘opportunism’ are central to the human experience (Lhuilier 2009: 231). Clot is undoubtedly right to highlight Dejours’ interest in moral philosophy: an analysis of the failure to think lies, as indicated already, at the core of Souffrance en France. However, despite Clot’s reservations about the need for scientific expertise, it should be understood that Dejours’ references to fragility emphasise the necessity of facilitating the
concentration of a shared language that would allow individuals to break out of the isolation engendered by cognitive dissonance:

Le problème, c’est de tenir compte de la fragilité des êtres humains et non d’y opposer un déni ou de la condamner. La constitution d’une identité solide peut permettre d’endurer le conflit qui va ébranler cette identité. La solitude est soutenable un certain temps seulement. Le problème alors est de trouver des égaux avec qui peut se constituer une action rationnelle de résistance. (Lhuilier 2009: 230)

Conclusion

In his recent book *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought* (2019) Alastair Hemmens emphasises what he sees as the importance of the distinction between two ways of approaching the critique of work. Whereas the first, ‘phenomenological’ approach assumes that work is not essentially problematic, but that it may be under certain historical conditions, the second approach challenges the category of labour itself (Hemmens 2019: 16). Clearly, psychodynamics is in many ways orientated primarily to the phenomenological approach, starting from the assumption that work is a central human activity. However, this article has aimed to show that there are radical aspects to psychodynamics as a mode of critique. The crucial shift that informs psychodynamics in this respect is the adoption a broadly psychoanalytic perspective, which opens the space for a complex and subtle reading of power relations and the affective landscape of the contemporary workplace. Further to this, although Dejours’ more recent elaboration of a form of moral philosophy may appear to be somewhat bleak, it raises important questions about the emergence of new techniques of control in the workplace. Frequently, psychodynamics confronts the uncomfortable fact that we are complicit in constructing the power relations that make work problematic and isolate us. In this way, Dejours addresses what appears increasingly to be a wider shift to an insidiously authoritarian phase of free-market capitalism. It is not just in the workplace that a new, ostensibly bland, but ultimately controlling language has emerged that denies conflict and stifles thought.

References


1 Dejours, who has a background in psychoanalysis in psychiatry, is a Professor at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM) in Paris, where he holds the Chair of Psychanalyse-Santé-Travail.