

Migration and Social Suffering

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The phenomenon of migration is discussed mostly from the point of view of its economic and political consequences, or, alternatively, from the point of view of the suffering the migrants go through both in their country and in the process of migration itself (the difficult trip, the arrival, the fight with bureaucracy etc.). Seldom one discusses the suffering provoked by the fact of being seen and of seeing oneself as a migrant, as an alien (to use the bureaucratic term). The paper aims at focusing on this aspect while, at the same time, establishing a parallel with those individuals who live in the economically developed countries (i.e. in the countries that migrants aim at reaching) and became useless for the economic system (the unemployed, the precariously employed, retired people etc.). Apparently these go through a different form of social suffering, but this form of suffering is close to that of migrants because in both cases their existence ceases to have any moral relevance. Public sphere and politics treat both exclusively from an economic point of view, discussing the costs of unemployment, of paying pensions, of receiving and maintaining a vast number of migrants etc. Both migrants and “useless” persons lose their humanity and become mere numbers, while their problems are described exclusively in terms of data, tables etc. Starting from the above, the paper will offer a general definition of social suffering as systemic suffering, and will discuss the way in which what I call pervasive doctrines constitute an essential moment of the very fabric of society in economically developed countries by formulating the main goals of both individual and social life. In other words, pervasive doctrines are part of the basic structure of society and, therefore, represent a major cause of social suffering as structural suffering. Their critique is a necessary step in order to better understand how this suffering is produced and can be avoided or at least reduced.

My argument shall not follow a strictly normative perspective;¹ rather it shall start with a brief social diagnosis based on the way migrants and welfare recipients are treated in Western societies (1 and 2). It will then move forward with an analysis of social suffering and its causes (3). It is indebted to the tradition of Critical Theory rather than to Rawls, say.

¹ For a normative argument see among others Angeli 2011, Ott 2016 and Velasco 2016.

1. “Deserving” and “undeserving” migrants.

In the last decades migration has played a major role in political debates all over Europe, becoming one of the most important issues along with unemployment and internal security (both with regard to terrorism and to cultural conflicts) and being often discussed along with both these topics. This might explain why the discourse on migration is usually developed either from an economic perspective or from the point of view of social stability, while at the same time both its moral dimension (the suffering of the migrants) and its causal explanations are left aside. Therefore, the solutions that are presented in most cases concern exclusively the best ways of closing the borders and stopping the stream of new arrivals. These however are solutions for the problems of the societies that are receiving migrants, not for the problems that provoke migration in the first place. There is something cynical in thinking that the real issue of migration consists in regulating effectively (or even in stopping) the migratory fluxes, while leaving untouched the causes that move people to face so many perils and so much pain in order to arrive to Europe. This cynicism plays actually a major role in intensifying the suffering faced by migrants in their journey towards what they consider to be a safe haven or a land of plenty.

There are however other forms of suffering that go often unnoticed in the discussion on migration. We all know the plights and risks migrants are submitted to during their trip through different countries and continents, during which they have constantly to face death by the fury of elements (while crossing the Sahara, the Mediterranean or some mountain range in winter with their summer cloths on), by the precariousness of their means of transport (not seaworthy dinghies, the hollow bottom of vehicles where they can hide, overheated trucks or containers etc.), or simply by human violence (exerted by the very smugglers they trust their life to, by bandits roaming border regions, particularly in Africa, not seldom by police or border patrols both in Africa and Europe).² Even when they manage finally to reach their goal or at least a safe country where they can apply for asylum, their suffering continues, since they have to endure for long months or even for years a juridical limbo, while living in overcrowded immigration centres, in which, beside suffering for the uncertainty of

² Among the many publications describing the odyssey of migrants Carr 2015 is particularly rich on details and data.

their fate and for the separation from family and friends, they may suffer violence by their very companions, by guards and even by the local population (as shown recently in Italy and Germany by far-right activists attacking and setting fire to immigration centres, or by people throwing stones to buses transporting refugee women and children). Beside all these forms of suffering there is another one connected precisely to the fact that the society they have reached after their ordeal not only labels them as migrants, but seems to consider them as *nothing but* migrants. Instead of simply referring to a temporary status they find themselves (they are migrating from place X to place Y), the word becomes a way of indicating their ontological status, to define what they are: they are just migrants. They cease to be persons who are escaping war, famine, poverty, and become plain migrants, as if the term would refer to a way of being, not to a specific action (that of migrating).

Of course, nobody would use the word (certainly not in this ontological meaning) to refer to an academic who accepts a position in some university abroad, to a football player moving from a league to another, or to a manager holding a position in an international corporation and working successively in different countries. Although technically speaking they are moving from a country to another for economic reason and doing so mostly in order to improve their life standard, they are normally referred to as expats, never as migrants, much less as *economic* migrants (which is actually what they are in a strict sense). Politicians and officials use the latter term to indicate those who come to Europe looking for better economic conditions, differently from refugees or asylum seekers, who try to escape war or persecution in their countries of origin. In doing so, they establish a distinction between “deserving” migrants, i.e. the refugees, who should be welcomed at least till the situation in their country gets better (although in the last months one could register a mounting unwillingness among governments, officials and national public opinions when it comes to really grant them asylum), on the one side, and “undeserving” migrants, i.e. those who are “just” looking for economic improvement, on the other.³ What strikes one here as an oddity is the fact that one of the main tenets of the ideology supporting capitalism, i.e. the positive

³ In introducing this distinction I am referring of course to the traditional distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, which dominated the discourse on poverty in the last centuries (see Geremek 1994, Himmelfarb 1984 and 1991, Somers and Block 2005). As remarked by Walker with regard to Tudor England, “the English word ‘deserving’ dates from this period (1576) and in 2013 was defined in the Oxford English Dictionary with reference to the ‘deserving poor’” (Walker 2014, 11).

character attributed to the incessant effort for improving one's own economic condition, becomes a reason for morally condemning people who strive for such an improvement to the point of risking their life in order to reach Europe. The same attitude deemed as laudable in skilled workers seeking economic improvement such as managers, football players or academics, is condemned as an expression of reckless egoism in people coming from poor countries, independently from their skills and independently from the fact that they reached Europe by legal or illegal ways.

As a matter of fact, most migrants are not even categorized according to their skills, particularly in the case of irregular ones. It does not matter if you are a doctor or a day labourer, all that counts is that you have arrived in Europe illegally in a dinghy or in a boat, hidden in a truck or a container, swimming through a river, or crossing by foot a green border. This simple fact makes of you a specific kind of person and defines your very identity, because from this moment on you are just an illegal migrant, living in a juridical limbo, almost without any real legal protection, certainly without the right to deploy your skills to make a living, for your status does not allow you to work *legally*. Therefore, you will at best carry out menial jobs, often at the mercy of your employers, who will profit from your lack of legal protection and exploit you pitilessly. A doctor shall be forced to work illegally as day labourer harvesting tomatoes in Southern Italy or oranges in Spain, if he wants to get some extra money, since the allowance he gets from the local government is just enough to survive, but not to live a minimally decent life, having a cell phone to communicate with family, friends and helpers, buying some clothing of your choice, allowing yourself some small luxuries like cigarettes, a beer, or a bus ride to town. Being an illegal migrant means ceasing to be the person you were used to be, leaving behind your specific personality, which is defined among other things also by your education, your professional skills, your life habits.

Also those migrants who receive the status of refugees, however, have to fight to gain back their personality. Not always they get the right to work, even less frequently do local governments recognize their formal qualifications (school and university degrees, professional training etc.), so that, even when they get job permission, they have to reinvent themselves by starting a new career in a new field or by working in the same field but on a lower level (e.g. a doctor working as a simple caregiver). While many people are willing to pay this price in order to stay in Europe or in a richer, safer country than their own, for others this represents a hard blow and a set back that affects them not only materially (in their country of origin they might have been used

to a certain affluence due to their qualifications), but also psychologically (they might see their new job as a humiliating retrogression). Once again, they cease to be the person they were used to be and become new ones. The respected doctor, whom everyone held high in esteem in his hometown, becomes a simple caregiver like any other and maybe gets scolded by the relatives of the caretaker because he is not willing to do certain menial jobs.

Being labelled as a migrant, in conclusion, is not just being given a legal status, rather it is tantamount to entering a new ontological and existential dimension, in which one's old personality changes and possibly dissolves, giving way to a new self defined primarily by the mere fact of having abandoned one's country in order to move to another and only secondarily by the qualities that made out one's old self.

2. The “deserving” and “undeserving” poor

The labelling suffered by migrants is not an exclusivity of this specific group. As indicated by my use of the terms “deserving” and “undeserving” migrants, which evidently echoes a traditional way of classifying the poor,⁴ there is a long tradition for labelling entire segments of the population of a country. In the case of the poor, the attribution of the label “deserving” or “undeserving” had an openly moral character. The poor were classified according to their willingness to help themselves by working: if they tried hard, but nevertheless were not able to make ends meet, they might deserve to be helped by the public hand or by private benefactors; but if they were out to explore parasitically the benefits of the social system, they did not deserve any help and should rather be punished – and punished they were, at least in Britain, where they might be condemned to prison, exile or forced labour, depending on the different Poor Law in force at a specific time.

While the very idea of punishing the “undeserving” poor might strike us as outrageous and unjust, a similar attitude has been assumed by many Western governments towards the so called “new poor”, i.e. the group including long term unemployed, people with precarious, temporary jobs, unskilled and unemployable workers, and retired people whose benefits are too low to afford them a decent life.⁵ Welfare reforms such as Clinton's PRWORA and Schröder's Harz Reform transformed social benefits into

⁴ For literature on this point see note ...

⁵ On the “new poor” and the so called “new social question” see the pioneer works by Robert Castel (1995 and 2003); see further Paugam 1991, Dejours 1998, Dubet 2006.

services for which individuals have to qualify (see Neubourg, Castonguay & Roelen 2007; Pinzani 2016). As soon as they apply for the benefits, these individuals stop being citizens asking for their rights and become at the same time “costumers” of state agencies.⁶ Their situation is paradoxical: on the one side, they are treated as passive recipients of public benefits; on the other, they have to be actively engaged in order to fulfil all the conditions under which they are granted those benefits. In the case of the unemployed, besides having to prove that they qualify for the benefits because they do not have a job or their earnings are inferior to a specified threshold, they have to prove that they are actively seeking for a job and, quite often, that they are not squandering the money they receive (in some countries state agencies are even allowed to inspect the recipient’s house in order to ascertain whether she is spending the allowance in luxury items or unnecessary goods). Instead of having a *right* to social benefits, now you have to prove that you *deserve* them, like the poor in 19th century Britain.

In the case of benefit recipients as well as in the case of migrants, individuals are reduced to a single aspect of their life: migrating in one case, receiving public help in the other. As in the case of migration, the causes that lead a specific person to apply for benefit are irrelevant: it does not matter, whether this happens due to being unemployed or to earning an insufficient income; what counts is that one is a recipient of public benefits. This condition is connected to four judgments of value that might or not be expressly stated in public discourse (sometimes even in official documents such as the very bills that reformed welfare, like the PRWORA).

(1) The first one concerns the inability of caring for one’s own life. In our performance oriented society, being unemployed or simply being poor is tied to a social stigma: one is not able to maintain oneself (and one’s family) and needs therefore public help. The irony (or the tragedy) is that this applies also to persons who *do* have a job, sometimes even more than one, but are nevertheless unable to attain a minimal level of decent life due to poor wages or to the absence of public assistance in fields such as health care or education. This is a well-known situation of many US Americans (Ehrenreich 2001; Tirado 2014), but is becoming increasingly common also in other Western societies and in developing countries like Brazil, due to the generalized loss of purchase power of wages, to the widespread precarization of work (part-time jobs, zero-hour contracts

⁶ The transformation from citizen to costumers within the welfare state has been described and deplored already by Habermas in the 1970s (Habermas 1975).

etc.) and to dramatic reductions in social spending (Peck and Theodore 2001). Even owning a job is no longer a sufficient condition for escaping poverty.

(2) The second judgment of value is connected to the first one and concerns the fact that benefit recipients are considered to be useless members of society, despite the fact that their dependency on welfare has different causes. They might be long-term unemployed, who have been active (“useful”) participants in the economic system; or they might be unskilled workers, whose lack of specific competence makes them less valuable for the labour market, so that they find only odd jobs, often irregular and informal, always badly paid; or they might be poor individuals born in poor families in depressed regions, with almost no school education and no professional training; or they might be retired persons who once participated actively to the economic life of society but now are falling down the social ladder because their pensions are too low. In all these cases, they are perceived as “useless” members of society, who get benefits from it without contributing anything on their side (although they might have contributed in the past).

(3) Also the third judgment of values is connected to the first one and concerns the alleged dependency from state benefits that recipients would develop. The idea seems to be that, once you receive public assistance, you lose your ability to earn a living out of your force and will be damned to live perpetually on state allowances, food stamps, housing benefits, child benefits etc. While data show that this is sometimes actually the case, the real question is why many people are not able to break the vicious circle of poverty and state benefits.⁷ The easy answer is to blame them for their situation: the anti-welfare rhetoric denounces the poor’s laziness and cunning exploitation of the social safety net and uses stereotypes like the so called “welfare queens”⁸ to discredit the whole system of public benefits (see Murray 1984). The moral tone of the second judgment of value is more evident than in the case of the first one we discussed above. While it is difficult to stigmatize hard working people who earn insufficient wages as “undeserving” or “lazy”, the same does not apply to individuals who live exclusively on social benefits for a long time. The very use of the term “dependency” implies firstly a lack or loss of personal autonomy (they become

⁷ For empirical data from the 1970s on see Pearce 1978, Ellwood and Summers 1986, Bagguley and Mann 1992, Chant 2006 and Prideaux 2010.

⁸ While there are doubtless people who abuse and exploit the system of public benefits, their number is nevertheless extremely low, as shown by empirical studies (...).

like minors, unable to decide over their life) and puts secondly these people near drug addicts (dependency on state welfare is compared to dependency on drugs). In both cases, people living on public benefits are deemed to be irresponsible or morally reprehensible. This leads sometime to the criminalization of the poor through laws that transforms into serious crimes petty forms of misdemeanour (e.g. free-riding on public transport, shoplifting in groceries in order to get some food, driving an old car that is not in compliance with technical requirements regarding emissions) to which poor people have to recur more often than “normal” people (Mitchell 2006, Wacquant 2009). It is therefore not by chance that in societies such as the US or Brazil one can ascertain a direct correlation between the high number of poor people on the one side and an extremely large prison population on the other.

(4) The fourth judgment of value concerns the legal status of the benefit recipients. Far from being seen as citizens claiming their *rights*, they have to apply for social *services* that the State grants only if one fulfils specific requirements. In order to qualify, one has firstly to prove to be really in need – which is quite humiliating: one has to declare oneself as poor and to admit that one is unable to guarantee one’s own survival or to attain a decent living standard. Secondly one has to prove one’s good will and look actively for a job that allows abandoning the social program and renouncing the benefits. In other words, one has to prove that one *deserves* the benefits – which is the opposite of claiming one’s rights. The state treats recipients not as citizens in the first place, but as potential cheaters who aim at living at the expense of the taxpayers (as if recipients were not taxpayers themselves, at least in the form of paying indirect taxes such as VAT). To the humiliation of having to declare oneself officially unable to provide for oneself and one’s family is added now the further humiliation of having to prove officially that one is not a crook.

There are similarities with the status of migrants. In both cases, they are seen in the first place not as individuals with a specific biography, who happen to find themselves in their situation because of peculiar causes; rather they are labelled according to their relation to the state apparatus and to governmental bureaucracy: respectively as migrants and as welfare recipients. Furthermore, they are implicitly or explicitly judged from a moral point of view with regard to their status. Are they migrating because they are escaping war or “just” because they want a better life and are pursuing economic success? Are they applying for benefit because their wage is not high enough or because they prefer to live at the state’s expense instead of finding a

job? In other words: are they “deserving” migrants viz. poor? Can they prove it? In both cases, they are expected to show that they are willing to abide to the conditions set for the “services” the state is granting to them, even when these conditions are humiliating or even self-defeating (like when you forbid migrants to get a regular job as long as their legal status is not completely cleared and, in doing so, you force them either into illegality or into a passive state of dependency from state aid). In both cases, people are generally deemed to be parasitic scroungers living off public benefits, therefore exploring the wealth created by others, more industrious individuals.

In recent years Right wing parties have managed to introduce into public debate the argument that “we” should give preference to “our” poor over migrants, i.e. that we should distribute to the poor within our societies the resources we are using to deal with migration. The general rhetoric of “deserving” vs. “undeserving” migrants viz. poor has been transformed into the opposition between the weakest members of our societies vs. the rapacious migrants coming to “us” just to explore our system of social benefits. UKIP, Lega Nord, Front National and other far Right parties use often arguments of this kind, claiming that preference has been given to migrant families when it comes to assigning public housing, or that more money per day is spent for a single migrants than for one of “our” poor. This shift in the public discussion has created a diversion from the usual anti-poor rhetoric, which however is still very strong in countries where immigration is not yet a relevant phenomenon (e.g. in South America).

In the next two sections I would like to discuss what lies behind these way of conceptualizing what it means to be a migrant or a welfare recipient, in order to show that the mentioned similarities obey to the same logic and are part of a wider ideology that plays a dominating role in Western societies.

3. Social suffering as systemic suffering and the stigmatization of migrants and the poor

What does the term “social suffering” refer to? The concept has been used to indicate forms of human suffering that have their roots in social *behaviour*. The first formulation of the concept might be found in the category of “socially avoidable suffering,” used by Barrington Moore Jr. to indicate a suffering that could have been avoided if certain social actors (individuals or institutions) had acted differently or had not omitted specific actions to prevent its occurring (Moore 1978). Classical examples

are offered by wars, racial or religious persecutions, the unjust distribution of resources during natural catastrophes etc.⁹ While all these examples are doubtless provoked by humans, not every form of man-made suffering deserves to be considered as “socially avoidable suffering.” The pain experienced by an unfortunate lover, by an unloved child or by the loser in a sport competition are all provoked by fellow humans, but it is not the result of a specific social arrangement, nor is it directly caused by social institutions (although social explanations might be advanced – sometimes plausibly – in the case of familiar relations or sport competitions). Not every suffering is avoidable, and not every avoidable suffering is *socially* avoidable suffering. In the cases we are discussing there is an undeniable responsibility on part of some social actors in provoking suffering among migrants and among the poor. They may suffer for the way officials treat them, or for the laws and rules established by specific governments and governmental agencies. If these agents would stop acting in a specific way (e.g. humiliating or harassing migrant viz. benefit recipients), certain forms of suffering (e.g. feeling humiliated or harassed) could be avoided.

Although it is important to stress the paper of specific social actors in provoking suffering, one should take into account also the possibility that the roots of suffering lie not just in the wrong or unjust behaviour of actors and power-holders or in an unbalance in power relations among social actors, but also in the very structure of society. Social suffering is social not only because it happens within society, or because it is caused by social actors or by unequal power relations between social actors; it can be provoked by the very way in which society is organized, so that its removal demands not just that some actors be held responsible for it, or that some form of power (economic, political etc.) be redistributed more equally, but that the structure of society itself must be modified. In this sense, social suffering can be defined as systemic suffering, i.e. as a form of suffering that is produced by the very way the social system is constructed and works. This is not tantamount to attributing the responsibility for systemic suffering only to economic or political structures. There is always an ideological or doctrinal dimension involved in provoking it. Therefore I would like to sketch the mechanism leading to systemic suffering in the following manner:

⁹ Moore discusses these and other examples in Moore 1970, in which however the term “socially avoidable suffering” does not appear.

a) Systemic suffering implies the existence of a specific societal structure and of a specific doctrine that offers legitimacy and normative orientation to that structure. I shall call it a *pervasive doctrine*, i.e. a system of (1) beliefs about the world and of (2) values based on these beliefs; this system has to be coherent enough to be mobilized for describing and explaining potentially every aspect of human life (human beings' relation to nature and to other human beings as well as to a preternatural, transcendent dimension); furthermore, it offers the basis for a system of (3) norms and (4) practices that aim at shaping or reshaping human life according to the mentioned beliefs and values. Examples of pervasive doctrines are most (if not all) religious creeds, since normally they do not limit themselves to explain the relation between the individual and a transcendent dimension (some deity or spiritual sphere), but aim at regulating every aspect of the individual's life in her relation to nature as well as in both the private and the public sphere.¹⁰ Another example of pervasive doctrine is the neoliberal version of capitalism, which has becoming dominant in the last decades in Western societies. Of course, differing from religion, capitalism has not been born with the explicit proposal of becoming a dominant, pervasive doctrine. There were no founders, no defenders of orthodoxy, no fight against heretical views or heterodox forms of the main doctrine. Capitalism has been born as an economic system for producing and exchanging goods and only later on has it developed the specific system of beliefs, values, norms and practices necessary to guarantee its survival and its global diffusion. However, it has always had a specific logic immanent to its essence. Most Marxist authors tend to think of this logic as an external, objective constraint for individual and institutional behaviour. In doing so, however, they have reified this logic; they have fallen prey to the very mechanism of fetishism denounced by Marx and Lukács among others. My claim is that the logic of capitalism is held in place by a belief in its objective validity and therefore it is expression of a doctrine, not of systemic necessity. In other words, capitalism works because enough people are convinced that it is the best economic system, or the only feasible one, or the most natural one.

b) In order to provoke systemic suffering, the pervasive doctrine must first of all

¹⁰ As a matter of fact, in the end these distinctions become meaningless and can be seen just as different forms of relating to the transcendent dimension through one's relation to other individuals, to society, to the environment etc. In the believer's universe no space is left free from control and regulation through religious norms.

become dominant within a specific society. Of course a doctrine may provoke suffering when it is still held by a minority or by a small group – as showed spectacularly by some clamorous, appalling examples involving religious sects. Studying these cases might be interesting in order to understand how pervasive doctrines work: how they take hold of every aspect of their followers' life, how they immunize their followers against alternative ways of thinking and living, how they become unquestionable for their followers, how they sometime succeed in convincing also outsiders and neutral observers to consider them to be unquestionable and perfectly legitimate doctrines (this is particularly evident in the case of religious creeds, which seldom if ever are subject to open criticism). Nevertheless, it would be always possible for followers to disengage from their group and join the larger body of society outside it, notwithstanding the high price they probably will have to pay from an emotional and social point of view. This may still apply when the pervasive doctrine has taken hold of society as a whole, since its members might still have the option to emigrate, but it becomes impossible when the doctrine has become globally dominant or when its application on the part of some powerful actors have global consequences, like in the case of capitalism in its present form. And, in any case, the choice of emigrating is not an easy one even when taken freely; when emigration becomes the only option, it can be considered as a further form of suffering provoked by the correspondent pervasive doctrine.

c) Although every pervasive doctrine tends for its own nature to expunge from the doctrinaire reservoir of society all other doctrines or to absorb them in order to make them compatible with itself (Christianity is a good historical example of this), society is not necessarily organized around a single pervasive doctrine. The coexistence of different doctrines within a single society can be relatively smooth and peaceful or excite internal conflicts, which may even lead to the disaggregation and collapse of that society. Once again, I am not referring to a dominant ideology in the sense of a set of ideas and values that aims at justifying specific power relations by naturalizing them and by rationalizing their shortcomings or their undeniable negative effects. I refer rather to a system of beliefs, values, norms and practices that permeate and shape the basic structure of society, its main institutions (family, clan, tribe, community, church, market, state etc.) and, of course, the lifestyle of its members. While it influences the legitimate distribution of power among social groups, it exerts power on its own. Its impersonal character makes it difficult to ascribe to such a doctrine the responsibility

for the harm and suffering it provokes. On the contrary, it promotes the naturalization of these negative phenomena, which therefore appear to the members of that society as unavoidable consequences of “the way things are” or even of “the way things have always been.” Even apparently autonomous systems such as economy and bureaucracy obey to the logic of some pervasive doctrine, as shown by the fact that it does not exist (nor it has ever existed) only one kind of economy or of bureaucracy. Since a doctrine comprehends not only beliefs and values, but also norms for action and practices, it has a direct transforming effect on reality, establishing new frames in which individuals and institutions are supposed to act and excluding alternative behaviours. Once the belief that there should be a market for everything has established itself as a part of the pervasive doctrine of society, for example, any attempt at defending specific areas from the market logic is doomed to fail, since it cannot any longer be justified by appealing to alternative beliefs. While this process, which represents what one could call systemic domination, might be slowed down or even brought to a partial halt, it will either continue until it has reshaped the whole fabric of society according to the pervasive doctrine that inspires it, or it will be stopped and undo by a symmetrical process, in which another pervasive doctrine shall triumph. In any case, once such a doctrine has managed to exert systemic domination, resistance (i.e. holding to a defeated doctrine) is futile on the long run, while only revolt (i.e. actively and aggressively striving for the success of an alternative doctrine) makes sense. The removal of the vestiges of defeated doctrines and the imposition of the new one causes, unavoidably, harm and suffering, not only because as a consequence of the ensuing shift of power relations certain groups or individuals will lose their previous social position, but also because the new situation demands from them a material and spiritual effort to adapt to the winning pervasive doctrine. This justifies using the term “domination,” since this process of adaptation is not voluntary, but imposed upon society. The neoliberal reshaping of society did not only provoke major economic, social, and political changes, but caused immense suffering among all social classes and groups, by forcing them to adopt new beliefs and new values, to follow new norms and new practices. Neoliberalism believes firmly in individual responsibility and this belief has both a descriptive and a normative dimension. It attributes to individuals the responsibility for their own economic or social condition and at the same time it demands that they actively assume this responsibility, turning down any help from the state or other social institutions (with exception of the market). By convincing people

that only a free life is worthy of being lived and that freedom means assuming the exclusive responsibility for one's life (which is of course an appealing and morally inspiring idea) and by informing institutional reforms that have *forced* individuals to increasingly take responsibility for every aspect of their life (for being employable and for getting employed, for choosing a healthy lifestyle, for caring for their own education and professional formation, for taking provision for illness and old age etc.), in other words, by taking Rousseau (*Social Contract*, book I, chapter 7) literally and forcing individuals to be free, neoliberalism has put a terrible burden on their shoulder. The result has been a surge in performance related disorders such as burnouts, stress etc. and an epidemic increase in forms of psychological suffering like depression or drug addiction, as observed by many authors (Ehrenberg 1998 and 2010, Soulet 2009, Menke and Rebentisch 2010).

d) The suffering produced by a pervasive doctrine is not always easy to detect. On the contrary, since its roots lie in a widespread belief in that doctrine, people themselves are often unable to connect their suffering with the doctrine they otherwise accept as valid or even to perceive their situation as somehow harmful to them. Marxists recur usually to the notion of "false consciousness" to designate this phenomenon: its victims are not even aware of the oppression or the alienation they are suffering from and believe there is nothing wrong with their life. It is not that they have been coercively indoctrinated, rather they have been socialized within an environment, in which the pervasive doctrine is deemed unquestionable (this is typically the case with religion) or has been naturalized (as in the case of capitalism in all its versions). That, e.g., the market produces unavoidably winners and losers without anyone carrying the blame or responsibility for the resulting inequalities and suffering is something people in capitalist societies tend to accept as a natural law. They have been educated into believing that the market is a sort of natural force, obeying to an unchangeable logic of its own, so that questioning that logic or holding its results as unjust would appear to them as absurd as questioning the law of gravity or morally condemning an earthquake. They do not connect directly the functioning of a capitalist economy to the harm inflicted upon them in terms of poverty, unemployment, or stress – or if they do, they think that something is not working properly within that economy, while in reality their problems are caused precisely by the fact that it *is* working properly and according to its own logic.

When faced with systemic suffering, pervasive doctrines may deny it altogether or

rationalize it. To remain in the example of capitalism, in the first case (denial) the very concept of workers' exploitation is rejected in favour of the idea of a fair bargain on the labour market between employers and employees; when this fiction is no longer tenable or is met with increasing scepticism from the workers, one appeals to the iron laws of the market that would leave no option to the employers but putting pressure on the workers (by reducing their salaries, or by exacting a higher performance for the same salary, or by recurring to outsourcing etc.). In the latter case (rationalization), the existence of suffering is acknowledged, but its responsibility is attributed to allegedly natural forces uninfluenced by human actions or to actors other than employers and companies, namely to unions and governments, which through their unwise acting (provoked by a misguided worry with the workers' welfare) would create unbalances in a otherwise perfectly working system.

In the cases we are discussing, the suffering of migrants and of "useless" persons living off benefits, we face a clear case of systemic suffering based not only in the way society is structured (i.e. on the position these people occupy in the social fabric or in the economic system) but also in society's dominant pervasive doctrine, which at present is a neoliberal vision of capitalism. According to this view, everyone is responsible for her own life and opportunities. As we have seen, this translates into blaming welfare recipients for their situation. On the other side, the kind of globalized capitalism advocated by neoliberals represents the major cause of that situation, since it provokes economic crises that result in the annihilation of jobs and it pushes forward a process of delocalization of labour, in which states compete by underbidding each other in offering good condition for enterprises while weakening labour regulations and workers' rights. As we have seen in the case of underpaid individuals, having a job under such conditions may not be sufficient to guarantee a decent level of life or even survival. The same system that demands that individuals care autonomously for themselves by working destroys jobs and lets wage decrease dramatically. Individuals who get caught in this quandary are mostly unaware of the double bind that causes their suffering. The neoliberal solution to the dilemma is presenting the precarious situation of jobholders as something positive. The lack of continuity in one's job is described as expression of one's freedom to choose among different options and to accept new challenges. The dependency from the contingent situation of the labour market, that may force one to accept zero hour contracts or unpaid internship, is presented as individual autonomy, while the dependency from state benefit is seen as lack of

autonomy. The suffering provoked by uncertainty is blamed on one's lack of capacity to secure one's own standard of living by taking advantage of the chances offered by the market. When people become useless because of the changes in production modes or because of the delocalization of labour, they are blamed (and blame themselves) for their uselessness, as if it would depend on some character flaw and not on objective economic circumstances.

In the case of migrants, the situation is complicated by the fact that the neoliberal doctrine gets intertwined and at the same time gets into conflict with another pervasive doctrine that is still strong in Western societies, namely the doctrine tied to the existence of the nation state. Correspondingly, national borders should be guarded in order to guarantee the safety of the citizens. The national community should be protected against enemies from the outside but also against unrestricted immigration, since this could disturb the balance of the social arrangements society is built on. These ideas are opposed to the neoliberal view according to which borders are irksome barriers to free trade and to economic globalization. In this sense, migrants are paradigmatic neoliberal subjects: they are willing to abandon their home, their country, their status and occupation in order to find a better economic situation, and they are willing to adapt and accept almost any employment, no matter how demanding and how badly paid – a circumstance mentioned by the frequently heard argument according to which migrants do not “steal” job places from the locals because they are ready to do jobs no local worker would accept. In migrating to countries that have a more developed economy, people are following the neoliberal imperative that demands that individuals take responsibility for their economic situation even at cost of giving up their former life. But, as we have seen above, this willingness to adapt to any circumstance that might lead to some material improvement clashes with the idea that economic migrants do not deserve admission to developed countries.

Also in this case, neoliberal, globalized capitalism is one of the main causes of the very economic situation that moves people to migrate in the first place. The economy of their home countries has often suffered under the pressure of the global market or under the imperatives of international agencies like the World Bank or the IMF. In many cases the policies imposed by these global actors had as a consequence the disruption of local economies, so that even when the national economy of a country improved as a whole the beneficial results of this process are unequally distributed and new poverty is created in specific regions or among certain groups. Also in this case individuals tend

to find themselves in a quandary, since mostly they are not allowed to find an individual solution for their problems: just as welfare recipients do not find jobs (or jobs with a decent wage) because such jobs are not available on the market, migrants often are not able to improve their economic situation by moving to another country because rich societies do not accept them. While they live in their countries they are submitted to the imperatives of globalized capitalism, but as soon as they try to reach the heartlands of capitalism (Europe, the USA, Australia) they are faced with the logic of the closed nation state. In this logic they are not individuals legitimately looking for economic improvement, but only a threat to internal stability under several points of view (economic, cultural, social, religious). They are tolerated within a specific society only when their economic contribution is relevant for its members, but as soon as they cease to participate actively to the economic life, they become useless and a burden that society tries to shake off by revoking their residency permit.¹¹

Both migrants and welfare recipients suffer under the very way Western society is structured and under its dominant pervasive doctrines and their contradictory messages. They are described generally as useless people who have to prove that they deserve to be helped by the state or by society (through asylum and residency permits or through social benefits). Redefining the discourse on migration and on welfare would be a first important step towards eliminating some causes of their suffering. Although pervasive doctrines are deeply intertwined with social reality, this redefinition would have at least the effect of unmasking the ideological mechanisms at work and at pointing at the true causes of migration and of poverty in our societies.

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¹¹ This is the main theme of the movie *Bread and Chocolate* (*Pane e cioccolata*, 1974) by Franco Brusati, which describes the ordeal of an Italian migrant in Switzerland. Although more than forty years old, it is yet one of the best movies to understand the suffering of migrants.

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