

## **Autonomy, Aspiration, or Condition?**

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**In *The Society of Discontent* (*La société du malaise*), Alain Ehrenberg provides an overview of a sociology of individualisms that is based on a comparison between the social meanings of autonomy in the United States and France. While his approach is interesting, he seems to have conceived of autonomy as independent of the social conditions of possibility.**

Text reviewed: Alain Ehrenberg, *La société du malaise. Le mental et le social*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2010. 439 p., 23,90€.

In previous publications, and particularly in his most recent, *The Weariness of the Self* (1998), Alain Ehrenberg has perfectly characterized a major, fundamental transformation in the psychic structure of the contemporary individual. The individual's psyche, to use Freud's terminology, used to be dominated by the conflict between "eros and civilization", between a basic anarchic impulse and the constraints and exigencies imposed by social life. This explains the central place of repression in clinical descriptions, which helps us to control impulses and guilt when we transgress the forbidden via transfer neuroses. But loosen the vise of the forbidden, and the individual is liberated—or believes himself liberated—from collective constraints and has to develop his own unfettered possibilities. No longer torn by a conflict that fosters guilt and anxiety, he lives in fear of not being able to live up to the imperative to freedom. The obsession with fault is replaced by a fear of failure, and psychic pain, instead of being tied to sin, is linked to the risk of powerlessness. This yields clinical descriptions dominated by "personality disorders», depression, feelings of internal emptiness, low affect, inhibitions, and the like. Instead of being drawn outwards by social obligations, the individual is driven within into the solitude of his unfulfilled aspirations (see narcissism).

Ehrenberg's analyses can be thought of as an important contribution to an anthropology of the contemporary individual. *The Society of Discontent* has a broader purpose, however: the establishment, or at the very least the "design [of] a sociology of individualisms" (p. 24) that explains the implications of the full range of sociologies of the individual, of which a number currently exist. And to the extent that we are increasingly a "society of individuals", in the words of Norbert Elias, contemporary sociology as a whole is deeply preoccupied by the question of the individual. It is therefore natural to conclude that the individual is the core value of modern society. But every conception of individualism is constructed within a particular social context, and each depends on the specific characteristics of their respective societies, the weight of their histories, and the idiosyncracies of their particular cultural configurations. A comparative approach is obviously required to address the commonalities and differences between individuals in different societies and to assess how each approach problematizes the notion of the individual. Ehrenberg chose to compare the American situation and the French situation, and as a consequence, his book is rooted in the contrast between the "American spirit of personality" (Part 1) and the "French spirit of the institution" (Part 2). The confrontation between these two fields ought to permit explanation of the traits of a general "sociology of individualisms" that goes beyond the particular contexts of these individualisms. It is an extremely ambitious project, and if it is to be taken seriously, then one must be strict in evaluating how it is conducted.

### **Autonomy-as-Condition**

American individualism is built on a belief in the autonomy of the individual himself--the self--and Ehrenberg's book traces the genesis of this orientation. He bases his analysis on the puritan foundation of American culture, which views the individual as the conduit of a direct relationship with God. In the secular world, this individual is an independent moral agent who must have freedom of choice in order to pursue personal self-fulfilment. According to this variant of individualism, a society of individuals is a community of independent, self-determining selves acting by and for themselves. Ehrenberg states that the individual is thus "an institution" unto himself, a self-governing entity who is suspicious of—and often even rejects—all forms of public or state control and intervention.

This kind of autonomy, though, becomes more and more difficult to maintain in an increasingly complex society in which social relationships are progressively de-personalized. It was directly in phase with the mode of existence of independent farmers living in small self-governing communities, but it was disrupted during what George Graham called in 1912 "the

Great Society”, a period of urban development, growing inequality, and increasing competitiveness in a market purged of its ascetic puritan heritage. From that point onward, the self, in its will to autonomy, was in danger of being cut loose and thrust into the centripetal pressures of a society in perpetual movement.

This helps explain the prominence of psychology in American culture. Indeed, the investment of a society in psychology can be construed as a contribution, rather like a crutch, that enables an individual to preserve or to regain autonomy. But in the United States, this is not just any old psychology. By linking discontent in personality to discontent in civilization, Ehrenberg demonstrates very convincingly the relevance of a psychoanalytic perspective to an understanding of the problems that occur when the psychological and the social intersect. But this is not just some random psychoanalysis, either, and in the United States, psychoanalysis has been billed as a psychology of the self, a sort of synthesis between psychoanalysis and culturalism that was developed by post-Freudian psychoanalysts like Eric Fromm, Karen Horney, Henry Stack Sullivan, and others. According to this orientation, treatment focuses more on difficulties in adjusting to the social environment than it does on the dynamics between various impulses. The goal of treatment is, by extension, to reinforce the individual’s self and to ensure social adaptation and ultimately to develop individuals’ personalities by helping them become—or re-become—themselves. Being oneself, though, implies being able to exercise autonomy in society, an idea expressed by Philip Rieff in 1966 in *The Triumph of Therapy*: “the self, improved, is the ultimate concern of modern culture”, or at least in American culture.

During the 1970’s, the self underwent a major crisis that gave rise to new diagnoses—“narcissistic pathologies”, depression, borderline disorders, the slowing of the movement of body and thought—that no longer refer to intra-psycho conflicts but rather to the powerlessness of the self to act, to engage, or to succeed. According to Ehrenberg, these are “variations on difficulties of self-direction and self-government and on the disruption of self-confidence” (p. 124). They are pathologies of the individual’s autonomy that stem from his inability to achieve his goals, but they are also simultaneously social pathologies, because autonomy entails the individual’s capacity for achievement within society.

Ehrenberg offers an extremely interesting perspective on what he calls “autonomy-as-condition”, a concept that encompasses an individual’s ability to organize the conditions of his or her own independence, enabling him to self-govern and to act on his own. The individual

can seize opportunities that his social life makes available, entering into competition or collaboration with others by mobilizing his own potential and by asserting himself through what he undertakes. Ehrenberg uses this wholly autonomic individual to support his claim that in the United States, the self is an institution in its own right, indeed, it is the institution *par excellence*. The self gives birth to the possibility of being and acting as a complete individual, the greatest example of which is without a doubt the “self-made man”, who arguably represents both reality and myth. He represents reality because American society does in fact promote and celebrate individuals “who have made themselves”, whereas in France they would be called “*parvenus*” or up-starts. But this same self-made individual is also a mythical entity, because the United States has no shortage of losers and lost souls whose existences give the lie to the sovereignty of the self. The significant point here, though, is that in spite of such exceptions, the notion of an autonomy rooted in the sovereignty of the self is the dominant model in the United States, a perfect example being the deep-seated repugnance of most Americans for interventions by a heteronomous agency like the federal government, even if its intention is to require minimal health insurance for every American citizen.

### **Autonomy-as-Aspiration**

Autonomy is configured very differently in France, where it is experienced above all as autonomy-as-aspiration, a product of the political and social history of France since the Revolution and the proclamation of the individual’s supremacy. From the outset, autonomy has been synonymous with asserting one’s emancipation, and as such it is a key feature of the social and political conflicts that opposed the preservation of the traditional order to the promotion of progress. This explains why the autonomy of the individual initially arose as a political concept : It is the declaration of independence of the citizen who subordinates the private to the public, and individual interests to the general interest. As a consequence, it is organically tied to the state’s very existence. Durkheim, as cited by Ehrenberg, stated that the French state has been “the liberator of the individual. As it gained power, the state liberated the individual from the groups and places that tended to absorb him—the family, the neighborhood, the corporation, et cetera. Individualism has thus marched to the same beat as statism throughout history” (p. 189).

It is impossible to conceive of a stronger contrast with American individualism. In France, not only does the state empower the conservatisms and traditional subjections (*sujétions*) that enmesh the individual, but the same state provides this same individual with the means to achieve autonomy. Ehrenberg calls equality of protection the state’s allocation to

its citizens of the resources and the rights necessary for their enfranchisement. This is the role played by what we call the Welfare State, or the Social State, which has brought about the generalization or democratization of citizenship by guaranteeing basic protection to every—or almost every—member of the nation. Here in France, the self is not an institution as in the United States, because the self's coherence depends upon his engagement with public and political institutions of education, labor, and social protection.

This arrangement was first called into question following what was called “the crisis” in the 1970's, a state in which we seem to have been stuck ever since due to the pressures of globalization. De-institutionalization, de-protection, de-regulation, privatization: the gradual abandonment of society by the state delivers individuals unto themselves, and from there into the weaknesses of civil society, creating in the process what is tantamount to an “individualism of untying”. According to Ehrenberg, these contemporary changes, which move society towards the privatization of everything while stripping the individual of the protection needed to exercise autonomy, express a profound anti-liberalism in French thought. This fuels a widespread “declinology”, a republican reaction that in turn feeds nostalgia for earlier times when “there were real jobs, real families, a real school, and real politics, when we were dominated, but protected ; neurotic, but organized” (p. 15).

This description of “*déclinologie*” applies to the analyses of Marcel Gauchet concerning the transformation of the status of the contemporary individual, who would be wrong to interpret the characteristics of today's individualism as the effects of a loss of the prerogatives of the individual citizen incarnated by the republican ideal. It also applies to denunciations of suffering at work or the fragilization of labor relations that attribute these misdeeds to some wild-eyed liberalism that is erasing the protections of the employed. What condemns these positions, of which the psychodynamics of Christophe Dejours are a prime example, is that they fail to take new trends in the world into account and they remain fixated on a conception of autonomy-as-aspiration that is piled onto the back of the Republican State. According to Ehrenberg, the time has arrived to play the autonomy card as the condition that “subordinates the protection of the individual with respect to inequalities to his capacity deploying his own personal resources” (p. 334). We are indeed and henceforth “in a world where it is about mobilizing and increasing one's personal resources by favoring policies that allow individuals to be the agents of their own change. No one obliges us to remain prisoners of our grand memories” (p. 335). In short, it is high time that we all rallied around the American model!

## **The Conditions of Autonomy**

I confess that am forcing things somewhat, because Alain Ehrenberg's analyses are more subtle than I give him credit for, but they are also occasionally ambiguous. The final chapter of his book, for example, is a heavily documented evaluation of the practices used to manage "social suffering" in France over the past twenty years. They correspond to an increase in new forms of psychic suffering that are different from the pathologies treated by classical psychiatry. It is a clinic of loss: loss of self-confidence, loss of housing, the on-going loss of stability in the labor market... Ehrenberg underscores the difficulty of the work of mental health professionals, psychiatrists and social workers who confront these situations. They do their utmost to meet the challenge of assisting individuals who are often crushed by the disastrous circumstances of their lives and to help them take charge of themselves again and to provide them with a minimum of self-confidence. Ehrenberg nevertheless decares that "social suffering is an expression of antiliberalism confronted by changes in the relations between society and the State" (p. 324). He seems to express regret about "an ambivalence about autonomy" that these practices supposedly continue to manifest. In reality, mental health professionals who confront social suffering on a daily basis remain attached to the idea of protection--which, until somebody proves otherwise, requires the state and its institutions. These actors are perfectly aware that their clientele is too fragile to develop alone and without objective support the very autonomy towards which they are trying to help them strive. Is that sufficient justification for labeling them "declinologists"? To the contrary, I tend to believe that they are doing their best under very trying circumstances to develop innovative practices that are in phase with the latest characteristics of the current social world.

A report by the working group "*Ville, Santé mentale, Précarité et Exclusion*" (The City, Mental Health, Instability, and Exclusion) from the *Délégation interministérielle à la ville* (Interministerial Delegation to the City) entitled "A Suffering that We Cannot Hide" (1995) noted that "the effort that is demanded of persons trying to be reintegrated into society is in general much higher than that asked of persons who are already socially integrated (...). Everything transpires as though complex bureaucratic processes such as contracts, plans (employment plans, training plans, life plans) were required only of the most marginalized people". Although Ehrenberg cites this text, he does not seriously confront the enormous question that it raises. Indeed, the call to autonomy can become its opposite, further invalidating individuals who are guilty of being unable to meet these elaborate bureaucratic requirements. One can prize autonomy while also honoring the obligation to admit that not

everyone is equally well-equipped to attain it. This obligation applies outside the minority of profoundly challenging cases of social suffering faced by the clinics. We all need protection in order to achieve and to maintain autonomy, by which I mean that we all require certain basic resources and rights in order to be independent of need, and we all need to be freed from having to live at the perpetual mercy of the slightest, most unpredictable twist and turn of existence. Social history (not just French) illustrates that the conditions necessary for the autonomy of the majority of citizens reside in the existence of institutions and the presence of a state that promotes equality of protections. The suffering of those who are deprived of social protection amply demonstrates that it is not just some outmoded heritage of the Republican State.

Reading Alain Ehrenberg's book is a salutary undertaking. The back-and-forth between France and the United States helps the reader to take a certain distance from the franco-French ethnocentrism that is a temptation here in the "*Hexagone*". We can salute the high level of knowledge behind his work and the mastery with which it is expressed. It seems to me, though, that there was a certain slippage between the objectives stated in the introduction and the body of the book. In the place of a systematic, detailed comparison of two systems, the author has substituted a value judgement that vaunts the United States as the most appropriate model for promoting the autonomy of the individual as Ehrenberg sees it. He clearly prefers autonomy-as-condition to autonomy-as-aspiration, and equality-for-competition to equality of protection, and that is entirely his right. Still more debatable is the construction of an opposition between an American configuration that does its utmost to achieve true autonomy, and a French configuration that does everything it can to refuse it. It is worth noting, for example, that America's version of autonomy has not prevented, and may even have encouraged, nearly fifty million American citizens to be deprived of their right to health care, not to mention the Black question, unresolved for two-and-a-half centuries...

But more fundamentally, one question must be asked that seems to have been obscured by Alain Ehrenberg's construction: What are the necessary conditions for autonomy to truly become autonomy-as-condition? Or is autonomy simply an inherent prerogative of the self, and we should just accept the notion, indeed a liberal concept, that everyone must be the agent of his own change and act as his or her own case manager. These assertions, though, are betrayed by experience, whether clinical or social. Social suffering tells us unambiguously that troubled persons need above all certain basic conditions like work and a place to live in order to lead decent lives. It's a little shallow to ask them to take charge of themselves without

determining whether this call to an unattainable autonomy risks exacerbating their sense of failure and their loss of self-esteem. Autonomy-on-command is not autonomy at all, but a new mode of domination. As for social experience, it also shows that for individuals who are in a precarious situation or in danger of losing their protection and support, it is not entirely a matter of personal activation. The individual's need for protection in order to safeguard independence or even to have access to it is not just a social history lesson, but a lesson of the current crisis, which has caused the number of lost and defeated souls to proliferate by unprotecting them in the name of unregulated competitiveness and of maximizing profits.

Defending individual rights, providing equality of access to protection, and regulation by the state are therefore not just yesterday's news, but the necessary conditions for continuing to "make society". In capitulating to an unconditional celebration of a context-less autonomy, *The Society of Discontent* avoids reckoning with the irrefutable weight of economic dynamics and the social constraints that destroy autonomy. To re-use the terms that Ehrenberg has so ably clarified, autonomy-as-aspiration seems to be winning out over autonomy-as-condition, in France and without a doubt in the United States.

Translated from French by **John Angell**

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