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## Book reviews

**Suicide Voices: Labour Trauma in France**, by Sarah Waters. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, 256 pp. ISBN: 9781789622232 (hardback).

In this book, work suicide is situated in the context of specific and localized workplace restructuring processes driven by wider international and structural transformations in the neoliberal economy (p. 11). The impact of these transformations on working conditions was devastating and, in the face of extreme pressure, instead of turning to a collective structure, such as a trade union, some workers turned to their own bodies, enacting forms of violence against the self or others (p. 10). Suicides have been reported across a variety of occupations, including engineers, nurses, teachers, assembly-line workers, checkout assistants, farmers, managers, postal workers and gendarmes (French paramilitary police), and suicide “waves” have affected a wide range of companies in France. This book examines examples of such waves in three companies – La Poste, France Télécom (Orange) and Renault – focusing on 66 cases over the period 2005–15. Suicides in these companies took place at a particular historical moment, when each company was radically redefining the value and parameters of work.

The author uses subjective, lived and narrated experiences of suicide as a prism for investigating the changed relationship between capital and labour at the contemporary neoliberal juncture. Specifically, she uses suicide letters as a lens to shed light on some of the extreme effects of systemic economic processes on “flesh-and blood bodies within the fixed spaces of the French workplace” (p. 215).

The first chapter traces the complex causal connections that link the singular, embodied and extreme act of suicide to systemic, disembodied and rational economic processes. The author looks outwards from the individual act of self-killing towards the neoliberal order as a whole and investigates its effects on lived experiences of work within French companies. The author treats suicides as a symptomatic eruption that reveals generalized, unseen and systemic tendencies that define the neoliberal economic order. The discussion shows us how suicide waves are in many ways predictable, once situated within our understanding of collective and individual responses to shifting economic and social realities. For instance, Emile Durkheim demonstrated that suicide is a historically contingent and cyclical phenomenon that reflects broad socio-economic transformations in society at a given moment in time and, in particular, the

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This book review is also available in French, in *Revue internationale du Travail* 164 (2), and Spanish, in *Revista Internacional del Trabajo* 144 (2).

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impact of economic crisis.<sup>1</sup> Christophe Dejours' work, which is also significant for framing the analysis of work suicides, shows how suicides are a sign of an unprecedented historical evolution that has laid bare changed power relationships in the workplace and, in particular, the effects of new forms of domination and servitude.<sup>2</sup> As well as drawing on key thinkers and research, the discussion brings in examples from artistic and cultural representations of suicide.

The second chapter examines suicide letters as a mode of testimony seeking to bear witness to external conditions of work and their impact on lived experience in the contemporary neoliberal context. Testimony provides a perspective on social processes from the inside, telling us first-hand stories of trauma in everyday life through individuals' intimate, subjective and material experiences. In treating suicide letters as testimony, private suffering, narrated in a space of traumatic intimacy, is transformed into public meaning and becomes a prism for interrogating the economic order as a whole.

The third chapter investigates the wave of 21 suicides at La Poste, the French postal service, in the 2000s. The company's strategic plans over this period focused both on extensive job cuts and on transforming the company from a public service entity to a commercial enterprise capable of generating economic profit. The transformation implemented new modes of surveillance, which were intended to measure, control and prescribe working activity. The analysis of suicide letters shows how the pressures generated by liberalization and restructuring, justified in terms of the company's survival in the face of competition, pushed workers towards self-killing.

The fourth chapter examines suicides in the telecoms sector. When the former state-owned company France Télécom rebranded as Orange in 2013, it sought to transform its image and reinvent itself as a global player in innovative digital technologies. Again, the suicides are situated within broad structural transformations in the economy, and a shift in the company's financing to a shareholder model, which introduced significant pressure from international competition. Through the restructuring process, labour was segregated, classified and reconfigured as either productive or unproductive, with the latter category ejected from the workplace as quickly as possible (p. 169). The suicides in the company led to a criminal trial. France Télécom is the only company in France to have faced a criminal trial in relation to its systematic mistreatment of employees, with three former bosses found guilty.

The fifth chapter examines suicides in the automobile sector. The case of car manufacturer Renault, where ten employees committed and six attempted suicide between 2013 and 2017, reflects a wider pattern in the highly pressurized and globalized car industry, with further cases at French rival Peugeot-Citroën. What generated widespread shock at Renault was that the suicides involved elite knowledge workers – highly skilled professionals who held ostensibly desirable and well-paid jobs. In June 2013, a French court of appeal found Renault guilty of gross negligence in three cases of suicide among its employees.

There is no doubt that this book is a difficult read, but it is essential reading for academics, practitioners, activists and for the public more generally. We cannot help but ask questions about how the contexts within which these suicides took place were permitted and why so few lessons have been learned from these cases to change the underlying economic model. France has recognized work-related suicides since 2002 and, since the conviction of France Télécom management in 2019, companies are likely to be held more accountable, with policymakers focusing more on the psychosocial risks of work. Yet without a change in the economic model and the neoliberal drive for profit maximization above all, other such cases will inevitably arise. A shift to a greater focus on the work-related causes

<sup>1</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897). Translated into English as *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Christophe Dejours, ed., *Observations cliniques en psychopathologie du travail* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010). Translated into English as *Psychopathology of Work: Clinical Observations* (London: Routledge, 2015).

of suicides is unlikely in the contemporary economic order, which tends to conceal the labour process and quell individual and collective forms of resistance by placing greater responsibility for performance on the individual and seeking to systematically destroy the trade union movement.

The book presents a bleak assessment for the future of work, in the context of what Ana Dinerstein describes as the deepening “hopelessness” of neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> Yet countermovements, such as trade union and social movements, have the potential to expose the worst effects of neoliberalism and offer alternatives. We have seen waves of strikes and protests across a number of countries and sectors in recent years. Perhaps we should be looking for hope (and participating) in a re-socializing of capitalism through such resistance.

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<sup>3</sup> Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

