

PROPOSAL :

Deadly “INSTITUTIONAL HARASSMENT”: can psychoanalysis be a resource against it?

by Gilles Amado

What to do when the organization looks like a wall against which you bump your head in vain? Ending one's life can then be THE answer to overcoming suffering.

This is what has been happening in many sectors of public service in France for more than 10 years: La Poste and Banque postale, EDF-GDF, SNCF, the Police, hospitals,... where suicides are counted by the dozen every year.

At the heart of this wave: the pressure of numbers, profitability, the extension of the "empire of market theology" (Hobsbawn, 1999) to universes previously concerned above all with user service.

Thus, a large company (110,000 employees) of the CAC 40, France Telecom (now called Orange), the flagship of French technology, went on to privatise in 2004 following a decision by the French government and the opening to competition decided by the European Commission.

Appointed CEO in 2005, Didier Lombard then launched, with his accomplice HRD, a reorganization plan: elimination of 22,000 jobs without dismissal ("in 2007, they will leave one way or another, by the window or by the door", he declared), transfer of 14,000 employees and hiring of 6,000 "new talents". Yes, but....the vast majority of employees are civil servants, protected by their status.

At the top of the company, a human resources strategy is then developed that mixes moral harassment (Hirigoyen, 2002), devaluing missions, scrapping (Lhuillier, 2002), forced mobility, job changes, repeated incentives to leave, into "a company policy aimed at destabilizing employees and agents and creating an anxious climate", as the court file indicates.

Thirty-five suicides (described by the CEO as an "epidemic") in 2008-2009 alone, numerous suicide attempts and the deterioration in the health of hundreds of employees finally led 7 former executives to court in 2019, in a long trial (May-July), all of them being condemned, the top ones to jail.

This case illustrates what the court called “institutional harassment”, a form of harassment that is no longer essentially interpersonal but the result of a system consciously developed by managers.

Hence the difficulty of a psychoanalytical approach to this type of situation.

However, after a quick review of the dramatic history of this forced privatization and the macabre measures put in place by the hierarchy, as well as on the basis of testimonies from "survivors" and relatives of victims, we will try to specify this new form of social pathology, stimulated by neo-liberalism. Perversion (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1984; Gillibert, 1986; Long, 2008; Nobus & Downing, 2006), ideology (Kaës, 2016), psychic imprisonment (Amado, 2013), denial (Freud, 1938) and alexithymia (McDougall, 1982; Kets de Vries, 1987), not to mention the deaf presence of the death drive (Green, 1986) fed by collaboration from multiple sources.

Finally, this presentation should shed light on psychoanalytical work on ethics (Diamond & Adams; Levine, 1999) and open a debate on the possible globalization of this type of perverse practice within today's organizations.

Short abstract :

The macabre forms of the “institutional harassment” decided and organized at the top of one of the biggest and most famous french organizations leading to dozens of suicides among employees ten years ago is a dramatic example of otherness denial and a neo-liberal perverse approach to organizational effectiveness. Its history, interpretations and learnings are explored in this communication.