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Suicide voices: testimonies of trauma in the French workplace

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Abstract

Workplace suicide has become an urgent social concern internationally with rising numbers of employees choosing to kill themselves in the face of extreme pressures at work. Yet, research on this phenomenon is hampered by fragmentary statistical data and the sheer contentiousness of this issue. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a research project on workplace suicides in France, where there has been a ‘suicide epidemic’ across a wide range of companies. I draw on an analysis of suicide letters linked to 23 suicide cases across three French companies during the period 2005–2015. My methodological approach is informed by the work of suicide sociologist, Jack D Douglas, who emphasised the importance of narrative, testimony and voice to our understanding of the causes of suicide. Douglas argued that an analysis of the ‘social meanings’ of suicide should start with a consideration of the motivations attributed to self-killing by suicidal individuals themselves and those close to them. Why does work or conditions of work push some individuals to take their own lives? What can the ‘suicide voices’ articulated in recent testimonies tell us about the causes of workplace suicide? In this paper, I treat suicide letters as a unique mode of testimony that can reveal some of the profound effects of workplace transformations on subjective, intimate and lived experiences of work. By examining French suicide testimonies, my aim is to deepen our understanding of the nature and causes of suicide in today’s globalised workplaces.

Introduction

France has experienced what the international media has described as a ‘suicide epidemic’ in the workplace with rising numbers of employees choosing to kill themselves in the face of extreme pressures at work. Suicides have affected a wide range of companies, including the telecommunications giant, France Télécom (rebranded Orange in 2013); car manufacturers, Renault and Peugeot; French postal services; electricity and gas suppliers; banks; supermarkets; police force and research centres.^{1–3} In some cases, suicidal individuals have chosen to kill themselves in a highly visible way, taking their own lives in the offices or buildings where they work, in a ‘voluntary dramatisation’⁴ of their deaths. Others have left detailed letters, many of which have been published in the press, in which they blame work and conditions at work as the cause of their violent actions. Following a campaign by health

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specialists and public intellectuals, the French government set up a National Observatory of Suicide in 2013 to respond to rising suicide rates in the workplace and across French society as a whole. Workplace suicides are not unique to France and this is a rising phenomenon across the international stage. For instance, recent studies carried out in the USA, Australia, Japan, China, India, South Korea and Taiwan point to a steep rise in workplace suicides in the context of deteriorating working conditions linked to job insecurity, work intensification, declining trade unions and a degradation of social protection. Such conditions reflect a broader transformation of the workplace with a macroeconomic and political shift to neoliberalism, which has placed new constraints on companies and transformed the power relationship between employer and employee. Some critics suggest that in today's neoliberal economy, labour is subordinated to the interests of capital in an unprecedented way with deleterious effects on lived experiences of work.⁵

While there is growing evidence of rising suicide rates internationally, research on workplace suicide remains limited and is hampered by two obstacles. On the one hand, statistical data are patchy and often inconsistent and no comparative international statistics exist. While workplace suicides in France have attracted intense media attention and political debate, epidemiological research has so far lagged behind. We know that French suicide rates are among the highest in Europe at 16.7 suicides per 100 000 inhabitants against an average of 11.7 per 100 000 inhabitants for the 28 countries of the European Union.⁶ Suicide rates in France and elsewhere have also been on the rise since the 2008 economic crisis under the effects of social and economic decline, particularly among working-age men.⁷ However, data pertaining to suicide committed at work or because of work are more difficult to find. In France, there is no official figure recording the number of workplace suicides that take place each year. National statistics are extrapolated from a regional study carried out in Normandy in 2003, from which a national figure of 400 cases per year has been estimated.⁸ Yet, some specialists argue that this figure grossly underestimates the scale of the problem, and one psychologist has estimated a national average of 6.500 cases per year (Michel Debout, president of National Union for the Prevention of Suicide).⁹ One recent study based on a qualitative analysis of statements by survivors of suicide in a French hospital reported that work-related issues were identified in 40% of cases.¹⁰ Another French study found that suicidal risk was disproportionately high among young adults working in unstable or unfair conditions.¹¹ There have been efforts to improve the mechanisms for recording workplace suicides in France and a recent pilot study drew on data from a multiplicity of sources (death certificates, labour inspectorate, social insurance and autopsy reports).¹² Yet, the findings of this research are undermined by the scarcity of reliable data sources. Death certificates do not always record the details of the suicide or the profession of the suicidal individual. Furthermore, these studies calculate suicide rates according to economic sector and do not help explain the rise of 'suicide waves' at specific companies which are often linked to the effects of management policies across the whole workforce covering a range of occupations.

On the other hand, workplace suicide is a highly controversial phenomenon and its media exposure and social recognition can undermine certain vested interests. Workplace suicide, according to some critics, is subject to a 'collective denial' or a 'rule of silence' that tends to keep it hidden from public view.¹³ Suicides can damage the reputational interests of a

company, and where liability is established, a company may be obliged to pay large sums in financial compensation to the family of a victim. In July 2016, French prosecutors announced that seven France Télécom executives may face criminal charges in the case of 35 suicides by employees at the company in 2008–2009. In a landmark criminal trial, the bosses were accused not of personally targeting individuals, but of pursuing management practices across the whole company based on ‘harcèlement moral’ or psychological harassment.¹⁴ In a separate case, a French court of appeals found Renault guilty of gross negligence in May 2012, in the case of suicides by three employees at the company. Because suicide is legally recognised in France as a ‘workplace accident’, there have been scores of successful litigation cases won by families of suicidal individuals against companies. For instance, 49 suicides by France Télécom employees were officially recognised as being work related in 2008.¹⁵ Yet, workplace suicide can also damage the reputation of government. In France, suicides have been highest in former public service companies undergoing privatisation, in which the state was still the main shareholder and was represented on the company’s board of executives when the suicides were taking place. During the suicide crisis at France Télécom, both the Minister of Work, Xavier Darcos, and the Minister of Finance, Christine Lagarde, were compelled to intervene and eventually pushed the chief executive of the company to resign. Critics suggest that both businesses and political elites in France have sought to conceal, minimise or individualise suicides taking place within companies, and this has impeded independent research into this phenomenon.² Because of an absence of rigorous data and the contentiousness of this phenomenon, current research cannot yet provide us with clear answers as to why there are increasing numbers of workplace suicides in France and what the causes of these suicides are.

In this paper, I develop an alternative perspective that focuses on letters written by suicidal individuals and those close to them, exploring what these letters can tell us about the social causes of suicide. French workplace suicides have been marked by an intensified production of texts, including letters, legal documents and audio recordings through which individuals have sought to explain, interpret and ascribe meaning to their own deaths. While research on suicide letters is very limited, Jerry Jacobs has emphasised their importance in giving us an unsolicited account of the motivations and thoughts of suicidal individuals in the period before their self-killing.¹⁶ My methodological approach is informed by the work of Douglas¹⁷ who argued that an analysis of the social causes of suicide needed to start with a consideration of the meanings attributed to suicide by suicidal individuals and those close to them. I will draw on Douglas’ notion of the ‘social meanings’ to examine the situated and narrated meanings of suicide. Douglas’ approach is useful in helping to draw connections between otherwise atomised personal stories and overarching social transformations at local, national and international levels.

Suicide and Neoliberalism

Suicide has long been treated as a social phenomenon that transcends personal circumstances alone and reflects a wider social structure of which the individual forms part. Emile Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1897)¹⁸ has defined an entire sociological tradition that locates the causes of suicide in the social order and this is seen to determine the number of suicides taking place within a given historical juncture. Taking Durkheim’s perspective, what are the

social forces that shape rising suicides in the globalised workplace today? A number of critics have sought to establish connections between a historical shift to neoliberalism and new forms of endemic violence within the workplace. For Saskia Sassen, global capitalism is driven by ‘new logics of expulsion’ that strive to push out those who are deemed unproductive, unfit or surplus to economic needs. Her book explores the way in which neoliberal economics engages with human bodies in the everyday, giving rise to ‘astounding elementary brutalities’.¹⁹ Similarly, Henry Giroux and Brad Evans argue that the contemporary economic order is driven by a ‘politics of disposability’ that consigns humans to excess and subjects them to hidden forms of violence and brutality.²⁰ Workers are dehumanised and treated as factors of adjustment, to be disposed of when economic interests require. For these critics, social violence in the workplace is embedded in the logic of instrumental rationality and the appeal to progress that drives neoliberal globalisation.

Beyond generalised forms of violence, some studies have established a connection between the contemporary economic order and rising suicide rates across society. Hence, David Stuckler and Sanjay Basu signal a sharp rise in ‘economic suicides’ in the context of socioeconomic decline and particularly in the period since the 2008 economic crisis.⁷ They argue that suicides are a consequence of material conditions of extreme economic difficulty, and of policies of austerity that remove social protection from those who are most vulnerable. Hence, they have identified higher suicide rates in countries where austerity policies were introduced, as compared with countries where robust systems of social protection are put in place and where suicide rates are lower. While this research has been critical in reaffirming a causal connection between suicide and socioeconomic factors, it presents suicide as a response to social marginalisation that pushes people out of work through unemployment. Indeed, rates of ‘economic suicide’ are estimated by making a correlation with unemployment rates among working-age men. The workplace is treated as site of social integration and economic advantage and the concept of ‘economic suicides’ is therefore not extended to cases of self-killing in work or caused by work.

The suicides studied here can be situated in the profound transformations linked to the neoliberalisation of the workplace over the past 30 years. Different studies have pointed to a profound deterioration of working conditions in the context of economic processes of deregulation, liberalisation and financialisation.²¹ The shift to neoliberalism radically modified the contractual relationship between employer and employee that characterised the postwar Fordist era and has given rise to an era of employment precariousness characterised by job insecurity, work intensification, an extension of flexible contracts and a decline of social protection.²² Such unstable working conditions and the anticipation of job loss may trigger suicidal tendencies. While France has some of the most extensive labour controls in the Eurozone, this has not protected employees from the effects of abusive management policies at company level. French workplace suicides have taken place in companies that were undergoing restructuring in order to adapt to a changed external context of neoliberalism. New management policies were introduced that sought to reorganise the workplace by radically cutting costs and raising productivity. At Renault, Contrat 2009 set as its target to increase car production by 800 000 new cars and to launch 21 new models of car in 4 years, without expanding the existing workforce. This goal was to be achieved by vastly increasing the workloads of individual employees. At France Télécom, the Next plan

(2005–2008) included as its strategic priority to cut 22 000 jobs in 2 years. As its chief executive made clear, job cuts would be achieved by whatever means necessary either by encouraging staff to leave or forcing them out.¹ As the majority of the company's staff were public service employees or *fonctionnaires* and could not be legally fired, management allegedly used more insidious psychological tactics to push them to leave the company. At La Poste, Horizon 2020 was intended to consolidate the company's privatisation and push through massive job cuts, particularly among public service employees. Suicides at these companies were not random or individualised events, but a product of a particular historical juncture when the workplace was being radically reorganised in order to respond to overarching neoliberal imperatives.

Suicide as Testimony

In this study, I examine workplace suicide from the perspective of the letters written by suicidal individuals themselves and their families, considering what they can tell us about the causes and motivations of workplace suicide. This approach is phenomenological and is concerned with how individuals narrate and interpret the experiences of suffering that motivate their self-killing.²³ A testimony constitutes a critical mode of self-expression through which an individual seeks to ascribe meaning to his or her actions and influence how they are interpreted by others. In suicide letters, individuals often seek to impute causality, pointing the finger at whom or what they see is to blame. While 'illness narratives' are now widely used in the medical humanities as a means to gain a deeper understanding of lived experiences of suffering, testimony shifts our attention from embodied experience to some of the external social causes of that suffering. Yet, to examine suicide letters as a mode of testimony raises a particular set of ethical and epistemological challenges. To what extent is it morally acceptable to convert someone's self-killing into a form of enunciation? In what sense can a suicide letter be read as a 'text'? What happens when we 'textualise' self-killing and turn it into an object of academic enquiry? Previous research also shows that we need to approach suicide letters with care, treating them as interpretative accounts rather than statements of absolute truth. This study is underpinned by the principle that suicide testimonies can deepen our understanding of an urgent and rising public health phenomenon and that the risks of studying these testimonies are therefore outweighed by the dangers of not doing so.

An approach based on testimony engages with the pioneering work of American suicide sociologist Jack D. Douglas who emphasised the importance of narrated and subjective meanings to our understanding of suicide. In *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (1967) Douglas argued that suicide has no abstract meaning beyond that given to it by the suicidal individual, and to understand suicide, we therefore need to start by examining the motivations and meanings held by the individual:

¹A statement made by Didier Lombard at a board meeting in 2006 set the tone for the restructuring process and presented a plan for 22 000 job cuts in the following terms: "I will do them (job cuts) by whatever means are necessary, by pushing people through the door or out the window." The statement was subsequently leaked to the press and was seen as evidence of inhumane management techniques. FranceTVinfo Harcèlement, mutation, déménagement: comment France Télécom poussait ses salariés vers la sortie. *FranceTVinfo* 14 December 2014. http://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/entreprises/comment-france-telecom-poussait-ses-salaries-vers-la-sortie_772461.html

“Since there are no specific meanings imputed to all (or even most) suicidal actions, the meaning of such actions must be *constructed* by the individual committing them and by the others involved *through their interactions with each other*. Just what specific meanings are realised or actually imputed will depend on the intentions of the various actors, the *socially perceived* ways in which the actions are committed, the specific patterns of *suicidal meanings* (...) which are realised and the whole *argument processes*, before, during, and after the ‘suicidal actions’.”²⁴

Douglas’ work can be situated within a Durkheimian sociological tradition that views suicide as a social phenomenon whose causes transcend the individual and are located within society itself. Yet, Douglas set out to challenge and deepen Durkheim’s sociological theory of suicide by reasserting the place of the individual in our understanding of suicide. Challenging Durkheim’s determinism, Douglas seeks to rehabilitate the individual by arguing that he or she is a rational and conscious actor capable of understanding the meaning of his or her own actions. In analysing suicide letters as testimony, I draw on three methodological principles from Douglas’ work.

First, suicide is a socially meaningful act that can elucidate the nature of the social structure of which the individual forms part. An analysis of suicide testimonies is concerned with what a private world of suffering can tell us about the social order, and in particular, the correlation between work and suicide. For sociologists, suicide has long been viewed as a prism for understanding society itself and rising suicide rates are considered to be a warning sign of a deeper social, political or economic malaise within society. What can suicide testimonies tell us about conditions of work in today’s globalised workplace? Why does work or conditions of work push some individuals to take their own lives? What do suicide letters tell us about the changing relationship between employer and employee in today’s workplace?

Second, an understanding of workplace suicide needs to start with a consideration of the social meanings given to it by the individuals concerned. For Douglas, we can only identify the external social causes of suicide by examining how social forces are interpreted, communicated and narrated by the individual through language. This phenomenological approach emphasises the importance of attending to aspects of language, self-expression and subjective voice. How are abstract economics played out at a most intimate, subjective and material level? How do overarching economic processes engage with flesh and blood bodies?

Third, an analysis of suicide should be based on a comparison of real-life cases of suicide within their particular social contexts in order to identify commonalities or recurring patterns. The paper examines suicide cases in a specific context—suicides either committed at work or attributed to work during a fixed historical period and within three specific companies. What common causes are identified in the letters? Who or what is blamed for the suicide? What shared grievances are expressed?

Suicide Voices

I draw on the preliminary findings of a study of a corpus of testimonies linked to 23 suicide cases in three companies during the period 2005–2015. Each of these companies experienced a ‘suicide wave’ at a time when it was undergoing restructuring and privatisation with a total of approximately 294 employee suicides taking place at the three companies during this period. The cases consist of 19 suicides and three attempted suicides, 11 of which were committed in the workplace itself. These cases were selected because they each provide rich testimonial material that explains and interprets the causes and motivations of the suicide and that articulates an explicit causal link to the workplace. Nineteen of the testimonies were written by suicidal individuals themselves, two by family members and two by colleagues of suicidal individuals. The testimonies consist of letters, emails, notes and audio-recordings and are addressed either to family members, colleagues, trade union representatives or the bosses for whom they work. Some consist of brief notes and others of a detailed portfolio of documents that are intended to be of use to the family of the victim in mounting legal action against the company. The analysis focuses on identifying common themes, explanatory mechanisms and causal arguments that are used to explain and interpret the causes of self-killing. All of the testimonial material used in this study has already appeared in published form, some in the French and international press, and others in books by journalists investigating suicide waves at particular companies.

Blaming others

In these testimonies, suicidal individuals unequivocally blame work and workplace experiences as the cause of their self-killing and exclude personal or family circumstances. In one case of suicide for which Renault was subsequently held liable, a 38-year-old technician hanged himself at home on 16 February 2007. He had been working on the design of a new model of Laguna and was under pressure to produce the new design by a tight deadline. In a suicide letter addressed to his family, the victim made clear that work rather than familial issues were to blame: “This has nothing to do with you. I can’t go on. This job is too much for me.”²⁵ Similarly, a 28-year-old senior manager, who killed himself by jumping from the top floor of the postal centre where he worked in Rennes on 29 December 2012, left a letter that clearly separated home from working life and blamed management for his actions: “I should however have everything to be happy, a loving wife, an adorable daughter. However, all this professional anxiety has encroached on my private life and I can no longer experience joy like before.”²⁶ Characterised as highly ambitious and conscientious, the victim had risen rapidly within his organisation from a position as postman to that of senior manager, but he had recently been redeployed to several different jobs and had been assigned to a post below his career level a few months before his suicide. Other letters are also unequivocal in blaming work: “My professional activity is the primary cause. It has crushed me and engulfed me to the point where I can no longer see any escape” (Senior manager at La Poste, 5 December 2005); “My suicide is due entirely to La Poste” (49-year-old manager, 15 January 2008); “I consider La Poste’s management, at all levels to be the cause of my loss of bearings” (42-year-old postal worker, 11 March 2012); “My actions are due solely to my professional situation” (attempted suicide of postal worker, 4 March 2013). A common feature of the testimonies is, therefore, that they seek to attribute

suicide to workplace causes, and in a number of cases, they specifically name individual bosses as being responsible for the suicide.

Chaotic restructuring

Many of the testimonies assert that workplace restructuring profoundly destabilised everyday working conditions and that new management techniques placed some individuals under such intense pressure that they were pushed to take their own lives. At France Télécom, during the period of restructuring, employees were faced with a situation of turbulent organisational change, as they were pushed to change jobs, redefine their roles or move to new cities on an almost ongoing basis.²⁷ Some engineers in their early 50s were redeployed into call-centres, as part of a plan to implement massive staff cuts. Having held considerable professional status and autonomy, they now found themselves having to recite lines from a headset, sell products over the phone and undergo strict surveillance during working hours. In one well-publicised case, a 53-year-old technician, who had been redeployed into a call-centre from his existing role monitoring satellite communications when the centre where he worked had been shut down, threw himself under a train on 2 July 2008. Prior to his suicide, he sent a letter to his trade union representative that contained over a dozen documents outlining his repeated requests to management to change position. His suicide letter emphasised his frustration with his new role for which he had no professional experience or training: “You know, I could no longer bear to be in this hell, spending hours in front of a screen like a mechanical puppet faced with the determination of some people to let us die like dogs.” He criticises management tactics and asks his trade union to let others know what is going on: “If you could speak about this or escalate it so that others know and realise what this reckless lot is prepared to do to get people to leave.”²⁸

In another case, a 57-year-old management controller and father of four set fire to himself in the car park outside the France Télécom office building where he worked near Bordeaux, upon arriving at work on the morning of 26 April 2011. He had previously sent repeated letters and emails to management complaining about his professional role. An open letter that he had written to company bosses in September 2009 was published in the French press after his suicide, in which he criticises chaotic restructuring driven by a ‘management by terror’ that pressurises employees and makes them feel guilty for resisting organisational change. He identifies himself among the group of workers over 50 years of age who were being forcibly redeployed into new posts: “I am part of this segment. I am surplus to requirements (...) Suicide has become a solution.”²⁹ The victim’s family is pursuing legal action against the company for corporate manslaughter.

Work intensification

One study has shown that the majority of victims of workplace suicide at France Télécom had no prior history of mental illness and were typically committed, conscientious and dedicated employees who tended to identify their own personal goals with those of the company.³⁰ In this respect, the French context seems to bear similarities with the Japanese phenomenon of *karo-jisatu* or suicide by overwork that is rooted in a highly pressurised corporate culture.³¹ Suicide letters evoke experiences of intense stress and psychological

trauma linked to an intensification of work and the setting of targets that seem impossible to attain. In the case of a 39-year-old engineer who threw himself off a footbridge at the Renault technocentre where he worked on 20 October 2006, his wife engaged in a legal battle against the company to prove its responsibility in her husband's death. At the time, Renault's Contrat 2009 plan had vastly increased the workloads of individual employees. His bosses had asked the engineer to move to Rumania for 18 months to supervise a Renault production line and he was distressed at the prospect of having to leave his young family. His wife described how he had begun to work obsessively not stopping to sleep, eat or communicate with others. "Towards the end, he was only sleeping two hours a night. He had lost a lot of weight. He was sick, physically sick."³² An appeal court in Versailles ruled that the company was responsible for the suicide, pointing out that management had ignored his symptoms of severe physical distress and had burdened him with an unmanageable workload. Dorothee Berthel, a government inspector who investigated the suicides at Renault's research centre, describes conditions of unbearable stress referring to 'employees who are cracking up under pressure'.³³

In a different case, on 25 February 2013, the 51-year-old Director of internal communications at La Poste's head office in Paris hanged himself at home without leaving a letter. His wife reported that he had been hounded by emails and phone calls in the period before his death and he had allegedly received 50 work emails on the day of his death. His brother wrote a letter to La Poste's boss (published in the press) in which he criticised the latter's response to the suicide and said: "How can you dare refer to 'personal and familial dramas in which work plays no part? (...) My brother was perfectly happy with his spouse and his daughter. In no way was his personal life the cause of this unfortunate act.'"³⁴

Management bullying

Some testimonies denounce abusive management practices such as harassment, bullying or intimidation. One study of the suicide crisis at France Télécom claimed that harassment had become a routinised management tactic used to fulfil economic ends by pushing employees to leave the company.³⁵ In one case, a 51-year-old Marseille-based France Télécom engineer, who killed himself on the night of 13–14 July 2009, left a letter in which he explicitly blamed work and his letter was published in detail in the French and international press: "I'm killing myself because of my work at France Télécom. It is the sole cause." The suicide victim was described as a high-achieving engineer and a perfectionist whose working life had been rendered dysfunctional by incessant restructuring. He refers in his letter to a situation of constant stress in the workplace and to bullying management practices: "constant urgency, work overload, absence of training, a company in total disorganisation. Management by terror".³⁶ He had previously spoken to his sister about regular messages from managers suggesting that he find work elsewhere and, in one instance, proposing that he open a rural guesthouse. This suicide was one of three cases among France Télécom employees in July 2009. In other cases, individuals refer to 'harassment' and 'humiliation' by managers (attempted suicide at France Télécom on 6 January 2009) or 'an oppressive situation' created by management (28-year-old postal worker 29 February 2012).

Lack of voice

Research on employment precariousness has established a connection between rising mental health problems in the workplace and a decline in trade union representation.²¹ In the three companies where suicides took place, trade unions were systematically marginalised and occupational services were weakened during the period of restructuring. Trade union representation was seen to interfere with the need for a flexible, mobile and responsive workforce attuned to the demands of a changing global economy. Testimonies assert that employees often felt isolated and powerless in the face of the organisational transformations taking place. Following the suicide of a France Télécom employee on 17 May 2008 who had been on sick leave for depression for 2 months prior to the suicide, his colleague of over 30 years wrote a letter to his trade union and remarks “we are living in a situation of permanent stress, pressure, restructuring and doubts about our future”. He goes on to state that ‘employees experiencing difficulties are confronted by an erosion of social structures’.³⁷ In a different case, on the night of the 21–22 April 2013, a 35-year-old night maintenance technician at Renault committed suicide leaving two letters, one addressed to his wife and daughters, the other to management in which he referred specifically to a lack of collective channels of representation: “Thank you Renault. Thank you for these years of pressure, of blackmail on the night shift. Where the right to strike doesn’t exist. Anyone who protests will be in trouble. Fear and uncertainty about the future are fair game, so it seems.”³⁸ Recent studies of workplace suicide in France and China suggest that suicide can act as a desperate means of protest where alternative collective channels of representation are unavailable.³⁹

Conclusion

Suicide testimonies give us a critical insight into some of the extreme human consequences of overarching economic transformations in today’s neoliberal workplace. Such transformations are driven by rational and quantifiable economic goals that seek to reduce costs and maximise profit in the context of intensified global competition. The suicide cases studied here demonstrate that workplace transformations can generate such intense suffering that some employees choose to take their own lives. In their letters, emails and notes, suicidal individuals have sought to communicate, interpret and define the ‘social meanings’ of their own self-killing. They point to the effects of chaotic restructuring, work intensification, management bullying and a decline of trade unions on their everyday working lives. These grievances might have been expressed by alternative means, for instance, through institutional channels of worker representation and communication. Yet, in a context in which trade union representation has been severely eroded, employees are often left isolated and powerless in the face of overwhelming workplace pressures. Grievances that might otherwise be given collective representation are therefore internalised and given expression in the form of extreme violence and self-killing. The present study has been limited to the French context and further empirical research is required to establish connections between work and suicide in the wider globalised economy.

It is important to emphasise that workplace suicides are not a uniquely French phenomenon, but manifest generalised trends towards precarious employment and work intensification in

today's neoliberal economy. Suicides take place not on the margins of society, but at its very centre in ordinary and globalised workplaces such as the call-centre, corporate office, research centre or production line. Christophe Dejours, a leading occupational psychologist and psychoanalyst, has called for an alternative conception of 'living work' that recognises the value of work as a fundamental human need and as a source of identity, belonging and fulfilment.⁴⁰ By reducing workers to factors of adjustment to be disposed of when economic needs require, today's economic order violates these human dimensions of work. While it might seem optimistic to expect companies to embrace an ideal of 'living work', rising workplace suicides on the international stage may now signal the limits of what it is morally and socially acceptable to do in the interests of economic gain.

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