The New Social Order: Post-Truth and Discretionary Social Intervention

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Abstract

The Post-Truth Society in this article is understood as the paradigmatic environment of the present Western societies where, in addition to the feeling of risk, there is added indifference to political discourses and social practices that do not correspond to factual truths, giving space for flexible interpretation of policies and for individualization of social action. In this article, we highlight the transformative potential that the street-level bureaucrats have, but also we discuss the liquidity of social intervention, which should be subject of ethical reequation, namely through the imperative of technical supervision.

Keywords: Post-Truth; Social Intervention, Street Bureaucratic; Professional Ethics.

Introduction

Post-Truth in Western Societies

At the end of 2016 we were confronted with the election of the term "Post-Truth" by the Oxford University as the word of the year.

Accordingly with the same source the term "post-truth" would be and an adjective: relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'(OXFORD Dictionaires, 2016).

The theme was debated in the "mass media" whom connoted it essentially to the political and journalistic arena where it was justified that the increase of its use in more than 200% resided in the manipulative effect that certain "untruths" have on the public opinion, even after its dismantling and replacement of the factual truth.

The "post-truth" was, in our view, allocated: a) to the "unreal" political discourse of National, European and World rulers; b) to the increasing power of social networks in favor of manipulating the public opinion; and c) the devaluation of social values that constitute a democratic society such as freedom and dignity.

This debate was not long lasting in the public arena. We did not witness social movements of indignation, or even a significant scholarly and scientific production or concern. In fact, after after almost two years of the election of "post-truth" as one of the world's most widely used symbolic and linguistic terms, it has not echoed in social dynamics, submerged in a politically correct silence.

What we propose in this article is to reflect critically on the importance of not only the social acceptability in relation to the selective use of truth, but also how such use may underlie the application of social policies and measures for "lesser evil" in intervention and the ethical questions that they entail.

In this way, we start from two central arguments in this essay:

Western societies integrate, paradoxically, perverse logics of social performance in concomitance with critical logics of social performance;

The field of social intervention requires ethical-professional changes in its acting as a transforming agent.

The two perspectives cannot be observed separately, as both are the result of the socio-political construction of the ideology of the Nation States. Construction seems to be the keyword for these two arguments, which focus on the narratives of the different social actors, present in the analysis made to the North American and Portuguese media in the time period from November 2016 to March 2017.

We present, on this path, the main analytical questions in a propositional way, with the deconstruction of the first argument l:

Western societies integrate, paradoxically, perverse logics of social performance in concomitance with critical logics of social performance

Social practices that are built on the same stage where seemingly peaceful ideas and values which circulate freely with a morality of "deception", or as we say in this "post truth" article, tend to be dubious social practices where trust relationships between citizens and the State, but also between citizens and social organizations representing organized civil society.

The production of truth in social relations is a relation of power (Foucault, 1972) that is being constructed in a web of meanings given to a certain political and/or social fact.

We are not faced with the Macaist distinction between "truth" and "lie", but rather on the intentional manipulation or omission of a set of information that does not allow

the citizen to make a free decision on a set of variables that can profoundly affect his life. Often information is masked by a potential risk, but apparently devoid of real consequences. The question of intentionality is a central issue in this argument, revealing the usefulness of this process for those who act in a diffused way, but can be terribly adjudicated to the discourse of intolerance that, together with the discourse of the resignation of the recipient, translates into the impossibility of recognizing and respecting the value of human dignity, promoting mechanisms of discrimination and insecurity.

The sense of insecurity and instability debated in the scientific and political arenas through the writings of Beck (2015) in what he called risk societies, now recovered with the densified symbolism of social indifference in the face of an ethical-moral crisis of the primordial social values.

The risk society is conceived by Beck (2015) as the one that brings together the paradoxes between technological advances and the degradation of living conditions, revealing the contradictions of the current economic and political model and the apogee of new forms of party conservatism. The 21st century seems to defend a new model of social organization where, critical conscience about fear and insecurity effects in the conception and implementation of public policies, is visible, but to which it still competes what Keyes (2004, p.35) designated by the Post-Truth Age*: "At one time we had truth and lies. Now we have truth, lies, and statements that may not be true but we consider too benign to call false".* It's this apparent indifference to the perversity of this power, where those outside the system cannot access it, and those in the middle do not want to know, that makes the post-truth era a dangerous time, questioning the ethical foundations of social intervention projects.

The ethical dimension of social intervention is an integrative process of its identity, meaning that it does not exist in a "divorced" way of the different contexts that surround it, but is nourished by them (Santos, 2014). Now, the ethical perspective of social action is based on the universal metaethical foundations - "the exercise of critical and methodical reflection … on customs" (Gontijo, 2006, p. 128) on which it is necessary to distinguish between "morality" and "ethics", which are commonly used as synonyms (Gontijo, 2006; Cortina, 2000).

In this distinction the objective of ethics is the conception of morality, this means it constitutes a metaphilosophically reflection on the moral foundations (Cortina, 2000) and that in a simplistic way the values built are oriented to the defense of human rights considered universally.

The ethical principles of social intervention seem to lie in the struggle for respect for the specific values that come from each citizen, group, community, country, nation, and all humanity, and in this sense they include a set of guidelines built in response to the social complexity. Thus, until less than a decade ago, one of the central questions for social action was the incompatibility between public policies and social

needs, between the disintegration of the social protection system and social responses in contexts of great vulnerability punctuated by the unemployment bastion, nowadays the issues related to the application of public policies and the application of social protection measures, which are heavily influenced by diffuse orientations, are result of the quickness in with which the rules of the game of social protection change the relations between State-Organization; State-Citizen and Organization-Social Controller.

The nonconformity in the face of situations of inequality and "non-integration" is part of the discourses of the professionals who work in the first line, accompanied by a new generation of clients of similarly nonconformist political measures. Social unrest assumes growing dimensions (Santos & Almeida, 2013), coupled with a lack of confidence in the political leaders who represent citizens.

Social movements grow on a worldwide scale (see the genocide of thousands of Syrian refugees in refugee camps), social networks are boiling with opposition and opposition movements in the face of inequality, risk and injustice. Never before has it been so easy to contest in an apparently free way (in Western World) against dominant hegemony. However, never like today are the impacts of these challenges so weak. There is an increasing number of reached people, but with less intensity, and the movements of nonconformity seem to be unable to mobilize public opinion and reach with little accuracy the policies, the politicians and the citizens.

Just as Sisyphus seems to be doomed to carry a great stone of social uneasiness to the summit of the mountain, every time we are nearing the summit, it returns to the point of departure, invalidating the effort expended. And in this incessant movement we fear losing confidence in our voices and citizens can lose confidence in the voices that represent and defend them.

The field of social intervention requires ethical-professional changes in its acting as a transforming agent

The fight against indifference implies, on the part of the social intervenors, the continuation of their fight for policies of social transformation, promoting the improvement of human relations, a greater physical proximity of services and institutions, and the removal of symbolic barriers interposed between the citizen and administration agents (Santos & Almeida, 2013).

Street bureaucrats play a fundamental emancipatory and transforming role. They are made up of all professionals who daily give body and face to state actions and as such have a practical and critical knowledge of the real needs and the adequacy of public policies. They are also those that, using a greater flexibility of procedures and through the effective management of the network of territorial partners, are able to give adequate response to social problems. According to Son (2014, p. 48), Lipsky (1980) lists three basic premises that define his work:

a) They work, in a regular routine course, in constant interaction with the citizens;

b) Although they are part of a bureaucratic structure, these employees act with a certain independence of this structure. An element of this independence is the power that was conceived to them in making decisions, that is, the discretionary power inherent in its function in the organization;

c) the potential impact of its decisions on the citizens it deals with is significant.

The relationship between these workers and the success of the implementation of public policies is extremely relevant and even a little discretionary because it´s on their decision that many policies result or fail (Oliveira, 2012). It means, that it is in this relational process that sedimentation bases are set for social arguments that validate or not the effectiveness of professional action. And it is in this transformative potential that can also be a powerful weapon of inclusion, but also of social exclusion, because the liquidity of the intervention is enlarged to coincide not only with the narratives and social needs of the citizens, but can, in the sense opposite and due to its unregulated aspect, favor the gray areas of maintenance of the vulnerability.

This argument is strong because it calls into question the relationship of trust that the citizen has with the social organizations and social intervenors that are integrated in them.

We are dealing with new forms of governance that interact with each other. The synergy, that is, the active and concerted contribution of the different agents, "*which will lead us to greater and more productive results*" (Covey & England, 2012, p. 28), opens a new dimension in social protection enabling growth, and the rational use of their opportunities.

The third sector, seems now to lose its field of intervention in favor of individualization of professional action. This movement is not new, however, whereas some five years ago we discussed the movements of social organizations in a depersonalized way or as if it were a homogeneous movement, we now call attention to both the heterogeneity of values and practices and to the differentiation of social outcomes.

The aims of the social promotion policies and measures and the means of implementing them are like other procedures immersed in unclear situations which may occur in the risk of their dismemberment. To paraphrase Oliveira (2012, p.1554):

The programs with vague, general or inconsistent purposes are not rare, and "often any effort to make them clear results in meaningless verbal production or exposure to deep disagreements" (...) these evidences suggest that policy makers have to go beyond the decision to apply them or not and this includes judging what they mean and what results they aim for. ". The organization's formal rules and procedures do not provide the benchmark for this judgment, because they cannot establish or clarify the purposes of

the programs, so the applicators often act in their discretion to set those goals and hence the most appropriate way to achieve them, that is, in addition to other factors (...), the vagueness of the ends in the elaboration of policies demands and amplifies the discretionary action of the immediate executors.

The daily work of these agents, who find themselves in a flexible model and in situations of great emergency seek to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of the population, cannot be devalued. The capital of change that professional practice has in these contexts is invaluable. However, unlike public policy "thinkers" and "doers" (who conceive them in closed offices, through a set of analyzes of other analyzes of other technicians who do not interface with the target population), the street bureaucrats face direct relations with policy recipients, their circumstances, and face in the first person the immediate reaction of citizens to the same policies. This context is difficult and it is in this sense that in our view, too, it fits in the political era of post-truth.

The cross-linking between the flexible practices that come from flexible readings of social programs and policies and their personalized application to beneficiary citizens is volatile. It is neither correct nor incorrect, but it can occur in results of success or failure because of the clear difficulty of the practitioner to possess a posture coinciding with a systematic and transformative practice not satisfied with just a brief and simplistic explanation of the situations. It seeks their understanding from the problematization of the real, allowing the diagnosis and social study in a broader way and simultaneously specific and transversal based on methodological instruments and the detailed recording of the information collected (Santos & Reis, 2010; Robertis, 2005), which contribute to the construction of social intervention methodologies with social equality, social inclusion and human rights as guiding values, promoting access to basic social rights as an indispensable component of the citizenship movement (Santos, 2012).

Final Reflections

The social history of pos-modern societies reminded us that social models that are too rigid or too flexible tend to break, either by fracturing or by dismemberment. There is, however, no balanced model. Communities and their social organizations tend to organize themselves in a compensatory way between the risks and benefits of both models. This compensatory movement is a conscious, critical and strategic movement. **Conscious** in the sense of cognition and responsibility that is consubstantiated in the attentive look at the social processes and in the assumption that they are not external to our actions, that is, assuming the responsibility of the critical participation. It is also **critical** because it is not accommodated or stagnant and is questioning about social practices and models of analysis and social intervention in them. It is **strategic** because it is intentional and purposeful through

the proportional use of social practices that are considered appropriate and their own re-equation.

The present article rehearses the theme of "post-truth" in the need for strategic and ethical-political change of the social interveners, taking into account the compensatory movements necessary for the adequacy of social practices that, directly or indirectly, influence the lifestyles of citizens and jeopardize their rights.

The supervision of professional action is a recurring theme of the writings on the practice of social intervention, highlighting its greater need as a consequence of the current economic-organizational determinants. However, it is paradoxically one of the least developed professional practices, despite the evidence of its increasing need, both in the form of internal supervision and in the form of external supervision.

This will allow a proactive action on the part of the professionals and the sharing within the professional group, the difficulties, the expectations and the expected reflexivity to a transforming action. It is up to these agents to take an active voice of formal recognition of this process. This is a struggle that obviously is not easy, but that "*can take out of the drawer*" the general norms of professional ethical conduct that are so often discussed. This needs to happen in order to have a normative and normalized action of the intervention, capable in the last instance of blurring the inequalities and making possible the consolidation of a democratic and democratizing social intervention in favor of the welfare of the population in situation of social risk.

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