

Roland Janvier

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Économie de marché et New Public Management dans le champ social : Impacts et alternatives

Market Economy and New Public Management in social field

Impact and alternatives

La logique de marché comme régulation de l'offre en action sociale :

Une pratique inepte pour le travail avec et pour autrui

MARKET LOGIC AS REGULATION OF THE OFFER IN SOCIAL ACTION : AN INEPT PRACTICE FOR WORKING WITH AND FOR OTHERS

France's move to the neo-liberal models initiated in the United Kingdom under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and in the United States under the presidency of R. Reagan culminated in the 2009 HPST law, which emended "Hospital and relating to patients, to Public Health and Regions" The law introduced the principle of tenders as the fairest and most efficient way to regulate offers of social intervention for different groups in the general public.

This model of descending state action, called "new public management" (NPM) is supposed to be more effective than the old system, which was characterised by local arrangements where small adjustments between the public service and the actors in the field prevailed.

This presentation will aim to demonstrate the ineptitude of applying rules issued from the trade of goods and products to social support services initiated and/or subsidised a by the State, local authorities and welfare associations. It will highlight the specificities of working with and for others that combines, where uncertainty is a background to fragile alliances between social workers and beneficiaries, with reference to the complexity of individual and collective situations, recognition of beneficiaries's empowerment and the enhancement of their citizenship.

All these elements have just transcribed in a legal definition of social work, as defined in the of French social work "bible": the Code de l'Action Sociale et des Familles. However, these values and approaches are incompatible with the economic competition, where a standardization of practices is a keystone of economic criteria and where biggest organizations are favoured, because they are seen as the only ones capable of responding to the huge number of procedures induced by this new organisation.

Introduction : New Public Management in France

Neo-liberalism (or ultra-liberalism) came into being during the Thatcher and Reagan periods, influenced by economists such as Milton Freedman and Friedrich Hayek. Many countries were then seduced by what we call now *New Public Management*, i.e. to the so-called benefits of public affairs' regulation, shaped by the rules of the private market.

In France, the culmination of this trend, applied to the social sector, can be seen in the 2009 law concerning public health organization, named "Patient, Hospital, Healthcare and Regions", which generalizes the principle of tenders. Public authorities, using a set of specifications, make welfare associations compete to retain the best offer at the best price.

This practice, modelled on "calls for tenders" in the public sector - which are also developing quickly - seems incompatible with the very idea of social work.

This speech will analyse how and why we believe that these *New Public Management* practices are not adapted for social work.

To do so, we will identify some characteristics of market logic and we will compare them with some characteristics of social work. Nevertheless, because we do not want to be limited to a simple observation of their incompatibilities, we will also put forward some ideas for action.

1. Some Characteristics of Market Logic

It is impossible, in this presentation, to describe exhaustively the characteristics of market logic, some of which are even effective. We will consider four aspects which, in our opinion, are particularly problematic: the market's tendency to rationalize everything, its reduction of phenomena to their financial aspects, the regulation of exchanges exclusively by competition and the standardization that results from these practices.

1.1. Rational Thinking

Mainstream economic theory maintains the illusion that market analysis is an exact science and that its activity can be encapsulated in a few algorithms. This fiction encourages us to think that one can predict facts and that there is always a good solution to everything; Margaret Thatcher used to say "*There is no alternative*".

Market logic has a tendency to impose itself as an absolute truth and it contaminates all aspects of social life. It encourages the idea of the possible rationalization of the world, of humans and of their behaviour.

In this way, the social sector does not escape this trend: we are witnessing the development of standards that format social work with and for others: budget standards, automated process for financial analysis, automatic link between needs and responses, recommendations of good professional practices, performance dashboards, etc.

1.2. A budgetary Approach

Market logic is based on monetary exchanges and ignores other forms of interaction that exist in the economic practices of any given society. By these means, the value of an action is reduced to its price, i.e. to the production costs and the profit made, or to investment returns.

Yet the market economy sometimes struggles to determine the price of things. The price does not solve everything, some elements are not included in it, such as volunteering in associations, the education of children inside the family, the well-being resulting from leisure activities, etc.

The hegemony of the budget approach has reached the social sector. Everything has a cost and therefore the right price has to be adjusted according to the regulation of the market, and therefore to the competition. The underlying illusion is that this budget approach is potentially a source of savings. Nothing is less certain!

The costs brought on by lack of resources are not included, even if they are significant: individuals who are left behind and who will later need significant resources to solve previously overlooked problems, a lack of problem prevention and of anticipating actions, people exiting the welfare system with unresolved problems, resulting in a later return with further complications to the existing ones, etc.

1.3. Regulation Through Competition

For the market, regulation by the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith is the desirable model. The idea is simple: in a free market, supply finds its level by meeting a demand, and this transaction occurs naturally when regularity conditions are not distorted.

Although this approach is effective in some commercial exchanges of goods and services, it cannot be seen as universal. Social exchanges are not simply the point where a client's demand meets the response

of a welfare service; there are always elements of social life that do not fit in with the model of the market and its invisible hand.

This is particularly the case for social and medico-social activities. These are not a simple barter between welfare services and beneficiaries. The exchange environment is more complex because it simultaneously involves the individual's specific needs, depending on their situation, (for example, disability, social exclusion, mental health, substance abuse, learning difficulties and old age), state welfare social intervention policies and programmes put in place by institutions and professional teams. The exchange takes place in a constrained context that which cannot by its nature be "*free and undistorted*".

1.4. Normative Goal

Finally, among the problematic aspects of market logic is its tendency to standardise activities. Standardization is a condition of economic exchanges (products, currencies, contracts, rules, information ...). The market logic aims at a certain standardization of activities, which guarantees its efficiency and its operation capabilities.

However, despite its claim to be hegemonic and universal, market logic fails to take into account the entire societal sphere. Market logic sometimes clashes with local realities, specific cultures, customs, and different practices in different regions, in other words all those societal idiosyncrasies that do not accommodate the idea of a standardized behaviour.

These idiosyncrasies are particularly relevant in the social sector, and trying to apply the rules of the market to it is impossible, as these rules have no regulatory effect on the social assistance of vulnerable people; indeed, they only serve to complicate missions that are already very complex.

Working with and for others does not rest on the client remaining passive, but rather on the mobilisation of the beneficiary, and their empowerment. They are co-authors of the action plan, and actors in the resolution of their problem.

2. Some Characteristics of Work With and For Others

Following our consideration of some characteristics of market logic, we here propose to compare them with some characteristics of social work, not with the intention of putting them in opposition, but to demonstrate their differences of nature. Work with and for others takes place in an unpredictable context and is based on the ethics of fragility; it aims at the construction of an alliance between individuals who recognize each other.

2.1 A Context of Uncertainty

While economics necessitates establishing predictable phenomena based of a few stable laws, social work necessitates acting in a context of uncertainty, because human behaviour is inherently unpredictable. Individual freedom is essentially based in this unpredictability.

Life is not a linear sequence of logical events. It is made up of hazards, unforeseen events, progress and setbacks. Life's richness comes from its uncertainties. Those who are assisted by social workers are to an even greater extent than the public at large, immersed in these uncertainties; their lives are sometimes chaotic, and consist of a succession of setbacks, misfortune and even misery.

Social actions are conducted in this context, and social work has to consider this uncertainty by not trying to rationalize work with the individual; it does not classify beneficiaries into pre-established categories, but leaves open the field of possibilities, because working with and for others is a continuous process, each case a unique innovation that grows out of the relationship itself.

2.2 Ethics of Fragility

This potential action is fragile because it is uncertain; as it is impossible to know what will work in a relationship with the other individual in advance, the result is uncertain. This is why social workers rely on the ethics of fragility: a particular mindset which does not expect iron-cast certainty. Above all, it is informed by strong convictions, such as respect for the person, their dignity, their ability to decide for themselves in their life.

Working with others means setting out on an uncharted path, and ethics of fragility facilitates the charting of the path in time with the development of the relationship.

This approach is evidently radically different from market logic.

2.3 Constructing Alliances

In order to be companions in a collaborative relationship, one must build an alliance, and this means taking the time to meet, to get to know the other individual and to value them. Making alliances requires recognising reciprocal interests which may converge or diverge. In social work, nothing can be achieved without at least a basic alliance between the social worker and the beneficiary. It is not the alliance that necessitated the adoption of the views of the other; rather, it is agreement that summons individual freedom, the agreement to decide to collaborate, to walk some of the path together.

This unique positioning of actors in social work relationships has nothing in common with positioning in commercial exchanges, with the seller on one side, and the buyer on the other; these roles are clearly delimited between the seller of a benefit or service and the passive benefiter. Market logic tends to reduce social work to delivering a benefit, with the risk of losing what is central to the profession: the fact that the user is given the position of actor, and is recognized for his skills as a fully fledged citizen.

2.4 Recognition Between Subjects

Moreover, exchange in the merchant model does not require the meeting of two individuals, much less mutual recognition. It is a simple exchange: the seller delivers goods or services and is paid for it. The relationship is formatted and standardized - for example, the criteria for content, timeline and performance are predefined - and little room is left for the unexpected. Indeed, ideally the control of the action would involve reducing or eliminating all hazards.

In contrast, working with and for others requires reciprocal recognition between subjects. The professional and the beneficiary identify each other in a relationship of otherness. One shares with the other a common humanity, and at the same time, both realize the radical nature of the differences between them that make them unique beings.

Thus it can be seen that merchant exchange is completely unlike the relationship inherent in social work. Why, therefore, is there a desire to format the latter with the criteria of the former?

3. Four Plans for Action: Four Moves, Four Searches for Syntheses

As seen above, commercial logic and working with and for others have little in common, do not rest on the same expectations, do not use the same references, and seem completely incompatible.

It is therefore not a question of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable, but rather, to affirm the legitimacy and originality of the relationship in social work. Indeed, we must resist the tendency to impose the logic of the market on social work. In order to do so, we can consider here four areas that are central to the nature of social work, with the aim of reconciling the constraints placed on social work that tend to reduce it to simple commercial delivery with the perspectives described above that return it to its real nature. Although far from exhaustive, we should consider the following: what produces working with and for others, the way of approaching it, the temporality of the action, and how to achieve it.

3.1 Labour, Work and Action

Market logic reduces social work to labour. Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between 'labour' and 'work'. Labour is "doing", with no other meaning outside the utilitarian completion of a task, and reduces Humans to their material condition. Work, on the other hand, is part of humanization, by the achieving a lasting result that goes beyond the limits of the task. Work naturally extends into action, i.e. the capacity humans have to transform their environment.

In the logic of the market, the notion of labour is very instrumental. Working with and for others has far more in common with the idea of work or action, than with labour.

This is why we must draw the distinction/*find the connection/bring together between* the concepts of labour and work. The work of social assistance is thought of as "doing", or "acting" ; but by referring to this social work as 'work' and 'action', we allow for the depth and extent of what is done.

3.2 From Delivery to Metis

For this reason, social work cannot be reduced to a mere commercial transaction: that would be too simple. When a customer orders a hamburger, he is expecting shape, ingredients, preparation and flavour in line with the commercial commitment of the fast food chain. When a beneficiary is speaking to a social worker, neither they nor the professional can know in advance what form the response will take, what elements will play a role in the assistance project, how exactly to proceed, or even what result will be arrived at.

With the fast food example, the word delivery can be employed because the product is standardised; in the case of social work, do-it-yourself would be a more useful term to use in consideration of the delicate approach needed towards a situation, the means and manner of adapting to a particular context, and the use of contrivance and strategy when faced with the inevitable hazards. The Greeks used the word *métis* for this art of do-it-

yourself, *métis* implies instinctive intelligence and thinking in unpredictable and uncertain situations. It is the art of putting yourself into other person's shoes in order to understand their point of view.

Market logic is delivery, but social work is *métis*: two registers that must remain distinct, yet inter-dependant, so that the former does not subsume the latter.

3.3 Chronos to Kairos and Aiôn

Let us stay a little longer among the Greeks to consider the temporalities at play in social work.

Market logic uses the first notion of time, the countable one, the *chronos* that counts down its units. This is how acts are timed, that the duration of a social accompaniment can be contained in a schedule, in order not to spend too much time. It is necessary to act quickly and well: it is the condition of the performance.

But the market logic also forgets the other two Greek notions of time. *Kairos* is the time for occurrences, opportunities, it is the moment when new possibilities for action happen. This time is not counted, it can be captured when the opportunity arises. It supposes a state of readiness, of vigilance, which is not allowed in *chronos*. In social work, the professionals do not cease to compose with *Kairos*, which needs patience and perseverance.

This is where *Aion* appears, the third notion of Greek notions of time, the long duration, the one of successive generations, destiny, age and even of eternity. In social work, professionals know how to place their action in this long duration, with all its possibilities.

The temporalities mobilized in the work with and for others have nothing to do with the immediate and profitable time of the market.

3.4 From Protocol to Narrative

A last element to complete these fields of reflexion which need to be open to resist the merchandization of social work: the development of protocols to regulate the practices. Standardization, already widely discussed above, leads to the confinement of the practices of social workers in more and more precise protocols that tell them what they have to do, how they have to proceed, when they have to act and how much time is allotted, as well as all the steps and deliverables that they have to respect and produce.

Resisting this reductive standardization of practices is not easy. The path proposed here is based on opposition. Rather than reporting on their work by demonstrating the conformity of their actions to the orders, social work professionals should make a narrative of their practices, i.e. construct a story that makes visible, readable and understandable what they do, what happens in their relationship with the beneficiaries and the effects produced by this relationship.

This narrative has more to do with biography than with accountability. It is a biographical description of the beneficiaries' life, rather than a factual report reducing the relation to an outcome. The narrative is an awareness of work, of the poetry of a life lived. This is light-years away from the performance indicators that market logic would like to impose.

4. Conclusion: Repoliticizing Social Issues

Because of states' move to New Public Management, as we have seen above, market logic has established itself as essential everywhere, including in the social field. With it comes the tendency to reduce everything to instrumentalism, which in turn reduces exchanges to the purely budgetary, makes competition as the mode of supply regulation sacrosanct, and restricts practices within narrow parameters.

We have contrasted this economic vision of the world with some characteristics specific to working with and for others: action within a context of uncertainty based on the ethics of fragility, which allows the construction of alliances between professionals and beneficiaries, as well as the reciprocal recognition of both. This gap between market logic and the quality of social work should not inhibit any potential action.

Some changes in the way of thinking allow us to find common ground between injunctions directed at professionals, and resistance to them that is necessary to maintain effective work. With the prospect of work being reduced to merely the delivery of a service, we must lay emphasis on work and action. This notion of service must be questioned, in order to highlight the art of improvisation that is used daily by professionals. Similarly, we must rehabilitate the extended support after the dictatorship of immediacy. Lastly, we propose to add to the narrative the real practices of professionals, which are different from reports bounded by the conformity that is expected by the financial authorities.

However, the reader may be doubtful: is not all this resistance to market logic simply a defense system that belongs to the past, and that rejects modernity that is now expected in social work?

This would be to forget that social work deals with social issues that are not merely the personal or collective problems of people in difficulty; they are political issues which affect citizenship, living together, and the common destiny of the city.

The perspective raised in this presentation makes sense concerns only the political dimension of social work. This is why it is necessary to affirm that social issues must remain political concerns: to resist the spread of market logic into social work is to affirm the need to repoliticize social work.