Andélis : contribution au colloque 2023 d'Aifris

Social engineering as an approach in the service of positive social transformations

For almost half a century now, the end of the development model of the so-called period of the Glorious Thirty and the various and recurring crises that follow, lead to progressive awareness of the need for profound change. But they are still struggling to emerge from new models of organizations and societies that are more viable, more egalitarian, more able to recognize the part that each can contribute, and to consider the potentialities and limits of environments, territories in which citizens live.

Together, the social/societal and institutional/political dimensions have experienced structural and structuring changes, for example: a strong individualization and an affirmation of the related rights; a decline in major social projects; a multiplication of decision-making levels and centers and a re-emergence of the territory as a relevant scale of action.

Social action (here including medico-social action) has also evolved profoundly, in particular through a major change in the service offer (fewer specialized establishments, development of service platforms linked to the common) at the service of a logic of personalization and individual path (rather than placement). Since the beginning of the 2000s, professional practices have been invited to transform themselves in order to let the people welcomed and accompanied, fully recognized as persons of rights, take part in the mechanisms and orientations which concern them.

Crises of meaning, trust and recognition

To these important contextual developments was added the health crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. The latter will have had the merit of making essential sectors of activity again momentarily visible in terms of social utility, and in particular that of social work and social intervention, a sector also in crisis, as shown in the number of October 2022 of the magazine Esprit or the latest Green Paper on social work and following it the ongoing process of a White Paper. What do these publications tell us globally and quickly about the crisis experienced?[1]

Difficulties in recruiting, thousands of positions to fill, high turnover, fewer entries into training and fewer expressions of a vocation: social work is no longer really desirable. Social workers express pell-mell: a feeling of contempt towards them, due in particular to salaries that are too low in relation to the usefulness of their missions and to a lack of knowledge or even an invisibilization of the latter; a devitalization of their practices linked to excessive administrative time for monitoring and evaluation and a dematerialization of certain procedures, to the detriment of the relationship with the people received and supported; an intensification of the problems faced by their publics, such as poverty or associated disorders; submission to contradictory injunctions, such as the need to be flexible, agile and

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[1] See also in this regard the video of the round table "From yesterday to today, what about social work? », organized by AFRIS: https://afris-france.org/journee-afris-france/

creative while evolving in a very normative and compartmentalised environment made up of procedures and repositories.

Other elements, the expected consideration of the participation of people and their life course leads to a necessary change in professional postures, even calling into question the meaning of practices. And disrupts working conditions, reception and support arrangements. However, "(…) in some organizations, the conditions are not met (…) because there are not enough resources or not enough time. »[2]

In this case, the social utility of the function may no longer suffice because it is also necessary "to be able to work in coherence with these professional standards and the common ethics (…)"[3], hence employees losing ethical coherence ("ethical dissonance"[4]).

On the side of the people supported, in a general context of over-responsibilization of individuals, persistent social and territorial inequalities and difficulties of access to administrative procedures that have become digital, a certain discomfort with regard to social work can be felt. : feeling that it is more of a control than a support, that it seeks to normalize rather than to emancipate; also feeling of a lack of listening and consideration which can lead to distancing from social services (withdrawal, non-recourse) and a feeling of devaluation.

Shared crisis of meaning, trust and recognition: in this situation, a collective approach to social change building meaning and common projects of social utility may be relevant.

What is social engineering?

Within the field of social action and the history of social work[5], social engineering [6] is understood as a collective and territorialized approach to social transformation for more solidarity and social justice, combining: research, production of knowledge resulting from a dialogue and a confrontation of different types of knowledge (experiential, professional and scientific); forecasting and project engineering; and multi-actor mobilization including the people and populations concerned. Historically, as Dubéchot and Rivard judiciously remind us, based on the work of historian Antoine Savoye, the origins of social engineering date back to France in the 19th century: "the social engineering of this period [19th century] rests on the postulate that a change of political regime cannot respond, on its own, to the crises of society. The resolution of the crisis presupposes new social relations, instituted through concrete experiences based on a scientific knowledge of reality and constantly evaluated. It was exercised in particular during this period in the phalansteries (self-managed communities of workers) and contributed to the appearance of the first social policies (social housing, provident institutions).

Based on the concern for a search for more social justice - a principle mentioned in the French and international definitions of social work -, social engineering, in the deployment of the approach that constitutes it, brings to the fore the issues of recognition and redistributing the ability to influence the

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[2] Coralie Perez, economist and research engineer at the University of Paris 1, intervention of March 13 as part of the production of the "White Paper on Social Work", https://www.ash.tm.fr/professions-et- social-work/social-work-white-paper-rethinking-work-first-730220.php

[3] Ibidem

[4] Ibid.

[5] In other fields (computer science, psychology), unlike here, it is assimilated to manipulation techniques.

[6] Since 2006, France has had the Diplôme d'Etat d'Ingénierie Sociale (DEIS), a level 7 diploma and related training..

actors present, ensuring that the people directly concerned take their full place, particularly in the decision-making process. To be concerned with recognition and redistribution therefore amounts to considering inequalities (of treatment, place, influence) and to encouraging, not absolutely but contextually, in the situation, a certain parity of participation: "By posing the problem in terms of justice, it appears more clearly that the recognition needs of subordinate groups differ significantly from those of dominant groups; and that only claims promoting parity of participation are morally justified. »[7] Co-construction, understood as "established process of open and organized participation of a plurality of actors in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public action" (La coconstruction de public action, Laurent Fraisse, socio-economist), then becomes a means to be used and a goal to be sought in any social engineering intervention, in order to associate all the stakeholders, including the first concerned.

In the extension of this logic of co-constructed progress, the intervention in social engineering allows the emergence of situated knowledge, results of a dialogue, even of a confrontation of knowledge and practices of the stakeholders. Disturbing semantic evidence, questioning representations, producing common sense and shared knowledge in the service of common action: so many practices that can promote cooperation and breathe new life into social action. "Social engineering can be defined from this generating space of territorial democratic governance in the design and implementation of public policies; the production of collective skills through the production of knowledge and public action. »[8] To scientific and academic knowledge, the social engineering approach will add professional knowledge and other experiential knowledge to the intervention space, which it will have contributed to bringing out by promoting reflexivity. American educational theorist David Kolb argues that experience can be learned through a cycle of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.[9]. Using the experiences of professionals or people supported, describing and analyzing their experiences, bringing theoretical insights and allowing both communication of this knowledge of use and new applications by reinvesting situations: this cycle of expression and of formalization is able to feed a production of knowledge located at the service of an innovative and shared project.

Thus, social engineering can contribute, from its modest place, to a better democratic exercise, a revitalization of imaginations and a renewal of practices, by mobilizing actors of various natures, first and foremost the people directly concerned. It constitutes a unique and collective approach to seeking understanding of the field of social action and action in and on this field, and seems to be one of the ways of thinking and doing the most suitable for designing, carrying out, piloting and evaluating devices, organizations and social policies, in situations apprehended in their complexity. The following example will try to confirm this point.[10].

A citizen contribution to the future of a neighborhood[11]

December 2021, the Town Hall of the 1st sector of the City of Marseille is launching a public contract aimed at the purchase of project management assistance (AMO) for "the preparation and animation

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[7] Dubéchot P. and Rivard T., DEIS all-in-one, Vuibert, 2010, p.28
[8] Fraser N., What is social justice? Recognition and redistribution, La Découverte/Poche, 2011.
[9] Penven A., Social engineering, Érès, 2013, P.33
[10] The example relates more to social development than to social work but, as the Social Development and Social Work guide demonstrates (Guide to Support Collective Social Work Interventions for Social Development, 2019), social development and social work should be more linked, the first having to orient the second "towards more collective approaches and to intervene on the environment of the people in order to transform the social and individual conditions that make them vulnerable. »
[11] Cette illustration sera plus développée lors d'un atelier du colloque AIFRIS 2023.

of two half-days of shared diagnosis on uses at the top of rue d'Aubagne and expectations for the future of this district". In the subject of the contract, the Town Hall specifies that it "wishes to recognize [the] expertise in use of the inhabitants and regulars of Noailles"[12]. A first notable point of this AMO thus lies in the state of mind desired by the sponsor for this approach, which is reflected in particular by an appropriation of the semantics used by the associations and collectives of the district.

The answer selected was constructed and then carried out collectively by a group[13] d'associations (one of them was a legal representative) and collectives in the district, instead of the usual consulting firms. This singularity allowed:

-To share an inventory of the situation of the district thanks to the different networks of each of the actors. Thus, in the same space for meetings and exchanges, it was possible to bring together civil society organisations, elected officials and technicians from different institutions, which, according to all, allowed better mutual knowledge - missions, limits , challenges for each -, the reciprocal appropriation of the vocabulary specific to each actor, and above all a dialogue of knowledge at the first service of the inhabitants and regulars of the district.

-To include people who are usually far from traditional spaces of expression. Indeed, the proximity maintained by the associations with the inhabitants and the regulars of the district facilitated their visit and the collection of their points of view in the workshops of reflection and the open forum organized for the occasion. For others, it is thanks to an outward journey practiced at the foot of buildings and on the market that this collection was made possible.

-To build proposals for the future of the district as close as possible to shared uses or, on the contrary, tensions or even conflicts of use according to the parts of the perimeter studied. The place of the collapses, for example, gave rise to the following results: less an expected construction than a square or garden type living space, very vegetated, including a commemorative gesture but leaving room for the renewal of life, open but also secure to avoid nighttime disturbances.

At the end of the process, its legitimacy was recognized thanks to a presentation of the results to the Borough Council and then a deposit of these results in the register of public consultation for urban renewal.

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[12] Cette reconnaissance fait suite à la dynamique collective déployée par les acteurs associatifs (formels et informels) du quartier à la suite des effondrements des immeubles de la rue d'Aubagne en novembre 2018 puis à la crise Covid en 2020 et 2021.

[13] A noter que trois personnes membres de cet ensemble sont formées à l'ingénierie sociale.