DIGITAL SOCIETY AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY - new SKILLS IN SOCIAL WORK

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is a Portuguese saying that says "for great ills, great remedies". Great here has two connotations, one related to the scale of sickness, and the other to its severity and scope.

The 2007/2008 crisis shook the world and had wide-ranging impacts in areas that expanded from finance and speculative markets to the rest of the economy, employment, social inequalities and poverty. After a period in which states in Europe responded to the crisis with investment in the economy and support for banking (Calado, Capucha & Estêvão, 2019), the worsening of the debts and deficits of the state budgets justified the adoption of a materialized response in the austerity programs from 2010/2011. It is a neoliberal response (Peláez & Ciriano, 2019) based on cuts in social spending and a retraction in wages that, on the one hand, further weakened the middle classes already affected by the economic and financial crisis and the poorest populations, while undermining citizens' confidence in the Welfare State and its ability to deliver on the promise of promoting equality, social justice and quality of life for all citizens.

After 3 socially devastating years, particularly in the countries of Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal), there has been a shift in the direction of government action. The cuts in social policies were reversed

and economic and social investment resumed. The storm was passing, and the landscape was recovering when the first news and the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in Europe, with particular intensity in Italy and Spain (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic quickly spread to all of Europe and almost all the world.

The scale of the crisis was multiplied in relation to what had happened during the financial and the debts crisis, and from which it had not yet fully recovered, and still more and worse is to come (Bedford et al., 2020). The living had not yet witnessed such a serious threat to governments, economies, and societies. The seriousness of these problems has been enormous, and the scope has been total. It is not yet possible to make the aftermath or to reliably imagine the impact of the pandemic, but it is already evident that it touches all relevant institutions, such as the State, markets, families, work, cities, the rural areas, health, education, employment, social services, media, culture, international organizations, in short, sweep everything. The impacts manifest at institutional level as well as in the daily routines and in the ways of consuming, loving, interacting, living, planning, investing, dreaming, playing, resting and acting of ordinary people. It covers all walks of life. It has effects on all classes and social strata, although here there is abundant evidence that slum dwellers, the elderly (particularly those living in long term care homes), immigrants, refugees and workers in industry and under-qualified services, are particularly victimized by the virus, showing that even in face of the disease, social inequalities matter. The pandemic has emerged as a new risk whose public

perception overcomes others, perhaps more dangerous for the future of mankind, such as global warming, war, and poverty in the world (OECD, 2020).

COVID-19 brought new routines to our individual and collective lives, namely in the private sphere and in personal interrelationships. But perhaps more important was the extraordinary expansion of the dynamics of processes of change that were already occurring, with different dynamics, such as the individualization of social systems. The visibility that other processes have gained is also enormous, namely those linked to the technological and scientific revolution that is producing, to our eyes, what we have called the digital society. These processes of global change are challenging social workers.

The challenges appear from two sides. First, on the social problems side, how can we continue to respond to the responsibilities of professionals promoting human rights and people's dignity in a context of growing inequality? Secondly, on the solutions side, it is important to know what new technologies can add to the set of techniques used by social workers, and how they should prepare to learn how to master them, being certain that the digital society requires the mastery of technological tools to daily?

Due to the relevance of their objectives, and the complex and multidimensional nature of the operational procedures they follow, community development projects to fight against poverty are practical references with which it is possible to illustrate, concretely, these challenges. We will bear in mind the Portuguese experience in this illustration.

II.   COVID-19 PANDEMIC: REVEALING AND AMPLIFYING PROCESSES OF CHANGE.

The COVID-19 pandemic is producing an enormous impact on all areas of people's lives and institutions in contemporary societies. It accelerated ongoing changes in political strategies, business models, ways of working and studying, health practices, landscapes and urban mobility, ways of communicating, patterns of behaviour, daily rituals, families' organization, leisure, and consumption routines, while leaving some other dynamics in "quarantine", waiting for the days to come. We do not yet know what the durability of what has been called "the new normal" will be, nor which of its domains will remain, and which will disappear with the pandemic. But we have no doubt that most changes in process in all these areas are here to stay. Let's look at four of the biggest implications for social work.

1. Social as a determinant "thing".

Recognizing the importance of social work involves recognizing the importance of its subject. The belief that everything is determined by the economy, by nature, or by the singular will of special individuals dominates the common explanations of social reality (Reich, 2016), and social workers (as, indeed, the social sciences as a whole) have the possibility to take advantage of an opportunity that the pandemic offered them to show the fallacy of these explanations. In fact, the way in which the disease spread and the health authorities' guidelines on how to prevent or minimize this spread, contributed to the revaluation of social phenomena as "things" (in the Durkheim's sense of the term) that obey a logic of their own. The call from health authorities to change

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social behaviors to control the pandemic is the greatest evidence in this regard. As far as we can acknowledge, the virus is a molecular structure in its nature, the disease it causes is biological, but social interaction and culture are decisive (Kucharski, 2020). They were present when the virus passed from animals to humans and are the most important factor in the virus transmission between people. And it has autonomy in relation to biological factors. Even when appealing to the social responsibility of individual behaviour, individuals in mind are not selfish beings to take care of themselves alone, as neoliberal thinking would like, but responsible citizens, engaged with the best practices for collective wellbeing (this topic would make a good point to analyse the role of individualization in the future of Welfare State, something that is outside the scope of this paper). Medicine makes a decisive contribution to the fight and prevention of the disease, but social behaviour (for example, the use of masks, physical distance in interaction and the new rules for the use of spaces) is no less determinant. The reality is giving reason to those who said that our biological constitution impels us towards relationships and social organization, as Norbert Elias (1978 [1970]) emphasized long ago, which simultaneously opens space and makes social workers responsible.

2. **State against market**

There is room for a change in public perception of the welfare state and its effectiveness in relation to the market, in a context of social, public and economic health crisis. This point is very important, and directly challenges social workers, who not only work, in the great majority, in the context of public policies, but are largely responsible for its implementation (Chopart, 2000). The

pandemic crisis has shown that, when all society matters, only the state is in a position to provide an effective response. It has been clearly the case, for instance, in Portugal (Capucha, Nunes & Calado, 2020), in the area of health, as was evident with the defection of private hospitals to fight the pandemic during the first wave, and then with the very timid availability during the second wave. Public health systems have been the only effective responses. The same has been evident in social action: it was to public authorities that the private managers of nursing homes most affected by COVID-19 appealed whenever the situation went out of control. Funding for scientific research on the disease and its treatment and prevention was also made public, both in the form of direct funding to research centres and universities, and the financing of companies capable of producing vaccines. The neoliberal proposals for the dismantling of the Welfare State and its replacement by the market (Glennerster, 2010), were clearly contradicted by reality. They will certainly always be able to re-emerge, namely as governments are being penalized electorally for the evolution of the pandemic, and as populist specialists in the spread of fear and the blame of politicians gain room. But the evidence is there for social workers to make an opposite point, perhaps more clearly than ever.

The challenge for social workers and their professional structures is to try to ensure that people learn from what they have seen and adopt a critical attitude towards attempts to weaken the State, the only effective protection when the disease hit. On the other hand, they must also contribute to the development of social policies where they revealed gaps, as was the case with the income support of low-paid manual workers, who cannot stop working even though their exposure would advise them to stay at home, only because they

have no alternative and, between the risk of contracting the disease and the risk of losing their income or becoming unemployed, they were forced to choose the first. In fact, this type of situation has intensified the debate around basic income, which should proceed. Another example of improvements to be made to social policies is better coordination between the health and social action sectors, which could have helped to alleviate the incidence of the pandemic in nursing homes (Pino et al., 2020). What social workers can do to find and implement the right policies is an issue that has become more and more pressing.

3. Pandemic and social inequalities

Social inequality is a central concern for social work. Social inequalities have always been a structuring topic in the social sciences, namely sociology and economics (Costa, 2012; Dorling, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009;). The speculative economy generated an acceleration of the concentration of wealth and the deepening of class inequalities (Piketty, 2014). The 2007/2008 crisis had these inequalities at their origin, according to authors such as Crouch (2011), as the speculative bubble is associated with the need to maintain consumption patterns of large segments of the population that are globalization's losers. The COVID-19 crisis initially appeared in the eyes of the European media as socially neutral. In fact, the first cases in several countries were identified in people traveling for business and leisure, or who were exposed to contacts with travellers. Furthermore, with the exception of China, the pandemic attacked Europe first and then the United States, only then reaching Brazil, India and other developing countries. Thus, it seemed that the

virus did not choose poor classes or countries and, if it did, it first attacked privileged and wealthy ones.

However, it quickly became apparent that, after all, as in all crises and catastrophes, the poorest and socially least protected are most vulnerable. In this case, the elderly (particularly those hospitalized in nursing houses), the low-skilled, low-paid and precarious manual workers in the industry and services were most affected - first of all, those who could not stay at home in telework and had to commuting on public transport to work - and slum dwellers and others living in precarious conditions of residence, such as refugees and immigrants. The pattern of socially unequal infection by SARS-CoV 2 revealed a striking social inequality that violates human rights, the dignity of people and the quality of society (Dang, Huynh & Nguyen, 2020).

But social inequality also became apparent in other aspects that emerged in the response to the pandemic. Two examples: (i) the exclusion of students from less educated and poorer families from access to distance learning, due to lack of equipment and access to Wi-Fi, thus extending and reinforcing the exclusion that they are victims within school walls; (ii) the impossibility of accessing the benefits of teleworking and the use of computers by segments of the aforementioned working classes, who do not have the cognitive resources to participate in the knowledge economy and in the information society, nor the material resources to acquire the necessary equipment.

If we want to extend the analysis a little, we will also observe that the different social classes are differently exposed to phenomena such as the creation of information systems for mass control and surveillance, supposedly

implemented to control the pandemic, but which allow much more than that. These are the same social classes that, unprepared in the use of platforms such as social networks, are bombarded with marketing campaigns - if not much worse - made from big data and algorithms that collect and treat information about their preferences and habits of consumption, with a view to promoting sales of goods and services. In fact, the pandemic has not only shown that the working classes are more exposed to the disease and to the exclusion from basic institutions. It also showed how the mechanisms of political domination extended to the colonization of the sphere of consumption and other dimensions of private life (Sennett, 1999). Social workers are therefore called upon to make every effort to stop the growth of inequalities and help to create a more equitable and fairer society. As Castillo de Mesa (2019) noticed, technologies have been producing deep changes in modern societies and social workers need to understand them in order to help vulnerable people from the unfair use of artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data, robotization, digitation, and other phenomena of the kind. But they also need to learn how to use those technologies to enhance connectivity and networking, and therefore improve the impact of their action.

4. Digital Society is today

The pandemic is also revealing the extraordinary new developments in science and technology. The ability of science to explain and transform reality is, as Harari said (2011), taking humanity to unimaginable levels of control over the Earth, over society, over life, over death itself. SARS-COV-2 was not a complete surprise for scientists, or eventually for their readers. But not for

ordinary citizens, those who are not familiar with the field of science and science communication. They also do not know what science and technology are doing to the world in which we live. Of course, people had already been informed that two men had stepped on the moon and that two twin sheep had been produced in the laboratory. But how did that happen, and how does science and technology manage to maintain other prodigies, that remains a black box for most people. These subjects only appear on specialized television channels and in the footnotes of the most serious newspapers. Suddenly, from one day to the next, science jumped to the heart of mass information, opening the news in television and filling the pages of the tabloids.

Ordinary citizens could see robots at work in medicine; heard about the way epidemiologists use statistics and new computers to calculate the evolution of the pandemic from the processing of billions of data on millions of people; how advertising campaigns started to use the reading of customer profiles from the huge amounts of information that mega-computers controlled by mega companies collect and treat about each one of us; they saw how teams of biologists and other scientists study things as extraordinary as the virus's DNA and how it acts, reproduces and transmits; they had the direct or indirect experience of teleworking, distance education, participation in virtual networks so important at times when real relationships could not happen face-to-face; they incorporated take-away meals and online shopping into their routines.

Of course, a few of these ordinary citizens believe in the propaganda of those interested in the denial of science. Others have not yet been able to digest the information and have arranged it in a corner of the mind where they keep unreal things. But even those realise that science is producing new things

that affect their lives, sometimes harming them, when for example machines steal jobs, sometimes helping them, when another machine makes professional or domestic work less painful. Perhaps more often, all people are demanding for qualification and capacitation for the future, even though if it is not clearly perceived.

In this context, social workers face a set of three challenges: how to work to prevent the advancement of science and technology from deepening inequalities through the digital exclusion (van Deursen & van DijK, 2010), rendering large segments of the population more unprepared useless? How can the benefits of science and technology be distributed equitably, articulating with structures capable of promoting a fair distribution of resources and these benefits, avoiding the risks brought about by the "metamorphosis", in Beck's words (Beck, 2016)? And how are the social workers themselves going to prepare themselves not to become devalued support for the losers of the digital revolution (an issue that we will address next)? If they don't want that destination, they will have to train and adapt to the realities of the digital society.

III.   SOCIAL WORK IN PROJECTS TO FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

Surely it will not be common for a social worker in our days not to know how to turn on a computer, to work with Word, to download and fill out standard forms, to search for simple information and look at sites on the net, and write posts on social networks (however, not everyone will know how to take advantage of tools like Excel or Power Point). But that is not what we are talking about. But much more than this is needed. Professionals must be able to take advantage of these and other tools to create new products aimed specifically at

professional performance. Let us see, from the Portuguese experience, the case of projects to fight against poverty.

Portugal has a rich tradition of using the project methodology to promote community development and combat poverty. This tradition comes from the late 1960s and the experiences conducted by Manuela Silva (1973). In 1987 the methodology was resumed under the II European Program to Fight Against Poverty EPFAP)after Portugal joined the European Economic Community. In the same year the National Program to Fight Against Poverty (PNLCP) was launched. It was also based on projects of the same type as those that were supported by the Community Initiative. The PNLCP expanded in the early 1990s, when EPFAP was launched, while successive similar programs co-financed in the areas of qualification, training, employment, and social development were also financed. Other European initiatives such as Horizon and Equal also contained projects for community development and the fight against poverty. The Urban Community Initiative and the Urban Rehabilitation Program financed projects of a larger financial scale and a greater focus on the problems of slums, but with a similar design. The different generations of Local Social Development Contracts brought to us, with little news, the original model.

Criticizing the model of all these projects is not an objective of this paper (although it is a necessity, since the model has never been evaluated, nor was it subject of study), neither is it discussing their potential and the results achieved, nor to define their limitations, namely of the financial and temporal scale. We will just mention its main features to show how digital tools can contribute to the increased impact of these projects. The main common features are:

The approach to problems is multidimensional. Material dimensions and cultural dimensions are considered; individuals and social networks matter; both societal and community dynamics are subject of intervention; family life frameworks and institutional participation in social protection, health, education, housing, employment, vocational training and social services systems, all these sectors are involved, although one or another dimension is emphasized in each project.

The organizational structure of the projects is based on the mobilization of institutions for the establishment of partnerships responsible for implementing it. This is, in fact, a condition of the multidimensional approach. Traditionally, it is local social action services that have taken the lead, but it is also not uncommon for cases where this function has been attributed to autarchies or associations and solidarity institutions. associations, charity institutions, employment services, and schools are usually members of the local partnerships, together with municipalities and local social security services.

Anti-poverty projects do not have a categorical basis, they always have a territorial logic. In a context in which the categorization of social policies has been used as a neoliberal principle to destroy the universalist Welfare State (Swank, 2010), the maintenance of an integrated approach directed to the entire population in a given territory, and not only to the poor, is one of the barriers to progress of neoliberalism. Furthermore, these projects are opposed to the moral condemnation of the poor (Cummins, 2019), thus combating another neoliberal ideological principle, that of the attempt to hold individuals accountable for their conditions and for the break with these conditions, with workfare-oriented policies, resilience of the "individual hero", activation, etc. The

projects look at people, and social workers use case management techniques, but they look at their contexts, the resources that can become available for them, and also look at collectives and institutions, searching for integrated responses to integration policies.

Community development and anti-poverty projects mobilize exogenous resources, correcting inequalities inscribed in the space, but also seek to make the most of endogenous resources. And they consider people to be the main resources not only in words, but also in deeds. In fact, all action is marked, at least in an attempted way, by participation, from the definition of the project to the determination of results, passing through all phases of implementation. Empowering communities and building capacities are a distinct feature of the projects. Particularly relevant in this regard is the advocacy role that the social workers involved in the projects play. It is a first step towards empowerment, since disadvantaged citizens begin to be excluded because they have no voice and no way to make themselves heard. With regard to training, the promotion of digital skills, which are determinant for autonomy and full citizenship in the knowledge economy and information society, stands out. In this sense, the projects adopt the principle of solidarity and inclusion, which is contrary to the principle of charity that ties the most disadvantaged to their subordinate condition.

Anti-poverty projects were pioneers (not exclusive) in the introduction of participatory planning and evaluation methodologies in Portugal. The project methodology involves the diagnosis of the situation (problems and resources), the definition of general and operational objectives, the definition of sectoral activities (social protection, family, employment, training, education, housing,

employment, access to equipment, community organization, cultural animation, associations, equality between men and women, childhood and youth and racial anti-discrimination action are the most common sectors), and for the assembly of communication, monitoring and evaluation schemes. What do social workers do in these projects? They speak, interview citizens and representatives of institutions, organize, conduct and participate in meetings, write, plan, gather and systematize information, make decisions about actions and support to be made available, guides peoples from one institution to the other, celebrate, protect, advise, negotiate, represent, train, capacitate, innovate. How can they learn from all these events and tasks without a tool that allows the collection and processing of information?

How can social workers take advantage of digital tools in the field of anti-poverty projects? They can build platforms that are permanently updated to keep the diagnosis of the territory up to date, including the registration and analysis of changes resulting from the intervention and the behaviour of the reference indicators built for monitoring and evaluation.

They can build communication platforms between those responsible for promoting institutions and partners, technical staff and populations, including sites where people can express themselves and transmit their points of view. Knowing that the populations with which they work are internally differentiated from the point of view of the objective conditions of life, but also of the dispositions and cultural orientations, they can develop models that register the characteristics and reactions on the part of the beneficiaries, that allow the construction of ideal types, typical profiles of people for whom tailored interventions can be designed, rather than the repetition of bureaucratic

routines. These ideal types will allow the operationalization of policies and the choice of the most appropriate actions for each type of person, family, or group, necessary to the extent that the effect of each policy is differentiated according to the specific characteristics of the people it addresses. Just as an example, poor people who blame themselves for their poverty (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013) cannot be treated the same way that are treated the ones who protest in many different forms, sometimes disruptive. How can these different attitudes be anticipated without the due information?

These profiles can also be very useful in integrated attendance, as they open up more rigorous perspectives on what each institution should do and how they should be articulated to provide the opportunities that people can take advantage of. Integrated service, such as conversations, interviews, referrals, or socializing is an excellent moment to collect the information to be treated. Individual registration sheets about each beneficiary only allow you to know things about that beneficiary and its path towards the intervention of the project. With experience and contact with many beneficiaries, mental images of different types of beneficiaries are formed and experience is gained on the best way to work with them. But with the help of data processing tools, one can learn even before having acquired all the experience.

The models can be shared between professionals, as long as the privacy and anonymity of those portrayed in the ideal types is ensured. This allows taking into account many factors that are not registered in the forms or that are filtered (some way corrupted) by the technicians' idiosyncrasies. In addition, the information can be enriched with precious elements collected from people who are not the traditional beneficiaries of the policies in action on projects.

Digital technologies and science methodologies also allow endless information to be channelled into the construction of typical genealogies (Lima, 2013), as well as networks of social relationships (Kadushin, 2012), which can make important contributions to understanding the perspective of the people with whom we work. The promotion of participation implies better understanding of people's patterns of behaviour and people's desires, in order to determine what may work at each moment, instead of implementing stereotyped measures and actions, and then blaming people if they do not adhere to them.

Digital tools also allow to record the contributions and attitudes of different partners during the course of a project, and to characterize their resources, so that everyone can reflect from more systematic and objective information. They also allow to exchange experiences with professionals who develop their work in other territories and to form networks of articulated work, to compare interventions and to promote extended learning networks between policy-makers and social workers.

Finally, a vast set of new opportunities opens for innovation and the qualification of social work in projects to fight against poverty, both in terms of knowledge, as well as coordination of agents, accountability and empowerment (Castillode Mesa, 2019).

IV.   CONCLUSION.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an accelerator and a discloser of the profound and rapid changes that are producing the digital society, which challenge social work. We have highlighted in this article four domains of these changes that currently challenge social workers: 1) the appreciation of the social dimension of reality as a determinant in all aspects of life, including

controlling and combating pandemics; 2) the valorisation of the State in relation to the market when it comes to providing the common good and facing collective risks; 3) the urgency to combat the most striking social inequalities that weaken modern societies; 4) the consideration of the technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, not only as present realities with determinant impacts on social structures, but also as tools capable of increasing the intervention capacity of social work in order to promote quality of life and human rights, and not just responding to reacting in a palliative way to the effects of ongoing transformations.

This qualification of social work is important for moral reasons, but also for immediate political and ideological reasons. In the face of accusations of inefficiency to the Welfare State, it is the obligation of its professionals to increase the effectiveness of the action, doing more things and, mainly, new, more sophisticated and complex things, that digital technologies allow. As we tried to show with the listing of a set (far from exhaustive) of possible uses of these technologies in projects of community development and fight against poverty, this use allows a better knowledge of reality, a greater adaptation of policies to the specific characteristics of each context, each family and each person, a greater capacity for reflection and learning on the part of partners, a greater coordination between stakeholders, and an intervention more capable of promoting empowerment, advocacy in favour of the poor and their participation in processes that aim to emancipate them.

The future is open. Social workers cannot be responsible for the outcome of the confrontation between two senses of scientific-technological change, one favourable to the equitable promotion of quality of life and happiness for all, and

the other in the sense of deepening inequalities to levels still unknown. But they will have a role to play. They are eventually the only means through which the most disadvantaged can be heard, active promoters of the training and empowerment of all citizens and of combating exclusion. From the outset, preventing the exclusion from the dynamics and benefits of the scientific-technological revolution.

But to do so, they must also be able to use the benefits of technology for their own labour productivity. They can, moreover, do so without discarding the affective and empathic side of the relationship with people. But man does not live only from affection and sympathy. It also needs dignity, well-being and rights.

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