

For a Heuristic of Social Suffering: The Paradoxes of the Association between Pity and Public Policy

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ABSTRACT— *In this article it is aimed to critically discuss the relevance and the implications of addressing social suffering as a central category of public action and representation of contemporary social issues. More precisely, we seek to position the reflection within the framework of the “pity policy” and of the contours, controversies and paradoxes that it may entail in terms of the political rhetoric and pragmatic of today. In this context it is particularly relevant the debate inherent to the limitations of the “humanitarian” and of a “viewer morality” for the construction of a justice policy regarding social suffering.*

Keywords— social suffering, pity policy, compassion, justice

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social suffering is conceived as a relevant analytical category in the grounds and renewal of the moral and socio-political debate about the purposes and characteristics of public policies and social action (Bourdieu, 1993; Boltanski, 1993; Dejours 1998; Renault, 2008). The questioning of the visibility conditions in the public space, of suffering and of the one that suffers, as well as the socio-political orientations, anchored increasingly in the topics of pity or compassion, shows up as the nodal points in a debate that aims to establish, in a first level, what emerges as social in the individual experiences of social suffering. The reflective contribution of this article intends thus to place the debate on the relevance and controversies of pity affirmation as the basis of the political intervention regarding the social suffering and, as such, to discuss the dissociation/association between politics and morality and the “(un)politicization” in favour of the humanitarian.

Mainly after the 1990s, the reference to the concept of social suffering begins in fact, to attract additional interest from the social researchers who seek to understand the social roots and cultural circumstances inherent to the subjective indicators of distress. Underlying is the idea that the way the “pain” is expressed and experienced by the individual stems, in many cases, from structural social constraints with collective configurations (Wilkinson, 2005). A contrario, there is the understanding, long advocated, according to which suffering would represent a category of individual and biological roots and, as such, a pre-cultural phenomenon, interior and naturalist, not much relevant and even inaccessible to sociocultural approaches. The line of thought that argues that the uneasiness individually expressed cannot be understood separately from the social dynamics and the political and economic processes, which are not only part of it but also name it, allows to clarify the social component of suffering and appeal to the critically understanding of the discourses and power relations that underlie it (Kleinman, Das & Lock, 1997). In this perspective, even a person's health condition does not cease to show a set of critical events in his life trajectory, thus representing a product, cumulative and complex, not only of the individual options but also of the social processes in most cases not controllable by mere personal will (Kleinman, 1999; 2006). Thus, the social suffering is the product of a limitation of the individuals' action capacity; a structural violence shaped on the biographies and everyday experiences. A particular kind of violence that, as stated by Galtung (1998), does not need the direct action of the individuals to be achieved, and is characterized above all by its procedural and indirect configuration.

On the other hand, the consecration of social suffering as an analytical category of the contemporary socio-political contradictions raises significant issues associated with moral conventions underlying the current political and social culture. In this regard, it is particularly relevant the understanding of the power dimensions inherent to pity and compassion assumptions, also politically translated, as well as the understanding of the moral contradictions underlying the experience of some individuals' “remote witness” by reference to the suffering of others (Ignatieff, 1999; Boltanski, 1993; Nussbaum, 2001; Halpern, 2002; Kleinman, 2007). In a sense, it may thus emerge, the risks of a kind of “secular

theodicy”, referring to the concept of Das (1997), which enshrines the suffering as a way of ensuring the feelings of identity and social belonging, therefore providing it a certain socio-pedagogical and humanitarian “utility” (Herzfeld, 1992). In other words, the “violence of zeal” (Lock, 2000) that seems to advocate a certain salvific dimension of suffering, aiming for the future and the greater well-being of all humankind. Therefore, the humanitarian protection and the public policies can be manipulated, and manipulate the organization of the belonging or exclusion modalities in a given place/time (Van Aken, 2005), contributing in a greater or lesser degree, to “change” the individuals’ lives (Agamben, 1998).

In this article, we aim to discuss the implications of a kind of “*êthos of compassion*” (Fassin, 2005), that tends to emerge and to substantiate some of the current policies in the understanding and intervention concerning the social suffering. That is, policies that tend to alleviate the suffering rather than acting on its causes and, that as such are not guided by assumptions of social justice but of humanitarianism.

Under the focus of social suffering, contemporary social science is challenged by new analytical demands and their limits. Not wanting to be assumed as reproductive of society’s silence on the suffering and its structural dimensions (Das, 1997), social science needs to rebuild at present time a new hermeneutics of political action able to provide a meaning to the various social, economic and political fractures and to the “solutions” which can respond to them. From this perspective, if an action against a shared suffering evident and intolerable is unquestionable, the assumptions underlying this action, particularly at the core of public policy and social intervention, need greater critical weighting and represent the nodal axis of this article.

2. POLYMORPHOUS SENSES OF SOCIAL SUFFERING AS A SOCIAL ANALYTICAL CATEGORY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

The individualistic modern conception, basis for the assertion of autonomous and integrated individuals, acquires, nowadays, a less positive feature (Cantelli & Genard, 2007). The frailty is constituted henceforth as an existential mark, and autonomy tends to acquire, in this context, connotations of over-individualization, by default or by excess, of “self-over-responsibility” (Ehrenberg, 1995, 2000) or “negative individualism” (Castel, 1995). Furthermore, the absence or weakness of socio-economic bases able to ensure the integration and continuity in public spaces of increasingly larger and heterogeneous groups of population creates the conditions for profound social suffering processes.

Indeed, the individual trajectories, in contemporary societies, may be, for many people, and no longer only for the assisted 'traditional' populations, trajectories of vulnerability and multidimensional breakages. In parallel, public policies seem guided increasingly by assumptions of personalization and capacitation, forwarding to the individuals the responsibility for the reversal of their exclusion paths tracks. Similarly, in the foreground is the self-fulfilling and expressive capability of citizens.

However if a speech and a set of practices that seem to primarily enhance the potential of individuals in a proactive logic are positive, the fact remains that, in parallel, they can create the conditions for the individualization of social problems and, simultaneously, to the “publicization” (in the sense of inscription in the public space) of problems and individual characteristics and trajectories. Accordingly, the current individual, uncertain, vulnerable, but also reflective, is subject to an irreducible tension between autonomy and heteronomy; autonomy understood hereafter as power/duty to lead his personal and social life in unstable and plural normative environments (Genard, 2007).

The reference to subjectivity, as a structural axis of current policies and practices, thus establishes the valuation of the individual in the process of building and driving himself and his social and economic participation. In other words, it emerges a set of practices and regulatory guidelines focused on the work of self-production and self-ownership of each individual, their personal experiences and their social and professional trajectories. Like this, emphasis is placed on the logic of “being able” and “demonstrate to be able” (Genard, 2007). The responsibility can thus be easily transmuted into individual responsabilization and that may be the essence of the current suffering, spread socially, but felt personally.

As stated by Genard and Cantelli (2007), by registering his mark in the field of subjectivity, public action becomes implicational, motivational and contextual, emphasizing the uniqueness which had been progressively removed from the political grammar by the egalitarian movement.

In certain contexts, particularly those associated with employment and poverty, the goal of the social professionals becomes the management, in permanency, of the non-integration and non-work. The social monitoring thereby constituted as a sort of “temporary permanent” (Rocher, 2004), legitimize the support for citizens in difficulty no longer based on the reference to social citizenship, but rather, on his recognition as an individual. Therefore, it is the uniqueness of each person, and then their handicaps and strengths, that becomes the basis of an intervention, which, thus, risks losing political potential if it is exhausted in a purely individualistic logic.

In this context, the concept of suffering, or social sufferings, constitutes itself, especially since the nineties of the last century, as a relief phenomenological category within the social sciences. The analytical relevance it has assumed since then, results mainly from the fact that it allows to recover the individual perspective within the analysis of the collective problems (since the pain is manifested today, for each individual, with distinct and complex contours), without forgetting the collective focus (the causes of suffering are shared socially and as such are above the individual). In addition, it is a concept that allows capturing under a single notion, relatively imprecise, a set of polymorphous aspects associated with

the "malaise" of several contemporary individual and collective experiences. Thus, under a common anthropological foundation, a kind of shared "soul wound" (Fassin, 2004), felt, however, hardly translatable, it is possible to aggregate aspects as diverse as the psychopathological effects associated with the loss or deterioration of employment, even until phenomena of exclusion, violence or domination in a collective plan.

Stand out from the outset in the construction and dissemination of the notion of social suffering, the works of Christophe Dejours (1998, 2000, 2007), Arthur Kleinman (1996; 1997) and Pierre Bourdieu (1993), anchored on different analytical fields and assumptions. Dejours, work psychologist, has contributed to the consecration of suffering as a comprehensive category of today's social contradictions and fractures, developing, from the late twentieth century, a relevant program of research concerning the relationship between mental health and labour conditions, particularly in the context of psychopathology and psychodynamics of work.

The works of Kleinman and his collaborators (1996;1997) integrate a broader perspective, related to a new "anthropology of subjectivity", perceiving social suffering as the product of the influences of the political, economic and institutional power in the "corrosion of the character" and in the life of humans and focusing on the answer to the social problems. The "social pain" is thus explained by the author as part of a larger reflection on the mediation of social structures and sociopolitical contexts of advanced capitalism, as well as the moral demands and cognitive dispositions of the individuals in the reflection on "what really matters" (Kleinman, 2006).

In turn, Bourdieu highlights, in the study published under the suggestive title of *La Misère du Monde* (1993), the category of suffering as a basic element for understanding the situation, complex and unique, of the so-called "new poor". This work sheds light on the need to rethink the assumptions of making policies, highlighting the strong dissociation between those who govern and the great mass of the excluded, trapped in logics of "social death" and "intimate dramas", and, as such, lacking plausible spaces for affirmation and public recognition.

Also in the recent work of Emmanuel Renault, *Souffrances Sociales* (2008), the author not only positions the state of the art concerning the reflection about social suffering, but rather defines it in a complex way, seeking the integration of the biographical and the social. In other words, he defends the thesis that the complaint of social suffering tends to position the critic, not only political, but also moral, about the multiple demands of self-realization, dismantling justifications and clarifying what society seeks to hide. Thus, the political relevance of the concept emerges, according to the author's conception, in the heart of the social struggles and movements towards better life conditions, constituting thus as "an indictment" of capitalism and society itself (Renault, 2008; Dubet, 2008).

Therefore, considering the growing scientific importance of the concept, and especially its spread to other fields, in particular to the political dimension and the social intervention, it seems that there is now much more than just a "suffering vogue", as evoked by Alain Ehrenberg (1998), which would correspond to a certain depression state extended to the whole society. It is especially important to understand the sociopolitical links of sense between the notion of suffering and the current forms of fragility, vulnerability and disintegration. In other words, it is critically important to foresee how such links can be translators of a new political semantics and of a renewed pragmatic regarding the current dimension of social injustices.

We cannot say that social suffering is a particular phenomenon of the contemporary societies (remember e.g. the conditions of work and life in the nineteenth century), however, it is innovative the reference to suffering as a category to found public policies. Such a reference has two distinct dimensions. On the one hand, a positive dimension since without taking into account the category of suffering and the particular situations, policies turn into ineffective and unfair abstractions; on the other hand, a dimension potentially negative if the reference to suffering allows hiding the social, economic and cultural mechanisms that produce and disseminate it, converting policies and interventions in mere palliative efforts.

Under these assumptions we emphasize the critics of many authors who believe that the concept of suffering translates, ultimately, an attempt to psychologize social reality, hiding, in the same way, the debate about social injustices. It is therefore pertinent to discuss the "status" of the "suffering" individual transformed like this in an "object of pity and not a subject of rights" (Guillebaud, 1994, p.84). The risks of what we might call "deferred citizenship" are, in this light, not negligible, and must necessarily be taken into account by all those who think and execute public policies.

Considering that social suffering is the pain mediated by social injustices, to use a famous definition of Agnès Heller (1976) in the seventies, the notion of suffering continues today to translate the grief of being treated as inferior, subordinate, invisible or useless, being, in addition, judged by the (in)ability to (not) surpass this life conditions. With this in mind, social suffering constitutes itself as the product of a "double jeopardy": on the one hand, the absence or inadequacy of current opportunities and the profound seriousness and complexity of structural problems such as poverty or unemployment, and on the other, an emphasis on individual skills or disabilities to proactivity and self-insertion.

Like this, the essence of what we might conceive as social suffering arises, as stated by Soulet (2007), from the gap between the command to attest the social usefulness and the lack of means (social, economic and political) that could allow its execution. The social suffering (or individual suffering socially generated) therefore, results from the incorporation of a structural vulnerability (associated with the prevalence and spread of uncertainty) in concrete situations and can, this way, neutralize any social and economic explanatory schema (Soulet, 2007).

In fact, the risk of subjecting individuals to ongoing processes of inclusion and non-inclusion, a sum of present times, thus, agreeing with the construction of border statutes, is not negligible. As evidenced by Soulet (1998), it is not only a

contradiction between what a person is living and what she would desire to live, but a tension that arises from the awareness that this distance is the product of a social machine that not only covenants, but produces potentially exclusionary logics.

In this context, the introduction, more or less explicit or implicit, of compassion and pity in the field of public action does not cease to reveal contours and crucial elements in the critical foundation of this debate, as it shall be further analyzed in the following topic.

3. THE PITY POLICY AND THE ECONOMY OF PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE

The so-called “pity policy”, Arendt’s famous expression (1967/1988), translates, at least apparently, a constitutive paradoxicality. The weaving of pity is based on the awareness of the unacceptable, intolerable and as such it implies switching from a logic of feeling and a logic of indignation. Furthermore, in order to have a political dimension it must entail, as emphasized by the above author, the distinction between two classes of people, those who suffer and those who do not suffer, as well as a dimension liable to overcome the particularities of situations, in favour of a generalization potential. Thus, the pity policy consolidates an economy of proximity and distance between categories of people. Such economy results from the processes of visibility or “theatricalize” of suffering, as evidenced by Boltanski (1993). That is, it is necessary that the person who does not suffer sees the other’s suffering, without experiencing it directly. It must also be ensured the universality dimension by promoting the aggregation and the overcoming, in time and place, of the individual expressions of suffering.

The pity policy would thus be based on the “disqualification” of the victims, that is, on exemplarities that emerge in addition to the individual experiences, and are echoed in a moral dimension of a shared humanity, which can justify an extension of the collective responsibility and neutralizing, as such, the argument of the “man of the viewpoint” (Etchegoyen, 1995).

However, how is it possible to set up a policy based solely on a moral dimension of orientation to the other and of response to the intolerability of his suffering, or, in a more extreme way, in the consecration of the human being in its biological dimension of living-suffering, thus deprived from any political dimension?

3.1. *Pity versus Compassion in public action: Critical issues*

After the confirmation of the suffering of the other, the need for action seems to prevail per se, under the reference to a universal principle of shared human essentiality. That is, the recognition of the infinitude of each human being in his finitude (Lévinas, 1973/1987) urges to action. Therefore, the action would be driven mainly by the moral demand of preserving the life of another human being. The empirical and concrete content of suffering thus legitimizes an action rooted in an *éthos* of love of neighbor.

Thus consolidating this moral guidance towards the Other, pity is originally anchored in the *ágape*. In this perspective, it would aggregate, in the action pragmatics, both a logic of compassion and an emergency logic, which, ultimately, would generate the generic category of the “humanitarian”.

However, if within a perspective of moral action, individual and/or collective, the affirmation of the *ágape* as the foundation of the response to suffering does not raise new issues, the transposition of the reference to pity, and to love which it originally entails, to the world of politics, embodies relevant critical operations by associating clearly differentiated universes of meaning.

The logics underlying the pity and compassion may, however, within a more politicized discussion be distinguished. In this regard, as underlined by Hannah Arendt (1988), although both concepts - compassion and pity - are mobilized in favour of suppressing the suffering of others, humanly unbearable, within a perspective of politicization they are clearly distinguished.

Compassion neutralizes the essence of politics. For the author, this is based on argumentative processes unknown to compassion which, in turn, requires quick, direct and circumstantial actions, and therefore, from a political point of view, it is perfectly irrelevant and inconsequential to the social whole. It is thus a pre-political entity, anchored in the axiological dimension and not in the negotiating arena that characterizes politics and may even have perverse effects that are not negligible. As evidenced by Arendt (1987, p.22), “we cannot discuss here the damage that compassion introduced in the modern revolutions, with the attempts to improve the lot of the unfortunate, instead of establishing justice for all”.

In fact, the space where it occurs, where political action can and must occur, is called the public space. The space of joint decision and shared responsibilities associated to a common future, the construction of political action as experimental sphere and area of creation of something new, of “new worlds” (Correia, 2001, p.237), in a context of plurality.

Compassion escapes the public space and thus the political dimension. It is focused on the uniqueness of concrete targets and, as such, it is only updated in specific situations of co-presence between categories of beings, statutory, moral

and normatively differentiated: the sufferers and the non-sufferers, the fortunate and the unfortunate. In addition, not being guided by a generalization assumption - except by reference to the theological domain of universal brotherhood -, compassion is discursively silent. “Compassion speaks only to the extent it needs to respond directly to the expressive sounds and gestures through which suffering becomes visible and audible in the world” (Arendt, 1967, cited by Boltanski, 1993, p. 19). It becomes effective in gestures and in a personal involvement, sensitive and “physical” with low potential for registration and public recognition.

In turn, pity implies, according to the perspective of the above mentioned author, the same dichotomy between the suffering and the others, spectators or witnesses of that suffering, but is focused on generalization. As such, it is discursively evidenced in a different way, in order to highlight what is “publicizable”, what is transversal beyond the particular situations, without neglecting them. Even though, despite this potential of generalization, Hannah Arendt advocates a policy “without pity”, as this introduces in the political debate ideological contours that tend to bias it, by legitimizing the same asymmetry of power generating the suffering that the policy aims to mitigate (Cadoni, 1996, p.97).

4. PITY POLICY IN THE RESPONSE TO SOCIAL SUFFERING: THE RELEVANCE OF THE “WITNESS”

In this argumentative framework Boltanski (1993) provides important inputs to the renewal and resizing of the debate, by positioning the relationship between the political status of the societal links of the individuals and their psychological conditions.

The “pity policy”, emerging and gaining legitimacy in a context of response to social suffering, visible and disseminated (we can even say mediatized), is perceived by the author, as clearly distinct from a justice policy.

The “justice policy” calls for a shared understanding of the “fair”, which enables the evidence and the public justification. A contrario, pity as it is conceptualized by the author, implies the distinction, already evidenced by Arendt (1988), between different groups of the fortunate and the unfortunate. Moreover, it cannot assume the demand for the proof of worthiness or the justification that would be absolutely contrary to morality. Therefore, the author states that, given the suffering, the need for action prevails over justice.

In an attempt to conceptualize pity, Boltanski (1993) sees it as opposed to two other concepts, the compassion and the communitarianism, when framing the dimension of the “distance” between the sufferer and the one who sees and provides consistency through this “testimony” to that same suffering. In this perspective, pity does not require social correlation, directly and in person, which is implicit to compassion or communitarianism. In fact, the transformation of pity into a policy implies a generalization potential, only possible through that distance. However, its semantics and institutional legitimacy must also include an evocation of the effective suffering, with individual manifestations but also, somehow, collectivized.

It is visible in this approach the tension relation, in the basis of the modern experience, between the abstraction and the concreteness, between the universal and the particular, component of the epistemological orientation of the moral-political research program in which Boltanski (and others) belong. In fact, both the recognition of the public evidence (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) and the legitimation of a pity policy are based on the release of the particularism, on the priority anchoring in generalized relations and non “local” (Boltanski, 1993, p.18). The equivalence of the individual experiences of suffering, despite the particularities and heterogeneity, is indeed a sine qua non condition for the “transport” of suffering to a political dimension. As the author mentions, “the creation of a public space is closely supportive of a definition of legitimacy which emphasizes the possibility of an observation without a particular perspective” (1993, p. 44).

And it is perhaps here that we can find, in our perspective, a heuristic key for the current understanding of pity with a political and societal focus, allowing resizing the criticism of bias and politicization for the humanitarian. In other words, the public visibility of the shared suffering elements, besides their particular manifestations, creates the conditions not only for the moral empathy with the other, but also for the consideration of supra-individual causes that can explain this shared suffering.

In this perspective, the topical of the complaint could be reinterpreted, guided no longer by the dichotomy victim/persecutor, but within the dimension of critical reconstruction of the emergence social conditions of the political debate and, accordingly, of the renewed social bond. In this context, the figure of the “viewer” acquires in the analytical construction of Boltanski (1993) special emphasis. Emerging in the Age of Enlightenment, in the form of urban anonymity (which simultaneously hides, with increasingly more sophisticated processes, and reveals), or from the theatrical contemplation, simultaneously distant and involved, the viewer role (and the “critical”) reflects the unleashing of singularities and the localized sedimentation (Chouliaraki, 2012). The public space requires, as the author underlines, the “constitution of an observer [...] without local ties, able to hover over the singularities of society, in the same way as the geographer, cartographer or the painter [...] hover over the landscape singularities” (Boltanski, 1993, p.51).

On the other hand, even though the viewer is a priori freed from all the constraints, the dimension of the internalization is important. Returning to the symbolism of the Christian and Augustinian tradition (to which the interior conversion and the eternal salvation assume the release ability of the self, seeking the divine in the other), Boltanski highlights the importance of reflexivity as a dialectic of distancing and return to the self as a central element in the

constitution of suffering as public category. The so-called “viewer’s pragmatic” thus calls for a competence able to incorporate the emotional and cognitive dimensions. That is, the viewer shall carry the factor, abstract and universal, called by the author “sympathy”, associated with the ability to be “affected” by the suffering of the others. Thus, the social bond liable to provide consistency to society, to a new *societas*, would go through a natural disposition in order to focus to the other. The motivation for the social relationship would thus be rooted in base of essentially moral contours, which seems to refer, in some aspects, to the original pity of Rousseau’s natural man. Anchored on a universal basis, that provision would also allow the symmetry between the “viewer” and the “sufferer”. In this perspective, the sufferer could also be a spectator, fundamental parallel in order to form a political community. In addition, and as already emphasized, the political consecration of pity assumes the dissociation of the “sufferer being” from a historical and socio-political context. Only this way can it be exemplary.

In fact, the dimension of universality advocates the needed “disqualification” (Boltanski, 1993) of the “victim”, separating it from the individual belongings and associating it with to a concept of shared humanity. Therefore, pity is somehow devoid of affection because the distance is associated not only with the mobile of the engagement (the “exposure” of the suffering), but also with the collective structure of contemplation. Regarding this “collective structure” - the public - it is effectively a “collective subjectivity” (Karsenti, 2001), in which pity is anchored and from which it can be exercised. We underline under this approach, the theorizing around the concept of “public” which have underlined, since the late nineteenth century, the supra-individual configuration of the phenomenon. This is distinguished from the crowd by advocating the involvement of agents who seek to critically assert its rationality. Hence, the public embodies a dimension of rational discourse, through arguments and duplications around a given issue, reflecting the ability to think, to communicate and to (re)act with others, without the underlying emotional component in the phenomenon of crowds. In other words, the public is a space for the affirmation of the rational individuality and for the sharing of common data and conceptions (Antunes, n.d.), thus consolidating the link between involvement and distance, fundamental within Boltanski’s analysis (1993).

5. FINAL REMARKS

The analytical perspectives that we emphasized, in a necessarily brief and limited way, present relevant heuristics hints to the consideration of the contours of the public action driven by social suffering.

In fact, although the subject of paradoxicality in the association between politics and pity is not new, and it is part, as we have seen, of the Arendtian analysis around the French Revolution, and it anchors the current social and political intervention on the topic of pity, it still places several renewed issues, with evident critical contours. First, two axes stand out in coordination: the axis of media coverage and the axis of politicization.

Regarding the first aspect, if it is true that the involvement stems from the information and the knowledge (not always associated), and thus that the “publicization” of suffering situations, which currently reach population groups more vast and diversified, it is a sine qua non condition for the involvement of the “non-sufferers” (Kouchner, 1991; Farmer, 2006), the criticism of the excessive media coverage of the existential and symbolic misery of some should also make us reflect.

First of all, the image can contribute to the perverse trivialization of the suffering of others, reinforcing a kind of social Manichaeism that, downstream, can legitimize an indifferent attitude and a collective judgment, more excluding than potentiating (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1997). In an associated way, we cannot ignore the status of the “suffering” individual, who by this means is the “object of pity and not a subject of rights” (Guillebaud, 1994, p.84), in a sort of “deferred citizenship”.

The transposition of pity for the politics advocates, as it has been highlighted, the distinction between two classes of people - those who suffer and those who do not suffer - that is, the identification of two structural socio-political poles, the “victim” on the one hand and “the spectators of the suffering” on the other hand. Although admitting the symmetry invoked by Boltanski (1993), the construction of the social bond based on this bi-focal anthropological-moral dimension contributes to the dilution of a debate and an action of structural contours. The darkening of the fundamental issues in the current political and social debate tends to be a form of tacit confirmation of what exists, focusing the action in a logic of emergency and monitoring, without an explicit purpose besides keeping themselves in a pseudo public space, as non-politicized.

Thus, at the heart of the discussion on the media coverage and politicization of social suffering two levels of criticism are evident: the ones that accentuate the excess of politicization, the others that highlight the lack of politicization of the debate and the action by the perspective of pity. Under this perspective, the effects of depoliticizing would associate mainly to the palliative and “presentist” component of certain actions targeted to the response to suffering. Thus, the suspicion of charity and compassion emerges, and with it, the risk of meritocratic assessment of the existence of some (social exceeding people) about which the only social and political responsibility would be the avoidance of biological death.

In fact, by considering a restrict and traditional dimension of pity associated with the moral of compassion as a political determinant element for the response to social suffering, it is evident a linear conception of the human being which has implications with regard to its affirmation and recognition as a political agent. As evidenced, for example, by Robert Redeker (1994, p. 34), the humanitarian only considers man as a biological animal whose existence is necessary to preserve; “in fact, the humanitarian is profoundly nihilistic as it carries in itself the denial of the man as something else other than of a mortal animal”.

In this perspective, it is confiscated to the individual, as underlined by Bruno Karsenti (2001), the possibility of applying their political existence; in other words, the collective meaning dimension which characterizes them as political individuals is at risk, reducing them to mere status of victim and sufferer.

Suffering would thus become the central criterion (and sometimes only) to legitimize the intervention. However, one cannot forget that such traps can only be overcome if the category of suffering does not become the unambiguous reading of the contemporary social issue, thus subordinating or neutralizing the substantive discussions on the structural causes of the greatest manifestation of the current individual and collective disintegration. Consequently it is necessary to include, as emphasized for example by Giovanna Procacci (1993), the short time in the long-term duration of policies that aim to respond, in a consistent and global way, to such causes. To that extent, the pity policies cannot be dissociated from the importance of justice.

If the justice policy is guided by, as evidenced by Boltanski (1993; and Thévenot, 1991), assumptions different from the pity policy, which dissociates from justification and equivalence criteria, this still includes, in our view, a critical reflection on the foundations of injustice and on their links with the processes of social suffering, with the risk of dissociating these processes from the contexts that allow to explain them. A study by Paugam and Selz (2005) shows an increase, in the European context, of the explanations of poverty associated with the “laziness of the poor” and a significant decrease of the justification connected to reasons associated with the depth inequalities and the social injustice. Such conclusions elucidate the progressive dilution of a political thought able to frame structuring debates, integrated in a plural public space and constantly revisited and reinterpreted.

Therefore, the consideration of the fracturing and disintegration processes of today allow, in our opinion, to discuss, from another perspective, not essentially moral and naturalist, the reconstitution of the social link. The randomness of the individual fates and the possibility of the non-sufferer to transit quickly and in a prolonged way to the sufferer situation, provide new grounds on the debate on the collective responsibility and solidarity.

The “spectator” is no longer the one who contemplates the suffering of others but especially the one who realizes the tenuous and unstable line between the sufferers and the non-sufferers. This perception can include discordant opinions if it implies the selfish retraction on the immediate personal interests and on the acquired, which will in short term tend to produce processes of social implosion, or the symbolic suppression of the other, that many approaches (with sometimes catastrophic contours) on the post-modern axiology tend to highlight. Under such perspective, it could be considered the hypothesis that the orientation towards the response to the suffering would not be based on any moral guidance, but rather on a pragmatic logic, and potentially risky and questionable of collective survival. New ways of control of “dangerous classes” are no longer defined by the difference, but by a disturbing similarity. In this perspective, the groups “at risk” are equally evaluated under the prism of the threat and the contagion and constitute themselves as “risk groups” for the preservation of the collective homeostasis (Seidel, 1993). Paradoxically is their “victim status” of a “social pathology”, a nosographic classification of a social condition of “bare life” (Agamben, 1998), which legitimizes a sociopolitical intervention anchored in an empowerment and personalization rhetoric. Thus, it emerges a kind of “humanitarian citizenship” using Nguyen’s expression (2008), a “biolegitimacy” (Fassin, 2001) or a “biocitizenship” (Pandolfi, 2005), which allows claiming social rights, precisely due the significant non-belonging to the society, but by the mere biological and psychological existence.

This “psychologizing of the social” (Fassin, 2001; Cantelli and Genard, 2007), which aims to alleviate the social wounds by the “exploitation of personal privacy” (Astier, 1996, p. 99) produces new forms of ambivalent political action (Comaroff, 2007) - among the protection, securing or capacity - which tends to polarize (morally and pragmatically) the current public policies of between repression and compassion.

Under this background it seems to be mandatory a shift of the analytical view: from a concentration on “exemplary singularities” from which the policies are found for a questioning of the political processes and links that enable the construction and consolidation of more worthy and “empowering” ways of life, according to the perspective of Amartya Sen (2000). Thus, the understanding of the underlying problems requires an intellectual political awakening able to, as mentioned by Zaki Laidi (1998), question the urgency, not that much as an action category, but above all as a model of representation of the contemporary societies and the future.

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