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Multidisciplinary call for contributions on:

Social work between power and powerlessness

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The thematic dossier will be coordinated by:

Cyprien Avenel (*Mission analyse stratégique, synthèses et prospective* (MASSP) of the *Direction générale de la cohésion sociale* (DGCS))

Nicolas Duvoux (Paris 8, CRESPPA-LabTop)

This call for contributions is addressed to researchers in sociology, political science, educational science, philosophy, economics, management, geography, demography and law as well as to actors in the social, medico-social and health fields.

Articles are due by Tuesday, 12 November 2019.

Social work is currently experiencing an unprecedented reappearance on the political agenda, restoring its legitimacy after a long period of doubt about its relevance and identity. First, for the first time in its history, French social work has just received an official definition (May 2017), integrated into the Code of Social Action and of Families. Subsequently, the General Assembly of Social Work (*États généraux du travail social*) led to the implementation of an “Inter-ministerial Action Plan for Social Work and Social Development” (2015). Finally, the “Strategy for preventing and combating poverty” announced in September 2018 reinforced the need to advance in the transformation of social work: the overhaul of higher qualifications, participation of supported persons, and the fight against the non-utilisation of rights; the simplification of administrative procedures, the promotion of collective intervention, and the unconditional, local, primary social support service; a career path referent, and social

development, etc. However, this favourable institutional context coincides with a diagnosis of a recurrent crisis in social work.

The extensible boundaries of social work

Social work does not form a homogeneous field, but rather an assembly of multiple professions with varied origins, traditions and profiles (Molina, 2015) and with an equally varied range of employers. Its missions often appear uncertain, not to mention the heterogeneity and increasing diversity of social problems and of “users”. Social work has been built according to separate genealogies (social services, special education, animation, etc.), each lineage having its own lines of demarcation and historical traditions (Autès, 1999). It is not limited to the field of poverty: it also deals with medico-social issues (institutions), early childhood, and the protection of children and the elderly. Professionals thus practice in a wide range of institutions. They can be agents of the state and local authorities, but also belong to the associative world. The term “social intervention”, a new expression, developed in the early 1980s with the new professions linked to urban policy mechanisms and integration policies. This has also blurred borders (social and family mediators; animators, integration counsellors, and development agents; the social and solidarity economy, as well as volunteer action) (Chopart, 2000). Social workers now work alongside other actors involved in social and health action within the broad spectrum of the caring professions. However, far from affecting only the boundaries of social work, these changes also affect the meaning of missions, weakening the tutelary dimension of social work (Donzelot and Roman, 1998).

More and more frequently, we see public intervention assigned to producing concrete and measurable short-term results (Ion, 2006) in a context of scarce budgetary resources. IT tools and accounting rules, focused on monitoring the entry and exit of various programmes, are also part of a “protocolisation” of social work (Janiaux, 2012). In the end, a new way of managing the world of social work is emerging, as evidenced by the “new public management” (Bresson et al., 2013) in several European countries. We may even speak of the “managerialisation” of social work (Chauvière, 2007).

New challenges, new frameworks for action

The first major development for social work concerns the return of the figure of the “poor” as a category of public action, instead of that of the worker as advanced by the Social Security. Mass unemployment and forms of underemployment have profoundly changed the composition of social work constituencies. Today, precariousness no longer refers to the “socially maladapted”, but to workers without work. Increasingly, as the boundaries of work and care blur (Martin and Paugam, 2009) it refers to the working poor or low-wage individuals. Faced with this new social question, the answer has been to develop systems whose combination leads to the “social management of non-work” (Castel, 1998).

A second development, which is equally important for social work, concerns the question of immigration and the consideration of ethno-racial discrimination (Safi, 2013). From this point of view, it is not only the reality of the composition of French society that has led to a shift, or

hybridization, from the “social question” to the “racial question” (Fassin and Fassin, 2006), but also very significant forms of self-representation in the working class neighbourhoods since the early 1990s (Beaud and Masclet, 2006). Social work is therefore reinterpreted in the light of themes related to the place of “differences”, religion, the formation of “ghettos”, and the suspicion of communitarianism exercised over minority populations (Avenel, 2010; Boucher and Belqasmi, 2011; Mohammed and Talpin, 2018).

A third development has been the individualisation of the treatment of the social question. This “individualist” policy (Castel, Duvoux, 2013) is characterised by the targeting of the individual, mobilising him or her to obtain their rights, which is a fundamental inflection of the spirit of social law at the heart of the notion of support. The individual is encouraged to develop his or her ability to connect with others. The expectation is that he will be a subject of the intervention, part of the decisions that concern him, a responsible individual and author of his own stages of development (Guiliani, 2013; Rist and Rouxel, 2018). In this sense, social work can no longer just be “work for another person”, but a “work with” (Astier, 2007) by which the helping relationship is established as “helping to build relationships” (Ravon, 2005). The contractualisation of social action aims to ensure that the beneficiary is no longer simply assigned a status and that he or she takes part in registering themselves in a life “pathway” (Lafore, 2016). The singularisation of social action has long been the dominant framework transmitted in social work training centres in France (Iori, 2018).

One of the effects of this contractualisation is to open the way to a high degree of heterogeneity in the modes of appropriation open to individuals (Duvoux, 2009). This raises questions concerning the work of social workers. Refocusing on the individual is a source of ambiguity and ambivalence between social debt and individual debt (Astier, 2007), as evidenced by the debates on the “activation” of social protection (Giraud, 2016) and the recurring shift towards the activation of individuals (Barbier, 2017). This has opened the question of the relationship between social work and employment, within the framework of integration policies. How are social work practices and values redefined as a result of the rapprochement with the labour market enshrined in integration policies? What tensions does this introduce for professionals? On the other hand, how is the accumulation of the fragility for those who are furthest from employment integrated into the construction of support pathways? This includes mental or physical health problems to which the most vulnerable populations are exposed. The construction of individualised pathways requires transversal action between the health and social sectors and a hybridisation of the modes of intervention of these two fields, whose effectiveness, however, is questionable due to the inertia of differentiated professional cultures and compartmentalised organisations.

Finally, in a fourth development, various institutional reforms in recent years have affected social work. This is particular due to decentralisation and the 2002 law on the renewal of social and medico-social action. Decentralization at the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s introduced new social policies, advocating territorialisation, activation and empowerment. This questioned traditional, centralised and sector-specific social policies (Donzelot and Estèbe, 1994; Palier, 2002). The legislator established an institutional framework that aims at strengthening the conditions for an intervention based on the prevention of exclusion. It also aims at the development of transversal projects dealing with social issues within the framework of territories and the collaboration of all the concerned actors, including citizens (Andreotti et al., 2013). But the evidence is that social action is being worn down because of the fragmentation

of programmes, stacked one on top of the other, and the managerial logic that accompanies them. This leads to an increased fragmentation of social work and, by the same token, of the care and support for people. (Avenel and Bourque, 2017).

Purpose of the thematic dossier

This thematic dossier aims at bringing together the most recent scientific contributions that shed light on the renewal of theoretical perspectives on social work, but also on its societal and institutional transformations as it returns to the forefront. It will analyse the different contemporary evolutions of social work from the point of view of power. Indeed, this question of power is raised by the very nature of social work, as a practice intended to “enable people to have access to all fundamental rights, facilitate their social inclusion and exercise full citizenship (...) participate in the development of people’s capacities to act for themselves and in their environment” (CASF, article D.142-1-1). From this point of view, social work implements highly dynamic conceptions of autonomy, through knowledge and structures, without necessarily being able to influence the causes of the situations it deals with. This point, which has become increasingly evident with the growth in the mass character of poverty and precariousness, leads to a diagnosis of the contemporary impotence of social work.

This raises a more fundamental and far-reaching question on the functions of social work. Social work had been considered to be an instrument of power, whether through the transmission of norms and discipline or through the internalization of the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting of the dominant classes. This very popular representation of the 1970s, has gradually been reversed into a contrary diagnosis. What is highlighted today is the inability of social work to provide answers to the situations it deals with as well as its submission to the market logic extended to the social sphere. As a counterpoint to these theses, which are as general as those that preceded them, many studies have highlighted the existence of a discretionary power of the agents who are in contact with the public. In this sense, highlighting the power of social work begins with a renewal of empirical investigation of the concrete effects it produces in the places where it has been applied. It then addresses the transformations of social intervention, with the advent of the theme of empowerment. Finally, it returns to the question of what social work accomplishes in society.

Theme I: Discretionary power of agents: from cognitive framework to practice

A first theme of analysis leads to broadening the scope of the effects produced by social work. Indeed, a significant literature has developed to account for the effects produced by field professionals, referred to as “street-level bureaucrats” by Michael Lipsky (1980). It explores the “discretionary power” of agents (Dubois, 1999), their concrete capacity to influence the implementation of social policies they apply according to their social status, their previous training, the concrete interactions they establish with their users, and the institutional frameworks and organizations within which they operate. Far from challenging the exercise of this discretion, the accumulation of programmes can reinforce it (“More rules may create more

discretion”, Evans and Harris, 2004). This margin of manoeuvre for agents has repercussions on users (Spire, 2008). Taking into account the social characteristics of the protagonists on either side of the counter leads to the emergence of different forms of appropriation of the objectives. Even if this is not necessarily a condition for responding to this call for contributions, symmetrical or structural consideration on both sides of the counter would be desirable. The study of the material dimensions of social work, both the description of the premises in which it takes place and the effects of their configuration on the content of the activity (Weller, 2018), as well as the material conditions of the functioning of professionals, is encouraged.

The “combined and non-convergent effects of gender and class” (Serre, 2011) have differentiated this “discretionary” power. Professional cultures expose generational variations and militant involvement (Duvoux, Mutuel, 2017), which have an impact on the ways in which actions are implemented and/or access to people’s rights is granted. The study of the social differentiations of professionals according to different variables would be welcome. Gender-sensitive approaches (Bereni et al., 2008) would be particularly appreciated. These distinctions linked to the class, gender and generation characteristics of social work professionals increasingly interconnect with a differentiation of roles and forms of direct or implicit interdependence between professionals. Discretion can also be exercised collectively (Weill, 2015) in mediation proceedings, as has been demonstrated in the case of enforceable housing rights. Diffusion of the activation logic leads to the development of control actions that generate the development of new practices (Dubois et al., 2018), a new temporality of action (Clouet, 2018), or forms of interdependence between sectors that are highly activated (such as social integration) and those that are less so (such as polyvalence) (Lahieyte, 2018). The study of the assistance relationship based on its temporal norms and cognitive frameworks generated by the forms of institutionally constrained action (Lima, 2017) would be welcome, especially to the degree it is undertaken on the basis of the practitioners’ practices and the forms of reflexivity that they can develop (Gardella, 2017) in the context of their professional activity. Professional cultures persist despite organizational and institutional injunctions, which contribute to maintaining borders in the implementation of social work (Watkins-Hayes, 2009) as demonstrated by the American case.

A final important aspect in the reflection on this discretionary power is to avoid neglecting the symbolic and moral dimensions it entails (Fassin et al., 2013). Whatever their technicisation and bureaucratisation, forms of social intervention always carry normative frameworks, implicitly or explicitly. Obviously, this dimension has close links to the social, professional and gender positions of the actors of the social state and their relations with other parts of the state, in particular the judicial and criminal authorities. The importance of these symbolic and normative frameworks appears acutely through the comparative approach (Haapajärvi, 2018; Clouet, 2018). A reflection on their effects on inclusion and exclusion, on the drawing of symbolic borders (Lamont and Molnar, 2002) would be welcome.

Theme II: Empowerment of social work and supported persons

The notion of power also applies in a second sense, the one commonly referred to as “empowerment”, which refers in concrete terms to the increasing importance of the themes of user participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of actions carried out. The “participation” of people will be treated from three main angles: gender, which is at the root of

conceptualizations in terms of empowerment (Bacqué and Biewener, 2013); non-utilisation of rights, which can be interpreted as a paradoxical power of users to refuse the benefits and services granted to them (Warin, 2016); and the metamorphoses of professional social work practices linked to the enhanced appreciation of collective social work, of “*l’aller vers*” [going out to meet people], of social development (Avenel and Bourque, 2017), and of “community organizing” (Talpin, 2016).

Since the late 1990s, we have seen the rise of a new way of thinking about supporting people in difficulty through the affirmation of a conception of recipients as actors in social and medico-social policies. This has accompanied a series of laws that modify the modes of governance of institutions, as well as the type of relationship between social workers and users. Through these different legislative texts, a fundamental evolution has been taking place based on the enhancement of users’ rights, with a view to co-construction. The dissemination of this approach has led this call for contributions to distinguish between the level of participation of the persons concerned in institutional bodies—user committees, social life councils, 8th college of the CNLE (National Council for Policies to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion), CNCPH (National Advisory Council for Disabled Persons), HCTS (High Council for Social Work), etc.—and the level of participation of people in individual and collective support, and more recently in co-training schemes with social workers, to develop approaches to associate academic and practical knowledge (Jaeger, 2017).

This call requests contributions on the role of social workers in this dynamic, in relation to the mobilisation of associations, as well as on the content and concrete scope of the involvement of target groups in the various stages of decision-making, from its conception to its implementation and evaluation. Moreover, a recurrent limitation lies in the uncertain link between participation and decision-making, i.e. the level of influence or power that the individuals concerned have at their disposal to participate in the very elaboration of public action and to influence the meaning and conduct of social policies (Carrel, 2013). Is this a simple search for consultation and a “joining effect” (Donzelot et al., 2003) or an integration into a co-construction process (Blondiaux, 2008)? This call also seeks a comparison with other countries on these points, because French social work is identified as a barrier, due to a tradition of individualized face-to-face support, a medical approach, and mistrust of the collective and community social work (Avenel, Bourque, 2017; Talpin, 2016; Gourgues et al., 2013). Has a new model of social intervention been emerging in France based on the development of individual and collective empowerment, challenging the usual practices of social work professionals in a redefinition of their relationships with supported persons, institutions and civil society? What are the normative dimensions of such a project? Is this a new management tool involving citizens and supported persons in the conduct of public policies aimed at a greater cross-disciplinary approach to intervention and an improvement in the service provided? Or is this also a question of promoting more autonomous groups of citizens aimed at strengthening the capacity to act on living conditions by empowering the most vulnerable populations in particular?

The question of gender and intersectionality in social work is also a major issue in understanding social relationships. This remains an unavoidable variable, following a long period of “denial” (Bessin, 2005) of the practices of a predominantly feminised professional sector. The field of social intervention thus appears to be a space for reproducing gender norms that amplify the gendered division of social roles. This is the case, for example, in early

childhood care (Murcier, 2007), child protection and parental support (Cardi, 2015), or in the provision of support for the elderly (Martin, 2001), the homeless (Marcillat, 2018; Loison-Leruste and Perrier, 2019), and women victims of violence (Jaspard, 2011; Herman, 2012). Using new instruments such as microcredit, gender is at the heart of women's empowerment strategies particularly in counterbalancing the influence of patriarchal systems (Sanyal, 2014), even if this approach may prove ambivalent in terms of its social effects (Duvoux, 2016). In this sense, this call mobilizes the gender issue to renew reflection on social work by raising new questions in three directions. First, it refers to a theoretical deconstruction of gender stereotypes that affect social work by questioning the organization of social work; training institutions, the categories of population concerned and their support; and the history of social work and its methods of intervention. Secondly, it is questionable to what extent gender is emerging as an approach that promotes a cross-disciplinary method of public action and social work practices. Third, gender integration in social work issues more generally questions the place of care in society, i.e. "care tasks" and "helping relationships", as an activity of universal value separated from the female (Molinier, 2013).

Finally, taking into account the non-utilisation of social rights also leads to rethinking the very roots of the founding conceptions of professional practices in social work. It refers to at least two main questions. The first concerns the complexity of social action and the difficulty of accessing benefits. The second is the mistrust that has gradually developed between a significant part of the vulnerable population and social services, which explains why people in difficulty end up giving up their rights. To what extent does non-utilisation lead to an understanding of the conditions under which social workers' organisations operate and professional practices are deployed, which determine the relationship of assistance and support? This major challenge for social work can refer in particular to the themes of "*aller vers*" [going out to meet people], of the transformation of the medico-social offer, and the "outside the walls" approach.

Theme III: Normative power versus the transformative power of social work

Finally, a third theme of the call for contributions on the power of social work concerns its capacity to be an actor of innovation and social transformation. This theme aims at reintroducing traditional debates on its internal tensions in a context of profound changes in social work: social control and emancipation, management of systems and social innovation, assistance and autonomy, sectoral intervention and territorial approach, and the individual and the collective (Autès, 1999; Ion, 2006; Chauviere, 2004; Karsz, 2004).

Since the early 1980s, many studies have strongly qualified the theses on the functions of social control (*Esprit*, 1972; Donzelot, 1977; Verdès-Leroux, 1978). The individuals concerned have a margin of autonomy, can negotiate and, above all, refuse to impose a negative identity (Schnapper, 1989; Paugam, 1991; Messu, 1991). Recipients come to challenge the definition of professional roles (Corcuff, 1996; Dubois, 1999). These approaches have had the great virtue of reintroducing the initiative capacities of the actors. Today, with the mass proliferation of situations of vulnerability and their increasing diversity, the spread of new management methods and "professional tests" (Ravon, 2010; Soulet, 2016), as well as forms of social workers involvement (Gaspar, 2012), these perspectives are both prolonged and counterbalanced by the logic of empowerment of the entire chain of actors, of activation, and of increasing accountability requirements for professionals and for supported people.

What does social work “manufacture” in restructuring intervention practices, in particular through the logic of individualisation and contractualisation of assistance and integration? In the same way, what should we think of the dissemination of the logic of social innovation advanced by the state, local authorities, associations, foundations, and cooperative societies with the whole social work theme of “partnership” and “territory”? Should it be seen as an increased instrumentalisation of professional practices by public authorities, or even as a “subversion of the social by the economic”, or conversely as a form of renewal and decompartmentalisation by “hybridization” of practices and knowledge? Thus, this call invites us to review the “function” of social work (“Pourquoi le travail social ?” [why social work?], *Esprit*, 1972) as well as its “utility” (“à quoi sert le travail social ?” [what is the purpose of social work?], *Esprit*, 1998) up to the theme of its “deinstitutionalisation” and its dilution into the broader notion of “social intervention”.

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Further information on the content of this call for contributions can be obtained from the coordinators at the following addresses:

Cyprien.AVENEL@social.gouv.fr

nicolas.duvoux@univ-paris8.fr

Authors who would like to propose an article on this subject to the journal should send it by 12 November at the latest, accompanied by an abstract and a presentation of the author.

(cf. the « conseils aux auteurs » of the RFAS [on-line] [http://drees.social-sante.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques/publications/revue-francaise-des-affaires-sociales /](http://drees.social-sante.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques/publications/revue-francaise-des-affaires-sociales/))

to this address:

rfas-drees@sante.gouv.fr