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Standard of Dynamism – Dynamism of Standards

Introduction – A Word of Welcome

Though not being from Cork and not living in Cork City, I welcome you in this city. I would like to ask you to apologise the mess – building sites, road works had been the impression following those who arrived at Cork right up to the hotel. Cork is in preparation for being in 2005 the European Capital of Culture.

    Whatever the criteria had been for voting for Cork as Capital for this year, there is a paradox which comes along with this honourable and hopefully exciting status. Cork is renowned for being the capital of Ireland's «rebel county». As such, it has a rich history, a heritage of engaging for the people living here, a tradition of fighting with them – all this of course being as well a place of common life and thus culture. If you go through the city, if you look at the hidden places you can see many memorials – probably many not being mentioned next year. And the honour of being capital of culture, celebrating the heritage means that Cork currently is a building site. Refurbishing the city from bottom up: the drainage scheme, new pavements and lighting. And as well it means: Renewing the economic and social structure to make Ireland and Cork part of the envisaged «most competitive Europe».

    No, I did not forget that the Lisbon goal promised as well that this society will be *«capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion».* Only: the discourse is another. As the European project is – at most – a project **for** the people it takes its point of departure from assessing what is done for them, an external framework or point of reference. Well, this is also a matter of a bottom up process insofar as it aims on building an urgently needed system of social sources and

provisions. This is thought to be a system, providing basic security and care for people to live independently and in dignity. And of course, we are told as well that this will be a quality service and quality care.

Décrire l'époque, ce n'est pas la refléter passivement, c'est vouloir la changer (Sartre)

Qualification – a Matter of Contextualisation and Establishing Relationships

I do not want to talk about the material side of the development – I assume *Sean Healy* will do this and I assume as well that this can open an entirely different debate on politics and policies. In this material sense I do not want to qualify local, national and supranational politics and policies.

Did I say qualify? Well, I did. And this is what I want to look at.

To qualify something simply means to put it into a wider context, by this: relating it to something. This «something» can be an external point of reference; and this «something» can be an internal point of reference. For instance I can look at the number of people who come to an agency that provides consultation for women and couples with regard to abortion. This figure as such does not say much. But I can qualify it by saying that these people came on a voluntary basis or they came because they the law requires them to contact such an agency – this was a matter which had been looked at when members of this project recently visit CARITAS organisations in Magdeburg. A concrete example, taken from another area: In a French report on precarity, which had been published two days ago by SECOURS CATHOLIQUE we read that the number of people looking for help at that organisation increased between 2001 and 2003 by 8 percent. As such the figure doesn't say anything. We have to qualify this figure, we have to ask if this is an indicator for the good work by CARITAS or higher capacities of the organisation to work in this area or an indicator for an increasing number of unemployed people (the figure referred to unem-

ployed) or an indicator of unemployed who do not get advice and support elsewhere?

The answers on such questions qualify any given absolute number of service users. They actually say something about the meaning.

What, then, are the criteria for such qualification? Before I elaborate this, please let me briefly turn to the question of what actually has to be understood by the term «quality».

Quality – Fundamental Definitional Reference

Looking at quality, there are basically two aspects to describe its character.

* First, it is just a means of what we can term to be a meaningful description. It is important to include the adjective meaningful as we are not solely aiming on a list of something we can see. Rather, we are concerned with a description that follows certain categories. Looking back into the history of philosophy we find early definitions of quality by starting with thinking about categories. In other words, the aim was to find basic moments that can be used to measure the uniqueness of something. Thus, *Plato* suggested as such categories being/existence, identity, difference, change, stability. This list is as such not of interest for our debate; over time many different attempts to change the categories had been made – and actually *Aristotle* introduced quality itself as one of the categories; at least the fundamental approach had been maintained over time: Quality in this sense can be grasped as a matrix of characteristics that can be used to describe the uniqueness of something. This uniqueness could be seen in the characteristics as such or in the specific quantitative combination. Building categories always aimed at finding last determinations, terms that can be used as grasping the «final meaning» and from which other terms can be derived.
* However, in this sense being «value neutral» the next step of looking at quality is concerned with what I mentioned before: relating such a descriptive approach with something. In philosophical terms, we can see this as matter of moving

- ➢ from an object or process as such to
- ➢ something for itself, something with a specific meaning.

This meaning is grounded in a specific use here of the service in question. In other words, it is decisive that we introduce aims and values to assess the quality. We are simply required to consider if the uniqueness of what we look at is appropriate to serve us in reaching our goals and values. In simple terms, an «excellent screwdriver» won't bring us any nearer to a good cup of tea; and a beautiful looking kettle may do so, but it definitely will not help us to drive a single screw into any wall. Quality cannot be expressed **as such**; quality in this understanding is only gained by its value in serving a set goal or objective. And these objectives can only be defined by taking decisions on the ground of certain values – convictions we have as guiding our action. I think this had never been as important as it is in the contemporary debates.

Why? We are again and again confronted with certain standards which are presented to us as eternal values. Effectiveness and efficiency are presented as guidelines of any action which cannot be questioned. But such a statement makes us forgetting that there is nothing as effectiveness or efficiency as such. Let us look at the fight against poverty. If we say everybody has to get into employment, thus being in gainful employment and receiving sufficient income we know what it is about – and every means is accepted to get people into employment. The German minister for economy and work made this in a frightening way clear during a recent meeting in Rotterdam. However, the effectiveness and efficiency of this approach can be questioned: Yes, people are effectively pushed into the labour market; however, in the same vein they are pulled out of their existence as competent citizens with their rights to decide on issues of their own life. For single mothers it may require the decision between neglecting the children if there are no appropriate child care facilities available or neglecting their physical existence. One of the real synonyms for effectiveness is usefulness. And things, goods and services, can be useful with respect to very different effects. We have to be aware of the fact that what is proposed as eternal law of the matter as such is actually a decision that is taken by certain groups who have defining power. And this means: such decisions are concerned with defining certain objectives as given

and as standard not only for follow-up decisions but as well as standard that subordinates decisions in other areas.

Quality Assessment

It was interesting for me to learn in preparation of this presentation a little bit about the origin of contemporary quality debates. Amongst others, it goes apparently back to problems that occurred during World War II in the British weapon manufactory. Bombs exploded in the factory during the production process. Of course, this was bad quality. The solution was that suppliers of products which had been used for the production had been asked to fulfil three steps:
*   write down the procedures of their own production,
*   ensure they these rules had been implemented and finally
*   opening this procedure for control by government inspectors.
For us it is important that even after the introduction of the quality control it had been actually not of relevance what happened to the bombs after they left the factory. Quality assurance, in this way, was not concerned with securing a good product, but only with securing … – well, the building in which the production took place. Sure, one can say that a bomb that exploded already during the process of production is useless in the battle field. But one cannot say anything the other way round.

Before, I briefly mentioned the appropriateness to serve us in reaching our goals and values. However, as correct as this is in one way, it is problematic in another way: We have to consider carefully if we really can simply talk about our goals and values. We have to consider this and we have to take a decision which actually is itself a decision on our goals and values – a decision with far reaching consequences.

Shifts in Quality Assessment – from Direct Relationships to Managerialism and Control

We can see an important general shift in terms of quality assessment – but actually this shift is not so much a shift in terms of production of goods and services but more a shift in social relationships.

*   Looking at quality assessment and control respectively, we first find the immediate relationship between manager (or employer respectively), producer (or employee) and customer (or client or user). In a way, one could even say that the definition of quality had been a matter of exercising power in a relationship between two parties. And of course, this had been subject to all matters around power imbalances. It included the hierarchical organisation of the system – if we look back we find the definition of the client as serf, as being dependent on the «good deeds» of the patron. In a away the client in the medieval system had the «right» to receive mercy on the condition that s/he subordinated him/herself. This had been a relationship that had been «negotiated» to a large extent directly between patron and serf, though on basis of un-equal terms.
*   The new pattern of quality assessment presumes that there is a quality that is fundamentally inherent to any given service. It is the suggestion of quality as following rules that can be defined in a neutral way, with-out any reference. If we go back to what I mentioned before it is the concern with inherent criteria which drives many contemporary debates on quality. If we follow this strand, we are back to categories that pro-vide as such, without any further qualification, standards for what good quality is and what not.

    A typical example for this is the *ISO 9000* standards. Brought to the point, they are based on three simple rules, namely
    ➢   Say what you do
    ➢   Do what you say and
    ➢   Make visible that you do what you say

    Now, being confronted with this I tend to get sarcastic. If we look at a practical example, let us take elderly care it could mean

- ➢ The person we are caring for will get the necessary service he or she needs to secure physical life appropriately long,
- ➢ We provide just basic hygienic and nutritional provisions and
- ➢ – life today is very much the art of presentation and formulation in an imaginative world, so we will let everyone know – «We take care of what people really need».

The appropriateness is not really a matter of interest as such a standard is rigid and simple, securing the provision of the service according to certain norms, however not being concerned with the quality of the service as such. For those of you who are used to thinking in legal terms: quality is being defined in terms of formal law rather than being seen as a matter of material law.

It is exactly this perspective that allows us to go a step further. Following such a model, we are actually not thinking anymore in terms of rights but in terms of law. Legitimation is not coming based on the rights of individuals and social groups – we cautiously may remember *Tom Marshall* with his reference to civil, political and social rights. Legitimation is now according to the new widely accepted norms based on procedures – so far *Niklas Luhman* had been right in talking of legitimation by procedure.

Power imbalances are surely not overcome in principal. But at least everybody has a right now that those in authority follow certain given rules.

* Subsequently, we arrived at a third social relationship, not marked by the clientelist relationship nor marked by granted formal rights. A new power relationship emerges, being employed with the definition of criteria that will now determine what is good, what is not so good and even what is bad. On the surface, power is returned to the customer. However, if we look behind the scenes we are getting aware of the dominance of competitive mechanisms of formal structures of trade laws. Quality of goods and services is assessed by power on the market. And the main stakeholder now is a managerial group who define their power over criteria of marketability or supposedly neutral «professionalism». What is of crucial importance is, that the link between «manager» and worker, between control and product is entirely broken. Instead of being

concerned with the understanding of a process we are concerned with its control.

En passent, it is worthwhile to mention en passent that the criteria for excellence of the Total Quality Management, complying with the standards of European Foundation on Quality management are awarded with the Ludwig Erhard price.

What is important in regard of all these developments is that quality looses one of the fundamental own qualities: that of being a relational matter. In other words, it looses it character of being a descriptor of a meaning.

Cogito ergo sum
Consumo ergo sum
Observo ergo sum

If I said we are concerned with a shift in social relationship, the core actually is that services – even person related social services – are not categorised anymore as personal relationship. Instead of being seen as human interactions they are redefined first as interactions between people and goods and then as execution of rules and the implementation of standards

Quality – Looking for Vested Interests

However, two points have to be critically remarked:

Actually, this approach does in no way help us to define standards of quality. The fundamental challenge consists of various steps

1) We have to define criteria that can guide us: Along which lines can we actually define what a good social service is and what not? This means nothing else than to define what we actually want to achieve. Coming back to the recent event in Rotterdam and the remarks by the German minister for economy and work, we can take employment and integration as example. The question, then, is if employment is actually the means or already the aim. – I leave it up to you to think about it. That employment is important will not be the question that is at the centre stage of this contemplation.

2) With this, we have to define the interests that guide and determine the validity of the criteria. Of course, we can claim that there are criteria which are inherent in any given service requirement – and guiding would be the requirement rather than the service provision. To take an example, we can say that every drug addict needs, first and foremost, a detoxiation and only after that any therapy can be taken up. However, evidence for such assumptions is in many cases problematic. Who – or what – provides such evidence or any other evidence?

3) If we are honest, the evidence is actually given by the goals and objectives of our «help», «support» and «care». In acknowledging this – and only then – we can begin to determine quality of social services.

Consequently, what we have to do is

* first, to define the different «stakeholders» who can or should actively express their interests

* second, to look at the – manifest or potential – individual interests and goals

* third, to find out which interests we are ready to recognise. This means as well to possibly look at a common (minimum) denominator and possibly to reject certain interest groups – here it is not the place to discuss how this can and should be done.

To arrive there, there are at least the following different approaches, the one being simply a way of defining – common – objectives and then asking if they are reached by the service provided. The question is how they can be arrived at. Do we have common values, sufficiently defined by what is known as «European Social Model»? Can we sufficiently suggest procedures – saying if these rules are observed the interests of the different stakeholders are fulfilled? Can we suggest that people will freely follow their own decisions, making their choices by following market rules – deciding by this what is good quality and what is not?

What we definitely cannot do is stating benchmarks – this would be to establish a circle of defining quality by quality. It is the approach which had been criticised before: The establishment of mechanisms of control rather than understanding.

Turning matters back on their feet

In this light, to determine quality we actually cannot start from the service as such but from two angles, namely
*   the service provider and
*   the coordination of the service provider and the service expected.
The service that is provided and its quality is consequently only the result of the process of coordination.

I.   Individual Inter-Esse

Looking at the service provider we are used to think of agencies or institutions. This is seen as main actor – and it is only within such organisation that we allow individuals to act according their personal motivations. I propose that we start with the individuals, coming with their different motivations together, forming and maintaining such an organisation that – in our case – is a service provider. Interest – the inter-esse, being and acting between something – is the actual foundation of any such organisation.
     Who, then, is coming together? To name but a few we find the following:
*   volunteers – with the interest of concern for a problem or the motivation of self-confirmation
*   professionals – having to work to make a living, doing it in the organisation in question because this was just an available job for them or/and because they could combine their personal interest and their professional orientation and the opportunities by the workplace
*   politicians – these can be a representatives as well of a «broader ideological stream» who see the organisation as platform their ideas; this can be the church, political parties etc. and it has to be considered that these ambitions.
You can add other actors within the organisation and you can add as well other motives. In any case, it will be important not to forget the personal motivations of individuals who finally define by their action the actual organisation.

II.　　　The «Organisation as Compromise of Values»

It is only from here where we can define the organisation and the service provider. In other words, the individual actors in their interplay define the original aims and goals. In this light, the specificity of the organisation is constituted by the interests of the individual actors. However, the individual actors fit themselves into the existing organisation – an entity which has a specific history and «own life». People who are getting active in DIACONIA perhaps do so because this is a protestant organisation or they do so perhaps because it is – in the given locality – the only organisation which is active in their field of interest as for instance working with asylum seekers.

In a way all this is closely linked to compromises. In this sense, the organisation has an «own existence». Quality, then, is how the organisation combined the different interests and bundled them to a common organisational goal. And here we have to see that the specific quality of the project and service is not least defined by

a) which different «values are included and

b) how the compromise within the organisation is elaborated.

It is from here where specific quality can be defined – and coming back to earlier remarks: There is no quality as such; instead we are always concerned with specific quality, specific to our organisation.

An example is the possible conflict for a catholic organisation working on the issue of abortion. It may mean to look in an individual case to look at a balance between

*　supporting self-determination

*　fighting poverty and

*　avoiding abortion.

The example is taken as well to show – en passant – that there may be very different approaches taken by other – non-catholic – organisations.

III.   The Question of Ownership – or: The «Environment» and Institutional Framework»

Quality is – as frequently said – a matter of establishing relationships. And the fundamental relationship is the one of the actor to her or his «environment». The first, the nearest environment is the organisation itself.

Ownership is a legal relationship, defining a possession. Looking at an organisation this means that formal responsibilities and liabilities are defined.

However, it refers at the same time – and more in substantial terms – to something that we can define as identification with the organisation, namely its values, norms and activities.

First and foremost it simply means to look at the formal status of the organisation. Is it a private, for profit organisation, a non-profit/non-governmental organisation or a statutory body? If it is a NP/GO: Is it a branch or part of a large organisation or movement, being linked to an «ideological grouping» or is it a more or less isolated, local initiative.

All this is important to determine the dependencies – which can be obstacles and restrictions or as well enhanced opportunities and support mechanisms.

Then, it is important to look at the actual relationships within the organisation – for instance the board structure, the relationship between professionals and volunteers etc.

Finally, it is from here where different links are established – statutory invigilation, control by professional boards …

As well, family obligations … have to be taken into account.

It is important that we are consciously take real actors, real human beings at centre stage.

IV.   De-Subjectivation – or: Professional Standards and Social Rights

Contributions/services to
*   The actors themselves, including their working conditions

* The «clients» – and as much I reject this term I am hesitant to accept one of the contemporary terms as service user, customer etc. not least as they continue the unfortunate tradition of subordination and power imbalance
* The organisation as entity with its own rights – and obligations
* The «general interest»

All of this is very much a matter of permanent balancing and rebalancing. And although we have to be careful with drawing attention as well to the fact that actually the question of knowledge and «evidence» is not concerned with truth as such. We are concerned with «historical truth», in this sense as well truth that is a matter of negotiations and battles.

Conclusion

You may decide yourself in the further debates of this is a provocation or if it is a way of opening a new perspective an assessing quality of social services. What we all have to keep in mind is that the «social» of social services has at least three dimensions, namely
* social as interpersonal – and hierarchical – compassion
* social as interactive relation, a relationship between individuals and groups that permanently create motivations, behaviour, attitudes, etc.
* social as system of institutions, rules, regulations – formal, substantial and material norms; as system that provides a framework of self-confirming expectations but at the same time a framework of permanent challenge to change.

Taking it from here – and coming back to the fact that quality assessment had been originally concerned with building bombs, we should always be sure that what we produce are no bombs, and if we are produce weapons at all they should be good weapons in combating poverty and exclusion; but as well in supporting solidarity and justice – a truism which again and again forgotten in this debate.

And so we are back in a way to the quote which makes the more recent title of the presentation, namely that

**Décrire l'époque, ce n'est pas la refléter passivement,
c'est vouloir la changer (Sartre)**

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i   These are notes only; though they can be quoted it has to be considered that (a) the actual spoken word is different and (b) that some aspects need elaboration, being here only mentioned as cues.