PUBLIC ETHICS

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Public ethics is a new paradigm in the social sciences that sheds a particular light on a range of topics and issues: the conduct of public officials and social actors involved in the construction of public problems; the systems and processes designed to regulate the conduct of these people; and the characteristics and moral justifications of public actions.

In our time, ethics is referred to from a perspective differentiating it from other modes of normative regulation and aims, such as moral philosophy and deontology. In the field of applied ethics, it is often said that ethics is a mode of regulation that is framed essentially around a self-regulatory logic (i.e., one that rests on an ideal of the responsible management of a margin of autonomy), while modes such as moral philosophy, law and deontology are, to a greater extent, framed around a hetero-regulatory logic (i.e., one in which the regulation of conduct is imposed by an outside party).

When this distinction is then applied to the paradigm of public ethics, the result is to move beyond viewing the field of politics as a space that is closed or "off limits" and instead as a locus of interaction bringing into contact an array of stakeholders who wish to influence government action but who must also self-regulate so that the political system does not go off course.

The notion of public ethics has come into use in the philosophy and social science communities rather recently. It has been employed primarily (Veca, 1999) to shed light on a number of new phenomena characterizing contemporary societies – namely, the need to: arbitrate moral debates so as to prevent them from either degenerating or erupting into major social conflicts; understand the new, emergent political culture in order to devise responses to this social and cultural process of pluralization; and grasp particular social issues that have been unfolding in the realm of public problems.

Thus, in reference to this notion, the first researchers in public ethics began to examine issues specific to contemporary societies, which have been shaped by moral and cultural pluralism. In sociological terms, the thrust of their efforts has been to reflect on new "shared reasons" (Dumont, 1995) on which to establish new parameters for "living together" (Touraine, 1997). For most public ethicists, a lack of moral frames of reference is not the problem. On the contrary, there has been a multiplication of moral positions and, as such, this social reality has made it difficult to bring about new social consensuses.

Against this backdrop, the focus of public ethics has been trained on the analysis of policymaking and the conduct of public actors. As has now become clear, the political community is less and less

willing to take risks on issues having a moral dimension to them, out of an awareness that any political position in this area is likely to prompt detractors to take to the grandstand and denounce the government's initiatives. In debates of this nature, the social realm remains the arena of choice for the deployment of discourses and the enactment of moral and ideological confrontations. It is there also that strategic alliances are built, thereby enabling the various moral positions to find their champions (whom Becker referred to in terms of moral entrepreneurs), who strive to make government actors aware of the need to take a given public problem seriously (Gusfield, 2009). Studies have shown that, when confronted with the symbolic violence of these clashes and the social fragmentation that they are a sign of, politicians are often tempted to shirk their duties and leave it up to the courts to decide. In Canada, the Supreme Court has emerged as the main actor charged with re-establishing public order, intervening to put an end to the normative chaos arising from moral confrontations. Thus, for example, the Court was tasked with handing down rulings on such sensitive moral issues as abortion, same-sex marriage, group sex clubs, etc.

Little by little, the focus of public ethics analysis has shifted away from exclusively moral concerns and begun to embrace the public processes serving to handle such debates. In particular, public ethics affords a perspective with which to better grasp the extent to which political actors have gradually been sidelined from the realm of decision-making whenever social issues freighted with major moral considerations are involved. It is as though politicians are no longer invested with the powers of social representativeness that once accrued to them by virtue of the democratic legitimacy deriving from the electoral process. It thus comes as no surprise that public cynicism toward these actors has been growing steadily, at the same time that social demand in the area of government ethics has become visibly stronger. There are also increasing pressures to subject political actors to the independent oversight of so-called public ethics watchdogs. These stewards or custodians of ethics have become vital components in efforts to put politics on an ethical footing and to partially restore the confidence of citizens who have grown disillusioned over political virtue.

The particular vantage point of public ethics has helped to deepen understanding of the new social dynamic that is radically changing the culture of democracy – a dynamic that has, on the one hand, weakened the legitimacy of the political monopoly held by an elite that has managed to win at the electoral game and, on the other hand, enhanced the legitimacy of new social actors who have been assuming an active role in the construction and resolution of public problems. This paradigm provides a basis for critically assessing the new public spaces that frame debates (public hearings, parliamentary commissions and select committees, standing committees on ethics and other main social issues, etc.), thus providing a lens with which to make out the social concerns of the various stakeholders, analyze the system of moral justification associated with these stakeholders (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) and examine how public action ends up being developed within the machinery of government. A further valuable area of inquiry is to be found in analyzing the moral justifications of stakeholders from the perspective of how the latter react to the government's response.

Work in the field of public ethics has further prompted researchers to analyze the transformation of democratic culture, which has seen the status of politicians shift from one of respected authority to that of a corrupt, irresponsible operator who must be watched over (Boisvert, 2009a). Research has also been dedicated to politico-administrative scandals with a view to grasping the practices of public actors who have lost legitimacy and who, today, are denounced in all the media (Boisvert, 2009b).

Thus, in light of the current proliferation of research in the field, public ethics can be seen as constituting a new paradigm that offers social science researchers a special framework with which to analyze the reconfiguration of political interactions in contemporary societies.

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