

Guest editorial

Sustaining complexity: an ethics for times of slogans

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Choosing a topic for an editorial is never a simple task. Certain ideas presented themselves quite insistently. I could have written about the need for official recognition of health social work, about the teaching role of the profession or indeed about the limited institutional support that exists for research. I might also have reflected on paediatric palliative care, which is my field of practice. But then I thought that perhaps what was expected of me was an ethical reflection on current sociopolitical realities—those about which Ismael Serrano sings: “the everyday sorrows, those of supermarkets, of the metro and pavements, and also those far from me, the sorrows of the dry deserts, of the green jungles.”

And yet, I do not know how to go about it. Every word positions us; and every silence, every glance, does too. It seems that lately, for every large or small issue, we are asked to take a stance, to make a symbolic gesture of commitment. But is that truly necessary? The ethical principles of social work already define our context of practice: when we look at the people we accompany, we always strive to achieve equality, justice and dignity. If these values are already part of our essence, what sense does it make to repeat, time and again—in corridors, on social media, in writing—that we are against war, racism, sexism, insecurity and incivility, lack of opportunity, inequality, discrimination and oppression? The danger we face in the present day is to confound a tweet with action, a manifesto with intervention. We risk becoming social stenotherms, organisms unable to survive outside a narrow range of certainties.

Perhaps we feel more comfortable in the social motherhood expected of us: gentle attitudes, caring accompaniment, softly voiced demands, polite requests, caretakers of all causes and with neat handwriting. And if we also recycle, then we are the complete package.

Perhaps all this would make sense if our spirit of advocacy took shape in public squares and collective action; otherwise, we risk remaining in the comfort of ideology. But then comes the great question: can we truly make decisions without being shaped by our own beliefs and values? Can we intervene without being stirred by the constant murmur of the world around us? We cling to the illusion that we can decide from a pristine place, as if pure ethics, untouched by context, could exist. We are asked to act as though we lived in a neutral ether, as if Schrödinger had never introduced us to his cat, as if entropy did not also govern our institutions.

As if it were possible to observe without involvement, without resonating with the subtlest vibrations of life.

Yet such expectations are not only unrealistic, they are also dangerous: they conceal the forces that shape us. They make it seem as though our decisions were born of social sterility rather than from the constant tension between moral principles and material circumstances.

Because, if we are asked to take individual stances, the result may not please everyone: in the postmodern landscape, social workers too are diverse, and so are our worldviews and narratives. We may fear being cancelled, judged hastily, misinterpreted or even losing our jobs. That fear explains many of our instances of silence: silence that is not always complicity, but often a strategy for survival in a context where everything is under scrutiny—pure mimicry when dogma is sacred and “political correctness” shifts with the wind.

This is why it is important not to lose our bearings and to remember that social work cannot be conceived apart from philosophy; not in the academic sense of grand systems, but in the everyday sense of what challenges us: knowing and applying our ethical principles, placing human rights at the forefront, grounding our interventions and decisions in scientific evidence, and polishing our phronesis. And accompaniment, with emotion. And personal life, in one's own way. For heaven's sake, let us not all have to think, feel or believe the same—whether bound, covered or corseted.

Ultimately, our task is to sustain complexity without yielding to the temptation of shortcuts. And if we must be uniformed, let it be in comfortable shoes for walking the streets, not in labels that prevent us from expressing ourselves. Because ethics in social work is not about reciting mantras or subscribing to causes, nor about speaking with a single voice. It is about accompanying without certainties, yet with the obstinacy of never abandoning the pursuit of social justice. The only promise we can make is never to stop questioning, questioning ourselves, even when it hurts, with the steadfastness of those who know that respect for human dignity is our ultimate horizon.