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Lifelong Career Guidance, the State and the Citizen

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Career guidance: for customers, clients, or citizens?

In the European forums on guidance that have been created over the past few years (Watts, Sultana & McCarthy, 2010), as well as in the reviews of the field that have been carried out (e.g. OECD, 2004; Sultana, 2004; Watts & Sultana, 2004; Sultana & Watts, 2006), two discourses have evolved which consider the person who makes use of guidance services in different ways. These discourses construct the person either as a citizen, or as a user, customer or client. There are important, nuanced differences between discourses that speak of the person as a 'customer' or 'client', but for the purpose of this short article, I will consider these together, and contrast them with the notion of the person as 'citizen'. Each of these two main discourses has a different, indeed contrasting conceptualisation of the individual, of the state, and of the relationship between both. Each one opens up some possibilities in terms of the empowerment of individuals, and putting them at the centre of the services that they receive.

Let me underline the fact that this analysis of the discourses and the attitudes and realities they vehicle is not a pedantic academic exercise for its own sake. On the contrary, such analysis is needed because much is at stake. The context which sets the scene for a discussion on guidance in the 21st century is enormously challenging for the state and individual alike. It is important to address it if we are to understand the forces that impact on our definition of career guidance, its potential and value, as well as its relevance in a world that is marked by super-complexity. Such an understanding can help us appreciate better the extent to which the state has responsibilities in the provision of guidance, that is, the extent to which career guidance is a citizen entitlement in late modernity.

The state and negative globalisation

A first issue here is the changing nature of the state in the context of globalization (Bauman, 1998; Jessop, 2000). Negative globalization has simultaneously reduced the power of the state, while at the same time providing complex, often bewildering challenges that the state is ill-equipped to handle through the legal and institutional instruments that it has developed throughout its 200-year-old history. Due to multinational companies, for

instance—not to mention supra-national bodies—economic power has expanded to such a degree, and at such a cost to political power, that decisions affecting people's life and welfare are made in contexts beyond democratic control. For if the state dares oppose market forces, then capital will flow where it can easily and comfortably grow. What does a state do—and what *can* the state do—when it raises corporate tax to support social service expenditure for instance, and companies close doors and translocate elsewhere?

Consequently, the state is obliged to confront its citizens, disarmed and somewhat denuded of its legitimacy, and instead of offering a mantle of support, as it did in the past, says:

“Citizens: the world is as it is: jobs are hard to come by, they travel in and out of our national frontiers with a speed and in a direction we have little control over. What we ask you to do is this: study hard at school, get as much training as you can, whatever you do, don't drop out and become socially excluded, and if, at the end of 15 or 20 years of the best days of your life spent in institutions, you fail to find a job, don't give up, don't drop out, don't become socially excluded...otherwise we'll have to 'activate you' to maintain your 'use value' and your employability...You only have yourself to blame if you don't...so be ready to train and re-train yourself, to change track, to increase your qualifications and decrease your aspirations for decent work...learn how to put up with jobs which are too small for your spirit. Be ready to abandon roots, individual biographies and community identities to relocate to serve capital. Europe, after all, is without borders, and in these 'Guochi senza frontiei' we offer you a mobility of persons that is, quite literally, on the same level as mobility of goods. This dear citizens, is the brave new world that we can offer you. 'Les jeux sont faits'. 'Rien ne va plus'”.

In this scenario—what some social scientists have termed 'casino capitalism' (Strange, 1997)—how does the state behave...and more importantly, how *should* it behave? For often, and in many parts of the world, the state is reneging on its obligation to protect people against insecurity and the fear resulting from it. Instead, governments call for more flexibility in the labour market and in all other areas of life regulated by market forces. This means even more insecurity. What they are calling for is not a decrease of risk, but its increase (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2006). In its position of weakness, rather than accepting its responsibilities towards those who gave it its mandate, it cunningly disguises its dramatically reduced capacities and competences for responsible leadership by reframing state deficit and projecting it as personal deficit (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002): you cannot have access to a decent and dignified way of life because you have not studied and trained hard enough, you have not learnt how to edit, package and market yourself so that you are attractive to employers, you are not entrepreneurial enough, and horror of horrors, you have

not converted to the Lifelong Learning Gospel (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Kuhn & Sultana, 2006) with sufficient fervour. The appeal to ‘responsibility’ is, as Beck (2006: 8) would say, “the cynicism with which the state and its institutions whitewash their own failure”.

Autonomy and solidarity

This proclivity towards ‘responsibilisation’ (Ball, 2008) of social issues is vehicled in the guidance field by such terms as ‘career resilience’ and ‘career agility’, ‘portfolio careers’ and ‘boundaryless careers’—terms which are often bandied about with much enthusiasm in anticipation of a brave new world, but which perhaps reveal the lack of sufficient critical reflection. What we are referring to here is the process of ‘insourcing’ (Lash, 2003), which signals a reallocation of functions, activities and responsibilities to the individual that were previously regarded as primarily the responsibility of institutions and collectives (Watts, 1995). This ‘socially constructed autonomy’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) helps highlight the resulting paradox, whereby what is expected of the individual in terms of adaptation to certain values is *collectively* defined, but the individual is then expected to respond to this *individually*.

The trends that are being described here are particularly worrisome since they are taking place at a time when notions of social solidarity are being weakened. One response is precisely to ensure that individuals are not expected to assume greater individual responsibility without being offered appropriate support, particularly of a collective nature. Career guidance services embedded in a *critical* lifelong paradigm can be one form of such collective support...but it can equally serve to *reinforce* the ‘individualisation’ that personalizes structural problems if the paradigm loses its critical edge.

Security, dignity and the state

The nature of the state’s response, i.e. whether it accepts it has some responsibilities towards the individual in these times, when living has become a risky business, or whether it abdicates such responsibilities, depends, it seems to me, on the nature of the social contract it decides to enter into with those within its borders. And the nature of the social contract really depends on whether the state looks at us as client, user or customer of services on the one hand, or as citizens on the other (Stoer & Magalhães, 2002).

Contracts with clients, customers or users are agreements that are essentially underpinned by a market logic, and are based on market principles: among others, such contracts raise issues of *exchange* (i.e. what do I, as the state, get in return for the service I offer?), *value* (i.e. should the service be at a fee, and if so, how much should I, as the state charge?), and *access* (i.e. is the service I offer equally accessible to all groups?). Customers, clients and users have rights, but often these are narrowly defined in terms of choice between

competing services, the right to ‘walk away’ from a provider, and at best, the right to shape a service in ways that respond more closely to needs (Walsh, 1994; Clarke, 2007). The client, customer or user is interpellated by the state as a free-floating individual, who is invited to access services to maximize individual benefit, and the devil take the hindmost. Informed by the logic of the market, the state can withdraw its services and walk away too: from being a source of security, the state becomes yet another source of risk.

The bonds of a social contract

In contrast, a social contract between the state and citizens has a broader, more inclusive vision. It is about creating public debate on what is good for all society, and a recognition that there is no individual self-determination without social solidarity. In a social contract, the state more clearly and more honestly acknowledges its responsibilities towards its members, whom it recognises not as passive recipients of services that are lulled into dependency, but rather as active citizens, who are called to have an impact on matters that shape lives. In this social contract between state and citizens, there is an understanding that if the individual is obliged to walk a tightrope, then there must be a safety net to catch him or her when he or she falls. This is the least the state can do in the context of a society where risk and insecurity are increasingly present. Career guidance is part of that safety net—and as such is an entitlement of all citizens—but I would submit that it needs to be reconceptualised in ways that take into account the nature of the times, as an integral part of a reconceptualised state.



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