

Work and Values Debate in Times of Change: the Paradoxes Related to Public Service Notion

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Abstract

The passenger land transport sector in Portugal has been characterized by changes that have given the activity, namely drivers' activity, other goals, values and meanings. The companies' privatization policy in the 90's, that favoured the definition of public service contracts with private companies, gave rise to a debate on the necessary "compromise" between what has its origin on public intervention and what's determined by market logics. The research was carried within a private company, to whom was imposed the fulfilment of public service obligations. The aim is to know how public service value is preserved in a competitive market. This reflection integrates the contribution of the *ergological approach*, as a permanent learning of the debate between different values.

Introduction

The Portuguese collective road passenger transportation sector has been through changes, in the sequence of a privatization policy, showing different values at stake, of which commitment becomes, sometimes, difficult to manage. The debate between preserving public interest and the liberalization of economy (Leitão Marques & Moreira, 2003; Orban, 2004) is particularly visible if we take as reference the notion of "public service", widely discussed in different sectors of activity and geographic contexts. Examples of this are, among others, the privatization cases of Great Britain's railroads; of France's telecommunications; and of Peru's and Equator's electricity and water (Cours-Salies, Gerfaut & Lefebvre, 2002).

The public service notion, concerning collective road passenger transportation sector, has the implicit guarantee of a service that replies to citizen's fundamental need of moving, and therefore isn't susceptible to market volatility. From there derives its important role in producing integration and social and territorial cohesion.

In Portugal, the policy of nationalization in this sector, decreed in 1975, contributed to the maintenance of an exclusive public “protégée”. The dominant conception of public service was that certain activities should escape to the application of a mercantile logic, of profitability search, assuming that the market couldn’t satisfactorily render some services in all situations. Therefore, it was the public authorities’ task to satisfy essential collective needs.

Entering the 90th decade announces the implementation of new transportation policies. The privatization and liberalization of the sector, in coherence with the Common Transportation Policy (article 70 of European Economic Treaty), as well with general economy policy (Regulation EEC no. 1017/68), have redefined the framing of transportation as rendering a public service. Yet another logic starts sustaining this notion, now without excluding the presence of the market. The public authorities’ responsibility of guarantee the fulfilment of public service principles is maintained, in spite of changing the way how they carry out their obligations towards citizens. Even if it’s a private company who’s responsible for designing the services, it “may continue to be public and public administration is the first and main responsible for it” (Freitas do Amaral, 1999, p. 628, author’s translation), i.e. without any commitment to the principles that identify public services (Chevallier, 1987).

Nevertheless, this notion of public service, while being enriched with new contents, has also become emblematic of another society model (Chevallier, 1987). European construction made common the use of “services of general interest”, instead of public service, designating “both market and non-market services which the public authorities class as being of general interest and subject to specific public service obligations” (Green Paper, 2003, p.7). The European model of society advocates a balanced coexistence of solidarity and social cohesion objectives, interacting with objectives of market economical dynamism.

Effectively, if on one hand, the collective need subjacent to this kind of services, acknowledged as so by the Administration, justifies the fact of having been historically rendered by public power (State and Municipalities), on the other hand, one recognizes that it mustn’t be the State to always assume service rendering, which can be trusted “to public or private undertakings or to public-private partnerships and limit themselves to defining public objectives, monitoring, regulating and, where necessary, financing those services” (Green Paper, 2003, p.8).

As it is reinforced by the report of public consultation to the Green Paper on services of general interest, “there is a broad consensus on the essential importance of services of general interest for European societies. It is also generally accepted that these services should be provided in a way

that puts users first. However, no agreement exists concerning the relationship between services of general interest and market principles” (White Paper, 2004, p.24).

Legitimately the question imposed is then to know how are these questions portrayed in concrete working activities, i.e., by those that render public interest services. Then, how can one build a balance between distinct values?

Is it possible to understand public services without experiencing the activity?

Despite this initial framework, the issue addressed in this article emerged as so in the course of drivers activity analysis in real working context. A certain ergonomics tradition – activity ergonomics - in which we’re inscribed, made activity analysis an unavoidable reference, aiming to propose the transformation of work or workplace design (Wisner, 1998). Even though the researchers work has an important methodological anchoring point in work activity, its analysis is developed in parallel with the economic, technical and social factors study that crosses it.

It was in the course of this analysis that we could note the confrontation of workers in their activity with a conflict of values and rules, defined at different levels, which lead them to question what it means to render a public transportation service. The debate is not regarding the values that showed support rendering public service, privileging one or other orientation, but instead working over these values, allowing to build a balance between them. Our goal is to understand how drivers’ activity may contribute and be recognized as a public interest space of regulation facing mobility.

The ergological approach

What we currently know as ergological approach has a scientific and institutional tradition that goes back to the 80’s. It was developed in the University of Aix-en-Provence (France), when Yves Schwartz, Daniel Faïta and Bernard Vuillon began the project “Working Situations Multidisciplinary Analysis”¹. This project goals gathered three concerns: “to think about work changes, through concepts and experiences trading; to assume as project partners the leading figures of the analysed working situations themselves; and at the same time have as object the eminently problematic act of conceptualizing others’ activities” (Schwartz, 1997, p.7, author’s translation).

¹ Originally in French: Analyse Pluridisciplinaire des Situations de Travail (APST) – Schwartz, Y. & Faïta, D. (1985). *L’Homme Producteur*. Paris: Messidor.

The ergological contribute in this research is associated to the perspective of activity as being eminently arbitrary, and so, immersed in a world of knowledge, options, rules and values (Schwartz & Durrive, 2003). On the other hand, this approach also highlights the interaction between work activity and what's happening in society, considering that "a work situation always contains society challenges and, each one, because of the way how he/she works, participates in those society debates and recomposes them to his scale" (Schwartz & Durrive, 2003, p.14, author's translation).

We can distinguish, according to this approach, the so called "mercantile" values – measurable, tangible, quantifiable – of the ones "without dimension" – non quantifiable, that are associated with social law, working law, democratic deliberation, i.e., to common welfare (Schwartz, 1997). The options that each one integrates in activity management frequently have to conciliate distinct values, not always easily negotiable.

The history of a bus line, its exploration and its leading figures

Framed in a period of concession, the exploration of an urban bus line by the company in analysis allowed it to recently acquire some rights over the earned income.

Not being possible to present, in this context, an analysis reporting to all the questions raised here, we highlight two, which purposes send us directly to real work context. The first one tries to understand the coherence between "public service obligations" defined in the exploration of this bus line and the working organization options defined by the company, in the sequence of the referred change. The second one reports to its impact in drivers' activity and in the service rendered to customers.

Aiming to understand the singularity of this new type of service "production", framed by other rules, a methodology was developed, in coherence with activity ergonomics principles, mainly based in the observation of drivers' activity in real context, and enriched by interviews with the drivers and service planning responsables. These interviews aimed, on one hand, to identify changes in work organization options and, on the other hand, to explore how drivers manage their activity, by harmonizing different goals.

The bus line under analysis is common to three companies, two being private and one being public, even though the public one has only a part of the path in common. The company in which

we conducted our study is private, and maintains an exploration agreement with the public company concerning that bus line. Now, knowing that the bus line is common to both, that the schedules are very similar and that the two private companies have profitability goals for the service rendered, even if the course exploration had been assigned to one of them, under the compliance of certain public service obligations, how do drivers manage their activity?

The observation held showed that, sequentially to the attribution to the analysed private company of the rights over the obtained income of the tickets sold, changes have been introduced on schedules; it was set a group of drivers exclusively inherent to this course; and were valued some activity managing strategies.

The service schedules were redesigned and, apparently, they allow drivers to afford now more time to render the same course. But, this assumption is not but misleading. The period that mediates the end of a service and the beginning of the other was enhanced, what would theoretically allow them to recover from eventual delays and to render a higher quality service to customers. However, if we distinguish driving time from “support time”, dedicated to breaks from service, we find that this enhancement is not placed in driving time level (always considered scarce face to path’s characteristics), which maintains unchanged, but more to “support time” level. This situation confronts drivers with a paradoxical situation: to fulfil schedule and render a quality service, only becomes compatible if they use the time considered as theirs (the “support time”) in order to make the necessary adjustments facing what the schedule dictates.

Not now... it seems that things are different... it's according to the number of client entrances. It's clear that surely, in those points, those schedules in which you know you'll have a certain amount of people, the driver tries to go slower, to try to get those passengers. But, in the end, one cannot even fulfil the schedule. We're very late, aren't we? And the funniest is that we finish at 5:00 h, at 17:00, but if we exceed that time, the company doesn't pay us, right? (A., bus driver)

These drivers were specifically selected to render this bus line and, on contrary to what happened before, when there was a driver's rotation for the different courses of the company, there is now a group that is exclusively maintained in this one.

This option aims, mainly, to create conditions for the drivers to develop a course driving experience, that seems to be particularly beneficial facing actual goals. The daily driving in that

bus line allowed them, for example, to know all the schedules, including the other company's ones, which facilitates the achievement of another of their current priorities: to delimit themselves of other drivers and, so, to transport more customers.

Our management is to try, i.e. not to drive close to the partner ahead. We reach a point where we start to know the schedules, if he gets out at 35... Now, if my schedule is to get out at 30 and theirs is 35, I really have to get out at 30. Because if I get late, we'll get out at the same time, and we're doing nothing there. We stroll around this and, that's the only management we try to bear in mind. (P., bus driver)

However, the management of the activity isn't done without debating values – mercantile and non dimensioned values: between fulfilling the company's defined goal, oriented to transport a bigger number of passengers, and to render a service that responds to the customer expectations and needs.

And there what counts is income, isn't it? And we have to try, at the least me, by being there, I have to do the best I can. I always do everything I can to go ahead and to be able to profit. (P., bus driver)

I have to drive in my place, if I don't profit, it's not my fault. Now, I'm not going to stand behind, to drive in others schedule to profit plenty and the other just go empty. I also think that would be... rendering a bad service. (A., bus driver)

The activity is not a sheer execution of the defined rules, but a permanent management of different goals, that require the *use of himself* (Schwartz & Durrieu, 2003). The commitment that drivers seek to build in their activity between different goals includes, nevertheless, non negligible costs to their health: the lack of rotation in driving lines, which contributes to the expression of a higher weathering than other drivers; the use of their break time to compensate path delays; and the work intensity caused by an activity management with reference always to others activities, are a good example of it.

Yes, yes, it is a stressful, dangerous bus line. It's a bus line that is complicated due to the competition that exists there, you know? And it tires us immensely due to the competition stress, because there are lots of buses, and one takes two customers, the other takes another two, then comes the last... gets nothing... (A., bus driver)

And this also does away with our head a little. Now not so much, but in the beginning, the schedules, and all that concern of having to speed up here and slow down there... If you're there the whole day it's complicated... (P., bus driver)

Conclusions

The evolution of public service notion accompanies the evolution of society. Its content is not, therefore, univocal: it all depends on how the principle is assumed and re-worked in the frame of political, economical and social conjunctures that are always particular (Lacomblez, Stroobants, & Vanheerswyngheles, 1989). The public service design has evolved in the course of liberal deregulation, being enriched by other principles and meanings: public service no longer has clearly defined shapes, and it no longer makes sense define it by the opposition of categories considered as asymmetrical: State-market; public-private; user-costumer; collective-individual (Reis, 2007). The perimeter of public service has become, therefore, “more ambiguous, more labile, and more instable” (Chevallier, 1987, p.78, author’s translation).

Besides the social debate on conciliating distinct values while rendering a public service, the reference, in this context, to a specific case of transport service rendering, show us how to build, in real context, a commitment of “sharing” (Jeannot, 1999) between what comes from public domain and what comes from private domain, preserving the public interest.

This case also shows how it would be a paradox to consider public service notion only by its goals. Real work activity analysis allows the discovery of what is at stake in its performance: the prosecution of different levels of objectives and commitments in continuous regulation – towards the *company* (by associating the obligation of public service to results); towards the *client* (taking into account schedules, services frequency, safety); towards *himself* (arbitrating the use of himself that they will make in building a balance between these objectives). It’s by the way how you work that each one intervenes and contributes, even if to an “infinitesimal” level, to the evolution of value debates that go through society and what we assume as “common welfare”.

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