Knowledge society and public administration

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The modern reflection on Administration must be done from an open and dynamic approach because the Public Administration is a plural reality which has to be approached from different viewpoints and, apart from the juridical dimension, we have the economic sphere, sociological and historical aspects, which help us to understand such a complicated and multidisciplinary reality as the Public Administration.

In this sense, doctrinal or academic discussions about whether a juridical or organizational approach should prevail have been left behind. Effectively, they are relevant discussions, such as those that time ago were held by Otto Nass and Otto Mayer in Germany with regard to the approach that should prevail with regard to the Public Administration. Nowadays, in the context of open thought postulates, these methodological confrontations do not make sense anymore, but we should be aware of the fact that all approaches are important, they are all relevant and, in a balanced environment, they may allow us to find solutions to Public Administration problems.

In order to introduce the issue that I have been offered to talk about, I should start with a series of general remarks, which stem from my analysis of reality and will allows us, or at least that is what I think, to gradually penetrate in the meaning that knowledge society has with regard to Public Administration.

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First of all, anyone who attentively reads Social Sciences books or who pays attention to the press or to TV, will verify that in the last few years there has been a dramatic and vertiginous transformation in the traditional ways of exploring reality, which does not mean that tradition is death, not at all. Quoting a famous Spanish philosopher, what is not tradition is plagiarism. Well, to a certain extent, the present reality, whether we like it or not, is the product of what has happened, of what we have inherited from our ancestors and it would certainly be irresponsible, for example, to try to transform our reality from the scratch, without recognising the good and bad our predecessors have left us.

However, in any case, there has been a relevant transformation, a very important transformation of the traditional ways of approaching reality: it is a fact we must be bear in mind in order to understand the meaning of knowledge society and public administration today.

Secondly, I do think it is useless or superficial to underline the fact that there is an increasing importance of open thought, dynamic thought, plural thought, complementary or compatible thought, whereas another model is fortunately becoming outmoded, the so-called unique, static or unilateral thought. It is certainly not easy to assume the principles of open thought, of dynamic thought and complementary thought, since, as we will later see, there are still strong preconceptions hampering this task. But, in the sphere of new technologies, in the sphere of information society, we must be aware of the fact that we should combine and jointly develop new technologies and fundamental human rights, for fear that an important bet with regard to new technologies could harm the quality standards in the exercise of the fundamental rights of all citizens.

Thirdly, we must verify and certify the great failure of closed ideologies. When I say closed ideologies I refer to those totalising and exhausting explanations of reality, which became salvation knowledge, especially last century and were expressed through great abstract formulations, which have been gradually dismantled by present reality.

Fourthly, we must also remember the crisis, the deep crisis of the thought model solely based on the enlightenment and on the absolute empire of reason. For a simple reason, because linear progression is a fallacy and the daunting consequences of the absolute dogma of reason have led us to technocratic constructions and political constructions, which are far from the real problems of people, which have to be solved.

Fifthly, it is necessary to overcome preconceptions. Preconceptions that were firmly installed in the mind and heart of men. In a famous theatrical piece by Molière, it is said that preconceptions are so strong that if one tries to throw them out of the window, they immediately attempt to slide under the door in order to relocate themselves inside us. Therefore, that endless battle to set us free from preconceptions is an essential struggle to recover humanist principles that will help us to understand the sense of human dignity and fundamental rights.

Sixthly, a phenomenon is occurring in a slight manner, almost without consistent media representation: we are talking about what has been referred to as the *rupture of the technostructure* or the *rupture of the technosystem*, which was quoted by Galbraith or Bell. We should not underestimate this. It is important to underline it because this technostructure, which sometimes has appeared as a subtle alliance between the State, the Market and the media, tries or has tried at all cost to arise as the supreme interpreter of the general interest and has brought an entangled web of languages and specific procedures in its wake, which prevent real people, flesh and bone citizens, from accessing the essence of the determination of general interests. For this reason, one of the risks, of the challenges knowledge society has is that general interests cease to be dominated by experts and are authentically opened to the real problems people have. To a certain extent, this reflection appears, at least as far as fundamental rights are concerned, in a sentence of the Spanish Constitutional Court from 1984, in which it is said that the general interest should be defined by means of an intercommunicated action between public powers and socials stakeholders.

Seventhly, as a consequence of the appearance of a new way of understanding power as the articulated freedom of citizens, as Burke understood it, it turns out to be necessary to place in the centre of the new political, social and economic order the dignity of human beings. We have to reconsider the figure of the person. But not the persona from a liberal doctrinal perspective, which leads to the visions of the new unsupportive individualism, but from the standpoint, I insist, of complementary and compatible thought, which turns supportive freedom into a central concept, because they are not two different aspects of the reality of people, freedom and supportiveness, but they are the two sides of the same coin and they are two features that should be combined in order to offer perspectives of complementariness.

Eighthly we would have to refer to the crisis of the paradigm of certainty and to the rise of the paradigm of truth as described by Alejandro Llano, which is one of

the consequences of placing ourselves in parameters in which the politically correct dictatorship gradually fades away, which will allow us to overcome this apparent society in which we are apparently installed, where money, power and notoriousness are the great lords that rule everything. It is therefore necessary to bring back the strength of people, the strength of real life.

And ninthly, as a consequence of all we have said, it turns out that the basis of general interest should lie in the promotion, the free promotion of the fundamental rights of all citizens. It is a great challenge, it is the great challenge that all public powers have, which democracies have and we have to wonder if we will be able, through this new society we have before our eyes, of giving birth to solutions, which encourage us to work for a more human society.

When one thinks or reflects on knowledge and new technologies, it is also necessary that this reflection takes into account the characteristics of the reality around us. For example, Habermas said that one of the manifestations of contemporary reality is that it is vast, a complex reality; and it is complex indeed because it has many aspects, many dimensions, and of all these dimensions, in all these dimensions there are interesting aspects. The social thinker, the philosopher of society needs to have the necessary sensitiveness to search for balance points, synthesising all the aspects that configure a given reality.

Logically, in this context, we find the idea of boundary, which is an essential idea in human condition. It may be liked or disliked, but the truth is that there are boundaries and these boundaries, instead of being seen as barriers, hardships or obstacles, should be considered working conditions for the humanisation of reality; therefore the management of the new complexity should be done, as Llano put is, from a humanist standpoint, which will help us to understand the meaning that social fragmentation has, the meaning of globalisation, the meaning of the lack of substantial regulations and the meaning of what we call implosion or rupture of the regulatory criteria of central institutions for the development of society, like the University or the family.

In this context of knowledge society, of the society of knowledge and new technologies, of the crisis of closed ideologies, we also come across the so-called governability crisis, also known as governance, or the crisis of public and private institutions as a consequence of an excess of organisation. It is surprising that nowadays we are increasingly aware of the fact that governments and representative

institutions are there to promote liberties, to promote the fundamental rights of people, and, nevertheless, as a consequence of the fact that we still have a very strong technostructure, there is a reinforcement of structures stemming from the new organisational theories, which far from clearly paving the way for the return of human values, are a reason or justification for an uncontrolled growth. In my view, this is what has happened with regard to the welfare state, in which after all public administration, budgets, civil servants, have all become a justification to grow instead of searching for formulae that may allow, in a context of permanent humanisation of organisation, to tend to and to solve the problems of real people.

Therefore, one of the hermeneutic keys to deal with the present challenge consists of opening up towards people and not to systems or procedures. The main stakeholders are people, real citizens and the organisation has to be constantly tackling problems, difficulties, longings, these people's collective interests. What happens is that unfortunately the history of the failure of administrative reforms has a lot to do with the history of the permanent isolation of organisation, which only seems to look at itself, instead of constantly looking at social problems.

In this environment, of a certain crisis, of certain restlessness, especially after September 11th 2001, with regard to the management of solutions in the face of new problems, it turns out that knowledge society is essential, but this knowledge is not for the unsupportive contemplation of acquired wisdom, but knowledge as a tool for the transformation of reality and also for the improvement of the ethical qualities of people. It is not a matter of acquiring endless information, it is all about selecting and acquiring knowledge that will help us to improve as people and also to improve our reality. And in order to achieve this goal, it is important to first of all attain a balance between theory and practice. Secondly, we should encourage the improvement of the daily personal work of public employees as a consequence of knowledge. And thirdly we should insist on the integral and permanent training of public employees.

In the new knowledge society, a lot has been spoken, a lot has been written about how to conceive organisations. For example, some people have underlined that they should be intelligent, flexible organisations, human organisations, which are open and not rigid, not hermetic, not vertical, not artificial and not pyramidal. Let us analyse this issue quoting the philosopher Alejandro Llano.

The key for this transition from verticality to horizontality lies in the conception we may have of the person in all models. It is therefore compatible with the

reflection, the meditation on the importance of people and transforming people into things. It is compatible with the discourse of humanist globalisation and then applying public policies, for example, that increase the gap between rich and poor countries, between rich and poor people. And this happens when the most important thing is rhetoric and not reality.

I am really interested by Alejandro Llano's claim, in which he explains that the key in these knowledge society organisations has a lot do with the traditional process of learning. Training never actually ends, as we all well know, and knowledge is equivalent to growth, even personal growth. Knowledge which is produced thanks to new technologies, should also help to improve daily working conditions and people's jobs, especially those who are part of the Administration, without forgetting about the fact that there is a very important ethic dimension, which has very accurate consequences for Public Administrations and furthermore, in my opinion, is perfectly represented in the Spanish Constitution, when Public Administration is defined as an organisation at the service of general interests. Citizens have to perceive that all the actions undertaken by the Public Administration, in the State, Autonomous Communities or even local institutions, always aim at meeting the collective requirements and needs of citizens.

It is obvious that the most important thing for knowledge society is people. People are not merchandises, people have a potential of freedom and intelligence, which is very important and decision makers within the Public Administration have to be able to make this potential flourish, this capacity to contribute with ideas, this capacity of exchanging ideas, the capacity of generating confidence to transform reality.

We all know that the organisations in which there is a good working environment normally work out. Wherever there is not a good working environment, they may apparently work through the manipulation of statistics, but, in the end, everything is discovered. Therefore, the person has to be considered the centre of the organisation.

In knowledge society, where Internet, the net, has such a great importance, we have to be aware of the fact that the key lies in knowledge as the ability to improve the life of human beings, and not in just compiling all the information stemming from the net, whose usefulness is not very well determined. Nevertheless, we are witnessing that many people are going through what was announced in a recent article by Jeremy Rifkin, 24 hours, 7 days a week; in other words, we are trying

citizens and workers to live in better conditions, in more human working conditions, and we are obliging people to be connected to their computers 24/7, Saturdays and Sundays included. Even through cell phones we can create in citizens and workers a permanent sense of dependency, which may even harm their family life.

Knowledge society allows us to know more in order to think more successfully, and that is why I also consider of great importance Alejandro Llano's reflection when he mentions the fact that organisations are learning and research communities. Why? Because if in an organisation there is a real wish to improve, if results are analysed: why things turn out well? Why did not they? What changes could we obtain from team working or from listening to our collaborators? then it will be easier to know what to do every time. It is not easy, but it is certainly a challenge for managers. In this sense, we may say that certain ideas are constantly highlighted in management programmes: open mentality, understanding methodology and social sensitiveness. A trilogy that the managers of modern organisations should somehow bear in mind.

Technological transformations are determining a new type of society, which is forcedly abandoning its post-industrial nature, in order to become, as we have mentioned before, a society of knowledge and information. However, I insist, that society of knowledge and information has to be a human society too, deeply human, where fundamental rights and dignity shine brightly. Furthermore, we should be able to see the bright of the fundamental rights of those who have less and those that are in worse conditions to carry on. And this new arising society offers many possibilities to improve the life of citizens from the public and private viewpoint. People talk about the new economy, of new commercial channels, of the new democracy, more direct and participative; they also talk about new ways of conceiving and implementing public policies. I do not know if everything is just too new, but it certainly brings about relevant challenges, such as privacy, confidentiality, social inequality. Challenges that have to be dealt with and for which we need to find satisfactory answers, bearing in mind that bipolar and ideological thought is still sometimes present in our society, such as for instance with regard to freedom and security. It seems as if, as a consequence of terrorism, liberties are being limited and a sometimes exaggerate need of security is being promoted, since public authorities have the great challenge, have to face the great challenge of improving people's security, but at the same time, they must improve the conditions for the free development of individuals. Otherwise, we could be configuring or building a new security ideology, a new ideology that could leave rights and liberties in the background and bring to the foreground technical

rationality again, which would now be disguised with the "virtues" of security and control. This is where we need a more complementary, open and dynamic vision.

The different aspects of knowledge society are being studied from all perspectives, social, political and economic. They are also analysed from the administrative viewpoint, since, to a certain extent, knowledge society obliges Public Administrations to undertake a deep and ongoing transformation of their structures and procedures in order to meet social needs.

As we all know, last decade the studies published by the OECD, the European Commission and different international organisations showed the importance that the new communication and information technologies had for the improvement of the management of public administrations. This importance, within the European Union, has been shown in the agreements taken in the European Councils held in Lisbon and Santa Maria de Feira, which determined, as I imagine you already know, the approval of the e-Europe 2000 initiative, one of whose strategic lines was the implantation of an electronic Public Administration, which should be operational before 2002. Later, the European Council in Seville approved the e-Europe 2005 programme, with the intention of updating the electronic administration, especially with regard to basic services, like health or education.

The advantages of new technologies for any organisation are obviously evident. We only have to think about the possibilities they offer the citizen to access public information, about the possibilities the organisation has of reporting with more transparency and the possibility of involving citizens in decision making processes or in the definition of their needs.

Finally, the simplification that sharing resources may entail for the organisation, avoiding unnecessary information and task duplications is clear; in other words, the advantages of new technologies are evident, especially with the aim of recovering that old idea of democratic thought according to which institutions belong to citizens. Thus, new technologies should improve the access of citizens to the Administration and the communication between the Administration and citizens.

However, we should be careful because human condition is as it is and it would not be the first time that a revolution of this nature fails halfway and creates some kind of single thought.

The Spanish Administration has substantially advanced in the implementation of the e-Administration and as a proof thereof we have the simplified administrative offices, which allow to interconnect record entries, the simplified entrepreneurial office, which makes the incorporation of companies faster, the Public Administrations website, the administrative Intranet, the regulations on the electronic signature, the soon to be implemented electronic identity card, the computer processing of certain administrative issues, such as the payment of social security or the tax declaration or payment of taxes, etc.

However, we should recognise that there still is a long way to go in the implementation of a real electronic administration, which guarantees higher efficiency rates, efficacy and quality in services, as well as being closer to people, to citizens.

In this sense, we should bear in mind that in order for the on-line administration to make sense, its development should be parallel to the technological development of our society. For this reason, we should not only endeavour to implant the e-Administration, but to prioritise the scope of use of new technologies in society, minimising the social gap which may be produced if information is used or not. Today access to Internet is limited within the Spanish population despite the economic efforts to implant the use of the computer in schools, or to make the access to Internet cheaper. This reality, as well as the adoption of certain measures, such as improving electronic security, guaranteeing confidentiality, is key for the on-line Administration to make sense. It is not really useful to provide a public service via Internet, if only 20% of the population has access thereto. By doing so, we are probably increasing inequality, the technological gap in society.

The way Public Administrations must follow consists of collaborating in the implantation of the culture of new technologies, making it in a progressive manner and in compliance with the humanist nature that should always preside the management of administrative problems.

This new culture should impregnate the organisation itself, working methods, administrative issues, procedures and the provision of public services. For this new technological and human culture, which is radically technological and human, to really penetrate our society, it is important to work in the world of education and training. Therefore, in an institution like the National Public Administration Institute, it is essential to highlight and to insist on the need of training for civil servants, for public employees in the use of new managerial computer tools,

without ignoring an essential idea: computing is not an end itself, it is a means to achieve a more human Administration, which makes the free exercise of our fundamental rights easier. On the other hand, this training should be conceived in the widest sense possible, since we should remember that computer knowledge is not only interesting for the manager of a given public service, for the window civil servant, who offers secondary computer services.

We have to know all the new techniques. It is essential for decision-making bodies, that is, for the different public authorities, since the amount of information they provide is essential to learn about reality, citizen needs and therefore to rapidly adopt relevant decisions to satisfy them.

In fact, this reflection on the aim and use of new information and communication technologies is basic to improve the quality of life of citizens, which is the main reason for the existence of the Public Administration.

All these reflections, all this range of considerations on information society and new technologies lead us to a new way of understanding the meaning of working in the Public Administration. In fact, in order to conclude this dissertation, which I do not know if it is taking more than what it should, we will make six considerations, six proposals, with the help of Professor Llano, with regard to knowledge society and the new functionality of work in the Public Administration.

First, to work is to learn. To manage is to teach. Working is learning because learning is permanent and work cannot be separated from learning. And, in the working post, in our daily activities, we learn from our coexistence with other collaborators, colleagues, so those in charge of the management do not normally keep for themselves what they have learnt from the others, but they generously transmit it, so that the rest can be better than us. I know this claim is polemical, dangerous, but we should be able to overcome that controlling way of directing, which has been present and still is in many organisations and claim the need to manage our companies and organisations in a human manner, allowing the development of the potential of all people .

Secondly, an intelligent organisation is a research and learning community. We must permanently analyse and search for the reasons of what turns out to be successful and what fails in order to make decisions. And as far as diagnoses and

analyses are concerned, we have to rely on the whole organisation, on all the people involved, who pursue the same aims and results.

Third, we need to understand the knowledge that leads us to a new way of understanding our jobs, which has a lot to do with craftsmanship and the elaborate manufacture of a working product. It has to do with the meticulousness and thoroughness of craftsmen. And I highlight this because frequently the most important thing is to have a result that may be manipulated or tergiversated. But that is not what it should be, the most important thing, apart from the result, and actually focused on the result, is the meticulous, complete and laborious work prepared in order to attain the said results.

Fourthly, an organisation has an obvious ethical dimension: transparency, collaboration. The person in the centre, in the working centre, must be the feature distinguishing the work of the new organisations within the knowledge society. If persons are just disposable merchandises, though luck. Or if they are just another stage in the process of professional promotion, that is bad, really bad.

Fifthly, an intelligent organisation must also cultivate a deep corporative culture and if it is a public organisation, its nature and style would be at the permanent service of general interests. General interests understood as the way of promoting and encouraging the fundamental rights of people.

And sixthly, in intelligent organisations, research and management can be identified. Why? Because learning never ends, training never stops and managing is learning and managing, as I said before, is researching.

To sum up, I would ask you to allow me to conclude with the presentation of a series of data, which I thought were interesting to illustrate what I have explained up to now.

According to the data published by the CIS, in September 2001, 50% of the population has a computer, but only 34% actually use it and 24% have access to Internet. Consequently, the number of users still is scarce.

The Info-21 plan includes 305 actions articulated around three axes, one of which is Electronic Administration. Within the 21 actions that are considered emblematic, we have the Citizen Portal, which has had approximately four million visits since its creation on September 4th 2001 and roughly 30 million websites have been served. In the near future, it will be improved including a text-only version to make access easier to disabled people, as well as a catalogue of the services provided by Autonomous Communities, Town Councils, Deputations and electronic certification.

Something related to this initiative, is the so-called Simplified Company Incorporation Office, which presently has 17 examples. It has allowed the creation of more than 5,000 companies, as well an additional 2,000, which are presently being incorporated.

Finally, according to the reported commissioned by the European Union in order to assess the degree of implementation and development of the e-Administration, Spain is in a quite favourable position as for the existence of portals. There is a single portal, the website of the Official National Gazette online, the legislation server, a citizen guide and a company portal.

If we analyse the situation taking into account the 20 public electronic services that have been considered basic, Spain is slightly above the average. We are at 58.41%, whereas the average is 54.25%.

Our main strength is the management of taxes (The State Agency of the Spanish Inland Revenue Administration is one of the most electronically advanced institutions in Europe), as well police complaints and the access to public libraries, which are extremely important issues. Our weaknesses are public purchases, health, vehicle inscription, licences for works and the declaration of address change.

Therefore, a lot has been done up to now, although there still is a lot to do. Nobody can question that nowadays new technologies, information society and knowledge society constitute a great initiative, which has been thought so that citizens can live under the best conditions; but if we want all citizens to live under the best conditions, we should not forget to mention and to insist on the fact that the these new tools we have must be managed with a lot of human sensitiveness, strong

ethic sensitiveness, which will help us to lead our lives in the best direction, whatever the destination may be. In fact, we are aware that in globalisation, in other words, in knowledge society, great dangers are hidden, especially with regard to the rise of single thought. In order to avoid this, on this road, on this great road we are walking, alongside technological progress, there must be a sound and consistent ethic dimension, so that we know how to manage the problems we have to deal with, placing each person in the centre of a new political, social and economic order.