My speech

Thinking about what is important to bear in mind during this work program for building the European Observatory of Prisons, I awake with this though, I now reveal to you:

Philip Zimbardo (2007) *The Lucifer Effect: understanding how good people turn evil*, Random House, worldwide leading psycho sociologist needed 30 years to write down his main discovery emerging from the Stanford Experiment: the Lucifer effect. His fiancé at the time – his wife afterwards – one day ask him what he was doing. He answer he was leading a very relevant scientific experiment that was successfully showing the perversity of prison institutions. Asked again, he realized that nothing could justify the profound and evident suffering of the volunteers trying to cope with the situation of mutual attacks at their dignity promoted by his tutor, teacher, companion of anti-war protests and young researcher. He stopped the experiment, and he realize that nothing more data was needed to gather – all would be probably redundant – and the experiment protocol schedule should not be more important than the health of the volunteered inmates and guards.

The Lucifer Effect is the belief that a goal (in this case, a humanitarian and leftwing goal) is more important than human dignity of the volunteers. And as a humanistic philanthropic person he was allowed to emulate a prison warden without any moral decay. He took 30 years to understand the perversity of the penitentiary mechanism: to drive normal people to perform profoundly and evident perverse actions in good faith and good conscience.

The research group, as an all, and each of us, is dealing with the Lucifer Effect. It would be easy to decay on a main stream managerial “banality of evil”. It would be difficult to become involved and, at the same time, maintaining critical approach to the different problems emerging of the project work. For instance, we all can agree that worse than beating torture is white torture – isolation. It is described in the literature and, at the same time, isolation is not persecuted as a torture crime. It is a common prison punishment or, even, security offered to inmates claiming for it.

Body pain makes suffer, not so profoundly and lastly as erasing social and personal identity. This is why Tocqueville found penitentiary system tougher than Old Regime traditional penalty (transportation and the body pain associated to it). The reverse what common sense thinks correct, perceiving “psychological” torture or violence as subjective (meaning no real) events.

Behind the prison walls “psychological” torture or violence achieve the punitive goal of the incarceration but “physical” torture or violence should be abolished. This turns the security staff task impossible to deliver. So, impossible to assess or criticize, without menacing institutional crises.

Prison institutions resist to transparency and to fair reports on prison critical events, stating that even wrong doing happens; they are occupational hazards that could not be punished without damaging the ability to drive penitentiary delicate balances and authorities.

Good practices and prevention activities are ways to deliver faith on the “human causes” of former penitentiary failures and in the ability to improve more the professionalism of prison staff in order to overcome structural Lucifer effects. There are hard tasks to deal with. There are the tasks we are involved in.

In my view, our biggest challenge is to be aware of all and each trap we can find and maintain the fight against compulsive lying (on self defense, sometimes for good raisons – beginning with the researchers) as well as chronicle distrust, Manichean thinking and ethnical, national, gender or inmate family discrimination.

In order to build the truth (against Lucifer effect) we should look critically to media, politics and policies, inspections bodies, NOG´s practices and knowledge, families and inmate experiences and data – the way they are available and delivered to the public, the way they are produced, the way there are conditions of assessing its quality, completeness, consistency and effectiveness.

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