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Contemporaneity and the idea polarization phenomenon: Influences on human behavior

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Human history presents abundance of moments in which human beings engaged in clashes due to conflicts in the ways of thinking and seeing the world. In general terms, at the root of this were the perceptions and interpretations attributed to the differences observed in other social groups, peculiarities that they considered negative in their representatives, related to races/ethnicities, genders, religious beliefs, the physical characteristics presented, habits and customs, the ways of conducting oneself in the group among others. Much of what displeased and still causes stir concerns the ways, means and technologies that have been created with the establishment of individuals in life in communities and societies, which the various groups have developed over time in sharing a common space.
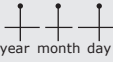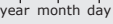
It was from this context and coexistence that the way of organizing everyday life originated: such as the social division of groups, the relationships between them, forms of work and its division, assignment and accomplishment of tasks, production and use of clothing and the ways of presenting oneself to others. Among the creations are also the creation and development of means of healing and treating the evils that affect people, the division of spaces, the means and contents of learning of the accrued knowledge, the values, norms and laws, the creation of devices and practices to curb the unwanted, the mechanisms and people with responsibilities to legislate in favor of the safety of the community and control the behavior of the groups, among others.

This set exposed, in its entirety, shapes the culture that is expressed in the community, in which politics, according to its own perception, can be understood as a protagonist, part of this aggregate, a framework of beliefs, ideas valued and directed to influence people in the ways of conducting themselves in the individual relationships and in relations with other humans and in creating or proposing ways and means of observing

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and judging behaviors under the justification and allegations of being needs for which it is necessary to seek and apply effective solutions that would contemplate social issues. It is obvious that, formulated in this way, it seems to be logical and well-intentioned; difficulties appear when the preferences of a group become a dogma and seek to prevail over those of others and, through imposition, intimidate us to follow a "script" that is not theirs and with which they do not agree.

In order to understand the current context or the contemporary background

Understanding current events, frequent to the smartest observers, demands interpretations by Human Sciences thinkers that provide elements to aid this venture. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman seems to be one of them since, with his works, he awakens in his readers the necessary reflection to try to understand the changes that have been taking place in humanity with the passage of a society supported by institutional pillars, solidly structured for the fluid modernity experienced in contemporary times. In a lucid and critical way, he exposes the terms of this modernity in order to favor understanding of how this new world in which human beings need to deal with multiple challenges works.

In his work, Bauman[1-3] proposes arguments and explanations that lead to understanding the reasons to call current society as "liquid modernity". Among his fundamental considerations, he evidences the difficulty observing the "contours", among other indicators that used to define society. For this contemporary sociologist, "most of the guidance points, solidly marked, that indicated a more lasting, safe and reliable social situation than a lifetime" are not present and visible. This undoubtedly leads to reflect on the characteristics of current community life. He emphasizes that the economic model adopted at the global level and in progress reflected in the changes experienced by the members of this community, which were procedural over the years and culminated in the observed scenario.

In the current context, there is no certainty that there will be a memory of events that will remain in society or that people will be able to find again at other times. There is no certainty that what they do to each other will come in the future, in the form of some comfort, disturbance or loss; that is to say, there is no certainty that the meaning of the acts goes beyond the episode that occurred, that their consequences will remain with those who made them even after their end, keeping in the minds and actions of the witnesses who will survive[2].

For the aforementioned author, this security in maintenance of the structures and other similar assumptions kept the philosophical ideology of the community life experience, which does not presuppose only an aggregate of people; for a community to be a reality, there must be "a fabric of shared biographies over a long period of time and an even longer expectation of frequent and intense interactions". Nowadays, this experience is absent in most Western societies, hence referring to the moment as one of "decay", "disappearance" of the community[2] - at least as it was idealized, shaped and known.

In today's cities there is a diverse and permanent set of human beings circulating, a large crowd of strangers in constant change. The way people see each other is characterized by superficiality, encounters are ephemeral, more a foreshadow of danger than pleasure; therefore, it is better to "deviate from the encounter", as it would allow discovering of who is who[1-2].

The author makes these very pertinent considerations about the forms of coexistence that have been consolidated between categories of city inhabitants and adds the conception that the various human groups elaborate a "mental map" of the city spaces according to the meaning they attribute to them; what does not make sense is not perceived, it constitutes empty spaces (including its inhabitants). "Mental maps" guide the movement of the various categories of inhabitants, people with more economic resources and those with less access to them rarely enter each other's radar, in view of their respective "mental maps".

There are areas in cities that, in order to make sense of these "maps", must remain empty spaces; they are exclusion zones and remain so, as this allows us to highlight the meaning of other areas valued by those who perceive them. As a consequence, people feel lost, vulnerable, surprised and live with fear in the aforementioned empty spaces when they verify that there other individuals who are strangers to them[1].

The obstacles imposed to not favor the encounter and the consequent construction of these mental maps encourage loss of civility, as the author considers the following as the main characteristic of this attribute: "the ability to interact with strangers without using their own strangeness against them and without pressuring them to abandon it or to renounce some of the traits that make them strange". However, he then talks about dispensability of this interaction, main characteristic of public spaces (although not civil) and a view contrary to the first, which means avoiding physical proximity. As contact with strangers cannot always be avoided, so that there is no threat of "being together" (this

would include an invitation to "meaningful encounters, dialog and interaction"), greater contact is avoided: seeing, but not listening to what is said (a file already used in other historical moments). The aforementioned are measures that Bauman[1] highlights as "less obnoxious" files, yet "hand-washing" in the face of this issue.

Such stance is contradictory in relation to the civilizing process in which humanity sought to dispel the stigmas in relation to some conditions presented by humans, different from what was expected and understood as indicative signs of the need for distancing. However, according to Bauman[3], there are suspicions that others were being created with the same purpose of moving away, hence it is inferred that there is slowness in people or difficulty identifying/ understanding messages expressed or projected by those individuals perceived as unfamiliar.

Thus, there are reasons to be afraid and hence its projection in the strangers who provoked it and, subsequently, fear gives way to panic, that threats to society's well-being arise (a feeling in general, exploited by representatives of the local policies) and condemn urban life for being dangerous due to its very diverse composition[3].

Following this author's thinking, it is inferred that humans are in favor of a "pinch" of diversity because it is an attraction in social life but, when too broad, it is perceived as something excessive to be assimilated by people and convey security to them. Therefore, community life projects based on simplifying the context arise, with the expectation of achieving a minimum of diversity with great homogeneity in the people who integrate them ("good" people). Therefore, a community unit based on the "segregation and maintenance of distances"; the "remedy" that imposes itself on the anxiety generated by insecurity, channeled to protective care, and it is this alleged "communitarianism" that further exacerbates the real sources of insecurity in contemporary times[1].

This type of protection as a way of dealing with the representative forces of differences, and consequently of insecurity, endorses the interests of public authorities with regard to not discussing and approaching the purpose and functions of the community about the sources of the real problems, generating anxiety (and the distress that it causes) today and which tend not to be among its priorities. After all, confrontation requires assuming as relevant "the equality of resources necessary for the transformation of the destinies of individuals in law, into individuals in fact and a collective insurance against individual disabilities and misfortunes"[2]. These intentions constituted the community values when idealized in their origin.

The fluid and continually changing context (rules change and without a warning or a pattern that can be identified) generates this uncertainty, permeated with real and imaginary fears and premonitions about the future that haunt people. The distress generated by this condition is not accumulated or condensed by them, nor is it felt as "a common cause" that afflicts all and that can be faced with the union of forces in a joint action. Therefore, pain is perceived as unique and does not unite them; on the contrary, it separates them, leading to distrust in relation to the others and their individuality[2].

In the considerations and warnings brought about by this author in the set of his works, we observe the elements and factors that induce the various groups of Western society to cling to ideas, conceptions and practices that prevailed in the past, in an attempt to recover a community that they believe to be the ideal, especially in the security attribute, and the attempts to only add those who think the same way, forgetting that in the broad context there are other groups that also want to rescue this community, based on the appreciation of another ideology different from their own, but that was also part of the ideological and cultural set of the same community which everyone wants.

Community life can be better than the current one if the people who comprise it expand their ability to live with the difference and feel satisfaction in this task; an art that demands study and, especially, exercising solidarity. A valid venture, as the greater the effort to avoid difference/the different, the greater will be the difficulty tolerating its presence and the higher the anxiety thereof. With the globalization phenomenon, everyone is interdependent; "no one is master of their destiny by themselves", separation between people only hinders management of the human tasks and control of the conditions under which the challenges of living are faced, which for most human beings can only happen collectively[3].

It is precisely in performing the tasks that community proves to be necessary, and it is also there that the opportunity for it to materialize lies. The community closest to the desired ideal can only exist woven together from sharing and mutual care, "with interests and responsibilities in relation to the equal rights of all human beings and the same ability to act in defense of these rights"[3].

Having exposed the challenges and hopes of reaching civilized coexistence levels among all those who make up the so-called humanity, through the thinking of a contemporary sociologist that synthesizes not only his original arguments but also the creations of others that greatly assisted in understanding man's behavior and the developments

observed in recent years in Western societies, the focus of the text will turn to a topic related to the complexity of this context, that is, idea polarization.

This phenomenon has been observed apparently more frequently among representatives and followers of political ideologies in tune with behavioral guidelines, beliefs and customs, which they emphatically defend, believing that this ideology is the best framework for the community, often strongly discrediting values, behaviors and beliefs that make up different political ideologies, practiced by other groups not in tune with their own and sometimes even considering them as enemies.

Certainly, the aforementioned regarding the contemporary historical and social moment assists in understanding this phenomenon and the questions that arise are as follows: Are there scientific theories and research studies about this? Which results did they present about the effects of human relationships?

Some previous studies based on theories of Psychology and other sciences, whose emphasis is on human behavior, have contributed with some explanations to help understand polarization between groups and its repercussions.

Social identity, Coalition Psychology and affective polarization

The Social Identity Theory[4-5], as well as the Coalition Psychology Theory[6], maintain that individuals are sensitive to bases of group belonging that lead them to classify other people as belonging to the in-group or to the out-group. When such a process of social identification comes into play, a sequence of psychological processes and social behaviors becomes more likely to occur, such as a negative stereotyped view of the out-group (external or different group) members and, consequently, a feeling of distrust towards them. Hence, it is more likely to have a positive view of the in-group members, associated with more willingness to trust and collaborate with them[7].

As such bases or agendas of group-belonging predominate, they reflect an increase in the tension between groups that perceive themselves as rivals or as a threat of any kind; with this, the expectation is that the psychological responses prepared to distinguish in-group from out-group reach higher levels[8].

A number of authors[6,9] attribute this division between groups to the imprint on the human being of an evolutionary path, in which since its beginning there has been and there is a need to respond recurrently and effectively to social problems (such as coordinating collective and cooperative actions) with a specific focus on defending the own group from rival ones.

Although the phenomenon seems recent, the perception of groups and rivalries when they especially involve preferences about partisan politics has been documented in the scientific literature of Psychology and Political Sciences for some years[10-12].

Regarding the citizens, it is widely known that people identify themselves with a group in terms of political topics, party or a political leadership, which contributes to defining that social identity[13]. A similar process seems to take place in terms of ideological topics in general[14].

Based on the Theory of Social Identity, a number of authors[4-5,15] proposed the notion of affective polarization to describe the growing displeasure and hostility observed among some groups of political supporters in some societies. It is true that constructing a social identity based on belonging to a group does not necessarily imply hating people who identify with other groups; however, they maintain that our psychological functioning shows certain tendency towards discrimination between in-groups and out-groups and the subsequent favoritism for the group to which we belong[16].

Although conflict between groups is not a necessity, according to the Psychology of coalitions, it is really easy to activate it and, once this happens, the world becomes divided into "us" and "them", allies and rivals. This is widely-perceived in the Politics context, where people establish guidelines according to political leaderships and parties, such as alliance, fidelity and coalition[12]. Political Sciences researchers argue that affective polarization reflect this process in a hyperactivity state[13,15,17].

The affective polarization that takes place based on the clash of political or ideological opinions can be the result of the accumulation of guidelines that characterize conflict and competition between rival groups. According to the Theory of Social Identity assumptions, the expressions of language used in the report of political or ideological opinions manifested in a derogatory or aggressive tone towards those with opposite positions, are probably perceived as triggering agendas of group conflict and threats and lead to encouraging favoritism by the in-group. Such behavior is an aggravating factor of polarization and generates socially harmful results such as undermining of trust in Politics and in its legitimacy[8].

A number of studies show that political polarization has shown a strong association with the increase in intolerance directed at those who hold different opinions and with the inability to collaborate with those who have different thoughts and not to legitimize politics and associated institutions[18-21]. In addition to that, it was observed as socially harmful for generating in people a reduction in mental amplitude to consider positions different from their own opinion[18-19], reducing their ability to evaluate in a neutral and objective way others' skills[22], and promoting negative feelings (cynicism, intolerance) and hostile behavior[20].

Its effects can also transcend the scope of politics or political topics, affecting decisions such as choices of affective partners or friends, work partnerships[23] and people to share a space such as a neighborhood to live in[24]. It can also affect the expressions of generosity in relation to strangers[10].

Based on these assertions, it is valid to consider that polarization of political ideas can be a potential factor with negative consequences that affect trust between people.

Trust seems to be a good indicator of socially desirable results, both in the micro and macro senses. A number of research studies show that higher levels of generalized trust are associated with successful close relationships in the individual scope, as well as with higher economic development at the social level[25-26].

It seems that Latin American countries have been constituted in a region of the world in which the indices of trust among people and in relation to public and political institutions have been worrying, as they have remained at a descending level in the last decade[27], a phenomenon that should be seen by researchers as a relevant social event.

Also in another American country and in a study carried out based on data from surveys in time series[15], it was identified that the growing hostility between party groups contributed to the existence of political (affective) polarization in the USA observed in recent decades. In addition to that, other studies in the same country evidenced that the political leaders' discourse using moral and emotionally charged language was associated with broader dissemination of their messages on social networks[28-29], which represents an additional gain for these leaders.

Mason[30] was more conclusive and asserted that, if some political parties openly supported civilized political interaction rules, partisan conflicts and preconceptions might be reduced. However, the author herself argues that this is highly improbable without secondary intervention, due to the political leaders' motivations to encourage conflict and uncivilized interactions, to attract attention and meet the objective of attracting votes. Partisan-biased media have similar incentives. In other words, neither of the parties foresees expectations for stance changes.

In summary, affective polarization on political or ideological topics is characterized by negative emotional responses triggered by stimuli that can be perceived as agendas of conflict between groups. This type of conduct seems harmful in the individual sphere influencing choices, modifying behavior and encouraging hostile, intolerant and distrustful attitudes towards the different, all of which can generate distress and insecurity, therefore imposing a cost on people's mental health.

In the context of society, it is also considered harmful, insofar as in the context of modern democracies, citizens and leaders must be willing to interact in a civilized manner, to respect and even to collaborate with those who disagree with their ideas and methods[21,31].

The question is as follows: How to limit negative externalizations derived from political and ideological polarization? The answer may be found in some studies on Human Sciences, which help understand the complexity of human beings' psychological and social behavior, as well as their willingness to collaborate.

There is a clear convergence in scientific knowledge branches that support the argument that people tend to follow social norms that benefit everyone when they are explicitly presented to them. This was evidenced in research studies grounded on Social Psychology[32-39].

Based on this assumption, it can be asserted that it is possible to be successful in messages with normative content that call for overcoming political differences between people, with a view to establishing bonds of trust resulting in fruitful collaborations.

According to the Normative Focus Theory, directing people's attention to adhere to a given standard, when it is explicit that the result will be beneficial to the population, tends to increase the probability of compliance. This hypothesis received empirical support in different domains such as waste disposal in public spaces[31], donation of financial resources[40-41], organ donation and other social initiatives such as stimulating payment of taxes, energy savings or waste recycling[42]; even in initiatives aimed at preventing situations involving the possibility of theft[43] and discouraging corruption in economic ventures[44-45].

In view of having presented these initiatives and the theories that supported them, the existence of a possible mutual agreement and cooperation between people is evident, provided that the issues are presented in a way that

clearly presupposes the benefits that can reach everyone; political ideas and projects can also be put in the same way and without encouraging polarization, provided that there is interest from those who express them.

As a suggestion, it is recommended to develop projects and proposals to encourage cooperation and tolerance among people in order to be inclusive with all those they consider different for not following their valued standards, as new ideas and creations that can make a difference in the future everyday life are born from diverse coexistence. From this more solidary coexistence, relationships based on affection and understanding can arise, which will certainly result in a reduction of anxiety, mistrust and hostility and, therefore, in a social life with populations more prone to reaching positive mental health levels.

There is a broad path to be unveiled in the topic, especially with the current uncertain and changeable context that is experienced; therefore, it is suggested to develop studies on the effects of messages that explain prescriptive norms (socially appropriate behaviors), which seek to reduce the social distancing and distrust that could generate affective polarization, as well as to carry out further studies on other possible consequences of the phenomenon among population groups. The results of the research studies might translate in recommendations to devise public policies based on the use of normative messages that prove to be successful, among other initiatives.

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