

THE FRENCH CONCEPT OF “HANDICAP”: Political metaphor and rallying point of professional protectionisms.

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Résumé

Il a déjà été amplement démontré que divers usages de la notion de handicap sont liés à des enjeux politiques, économiques, corporatistes.

Dans cet article fondé sur une analyse historique des usages de cette notion, nous montrons que leur évolution ne s'inscrit pas dans une démarche de connaissance mais dans une démarche normative orientée vers la recherche d'un consensus politique entre divers groupes de pression et diverses branches professionnelles.

Il en résulte que l'usage de cette notion dans une pratique scientifique ne peut être que déconseillé, sauf à en produire une définition opératoire fondée sur des distinctions non ambiguës entre altérations organiques, dysfonctionnements et handicaps.

L'élaboration d'une structure conceptuelle opératoire et l'abandon de la quête compulsive d'un terme générique constituent aujourd'hui une tâche prioritaire et urgente. Elle conditionne la possibilité d'une analyse précise des relations entre les divers ordres de phénomènes concernés

Mots clés : altération corporelle / dysfonctionnement / handicap / sémiotique / terminologie / concepts

Abstract

It has already been widely established elsewhere, that diverse uses of the concept of “handicap” are linked to political, economic, and corporate stakes.

In this article, based on an historical analysis of the uses of this concept, I shall show that their evolution is not due to the pursuit of knowledge but with a normalizing process in mind, oriented towards a search for political consensus among diverse lobbies and professional groups.

The result is that, in scientific research, the use of this concept can only be discouraged, unless an operating definition based on unambiguous distinctions between impairments, dysfunctions and handicaps can be produced.

The elaboration of a conceptual operating structure and the abandoning of the compulsive search for a generic term are today a priority and an urgent task. Only this will make possible a precise analysis of the relations between the different types of phenomena concerned.

Keywords: impairment / dysfunction / handicap / disability / semiotic

1. Introduction: Scientific Concepts vs political metaphors

It has been widely demonstrated that the diverse definitions of the term “handicap” are linked to political, economic and corporate stakes. In other words, to be absolutely clear, linked to the undertakings of power, be it associative, administrative or political.

This sort of context obviously does not lend itself to clarification or logical reasoning or the elaboration of a true scientific research which implies operating definitions, even if not consensual ones.

This point will need a brief explanation. This is why, without going into the details of an exposition on textual semiotics and with the risk of being too schematic, I shall oppose – i. the concepts used and usable in a scientific context and – ii. the concepts usable more particularly in political rhetoric and discourse. They are not produced by the same actors, do not have the same properties and do not reply to the same necessities.

Scientific concepts are usable in procedures of knowledge whose aim is to solve problems to describe and explain phenomena and invent new ways of acting. In order to do this, scientists, technicians, and engineers need operating concepts: in other words they need concepts defined by a set of properties which are in themselves elementary concepts. They need unambiguous concepts with which one can carry out logical operations and build a scientific reasoning.

The definition of the equilateral triangle cannot be interpreted in multiple ways, no more than can a clearly identified and recorded pathogenic agent or a specific animal species. These definitions are an integral part of conceptual systems and can fairly easily be translated into all languages. Scientists, engineers and manufacturers worldwide will usually understand each other with no problem as to categorizing an object, be it concrete or abstract.

On the other hand political discourse does not aim at solving a technical problem but at convincing, and, more often than not, of gathering together, with the help of imprecise but consensual expressions, people who do not necessarily have the same interests but whose grouping together is necessary in order to constitute a power struggle sufficient to reach a given political objective.

In order to do this, the politicians needs polysemous concepts, concepts that can fire the imagination and have different meanings according to the context in which they are used and which can be interpreted differently by the diverse categories of actors to whom the discourse is addressed.

These highly ambiguous terms sometimes take advantage of the particularities of a given language, certain homonymies for instance, in order to build what I shall call textual strategies. The politician needs to construct discourses that can be interpreted in different ways, both in time and in space. But, on the other hand, these terms, that are useful to the politician, cannot be used in scientific research or in a reasoning process. They are not made for that. The politician also sometimes needs “concepts” that allow him to somewhat anaesthetize the intelligence of his listeners or at least to prevent them from going in directions where the politician does not wish them to go.

The concept of handicap as it is commonly used in France in the medico-social field, clearly belongs to this latter category, that of concepts which from a scientific point of view are or have been very much exploited politically.

2. The concept of handicap: archaeology of a metaphor

The use of the term “handicap” in the medico-social field has a metaphoric origin. Even if it constitutes today a lexicalized metaphor, it corresponds particularly well to the definition that ARISTOTLE gave of this figure of rhetoric “the transport of a name to a thing which designates another thing”.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary¹, the term seems to have a rather obscure history. Two examples of the use of the noun and one of the verb are recorded in the 17th century, and its links with horse racing appear later, in the 18th century. The term’s origin seems to come from the expression “*hand i’ cap*” or “*hand in the cap*” which refers to a game where an element of chance plays a role. One player offers to bid for an object belonging to another and for which he offers in exchange something belonging to him.

When the game has been agreed, a referee is chosen and the three participants (the two players and the referee) each place the same sum of money in a cap or hat. The players then put their hands in the cap and the referee gives his estimation of the balance or the sum needed in the exchange of an object of lower value. At that point, the two players take their hands out of the cap simultaneously and if their hands are full of coins, this means that they both accept the exchange, and if their hands are empty, this means that they refuse. In the former case, the exchange takes place and the referee gets the stakes in the cap. In the latter case, where both players are empty handed, the exchange does not take place but the referee also gets the stakes. Finally, if one player accepts and the other refuses, the exchange does not take place but the one who has accepted gets the money.

Again, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, such practices were recorded as early as 1680 but the expression “*handicap match*” had not yet appeared. It does appear in the form of “*Handy-Cap*” in 1754 in a racing calendar² which gives the rules of racing in general and notably the description of a “*Post and Handy-Cap Match*”. This consists, for three people: two riders “A” and “B” and a referee “C”, of each putting the same sum of money into a hat. “C”, who is the “*Handy Caper*”, then defines the conditions of the race. “A” and “B”, when they have been informed of the proposal of the referee, put their hands in their pockets, then bring them out clenched shut and then open them both together simultaneously. If both riders have money in their hands as a sign of acceptance then the race is confirmed. If they are empty handed as a sign of refusal, the race will not take place. But in both cases the “*Hand-Caper*” wins the money deposited in the hat. If, on the other hand, one has money in his hand and the other doesn’t, the race does not take place, but the one who has accepted the referee’s proposal gets the money in the hat.

The expressions “handicap race” or “handicap plate” used to designate “a horse race in which a referee (the handicapper) decides what weights should be carried by the different horses involved, according to his judgment of their values, with the aim of making their chances of winning equal, were recorded as early as 1786. In its verbal form, “handicap” was used from the middle of the 19th century to designate the action of “burdening, hampering or in some way penalizing a stronger competitor so as to reduce his chances in favour of less strong competitors. More generally it is to put someone in a position of disadvantage by imposing some form of hampering, obstacle or incapacity”. Simultaneously at that time, the expression was beginning to be used metaphorically, as for instance in the sentence, “*he is handicapped with the weight of his own reputation*” (1864) or as in “*a high expenditure and heavy taxation handicaps a country*” (*The Times* 6th November 1885”).

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, (Second Edition on Compact Disk.) Oxford University Press 1996.

² *Pond’s Racing Calendar*, 1754.

It is only at the end of the 19th century (from 1875 on) that “handicap” is used as a noun to designate “any race or competition where one has tried to equalize the chances of the competitors by giving an advantage to the least efficient or by imposing a disadvantage on the most efficient. A few years later, the term is used to designate “the extra weight or any other condition imposed on a strong competitor in favour of a weaker one in any athletic match or other; by extension any encumbrance or disability that weighs upon effort and makes success more difficult”³. An example of this is: “*Two minutes at such time is a heavy handicap on the efforts of hounds*” (1883), or again “*His broken wing is a heavy handicap to him, and his chances against fox and stoat are now reduced to a minimum*” (1890).

In France the term “handicap” to designate a disadvantage or a physical defect appears much later. H. J. STIKER situates it in the 1930’s.⁴

All this said and done, the notion of handicap semantically contains the idea of competition, that of an objective to give equal opportunities, that of a procedure by which could be established, among entities of different sorts, an equivalence based on an abstraction (time or money), and if one refers to the oldest historical reference, the idea of a procedure aiming at ensuring the impartiality of the referee⁵. F. CHAPIREAU⁶ notes that the word “handicap” has semantic components common to the French word “tare”, but that it does not possess, – at least not as yet – all its pejorative connotations. “Tare” means, according to the context, either the weight that is placed on the pan of the scales in order to balance that of an object (the container for example) that one does not wish to count in the measurement of the weight or the value of the given object, or it means a more or less serious hereditary defect.

As to the present usage of the term “handicap” and its associated social representations, the handicapped person is someone who, in the big lottery of heredity and heritage, has “picked out the wrong number” and who find himself afflicted with some sort of limitation of his capabilities on which his will has no hold, whose determinations are generally unknown and where it is thought that his free choice plays no part. In the discursive universe of our Western societies, handicap is conceived as a natural inequality which results in affecting chances of success in a social life conceived as a sporting competition. This race, like that of the handicap, is itself the metaphorical representation of a healthy economic competition whose benefits have been widely acknowledged. Like most games, it can be considered as an idealized and ideological representation of social relations of the society in which its rules were defined.

The “*passion for equality*” which TOQUEVILLE defines as a characteristic of democratic societies, is a subject of perpetual debate, but as an editorialist of the newspaper “*Les Echos*” pointed out recently: reduction of inequalities policies resemble more and more Sisyphean labour and attention is now being transferred to “equality of opportunity” Anything that appears to break this balance, in daily life as in its diverse representations, evokes certain social contradictions and enters into conflict with one of the fundamental values of our liberal societies where the State, in its role of “hand-Caper”, is presented in the form of a guarantor.

In the field which concerns us, this equality of opportunity should therefore, as far as it is possible to do so, be re-established and inequalities compensated for, – be it in an artificial way – according to the principle of redistribution. This is the meaning of the “national

³ « Any encumbrance or disability that weighs upon effort and makes success more difficult. » O.E.D. (4).

⁴ H.-J. STIKER, « Handicap handicapé » in *Fragments pour une histoire : notions et acteurs*, Paris. Alter 1996, pp. 18-20

⁵ In the game of « hand in the cap » if the proposal of the referee favours one of the players, it will probably be accepted by the favoured player and refused by the other, so the referee will lose his stakes.

⁶ CHAPIREAU, F., *Le handicap mental chez l'enfant*, op. cit. p. 52.

obligation” created by the French law of 1975 and the basic principle of French social legislation.

Let me use the same metaphorical language and say that in order for the economic game to continue in social peace, the players must not only accept to play according to the rules laid out by the referee, but also that the “inequalities” to be compensated for, must continue to be considered as natural phenomena of diverse, indeterminate or accidental origin, on which politics has no hold⁷, or as the effect of accidental dysfunctions of a complex social system, which although fundamentally good in its principles, needs to be repaired here and there. In order for the game to continue, it is advisable to prevent a large number of these inequalities from being seen due to systematic effects of a given social order or to the day to day running of the institutions which ensure its working and reproduction.

The similarities with the metaphor of the race course are obvious. We have the referee who – in order not to lose his stakes – makes sure that the chances of the players are equal by using a compensatory artifice, – an extra charge for the strongest / a measure of national solidarity in favour of the weakest –, to compensate for the “inequalities” considered as natural, fortuitous or accidental.⁸

According to H. J. STIKER, the handicapper’s sporting objective would be “*to see all the competitors cross the finishing line together*”, which is a very strange idea to say the least and one which would satisfy neither the betting public nor the race organizers. Indeed the race only has meaning when at the finish there are always winners and losers. This is certainly not the objective and one cannot say, as does STIKER, that “*among the semantic traits that the term handicap had possessed in its first meaning, the notion of chance has disappeared*”. Quite the opposite, it still plays an essential role.

Among the effects of meaning that this metaphor generates, is the idea that as the chances were supposed to have been equalized “at the start” of the race, the differences which are bound to appear “at the finish” can be attributed to the risks of the race, to the skill of the competitors, to the efforts or investments they have made at the right moment. In this way, the principles of equal opportunity and equity are supposedly respected.

I thus formulate the assumption that the use of the term of “handicap” in our society serves to make more bearable the inequality of revenue, prestige and power that are a part and parcel of all society and that no social policy has ever been able to eradicate. Another effect and probably social function as well, is to hinder a true search for knowledge as to the issue of the real causes of the phenomena it claims to subsume.

Indeed we can see that in medico-social terminology, the term “handicap” has come to no longer mean the artifice meant to compensate for differences or “deficiencies” so as to re-establish “equal opportunities”, but the differences themselves, that are in need of neutralising or being compensating for, – differences that, very often, the provision of care contributes to produce. Given that these differences and their causes are presupposed to be natural and contingent, they can be conceived as the result of a lottery, of an “accident of life”, which, from then on, would need no further explanation. It’s chance! But chance in the study of human conduct is not a simple notion to understand and it is my opinion that by implicitly referring to chance, the notion of handicap is based on confusion and maintains confusion.

⁷ “All that makes us unique, as has often been written to console us from being made of lottery balls pulled out of the urn of Mendelian heredity. Unique, certainly. But also sometimes defective” CANGUILHEM. G., *Le normal et le pathologique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1966, p. 210.

⁸ The natural or chance character of social inequalities is very well rendered by the generic French expression « *les accidentés de la vie* » (ie. The people who have suffered accidents in life) used to designate the ill, the disabled and the handicapped.

3. Chance and the question of “cause”

As André LALANDE reminds us, the word “chance” can be used to translate two different terms: τύχη and αὐτόματον by which, in his research on the function of the cause, ARISTOTLE established, for the first time, a fundamental distinction.

αὐτόματον, designates chance itself, where no form of intentionality intervenes and which he attributes to a purely mechanical causality.

“The falling of a stone does not occur in order to hit someone; therefore the stone has fallen by αὐτόματον effect because otherwise it would have fallen by someone’s will in order to hit someone else.”⁹

τύχη, on the other hand, is used by ARISTOTLE when an act carried out with a specific aim in mind, has the same consequences as if it had been carried out with another objective. It designates in this way, that which, happening by chance to a being endowed with language, by an accidental effect of his action or due to the effect of an outside cause which is no way intentional, is however such as he would have hoped for, feared, wanted or tried to avoid. The man who goes to the Agora and has the “luck” to meet his debtor, can therefore believe that the τύχη is a perfectly real cause. It can indeed be thought of as such, if we consider the opposition between the acts which result from a conscious will and the others, as a relative opposition

“The τύχη” says ARISTOTLE “seems to belong to the domain of the indeterminate, impenetrable to man” That is why some have thought that: “the τύχη is a cause hidden to human reasoning because it would be something divine and supernatural of a higher order”¹⁰

One has only to go one step further to maintain that ARISTOTLE’S τύχη only presents itself as an accident when, between the real cause and that which it affects, there is an efficient discursive process which escapes conscious control, that is to say a “will” which is not conscious.. The τύχη only presents itself as an accident to the extent where the cause which has produced this effect remains unknown, undetermined. That is why τύχη is simply to intentional finalities what chance (αὐτόματον) is to natural finalities. The τύχη is therefore, for ARISTOTLE, a variety of chance, chance in the field of human activity.

“There is τύχη and effect of τύχη for all to whom one can attribute practical activity. So it is necessarily in the objects of practical activity that there is τύχη”¹¹

He then specifies that the τύχη is defined as something that can only come from a being capable of making a choice.

“Therefore beings that cannot act practically cannot produce any effect of τύχη. That has as a consequence that no inanimate being, no animal, no child is an agent of effect of τύχη”

In other words, neither inanimate being, nor animal, nor child, the agent of the effects of τύχη can only be a human being, that is to say, a being endowed with speech because:

“that man is a political animal of a higher order than a mere bee or any other gregarious animal, is obvious. Nature, has indeed, in our opinion, done nothing in vain; and only man of all the animals possesses speech.”¹²

⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Physique*, Paris, Les belles lettres, 1969, Tome I, Livre II, pp. 73-74.

¹⁰ BOSSUET also writes “what is chance as regards man is intention as regards God”

¹¹ ARISTOTLE, *Ibidem*. p. 72.

¹² ARISTOTLE, *Politique*, Paris, Vrin, 1970, p. 6.

To come back to the notion of handicap, we can see that it accounts for the effects of “chance” in the fields of human activity. All that remains is to demonstrate, like FREUD, that what guides the hand that plunges into the hat is as rigorously determined as the choice of a number chosen at random or a parapraxis. We only have to show that this determination obeys rules which are not these established by the sciences of nature, but those which are incumbent upon disciplines which deal with processes where human agents interact on the basis of social conventions. As ECO states, their domain begins “*where that obscure entity that is ‘meaning’ starts to appear*”.

Let us also remind ourselves that the term “handicap” as something which refers to chance, is the expression of a social symptom which, at the same time designates phenomena whose determination is unconscious and denies the existence of such a determination. The term “unconscious” being used here not only in the descriptive sense of that which is not conscious but, more precisely, as it designates a set of discursive processes which escape consciousness while at the same time preserving their intensity and their efficiency.¹³

4. The misadventures of the French notion of handicap: from maladjustment to handicap

In France in the 70’s the metaphor of maladjustment, in use since 1942, had worn itself out and the concept had become the basis of a depreciated social status: the term has acquired an out-moded consonance and pejorative connotations. Things came to such a head that the father and principal promoter of the concept was obliged, in a belated self-criticism, to admit it. Robert LAFON writes in 1971:

“We looked for a general terminology with simplification, brevity and tact in mind, because the terms used were insufficient or shocking [...] I do realize that if we do not go beyond this conception, we shut up those whom we call the maladjusted and the handicapped in a segregative and conservative system that is disintegrating, falsely disculpabilizing and ending up in a uselessness of action, in intolerance, in dramatisation and rejection”¹⁴

The term maladjustment no longer has the favour of politicians. For a while the term “exclusion” was favoured, this notion being sanctioned by the success of the book by René LENOIR: *“The Excluded. One Frenchman out of ten”* whose introduction to the first 1974 edition, ends with the following sentence: *“This fringe group, doubly worrying, by its nature and by its volume, far from diminishing, is growing ever larger.”*

A law of the 23rd November 1957 already defined as a *“handicapped worker”*: *“any person whose possibility of obtaining and keeping a job is effectively reduced following an insufficiency or a lessening of his physical or mental capabilities.”* Then a law dated November 19th 1974, which aimed at allowing a certain category of people who found themselves temporarily without resources and homeless, to benefit from the provisions of the work code in favour of handicapped workers, will prefer the expression the *“social handicapped”* to the *“maladjusted”*. Finally, the notion of handicap will be definitively sanctioned by the law of the 30 June 1975 *“in favour of handicapped persons”*.

¹³ FREUD evoked on this subject *“intense psychic processes capable of manifesting themselves by effects similar to those produced by other representations, or by effects which, taking in their turn the form of representations, are liable to become conscious, without the processes which produced them becoming so themselves”* *Le moi et le ça*, op. cit. p. 179.

¹⁴ LAFON, R., Recherche sur les critères d’inadaptation, in *Revue de droit sanitaire et social*, n° 28, October-Décember 1971.

However, although until that date at least, the two terms seem to have often been used indiscriminately¹⁵, two presuppositions allow us to distinguish them.

The first appears clearly in the BLOCH-LAINE report entitled “*Study of the general problem of the maladjustment of handicapped persons*” where handicap designates a cause whose consequence is maladjustment, however complex this relation is.

*“Between handicap and maladjustment, the relation of cause to effect varies greatly according to the cases. To the intrinsic gravity of handicap, a proportionate degree of maladjustment does not rigorously correspond”*¹⁶

The second presupposition is that:

*“Handicap is certainly a physical deficiency of the individual, that affects him in his motor or psychological behaviour, while maladjustment represents the social effect of this handicap”*¹⁷

Despite this accommodating presupposition, when they attempt to propose a definition of what a “handicapped person” is, it remains to be said that the authors of the BLOCH-LAINE report still find themselves obliged to refer to a confused concept of normality.

“They are called ‘handicapped’ because, due to their physical, mental or emotional state or to their social situation, they suffer disorders which constitute for them ‘handicaps’ that is to say weaknesses, and specific constraints with regard to the normal: this being defined as the average of the capabilities and opportunities of most individuals living in a given society”

It is as though the term “handicap” designated an indefinable cause, or which cannot or must only be apprehended by its consequences: a divergence “from the normal”.

The confusion which results from this impossibility to define the concept, seems to be leading to an evolution of the meaning of the term. In 1957, handicap was still spoken of as being relative to a cause or to a particular situation, in this case professional work. One was handicapped by something or from doing something. Subsequently, the notion came to apply to the entire existence of the person and the adjective “handicapped” became a noun. For the writer of the 1975 law, one is no longer “*handicapped by*” or “*relative to*”, one is “*a handicapped person*”. The notion is thus explicitly destined to become the foundation of a particular social status subject to particular laws. Before the Senate, on the 3rd April 1975, the Health Minister, Simone WEIL, declared:

*“Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate, I hope that I have convinced you of the importance of the reform this text means to achieve in favour of handicapped people. In fact, the application of this law should give a true social status to the handicapped.”*¹⁸

This confusion arising from the impossibility of defining the notion of handicap is plain to see, both in the political debate which precedes the adoption of the law, and in the exposition of motives of the law itself. Mrs WEIL also states before the senators:

“As you may have noticed, this text does not give a definition of the handicapped. On this point, the government has chosen a very flexible and empirical concept: from now

¹⁵ On the first occurrences of the term “handicap” in the United States and in France Cf. STIKER, H.-J., « Handicap handicapé », in *Fragments pour une histoire : notions et acteurs*, Paris. Alter 1996

¹⁶ BLOCH-LAINE, F., *Étude du problème général de l’inadaptation des personnes handicapées*. Report presented to the Prime Minister, December 1967. Paris, La Documentation française, notes et études documentaires, février 1969.

¹⁷ MONEGER, F., « La notion d’inadaptation en droit positif. » In *Revue de droit sanitaire et social*, n°44, October-Décember 1975.

¹⁸ Senate, debate on the law relative to social and medico-social institutions, session of 3rd April 1975. J.O. pp.286-294.

on, any person shall be considered as handicapped when recognized as such by the departmental commissions provided by the articles ...”

This statement will not prevent the same minister from declaring a little later that the great imprecision of the 1975 law is in fact that it, in no way, defines what a handicapped person is.

The exposition of motives of the law tries, very clumsily, to justify this absence of definition by an accumulation of contradictory arguments, which, in other circumstances, would make one smile.¹⁹

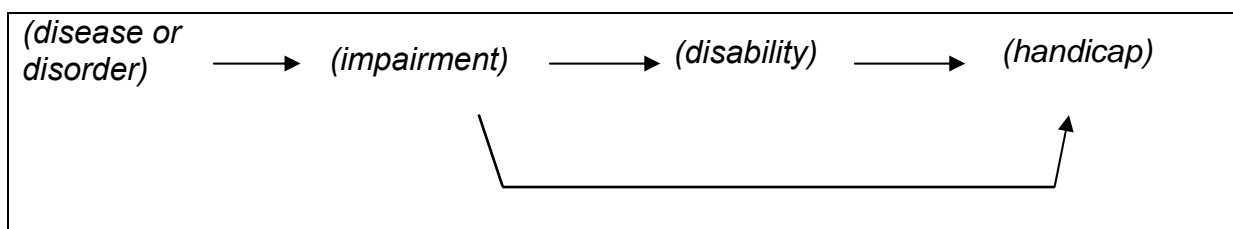
*“Let us now consider physical and mental handicaps. We must emphasize that it is purposely that the law has not given a definition of ‘a handicapped person’. Such a definition is, to all extents and purposes, almost impossible. The best is still that of ... (there follows the definition given in the BLOCH-LAINE report quoted above).”*²⁰

In spite of this confusion, it seems that neither those who drafted the report nor the French politicians, took into consideration the fact that, at the same time, the World Health Organisation was adopting terminological conventions diametrically opposed to the presuppositions of the BLOCH-LAINE report on *“the study of the general problem of the maladjustment of handicapped persons”* and consequently diametrically opposed to those who underpin French legislation.

Thus, at the same time, The WHO – supported by the hope that the success of the medical world to build up and impose the use of a relatively well defined vocabulary, thanks to the *“International Classification of Diseases”*, could be extended to phenomena which had not, until then been considered relevant to the medical field – asked one of its consultants, Dr Philip WOOD, to compile a project compatible with the principles underlying the International Classification of Diseases.

In 1975, after having examined WOOD’s proposal, the WHO recommended its publication on trial and in 1976, taking this recommendation into account; the World Health Assembly approved the principle of a trial publication of a classification of “impairments and handicaps” which would be separate from the International Classification of Diseases.

The distinctions made in this project are known as *“WOOD’s Model”*. They are based on the articulation of four concepts as shown in the following diagram.



In this initial diagram:

- *“impairment”* designates a loss of substance or change of an organic structure as for in the loss of a limb or in deterioration of certain tissues.
- *“disability”* designates an objective restriction (due to an impairment), the limitation of a function or of a capability to carry out certain acts. As for example in the limitation of the amplitude of movement of the knee or hip.

¹⁹ It even evokes the argument of the cauldron: “this cauldron that you want back, I’ve never seen it, and in any case, you never lent it to me, and to top it all, it had a hole in it”

²⁰ Exposition of motives of the law n° 951.

- “*handicap*” designates the difficulties that an individual is likely to meet in his social or personal life because of an impairment or a disability, the extent of these difficulties depending on his material, social or family situation. For example, the extent of the difficulties encountered by a person with reduced mobility will depend on how accessible his house is and how much his home has been adapted to his disability.

This first conceptual diagram, despite its shortcomings, constituted a usable base for the elaboration of a conceptual structure, usable in the pursuit of knowledge regarding the search for efficient answers to the problem encountered by a relatively well defined sector of the population. But under the aegis of WHO, its future was to be different.²¹

Indeed, as soon as the WHO took control over the future of this classification, the range of applications rapidly spilt over the limited compass of WOOD’s concerns to take in the planning of health services, the administration and the drawing up of social policies. From then on, the development of this classification was no longer inscribed in a framework of scientific research, but in a political one, weighted down by corporate interests and economic considerations. The resulting so called “classification” is not the product of a scientific work but the result of negotiations between politicians and representatives of different professional sectors and of the different lobbies concerned, all motivated by the defence of private interests and by the search for a consensus on “politically correct” terminology rather than the need to produce operating concepts.

The term “handicap”, now abandoned by the WHO and by most English-speaking countries, was however, under the pressure of certain French professional and associative spheres, reintroduced in the French “translation” of the “International Classification of Functioning” with the title “*Classification Internationale du Fonctionnement, du Handicap et de la Santé*” Its use, upheld by certain professional sectors and even by some researchers trying not to dissatisfy their employers or sponsors, continues to be a problem, to cause confusion and to paralyze scientific research in this field.

The latest definition, inscribed in the law of February 11th 2005 “*For the equality of the rights and opportunities, the participation and the citizenship of handicapped persons*” is the following one:

“Constitutes a handicap, according to the present law, any limitation of activity or restriction of participation in social life for a person, because of a substantial alteration, durable or final, of one or several physical, sensory, mental, cognitive or psychic, of a multi-handicap or an invalidating health problem.”

This definition imperceptibly resembles that put forward 30 years ago by WOOD’s original model. It defines ‘handicap’ not as a personal characteristic, but as the result of an interaction between certain characteristics of the person and of elements of the situation in which the person finds himself. It nevertheless remains very vague and does not constitute an operating concept.

5. Conclusion: the French concept of handicap in political and administrative rhetoric

We can conclude from what has been put forward here, that the definition of “handicap”, as the result of an administrative decision remains to this day, in France, the only known operating definition. The terminology associated with it remains fluctuating, uncertain, and a tendency persists to promote the vaguest and most polysemous expressions possible to designate the persons concerned.

²¹ See on this subject: ROSSIGNOL, C., « *Classification Internationale du Fonctionnement : démarche normative et alibi scientifique.* » *Gérontologie et société*, vol. Ages et handicaps, no. 110. 2004, p. 29-46. <http://aune.lpl.univ-aix.fr/~fulltext/1838.pdf>

The terms presented as “concepts”, including the semantic labels of the main categories in use: “*incapacité*”, “*déficience*”, “*situation de handicap*”, “*facteurs environnementaux*” are not subject to operational definitions and are not related to identifiable scientific or technical contexts.

The sophisticated discourses associated with it and which characterise the professional culture of this sector are based on the borrowing from diverse scientific disciplines (psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics etc.) of concepts, which once disconnected from their theoretical context, are used as concepts of common sense. This is the case, for example, as regards concepts of “structure”, “system”, “paradigm” “model”, which have a precise meaning in linguistics or other scientific disciplines. Once disconnected from their original theoretical context, they are used as concepts of common sense and enter into multiple networks of associations which make their use particularly adaptable to the necessities of political speech or of auto-justification. The use of these concepts allows one to give an air of scientific authenticity to these discourses. By doing this, they can no longer be used to state a problem clearly or to reply to a precise question.

Consequently, the ordinary citizen can scarcely imagine that these “scientific terms” are not defined anywhere and that the administrative decisions that they contribute to justify are, for a great part, arbitrary.

There are, in our societies, complex processes by which people find themselves hindered in the exercise of their rights, and prevented from leading an active life or from working in order to provide for their needs.

If one wishes to prevent or at least limit the development of these processes, it is important that the intellectual means to proceed with their description and analysis should be provided.

For that, the elaboration of a conceptual structure based on clear distinctions between impairments, dysfunctions and handicaps should have been considered as urgent and as a priority, given that it is the way to a precise analysis of the relation between these different orders of phenomena.

However, for reasons that cannot be gone into in the limited scope of a paper, scientific research has not been very active in this field and even today seems to be paralyzed by an administrative control and by an imposed terminology.

During the last 50 years, the compulsive search for a generic term and the hope of a utopian scientific taxonomy – which in any case, will prove to be impossible to build – seems to have mobilized a great part of the available energy and means. It is linked to concerns which are more oriented towards the preservation of the existing institutional systems and their principles of action than towards a better knowledge of the problems they are supposed to solve.

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