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FROM OBEDIENCE TO RESPONSIBILITY: CRITICAL THINKING IN THE TRAINING OF CIVIL SERVANTS

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Abstract: *The study proposes an integrative theoretical framework for understanding the transition "from obedience to responsibility" in the training of civil servants, arguing that in the absence of critical thinking, responsibility remains a slogan, while obedience continues to function as the implicit operating rule of public administration. Starting from the conceptual foundations of obedience, authority, and responsibility, the analysis shows how the Weberian bureaucratic model and, subsequently, New Public Management have privileged procedural compliance and efficiency to the detriment of ethical reflection and direct engagement with citizens. Critical thinking is conceptualized as the cognitive infrastructure of public responsibility, insofar as it enables the problematization of norms, the assessment of consequences, and the contestation of professional myths within public administration. The study develops a typology of civil servant models - from the obedient bureaucrat to the responsible professional - and argues that professional training can become an institutionalized space for productive doubt through the systematic use of case studies, simulations, and written reflection. Structural and cultural obstacles are identified (a conformist organizational culture, chains of accountability oriented exclusively upwards, deficient architectures of accountability), as well as enabling conditions for responsibility (institutional leadership, international integrity standards, and the reconfiguration of training curricula). The conclusions underscore the need for empirical research on curricula, on justificatory discourses used in controversial decisions, and on comparative variations across administrative systems, to test the hypothesis that institutional ecologies which explicitly value critical thinking generate more robust forms of public responsibility.*

Keywords: *critical thinking; obedience; public responsibility; civil servant; New Public Management (NPM); New Public Service; organizational culture; professional training in public administration*

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INTRODUCTION

In most public administration textbooks, the civil servant appears as a person of rules: they apply regulations, follow procedures, and implement decisions formulated by others. In reality, they are much closer to the core of power than it seems. Every day, behind an anonymous service counter or a computer screen, they decide whether a law becomes an experience of protection or a refined form of symbolic violence. The question that runs through this study is therefore disturbingly simple: do we want obedient civil servants or responsible civil servants?

The bureaucratic tradition, from Max Weber's classic analysis of rational–legal authority (Weber, 1978) onward, has privileged the image of the neutral civil servant, devoid of preferences, who submits to hierarchy and takes shelter behind the reassuring formula "this is what the procedure requires." This architecture of obedience has produced stability and predictability, but at the same time has generated a culture of unlearning moral responsibility. In an extreme context, Hannah Arendt showed how dangerous the combination between the banality of evil and the refuge in "mere obedience to orders" can become (Arendt, 1963/2013). In more discreet forms, contemporary administrations reproduce precisely this logic.

In parallel, the public service literature suggests a shift in emphasis: the civil servant is no longer a mere executor of political will, but a professional called upon to share responsibility, together with citizens, for the quality of public decisions (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Such a change cannot take place without an intentional reconstruction of training: from the transmission of rules to the cultivation of critical thinking that problematizes the rule, evaluates its consequences, and reveals its presuppositions. In Paulo Freire's terms, the education of the civil servant must exit the "banking" logic of depositing information into passive minds and become a process of joint questioning of social reality (Freire, 1970/2000).

This study aims to elaborate the theoretical framework of the transition "from obedience to responsibility" in the training of civil servants by articulating three levels: (a) conceptual clarification of obedience, authority, and responsibility; (b) the integration of critical thinking into civil servant role models; and (c) the repositioning of professional training within an ethical and democratic perspective. The endeavor is a theoretical one: it does not offer training recipes but seeks to clarify what kind of institutional being we intend to form when we train a "servant of the state" in a democracy that claims the state is, in fact, the servant of the citizens.

The approach proposed in this article is explicitly theoretical, in the form of a narrative review and conceptual construction. The selection of literature was purposive ("purposeful sampling"), focused on three major axes: (a) classic and contemporary works on obedience, authority, and responsibility (Weber, Arendt, Milgram, Bovens); (b) the literature on public administration and managerial reforms (Weberian bureaucracy, NPM, NPS, theories of street-level bureaucracy); and (c) recent contributions on critical thinking and adult professional education (Dewey, Ennis, Facione, Mezirow, Brookfield, OECD, EU, and UN documents). The analysis does not claim to be exhaustive, nor to provide a systematic mapping of all existing approaches, but rather to bring these three theoretical registers into dialogue to construct an interpretive framework useful for understanding the training of civil servants "from obedience to responsibility." The aim is not to test hypotheses empirically, but to formulate a conceptual model that can later be used and verified in empirical research and in the design of training programs.

The main contribution of the article lies in the articulation, within a common framework, of Arendt's and Milgram's critique of obedience, the debate between NPM and NPS in public administration, and theories of critical thinking and transformative learning as applied to the training

of civil servants. Instead of treating these traditions separately, the text proposes an integrated reading: obedience and irresponsibility are understood both as effects of specific institutional and cultural architectures and as the outcome of modes of training that privilege cognitive conformism. Conversely, responsibility is conceptualized as the result of an institutional ecology of critical thinking, in which curricula, pedagogical practices, and organizational culture are reconfigured to encourage independent judgment, the capacity to problematize orders received, and a reflexive orientation towards the public interest. In this sense, the article advances a normative and analytical framework that can guide both future empirical research and the design of civil servant training programs.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: OBEDIENCE, AUTHORITY, RESPONSIBILITY

In everyday administrative discourse, "obedience," "authority," and "responsibility" appear as banal, almost technical concepts. They populate internal regulations, codes of conduct, and job descriptions. Yet, examined closely, these three words describe how a society decides who has the right to command, who is obliged to obey, and who is to blame when something goes wrong. Obedience is, at a minimal level, the disposition to follow the instructions of an authority regarded as legitimate, even when those instructions run counter to our immediate impulses. Stanley Milgram's experiments showed how far this willingness can go: ordinary people accept to inflict (in their perception) severe suffering on a "subject" merely because an authorized voice tells them it is necessary for the sake of science (Milgram, 1974). In public administration, the research laboratory is replaced by offices, stamps, and official letterheads, but the psychological mechanism remains similar.

Authority is the social form through which this obedience becomes stable and relatively predictable. Max Weber distinguishes between traditional, charismatic, and rational–legal authority, emphasizing that in modernity bureaucracy is legitimized less by the sacredness of tradition and more by the impersonality of rules (Weber, 1922/1978). The civil servant is constructed as an "officeholder": they do not command in their own name, but as a temporary embodiment of an institution. Precisely this impersonality, which promises protection against arbitrariness, can, however, generate a very comfortable form of moral disengagement: "I am not the one deciding, the law decides; I merely apply it." Rational–legal authority thus reduces the friction between conscience and command, transforming ethical dilemmas into matters of technical interpretation.

Responsibility reintroduces friction. It denotes the obligation to give an account of the consequences of our actions or inactions before a forum - legal, political, administrative, or moral (Bovens, 2007). In public administration, responsibility always has a dual component: the civil servant is answerable, simultaneously, to hierarchical superiors and to the society they serve. When these two loyalties come into conflict, the concept of responsibility becomes a minefield: if you follow an illegitimate order, you betray the citizen; if you refuse it, you betray the hierarchy and risk your career. In her analysis of the "banality of evil," Hannah Arendt showed that taking refuge in the formula "I was only following orders" is not a moral excuse, but precisely the distinctively modern form of irresponsibility (Arendt, 1963).

From the perspective of this study, the conceptual foundations can be formulated simply: obedience is the mechanism that makes authority effective; responsibility is the mechanism that prevents obedience from becoming criminal or, in its milder administrative version, purely cynical. To discuss the training of civil servants therefore means to decide what kind of relationship we want among these three dimensions. A system oriented exclusively toward obedience will produce civil servants who know perfectly "how" to do something but no longer ask whether it "ought" to be done.

A system that takes responsibility seriously will implicitly require the cultivation of a capacity for critical judgment - that is, a willingness to question the legitimacy of an order and to evaluate its consequences for the rights and dignity of those affected. In this sense, a rigorous conceptualization of obedience, authority, and responsibility is not merely a terminological exercise: it sketches the moral profile of the civil servant we are training for our democracies.

CRITICAL THINKING AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In educational discourse, *critical thinking* is often invoked as a comforting slogan, as if the mere mention of the concept would automatically transform students – or civil servants – into lucid citizens. On closer inspection, however, critical thinking is not an intellectual ornament but a social technology: a set of mental practices through which a community decides which version of reality deserves to be regarded as true and legitimate. Since John Dewey, it has been defined as a form of reflective thought in which beliefs are not simply accepted but examined considering their reasons and consequences (Dewey, 2007). Ennis later formulated, in what has become a classic way, the idea of critical thinking as "reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1987).

This dual orientation – towards truth and towards action – is essential for public administration. Civil servants do not operate in a sterile laboratory, but in a world of petitions, political pressures, and normative ambiguities. They must decide, always under time constraints, which fact is relevant, which rule applies, and which interpretation of the law produces the least harm and the greatest protection for citizens' rights. Foundational literature such as the Delphi report coordinated by Facione describes critical thinking as a set of skills (analysis, inference, evaluation, interpretation) supported by dispositions such as openness to argument, intellectual honesty, and a desire for clarity (Facione, 1990). If we transpose this framework into a civil servant's office, it becomes a map of everyday decisions: whom we give priority to, which document we request, what level of risk we accept in applying an exception.

More important than the list of skills, however, is the underlying attitude. Brookfield insists that critical thinking begins when people interrogate their own fundamental assumptions, especially those that seem self-evident to them (Brookfield, 2011). For the civil servant, this means questioning not only the "theories" of citizens, but also the myths of the institution: that the rule is always just, that efficiency is always virtuous, that obedience is always neutral. In the absence of this self-questioning, critical thinking risks being externalized – a capacity applied only to others, never to one's own administrative practice.

The relevance for public administration becomes evident if we consider the paradigm shifts proposed by the "New Public Service" approach, in which the role of the civil servant is to "serve rather than steer," in partnership with citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Such a role cannot be fulfilled solely with the tools of obedience and procedural compliance; it requires the capacity to evaluate policies critically, to identify unintended effects, and to recognize situations in which rules produce injustice. In more technical terms, critical thinking becomes the cognitive infrastructure of responsibility: it forges the link between the text of the norm and the social context, between the individual decision and the broader picture of the public interest.

Finally, if we take these theoretical reference points seriously, the training of civil servants can no longer be conceived as a simple transfer of legal or procedural knowledge. It must become an institutionalized space of productive doubt: the case study as an opportunity for critical reconstruction of a situation, debate as an exercise in public justification, written reflection as a discipline of self-evaluation. The aim is not to turn public administration into a perpetual philosophy

seminar, but to acknowledge that, in a state governed by the rule of law, every bureaucratic decision is, in miniature, a decision about what kind of world we deem legitimate. Critical thinking is precisely the art of making the premises of these possible worlds visible before they are imposed, through stamp and signature, on the lives of citizens.

MODELS OF THE CIVIL SERVANT: FROM THE OBEDIENT BUREAUCRAT TO THE RESPONSIBLE PROFESSIONAL

If we look at the history of public administration as a succession of "ideal types," the first character to enter the stage is the Weberian bureaucrat: the impersonal official, selected on the basis of competence, embedded in a clear hierarchy, governed by written rules and orderly files (Weber, 1922/1978). This model represented a silent revolution compared to patronage- or clientelism-based administrations; it promised equal treatment, predictability, and protection against arbitrariness. Yet the price often paid for this rationalization was the transformation of the civil servant into a "cog" in a normative machinery, whose principal virtue is obedience. As long as the system is perceived as legitimate, this obedience appears as an act of virtue; when the rules become unjust or disconnected from social reality, the same reflex of submission generates cynicism and irresponsibility.

The next wave, that of New Public Management (NPM), changed the scenery but not always the moral plot. In the logic of NPM, the civil servant is reconstructed as a manager or public entrepreneur, concerned with efficiency, performance, and competition, within an administration that borrows tools and language from the private sector (Hood, 1991). The obedient bureaucrat is replaced by the "client-oriented" manager, who must "deliver results." However, if it is not anchored in an ethics of the public interest, this model risks reducing citizens to fragmented clients and responsibility to a game of indicators, contracts, and reports, in which whatever cannot be measured disappears from the field of vision.

A third conceptual shift, associated with the New Public Service (NPS) current, proposes yet another figure: the civil servant as democratic professional who co-produces the public good with citizens, "serving rather than steering" (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Here, responsibility is not only upward (towards superiors) or contractual (towards performance indicators), but also horizontal and downward, towards the communities affected by decisions. The civil servant is called upon to assume a reflexive role: to listen, to argue, to negotiate, and to explain publicly the reasons for their decisions.

From another angle, Michael Lipsky's work on street-level bureaucracy compels us to look not only at the top of the hierarchy, but also at the contact frontier between state and citizens: teachers, police officers, social workers, front-desk clerks who translate abstract policies into everyday experiences (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky shows that these officials enjoy a considerable margin of discretion and, in fact, "make policy" through the way they apply or adapt rules. Within this framework, the model of the obedient bureaucrat becomes purely fictional: in reality, the street-level civil servant constantly negotiates between constraints, dilemmas, and pressures, and the central question becomes what kind of grammar of responsibility and critical thinking they employ when deciding who receives assistance, who is sanctioned, who is "postponed."

Thus, the transition "from the obedient bureaucrat to the responsible professional" is not a mere change of vocabulary, but a reconfiguration of professional identity. The classic bureaucrat is constructed for stability and compliance; the NPM manager for performance and competition; the professional responsible for deliberation and public justification. This last figure presupposes the integration of critical thinking skills and a public service ethic into the very definition of the profession. Rather than hiding behind procedure or the "performance contract," the responsible civil

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servant accepts that, at the end of every decision, there is a signature that belongs neither to "the system" nor to "the market," but to a real, identifiable person. Public administration thus ceases to be an exercise in well-executed obedience and becomes an exercise in responsible judgment, carried out under the critical gaze of citizens.

The "obedient bureaucrat – NPM manager – responsible professional" typology is clearly useful from a didactic standpoint, but it risks suggesting a linear evolution from a "deficient" model to a "superior" one, whereas in practice these registers coexist and combine in far more nuanced ways. There are numerous "grey zones": civil servants trained in the logic of NPM yet animated by a strong sense of the public interest, or Weberian bureaucrats who display a solid ethic of responsibility without explicitly claiming the discourse of the "responsible professional." It is therefore important to emphasize explicitly that we are dealing with ideal types, which overlap and blend in concrete situations, and that none of these models is purely "good" or "bad." This clarification prevents an excessively normative and schematic reading of the proposed analytical grid.

TRAINING CIVIL SERVANTS: A SPACE FOR THE CULTIVATION OF CRITICAL THINKING

Traditionally, the training of civil servants has been conceived as an engineering of conformity: short programs, dense with norms, procedures, and acronyms, designed to produce "the right person in the right place" within a bureaucratic machine. From this perspective, the best course is the one in which participants quickly memorize legislation, pass the exam, and return to the office with a slightly more technical vocabulary but the same reflexes of obedience. However, if we regard democratic administration not merely as an implementation mechanism, but as a space of public deliberation, then training can no longer be neutral: it becomes the main laboratory in which it is decided whether the civil servant will be a docile executor or a responsible professional.

Recent literature observes that many programs aimed at senior officials uncritically copy generic management templates, focusing on leadership, project management, and "transferable skills" usable in any sector, while completely neglecting the specifically *public* – constitutional, ethical, deliberative – dimensions of their role (Hartley, 2025). Such a model educates efficient managers, but not necessarily guardians of the public interest. By contrast, approaches inspired by the New Public Service insist that the training of civil servants must be anchored in democratic values – serving citizens, seeking the public interest, acknowledging the complexity of responsibility – and not only in techniques for optimizing performance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000, 2015).

At this point, transformative learning theory becomes relevant. For Jack Mezirow, adult education has truly emancipatory potential only when it helps participants to question their basic "frames of reference," rather than merely adding new information to old habits of thought (Mezirow, 1998, 2000). In the case of civil servants, this means problematizing the myths of the profession – that "the law is always right," that "politics decides, administration executes," that "the citizen is just a case" – and reconstructing their professional identity around critical responsibility rather than comfortable submission.

Administrative ethics adds a second layer. Studies on ethics education in public administration programs show that the mere presentation of codes of conduct has limited effects; what matters is exposing students to the real tension between the bureaucratic ethos and the democratic ethos, between loyalty to hierarchy and loyalty to constitutional values (Raadschelders, 2021). In more normative terms, "regime values" frameworks such as those proposed by John Rohr start explicitly from fundamental values – such as dignity, equality, or freedom – as reference points for civil servants' reflection on their own decisions (Rohr, 1988, 2018).

It is no coincidence that European and international initiatives on competences for open government and on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals treat critical thinking as a key competence, both for citizens and for the civil servants who design and implement policies (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2019; UN DESA, 2021). These documents implicitly suggest that the training of civil servants cannot remain a mere exercise in technical literacy, but must include pedagogical practices that stage value conflict, normative ambiguity, and factual uncertainty.

In practice, this translates into a particular design of the training space: the case study as a central method, not an appendix; simulations and role-playing exercises in which participants are forced to make decisions under realistic constraints and then defend them before a critical "public"; reflective journals in which the civil servant analyses their own assumptions and biases; assessments that measure not only the amount of information reproduced, but also the quality of argumentation and the capacity to identify side effects on vulnerable groups. Within such a framework, the training of civil servants deliberately becomes an institutionalized space of well-oriented doubt: the place where reflex obedience is bracketed, and loyalty to democracy is translated into the capacity to ask uncomfortable questions before applying the stamp.

OBSTACLES AND CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR THE TRANSITION FROM OBEDIENCE TO RESPONSIBILITY

If we take seriously the idea of a transition from obedience to responsibility, the first thing we discover is that the problem does not lie in the "character" of civil servants, but in the institutional ecology in which they live. Obedience is not merely an individual choice; it is the product of an organizational culture that rewards conformity and punishes doubt. Edgar Schein shows that organizations communicate, through routines, rituals, and their reactions to "insubordination," what is truly acceptable and what is intolerable, beyond official texts (Schein, 2010). In administrations where bureaucratic errors are sanctioned more severely than the injustice inflicted on citizens, civil servants quickly learn that it is safer to follow orders than to assume a decision that is debatable but just.

A second obstacle is the embrace of a pessimistic anthropology: the tacit belief that people, both citizens and civil servants, are fundamentally opportunistic and must be controlled through detailed rules. In such systems, moral obligation is replaced by fear of sanction, and responsibility is interpreted as the art of leaving no traces. Stanley Milgram's research on obedience suggests how easily ordinary people can be pushed to do things they would normally consider unacceptable, if the authority assumes "responsibility" (Milgram, 1974). Hannah Arendt described this dynamic as the "banality of evil": an evil produced not by exceptional monsters, but by individuals who renounce the faculty of judgment and take refuge in the formula "I was only following the rules" (Arendt, 1963/2013).

To this we can add the deficient architecture of public accountability. Mark Bovens shows that accountability is an institutionalized relationship in which an actor is obliged to explain and justify their conduct before a forum that can ask questions and apply sanctions (Bovens, 2007). In many administrations, chains of accountability are either too narrow (the civil servant is answerable only upwards, to superiors) or too diffuse (everyone is responsible, therefore no one is responsible). In the absence of real for a - internal and external - before which administrative decisions must be explained and judged, obedience remains the rational option: the safest course is to do what the boss demands and let the abstraction called "the system" bear the blame.

Yet these same mechanisms can become enabling conditions for responsibility. Organizational culture can be rewritten when leaders change the criteria of internal prestige: they no longer reward

merely "not causing problems," but also the well-argued courage to flag risks, to refuse illegal orders, or to adapt procedures in favor of the public interest (Schein, 2010). International normative frameworks move in the same direction: the OECD Recommendation on Public Integrity proposes a shift from ad hoc ethics policies to a systemic integrity strategy based on three pillars - system, culture, and accountability - with an emphasis on creating a climate in which civil servants can discuss dilemmas openly and report abuses without fear of retaliation (OECD, 2017, 2020).

At the operational level, the New Public Service movement reconfigures the very identity of the civil servant: not as an entrepreneur of efficiency, but as a citizen-professional called to "serve rather than steer" and to deliberate with the community about the public interest (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). When this vision is coherently integrated into recruitment, training, evaluation, and promotion, it creates an ecosystem in which critical thinking is no longer a dangerous deviation, but a core career competence. Finally, where accountability mechanisms are designed so that not only errors of non-compliance but also errors of moral omission become visible - situations in which the civil servant "did everything legally" yet produced an evident injustice - purely procedural obedience loses its evolutionary advantage. In its place, another unwritten rule gradually takes hold: it is not enough to have the paperwork in order; you must be able to explain, before citizens and before your own conscience, why your decision is worthy of being defended.

AN INTEGRATIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM OBEDIENCE TO RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING

If we attempt to articulate an integrative theoretical framework for the transition from obedience to responsibility through critical thinking, the first step is to recognize that we are not dealing with three independent concepts, but with a single social mechanism viewed from different angles. Obedience is the device that ensures the functioning of rational-legal authority in the Weberian sense: without a minimum of submission to impersonal rules, modern administration would collapse into the chaos of personal arbitrariness or clientelism (Weber, 1978). Responsibility is the reflexive mechanism that limits this submission, obliging actors to account for the consequences of their decisions before institutional and moral fora (Bovens, 2007). Critical thinking is the cognitive infrastructure that makes this limitation possible: without the capacity to evaluate norms, facts, and consequences, appeals to responsibility remain empty rhetoric.

The classical bureaucratic model has privileged the dimension of obedience and has treated responsibility as an almost automatic effect of procedural compliance. "I did my job" becomes synonymous with "I acted responsibly." Hannah Arendt's analysis of the "banality of evil" dismantles precisely this confusion: it is not sufficient to conform to rules to be responsible; on the contrary, the renunciation of critical judgment in favor of comfortable obedience is the specifically modern form of irresponsibility (Arendt, 1963/2013). In this sense, the obedient civil servant is the product of a specific institutional design of responsibility: chains of accountability oriented exclusively upwards, towards superiors, and almost not at all downwards, towards citizens (Bovens, 2007).

Although responsibility is analyzed here predominantly at a conceptual level, drawing on authors such as Bovens and Arendt, it remains within the economy of the article more a normative ideal than an operationalized category. Since we have confined ourselves to the theoretical level, what is missing is an explicit typology of forms of responsibility - legal, political, administrative, professional, or moral - illustrated with concrete examples, as well as a discussion of indicators or criteria through which we might observe and assess in practice the "transition from obedience to responsibility," both in training programs and in the evaluation of civil servants. Such an endeavor

would allow the proposed theoretical framework to be transformed into a more useful instrument for empirical research and for the design of training policies in public administration.

The theoretical framework proposed in this study rearranges the pieces. Instead of simply opposing obedience and responsibility, we think in terms of a continuum in which the position of the civil servant depends on the interaction among three layers: the institutional structure of authority, organizational culture, and training devices. At the structural level, the central question is: before whom, and for what, is the civil servant called to account? If the answer is exclusively "before the hierarchical superior" and "for complying with procedure," obedience becomes the rational strategy. If, by contrast, chains of accountability explicitly include citizens, independent bodies, and mechanisms of public justification, any purely formal decision runs the risk of being challenged as insufficient.

At the cultural level, organizational culture theory shows that the "real values" of an institution are not those written in codes of conduct, but those transmitted through reactions to error and dissent (Schein, 2010). An administration that systematically punishes those who ask questions or report abuse will produce civil servants who suppress their critical thinking in order to survive. Conversely, organizations that confer internal prestige on well-argued courage create an environment in which responsibility is rewarded rather than merely tolerated.

Finally, at the level of training, the literature on critical thinking and transformative learning suggests that it is not enough to insert an "ethics" module into a curriculum dominated by technicalities; the entire educational pathway must be constructed as a training of judgment: examining presuppositions, analyzing arguments, simulating the consequences of decisions in ambiguous situations (Dewey, 1910/2007; Facione, 1990; Mezirow, 1998). In this model, the responsible civil servant is not an isolated moral hero, but the outcome of an institutional ecology in which obedience remains necessary for the coherence of collective action yet is constantly filtered through critical thinking and anchored in a robust regime of public accountability. The integrative framework proposed here does not promise the abolition of obedience, but its democratic domestication.

Deliberately, I have presented critical thinking almost exclusively as a positive virtue, without sufficiently thematizing the risks and tensions it may generate within bureaucracy. In certain institutional contexts, critical expression may be perceived as insubordination or even political activism, which complicates the status of neutrality of the civil servant. If it is not rigorously delimited by constitutional loyalty and the requirement of political neutrality, the promotion of critical thinking can fuel the risk of politicizing the civil service corps. At the same time, there is a structural tension between encouraging critical reflection and the need for stability, predictability, and coherence in the implementation of public policies. An explicit discussion of these risks and limits would allow for a more balanced conceptualization of critical thinking in public administration and would help avoid turning it into a cost-free normative panacea.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Viewed retrospectively, the argumentative thread of this study is relatively simple, but its implications are uncomfortable: in modern public administration, obedience constitutes the invisible infrastructure of everyday functioning, while "responsibility" risks becoming merely a legitimizing slogan if it is not underpinned by a genuine culture of critical thinking. I have shown that obedience, responsibility, and critical thinking are not three parallel themes, but three facets of the same social mechanism through which society decides who may command, who must obey, and who is

accountable for consequences. Obedience maintains order, responsibility sets its limits, and critical thinking provides the cognitive tools that make those limits intelligible and applicable.

The central theoretical contribution of the study lies in clarifying these concepts and repositioning them within an integrative model. I have drawn on distinctions from the literature on public responsibility, in particular the conceptualization of accountability as an institutionalized relationship of justification before a forum capable of questioning and sanctioning (Bovens, 2007), to show that "being responsible" does not simply mean complying with procedure but being able to explain and publicly defend a decision. I have articulated this framework with theories of reflective thought, from Dewey to Mezirow, which describe critical thinking as the active and careful examination of beliefs considering the reasons that support them and the consequences to which they lead (Dewey, 1910/2007; Mezirow, 1998). Finally, I have connected these resources to the debate on models of administration - from the Weberian bureaucrat to the New Public Service - suggesting that the responsible civil servant is, structurally, a "citizen-professional" called to serve in dialogue with the community rather than to steer from a distance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000).

This construction remains, by design, a theoretical one. I have not empirically tested how civil servants understand and practice responsibility, nor the concrete effects of training programs on their critical thinking. The analysis has relied predominantly on Western literature and liberal institutional models, which limit the degree of generalization to administrative systems shaped by other legal, political, or cultural traditions. Moreover, I have deliberately treated critical thinking more as a normative ideal than as a measured variable, leaving open the question of which indicators might allow us to evaluate, in a rigorous manner, its presence or absence in public administration.

Precisely these limitations open avenues for future research. The first line concerns empirical studies on initial and continuing training curricula for civil servants: how much space is devoted to critical thinking, how it is defined, and what types of methods (case studies, simulations, debates) are used? A second direction consists of discourse analyses and case studies of controversial administrative decisions, examining how actors invoke or evade responsibility, and the extent to which they do - or do not - appeal to reasoned justifications before citizens and other fora. Finally, a comparative research agenda across different administrative systems would allow for testing the hypothesis that institutional ecologies which explicitly value critical thinking - in recruitment, training, and evaluation - produce distinct configurations of responsibility, both as a mechanism and as a virtue (Bovens, 2007). In the absence of such investigations, we remain at the level of a "normative atlas" that indicates where public administration could be moved; future research bears the less comfortable task of measuring how far, in fact, we are from this map.

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