



## Social Work as Laboratory for Normative Professionalisation

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### 1 The problem-situation

In most Western countries, the professional status of social workers is instable and insecure. Of course, most Western countries are *themselves* instable, ridden with feelings of insecurity and in search of reassurance and promises of control. But social work hardly lends itself as a projection screen for visions of professional control and efficiency in the face of insecurity. On the contrary: within the present cultural and political climate, social work connotes primarily with unpopular social problems, with people unable to cope adequately with the competitiveness and the rate of change of post-industrial societies, that is to say: it connotes more with dependency and helplessness than with autonomy and control. Moreover, whereas public discourse in most Western country is dominated by a neo-liberal perspective and the intricate network of economic, managerial, consumerist and military metaphors connected with it, social work still carries with it a legacy of 'progressive politics' increasingly labeled as outdated and inadequate. Although the values of solidarity and social justice connected with this 'progressive heritage' certainly have not faded away completely, the loudest and most popular voices on the level of public discourse keep underscoring the necessity to adapt to the 'realities' of present-day postindustrial societies and their dependence on economic growth, technological innovation and the dynamics of an ever more competitive world-market. This 'unavoidable' adaptation involves both the 'modernization' and progressive diminishment of 'costly' welfare-state arrangements and a radical reorientation of social work as a profession. Instead of furthering the dependency of clients in the name of solidarity, social workers should stimulate them to face their own responsibilities and help them to function more adequately in a world where individual autonomy and economic progress are dominant values. This shift has far-reaching consequences for the organization of the work itself. Efficiency and transparency are the new code words, professional autonomy is dramatically limited and interventions of social workers are increasingly bound to 'objective' standards of success and cost-effectiveness.

At first sight, this situation does not provide a very promising horizon for those theorists, researchers and social workers still adhering to the 'progressive' legacy of social work and its central values: solidarity, social justice and empowerment. The notion of historical progress connected with these values seems to have lost its visionary and unifying power, to be replaced by and large by a quite different, neo-liberal view of 'a better future', dominated by the idea of ever increasing consumptive possibilities for autonomous individuals on the basis of unlimited economic growth and technological innovation. This neo-liberal vision of a better future is underpinned by its own version of a just society, wherein every man (!) gets what he deserves on the basis of his own efforts. This vision accomplishes the remarkable feat of trivializing blatant forms of social inequality and exclusion, not only by picturing them as an unavoidable price to be paid 'in the short run' for a better future for all 'in the long run', but also by stressing the individual *responsibility* of those who are unwilling or unable to face

the challenges and opportunities of a dynamic market society of their own accord. Within this neo-liberal constellation, the concepts of solidarity, social justice and empowerment become redefined in such a way as to leave the proponents of the 'progressive legacy' of social work more or less empty-handed: empowerment is redefined as enhancement of individual abilities to cope with competition and permanent change; social justice is redefined as a corollary of the worldwide implementation of the free market system, supposedly guaranteeing both equal opportunities for all and optimal conditions for the most effective production of unlimited consumptive possibilities; finally solidarity is pictured as an ambivalent, potentially contra-productive social value, not only because it tends to further bureaucracy and the inefficient expenditure of public means, but also because it would lead to dependency and passivity instead of enhancing autonomy and personal initiative.

To make things even worse, the 'progressive' intellectual tradition, which has guided and inspired the reflection on social work as a profession for a long time also has been considerably weakened. In a remarkable reversal of the 'Positivismus-Streit' of the sixties and early seventies, critical perspectives have lost a great part of their former prestige and credibility, whereas 'objectifying' forms of research are rapidly acquiring a dominant position. This development goes hand in hand with new forms of monitoring and control of social work under the sign of cost-effectiveness, transparency and evidence-based interventions. The 'utopian energy' heeded by critical theory and its proud intention to 'finish the project of Modernity', as Habermas says, have moreover been weakened by the postmodern critique of the universalistic perspective connected with it and by the concomitant spread of constructivist views on science and the contingent, power-ridden knowledge-basis of professional practices. Thus, both losing its former social and political support and its intellectual grounding in critical theory, the prospects for the 'progressive' legacy of social work seem to be quite dim indeed.

## **2 The importance of moral and existential values**

Instead of pragmatically adapting to the new political realities and forsake the values which have so long been dear to social workers, or vainly criticize and deplore in their name the new times and the new mores which have come over us, it is in my view high time to try and develop new articulations of the critical conceptual framework which for a long time has legitimized the professional status of social work and guided conceptual analysis and scientific research in this field.

As a point of departure for such a rearticulation, I propose to focus on the moral and existential values at stake in social work, as a proper domain of insight and knowledge involving specific learning processes and concomitant forms of normative professionalisation. Social work as a profession is involved on three interconnected levels with moral and existential values. The first level consists of dominant moral frameworks on the level of culture, politics and public discourse. Speaking very broadly, during the last fifty years social work has been practiced and legitimized within three different moral matrices: a Christian matrix, dominated by unselfish love and *caritas* as central values; a social-democratic and humanistic matrix under the moral sign of social justice, solidarity and emancipation, and a neo-liberal matrix, dominated by personal autonomy, individual accomplishment and unlimited consumptive possibilities as central values. The specific content of these moral matrices determines to a large extent both the intellectual reflection on social work as a profession and the specific organizational arrangements canalizing its practical implementation. Of course these moral matrices are not completely autonomous, but are themselves intertwined with economic and technological conditions and with political power structures. But focusing on economic conditions and political power structures, e.g. along

neo-Marxist lines or from a postmodern perspective a la Frederic Jameson or Stephen Rose, would establish anew the primacy of a *cognitive* framework for the elucidation of the professional status of social work and its future development, whereas I think that we should foreground the *moral* and *existential* dimension of social work as a new starting point. It is my first contention that social work could gain a new momentum and new forms of social and political support by contributing to the emergence of a new, 'post-capitalist' moral matrix, evoking a better, more humane future as a *general* horizon legitimizing the *specific* contribution and content of social work. Safeguarding the 'progressive' legacy of social work asks in other words for a renewal of the general *horizon* of progress legitimizing (or delegitimizing!) its specific contribution. My second contention is that such a renewal asks for a redefinition of the professional content of social work, doing justice to the central role of moral and existential insights at the side of workers and the importance and necessity of normative forms of professionalisation. This is the second level where social workers are involved with moral and existential values. Although this level has to be clearly distinguished from the first level - the moral matrix dominating public discourse - it is not only heavily influenced by it but also connected with it by way of its own feedback loops. The strength of this feed-back depends among other things on the sensibility of social workers for the third level where moral and existential values play a decisive role within social work as a profession: the level of moral judgments and existential insights at the side of their clients. This level not only involves notions of rights and responsibilities, but also questions of self-respect, and self doubt, trust and mistrust and hope or despair. It is my third contention that an important part of the professional competence of social workers consists in their ability to get in touch 'from the inside' with the moral and existential values of their clients and help them to deepen their *insights* in this domain.

### **Two examples**

To concretize these abstract considerations and further elucidate the intricate connections between the three levels on which moral and existential values are at stake within social work as a profession, I start with two practical examples taken from Dutch social work and home-care. The first example is a practice known as 'free time-help'. It involves voluntary contacts with clients who have received the standard-package of eight sessions with a social worker and have been led through the different steps of the protocol, leading up to an obligatory farewell after the eighth session. In many cases however, their specific problem situation has not been really resolved in the eyes of individual workers, so they go on helping clients after working-hours and in the weekend. This practice leads to heated debates among workers, centering on the clash between two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand this kind of help is advocated as a form of practical solidarity with clients who have been duly 'processed' and been helped in a *formal* sense, but are both in their own experience and in the eyes of the workers involved *abandoned* by the agency they have turned to for help, because there is no real solution in sight for their problems. On the other hand this kind of 'free time-help' is pictured as a sign of an 'unprofessional attitude', characterized by an emotional over-involvement with clients and their problems and potentially hindering them in finding a good solution for their problems themselves.

The second example illustrating the crucial importance of moral and existential values for social work as a profession is taken from an interview with a team of professionals in the domain of home-care. It concerns a problem encountered by this team involving Robert, an elderly man living alone and not able to take care for himself due to complicated somatic problems. The team involved took care of his household activities, personal hygiene and health, including an open wound, which refused to close. For these different tasks 45 minutes

a day were officially allotted and paid for by the Central Care Agency, which in the Netherlands is responsible for a just and efficient distribution of the collective means available for home-care.

Now the problem was that Robert was rude and unfriendly towards the professionals who helped him, but at the same time completely dependent upon them, because he lived in almost complete social isolation. Sometimes, when they were able to finish their different tasks a little bit early and had a few minutes to sit down and talk with him, he started to tell them fragments of his life-history, which led them to interpret his unfriendliness as a sign of his loneliness and lack of perspective in life. However, the few times Robert started to open up a little bit, they had to break off the conversation, because the 45 minutes were used up and other clients were waiting. Because there were insufficient formal indications for an extension of the available time, they decided to try and 'borrow' five minutes a day each from the time allotted to other clients and add these to the time officially available for Robert. In this way they created space to deepen their contact with him and in the course of four months succeeded in motivating him to leave the house now and then and start developing a social life of his own. During this period his wound also started to heal and Robert regained a new perspective on a meaningful life for himself.

Both these simple examples illustrate the importance of moral and existential values for social work: the professionals involved are confronted with moral dilemmas centered around the question whether they can really help their clients or have to look away from their problems and abandon them both emotionally and in a moral sense. These dilemmas suggest a clear continuity between the famous story of the caring Samaritan as related in the bible more than 2000 years ago and the moral questions facing social workers in our times. Although important, this continuity is only partial, because social workers are confronted with these moral questions not as 'human beings' but as *professionals*. This implies that the moral dilemmas they face are closely intertwined with organizational arrangements on the one hand and with the values experienced by them as central for the meaning and existential significance of their *work* on the other hand. This intertwinement can be elucidated further by distinguishing ideal typically three different strategies adopted by workers to deal with the moral and existential values at stake in their work.

### **Three strategies**

The *first* strategy can be designated as 'organizational adaptation'. It involves accepting and following the norms for professional competence and the ethical guidelines as specified by organizations employing social workers and by professional associations. In this way the moral responsibility for their actions is transferred to a higher level and professional competence is framed as acting in accordance with the body of knowledge established within and for the profession and the formally approved guidelines and regulations of employing organizations. The *second* strategy followed by workers can be designated as 'going underground'. 'Free time-help' provides a clear example of this strategy, just as the solution developed for Robert by the team in the second example. In both cases workers follow their own moral compass, for better or for worse, because in their own judgment they cannot adequately help clients within the space provided by the official rules and precepts. Potentially this brings them into conflict with their employers and sometimes also with colleagues, but generally they keep their mouth tightly shut about their 'clandestine' activities. In this way they are able to combine the official standards for professional competence with their own moral commitments and succeed more or less in safeguarding their professional self-respect and the meaningfulness of their work. Although these two strategies obviously differ deeply from each other and have very different consequences both

for the workers involved and for their clients, there is nevertheless one respect in which they are similar: in both strategies the moral judgments and existential insights which are at stake on the level of actual contacts between workers and clients are not treated as a constitutive part of the *professional* quality of the work but are either absorbed by regulations and protocols or relegated to the *private* judgments and intuitions of workers.

This brings me to the *third* strategy available to social workers in order to deal with the moral and existential values at stake in their profession. The central concern in this strategy is the development of fruitful connections between the two poles which are isolated and absolutized in the other two strategies: on one hand the organizational norms for professional competence and adequate support, reflecting and specifying the dominant moral matrix; on the other hand the moral commitment of workers to deliver forms of help and support which are experienced by their *clients* as adequate and really helpful, if need be by way of 'underground activities'. This third strategy can be designated as *normative* professionalisation, because these two poles can only be connected by way of the normative, moral and existential insights and learning processes which play a decisive role both within the organizations responsible for the practical implementation of social work and in the lives of the clients who are supposed to benefit from their activities. Normative professionalisation is based then on the development of reflexive connections between cognitive insights, organizational norms and moral and existential values on the level of practical work processes.

At this point an important connection comes into view between dilemmas and questions confronting social work as a profession and wider developments within present-day postindustrial societies concerning the dynamics of knowledge-intensive organizations and the content of professional knowledge and expertise. To elucidate my thesis that social work could develop into an important 'laboratory' for normative professionalisation and thus contribute to the emergence of a new, 'post-capitalist' moral matrix, I will now zoom out a little bit and touch upon wider developments within contemporary philosophy and sociology of science and within organizational theory, pointing towards the emergence of new modes of knowledge-production within postindustrial, knowledge-intensive organizations.

### **3 Three modes of knowledge production**

One of the most remarkable developments within social work during the last decade, has been the slow but steady rise of objectifying forms of research as a paradigm for all dependable and useful forms of scientific research in this field and the concomitant spread of new forms of monitoring and control of social work under the sign of transparency and evidence-based interventions. This development is remarkable for several reasons. In the first place it is highly 'out of phase' with recent developments in the philosophy and sociology of science. Although the proponents of objectifying forms of research and evidence-based interventions in the field of social world lay an exclusive claim on the predicate 'scientific' for their own approach and criticize other approaches as soft, uncontrollable and unscientific, they use an image of objectivity and of scientific knowledge, which in point of fact is quite outdated.

To illustrate this remarkable 'time-lag' I refer to the well-known work of Gibbons, Nowotny and their collaborators who have developed a new, influential model of the dynamics of scientific knowledge-production in postindustrial societies (cf. Gibbons, Loges and Nowotny, 1995). Central to this model is the distinction between two modes of knowledge-production within contemporary science. The first mode can be designated as 'academic science'. It is directed at the acquisition of universally valid knowledge, has a mono-disciplinary structure and the scientific community involved serves as the highest authority for judging the validity of knowledge claims. This mode of scientific knowledge-production has been dominant for a very long time. The last decades however, coincidental with the emergence of postindustrial

societies, according to Gibbons et al. a different mode of knowledge-production has come to the fore, which builds upon mode one, but has quite different characteristics. This 'mode two' is characterized first and foremost by its *practical* intent: it aims at the solution of clearly delineated practical questions, such as the construction of a fusion reactor, the development of faster computer chips or genetic enhancement of animals and plants. Such practical aims require most of the time a multi- or interdisciplinary approach. Moreover the results of the research efforts are not only judged by the scientific communities involved, but are subject to deliberation (and often disagreement or conflicts) among a *plurality* of stakeholders: apart from the scientific communities involved also government agencies or commercial parties, seeking a solution for practical problems and supplying the financial means for relevant research, but also NGO's or other civil parties, such as churches, participating in the deliberations. Thus, although mode two builds upon mode one and cannot do without it, it nevertheless differs considerably from it, both in its scope and with regard to the involvement of a plurality of stakeholders in the judgment of the validity of the knowledge claims involved. A good example of mode two knowledge production is provided by one of the frontiers of present day science: the field of genomics. The spectacular developments taking place in this field during the last decades, build both upon theoretical developments within biology in the wake of the deciphering of the structure of DNA and on a whole array of developments in the fields of informatics and nano-technology, allowing for precise interventions on a molecular scale. At the same time, developments in this field are heavily influenced by international companies and by national governments, investing huge sums of money in research lines deemed promising from a commercial or military standpoint. At the same time, the new possibilities for intervention in the genome of plants, animals and humans give rise to very complex moral, existential, ecological and geopolitical questions, for instance concerning the genetic manipulation of embryo's, or the risk of uncontrolled, potentially harmful crossovers from genetically manipulated plants to other plants, or the many-sided moral and political questions concerning the use by commercial companies in highly developed countries of biological material 'borrowed' from poor countries in the southern hemisphere.

Genomics research as an example of present day mode two knowledge-production, clearly illustrates that the identification of science with objectifying knowledge and empirical evidence is valid up to a point for mode one, but is not meaningfully applicable to mode two - and thus ignores the greatest part of scientific research conducted on a worldwide scale. The main limitation of such a limited view of the core of scientific knowledge production is the assumption that science is an autonomous activity, characterized by internal forms of validation which lead to binding, 'evident' results for other domains and contexts where scientific knowledge is 'applied'. But mode two knowledge-production is not applied science. It involves the development of *new* scientific knowledge, based on the *interpenetration* of different perspectives on 'adequate' solutions for practical problems, on often conflictual forms of deliberation and negotiation between different stakeholders. In these negotiations claims to objective knowledge based on mode one knowledge-production exclusively validated by specific scientific communities undoubtedly play an important role. But in the context of mode two knowledge-production such claims form part of a complex *mixture* also comprising varying, often conflicting interests and values, leading to open and dynamic knowledge-constellations involving a variety of stakeholders.

Against this background I venture to suggest that knowledge-production in the domain of social work exhibits all the characteristics of mode two. This implies that it cannot be meaningfully interpreted with the help of an image of science completely based on traditional, academically dominated 'mode one' knowledge-production, unless such an interpretation

serves to ward off the influence of other potential stakeholders and devalue their claims to valid and valuable insights. This brings me to the second reason why the slow but steady rise of objectifying forms of research as a paradigm for all dependable and useful forms of scientific research in the field of social work can be called remarkable. The first reason was the time-lag connected with this development: whereas at the frontiers of present-day science, such as the field of genomics, more oriented images of knowledge-production are increasingly perceived as inadequate and outdated, in the field of social work (and related professions) very traditional and restricted interpretations of scientific knowledge are presented as the pinnacle of wisdom and impartiality. Isn't it a remarkable coincidence that the popularity of such restricted interpretations almost completely coincides with the 'forced anorexia' of the welfare state which has befallen most post-industrial societies during the last fifteen years and has gone hand in hand moreover with the spread of new forms of monitoring and control of social workers and their clients?

### **The Net and the Self**

Important insights with regard to this remarkable coincidence can be found in the work of present-day social theorists such as Habermas, Giddens, Touraine, Foucault and Castells. Although their analyses differ in important respects, they all diagnose in one form or other a *split* within postindustrial societies between on one hand the dynamics of the economic system, scientific and technological developments and the logic of state bureaucracies and on the other hand existential concerns on the level of everyday existence in the life world. Habermas speaks here of the colonization of the life world by economic and political systems. According to Anthony Giddens, modern institutions "tend to dissolve issues of the moral meaning of existence" (cf. Giddens, 1991, p. 156). This diagnosis is akin to Alain Touraine's thesis that in postindustrial societies, "where cultural services have taken the place of material goods in the heart of production, the defense of the subject, in his person and culture, against the logic of apparatuses and markets, has taken the place of the notion of class-struggle" (cf. Touraine, 1994). From a different, post-structural perspective and in a very different vocabulary, Michel Foucault thematizes a related problematic, where he criticizes the social sciences for their involvement in the disciplining and normalization of modern individuals and advocates the development of 'practices of freedom' and new forms of existential ethics. In a related vein, Manuel Castells analyzes the 'split between the Net and the Self'. In the prologue to the first volume of his magnum opus *The Information Age*, he writes "...Identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in a historical period characterized by widespread destructuring of organizations, delegitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements and ephemeral cultural expressions.... Meanwhile, on the other hand, global networks of instrumental exchanges selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, regions, and even countries, according to their relevance in fulfilling the goals processed in the network in a relentless flow of strategic decisions. It follows a fundamental split between abstract, universal instrumentalism, and historically rooted, particularistic identities. Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self" (cf. Castells, 1996, p. 3).

In the light of these diagnoses, the rising influence of traditional and restricted interpretations of scientific knowledge within the field of social work and the concomitant spread of all kinds of monitoring and control, is small wonder indeed: they fit seamlessly to the 'abstract, universal instrumentalism', the systemic logic, the disciplining practices and the organizational dissolution of moral and existential questions as analyzed by Castells, Habermas, Foucault and Giddens. Important as this insight might be, it is of little help for the development of new articulations of the critical conceptual framework which for a long time

has legitimized the professional status of social work and guided conceptual analysis and scientific research in this field. The common focus of leading social theorists on the *opposition* between system and life world, or the *split* between the Net and the Self or the great *distance* between disciplining practices and practices of freedom, even threatens to strengthen the defensive position of critical theory and elicit over-identification with the 'subjective', communicative, narrative and existential side of the opposition, which then becomes powerless over and against the systemic, instrumental, technological and disciplining side.

It is here that the concept and practice of normative professionalisation could be of help: it could provide a bridge between the two sides of the opposition, because it focuses not only on the tensions but also on the inner connections on the level of *professional* action between on one hand the normativity of institutional arrangements and the underlying moral frameworks and power relations and on the other hand the moral and existential values of workers and clients. To elucidate these inner connections, I return to the two modes of knowledge-production distinguished by Gibbons and Nowotny.

### **A third mode of knowledge production**

The notion of a second knowledge mode, characterizing scientific progress in contemporary postindustrial societies, is very fruitful, but in my view not yet precise enough. Upon closer inspection it becomes clear that most of the empirical material referred to by Gibbons and Nowotny to substantiate their thesis is taken from developments involving the natural sciences and technological innovation processes. The social sciences and the humanities get much less attention. This 'bias' could be the reason for a regrettable lack of precision in their analysis of mode two knowledge production. They lump together two elements which should be carefully distinguished: on one hand the influence of economic and political *interests* within mode two knowledge production (for instance the influence of Monsanto's commercial interests on the development of research in the field of plant-genomics or military priorities of all kinds) and on the other hand the influence of moral and existential values within mode two, for instance moral values concerning the cloning of embryo's or existential values in domains as healthcare and education. In my view it is of the utmost importance to distinguish these two different influences, which in mode two fuse with insights stemming from mode one, in view of the development of adequate, workable, acceptable and sustainable solutions for practical problems. Only if one distinguishes sharply between the strategic influence of economic and political interests and the influence of moral and existential values, it becomes possible to do justice to the specific forms of *learning and insight* potentially connected with these values in the context of knowledge-intensive organizations (for further elaboration of this line of thought, cf. Kunneman, 2005).

In view of these considerations I propose to distinguish a third mode of knowledge production characteristic of postindustrial and postmodern societies. This mode three knowledge production concerns moral and existential insights necessary for the development of adequate solutions for practical problems defined within professional language games in the context of knowledge-intensive organizations. It deserves to be distinguished from mode one and mode two knowledge production, not only because its contribution is very important for the quality of practical solutions created in mode two, but also because this form of knowledge and insight is dependent on specific conditions to be able to flourish.

These conditions are connected with the specific characteristics of mode three and with the changing forms of moral deliberation and existential learning emerging under postmodern cultural conditions. Beyond the grand narratives of modernity and beyond the absolute



notions of transcendence characterizing traditional religious worldviews, new forms of moral deliberation and existential learning are emerging, centering around *creative frictions* between a *plurality* of different moral perspectives and existential scripts. In the context of knowledge-intensive organizations, the 'centrifugal' dynamics characteristic for the widely differing individual life projects of post-modern individuals, is counteracted by the necessity to find adequate and workable solutions for practical questions under conditions of scarcity and competition. This same 'centripetal' dynamics permanently threatens however to limit the space for mode three learning processes and in point of fact under the present circumstances most of the times *does* severely limit the exploratory space and the opportunities for creative frictions between a plurality of moral perspectives and existential scripts within (and surrounding) knowledge-intensive organizations.

In my view presentday post-industrial capitalism is deeply ambivalent in this respect. On one hand the strategic logic of short term economic power, profit for shareholders and geopolitical power clearly dominates, with all the well known negative effects for people and for the planet. But on the other hand this dominant constellation is not completely homogeneous: it is perturbed and at times counteracted by other developments and undercurrents, for example the need for open communication and trust between professionals as a prerequisite for creative cooperation and innovation. But also the movement towards new forms of corporate social responsibility, deeply ambivalent in itself but nevertheless pointing towards a long term, more inclusive perspective on economic progress and the necessary social conditions for competitive firms to safeguard their own position in the long run.

The most important countertendency however concerns the limited possibilities for a meaningful existence provided by a life dominated by the necessity to produce, be competitive and enjoy ever more sophisticated consumptive possibilities. Production, competition and consumption all three refer to the logic of control and predictability and to strategic relations with other people. But they are of little use in dealing with central moral dilemmas and existential questions confronting present-day individuals not only within their lifeworld, but increasingly also on the level of their work and in their relation to an instable and insecure world society. In these domains they are also in need of inspiration and of moral and existential insights which can help them to find more adequate ways of dealing with the complex mixtures of technical, strategic and moral questions confronting them. It is here that normative professionalisation and mode three learning processes can be of help. They provide *a link* between individualized existential questions of postmodern individuals, a plurality of general moral frameworks and narrative traditions and questions of productivity, innovation and efficiency within knowledge-intensive organizations. The large-scale waste of money, means and people due to escalating conflicts, miscommunication and stupid power games within organizations clearly indicate that moral and existential questions are not *external* to questions of efficiency and productivity, but are on the contrary completely intertwined with them. Neither mode one, objectifying learning processes, nor mode-two knowledge production dominated by strategic interests can provide the inspiration, deepening of insight and creative friction between alternative narrative evocations of a meaningful life and less restricted relations between people which are necessary to learn in this crucial respect.

### **Social work as laboratory**

It is here also that the outlines of a postcapitalist moral framework become visible, however dimly, that could come to serve as a general *horizon* of progress legitimizing the specific contribution of social work and its claims towards professional competence. Social work could develop into a laboratory for normative forms of professionalisation, *connecting* questions of productivity and efficiency with moral commitment and existential meaning.

This would require among other things a far reaching reorientation at the level of theory and research. It is clear that such a development not only requires new theoretical perspectives, conceptual analyses and extensive empirical research but also a reappraisal of the importance of narratively structured, moral and existential sources of inspiration and insight for the quality and further development of social work. It also implies in other words a redefinition of the standards of professional competence and personal development for theorists and researchers in this field, a thought which maybe provides the strongest indication possible of the amount of work lying ahead of us, but also of the personal, moral and political inspiration possibly connected with it.

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