Social Work and a New Social Order – Challenging Neo-liberalism's Erosion of Solidarity

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The world in which social work operates today is a very different world from that in which most of us took their social work training, and the changes we are facing are profound. This paper argues that these changes are not merely a regime change in social policy but that they are essentially about a re-ordering of social relationships and attempt to model them on neo-liberal ideas. In view of these pressures it is understandable that social workers often try to ignore those changes and withdraw into a private world of therapeutic relationships in which the methods they trained in are made to be still valid, or they simply go along with new service delivery designs without asking too many questions. Both reactions fail to question what the "social" can still mean in the light of these changes and how social workers can fulfil their mandate to be responsible for the social dimension of public life. Nothing less than a head-on challenge of the basic presuppositions of neo-liberalism (Willke, 2003) and their manifold applications to social service delivery systems will thereby suffice.

Applying a European perspective to this task reveals the international character of current political and social transformation processes. In all parts of Europe we can observe the influence of neo-liberal thought not only on economics but also on politics, an influence which is trickling down even into popular culture. The core principles of neo-liberalism are 'less state, more market, more individual responsibility', and in relation to the re-organisation of social services they are translated into the demands for deregulation, privatisation and flexibilisation (Weber, 2001). There are clear signs that in some shape or form those demands are finding their way into politics, and particularly into social policies, in every country. This new 'universal language of politics' creates on the one hand strong pressure towards convergence and a sense of inevitability that sooner or later all welfare models will bow to the dictates of a globalised economy that does no longer permit individual nation states to determine the character of their social integration systems for fear of missing out on competitiveness. On the other hand the technological means of connecting, communicating and exchanging goods with all parts of the globe have accentuated differences and inequalities thereby creating whole new configurations of interest and cultural communities that cut through established boundaries of solidarity and belonging. These seemingly contradictory trends are the two sides of liberalism and of globalization which have to be born in mind simultaneously. Such observations have been summarized with the over-stretched term of globalization as the disengagement of economic and cultural activities from local geographic, political and cultural contexts (Giddens, 1990). But globalisation is not an explanation, no more than it is a natural phenomenon, 'a single condition, a linear process or a

final end-point of social change (Held et al., 1997, p. 258); it poses merely a series of very deep questions about the current nature of our 'connectedness' in the world, at all levels.

A sociological analysis of current developments in social relations reveals a pronounced splitting that occurs in key areas and institutions of contemporary societies at every level which could be characterized as the second rupture of modernity, the first having been associated with the advent of industrialization which had ended the old world of mechanical solidarity in Durkheim's terminology and had inaugurated a historical period in which social relations and social solidarity had to be deliberately organized. Despite many new forms of dependency, oppression and power domination that ensued, that first departure from traditional social bonds followed the premise of freedom and liberation, an emancipatory project that placed individual self-expression at the centre. It was therefore intricately bound up with philosophical notions of liberalism which, in Jefferson's famous Declaration of Independence promised to promote 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. This first rupture always threatened to run out of control both politically and economically with the emerging strong and constitutive antagonism between state and industry, a set of dynamics that produced the 'Great Transformation' (Polanyi, 1940). The capitalist market wanted just enough state to enforce contractual arrangements and to maintain law and order whilst otherwise wanting to regulate itself, whereas the state became increasingly dependent for its legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenship on its ability to control the insatiable demand of capitalism for profit. In the broadest sense, this antagonism gave rise to the various state-organised or state-sponsored welfare systems and in that context also the birth of social work. It played its – perhaps very small and insignificant – part in the social arrangements and institutions which now had to be continuously expanded to hold society together in a constant effort against the threat of fragmentation, of insurrection, of a total breakdown of order. The main institutions with which this transition was mastered were democratic nation states which gradually gave all citizens a say in the process of determining political priorities, followed by the welfare state which aimed at making citizenship less of an abstract concept and more of a lived daily experience of people sharing risks and responsibilities (Gray, 1999). A second domain was the organization of labour, the solidarity created among wage-earners through strong civil society movements such as trade unions which fought for the formalization of labour through contracts and collective bargaining, thereby strengthening the bonds of workers across very different sections of industry and initially also across different countries. A third domain concerned culture, where traditional identities were actively re-worked and questioned in their self-evident 'given-ness' and instead new cultural allegiances became possible, albeit often under the dictate of harmonising politics, as was the case in various forms of nationalism that sought to re-create a glorious past as legitimation for the modern nation state and its territorial claims. Educational institutions played a primary role in stabilising the effects of this cultural rupture, as did museums and other national institutions balanced by informal movements dealing with cultural identities.

Together these institutional arrangements formed a social order that became, for better or for worse, centred on the nation state as the guarantor of stable, contractual arrangements in relation to political, commercial and civil rights. Social work contributed to this process by making itself available to the nation state project and defined its scope and objectives on a national scale: its aim was to produce good, well adjusted citizens with the whole range of its emergent repertoire of methods. Being part of the welfare state project aided its professionalisation, as did its anchoring in the scientific project of modernity for the mastery of social problems with rational

means, and the two strands often went hand in hand. The culmination and consolidation of this development can now, in retrospect, be seen in the period after WWII when at least in Europe the nation states discovered the economic, social and political advantages of establishing welfare states. The various political cultures produced distinct welfare regimes (Esping Andersen, 1990) to reduce social tensions and the worst excesses of social inequality. The broadly shared vision of a social order across all regimes was one in which everybody had a place and where the dichotomies of rich and poor, healthy and sick, educated and uneducated would gradually and in time be overcome. The risk groups identified in this process shared distinct characteristics and could therefore be targeted through – at least intentionally – broad programmes such as pension schemes, insurance measures, public employment and other large-scale public investments in institutions. The state benefited from this Fordist, Keynesian approach (Jessop, 1996) in prestige and legitimacy from being seen as caring and involved in the welfare of its citizens, albeit to varying degrees and within carefully controlled boundaries.

The Nordic countries had promoted this process of modernisation to the highest degree. Here a belief in the benefits of rational planning prevailed that hinged on the coordinated expansion of state activities in the economic, cultural and social domains. The characteristic compromises promoted by the systems were indications of a formalised approach where the solution of social problems would eventually become a technical matter within an overall plan or system. Informal activities, for instance in the field of charity, were regarded as remnants of a pre-modern age or as provisional measures until such time when formal arrangements would take over (Gould, 2001).

But while this approach remains strong at the level of welfare planning in specific situations, it is gradually giving way to a competing model of social solidarity, most openly promoted in the USA, the classical country of neo-liberalism. This new – or rather old – model sees social security, the hard-won formal protection systems against social vulnerability, as an impediment to economic progress and regards the state as too dominant and controlling when it plays such a central role in welfare. The new trend constitutes the demise of the Fordist approach and could be summarised as the informalisation of social relations and is exemplified by the rise of informal arrangements in the domains identified here as the key areas of social relations.

Informal arrangements return especially in the area of work (Altvater and Mahnkopf, 2002). Where the labour movements had fought for formal contractual arrangements that would safeguard a living wage, healthy working conditions and job security, we now witness the rise of casual, informal labour patterns. Richard Sennett (1999) characterises this creation of flexible workers as the 'corrosion of character'. In many countries trade unions have lost their dominant influence and suffer from diminished membership while more and more workers are forced to adopt work practices outside the contractual arrangements, leading to the phenomenon of the 'working poor'. At the same time the shadow economy is spreading with many more activities being carried out outside the systems of wage taxation and social insurance, and at the extreme end of this scale of informalisation is outright illegal work, the rise of mafia-style bosses that create entire networks of 'work' based on the exploitation of women, children and poor people generally whose dependency they foster to their economic advantage.

Similar symptoms accompany the process of political will formation. Both at the sub-national and at the supra-national level arrangements between actors and organisations which have no

direct democratic mandate have begun to play an increasingly important role with the rise of organisations such as the World Trade Organisation or the World Bank and the range of trans-national corporations which have the power to dictate to elected governments the terms under which they will remain located in a particular country. Their influence, combined with that of social movements and single cause action groups causes a shift of political attention away from the formal channels of representation. Lobbying is only the most visible form of the informalisation of political representation, other forms of direct action can drift into the illegal sector and cause a general crisis of governance in many fields of politics. Not only do whole neighbourhoods become ungovernable, whole countries and regions assume the same reputation, thereby falling prey to informal power assertions in the form of terrorist organisations, warlords and corrupt politicians, which in turn spawns a widespread feeling of disillusionment with formal politics, particularly among young people who become less and less inclined to use the ballot as a means of participating politically (Hertz, 2002).

Casualisation is spreading also in the cultural domain where traditions, conventions and formal structures are losing their influence over populations. Cultural contours dissolve into lifestyle choices which become fashion-driven, ephemeral and non-committal since they can be changed at will. Identity becomes a project, something that needs to be achieved rather than something that has a given nature. This requires considerable efforts and raises enormous problems especially for groups, like men, whose cultural and social identity had always been regarded as dominant and simply given. Of the thousands of different ways of being a man none is unproblematic (Böhnisch, 2003).

But before judging these changes in the domains selected from a purely negative angle, which is the case when a perspective is adopted that takes the Fordist nation-state-as-welfare-state as the standard, the positive, liberating aspects these symptoms of informalisation imply need to be acknowledged. In relation to labour, people can indeed restore their dignity by finding a way back to some form of gainful employment instead of being relegated to the status of welfare benefit recipient, and an enterprise culture can release a lot of creative and productive energy, as can be witnessed by the boom of electronic information specialists in countries like India. Within the new frameworks, informal labour is also more likely to be recognised as labour, for instance in the case of women caring for infirm or retired relatives, and caring activities in the area of the third sector link with the informal economy often to form new models of production for instance for and by people with various handicaps.

In politics, the informal sector often plays a rejuvenating role, opening up channels of direct representation which challenge established power structures in political parties. The EU in particular has promoted the concept of participation and many projects and programmes lead to direct exchanges between action groups of different countries. The flexibility of the new electronic media is being exploited skilfully by many groups that can rally support or protest quickly and across country boundaries to become powerful political groupings.

Equally in cultural expressions the erosion of formal norms has released enormous energies and possibilities of self-expression in so many regards. From blogs on the internet to new interests in traditional communities and ecological life styles people congregate across national boundaries to exchange and share common interests, form strong allegiances, find partners, chat and feel part of

an infinite variety of communities. This is the age that allows people to be what they are, to choose their identities, to form new communities unhindered by traditions.

But of course, this dichotomy is highly problematic, for very often the attraction of the second line of observations serves as a justification for the promotion of the first line of measures and their commercial and political exploitation. What is urgently required therefore is a precise analysis of the circumstances under which one or the other direction of the liberal tradition can take effect and, above all, how its liberating potential can be put into action within the current constellation of social policies in Europe. There is no in-built automatism in this process, rather the dichotomy poses a challenge to the organisational abilities of society as to whether it can find structures and processes which will at least limit the suffering and the oppression which were always the risks contained in the project of enlightenment and modernisation.

This is the point where the reflections centre indeed on social work, a profession which, despite all doom and gloom predictions has not disappeared from the scene just because the welfare state has taken such a different turn. On the contrary, social work is very much in demand, enjoys a boom, represents a growth industry even in countries that ideologically would rather do without it. But in this demand lies a very fundamental danger which can only be confronted by looking at the historical development of the profession. It is becoming clear now from such historical reflections that social work was an essential element in the project of modernisation, the integration of society under the conditions of modernity and industrialisation. Beyond the concrete help it provided to individuals, families and communities in particular circumstances of need, it helped to promote the idea that the nation state was a successful enterprise, that society was able to come to terms with social problems, that these social problems were largely aberrations and adjustment difficulties which through targeted intervention could be remedied and national solidarity could succeed. In other words, social work not only resolved problems, but it helped to define social problems in a particular way, to give them a certain spin, an interpretation that helped to justify and legitimate the entire concept of welfare and social arrangements. Social work was applied social policy, without realising this on the whole. And social work remains applied social policy today and is being taken into the service of the new social policy agenda, without this being the subject of much critical reflection.

It can be argued therefore that contemporary social work has once more a decisive role to play in interpreting these processes of informalisation in one direction or the other. Social work can either be instrumentalised in privatising social relationships more and more so that people eventually will come to understand their actions in a purely individualistic way and help will largely consist in helping service users to become little entrepreneurs (or at least act as if they had a chance of becoming those), or it can define its role in reasserting the importance of the social dimension in social relations and emphasising and practising the primacy of social solidarity as a fundamental human condition, which gives the individual intervention a completely different connotation. In realising that it is already actively involved in the project of the re-shaping not just of welfare states but of welfare relations social work needs to re-examine its entire methodology as to whether it is suitable of contributing towards making social relations viable under the conditions of globalisation. In order to be able to meet this challenge social work methodology needs to be based on a much more sophisticated analysis of human autonomy, action and identity than that suggested by the abstract ideologies of neo-liberalism and its blind

reliance on competitive individual enterprise. This will result in a much more differentiated kind of practice that jointly constructs social relations at the micro-structure of interventions rather than ignoring them as an incidental matter.

What this would mean can be illustrated with two examples. Social workers in all countries are becoming involved in programmes of 'activation', meaning that they have the mandate to motivate welfare recipients of various kinds, particularly long-term unemployed or single parents, to seek active participation in the labour market. This task can be viewed from two fundamentally opposite perspectives. On the one hand, interpreted as helping people to rise above a state of dependency, activation corresponds to the oldest methodological principles of the social work profession, both at the psychological level in terms of the Freudian concept of strengthening ego-capacities, and at the community work level in providing help for self-help. On the other hand activation can be regarded politically as a punitive measure, a kind of means test designed to identify and segregate the 'undeserving', the 'scroungers' who exploit the welfare system to nurture their laziness. Across Europe there has been a mixed reaction by the profession to this task ranging from total rejection of becoming involved in such highly political and ethically dubious tasks, to the enthusiastic welcome of a new field of action that makes social work socially and economically more 'relevant'.

The core issue, however, is not the methodological aspect in isolation, whether activation can be done in a 'nice', caring, non-punitive way as against doing it in a cold, bureaucratic, policing way. The issue is instead the social policy context in which such interventions take place. If the political agenda prescribes a punitive approach aimed at segregating the deserving from the undeserving cases, then the friendliest approach will fail to gain acceptance by the recipients, or rather, their suspicion of a 'friendly police-social worker' will be much greater and the loss in trust much more damaging once the mask of niceness has been lifted. Studies have found considerable differences in the acceptance of activation programmes by welfare recipients (Hvinden et al., 2001), and this acceptance has to do with the status of social citizenship that is conveyed in those measures. In other words, if activation programmes form part of a social policy concept and approach that expresses and fosters a sharing of responsibilities between the various actors and institutions concerned, they can have a motivating effect and gain acceptance because basic guarantees of social solidarity remain. If however the political intention is clearly the delegation of responsibility to individuals, who thereby get cut out of the community of risk sharers, then the resistance is noticeable, as is the case with workfare or welfare – to – work schemes in countries like the UK (Lodemel and Trickey, 2000). This means, that social workers involved in the implementation of these programmes need to become actively involved at the social policy level, both by of influencing the formulation of the actual programmes, and in making recipients understand what the political intention is and how they can rally political action to assert their needs. Welfare systems that promote passivity are indeed damaging and degrading and having work is an important part of people's identity and self-worth. But this does not mean that they have to be content with any kind of work – on the contrary, the social significance of work needs to be reasserted and re-formulated in the present context precisely because societies are facing the challenge of a new social order and an agenda of re-working social solidarity. This is where neo-liberalism is fundamentally wrong in that it ignores the social dimension of work and reduces it to an empty exchange mechanism divorced of any social ties and bonds. In this regard the Nordic states set a good example in as much as they balance

incentives to return to work with actual measures of real job creation and the promotion of new careers. Above all, here there is a general consensus in society that taxes are a legitimate means of expressing social solidarity and of reducing inequalities. In other words, activation in the context of the guarantee of formal welfare arrangements is less of a social control measure and aids the integration, whereas without this secure social policy horizon the same measures lead to casualisation and marginalisation.

The second illustration concerns de-centralisation, the pervasive re-ordering of social service structures that takes place across Europe allegedly with the intention of bringing services closer to the people. This has also been a very old concern of social work, to establish community-based social services that respond to the particular needs and interests of the immediate user groups. But the re-organisation is burdened with a great deal of other agendas, such as the establishment of devolved budgets for those services, the partial privatisation of services in order to create competition or at least quasi-markets, the introduction of quality management systems that allow for transparent measurements of cost-efficiency (Harris, 2003). In all these intentions lies hidden the danger of the re-distribution of responsibilities away from the whole society to the individuals or at least to neighbourhoods. Decentralisation can easily become a means of widening social differences, of cancelling the overall social contract, of making those most affected by social problems directly responsible for their solution. Again, like with work activation programmes, it is not a matter of putting up general resistance against such initiatives or of embracing them uncritically, rather everything depends on the precise interpretation of the surrounding political measures and in that on the safeguarding and enhancement of social solidarity rather than its cancellation.

Departing from these examples and considering the all-pervasive impact of neo-liberalism on social policies, a clear agenda for social work practice can be outlined. The profession has the choice of either conforming to these political conditions and becoming what it has always refused to become in its history, despite all compliance with the broad outlines of the nation state project, an uncritical servant of social policies, or it must develop a framework for action that takes a critical distance from this agenda on the basis of an autonomous analysis of what is happening to the social fabric of society as a result of informalisation.

This matters particularly in some of the basic tasks of social work which can give an indication of the direction in which our contribution towards a new social order must take. For instance, in dealing with children at risk of being harmed and neglected, one of the most fundamental principles of intervention is providing stability and continuity. This does not mean institutional rigidity and imposing a host of bureaucratic procedures, which sometimes begin to dominate child protection practices. Rather, the continuity principle serves as a reminder that beyond dealing with the immediate crisis social workers are concerned with the maintenance and establishment of social bonds which are the pre-condition for a child to develop basic trust and confidence. This basic trust is a dialectical process between trust in oneself and trust in the social environment, and interventions need to build up a mutually reinforcing circle of experiences in which both ends of this polarity can feature. Informal arrangements are only good enough when they take place in the overall context of commitments, of reliability and accountability. This is of crucial importance not just for children – adults also need a stable environment, not an oppressive stability but reliable contractual arrangements that reduce the unpredictability of life to which we

are otherwise exposed. The same is true even for the economy – the market itself reacts very adversely to instability and unpredictability. What is useful to learn from the market, as against a planned economy which clearly failed on this point, is the process by which such unpredictability can be reduced. This operates as a kind of constant participatory voting system where buyers and sellers are linked together, ideally, in an open and fair exchange in which the value of a good can be established (Willke, 2003). This is indeed an element of liberalism that can be transferred to social relations, that values are negotiable, as long as these negotiations are conducted in a spirit of commitment to a joint cause and within an overall understanding of our mutual dependency. Only then can compromises be justified without creating losers.

In many ways, the daily task of social workers today has some parallels with the work of relief and aid workers in post-war and post-catastrophe situations. Who would propose that the principle on which relief work to the victims of the tsunami devastation in December 2004 for instance should be 'every person look after their own interests'? The success of the relief efforts hinges totally on the ability to establish coordination between the localised, individualised, informal efforts of assistance and the international organisations, without diminishing the value of the former.

Equally globalisation requires structures of global governance, and this not only at international level where this necessity is gradually dawning on the big players in the global game (Gray, 1999), but also at the local level. The international perspective is not an alternative to the local perspective; on the contrary, it is the necessary reference point for understanding local developments in their fuller significance. Dependency and interdependency as such are not a threat to human endeavour, they are the necessary pre-conditions, but the structures and processes that establish networks of order and solidarity need to be negotiated rather than imposed. This is an experience that every social worker makes at the personal level with all types of users of social services, and this experience has a direct structural and political equivalent for which social workers are not only responsible, but are also uniquely equipped in terms of their skills and experience. What is necessary now is to bring together these different levels of experience (which a controlling political agenda often wants to keep separate) and to work on concrete strategies jointly to overcome the fundamental threat of fragmentation, individualisation and the informalisation of social relations.

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