

Social Work and Society: Pathways Towards a Global Public Sphere

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A succession of global crises defines the first two decades of the 21st century. Crises already dominated main parts of the 20th century – and are part of the modern societies in general. But the global dimension of the current crises is unprecedented. In contrast, social security and social care programs and strategies are still anchored in and oriented towards the nation state. Therefore, they react with a corresponding uncertainty or simplified security promises only on the national level. Exceptions on a supranational level, such as attempts to strengthen the social dimension in the European Union (EU), are only partially successful. This is not least because the European unification was primarily motivated by the economic strengthening of the member states and the European economy in general. Aspects like social security as well as the democratic legitimacy of the EU always lagged behind. This seemed to be legitimate as long as a certain division of labour seemed to work: transnational cooperation strengthens economic dynamics and the necessary social integration is established at the national level. With the need to manage the current global crises and prevent their further escalation, the question of an actual global welfare policy and a global public sphere is moving to the centre of attention.

1 Multiple Crises and their effects on social work and social pedagogy

What significance do multiple crises have for social work and social pedagogy? The effects of the current global crises can be situated on three different analytical levels: in relation to the users of welfare services; the welfare service profession and its organisations; and with regard to the politics of welfare.

1.1 Users of Welfare Services

Users of welfare services are massively affected by the current crises. Social inequality has been already most challenging for the everyday life of users long before the current situation. But in times of Covid 19 social and gender inequalities (see for Germany: Ahmed et al. 2020; Kohlrausch, Zucco and Hövermann 2020; Kohlrausch, Zucco 2020; von Würzen 2020) as well as educational inequalities (see for Germany: Bremm 2021) were increasing (globally: Michie and Sheehan 2022). Rising energy costs and high food prices exacerbate the social hardships in many countries and the ongoing climate change threaten to become a humanitarian disaster (see Carmodi et al. 2020). The different developments in different parts of the world must be seen in their mutual relationship. The global division between poorer and richer countries manifests itself in differences among the groups of welfare users (see e.g. needs of citizens on the one side and refugees and *sans papiers* on the other).

1.2 The Welfare Service Profession and its Organisations

The effects of the multiple crises are also reaching the professionals in welfare service organisations. Social work and social pedagogy are historically ‘female professions’, in which precarious employment conditions exist and the employees are thus often themselves affected by the growing inequalities (see for Germany: Fuchs-Rechlin 2018). Furthermore, their work itself is affected by the current crises. The corona pandemic, for example, had a clear impact on child and youth welfare (see for Germany: Mairhofer and others 2020; international: Featherstone as well as Leskošek in this issue): Welfare organisations had to weigh infection protection against personal contact to the clients, which is of fundamental importance for professional work (see for Germany: Meyer and Buschle 2020). During the lockdowns the problems of the users increased largely unnoticed because people could not be reached. Even in the context of long-established service structures like in Middle and Northern Europe or in Canada and Australia, there are indications that once established professional standards have come under pressure due to the pandemic. However, pandemics are – as well as the climate crisis – ‘real’ global phenomena, and social work as well as social pedagogy face the challenges of finding professional responses on that. Additionally, as the present times are marked by various crises, it needs to consider the cascading effects of multiple crises. For example, how do social impacts of climate change challenge professional social services on a global, national and local level (Dominelli 2012; Ferguson, Vasilios & Lavalette 2018; Gray, Coates & Hetherington 2013)?

1.3 Politics of Welfare

The crises encounter social politics that are still anchored in and oriented towards the nation state. Moreover, they take place in a neoliberal era of welfare policy de- and reregulation (see Abramovitz 2012), that is characterised by economisation and logics of activation, that shift responsibility of social problems more onto individuals. The current effects of the crisis are thus encountering unstable welfare systems that tend to reject its public (see Clarke 2004) as well as its global responsibility. Thus, social work and social pedagogy in current times are challenged by the question of a concept of a ‘global public sphere’ (see Nash 2014). Otherwise the existing tendencies towards renationalisation, political representatives who reject any responsibility for combating global crises and build a global public sphere, would be promoted further. Which contributions can welfare services make? How would a reasonable perspective for welfare services as part of a global public sphere would look like?

2 Pathways towards a global public sphere

We borrowed the phrase of a “global public sphere” – even in a modified way – from Nancy Fraser. Her effort to rethink and reconceptualised critically the question of a ‘public sphere’ has led her to considerations on “transnationalising” it.¹ The starting point in 2007 in Frasers paper had been the question: What could and should a public sphere politically and empirically look like in a “Post-Westphalian World”? And what questions have to be raised in an adequate public sphere-theory in the 21st century?

¹ Her article, titled “transnationalising the public sphere”, had been published in 2007 in *Theory, Culture and Society*, so around 15 years ago. Seven years later, Kate Nash re-published the article of Fraser and asked four colleagues, who reacted on Frasers analysis – Nash herself reacted also. Nancy Fraser answered on all these reactions in the same book, published by polity press.

What does Fraser mean by “Post-Westphalianism”? She based her considerations on the diagnosis of a dominant and formative post-national constellation at least in the 21st century. This constellation undermines the prevailing conceptions of a public sphere as it has been intended till the 20th century, Fraser argues. And till the 20th century this public sphere has always been tied to the nation state – what is not true anymore for the 21st century. So, what Fraser – with others – call the ‘Westphalian State’, is referring back to the contractual agreements of 1648 in Münster and Osnabrück, where the borders of European nation states have been fixed: the ‘Westfalian Freedom’ (*Westfälischer Friede*). Historically, for the first time, the nation state had been conceptualised as sovereign state as well as equated with a ‘state nation’ (*Staatsnation*). So, the territory had become the space for producing and re-producing a public opinion, bound to the formal members, the citizens. Here, the nation state had been, even generally, able to regulate the economy – the national economy. The nation state as a ‘state nation’ formed or even had been conceptualised as a specific “imagined” community (Anderson 1983), linked to a common language and a cultural image (on the basis of a “national vernacular literature”; Fraser 2007/2014, p. 25).

The model of the public sphere has been bound to a specific territory – the nation state, to a political community – the nation as a political community, to a set of institutions – the parliamentary decision-making bodies as well as welfare institutions, and not at least to a specific political image – “national imaginaries” (Fraser 2007/2014, p. 13).

All that has been the basis, as Fraser argues, for main and influential public sphere-theories, like the one of Jürgen Habermas (1962). But the supposed connection, of the public sphere and the nation state, can no longer be assumed, Fraser argues: All that “constitutive presuppositions” of a public sphere – and also an adequate “public-sphere theory” (Fraser 2007/2014, p.20) – are not convincing any more in the post-national constellation. This is, because the relevant “problems debated are inherently trans-territorial and can neither be located within the Westphalian space nor be resolved by Westphalian stat” (ibid., p. 19).

Therefore, the *Zeitdiagnose* of a Post-Westphalian- and post-national-constellation is calling us to revise our conceptions of the public sphere as well as our practice in the public sphere. If this is true, we are not at least challenged in the field of social work, social pedagogy and social policy – in practice as well as in research and critical theory.

What has to be answered, following Nancy Fraser, is the question of “normative legitimacy and political efficacy” (ibid., p. 33), so – first – the question, in what why / how can the public sphere get its legitimation in a transnationalised and global context – and who are the actors of such a transformed public sphere? (multitude; assembly; diaspora communities; ...); and second the question, where do we – as members of the transnationalised and global public sphere – experience political efficacy, i.e. the relevance of our political engagement, political protest, common political reflections etc.?

Having Frasers idea in mind, this special issue is dedicated to opening a transnational discourse on social work and social pedagogy in times of multiple crises. Obviously, their effects are not equal and simultaneous for different welfare states and different regions. But their interdependencies go beyond the national framework, which is why we consider a transnational debate to be crucial – so ideally, we become actors in a time and a space, where a global public sphere can emerge – where we can struggle for develop a global public sphere, from our perspectives and positions in social work, social pedagogy, and social policy.

3 Overview of the papers in this issue

The special issue was produced as part of the 20th anniversary conference of the journal in June 2023 at the University of Wuppertal (Germany) (sponsored by the German Research Association, DFG). The articles focus on the three levels outlined above.

On the level of the **Politics of Welfare**, we are very happy to present the keynote of one of the funding editors of Social Work & Society, Walter Lorenz (Prague, Czech Republic), on *Historical and contemporary opportunities to assert social work's political commitment between private and public sphere*. Walter Lorenz discusses the historical and current shifts between private and public sphere and the role of social work and social pedagogy within them. According to the author, social work's unique professional mandate implies negotiating the relations between the private and the public sphere. Lorenz shows the shifts between the spheres regarding the beginning of professionalisation and the public discourse on the so called *social question* (1); the changing context in the current decades regarding to a neoliberal backlash (2); the new impulses from civil society and social movements (3); and finally social work and social pedagogy in the wake of the Covid 19-pandemic (4). He argues in favour of a “democratic professionalism” that social services should be “dedicated to building solidarity at personal and political level combined and therefore represent[s] models for the renewal of a national and the construction of a global public sphere”.

The article by Brigid Featherstone (Huddersfield, United Kingdom) on *Protecting Children and Supporting Families post-Covid* outlines the political context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on child protection in UK. She argues that Covid-19 opened up new ways of questioning the neoliberal era of public private partnership, even if these have not prevailed politically. Based on empirical findings on social inequalities and social harms Featherstone formulates a critique of current child protection models and its individualising logics. However, the preferred *Social Model of Protecting Children*, which the author developed in her earlier work, is also being revised and renewed in the face of the pandemic.

The part on **Welfare Service Profession and its Organisations** starts with Vesna Leskošek (Ljubljana, Slovenia) paper on *The interdependence of structural context and the Covid-19 pandemic: The case of Slovenia*. Leskošek discusses how the harsh measure of drastically limiting contacts between social services and service users during the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia had negative consequences for the users and their support. Based on empirical results from a survey of social workers she identifies major differences between the social services in dealing with the pandemic and with the government measures. While some have significantly reduced their offers and contacts to users, also some innovative ways of acting and connecting with users could be observed. She problematises the (political) inability to adapt measures to the specificities of each sector, especially to the social sector and its basis of personal contact. She concludes that the pandemic was predominantly understood in health and economic terms but not in social terms.

In his article *Challenges faced by older persons in Eastern and Southern Africa and implications for social work practice* Jotham Dhemba (Kwaluseni, Eswatini) describes the challenges of population ageing in East and Southern Africa and its implications for social work. He emphasises the high vulnerability of the group of older persons in current times, as the inter-generational support is simultaneously diminishing due to migration forced by poverty. Also, the social pension that a few receive is inadequate to take the persons out of poverty. Dhemba describes their vulnerability and suffering in terms of various dimensions:

Poverty and food insecurity, poor health and lack or limited access to healthcare and other services, lack of national identity documents, neglect and abandonment and last but not least withcraft accusations. He concludes that a new framework for social work is needed to ensure the well-being of older people. Referring to the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2012 Dhemba argues for a developmental social work approach, which takes greater account of this vulnerable group.

The level of the **users** is focussed in the last two papers of the current special issue. Griet Roets (Ghent, Belgium), Fabian Kessl (Wuppertal, Germany) and Walter Lorenz (Prague, Czech Republic) reflect the *new charity economy in relation to social work*. Under the title *Reclaiming the social dimension of public life in the context of changing welfare rationales* they follow the changes in the European welfare state arrangements, which has been widely diagnosed since the 1990s. This transformation of welfare arrangements can be seen, following Roets, Kessl and Lorenz, as also taking shape in a new form of philanthropy. This phenomenon is the reason to ask how social service providers, such as social work and social pedagogy, can fulfill their professional mission in this transformed context. The authors define the concrete forms of the new philanthropy as a “new charity economy”. That development is illustrated using a Belgian example – in the context of similar developments in other European welfare states. Against the background of these developments, social work and social pedagogy seem to be challenged to intervene in the ongoing social and socio-political debates.

Marie Frühauf (Wuppertal, Germany) asks in her article *Adolescence in Times of Social-Ecological Crisis. Perspectives for Social Pedagogical Analysis and Research* how adolescents are currently affected by the social-ecological crisis and how this relates to their social position, especially to gender and class relations. She argues for qualitative research that takes into account the connections between the social and affective dimensions of adolescence. The article emphasises the relevance of the crisis experience for the shaping and dealing with adolescence in fields of social pedagogy/social work. It discusses the relevance of the social-ecological crisis for the negotiation of adolescence between professionals and young people by focussing on the Open Child and Youth Work.

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