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Historical and contemporary opportunities to assert social work's political commitment between private and public sphere

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Abstract: The Corona pandemic evidenced the profound uncertainties over whether securing one's welfare is a private or a public concern since neoliberal policies had promoted individualisation and privatisation on all fronts. This historical overview of key moments in the development of social work summarises the transformative role this profession assumed in the face of political tendencies to impose splits between a national and an international orientation, scientific neutrality and the recognition of diverse identity claims, personal and public responsibility, care and control. Overcoming these dilemmas requires an ethical commitment in giving situation-specific assistance and a political commitment towards building a public sphere that can effectively raise personal concerns in terms of public and indeed international rights. In this way social work can contribute to trust-building in participatively and reflectively grounded expertise and thereby the strengthening of democratic processes.

Keywords: social work history; international social work; neoliberalism; Corona pandemic; diversity of identities; reflectivity; democratic professionalism

Introduction

Social work has a rich history of engagement with international political developments and has always been charged with simultaneously addressing and transcending the local and national horizon of practice orientation to confront the interchange of wider forces impinging on social problems. Affirming this history and drawing on historical experiences assumes new importance in an era in which globalisation is threatening to impose a mentality of universalism, linearity and adjustment to economic "realities" that seem to allow for no alternatives. Practising under these conditions requires political awareness and skills in taking position towards new policies that put clients under pressure to adjust to advancing ideologies of privatisation and the individualisation of responsibilities for well-being.

The intention of this paper is to show how the recent Corona pandemic has cast doubts on the viability of "post-welfare" arrangements that seek to shift the responsibility for securing the welfare of citizens from the public to the private realm and how the ambiguities it exposed can be taken as opportunities for social work to reassert its social as a political commitment by addressing both the personal and the public-political side of "social problems". Social work's unique professional mandate implies negotiating the relations between the private and the public sphere. Social workers are neither contracted privately by their clients, as most therapists or counsellors are, nor are they bureaucratic agents of the state like public welfare officials. Their general task is to assess to what extent social problems that affect clients personally are indeed private issues and in what regard they must be treated as matters of public concern. Their professional "margin of discretion" (Ellis, 2014) expresses this dual responsibility and must therefore be linked to a social justice perspective so that in certain

circumstances they can also criticise and oppose state regulations. It will be argued that this in turn requires a direct engagement with and fostering of democratic processes and competences and a critical-reflexive use of participative forms of practice.

The development of a public sphere and social work

Habermas's theory of the development of a public sphere as part of democratic processes in modern societies emphasises the communicative aspects of this form of the mobilisation of private citizens. Through this medium they can raise their voice collectively and thereby critically monitor and influence public centres of power and authority of the modern state (Habermas, 1991). Besides the role of the press and other bourgeoise debating platforms since the period of early industrialisation, civil associations also made an important contribution to the shaping of government policies. They provided platforms for "welfare debates" where the "social question" could be raised by philanthropic and charity organisations, by the international labour movement and by the international women's movement which all campaigned for wider issues like justice and peace beyond their immediate calls for better living and working conditions (Wilmers, 2020). In Germany it was the role of intellectuals around the "Verein für Socialpolitik" who contributed to debates on Bismarck's social insurance project: "In the concept of the social question, the civic public for the first time addressed the tension between the political ideals of civic equality and the de facto social development" (Kaufman, 2013: 31). These debates ultimately gave rise to social work and social pedagogy as a civil society movement and as a profession (Schröer, 1999).

Professionalisation through internationalisation

Early forms of social work arose directly from civil society initiatives and organisations that each advocated a particular approach to social problems and thereby represented contrasting positions on how public welfare could be ensured. The Charity Organisation Society in the UK (Lewis, 1995) and the USA (Hansan, 2013), which had taken the Elberfeld System of "targeted assistance giving" as a model (McMillan, 2022), tended to give rise to a social work methodology that aimed at making people adjust better to prevailing economic and political conditions. Its "case by case" approach pioneered casework as the application of Mary Richmond's method of "social diagnosis" (Richmond, 1917) and was strongly influenced by 19th century economic liberalism (Lorenz, 2016). Instead, the "Settlement Movement", which also spread internationally (Köngeter, 2022), articulated the structural factors that caused poverty and related social problems more critically to political and economic framework conditions (Köngeter & Schröer, 2013), particularly through the work of Jane Addams in Chicago's Hull House. While not having an immediate impact on social policy (Branco, 2016), the settlements nevertheless pioneered an approach to social work that is now being taken up by the social economy movement (Tadesse & Elsen, 2023). Despite the class-related biases in civil society engagements of early social work, charitable organisations played a role in the development of "the social and sensory economy of modern public space" (Webb, 207, p.205). Furthermore, together with the international labour movement in the form of the International Workingmen's Association of 1866 (Groh & Brandt, 1992), later the First International (Katz, 1992) and the international women's movement through the International Alliance of Women (Rupp, 1994) they articulated the "social question" as an international issue.

Social work's professionalisation emerged in relation to these international activities and owes its success very much to the "global perspective" that its pioneers had adopted (Braches-Chyrek, 2013). Through their involvement in the international women's movement and the peace movement iconic women pioneers like Jane Addams and Alice Salomon (Kuhlmann,

2008) strongly advocated that social work should rise above the narrow, bureaucratic and politically controlling reach of national governments and their limited social policy agendas.

The national agendas prevailed, however, and many civil society initiatives became advocates of nationalism, sadly also some of the labour movements. Only the horrors unleashed by the warring nation states who had slaughtered each other in the first global conflagration, the so-called Great War, renewed in some movements, among them social workers, the determination to take a critical distance from national agendas. And the spectacular success of the Paris Conference of 1928, when social work affirmed its professional and academic status globally with probably 5000 delegates gathering to discuss the role of social workers in a world in crisis (Healy 2008), confirmed the validity and actuality of that approach to professionalisation. And Jane Addams' commitment to the peace movement earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

But this global orientation of social work and its professional engagement with an open public space, in which the dynamics of identity and belonging could interact openly and through international exchanges, was again curtailed by the rise of Fascism and Nazism which imposed racist nationalist identity criteria and policies of "Volksgemeinschaft" to discriminate between "deserving" and "undeserving" citizens (Steber & Gotto, 2014; see also Kunstreich, 2003), causing the next global slaughter of the Second World War.

The ending of the Second World War however marks another historical threshold for social work's internationalisation and implicit engagement with politics. The newly founded United Nations saw the potential of the social work profession in promoting democracy and a justice orientation for the eradication of authoritarianism and commissioned three international surveys on the state of social work education in the 1950s (Healy, 2011). Its political potential was however once more limited by the ensuing Cold War which transformed "social welfare" into a largely "Western agenda" in contrast to communism which declared social work as superfluous (Petersen, 2013). In the West, freedom and democracy became an ideological project in support of capitalism in which agents of the public sphere, and with that social work, became largely complicit and made it difficult to engage fully for those who had hoped the welfare state would eliminate inequalities. This ideological frame also meant that the international horizon was re-interpreted as the Western horizon and vice versa so that all alternative models of welfare would be labelled as communist and inimical of personal liberty.

Between "scientific neutrality" and the "recognition of diversity"

This ambiguity inherent in an unacknowledged political agenda is reflected in social work discourses in the 1950s and 60s. Textbooks in many Western European countries where social work emerged as an academic discipline, frequently under the guidance of US or UN programmes, were dominated by "scientific methods" that claimed to be universally applicable across service users from different cultural backgrounds, whether in the version of the psycho-social approach, behaviourist social work, task-centred work or system theory (Healy, 2008). This scientific "neutrality" helped social work practice, largely in the form of case work, to become firmly embedded in national policy agendas and to mesh with the growing welfare bureaucracy under the agenda of "modernisation" (Harris & White, 2009). Study courses in that period paid little attention to the diversity of "welfare regimes" that developed in other countries and that could be used as counter-foils with which to critically examine the national agendas (Lorenz, 2017).

This link between an abstract internationalism and nation-specific forms of practice, which did not question their culture-specificity, was broken up by the fundamental challenges posed by international social movements of the 1970s and 80s and their "disruptive" effects (Fox-Piven & Cloward, 1977). They exposed the falsity and blindness of the "people are people everywhere" assumption behind social work methods by re-claiming the identity characteristics of women, black people, gay people and people with disabilities who all demanded recognition for their specific identities, needs and interests which the national welfare agendas did not respect (Melucci, 1980). On account of this universalism welfare systems had created inequalities hidden from a class perspective (Martin, 2001). By articulating those demands, international social movements not only challenged the presumed scientific neutrality of social work theories and approaches and at times challenged them to take on the role of social activists (Alinsky, 1971), but they also cut across the national orientations of welfare to highlight the fundamental dilemma between recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 1995). Discrimination, exclusion, and racism were exposed as trans-national and transversal issues whose pervasiveness questioned the adequacy of national welfare provisions fundamentally from a transnational perspective. This called for new policy responses and hence also new social work methods based on the recognition of "difference" according to iconic mottos: "black is beautiful", "nothing about us without us", "my body belongs to me". These international social movements marked the emergence of a political space beyond the traditional state-civil society distinction in the form of a new intermediate and highly dynamic public space (Melucci, 1980; 1985) and gave this public space thereby a global significance by joining up with the direct voices of activists for different social justice causes internationally and re-invigorating a democratic culture "from below".

For social work, this period heralded a major disturbance in its methods discourses and a decisive change in orientation. The existing "methods schools" began to break up as the messages by the new social movements resonated with social workers' own perception of the importance of diversity and of political position-taking. Disseminating under titles like "black social work" (e.g. Ahmad, 1990) or "feminist social work" (White, 2006), but also "radical social work" (e.g. Bailey & Brake, 1975), themes formed in social work literature that shared common strands through their link to vibrant transnational public debates:

- Social work articulated again the question of identity not as simply given but as a social construct to whose formation social work interventions could contribute substantially either in an oppressive or in a confidence-building version.

- Social work re-affirmed the capacity of service users to be autonomous agents whose own initiatives were to be rated positively and built upon at professional level, rather than negated as deficient.

- Solidarity requires chosen communities of action across regional and national boundaries to articulate the needs of people rather than trying to achieve "belonging" through individual case work.

- Social work interventions cannot be confined to the psychological personal level but always must reach beyond the private into the public realm to be effective and have a social justice orientation.

Those guiding principles (many of which had been around already in the 1920s, see Platt & Chandler, 1988 for black initiatives) encouraged social workers to forge new alliances with

service user and self-help groups (Croft & Beresford, 1989), to affirm their commitment to a social rights orientation and to articulate the political context of individual social problems more clearly. However, they mostly failed to address and develop the communication and negotiation strategies which render a public sphere, at national or international level, active and politically effective and the weak political impact of social work proved that "having a voice" by itself is not enough (Reisch, 2018). At the structural level it needs political organisation to take up this voice and turn it into action, and at the personal level it requires patiently building relationships that do not impose ideological presumptions on oppressed people in the expectation that they become instant freedom fighters. Their lives are shaped by dictates of "economic necessity" which set limits to their engagement in movements and politics (Hearn, 1982; Reisch, 2019). And at the international level, with the advance of globalisation developments were less influenced by political organisations but largely by economic ones on which social movements had little impact.

The neoliberal backlash

What compounded the lack of political impact of social work activism in the 1980s was a perfidious communication trick that seemed to take the wind out of the sails of social movements by stealing their demands and their vocabulary and turning their meaning into the opposites. This was performed by the rhetoric of neoliberalism (Nguyen, 2017), a political project promoted by the figures like Reagan and Thatcher based on the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek (1978) and Milton Friedman (1993) that ultimately aimed at also privatising the welfare state (Abramovitz, 1986). This propaganda device came to dominate and transform the public sphere by ostensibly substituting the demands of "liberational" social movements with a re-formulated repertoire of "liberal" political values. Demands for direct participation, direct democracy and freedom became equated with capitalist economic values of self-activation and entrepreneurship, thereby aiming to de-politicise the entire culture of the public sphere. The striking similarity to the demands of social movements is expressed in those neoliberal principles:

- The right of the individual to freedom and self-determination (but "as a market player")

- The freedom from state control over personal life-style decisions and other matters of personal engagement (as the "freedom of consumers")

- The recognition of personal potentials and achievements instead of emphasising deficits that need to be compensated ("equality of opportunity through self-activation")

- The importance of self-chosen communities (of interest) instead of given or imposed traditional identity formats (so that commercial labels and "influencers" could function as new "collective identity models")

With those principles and policies, neoliberal governments aided the already existing tendencies of pushing market capitalism towards globalisation, relativising or suspending national boundaries, merging cultural reference points, reducing the political steering capacity of governmental institutions at all levels, transforming citizens into consumers (Barnes, 1999) and undermining the dynamics of public political debate on longer-term visions by prioritising issues of immediate self-interest. The fundamental difference to the demands of social movements is that neoliberalism replaces social goals with commercial goals (Ismail &

Kamat, 2018). What binds people together in a market society are self-interests. And this has a decisive impact on the role of civil society movements and organisations: what was their prevalent political role, namely to push citizens' private concerns, for which they had not received public attention, towards public awareness and hence politicising private concerns, is now being reversed to portray public issues as one's private "business" (Cowden & Singh, 2017). The effect on NGOs is that they are made to keep private concerns private and to deal with them increasingly with commercial methods and principles, transforming themselves into "private businesses", aided further by the "new charity economy" (Kessl, Lorenz & Schoneville, 2020). This pressure also manifests itself in social work education (Reisch, 2013) and impacts particularly social workers in NGOs, but also those in public positions who have to increasingly conform to managerial performance criteria under the guise of giving service users more choice and effectively re-classifying them as "consumers" (Spolander et al., 2014). This trend confirms the old accusation against social work practice, that social workers turn "public concerns into private troubles" instead of doing the reverse, of linking private troubles to public concerns, as C. Wright Mills characterised the contemporary role of sociology in his "Sociological Imagination" (Mills, 1959).

The events of 1989 and the massive political changes they brought globally, were sucked into this economic agenda that blurred the distinction between the two versions of an emergent global public sphere. On one hand, the "Velvet Revolution" had itself been the product of strong social movements which had challenged the overpowering might of the totalitarian states of the Soviet sphere of influence and came to fruition in achieving a decisive regime change and with that the establishment of what could then be called an independent and democratic public sphere. On the other hand, with the eclipse of the socialist imaginary, which had set in in decades before in the West, the achievements of civil society groups were frequently sequestrated by neoliberal ideologies as in the West, transforming their desire for freedom into the will to take part in the consumer choice culture (Lorenz, 2020). This meant that the rhetoric of neoliberalism colonised the language in which civil society demands had been expressed and with that undermined the whole project of the democratic re-construction of a public sphere of free citizens in post-communist countries by trying to turn it into a privatisation and commercialisation project. This historical example illustrates the dilemma now faced by social activists concerned with issues of social solidarity of forming public discussion arenas that have not been already colonised. In the light of this the whole concept of social citizenship, on which the drive for establishing public welfare, must be re-evaluated critically (Edmiston & Humpage, 2018).

The Corona pandemic as a challenge to neoliberal dogmas

The Corona crisis evidenced dramatically the disastrous weakening of political structures and processes, including the functions of the public sphere, that neoliberal politics had engineered despite their failures in preventing for instance the fiscal crisis of 2008 (Crouch, 2011). The virus did not cause social divisions, mistrust in politicians and experts, inequalities in employment conditions, distancing of social relations, racist and sexist discrimination – it merely accentuated these phenomena because recent politics had already set all these trends in motion (Aluffi Pentini & Lorenz, 2020). As Benhabib notes (2021, 478):

> "The Covid-19 pandemic has pulled aside the curtain which had partially covered enormous class, race, ethnic and gender cleavages still existent in our societies. The dialectic of interdependence and fragmentation, which has been so characteristic of the global condition for decades, has shown itself one more time, and the internal fractures and fissures in our societies between rich and poor, intellectual and manual workers,

> Anglo, European and American elites versus Black, Hispanic and other 'racialized' working minorities (who have been subject to much higher contagion and mortality rates in ways that are unimaginable) have come to light".

What is more, the intricate connection that had developed between the national and the global level became a lived experience for everybody. The boundaries between the private and the public sphere shifted constantly as the state invaded private spaces in a for democratic societies unprecedented way and private life, through endless video links, became visible to a wide public. It demonstrated the fundamental discrepancy inherent in the emergent global public sphere, with considerable implications for social work (Ornellas, Engelbrecht, Atamtürk, 2020). On one hand it has grown immensely in importance, largely due to the digital revolution and the creation of global social networks. The digital information providers have developed a critical potential for giving people voice and creating social communities in which relevant topics can be openly discussed without incurring censorship by undemocratic governments. On the other, it has achieved the exact opposite, creating echo chambers of opinions and positions constantly reinforced by the selection of algorithms, of increasing expressions of hate and racism of the vilest forms, and subjecting users to the manipulation by owners of these platforms and their commercial sponsors (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). This points to the absence of a guiding and selecting structure, such as international law-making institutions and courts that could control the excesses and steer the technical developments and flows of information in a balanced direction based on ethical principles. So far, the most effective instruments of that kind that would reconcile the right to freedom of expression with the protection of the dignity of persons are still to be found mainly at national level, but economic forces in globalisation threaten to weaken those further.

The pandemic called the sovereignty of the state fundamentally into question. The spread of the virus forced even the most neoliberal governments in the UK and US to adopt control measures that completely negated their political core principles (Walby, 2021). Resorting to control measures was subsequently presented as an act of caring. Yet it also triggered a lot of resistance, particularly in relation to compulsory vaccination because people had long before become sceptical about the caring intentions and abilities of states that had invested more and more in control measures and less and less in caring ones. The caring function of public sphere organisations has been severely undermined as their functions have become gradually privatised (Ross, 2021). And by the same token, the organisations of civil society charged with caring functions, the big NGOs, get drawn into the dynamics of globalisation but fail to represent a global public sphere in the true sense unless they thereby legitimise their functions by commercial or political agendas. The big players in the field, nationally and internationally, had assumed more and more the features of business enterprises at the neglect of their actual social mandate.

The pandemic was dominated by the motto of "social distancing" which had a physical and symbolic side to it. The danger of contagion through physical contacts justified the radical changes in social habits that characterised social exchanges, from forms of greetings to getting together in social places. Those who had access to digital means could compensate for this loss of immediacy to some extent, some even benefitted from being able to work from home, while others either could not afford such privileges and had to work in dangerous conditions outside or in hospitals or suffer total isolation for lack of digital access in institutions. But social distancing has long been a pervasive trend in societies and had confined different population groups not only to ever more separated city zones but subjected them to exclusion, oppression and persecution, as evidenced in the Black Lives Matter

(Neyman & Dalsey, 2021) and also in the #MeToo movements, that significantly erupted during the pandemic (Reisch, 2019).

Lessons for social work deriving from the experience of the pandemic

These indications of the ambiguous and precarious social state of global society threaten to make it ever more difficult to grasp what is meant by "social". But these conditions represent an opportunity for social work to define an understanding of "social" precisely in relation to these developments and conflicts:

- Social work addresses social distancing critically and with that the issue of boundaries in general. It aims at ensuring not just a sense of belonging, but also at providing the structural security so that this sense of belonging can become a lived reality. The boundary between private and public has become highly problematic as above all the #MeToo movement reveals. When we have become cautious about hugging and kissing during the pandemic it makes us aware that boundaries of intimacy cannot be crossed without some critical reflective considerations, at the personal familiar and particularly at the institutional level, while categorical rules cannot grasp the intricacies of intimate encounters (Green & Moran, 2021). The many scandals in residential care institutions about physical and sexual abuse indicate how dangerous the neglect of open critical reflecting can be in organisational contexts and in transparent relations to the wider public. If globalisation becomes a project that seeks to remove all boundaries, political or cultural, it threatens the integrity of private spaces. Social workers demonstrate how to protect privacy while making also private individuals publicly accountable in certain well analysed circumstances and their professional practice can serve as a model of how to stop global players from invading the private sphere with impunity.

- Social work is characterised by having to exercise both care and control (and any notion that it might practice just caring is a dangerous illusion). It can, however, exercise both in relation to each other only if the authority with which it is acting is legitimate. This is why it is also mandated to contribute to the legitimation processes in situations where power needs to be exercised, particularly in the public sphere, but also in the private one (Hauss, 2008). This legitimation calls for ethical standards, which take into account transnational issues so that in certain cases national laws and guidelines can be questioned (Banks et al., 2020). Social work contributes to the building of this global awareness and discourse.

- The securing of a boundary that renders intimacy inviolable links directly to the ability to establish a secure sense of identity. This does not mean that everybody has to construct a distinct identity by their own efforts, like Castells (2010) characterises global trends towards "project identities" – on the contrary, a secure identity arises in the context of a secure sense of belonging or affiliation (in Nussbaum's sense, 2011) which means that the relationship between self and community needs to be treated as a mutual exchange that facilitates neither the merging of the self with given collective identities, as promoted by current nationalisms, nor the isolation of a self that has to be different at all – mainly psychological - costs. Assisting refugees, people with disabilities or victims of oppression and racism to develop a secure identity in community contexts that promote diversity is a personal and a political issue for social workers and the way they resolve the inevitable conflicts has great significance for

global debates. The resurgence of nationalism and racism is one of the biggest threats to the development of a constructive and global public sphere.

- Social work is about giving people voice in private and in public relations, which requires high competences in trustworthy forms of communication. Given that the digitalisation of communication has a leading function in the dissemination of information this in one sense facilitates minority and excluded groups in taking voice in a public arena, but at the same time can subject them to manipulation and hate attacks. Furthermore, social media are creating a "struggle for visibility" and overemphasise "dialogues of images" instead of representing "voice" in words, which has a completely different quality. The role responsible journalists are still playing presently who take the trouble to turn images into analytic, investigative reporting and thereby hold on to ethical standards and practices in the face of massive disinformation and fake news is encouraging and a model for social workers. Giving voice to people can make them very vulnerable and our professional communication skills set an example of how to make the transition from private to public communication less risky, and the reception of public information usable through critical scrutiny as is intended, for instance, in the "hearing voices" agenda of self-help movements of people with schizophrenia (Corstens et al., 2014).

- Social work breaks the polarisation between private initiative, personal agency, and public welfare support and therefore also regards civil society initiatives as transitional or transformative phenomena. They cannot be regarded as replacing the functions of the state but must be seen in a dynamic exchange with each other in that civil society initiatives must contain a direction of enshrining their work in rights and state provisions must remain open to the critical accompaniment by civil society organisations and indeed by private individuals (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013).

- This also means that the pure insistence on a "rights" approach might have to be critically examined under current conditions of a "risk society" which seeks to regain moral certainty through an ever-increasing spread of legal prescriptions in all spheres of life. This might lead to what Giddens (1990, 1991) called the "sequestration of experience", meaning that people's own moral and common-sense judgements might become blunted through the replacement of morality with legal regulations and expert systems. As Smith (2002) argues, these conditions call not for "moral revival" of the kind evident in the certainties spread by fundamentalism of both the religious and the political versions, but for a "space for moral discourse" to be opened. The ability to engage in moral discourse hinges on the ability to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty and promoting this is part of the core competence kit of social work (Parton, 1998). According to Bauman (1993) morality in that sense fosters empathy and responsibility for the other through an acceptance of uncertainty rather than the insistence on polarising certainties.

- The Corona crisis evidenced the profound value disorientation that characterises the political landscape and with that the hollowing out of ethical reference positions at the level of civil society. Politics that turned towards populism is at the mercy of fluctuating opinion poll majorities which in turn feed on a market-like "vanity fair" of likes and dislikes which deprive the public sphere of its prime function of leading to, and indeed educating towards the ability to reach consensus among conflicting

positions. Social workers know that participation and collaboration with service users cannot be equated with consumer choice orientation but their interventions need to be guided by clear ethical principles and a clear understanding of their implementation in specific situations. Hence by taking such an ethical stance social workers interpret and realise a core part of democracy, which is taking responsibility not just for specific interest groups but for the well-being of society overall. As Kaldor (2003, 590) characterised civil society, it "is the process through which consent is generated, the arena where the individual negotiates, struggles against, or debates with the centres of political and economic authority." This implies a constant struggle for ethical values that cannot be universalised in abstract. As the resistance against UN human rights conventions by some voices in the Global South witnesses, universalising ethical principles is not self-evident but must be seen as a process of engagement with different value positions and hence anticipate conflict – and provide the means of addressing these conflicts in open discourse and not through wars (Mende, 2021).

- The Covid crisis finally evidenced a crisis of trust in politicians and also in scientists. This can be directly linked to the erosion of democratic principles and practices in the political arena as well as in academia. Academic competition for ranking and popularity, short-term effectiveness criteria and quantitative criteria substituting for quality discussions are indicative of the loss of discursive practices and the resulting loss of trust in public and knowledge-producing institutions (Busso, 2014). Delivering social work is all about creating trust and participative approaches are the only way of achieving trusting relationships that can overcome differences of opinion through critical reflexivity and authentic discussions (Van Beveren et al., 2023). This practice experience can be translated directly into the public realm and shows that social work practice is ultimately about promoting democratic practice.

These observations call for an arena in which the voice of social workers, based on their experience, scholarly knowledge and ethical and political commitments, can develop their comprehensive political significance. This can only be built along principles of participation that continuously transfer and translate the skills with which to address problems at the lifeworld level of the private sphere into the realm of the public sphere, and into a public sphere that requires constant reconstruction.

Facing up to the complexities in social and political relations revealed in the Covid crisis demands high competences of reflexivity on the part of social workers at every turn. They cannot resort to standard models of intervention, even though they are increasingly at risk of becoming locked into standard procedures and prescriptions in the era of managerialism. As a research project at Charles University Prague showed, fostering those reflexive competences in students and practitioners mirrors critical reflexivity in social work practice by having to connect psychological processes and preconditions to wider political frameworks and issues which. If the connections with organisational and political framework conditions have been left out of training and practice it can turn the process of reflexivity into an instrumental exercise of mind control, specially when it is guided by the constant fear of "making the wrong decision" (Lorenz, 2023). The research affirmed therefore the concept of "democratic reflectivity" by taking up the notion of "democratic professionalism" proposed by Dzur (2008). This competence focuses on the discursive interaction of "different voices", internal and external ones which can be practised individually, in teams or in corresponding forms of supervision (Van Beveren et al., 2023).

The Covid pandemic leaves a highly problematic political legacy of growing divisions that have now manifested themselves in starkly polarised global political conflicts. The work of social workers is dedicated to building solidarity at personal and political level combined and therefore represents models for the renewal of a national and the construction of a global public sphere which can promote trust. But as Offe (2020, 38f) affirmed in his assessment of the Covid-19 pandemic:

> "It is well possible that trust (a relationship that takes a long time to build and can suddenly collapse) will turn out to be the ultimate strategic variable that determines success and failure of measures to cope with the pandemic. But trust cannot be built in the way a highway can".

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