"Re-positioning the social mandate of social work"

FORSA 2023 conference **Bodø**
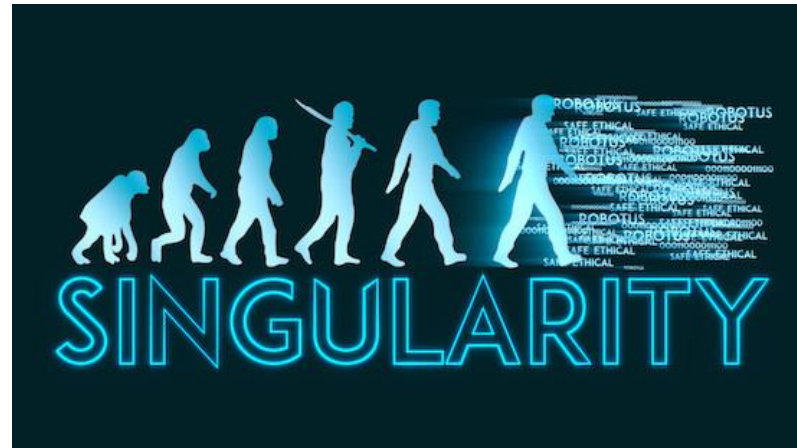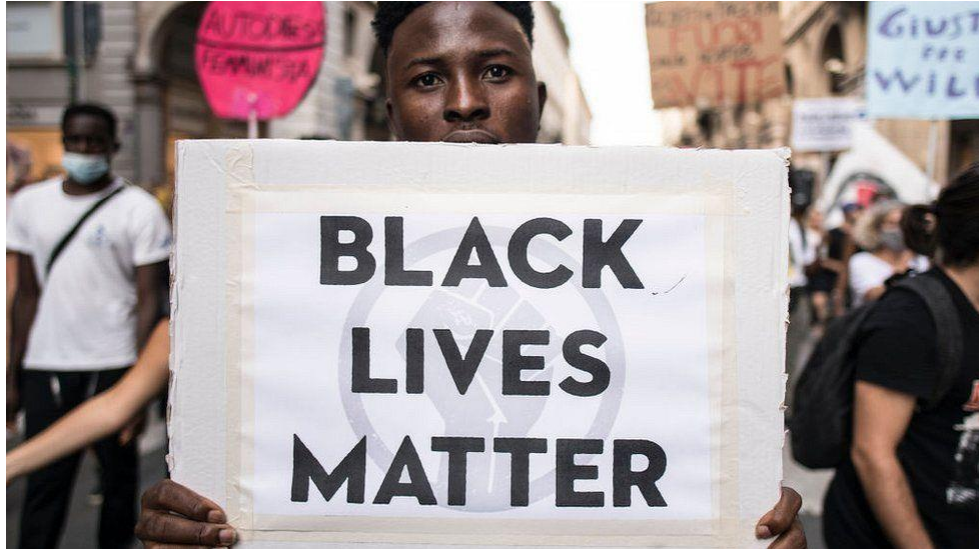## "Social Work in Changing Times – Challenges and new Opportunities."

Walter Lorenz

Charles University, Prague

Free University Bozen / Bolzano

The Corona shock – "social" distancing

other dimensions of social distances

Erosion / disaggregation (not "blurring", Latour) of the meaning of "social" – becomes manifest in recent crises (and was not caused by them):

- Corona crisis: "social distancing" (hints that "social" is mainly spatial); "social networks" (connecting only "likes", echo chambers)

- War in Ukraine: war as between "blocks"; these were re-established after "economic trade links" had not brought "blocks" socially and culturally together; failure of post-1989 diplomacy resulted in Russian resentment to "justify" war

- Climate crisis: failure to reach agreement because social implications (poverty divisions) not fully respected; we are lacking a "social" relation with nature

neoliberal strategy had already promoted the privatisation of the „social"

neoliberal ideology as the driver of the erosion affecting the meaning of "social"

- individualisation (Thatcher: "there is no such thing as society")
- emphasis on activation and achievement (moves "social" towards "dependency" with deficit implications)
- polarises pubic and private sphere (and pushes "social responsibilities" into the private arena)
- privatises and commercialises public (including social) services, thereby replacing citizen interests with stakeholder interests
- fragments the understanding of "community" into "communities of (self-)interest

impact on social work is well documented

An increasing amount of research in Norway over the last decade documents a declining demand for the competences normally associated with social work, as well as a gradual disregard of the 'social' aspects of people's lives (Fjellstad 2007; Normann 2009; Røysum 2012; Ohnstad, Rugkåsa, and Ylvisaker 2014). These trends are also observable in other European countries (Dewe, Otto, and Schnurr 2006).

Hanssen, J. K., Hutchinson, G. S., Lyngstad, R., & Sandvin, J. T. (2015). What happens to the social in social work? Nordic Social Work Research, 5(sup1), 115–126. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857x.2015.1060895

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nordland, Bodø,

Slovenian research on Covid impacting on SW

"Structural changes, such as the introduction of neoliberal managerialism and the marketisation of the public sector, along with numerous other reforms of social services, have weakened professional work and restricted the professional autonomy of social workers…. social wok has recently tended towards maintenance and individual work."

enforced greater distance from service users was perceived ambivalently by social workers: relief from pressure – and as obstacle to effective work

Mešl, N., Leskošek, V., Rape Žiberna, T., & Kodele, T. (2023). Social Work During COVID-19 in Slovenia: Absent, Invisible or Ignored? The British Journal of Social Work, 53(2), 737–754. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac149

"But the social, understood as the connections making up the practices in which human problems are produced, maintained and dealt with, has certainly not disappeared, or even diminished.

What is diminishing is the recognition of the complexity of relations producing and upholding social problems, and it is precisely this relation that makes them social."

(Hanssen, Hutchinson, Lyngstad, & Sandvin (2015)).

social work re-affirmation of core meanings of "social"
(by reflecting on what makes our practice "social") -
against the disaggregation and marginalisation of "social"

1. **social** indicates "vicinity", "being in touch" (not mechanical, purely spatial, instrumental, numerical related to "followers")

2. **social** means giving expression to shared meanings that have to be interactively defined and experienced (meanings are not simply "given", symbols do not speak for themselves)

3. **social** means encountering others as others and seeing their "otherness" as stimulus that "makes us want to have something in common" (social communities built on (enforced) likeness become sterile, authoritarian, exclusive, narcissistic)

social work re-affirmation of deeper meaning of "social"

4. **social** has always an <u>ethical quality</u>, means being recognised by others as a distinct self in conditions of equality and fairness (and not simply "thrown together") - equality can have different meanings in different contexts

5. **social** means being in a place and in a relationship that feels <u>safe</u>, that respects, protects and promotes my integrity (threat: over-protectiveness inflicts restrictions on my freedom)

6. **social** means living with a clear <u>distinction between private and public</u> space and yet being able to move in both spheres without losing one's identity; being able to <u>express one`s identity in both</u> (threat: blurring of the boundary between public and private, having no space to withdraw into or having to constantly project an identity into the public sphere for fear of becoming a nobody).

resumé from conceptual and historical-political observations on the meaning of "social":

- "social" is a <u>contested</u> concept (more than e.g. "health")

- questioning and direct attacks on its meaning lead to uncertainty and insecurity (where do I belong?)

- this can easily lead to <u>polarisations</u>: "social belonging" either totally fluid / arbitrary – or totally fixed (gender, ethnic, cultural "homes")

- social workers are under pressure to <u>provide certainty</u>, being "arbiters", definers and custodians of the "contours of what is social" instead of being its "promoters"

growing polarisations that affect social work and widen antagonisms "anti-socially"

- dealing with facts – dealing with constructs

- emphasising objectivity – "all a matter of perspectives"

- celebrating individuality and uniqueness of the person – categorisations and generalisations that lead to exclusion

- "personal freedom fetishism" – fascination with authoritarianism

- widening demand for "care" – increasing surveillance and control

- increasing protection of the private sphere – invasive role of the public sphere

"*no matter how hateful and corrupt the communists and criminals we're fighting against may be, you must never forget, this nation does not belong to them — this nation belongs to you.*"

At a recent rally in Waco, Tex.

proposal: "social" understood as confronting and putting in relationship the polar "opposites"

"<u>agonistic" approach</u>: Zulmir Bečević and Marcus Herz suggest in a recent paper in EJSW with reference to Chantal Mouffe's understanding of "the political" as "*the ontological, contingent space of power relations, fragmentation, conflict and unresolved antagonism*" which points to a form of political action that is fundamentally "agonistic".

Mouffe (1999: 753): "*But if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values*"

Social workers are centrally involved in negotiating <u>antagonistic power relations</u> – and their "<u>agonistic</u>" interventions show their commitment to democratic practice

Zulmir Bečević & Marcus Herz (2023): Towards an agonistic social work: a framework for political action and radical practice, EJSW, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2023.2190052 (Goteborgs universitet)

Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? Social Research, 66(3), 745–758.

agonistic social work – case example 1:homeless shelter work – ("relating" as enacting what is "social"):

antagonistic reactions

- feeling of sympathy vs. professional neutrality

- offering housing as a rational solution vs. consenting to the person's "irrational" wish to maintain independence by sleeping in the streets

- attending to individualised material needs vs. agency regulations that are "conditional" to "categories"

agonistic potential

- listening to feelings of aversion in relation to one's professional role makes "closeness" dynamic and authentic

- coming up against a different opinion can make a person feel respected (rather than 'categorised')

- involving the person in the questioning of agency regulations offers opportunities to confront limits

agonistic social work – case example 2: women's refuge work

antagonistic reactions

- offering a feminist perspective on violence vs. accepting "traditional" (culture-specific) gender role models (despite experience of violence)

- the refuge's intervention practice in cases of intimate violence vs. intervention protocol by police

- focus on giving assistance to women (and their children) vs. need to address the behaviour of perpetrators of violence

agonistic potential

- exploring with service user where her own cultural background encounters limitations so that for her certain values may become questionable

- confronting and acknowledging the normative assumptions behind both positions

- confronting the incompatibility of both positions and recognising their wider "roots" and contexts

agonistic social work – case example 3: Child protection work

antagonistic reactions

- safety and needs of the child vs. needs of the abusing parent(s)

- physical safety of the child vs. trauma of separation

- aversion against unacceptable parenting behaviour vs. understanding the trauma parents might have suffered themselves

- focus on behaviour of parents vs. focus on material circumstances of family

agonistic potential

- both needs remain related to each other and cannot be reconciled or set against each other

- seeking agency agreement that neither perspective is risk-free

- understanding is neither excusing nor accusing, conflict of perspectives remains

- material assistance per se does not change behaviour, nor do imposed "conditions"

the "social" practice of social work in the context of polarising tensions indicates that the "social" consists <u>not in a fixed status</u>, but in <u>an ongoing process of "connecting"</u>

"the word 'social' should not designate a thing among other things ... but a type of connection between things that are not themselves social"

Bruno Latour, B.(2005). Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-network-theory. Oxford: OUP

implications of regarding "social" as an ongoing process

This process means <u>neither</u> introducing "compromise" or dictating "equilibrium" between opposites "from outside", nor any other recourse to a "higher authority" that stands above the situation;

instead it requires the <u>transformation of the way the opposites relate to each other in full recognition of the power differentials they represent</u>,

power aspects cannot be "explained away" but must be questioned as to their <u>legitimation (essence of democracy)</u>

this can establish distinctions that demonstrate and legitimate authority in specific situations, authority that <u>relates</u> rather than excludes

resisting de-politicisation (resisting polarisation between "irreconcilable positions" or recourse to factual criteria to which "there is no alternative")

"*When the positions of the participants are less polarised, a space of understanding opens up opportunities for learning about the political*".

Brandt, S., Roose, R., & Verschelden, G. (2021). 'I'm actually your worst nightmare': intergenerational dialogues of social workers in search of the political. European Journal of Social Work. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.2016643

for instance

- my personal abhorrence of a violent parent cannot be suppressed by a rigid adherence to "professional neutrality" (nor can it justify my power position)

- my feminist principles and position on intimate partner violence induce me to want to "eliminate" the perpetrator (put this may perpetuate the power he and other male perpetrators exercise)

- my knowing from research what are indicators of a child being "at risk" may lead to a rigid "assessment by numeric risk factors" (that protects me from the discomfort of such an assessment but makes my power "impersonal")

"the depression brought into being in a diagnostic practice is not the same as the one experienced by the person diagnosed in his/her everyday practice". (Hanssen, Hutchinson, Lyngstad, & Sandvin (2015)).

this requires "democratic participation" in social work practice and research

- aiming for participative forms of practice in social work is not a panacea that makes all practice easier
- when genuinely practiced, it is fraught with <u>conflict and contradictions</u>
- these conflicts and contradictions are not "side effects" but the very occasions in which the <u>social as a process</u> manifests itself and is being constructed
- This requires a continuous "reflective stance" of all participants and particularly of professionals
- reflectivity is the central instrument that relates the dispersed and multi-level factors of complexity to each other and grounds "accountable agency"

Mouffe: *We could say the aim of democratic politics is to transform an "antagonism" into "agonism"*

re-constructing social processes is ultimately a political undertaking of "practised democracy"

giving social work interventions a political significance means …

… structuring inter-personal processes according to principles of justice

… attributing dignity to people so that their existence and their concerns "have importance" in a public context

… giving people a voice that counts

… acknowledging the power expressed in boundaries, categories, differentiations and questioning the legitimacy of that power

… using political procedures and structures to "connect and communicate" and not to polarise, condemn, demonise and exclude

"An "agonistic" democratic approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and recognizes the forms of exclusion that they embody, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality. Awareness of the fact that difference allows us to constitute unity and totality while simultaneously providing essential limits is an agonistic approach that contributes in the subversion of the ever- present temptation that exists in democratic societies to naturalize their frontiers and essentialize their identities." (Mouffe, 1999: 757)