Walter Lorenz: Trends in social work in the 21st century

Abstract

This historical and contemporary overview of key developments in social work's professionalisation demonstrates its intricate enmeshment with political framework conditions. The current scenario is characterised by stark polarisations as evidenced by the seemingly insurmountable dilemmas over how to overcome wars, epidemics and the economic and climate crises. These polarisations indicate a systematic erosion of the social dimension of societies largely through neoliberal politics which pose a central challenge to social work and its professional social mandate. The experience of social workers in confronting ambiguity and dealing dialectically with the polarising tendencies of modernity in their position as an "in-between profession" therefore offers transformative possibilities for dealing with current global dilemmas through the affirmation of core social work competences, which is illustrated with examples.

Key words: social work history, social work professionalism, welfare state, neoliberalism, Covid pandemic, climate crisis, de-colonisation

Absztrakt

A szociális munka professzionalizálódásának legfontosabb fejlődési irányainak történelmi és jelenkori áttekintése bemutatja a szociális munka és a politikai körülmények bonyolult összefonódását. A jelenlegi helyzetet éles polaritások jellemzik, amint azt a háborúk, járványok, gazdasági és éghajlati válságok leküzdésének látszólag megoldhatatlan dilemmái is mutatják. Ezek a polaritások a társadalmak szociális dimenziójának szisztematikus leépülését jelzik, főként a neoliberális politika révén, amely központi kihívást jelent a szociális munka és annak szakmai társadalmi felhatalmazása számára. A szociális munkások tapasztalatai a kettősséggel való szembenézésben és a modernitás polarizáló tendenciáinak dialektikus kezelésében "köztes szakmaként" kínálnak átalakító lehetőségeket a jelenkori globális dilemmák kezelésére a szociális munka alapvető kompetenciáinak megerősítésén keresztül, amit példákkal illusztrálunk.

Kulcsszavak: szociális munka története, szociális munka szakmaiság, jóléti állam, neoliberalizmus, Covid-járvány, klímaválság, dekolonizáció.

Social work owes its existence to a massive rupture of social bonds that occurred at a time of the industrialisation in Europe and the USA and is hence a product of modernity. While there were welfare provisions in traditional societies, such as charities and also public poverty measures like work houses and asylums, social work as a profession formed part of the responses to "the social question" as it was posed in the 19th century on account of the massive "bond disruption" brought about by the rising industrial capitalism which pulled workers from rural areas into industrial centres where they were forced to live and work together devoid of their original family and community bonds. The ensuing problems that manifested themselves in poverty, during unemployment and in old age, in sickness due to epidemics and work accidents, and in delinquency constituted challenges not just for those immediately affected but for society as a whole, not least through the threat of riots and lawlessness. While charitable efforts helped to limit the extent of those problems, their endemic spread called for more person-oriented, systematic and professional responses, in certain respects in parallel with the rise of modern medicine (Webb, 2007). The gradual introduction of training for social workers that promoted the use of systematic, research-based methods of intervention, ties the profession's development closely to the project of modernity.

But the project of modernity is inherently ambiguous, as particularly sociologists of the Frankfurt School asserted (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1980). Modernity promised emancipation and the liberation of the individual from non-legitimate authorities. In the tradition of the Enlightenment it promoted the autonomy and self-responsibility of rational individuals and gave rise to the successes of science and technology from which societies benefited greatly. But at the same time, modernisation brought new restrictions on personal freedom through greater inter-dependence owing to the division of labour and all its social implications. Technology could be used as much for liberation and self-development as for power concentrations, domination and exploitation, as witnessed in the atrocities of colonialism and the technologically based and rationally "legitimated" dictatorships of Nazism and Stalinism (Bauman, 1991).

Our current world situation shows many parallels to that historical transformation period of the first industrial revolution. Indications are a radical change in modes of production in the wake of digitalisation, the relativising of geographical, political and identity boundaries through trends in globalisation, profound changes in social bonds and relations and all that manifesting itself in crises of identity at personal and collective levels. These transformations pose renewed dilemmas for social workers as to how to find and fulfil their social mandate when any consensus over the meaning of the term "social" is dissipating. This manifests itself in the current global crises, the pandemic crisis, the war crises and the climate crisis, each of which have a socially divisive impact. What is more, each crisis phenomenon increases our sense of insecurity and helplessness particularly because people have become socialised, on account of the effects of modernisation, to look for definite, unambiguous technical solutions – and there seem to be none that could promise to bring a resolution.

But given this impasse of "modern thinking" my suggestion in the following considerations is to take recourse to one of the core insights in social work practice and apply it at the political level, namely the knowledge that unambiguous technical solutions ignore or downright

eliminate precisely those social dimension that are so essential for understanding the nature of and for therefore resolving conflicts. My hypothesis is therefore that the recent political trends towards neglecting or reducing measures that strengthen the social cohesion of society have contributed to the deepening of conflicts between and of divisions within societies and this impedes the search for crisis solutions. The restitution of social conditions is therefore a necessary precondition for overcoming the crises.

Social work and ambiguity

Social work, by being enmeshed in the process of modernisation, has also inherited some of the ambiguity of modernity. For instance, social workers on one hand enable people to become more autonomous and capable of playing an active and constructive role in society, despite being disadvantaged, through the mobilisation of their own resources. This shows in a commitment to the principle of empowerment. On the other hand, social workers have also the role to exercise control and set limits to personal freedom when people's actions threaten to damage the life of others, as in the case of child protection, or their own. The distinction between both sides of the social work mandate and the way to address it professionally and constructively is not a technical matter, rather it requires an awareness of and engagement with the wider political context in which social workers are called upon to act. And it will be shown with examples below, that in the history of its professional development social work has frequently moved between ignoring and facing up to this political reality. Current trends in social work show that it could go in either direction.

The ambiguity can be shown also in other dilemmas. Social workers mediate between private problems and public issues, between the right to unique personal identity and the recognition of collective identities, between local and national interests and global demands. Social work's "in-betweenness" can be taken as a positive attribute (Giesen, 2017) and is related to the complexity with which social problems present themselves <u>as</u> social problems. Social problems, in distinction from medical or material problems, involve always a precarious relationship between individuals and their social environment, like the family, the group, the neighbourhood, the organisation or society as such, precarious in the sense that they cannot be related to a one-directional causation ("I broke my leg and need treatment"; "I lost my job and need money"). Social problems are of a reciprocal nature and that reciprocity in many ways constitutes people's sense of belonging and hence identity. But of course, social problems can be interpreted and dealt with in such a manner that they become the sole or predominant responsibility of individuals, despite their relation with or even origin in public issues, as in the case of poverty or homelessness. Empowerment can be interpreted as solely a matter of personal achievement, of showing more entrepreneurial spirit, as when "activating" a person in rehabilitation, instead of acknowledging that empowerment requires a context of and access to rights and resources (Lorenz, 2016; Taylor-Gooby, 2009). Social problems can be regarded as being localised issues to be addressed without reference to wider and indeed global connections, as when a neighbourhood is being run down with unemployment and shop closures, instead of seeking to link such a community to broader and international lobby groups. Social work's "in-betweenness" can either lean towards explicit politicisation or

towards becoming an instrument of depoliticization. Taking up the political issues involved in questions of poverty and other forms of injustice is risky, but these risks arise unavoidably in social work (Dewanckel et al., 2023).

It could be said that social work took the path towards professionalisation when it began to face up to the political implications of "helping" in the social domain. Many of the pioneers of social work were involved in political campaigns like the feminist or the peace movement, for instance Jane Addams or Alice Salomon, and this gave the profession a clear orientation towards rights, social justice and campaigning, to which the internationalisation shown in global conferences after Paris 1928 gave expression, at least until the rise of Fascism and Nazism hijacked the political commitment to its own ideological purpose (Healy, 2011).

Social work between depoliticization and re-politicisation

This experience, which led up to the catastrophe of the Second World War, and the new global political constellations afterwards de-politicised social work or eliminated it altogether, just when nation states claimed a more central role in solving social problems through comprehensive social policies. With the ensuing Cold War, the West began to form coherent public welfare state programmes in support of its allegiance to capitalist economics. Consequently, social work interventions focused more on personal aspects of social problems in the form of the "standard model of social work", expressed in case work, group work and community work, each emphasising "self-determination" in realisation of the democratic principle of personal liberty (Reisch & Jani, 2012). The Communist "solution" was to abolish social work altogether, at least officially, in order to underline that the socialist state solved all social problems structurally. In countries under Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe, social work could only exist during that period under different disguises of therapy, rehabilitation or counselling (Hering, 2017). With hindsight, the symmetry between both sides of the divide (and the competition ultimately for a "better society") is astounding. The power to define the nature of social problems and their solutions in both cases was delegated to a "higher authority" and social problems existed only as personal problems. But while ostensibly accommodating to this programme of (de-politicised) neutrality, social work in the West very much had a political function.

Then came a new wave of social movements, for which the year 1968 is symbolic. Beginning with Anti-Vietnam-War protests and the fight against nuclear armament, Feminism, Civil Rights and Disability Rights movements and finally also Gay Rights campaigns all challenged the right and the power of the state to define universally what is best for people in specific situations and to define their universal identities as citizens of a state (Béland, 2017). They made it clear that the right to define one's needs and identities belonged only to the persons themselves and that the traditional roles in families, neighbourhoods and in society generally, including gender roles, were not "naturally" given but constructs of political processes and interests – hence the well-known slogan "the personal is political".

These movements impacted markedly on social work in the 1970s and 80s and questioned the presumed neutrality of the profession and its blindness to questions of identity and to political

influences. Consequently, more emphasis was placed on the rights of service users to express their personal preferences, to participate in the search for solutions and to re-think the professions commitment to rights and social justice. Social work could be conceptualised as "feminist social work" (White, 2006), "black social work" (Bent-Goodley, Snell, & Carlton-LaNey, 2017) or "radical social work" (e.g. Bailey & Brake, 1975).

The impact of 1989

On the Eastern side of the political divide, after several brutal repressions of calls for democratic political change, the force of social movements succeeded in overthrowing authoritarian Communism finally in the 1989 revolutions. This provided a new opportunity of shaping the relationship between citizens and the state and with that also the approach to civil social relations and problems with them (Lorenz, 2020).

Clearly, in post-communist societies there had existed traditions, competences and movements which stressed civil responsibility for solving social problems. Some social work training and practice projects here re-connected with pre-communist traditions, some with the imaginative efforts of maintaining a social work orientation against all resistance, for instance in religious contexts, in the context of therapy and rehabilitation and, as in Hungary, as a movement towards academically grounded social practice instigated by sociologists like Zsuzsa Ferge and Gábor Hegyesy (Hegyesi & Talyigás, 2020). Connecting those efforts to the various difficult political contexts and exploring possibilities under such constraints provided further illustrations for the potential of "in-betweenness" of social work between a personal and a political mandate.

But the wider political context, East and West, after 1989 threatened to de-politicise social work again. This came in the wake of the rise of neoliberalism and its attack on everything that was communal, social and equality-promoting. When Margaret Thatcher, next to Ronal Reagan one of the chief proponents of neoliberalism, pronounced "there is no such thing as society", she meant that she regarded all social relations to be the product of individual effort and choice and that the state should abstain from being the provider of common goods. Neoliberalism seeks to substitute social policy-making with leaving welfare provision to the mechanism of the free market.

Social workers often felt defenceless against this undermining of their work because insidiously, neoliberal ideology operates with many concepts and ideals that echo the principles pronounced by social movements and had become particularly precious to social work, like "individual freedom and choice", "empowerment and activation of one's own capabilities", "organisational independence from patriarchal authorities" etc. Social workers found it hard to assert that there is a fundamental difference between their practice of those principles and their neoliberal meaning.

Social workers experience the impact of neoliberalism particularly in terms of the following indicators (Spolander et al., 2014):

- Organisational settings became oriented towards managerialism, particularly with the introduction of New Public Management principles, which set performance targets,

largely determined by budget considerations, which are meant to increase not only the efficiency of service delivery, but also to ensure the chances of a privatised service to be re-selected for tender.

- Correspondingly, social work performance is being increasingly restricted by regulations, partly as a result of failures in child protection decision-making, but more generally in a climate of risk calculation and risk reduction. Its political origins have to do with giving social services a stronger control function generally and to justify social expenditure with arguments of law-and-order increases.
- Pressure on social workers results particularly from the emphasis on "activation" of welfare recipients. They must show that they make efforts to become self-sufficient and be no longer a "burden" to society, and social workers are increasingly drawn into assessment procedures to distinguish between clients who are "deserving" and those who are "undeserving" of public support – a switch-back to moralising welfare attitudes of the 19th century. These developments are very much in line with the growth of charity initiatives such as food and clothing distribution projects that are meant to substitute for the denial of sufficient support from public services.
- Social work methodology trends are responding to those pressures with the use of Evidence Based Practice approaches, pioneered in the field of medicine and suggesting that the use of scientific studies concerning the statistical efficiency of certain intervention programmes can determine the choice of the most effective line of intervention in different social intervention scenarios.

Signs of increasing social divisions and polarisations

The net effect of neoliberal policies is to weaken social workers' ability to work to a comprehensive understanding of what is "social" in their mandate (Lorenz, 2016). All such policy measures concerning social issues turn the ambiguity inherent in modernity into irreconcilable polarisations between two epistemic systems, one that sees everything from a private, personal and individual perspective and one that universalises, objectifies and standardises everything. The paradox is, that neoliberalism, which ostensibly is on the side of individualism and personal self-interest, can readily switch to the other side of the polarisation, as when it declares the rational choice approach to economic decision-making as the only, objectively true and universally valid mechanism of economic behaviour. This explains the tendency of neoliberal government policies to pave the way for neo-conservative and neo-nationalist politics that stand for collectivism with many illiberal features (Brown, 2006). The attraction of these, often populist, politics of nationalism and downright racism is that they promise to offer security and certainty through strong state controls where the emphasis on liberty had seemingly over-burdened citizens with constant choices, not only among commercial goods, but ultimately concerning their personal lifestyles and identities (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). But as dialogue between such opposing political positions is becoming ever more difficult, trust in politicians generally is decreasing rapidly, and with that also trust in other "authorities" such as the police and scientific experts. The polarisation of irreconcilable

positions leaves no room for social considerations and processes, and this stalemate results in uncertainty and loss of trust.

The fallacy of this splitting became evident in the Corona crisis. Particularly (but not only) in countries with clear neoliberal governments the first appeals in the face of the spreading virus targeted people's individual responsibility to protect themselves. But soon even those governments were forced to impose unprecedented collective restrictions on the freedom of citizens to move and to socialise. The sudden switch from individualism to almost totalitarian collectivism was dramatic – and confusing, causing a lot of mistrust and resistance. This polarisation showed that trust in the caring function of the state had long before become eroded (Aluffi Pentini & Lorenz, 2020). Citizens had become used to suspect that despite all the emphasis on personal freedom, the state was taking ever more control over their lives – against which they now wanted to defend themselves, and this came out partly in violent protests. Others, including staff for instance in residential institutions, had no choice but to conform to drastic restrictions and deprive residents of all physical contacts with loved ones, and while this ruling was justified on purely medical grounds, it left no room for the expression of social needs (Anand et al., 2021).

Equally, trust in social media is also split between those who see in them a new and better means of democratising public opinion-building and those that fear they are instruments of ideological manipulation and commercial exploitation. The digital media themselves have divisive effects since they are driven by algorithms that filter and feed back information that conforms with people's instant preferences, with the result that contact with a diversity of positions and opinions gets eliminated and the "social communities" thereby created form "echo-chambers" in which prejudices get constantly reinforced, leading to discriminatory and racist effects (Barberá, 2020).

The pattern of polarising positions is repeated in the reactions to the wars in the Ukraine and in Palestine which seem to allow for little differentiation other than opinions already categorised as either pro or anti. Both conflicts arose in the long build-up of a fatal neglect of attention to social relations. In the case of Russia, it was the dominance of economic interests that shaped the diplomatic culture in the post-1989 era instead of recognition being given to social aspects of international relations with the result that resentment could feed into power politics of revenge and dominance which populist politics exploit (Cohen, 2019). Solving questions of cultural and political belonging with militarily defended borders and divisions in the case of Israel equally fed into the build-up of resentment that then seeks expression in unfettered violence.

And finally, polarisations hinder progress in the climate crisis. Finding a concerted global response to this threat is hindered by the polarisation between "believers" and the "deniers" and also between those who promote solutions only at the structural and political level and those who claim it is up to individuals to change their lifestyle. Moral appeals to people having to adopt a more ecologically responsible lifestyle have a cynical ring for people who simply cannot afford the extra expenses this invariably implies, and these social considerations are mostly excluded from the debates on solutions.

Effects of polarisations on social work

These global phenomena penetrate with their polarising effects right into the daily practice of social workers. For instance, in social work with families, research has noted a steadily widening split between a child welfare and a child protection orientation (Morris, 2012). Regulations, formed as a "risk reduction" response to cases of social workers mis-reading indicators of hazards in the home situation of children who then suffered fatal violence, focus on the identification of "factual indicators" that would trigger prescribed child protection measures. The care aspect for the whole family, the attention to maintaining social bonds for the child can easily become neglected or delegated to different personnel, a split which can severely undermine the family's trust in the professionals. Social work requires a more differentiated understanding of the relation between care and control for it to be effective, and this implies the ability, and the acceptance, of taking risks (Parton, 2006).

Another example relates to the area of homelessness where in many countries legislation has become more and more punitive (Evangelista, 2019). Hungary provides a particularly drastic example where the criminalisation of homelessness has been even included into the constitution of the country, underlining the symbolic significance such "border-drawing" and exclusionary measures have for an authoritarian government (Udvarhelyi, 2014). Yet other countries are also introducing legislation that gives the authorities grounds for excluding homeless people from public spaces while at the same time not providing any alternative for their housing. And the expulsion of certain groups of people from public spaces extends now more and more to for instance young people or people of colour when they are not engaging in commercial activities (Johnstone, 2017). This links up with trends of 'zoning' areas so that 'undesirables' like prostitutes or people engaged in drug or alcohol use are driven out while 'gated communities' create safe areas for the rich where they are protected through private security firms and barriers at the entrances. Again, social work under such divisive conditions becomes more difficult because 'caring measures' can easily become absorbed into discriminatory policies and practices as a way of justifying them. Under these conditions having an 'in-between position' can only be carried out in a critically political manner that questions the underlying principles of the framework while maintaining an orientation of justice and equality towards those at risk of being excluded.

The most acute exclusionary borders are being drawn currently along criteria of ethnicity and origin. Even though social workers have in most countries only a marginal role in the assessment of asylum-seeking refugees, the entire political climate that is being created around the treatment of immigrants links directly with the rise of racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination and oppression of minorities. Observations that social workers make concerning a person's or a family's lifestyle, cultural habits and attitudes can be taken out of the 'caring' context to count as evidence of, for instance, terrorist tendencies or other indicators of illegality that could trigger police interventions (Farmer, 2017). These dilemmas that social workers face increasingly require enormous skills and integrity because they cannot be resolved in an "either-or" manner. This is precisely where once more the "in-between position" of social workers becomes a professional, and through that a political challenge. Facing up to this requires a very high level of what could be called dialectic competence, the competence

not to get caught up in imposed polarisations but to seek to transform them. For it is precisely in those negotiation skills that social workers demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding the social dimension of society and to social justice, because polarisations always have an "anti-social" effect and transcending polarisations re-constitutes the social fabric of human relations.

Social workers opposing conditionality

In all these situations there is increasing pressure on social workers to act as instruments of "border drawing", and the normative criterion that underlies all those distinctions is that of "deservingness". The guiding idea behind the welfare state projects that characterised the immediate post-WWII era was to overcome the stigmatising effects of welfare based on charity and to replace it with a notion of social citizenship where people have legal entitlements and can be proud to enjoy the solidarity of the national community. By re-introducing pervasive conditionality into the assessment of welfare and citizenship entitlements, stigma re-enters quite intentionally (Eule, 2024; Fletcher & Flint, 2018). Stigma invariably undermines the dignity of a person and thereby creates secondary obstacles to the "presenting" problems social workers are called upon to deal with (Watkins-Hayes & Kovalsky, 2016). This is the reason why becoming involved in stigmatising procedures is lastly incompatible with professional practice and defending their professional status and integrity is probably the most urgent task facing social workers collectively.

Social workers across Europe and indeed globally are beginning to assert their position of professionalism and autonomy anew. One clear reference point was the agreement on the Global Definition of Social Work in 2014 by the leading world social work organisations, IFSW and IASSW. It is stated there, "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work" (https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/). This affirms a commitment to a justice and social rights orientation in all areas of social work and underlines therefore social work's political role that cannot be reduced to personal assistance and counselling. The implementation of the "social agenda of social work" is being monitored at international level.

Social workers are also forming stronger alliances with social and self-help movements. The value of greater direct service user participation in the planning and implementation of services as well as in social work research is becoming widely recognised and implemented. Also in this regard, issues of power differentials between experts and service users cannot be "technically" resolved by formalising procedures of participation. This would only lead to tokenism, while a reflexive approach to participation acknowledges the difficulties and conflicts that will usually arise when service users raise their voice authentically (Van Beveren et al., 2023). This is where social work can also show its commitment to the promotion of democratic competences as a profession (Dzur, 2008) which are being so dangerously

weakened under current political conditions of polarisation tendencies (McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018).

This trend also shows itself in a greater awareness in social work education and practice that academia is not the only relevant source of knowledge but that there are informal and indigenous knowledge pools to be tapped. As social workers particularly in the Global South are analysing the effects of colonisation on their epistemology, many begin to become critical of the value implications in those discourses which tend to prioritise rationality, causality, linearity and autonomy (e.g. Sinclair, 2020). The greater openness towards folk and indigenous knowledge helps to question those taken-for-granted assumptions and give the process of knowledge-creation a new impetus (Almeida et al., 2019). But again there is a danger of this leading to a polarised approach that idealises one approach over the other, while the real practice value of this development lies in the confrontation with a greater variety of understanding human interaction and hence "the social".

Indeed, the critique of "binarism" has reached social work from various angles, not least from the side of new feminist approaches to epistemology that proposes to overcome the entire Cartesian split between mind and matter to arrive at a new approach to knowledge creation that does not necessitate the distinction between objects and viewers but sees them as equally having "agency". This also leads to a new look at "intersectionality" as the cumulative effect of oppression (Yamada, Werkmeister Rozas & Cross-Denny, 2015) that again questions the simplifications that currently spread particularly through the social media by proposing "it is all a matter of … (the economy, the system, the government, personal effort…)".

And finally, this stronger commitment to a justice and rights orientation offers also opportunities for social work to confront the climate crisis (Coates, 2003). The criticism is being voiced that social work avoided paying attention to the natural environment even where it was trying to see the situation of service users embedded in a wider context, but this context was defined by the physical environment, such as housing and the neighbourhood, the economy through employment structures, and the government with its various institutions. Linking the situation of social work clients with the natural environment is again fraught with difficulties and contradictions particularly since adopting a more sustainable life-style of eating and consumption is still associated with higher costs which puts such goods and habits out of reach for poor people. These dilemmas are now being addressed on a broad front of publications under titles like eco-social social work (Boetto, 2017), environmental social work (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013) or green social work (Dominelli, 2021). The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World, agreed at the People's Global Summit, 'Co-Building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind' in 2022, was brought about with the contribution by social workers (Ioakimidis & Maglajlic, 2022) and contains details of solutions to global environmental challenges based on grass-roots experiences (see https://newecosocialworld.com/the-peoples-charter-for-an-eco-social-world/).

Conclusion

In the current global crises, just as in the transformation crisis of the industrial revolution 200 years ago, social work has a special role in upholding and demonstrating the value of what makes human efforts social, not just at the personal level, but also at the structural and political level. Social work's mandate is to point a way beyond the polarisations which are driving societies currently apart, materially and ideologically. Social work interventions are mediating acts that are not done to individuals, families or groups but enlist them and engage them jointly in the re-organising of social relationships. This engagement inevitably has a political dimension: modern citizens regard their place in society and their relationship to others not simply as (God-) given. Social relationships imply power relationships. For power over others to be legitimate it must relate to criteria of justice and equality. Exercising power in relationships legitimately requires political and ethical competences. Therefore, it hinders and ultimately destroys this political competence when social workers are made to one-sidedly put pressure on people to adjust to whatever conditions they live under instead of questioning the legitimacy of rules that determine those conditions.

"Social" means relating the personal to the political level, it means negotiating shared values and meanings with which to overcome conflicts, it means connecting things that are not in themselves social (Latour, 2005) and dissolving the paralysis over ways out of the climate and the war crises. Social means recognising the otherness of others under conditions of equality, and above all social means securing spaces where people can come close to each other without this closeness becoming a threat.

This is a tall agenda – but without maintaining such a comprehensive perspective social work risks being misused as a kind of fire brigade service that operates only in extreme situations instead of it being a profession that has its place at the centre of society.

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