Walzer Lorenz: Challenges, Opportunities and Resilience in Contemporary Practice

Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of social work as a profession within the context of changing socio-political landscapes. Through critical analysis of historical developments and contemporary challenges, it explores how neoliberal ideologies have fundamentally transformed the conceptualization of "the social" and consequently altered the practice and perception of social work. The research investigates the tension between technical-managerial approaches and relationship-based practices in social work, highlighting the profession's struggle to maintain its core values amid political and economic pressures. The paper argues for a re-politicization of social work practice as essential for its continued relevance and effectiveness, proposing a framework that reaffirms social work's commitment to fostering meaningful human connections and addressing structural inequalities. This analysis contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on the future direction of social work in increasingly complex and polarized societies.

Keywords: social work, neoliberalism, social policy, professionalization, political practice, social justice

1. Introduction

In the following, I would like to argue that in the current international political climate the meaning of "social" is changing from expressing the positive value of social coherence to a term with negative attributes or something that has only marginal importance for society. This development has a strong impact on social work, which, after all, has "social" in its professional title. However, social workers know that their title is indeed difficult to communicate and explain since, in contrast to the professions of medicine or psychology, their subject matter is much less tangible.

Rather than this being a deficit, our difficulty of explaining the meaning of "social" has meaning because it points towards a specific quality of what social refers to: social is not a substance but an ongoing process of connecting in which we are all involved as members of a society when we establish and foster relationships, and this not just between people but also, for instance, between people and institutions. However, much can go wrong in these processes, leaving people cut-off from social relations and vital resources. This is where social work comes into action with their special mandate of establishing and mending relationships, in families, in communities, between communities and in relation to organisations. Social workers, on the whole, deal with immaterial factors that go beyond the merely psychological sphere of human behaviour and contribute to shaping the social fabric of society. They are engaged in ongoing social constructions, which nevertheless rely very much on the existence of material resources to come about but which alone are insufficient to constitute the coherence and stability of social units. Families are not held together by genetics, societies not by territory

or economic productivity. Social work engages with the constantly evolving, dynamic processes through which human connections are formed, maintained, disrupted, and reconstituted. This explains also why social work's theoretical foundations draw from diverse disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, and philosophy, reflecting its comprehensive concern with both individual wellbeing and structural conditions (Payne, 2014). What distinguishes social work from adjacent helping professions is precisely its focus on the interface between personal troubles and public issues—what Mills (1959) famously termed "the sociological imagination." This perspective enables social work to address individual needs while simultaneously recognizing how these are shaped by broader social forces.

This paper explores how social work's unique position has evolved at the intersection of individual needs and broader societal structures over distinct historical periods, from industrialization through the welfare state era to contemporary neoliberal governance often labelled post-welfare. The profession's historical trajectory has been marked by a continuous interaction with changing socio-political conditions. However, the rise of neoliberal ideologies since the 1980s, and particularly after the fall of communist regimes in 1989, has presented unprecedented challenges to social work's foundational values and practices (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). A critical analysis of these developments will show how the concept of "the social" has been transformed under neoliberal governance, with significant implications for social work practice and professional identity. As Lorenz (2016) emphasizes, social work realises its mandate through practices of giving recognition, engagement in social justice issues, and empowering people to take responsibility. This processual understanding of social work and with that of all forms of a "sense of belonging", from personal to national, stands in contrast to essentialist views that treat social bonds as natural or predetermined which are not being invoked by nationalist and racist political movements.

Historical considerations

From these considerations it becomes significant that social work emerged as a profession and as an academic discipline in the context of the Industrial Revolution. This epochal transformation was not confined to the economic sphere where capitalism brought about fundamentally altered labour relations. The mechanised large-scale production of standardised goods necessitated new social arrangements as traditional bonds of family, neighbourhood, and community were disrupted by these massive economic and demographic changes. People increasingly faced risks of becoming detached, unsupported, and marginalized without having recourse to the safety nets previously provided by traditional social institutions (Esping-Andersen, 1990). It was within this context that social work emerged not merely as a compensatory response to material deprivation but as a practice concerned with reconnecting individuals to supportive communities, from families to neighbourhoods, support groups and ultimately the modern nation state, making it fundamentally a relational profession in a double sense: it provided citizens with the means of coping with the new conditions constructively

through asserting their autonomy while creating new, contractual social bonds, but it also influenced the growth of political and legal arrangements that make social relations structurally and legally possible (Ruch et al., 2018). Early social work exponents like Jane Addams and Alice Salomon responded to this disruptive development by pioneering professional approaches that addressed both immediate needs of people and systemic causes of social problems (Reisch and Andrews, 2002). Their work laid the groundwork for understanding social work as inherently political practice, concerned with challenging unjust conditions rather than merely ameliorating their effects.

The realisation that the social integration of modern societies could not be left entirely to voluntary and non-governmental organizations took only gradually hold of governments and this in phases that varied with the respective political cultures of countries, but it can be said that with the end of the Second World War all industrialised countries gave some form of official recognition to this task. The simultaneously emerging global rift between the capitalist West and the communist East led to two fundamentally different approaches in that the West saw various concepts of the welfare state as a means of compensating for the detrimental effects of capitalist economies, giving social work a key role in this project, while the East saw in collectivist economies simultaneously a universal solution for social problems, thereby negating the need for a profession like social work devoted to social problems.

3. The Neoliberal Turn and Its Impact on Social Work

3.1 Core Elements of Neoliberal Reform

West of the Iron Curtain government approaches to social welfare since the 1980s began to shift decisively under the influence of neoliberal ideologies. The neoliberal reform agenda was not confined to the economic sphere but carried profound implications that affect the very conceptualization of society itself. Margaret Thatcher's infamous declaration that "there is no such thing as society" exemplified neoliberalism's ontological challenge to collective social understandings (Harvey, 2005). This perspective elevates individual autonomy as the highest value while casting dependency in overwhelmingly negative terms.

These ideological changes manifested themselves in social policies by several key developments:

First, the introduction of conditionality in welfare benefits has shifted focus toward individual "activation" and away from entitlement-based support (Brodkin and Marston, 2013). Recipients must increasingly demonstrate worthiness through behavioural compliance, transforming social assistance from a right to a conditional privilege, exemplified by the substitution of the term welfare with that of workfare in relation to conditions of receiving unemployment benefits.

Second, extensive privatization of public services has reframed social relations through treating them with market logics (Harris, 2003). This commercialization process (described as

commodification) extended from national postal, telephone, transport, water and electricity services gradually to health and social services with the instrument of "contracting out" sectors to non-profit but also to for-profit organisations that had to compete periodically for time-limited contracts determined by achievement-targets. This recasts citizens as consumers and social needs as market opportunities, fundamentally altering the relationship between service providers and service users.

Third, managerial approaches emphasizing efficiency metrics have been imported from business contexts into social services (Power, 1997). This focus on measurable outcomes according to managerial performance criteria often privileges short-term interventions over relationship-based practice and prioritizes cost control over addressing complex needs with social work professional criteria.

Finally, there has been linked to an increasing reliance on technical solutions to social problems at institutional level, including enhanced surveillance, medicalization of social issues, and physical barriers to exclude unwanted migration (Garrett, 2021). The spreading use of Evidence Based Practice principles in social work is a sign of the pressure this trend exercises on the profession. These approaches risk depoliticizing social problems by recasting them as technical challenges rather than manifestations of structural inequality that must be tackled with political means.

4. Political Consequences of Neoliberal Social Policy

4.1 Democratic Erosion and Political Realignment

Before discussing the more direct impact of neoliberalism on social work practice it is important to highlight the wider political effects of these policies to demonstrate that when social workers affirm their autonomous professional role they also exercise their political responsibility. Neoliberalism's ascendance to a position that claimed to "leave no alternative" has corresponded with significant democratic disengagement and institutional distrust across many societies. As economic principles come to dominate governance because formerly political decisions based on value controversies in the interest of citizens as a collective body were delegated to market processes in which individuals seek to gain personal benefits, traditional political distinctions between left and right positions have blurred, leaving many citizens feeling unrepresented by mainstream parties (Brown, 2015). Expressing opinions and defining priorities in the political arena seemed to have less effect than expressing priorities by means of commercial choices. This "hollowing out of democracy" causes a diminished capacity of democratic institutions to effectively address citizen concerns when economic imperatives take precedence over social needs.

As noted in the Democracy Index 2024 by the Economist Intelligence Unit (https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/) there has been an alarming global rise of authoritarian regimes or flawed democracies in recent years:

Charting democracy's ups and downs, 2006 to 2024

Global average Democracy Index score out of 10 (10=best)
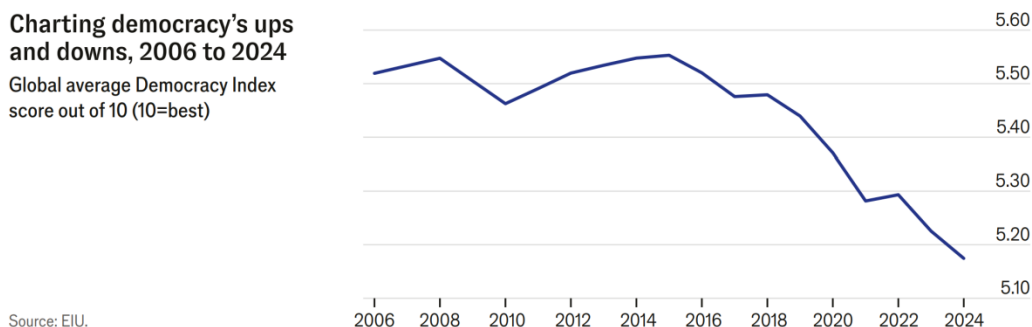
Only 15% of all countries representing 6.6% of the world population can be regarded as full democracies:

Democracy Index 2024, by regime type

	No. of countries	% of countries	% of world population
Full democracies	25	15.0	6.6
Flawed democracies	46	27.5	38.4
Hybrid regimes	36	21.6	15.7
Authoritarian regimes	60	35.9	39.2

Note. "World" population refers to the total population of the 167 geographies (165 countries and 2 territories) covered by the Index. Since this excludes only micro states, this is nearly equal to the entire estimated world population.

Source: EIU.

At the level of individual citizens the constant pressure to make choices across all life domains—from healthcare to education to retirement planning—generates decision fatigue and anxiety rather than meaningful autonomy (Salecl, 2010). The rising economic precarity is responded to not so much with comprehensive social policies but with an increased reliance on charities which is intended to soften the effects on poverty and also to divert from central political responsibility. The phenomenon of food and clothing distribution schemes, even in countries like Finland that once counted as bastions of universal public welfare, counts as evidence for the growth of what has been described as the new charity economy (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020; Roets, Kessl,and Lorenz, 2023).

4.2 The Rise of Nationalist Populism

These combined conditions of precarity and uncertainty and the indifference shown by traditional democratic parties which are regarded as all being part of "the establishment" create fertile ground for populist movements and nationalist parties that exploit this widespread anxiety and promise certainty and security through alternative, simplified narratives about social problems and their solutions by means of authoritarian measures (Hochschild, 2016). As traditional economic and cultural certainties erode, many individuals experience what might be termed "cultural displacement"—a profound sense of identity insecurity that makes exclusionary nationalist appeals particularly resonant. These developments represent what Zygmunt Bauman (2016) described as a retreat from the complexities of globalized modernity toward the apparent certainties offered by essentialist identity claims. The resulting "politics of resentment" positions marginalized groups as scapegoats for systemic problems while undermining the possibility of solidarity across people whose cultural and social reference points are characterised – and enriched – by difference. This form of solidarity is precisely the professional goal that social work has historically sought to foster.

5. Implications for Social Work Practice and Identity

5.1 Professional Challenges Under Neoliberalism

Conceptual Consequences for Social Understanding

The cultural shift resulting from these political changes has generated a paradoxical situation wherein individuals are increasingly held responsible for circumstances largely beyond their control (Bauman, 2000). This "responsibilization without empowerment" creates conditions of heightened anxiety as people struggle to navigate complex systems with insufficient resources and support. Social needs that cannot be addressed through market mechanisms are relegated to charity, reversing the historical progression from philanthropic to rights-based approaches (Lorenz, 2016).

For social work, neoliberalism's redefinition of "the social" as something negative or being of simply private concern presents existential challenges to the profession's identity and purpose. When social connectedness and interdependency are devalued in favour of individual self-sufficiency, social work's relational core values are undermined. Several specific tensions have to be confronted in this context:

First, social workers face ideological pressure to conform to new regulations defining social assistance as conditional and minimal rather than rights-based and comprehensive (Reynaert et al., 2022). This conflicts directly with ethical commitments to client self-determination and dignity and the social work obligation to upholding social rights as defined by the Global Definition of Social Work (Ornellas, Spolander and Engelbrecht, 2018).

Second, material pressures intensify as agencies compete for diminishing resources, often requiring compromises in service quality or accessibility (Harris, 2003). Social workers who

are caught up in cost-saving procedures increasingly face impossible choices between ensuring organizational survival and adherence to professional values (Banks, 2011).

Third, methodological demands for "evidence-based practice" and algorithmic decision-making tools, being introduced in public and civil society organisations with the aim of achieving greater efficiency, may displace professional judgment and contextualized understanding which are the hallmark of professionalism (Webb, 2001). While empirical evidence certainly has value, narrow definitions of what constitutes valid evidence often privilege interventions amenable to randomized controlled trials over complex, relationship-based approaches (Ziegler, 2020).

Finally, the observation that social workers take an active stand against social injustice and inequality has in many countries led to political pressure to "depoliticize" social work. This can take the form of attempts to restrict the profession's range of methods to standardised technical interventions while discouraging engagement with structural causes of social problems (Garrett, 2018). This contradicts social work's historical commitment to addressing both personal troubles and public issues in basically all social work methods proposals.

5.2 Responses to Professional Challenges

Social workers have not remained passive in the face of these challenges. An international overview of recent handbooks (e.g. Webb, 2019; 2022; Morley et al., 2020) can confirm that practitioners and academic scholars have developed various strategies to maintain professional integrity in opposing neoliberal constraints. This has become more difficult in the light of the postmodern critique of all-encompassing intellectual systems such as the Marxism which had largely inspired the "radical social work paradigm" of the 1970s with its critique of capitalism. This has led to more differentiated expositions of "critical social work" which focus on manifestations of power in relation to race, gender, ability and also the environment, outlining various forms of possible critical engagements with these issues.

Some have embraced critical practice models that explicitly address power relations within helping relationships and connect individual experiences to structural conditions in order to locate and oppose the seats of power over people's lives (Fook, 2016). These approaches seek to preserve social work's political dimension through activism on policy issues while acknowledging the limitations of current practice contexts. Their relevance was starkly demonstrated in the experience of the Covid pandemic which evoked a strong critical social work response that exposed and challenged the inequalities that exacerbated the mere medical effects of the health crisis (Garrett, 2022).

Others have focused on strengthening alliances with service user groups and social movements. They regard the critical element of social work not as a method per se but as a recognition of the disruptive force with which people affected by discrimination and injustice confront their lived reality, often in the form of resistance, by way of finding unexpected and unorthodox ways of coping (Piven, 2006; Pentaraki, 2019).

Still others emphasize preserving the relationship-based core of practice within constraining systems through what Ferguson (2008) terms "situated ethics"—finding spaces where meaningful connections can be fostered despite bureaucratic pressures. In this line of responses the voice of practitioners is gaining new relevance guided by the pragmatics of daily practice in seeking to realise social justice. Strengthened by participative research approaches they seek to redress "epistemic injustice" (Fricker, 2010) that occurs when service user views are overshadowed by academic epistemologies and to reassemble "situational knowledge" (Beresford and Croft, 2019). This approach recognizes that even within highly regulated environments of health and care services (Fraser and Matthews, 2008) or within seemingly traditional methods frameworks such as psychoanalysis (Ponnou and Niewiadomski, 2022) practitioners retain some capacity to enact professional values and methods in a critical fashion.

6. Re-Politicizing Social Work: A Path Forward

6.1 Reclaiming Social Work's Political Dimension

The Universal Definition of Social Work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) explicitly acknowledges the profession's political nature, stating that "principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work." Reclaiming this political dimension represents a crucial strategy for preserving social work's integrity amid neoliberal pressures.

Re-politicization does not imply partisan alignment with particular political ideologies but rather recognition that social work necessarily engages with how power is distributed and exercised in society. As Ioakimidis (2015) points out, social work has a long history of engaging critically with conflict and has a mandate to take an active stand against the causes of such conflicts. This engagement occurs across multiple dimensions of practice:

At the macro level, social workers can participate in broader social movements challenging policies that cause or exacerbate inequality and marginalization. This might include involvement in campaigns against punitive welfare reforms or policies that give insufficient protection against racism and other forms of systemic discrimination. In countries like Germany an entire multiprofessional profile is being developed in the form of "Demokratiearbeit" (Oehler, 2018) to which social work makes an important contribution. Apart from its pedagogical mandate in schools and youth centres it is becoming specifically oriented against the threat posed by right-wing political formations, often at considerable personal risk for these professionals (Leber, 2025).

At the meso level, practitioners can work to transform organizational cultures and practices that reflect neoliberal values in managerial regimes rather than professional ethics. In this line of critical social work, which has a long history (Wheeler, 2021), opportunities of resistance are being sought "from the inside" rather than social workers refusing to collaborate with public agencies. This might involve advocating for more holistic assessment tools or developing alternative outcome measures that capture relational dimensions of practice.

At the micro level, everyday interactions with service users present opportunities to enact an understanding of "the social" as process rather than fixed quality. This means elaborating jointly with service users an understanding of the contextual factors shaping their individual difficulties and building on their competences in struggling through the complexities and difficulties imposed on their lives. This base-level work can make a significant contribution to re-awakening democratic engagement by marginalised groups by giving them the confidence that their voice and their sense of agency matter in a wider political context (Lorenz, 2025).

6.2 Illustrating Political Practice at the Micro Level

The political engagement of social workers at the micro level becomes concrete through examples of everyday practice situations where practitioners must navigate tensions between system demands and relational ethics. They illustrate how the relational competences of the profession are not limited to facilitating psychological processes but extend to organisational and other structural factors that impinge on personal conflicts:

For example, when schools threaten to expel disruptive students, social workers can facilitate processes that recognize both the institution's need for order and authority and an individual pupil's motivation for showing challenging behaviour as a way of seeking recognition. Rather than simply enforcing compliance with school regulations, this approach seeks to convey reciprocally the underlying meaning of rules and of disruptive behaviour as a basis for the constructive search for appropriate boundaries. When they are perceived as negotiable the value of democratic processes becomes a lived experience on both sides.

In cases involving parents struggling with the care of severely disabled children, social workers operate in the precarious space between individual family needs and available social supports. The political dimension becomes relevant in recognizing how on one hand inadequate resource allocations reflect broader societal devaluation of care work and disability rights instead of daily difficulties reflecting the parents' personal inadequacies and on the other strengthening their competences in the direction of joint campaigning for rights and resources.

Another example concerns work with prisoners preparing for community reintegration. Here social workers engage very directly with social processes of exclusion and inclusion for which prisoners need to be prepared but not just in an adjusting and defensive manner but also in seeking opportunities for genuine social participation in civil society initiatives that challenge stigmatizing narratives about former offenders and foster competences in self-advocacy (Barak and Stebbins, 2021).

In each case, the distinctive contribution of social work lies in its commitment to connecting what and who have become excluded. This can only operate by recognizing the legitimate concerns of all parties involved without this amounting to a position of detached neutrality and a seeking of superficial compromises. Instead, it means establishing boundaries that are no longer perceived as simply imposed by impersonal forces, but that have meaning to those

affected. (Lorenz, 2016). These principles reflect social work's orientation toward social justice not as abstract ideal but as concrete practice.

Conclusion: Toward a Renewed Understanding of "The Social"

This analysis suggests several fundamental principles that might constitute a "manifesto" for social work's understanding of "the social" in contemporary contexts:

First, the social should be understood as process rather than fixed quality—specifically, the process of forming relationships between elements not inherently social in themselves. This processual understanding challenges essentialist claims about who "belongs" or deserves recognition.

Second, social practice requires engaging with ambiguity and difference rather than insisting on uniformity. This engagement builds capacity for democratic participation by developing skills in negotiating diverse perspectives and interests.

Third, meaningful social connections must be grounded in ethical principles that recognize both rights and responsibilities. This ethical dimension distinguishes social work's approach from both uncritical acceptance and rigid boundary enforcement.

As societies face increasing polarization and fragmentation, social work's distinctive focus on relationship-building across difference assumes renewed importance. By reclaiming its political dimension and articulating a constructive understanding of "the social," the profession can contribute significantly to addressing contemporary challenges. Rather than retreating into technical approaches that accommodate neoliberal constraints, social work's future relevance depends on its willingness to engage critically with the conditions that produce social suffering while actively fostering connections that transcend division.

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