Walter Lorenz: “European Social Work – between universal principles and cultural sensitivity”

Social work is, despite occasional despair over the bewildering diversity of the profession in international comparisons (Adams 2000), an international profession and a profession committed to transcending always national frames of reference. If this sounds like a political statement, it is meant to be explicitly political. The pioneers of social work wanted to have their early internationalism understood as a political statement when they tried to forge contacts and exchanges across borders and through international organisations from the very beginning of the professionalisation of social work. For women like Jane Addams in the USA (Branco 2016), Alice Masarykova in Czechoslovakia (Kubickova 2001), Helena Radlinska in Poland (Lepalczyk & Marynowicz-Hetka 2001) and Alice Salomon in Germany (Kuhlmann 2008) working and developing social work at international level was an explicit strategy of underlining the professional autonomy of this newly emerging activity and thereby a political tool to ward off any attempt at bringing the profession under the direct control of national social policy agendas and thereby reducing it to the status of a civil service. And it were not the self-interests of the profession that motivated this internationalism but the value commitment of the profession to upholding the dignity of clients as persons with rights irrespective of their status as citizens of this nation or that political unit. Jane Addams, the pioneer arising from the Chicago Settlement Movement, after all was awarded the Nobel Peace Price in 1931 as the founder of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1919, and her commitment to get the great powers to disarm and conclude peace agreements (Shields 2017).

Of course social work cannot be established as an international discipline as easily as for instance psychology or medicine where it could be said that “people are people” irrespective of their cultural, ethnic or national belonging on account of their universal psychological or physical constitution and where therefore training protocols with international validity and according to international standards could be set up. The research and practice methodology of these disciplines could or would therefore have to have immediate international validity and “internationalising” these professions was never such a contentious issue, although combining global competency standards with cultural sensitivity remains a challenge even in medicine (Eichbaum 2015). Social work has to respect cultural differences in people as being immediately relevant for the definition of what constitutes a social problem or a culturally sensitive solution. And social work has to operate under national social policy frameworks to achieve an effective matching of the needs of clients and the best available resources, or challenge national social policy makers specifically to make such provisions available where they are lacking. But it is precisely the ability to negotiate this tension between universal human principles like justice, equality and dignity as starting points and as goals of social work practice on the one hand, and their application in concrete historical and politically contingent contexts that characterises the professionalism of social work.

The internationalism of early social work educators in the 1920s and early 30s is all the more remarkable as it run counter to the political trends in Europe prevailing after the end of WW I and the Paris conference which ended in the Versailles Treaty which re-drew many national boundaries in Europe with the curtailment of the German territory and 1920 with the Treaty of Trianon the splitting up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a number of nations that were

driven by the aspiration, but also with the burden of becoming self-determining nations. In all cases of the newly defined post-WWI states of East Central Europe this required the consolidation not only of a national identity with new ethnic compositions for states that had never existed in that territorial form before, such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland and the Baltic states, but also their inherent social solidarity. Extending voting rights particularly to women was one such nation-building measure but above all welfare state development, in all its different versions, became recognised as a vital instrument for consolidating new states and buying off social peace following broadly the example Bismarck had already set with the introduction of social insurance measures as part of the unification process of the Second German Reich after 1871. Poland and Czechoslovakia were relatively efficient in introducing welfare legislation in the early 1920s, developments in Hungary were complicated by the civil war and the ensuing political polarisation. But all followed nation-specific pathways, as Inglot states: 'the creation, failure, reconstruction and/or change of a particular political regime profoundly affected the processes of emergence, "maturation" (completion of social insurance coverage of all major social groups) and consolidation of the key institutions of social policy in the region' (Inglot 2008, 55). It was exactly in this early inter-war period that social workers formalised and strengthened their international dimension with their active participation in the first international conferences on social welfare and the founding of what was to become the International Federation of Social Workers. It was only with the coming to power of National Socialism in Germany that attempts to break this internationalism and to commit social work to national, and in the case of Germany and to some extent Italy, to a nationalistic and racist social policy agenda began to bite.

The social reconstruction of Europe after the devastation of Nazism and the war followed very different pathways in Europe East and West but with an underlying consensus in this round of renewed reconstruction of national identities that attending to matters of the welfare of the population could not be treated as a marginal issue beside other more urgent issues. This social commitment was approached under fundamentally different ideological assumptions in the countries of the capitalist West and the by then Soviet-dependent countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but developments were driven to an extent by similar agendas: Each system had the need to "reward" its population for the sacrifices and the suffering endured during the war, in the countries that had jointly defeated Nazi Germany with the endorsement of one of the exhortations to soldiers and citizens during the war that it was "worth fighting" for a better society, and what had to be better was the realisation of social citizenship (in the terminology of T.H.Marshall, 1964) in relation to the affirmation of political citizenship. In the defeated countries this was inspired by the intention of eliminating social injustices that had formed the fertile soil on which Nazism and Fascism had propagated its false promises and that democracy could only appeal to the population together with a measured taming of the deleterious effects of capitalism as alternative to socialism – in its national-socialist or its communist-socialist form. For this was the second motivation for the development of the different forms of social protection, that each ideological system had to show, in competition with each other, that it was capable of eliminating social problems through its own brand of politics. Particularly in West Germany the formula of a "social market economy" was clearly coined with that competition in mind and therefore with more attention to bringing the working class through its representative organs as parties and Trade Unions in line with the democratic capitalist agenda.

The shape social work and social work education took in Germany after WWII very much corresponded to those agendas. In Western Europe it formed part of the international programme of social and economic reconstruction of countries that had been promoters or victims of fascism and that had to be brought into the anti-communist NATO alliance. The 1950s and early 60s saw a range of development programmes being implemented in countries like Germany, Italy and Greece, funded by US and UK organisations with the aim of training social workers according what was promoted as universal models of social work divided into the three methods of case work, group work and community work. The all centred on the value of "self-determination" and taking responsibility for social adjustment through shared decision-making. Implicitly or sometimes explicitly this was a way of promoting principles of democracy and thereby allaying fears in some conservative quarters that the term "social" in "social work" was referring to socialist principles. It was somewhat ironic in that context that for instance the American resident Gisela Konopka, as part of this aid programme, gave courses on social group work in West Germany in the 1950s as a method that she had developed as a German in her home country in the 1930s before she had to flee the country on account of her socialist orientation and her work in the resistance against Hitler. But in those decades English-language social work methods and textbooks counted as "scientifically neutral" and were translated into several European languages, while aspiring academics were benefiting from Fulbright scholarships to obtain social work qualifications in the USA at university level so that they could occupy academic positions back home where social work in continental Europe did not yet count as an academic discipline. The UK obviously had its own established tradition of academic social work education and of professional practice and Nordic countries soon adopted also the "universal model" (Lorenz, 2006).

But for all the international appearance of this phase of social work development, the character and value of this type of internationalisation was never made thematic and social work students were in fact exhorted to learn through these methods to "treat people as people" and not to enter into aspects of ethnic or cultural diversity as this was regarded as opening the door to discrimination. It was only in the 1970s and 80s when this type of universalism (and its underlying hegemonial agenda) was called into question as an effect of social movements like the black civil rights movement or the second wave feminist movement that demanded attention to be given to diverse identities as an affirmation of the "right to be different". All of a sudden placing black children with "good caring foster parents" irrespective of their skin colour or religious affiliation was called into question, methods books on feminist social work or black social work were written and a re-evaluation of "indigenous" traditions of social work methods and discourses sprang up in various Western European countries, also at times with the underlying agenda of questioning US hegemony at that level. This was a period when not only social pedagogy as a well-established part of the "social professions" was "re-discovered" in the sense that for instance in Germany it had its own very respectable academic tradition and in countries like the Netherlands or in Nordic Countries it paralleled the professional status of social workers, new and "progressive" titles and practices sprung up like "animation" in France and in Italy or "community education" in Scotland (Lorenz, 2008).

These developments did however not lead automatically to a greater degree of "internationalisation" of social work among Western academics although the occasions would have been there. This mirrored once more the dominance of a social policy agenda which despite the growth of the European Economic Community (EEC) as it was originally called

remained the zealously guarded prerogative of the nation states, thereby leaving the European unification process to pursue a purely economic objective. The increasing politicisation of social work discourses in those decades did however make reference to the importance of differences in political orientations that shaped the distinct forms of social policies in Western European countries and therefore began to question particularly the prevalence of person-oriented change processes at the core of social work methods, but these comparisons were largely carried out at the level of political theory comparisons rather than on the basis of a detailed examination of the relationship between social policy "regimes" and nationally characteristic forms of social work practice. It was only when the European project began cautiously to go beyond its original economic agenda in the 1980s and targeted university education as key to developing a European orientation in the future professional and academic elite that social work educators seized the opportunities provided by the ERASMUS programme and embarked on very intensive European exchanges of staff and students, forming for instance one of the first "Thematic Networks" to examine the meaning of social work's – for some quarters confusing – diversity. Even then the more or less overt agenda of the administrative promoters of the ERASMUS programme was to achieve "harmonisation" among the different titles and methods, a pressure that was strongly resisted by the members of that seminal network who, instead, affirmed that social work's professional and disciplinary specificity lay not in its positivist uniformity but in its ability to combine insights into universal aspects of the human condition with competences in recognising their manifestations in specific cultural and political contexts and thereby setting up a continuous process of critical questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions (Lorenz, 2007).

The relative coherence of these developments in Western Europe was matched by a coherence of its own kind in Communist Central and Eastern Europe which was based on the ideological premise that "really existing socialism" provided the actual answer to social problems and therefore obviated the (official) need for social workers. Anybody observing the situation "on the ground" and managing to maintain or open up the sporadic contacts across the Iron Curtain realised of course that this ideology did not hold true and that countries under Communism not only reproduced some of the "classical" social problems related to poverty, discrimination, personal conflicts, delinquency and substance dependency for instance, but also produced their own problems related to socio-political context conditions, such as certain forms of mental health problems or conflicts of a direct political nature. Countries of Central and Eastern Europe however varied also enormously in the formats in which they responded to those social phenomena, again in a manner that bore some relationship with the nationally prevailing political constellations and with a wide range of professionals or members of Trade Unions carrying out "social work type activities", often amounting to "surrogate structures (Hering 2007, 2017). For instance it can be said that Yugoslavia sporadically produced models of social work that had some resemblance to Western versions, as demonstration of their particular "social" version of Communism (Zavirsek, 2006), Czechoslovakia operated with publicly employed staff dedicated to "social questions", while in countries where the Catholic Church maintained a public role like Poland and Lithuania social work type services were being carried out within the ambit of that church. In Hungary's Budapest socially committed sociologists around Zuza Ferge, including Gabor Hegyesi, promoted work in high-rise urban districts that had all the hallmarks of social and community work but was not officially termed as such. Particularly telling is the novel by Gyorgy Konrad (1998), "The Case Worker" which portrays with such astonishing intensity the practice dilemmas of a professional social worker who when

caring for a child comes to resort to improvising coping mechanisms which closely resemble those of the child's parents for which the child was taken into care in the first place.

And then came the totally unexpected events of 1989 and the political context of European societies and hence of social work once more changed. The changes were obviously more drastic in post-communist countries where new social policy measures necessitated support and outreach services to deal with problems arising from what was turning into a much more differentiated and selective welfare system. It is very hard to generalise the picture of social work that emerged in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s but with the benefit of hindsight over 30 years some general features can be identified. Like in the early post-WWII West, investing in social work was regarded as a stabilising factor in relation to the legitimation needs of new, democratically constituted governments on the one hand and to the insecurities people were experiencing in the change towards much more self-responsibility and independence on the other. The agenda, that the political context represented something completely new for the countries concerned and required therefore new intervention methods and a corresponding new profession, gave rise to a tendency to look for "importing" social work from countries that had produced social work models fitting for capitalist welfare requirements. And at the same time, many Western academics and educational institutions were eager to "export" their whole study programmes in response to those demands, sometimes in collaboration with non-governmental organisations which either had already existed in some form under Communism (particularly the Catholic organisation Caritas) or which generally had an international orientation. But as those exchanges with Western social work educators developed, an awareness also grew among colleagues in the former Eastern Bloc that there were "indigenous" traditions to be discovered and to be taken into account in the creation of approaches which took account of the particular welfare landscape, its cultural and political orientation and structure of needs of the country concerned. In this way we can find a great diversity of approaches to social work and social work education in those countries of Central Eastern Europe, mirroring to some extent the state of development in Western Europe in the first decades after WWII. Social work education is dispersed between universities and other higher education institutions, the boundaries and the specificity of the discipline of social work in relation to for instance social education, community nursing and professions engaged in rehabilitation and therapy is fluid in some cases and the representation of the profession in academic and professional associations is therefore also very varied.

But these issues are not the exclusive concern of post-communist countries. We are now realising that the events of 1989 also signalled profound changes in welfare politics and structures in Western Europe. While neo-liberal economic principles had begun to invade politics, with for the population the most noticeable effect being felt in the area of social policies, in the decade before the revolutions, their effects took hold after 1989 without effective resistance. The neoliberal propaganda cry "There Is No Alternative" (the TINA principle), voiced first by Prime Minister Thatcher, presented the dismantling of the welfare state not only as a necessity but as the return quasi to a natural anthropological state which declares human beings as essentially autonomous and hence solely responsible for their own decisions and their well-being. The slogan "workfare not welfare" signalled the return to the ideology of the work ethic of the 19th century in all its ambiguity, as a facilitating as much as a punishing principle (Hemerijk, 2013). The receipt of welfare benefits became increasingly conditional on the demonstrated willingness to seek work, and this across all sectors of need –

even where work was effectively impossible to obtain. The simultaneous onslaught on the work of Trade Unions led to a weakening of contractual working conditions with an increase of people being forced into precarious jobs and the phenomenon of the "working poor". Neoliberal economic principles were also transferred to the organisation of public services in the form of their de-centralisation and then their contracting-out to private bidders. The dismantling of state companies like Post and Telephone, national rail services, domestic energy supply, waste collection, road management etc. etc. was paralleled by either the transformation of many non-governmental social services from organisations financed and managed according to traditional principles of subsidiarity into quasi-commercial enterprises or the creation of new services that seized on the funding opportunities and entered the field of competition as "start-ups". A market in welfare emerged, particularly in the area of social care for children, people with disabilities and elderly people, with all the associated risks of a loss or a discriminatory polarisation of standards of quality according to ability to pay (Klenk & Pavolini, 2015).

These political changes had a profound impact on the way social workers regarded and applied their professional knowledge and constitutive principles. In many countries, social workers were taken in by the gradualness of the changes and particularly by the political arguments surrounding and legitimating the new service structures and welfare principles. These latter arguments operate with what constitute core principles of social work such as self-determination, self-help, user participation, user definition of need and vicinity to the community but turn them into instruments of limiting assistance, introducing market principles so that users become customers and punishment or control when clients do not show willingness to adhere to those conditions. Organisationally, the professional principle of "discretion" also turned into an administrative necessity of social workers as "street-level bureaucrats" who could not assess the need of claimants with the full benefit of their professional knowledge but had now to gauge the extent of leeway the tight regulations afforded and to interpret a person's needs within those margins, thereby transmitting also the controlling "spirit" of the changed welfare regime (Nothdurfter, 2016).

Again, social policy contexts constituted a source of variations in the impact of those changes across all of Europe, as Eastern social policies began to adjust to similar principles. The "path dependency" of social policy models was pronounced in Nordic countries and their social-democratic traditions where privatisation did not reach the same extent and the ethos of providing good quality public services prevails, even though services became also profoundly restructured and non-governmental organisations assumed a greater role. Correspondingly, social work maintained its professional profile in those Nordic countries, mirrored in the strong role the professional associations and the extent of research being conducted at university level with practice relevance.

In countries with a conservative-corporatist tradition like Germany and Austria the changes have been more pervasive. Owing to the dominant role allocated to non-governmental service providers under the principle of subsidiarity the character of those organisations changes inexorably towards more competition among themselves and with new players and consequently a creeping commodification of the relationship with service users. Significantly, social work is expanding numerically and social work training institutes, particularly the *Fachhochschulen*, are inundated with applicants but who in their school socialisation have already internalised the prevailing individualism and, in seeking also job security, have little inclination to question the political context in which they are to work.

The impact of neoliberalism on social work has been most pervasive in the UK where welfare, in most sectors apart from health, had traditionally been kept to a residual level. Here social workers are not only labouring under a host of bureaucratic regulations since many of the policies were designed from the perspective of "risk reduction" and the margins of creativity and innovation are also influenced by those principles. The merging of social work with social control has become so obvious that professional workers have a hard time basing their interventions on processes of relationship-forming. The development is accompanied by a considerable growth of the "care sector", and this not only quantitatively but also through the growing recognition care workers receive in terms of training and quality assessment, and here the paradigm of social pedagogy is being used strategically in official policies to provide some, albeit very basic, level of training in the care sector.

Many of those professional features can be found also in post-communist countries where social work has assumed a firm place in social policy and is delivering over a wide spectrum of services, gaining recognition with its valuable contribution to society. The question is, however, whether once more this demand for social work and the reliance on social workers' adaptability to changing contexts, their commitment to service users and their flexibility in relation to methodological paradigms and disciplinary boundaries in academia prevent social workers from taking a more independent, determined and politically conscious position on those developments. Because as they are being "needed" in relation to problems arising at the personal level for people experiencing unemployment (and the situation of young unemployed people is desperate in some countries like Italy or Greece), living in poverty (and the poverty rate is increasing dramatically), being discriminated on account of their disabilities, mental health problems or criminal record, or indeed arising from displacement and having been forced to migrate, this crisis work and crisis competence can block the view to wider political and economic causes of those personal conditions. And these issues are very much a matter of immediate professional and academic concern to all social workers and not just those who chose to become politically active. For what is happening all around us in Europe (and beyond) amounts to a profound crisis of solidarity at all levels.

There is a striking correspondence between the crisis of solidarity in terms of the European unification project which has not just stagnated for years now but which is seriously being called into question by many countries not just Britain and the questioning of social solidarity in social policy contexts. National interests are again placed in opposition to interests of shared responsibility and solidarity, best exemplified by the undignified wrangling over the allocation of refugees between member countries. The self-interest of nations is directly mirrored by the self-interest that pervades national politics under the neoliberal ideological spell where people, and particularly young people, are being exhorted to "make something of themselves" and not to rely on other people. This orientation permeates into the immediate personal sphere when family relations and other psychological bonds become increasingly fragile and transitory, leaving individuals with overwhelming challenges to cope for themselves (Rosanvallon, 2000).

The worrying political reaction to all that is a populist invocation of quasi-natural states of solidarity as the panacea, the family, the ethnic group, the religious community (Christian as well as Islam) and also the nation. The fragile states of personal identities seek refuge in seeming certainties of belonging which would explain the rise in nationalism and racism in practically all countries of Europe. But in the face of this, social workers know all too well from their training and their experience, that these are false solutions, that a personal identity

cannot be grounded in biological or national sameness, but that a stable identity is the product of the learned capacity to integrate differences, in oneself and in one's relationship with others. This is the message social workers can and must give as a matter of professional responsibility, not because of any party-political bias or allegiance, and these are the preconditions that need to be secured so that the social work intervention at the personal level can make sense and can succeed.

In order to bring this realisation publicly to bear and to become effective, European contacts and exchanges among social workers are the most valuable instrument. Being engaged, as so many colleagues are still today, in the creation of a truly "European" version of social work does not mean abandoning concerns for national, cultural and indeed religious identities – on the contrary, those concerns can only become constructive when pursued in a wider international context that teaches continuously what the pioneers of social work wanted us to learn, to become autonomous as professionals from narrow national agendas in order to serve more appropriate, more humane and more person-oriented agendas in specific national, cultural and community contexts.

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