

## Social work in turmoil

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**We have seen the duty of confidentiality being undermined in the *centres publics d'action sociale* (public centres for social welfare) in Belgium, with the fight against terrorism being put forward as the pretext, the children's rights officer being robustly challenged in parliament when presenting his 2016 annual report, and we have also observed the work of human rights activists worldwide being criminalized. In some cases significant cuts have been made to the resources allocated to social work in Europe as part of the austerity measures implemented over the past five years. So, is social work in turmoil? Is this vast field, which develops solidarity between human beings, helps people to live together and enables people to talk to each other, being misused and even distorted?**

We must not delude ourselves: social work's history and uniqueness have meant that it has helped to secure the long-term future of the systems in place rather than changing them. As Robert Castel said, *"...in some aspects, social inclusion policies resemble the strategies used to morally improve the working classes which flourished in the 19th century."*

While social work has helped and assisted, it has also channelled and even repressed: *"social work grew out of the confrontation between two classes. It is the result of the middle classes dominating the proletariat. Using religious and humanist ideologies as a basis, social work has enabled the middle classes to twist the fundamental meaning of the working classes' legitimate assertions, under the guise of charity and benefaction..."*

### **The politicisation of social work**

However, history also teaches us that there is a political current among social workers, one to which the majority of street social workers adhere, for example. The major movement of May 1968 obviously made a significant and profound impact on the future of social work in general.

Prior to May 1968, the history of social work already reflected a desire to give a political slant to the approach being applied. In the mid-1920s, two sociologists, Shaw and McKay of Chicago, researched criminality and delinquency in groups of socially-excluded young people.

This research led to new approaches and heralded the beginning of the development of the concept of social work with excluded groups in their own communities. One of the stated intentions was to develop strong constructive relationships with the hardest to reach young people. The fundamental idea underpinning the concept, which is still completely valid today, is that this aim can only be achieved if the people in question and/or their communities provide the impetus and develop the initiatives and programmes themselves.

A few years later, Saul Alinsky confirmed these ideas in his famous book, *Rules for Radicals*, in 1971. *Rules for Radicals* remains an authoritative book for many social workers today. Social work has also drawn upon a significant amount of research, schools and thinking from diverse horizons but which all reflect the inherent ambivalence and contradictions of social work.

The tension caused more recently in Belgium in the 1990s between social workers and some politicians following the advent of the 'security contracts' is also worth highlighting. The conflict initially proved difficult to manage, as each viewpoint excluded the other. These clashes are still an issue, despite changes to these much-talked about 'contracts', and go beyond issues of style involving the corporatist interests of stakeholders keen to protect their privileges. There are two

opinions of social work, two ethoses which go head to head around the over-used concept of 'prevention.' All those involved, irrespective of their conceptual model of belonging (including representatives of the police and gendarmes), purport to be "prevention-focused" without always being able to explain what prevention really means. Prevention is a particularly broad concept and, from one extreme to the other, covers forms as diverse as defensive and proactive prevention.

The former endeavours to protect society from a range of problems which may be caused by certain pre-stigmatized groups, all in the name of each citizen's individual security. In so doing, defensive prevention is based on a desire to control and automatically reproduce a predetermined social order in which only initiatives likely to have a spectacular short-term impact by addressing the effects of social problems rather than their root causes are permitted.

The latter offers a completely different view of social life and seeks to promote the individual, rather than opting for a defensive approach looking to anticipate the problems that the individual may cause society. This diametrically opposed view prioritises combating all forms of exclusion and fostering equal opportunities via a true policy of general and specialised social support.

Social work has experienced at least two significant shifts, one towards humanitarian work and the other towards enablement, over the past few years.

### **Humanitarian social work**

Although little has been heard from social workers about this phenomenon, Europe and other neighbouring countries have experienced an influx of migrants from conflict zones over the past few years (Afghanistan and Syria) and from areas where minority rights are not always respected (including Serbia and Romania). Cities such as Brussels have therefore experienced something that would have been unthinkable two decades ago. We now see whole families living on the streets with this sometimes costing lives. However, migrants are not the only people who end up on the streets. The gradual and insidious dismantling of the social protection system in Belgium is also forcing increasing numbers of younger and older people onto the streets and not only in the country's major cities. It is no longer unusual in smaller towns to come across a homeless person looking for shelter under a football ground terrace or seeking some warmth in a bank atrium. This new situation has caused a shift in social work towards humanitarian work which is primarily characterized by the urgent and short-term management of social suffering, often to the detriment of more fundamental work.

### **Enablement**

The last few Belgian governments have persisted in slowly unravelling the country's social protection system, even though it is regarded as a flagship system. Removing benefits from a large swathe of young people is a prime example. The at times modest integration allowance (*allocation d'insertion*) varied from €300 to €800 depending on the claimant's age and circumstances and enabled many young people to become independent and gain a foothold in the labour market or in society as a whole. The abolition of this benefit is having disastrous consequences, as many young people have no other source of income and are therefore swelling the ranks of a new category of poor people – young poor people. Moreover, a large number of young people are forced to stay living with their parents and come into conflict with them, with the clashes caused by living together getting worse over time. The authorities set a new approach for social workers – *enablement* - in this context. Getting young people to take responsibility for their job search, training and future by offering sustained and binding support, with very little or no room being given to the young person's own aspirations, is the basic principle underpinning enablement

policies. *“The situation is too critical, only results matter.”* And the result is that unemployment figures are down. Admittedly, we should not deny the benefit for some young people of being monitored and supported but more and more often this support is in fact a trap, *“these enablement policies are dependence and desubjectivation policies. The disadvantaged individual is culpable for what happens to them and is responsible for their situation, while the social root causes of the situation are erased.”*

Anyone who does not fit into the wide-reaching enablement initiative completely drops out of the system. Countless young people are no longer entitled to support and are experiencing a long downhill journey. We have moved from encouraging young people to take responsibility to playing the ‘blame game’. Social work based on this ethos of enablement is simply a return to the very roots of social work as highlighted by Robert Castel at the start of the article. However, it is no longer a case of middle class moralising but rather Guattari’s “integrated world capitalism” model which now holds sway worldwide.

The active welfare state, notably described by Loïc Wacquant, stems from this dominant model. *“In any case, social services are organized so that they do not so much provide assistance for needy families; instead the aim is to reduce the number of people entitled to benefits in order to cut social spending which is deemed intolerable by the majority white electorate. For instance, Chicago’s welfare office is increasing the number of nitpicking checks and bureaucratic procedures. The city’s welfare office allocates part of its budget to spying on benefit claimants in order to ‘nab’ any fraudulent claimants. The office has freephone numbers to enable people to anonymously report benefit fraudsters, publishes appeals in the press calling for people to inform on others, pays informants tasked with close surveillance, and makes unannounced visits to the suspects’ homes. Anything goes in the quest to trim the numbers of benefit claimants. Indeed, the residents of the ghetto are quick to compare social services to the KGB.”*

### **Social work is undergoing change and is caught between conservatism and activism**

The fate of these 18-25 year olds is currently on the agenda at the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles (the French-speaking Community of Belgium), particularly as part of a new proposal for a law on youth services. While many social workers do acknowledge the urgent need to find structural and sustainable solutions for this age group, it is hardly surprising that some of the youth services employers’ organisations and some political parties are opposed to expanding prevention work to cover young people up to the age of 25. Even worse, in the end only lip service was paid to the proposal to bolster prevention work as part of youth services. If we add the lack of consultation of grassroots social workers when developing these sector stances, the lack of reaction and also the weakness of the pockets of resistance in response to the multiple attacks on social work, we may well wonder about the increasingly conservative trend in some sectors of social work.

There are certainly counter-examples, such as some public centres for social welfare, which have set in motion diversification and a return to the very essence of social work, with initiatives combining housing and labour market integration, in order to provide comprehensive support that is respectful of differences. New forums for dialogue and lobbying such as the Fédération Laïque de l’Aide à la Jeunesse (FLAJ or the Secular Youth Services Federation) and the Fédération des travailleurs sociaux de rue (Traces de rue or the Federation of Street Social Workers) have been created. We should also note the excellent discussion work reiterating the fundamentals of social work being done by the Oversight Committee. However, these initiatives should not obscure the backwards steps being taken by the stakeholders and programmes which institute social work.

In the Brussels region, to cite one example, social cohesion projects have slowly but surely evolved into a technocratic version of social work. The strength of social work in the past was its ability to create new forums for dialogue, a broad-based approach and creativity in neighbourhoods. Nowadays, this has been channelled into a series of pre-defined initiatives (homework clubs, literacy, reception services for newcomers etc). These trends towards rationalizing social work programmes can be seen in most regions of the world, unless of course the programmes have not been abolished outright. Quite clearly, the social approach based on popular, collective and community education is being targeted the most.

## **Conclusion**

More specifically, control of social work is now being taken back robustly and unapologetically in order to base it (once again) on managing and controlling vulnerable population groups who could be dangerous if they came to understand their woes.

Is this in fact the victory of a dominant model of integrated world capitalism over the left hand of the state?

Many social workers reject the ambitions of another stakeholder to unilaterally (and for its sole benefit) set in stone how our society should develop. These grassroots stakeholders witness first-hand the undesirable effects of the dominant model and are demanding to take part in the development of society.

We need to forge new alliances with the left hand of the state stakeholders, as Bourdieu suggests, in order to assert a societal focus and a different social development model; working with the stakeholders who are not subjugated to the laws of the market, unlike the right hand of the state.