



“Social work’s potential in facing current European challenges – lessons from the profession’s history”

Walter Lorenz - Charles University, Prague
& Free University of Bolzano

**strong
social
work**

My intention:

- briefly trace the history of social work's engagement with the national and European “integration agendas”
- show failures of and necessity to developing an explicit political orientation
- identify current European and global challenges as connected to a distortion in the meaning of “social”

European post-world war II welfare state projects

- realisation of „social citizenship“ (T.H.Marshall)
- moving from charity to public welfare provisions, preferably law-enshrined in rights
- introducing some measure of redistribution in order to keep social cleavages within limits that would not trigger unrest and disaffection
- demonstrating the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratically grounded state authority so as to create a “sense of belonging” based on freedom rather than coercion.
- presenting a “social face of capitalism” in Cold War competition with Soviet Communism

Promises of the European unification project

- **peace agenda:** ending the political rivalry in Europe by „taming nationalism“
- **economic agenda:** opening markets across borders
- **social policy agenda:** ensuring workers' rights, reducing centre / periphery disadvantages; creating training opportunities

BUT: social policy making remains a national competence – subsidiarity principle
(Bismarck) but **not federalism**

social work accommodation with emerging national welfare agendas (1950s+)

- building on and renewing pre-war internationalism (Jane Addams, Mary Richmond in USA, Alice Salomon in Germany, or Marie Mulle in Belgium): not to become „servants of the state“
- conformity to a „standard model of social work“ (case work, group work, community work), scientifically neutral and „universal“
- principle of „self-determination“ – practising democracy: assisting people to strengthen their cognitive and affective skills
- results in ambiguity: appearing “politically neutral” (“bureau-professionalism”) while de facto supporting the political agenda of “reducing social tensions”, supporting enterprise – no engagement with “Europe”

post 1968: new social movements, civil society mobilisation, issues of identity

challenge social work's "universal neutrality"; stress the need to confront issues of identity, hence the political origins of "differences"

1. **"the personal is political"**, confronting own identities: "black social work", "feminist social work".
2. relevance of differences between political approaches to welfare ("welfare regimes"), re-discovery of **"indigenous" social work traditions**: social pedagogy or "agogics"; new approaches to empowerment: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, movement of "animation"
3. **"rediscovery of poverty"** and critique of paternalism built into the welfare state project

1970s+: „crisis of the welfare state“ and impact

wars in Middle East (oil crisis) cause economic slump, end of Keynesianism, welfare expenditure exceeds tax receipts

unemployment weakens class solidarity just when several European states vote in social-democratic governments

Europe's “**ever closer union**” becomes more ambivalent between **economic** (Schengen) and **social priorities** (*Jacques Delors*, “Social Europe”: 1989 European Social Charter, opt-out by UK, *Margaret Thatcher*)

Social work: active engagement with trans-national European issues, “*Europeanising the curriculum*”, Erasmus

1989 “Velvet Revolution” – victory of civil society activism or victory of capitalism?

reconstruction of democratic welfare measures in Central and Eastern Europe comes under the dictate of neoliberal ideologies

creativity and activism on the part of NGOs – vs.
instrumentalization by politics keen to implement privatization

EU demands a social rights orientation (e.g. PHARE project) in preparation for membership

re-start of social work education through international exchanges – product of indigenous resourcefulness or of Western “colonization”?

impact of neoliberalism on social work in all European “welfare regimes”

- **managerialism, New Public Management principles:** performance targets, budget considerations, increase in efficiency of service delivery, competitive tendering.
- social work performance is increasingly restricted by **regulations**, partly a result of failures in child protection decision-making, climate of **risk calculation and risk reduction**, stronger control function.
- emphasis on “**activation**” of welfare recipients, who otherwise appear a “burden” to society,
- drawn into assessment procedures of clients who are “**deserving**” and those who are “**undeserving**” of public support –growth of charity initiatives such as food and clothing distribution projects
- Social work methodology flirts **with Evidence Based Practice** approaches
- renewed push to “**de-politicise** social work”

Europe's darkest (social) moment: response to the Banking Crisis 2008

- enforcement of monetarism at all (social) costs – see Greece, Ireland: saving the commercial banks at the expense of protecting public welfare expenditure
- internalization of anti-welfare mentalities: poverty portrayed as “personal failing”
- drastic rise in youth unemployment, child poverty
- creates anti-EU resentments: “club of the privileged”; “Brussels establishment”

social work's political “re-awakening” (?)

- “Global Definition of Social Work” of 2014 affirms **social rights and justice**
- research and practice emphasise **participative approaches**
- greater attention to the danger of political manipulation (Hungary, Sweden, UK ...), scepticism of imposed separation care / protection,
- return of “**radical and critical social work**”
- after Corona had imposed “social distancing”, renewed awareness of the comprehensive value and meaning of “**social bonds**”

is social work equipped to face the most pressing social challenges in Europe?

- **poverty crisis** (despite European Pillar of Social Rights 2010/17); child poverty: 2022, 24.7% of < 18 years at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Romania (41.5%), Bulgaria (33.9%), and even Spain (32.2%) – *where is there a lobby equivalent to that of farmers?*
- renewed emphasis on “**borders**” – intern: deserving / undeserving; towards outside: welcome (e.g. Ukrainian refugees: 4.2m in 2023!) and unwelcome refugees (1.2 m asylum applications in 2023)
- environmental crisis is more a social issue than a technical or economic one, requires building a comprehensive basis for solidarity

turning social work practice “lessons” into “political lessons” (and strategies):

- externalization of problems will make problems return (racism, colonialism, nationalism); inter-cultural / antiracist competences are crucial
- only through engagement with structural causes of poverty and unemployment can “activation” make sense (e.g. through social economy projects)
- widening the understanding of “context” of social problems from economic, physical to environmental frameworks – **eco-social social work**

turning “border issues” into ”search for identities

all social work interventions concern differentiated approaches to “identity”

at personal level: assisting people to integrate diverse and often conflicting identities arising from complex social relations is key to strengthening “social competence”: a “secure sense of belonging” requires economic, legal and political security, is a constant process

at European level: European citizenship must become a lived experience that acknowledges and integrates also diversity

“Europe” as a shared historical legacy has always contained a fundamental ambiguity between

- splitting up into myriads of little threatened, defensive and exclusive fiefdoms, and
- a project of unity of high values, ambitions of enlightenment, liberty and peace.

Our shared task, in which social work has something important to contribute, is to transform this polarisation into a project that acknowledges its dark sides but works to transform them, with reference to its ideals, into a **liveable, diversity-embracing unity**.