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**Scenarios for the future of social work**

**The development of modern societies** is confronting people living in these societal conditions with a paradox: on the one hand sociality has become hyper complex in its form, on the other hand every single citizen is reduced to his very individual living. On the one hand this kind of social change opens a seemingly unlimited richness of options. On the other hand every individual is “damned to be free”, which means that everyone seems to be responsible for shaping his own life and getting through on his own. The risk of choosing in very complex conditions is systematically high and at the same time the consequences are accounted to the individual – the risks deriving from a structural development is transformed into a personal risk (vgl. Beck 1986). The paradox consists in the fact, that the hyper complexity of the social conditions limits the options an individual actually can choose in a very restrictive way. In particular those living at the edge of modern societies are dramatically limited in the options they have. These facts can be observed in both the western and eastern European countries. The transition process from the former socialist structure to the western model of a capitalist structure just makes the processes visible in a more drastic way.

**The consequences of the structure of modern societies** are that the living conditions of the people are unstable and risky. Precariousness and vulnerability (“precarité” et “vulnerabilité”, Castel 1992; Castel 2000) are two terms that illustrate quite good the consequences of the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2003) for the individuals. Most of the people live in conditions that make them vulnerable, i.e. that they can lose their relatively comfortable state of living (wealth/ welfare) in very short periods of time. But the social risks consist not only in material risks (and chances) but also in terms of a loss of orientation, a loss of social sense. The traditional cultural orientations are replaced by extremely individualized orientations. Sennett describes this individualization with his notion of “flexibility” (Sennett 1998). Another expression of these “modern” orientations for example is the principle that “the winner takes it all”. This means that only the very few at the top get extremely rich. For all the others there exists theoretically the option to be one of the few, but in reality for most of us, it is not possible from the start. In short the modern society produces an unknown amount of wealth and enormous social inequality as well. Marx at the very least was right, when he wrote that the rich will become richer and the poor will become poorer, but in a relative way, which means that the gap between rich and poor becomes larger. Even in a rich country like Switzerland a third of the people living there is (relatively) poor or very close to poverty

(Budowski/ Tillmann & Bergman 2002; Dupuis & Rey 2002). But being poor in Switzerland is different from being poor for example in Russia or Thailand or Nigeria. One reason for this is, that there is a gap between rich countries and poor countries which has become larger as well. Another reason is, that in the western countries we can observe historically a co-evolution of different “functional systems” (Luhmann 1997) embedded into a societal “semantic”, that was strongly influenced by the (contradictory) values of the French revolution: freedom, equality, fraternity (solidarity) which led in many European countries to a socially moderate form of capitalist political economy.

**One of these semantically contextualised and co-evolving systems is social work.** This is one of my basic assumptions that social work is a necessary part of societal differentiation that emerges as soon as the “secondary problems” of the modernisation process structured by a capitalist political economy occur as shortly described at the beginning of this little contribution. We can observe this emergence of social work in all the transition countries of eastern Europe which might be interpreted as an empirical evidence for the argument that social work is a logical element of capitalist and functional differentiated societies. Social work in this sense can be conceptualised as the system in modern societies of this type that cares for people who fail in getting through on their own and who are threatened or affected by social exclusion. Social work therefore is constantly looking for possibilities for reintegration and accompanies and supports these people on their way to complete participation in society or at least to living conditions that conform to the human rights and human dignity (Staub-Bernasconi 1995). Social work in this sense cares for improving the living conditions of the poor. The effectiveness of social work therefore is one reason that to be poor in Switzerland for example is relatively different compared to other countries with no social work or a less effective one. But the effectiveness of social work depends on the material conditions it can work with and this is a long history of a development of about one hundred years. And if we observe this development we can see that social work depends on ideas in society of what is just, of what kind of help there should be and of how the societal wealth should be shared (or not shared). With other words: Social work depends on the societal semantics. Social work therefore is very closely coupled with the political system. And this means in a systemic perspective, what might be surprising for some, but nevertheless is my second assumption: The political system depends more or less directly on the capacity of problem solving of the social work system.

**The future of social work** depends basically on three social arenas (my points are inspired and very close to Abbotts work on professions in general, vgl. Abbott 1988) that have to be taken into account when we are talking of “mapping the way forward”: First the future of social work depends on the development of the ideas about social justice under the conditions of a society that produces extreme social inequality, thus it has to raise its voice in a public arena. Second it depends on the relation to the political system, a relation that has to be and can be shaped by the

actions of social work itself. And finally the future of social work depends on its own competence in problem solving and on making this competence visible and accountable. If these three elements are true we can pronounce two scenarios for the future of social work. I developed these scenarios for the social work in western Europe, especially in Switzerland. It has to be discussed how far these scenarios and the reasoning leading to them may be adopted or rejected in relation to the different circumstances in the eastern countries. The first scenario is: Social work will develop to a completely recognized and established profession with a much higher status than now. Its expertise is an appreciated and acknowledged part in the processes of shaping social politics. As an expert profession competent in treating complex social problems, social work is legitimated to take the lead in organising and coordinating inter-professional problem solving processes. Social work is the leading discipline in the concert of the applied social sciences. The second scenario is: Social work is reduced to a simple helping occupation without any special expertise needed. This occupation is mostly done by volunteers and assistants with a short term education. They are administering poverty rather than try to change things into the direction of complete participation. Public order is dominantly established by repressive means. The organisation of social help is granted by an elite of specialized managers. Social policies are shaped without the voice of social work and a scientific discipline has not been established.

**Steering social work into the future** can be oriented with these scenarios which of course are thought to be distinctive and realistic but not to be true. The sense of the scenarios is to highlight what might make a difference for the development of social work in the sense of "mapping the way forward". At last I therefore want to make some remarks about what we, the social work representatives in science and practice, can do to steer into the direction of scenario one and by this to contribute to avoid scenario two. I suppose that this is our common interest. The major elements are:

Awareness of the fact that social work is structured by struggles in the context of the political economy of society and has to play an active role in these processes. The central question is: How do we get political influence and how can we contribute to the forming of societal semantics?

Self-consciousness, competence in communication and presentation. This point is aiming on the identity of social workers. Do they conceive themselves as representatives of a profession or as individuals doing social work. Are they capable to present themselves and their profession as an important player in the problem solving process of modern societies? And: Is there an openness and a willingness to learn inside the social work community? The central question is: how do we educate our students and how do we cooperate with the practice?

Above all a significant amelioration of the problem solving capacity. The complexity of social problems today needs complex processes to deal with. Probably there need to be completely

different approaches that we have developed yet. The central question then is: what is needed to get this amelioration and innovation?

I think, that the concept of “knowledge society” (Stehr 1994) gives us some answers to the central questions risen above and some hope that scenario one could be the scenario closer to the real future of social work. If the sociological analysis underlying the concept of “knowledge society” is right, then knowledge has become the third major factor of structuring society besides work and capital. So knowledge is the key notion for a profession like social work, that could contribute to the development of better ways of dealing with social problems, and at the same time is a major resource of legitimacy in a knowledge society that can be used for shaping the relation to the political system and for the dissemination of our cognitive models into the societal semantics. This has been done successfully by the neo-liberal agents and the role of science or knowledge is an important one as far as I can see. And I suppose that we don’t agree with this model and that we are capable to develop a better and convincing different model. And of course, traditionally, knowledge is a major factor when we are talking about educating our students.

So if it is right, that knowledge is the key concept for the future of social work, we have to consider the modes of knowledge production and knowledge transfer and knowledge use in social work science and practice. Because obviously there is a lot of potential that we can still develop. The big challenge is how to diminish the gap between theory and practice and to develop knowledge based social work practice. There are a lot of difficulties attached to such an approach. There is no doubt about that. But there are some recent findings that we might use for reforming or completing our modes of knowledge production and –transfer as an action science (Argyris). There are “new forms of knowledge production” (Gibbons/ Limoges/ Nowotny/ Schwartzman/ Scott & Trow 1994) emerging together with the knowledge society. These forms seem to be appropriate forms for the production of problem solving knowledge. One characteristic of these new forms is a closer cooperation between science and practice and even clients if we dare (vgl. Sommerfeld 2000).

So my point is, that if we want to map the way forward in the sense of my scenario one, we have to develop new forms of knowledge production, new forms of learning, and that this implies a closer cooperation between science and practice and the development of appropriate methods for doing so. And if we are successful, there is no doubt for me, that social work will have a prosperous future, for the sake of our clients and our societies.

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