

Thomas Maesele, Rudi Roose & Maria Bouverne-De Bie

Department of Social Welfare Studies
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences
Ghent University
Thomas.Maesele@UGent.be
Rudi.Roose@UGent.be
Maria.DeBie@UGent.be

Social work between charity and the right to social welfare

How social is social work? This question was asked by Gladstone in 1955 (in: Rapoport 1960) in which she said that social work has 'champagne pretensions but a root beer performance'. The 'social' in social work is something intriguing. What the 'social' means is a contested area, in theory and in practice (Donzelot 1984; Rose 1996; Bisman 2004; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Jordan & Parton 2004; O'Brien 2004; McKeen 2006; Bradt 2009). Social work is an actor, traditionally situated in the social sphere. This social sphere developed as a hybrid in the space between the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the state and wider polity (Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Jordan & Parton 2004). The 'social' constantly negotiates between both, and at the same time redraws their boundaries, while simultaneously the social itself is influenced by the developments within them (Jordan 2004; Lorenz 2005).

When we look at the historical roots of contemporary social service delivery, we can notice a conceptual 'transition' in the frame of reference that guides this negotiation, namely a transition from social services based on charity to social services based on a right to social welfare (see Bouverne-De Bie 2003). Social work then becomes a key actor in reaching this (right to) social welfare. This right to social welfare needs a carrier. The conceptual transition would imply a shift from charity based social service delivery to a rights based social service delivery and thus the 'social' in social work would be driven by a strive to realise human rights. This paper argues that depending on the way in which rights are translated in concrete social care practices the right to social welfare itself will change shape and will influence the way social service delivery is organised. We will argue that current interpretations of the right to social welfare tend to reinforce charity and keeps the right to social welfare in its traditional sphere of 'realising the connection between the private and the public sphere by helping people to become aware of what they needed to be socially integrated and the opportunities to meet these needs' (Bradt 2009, 3). Societal and individual interests are then presumed to coincide (Bouverne-De Bie 2003). Social work then lies in the line of its historical roots in charity based organisations. When defined as a social political project, however, the right to social welfare could become a lever for social transformation. When the tension between the private and public sphere creates a sphere open for differing opinions the content of social work changes.

Bibliography

- Bisman, Cynthia** 2004: *Social work values: the moral core of the profession*. British Journal of Social Work, 34, 109-123.
- Bouverne-De Bie, Maria** 2003: *Een rechtenbenadering als referentiekader*. In: Bouverne-De Bie, Maria, Claeys, Anja, De Cock, André & Vanhee, Jan (red.) Armoede & participatie. (pp.1-20) Gent: Academia Press.
- Bradt, Lieve** 2009: *Victim-offender mediation as social work practice. A comparison between mediation for young and adult offenders in Flanders*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Ghent: Ghent University.
- Donzelot, Jacques** 1984: *L'invention du social : essai sur le déclin des passions politiques*, Editions Fayard.
- Jordan, Bill** 2004: *Emancipatory social work? Opportunity or oxymoron?* British Journal of Social Work, 34(1), 5-19.
- Jordan, Bill & Parton, Nigel** 2004: *Social work, the public sphere and civil society*. In: Lovelock, R., Lyons, K. & Powell, J. (eds.) Reflecting on social work – discipline and profession. (pp. 20-36). UK: Ashgate.
- Lorenz, Walter** 2005: *Social work and a new social order – challenging neo-liberalism's erosion of solidarity*, Social Work & Society, 3 (1), 93-101.
- McKeen, Wendy** 2006: *Diminishing the concept of social policy: the shifting conceptual ground of social policy debate in Canada*. Critical Social Policy, 26:4, 865-887.
- O'Brien, Martin** 2004: *What is social about social work?* Social Work & Social Sciences Review, 11(2), 5-19.
- Parton, Nigel & O'Byrne, Patrick** 2000: *Constructive social work. Towards a new practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Rapoport, Lydia** 1960: *In defense of social work: an examination of stress in the profession*. Social Services Review, 34(1), 62-74.
- Rose, Nikolas** 1996: *The death of the social? Re-figuring the territory of government*. Economy and Society, 25(3), 327-356.