

Leo van Garsse

Department of Social Welfare Studies
Ghent University

Leo.vangarsse@ugent.be

THE DEVELOPMENT OF “FORENSISCH WELZIJNSWERK” IN FLANDERS: SOCIAL WORK IN SEARCH OF EMANCIPATION FROM PENAL JUSTICE

For many decades social work was seen as an investment complimentary to penal justice and mainly focused on public safety. Whether to help or to punish seemed to be a matter of “what works best” for social order.

The Flemish notion of ‘forensisch welzijnswerk’ was coined in the late seventies by a small group of ambitious criminologists, very much inspired by postmodern thinking and by critical scientific research. It was a call for a political conception of social work in a penal context, as an instrument for a permanent questioning of social order as such, and as a challenge of the authority of those in charge of it’s defence.

But is emancipating social work from a servant of maintenance to a critical facilitator of change at all realistic? Can it do without a proper space, an open, inviting structure ? Is such a space politically imaginable? And what could be it’s potential to enrich, change, or even abolish the imperative and repressive features of traditional penal justice?

In the early eighties, Flanders seemed to have a historical occasion to find this out. Due to an important State-Reform in a gradually federalizing Belgium, social work in the penal context was given an independent position as a specific authority of the Flemish Community. From 1980 on it engaged for nearly thirty years in attempts to find practical and conceptual balances between public and private interests in the battlefield of punishment, individual wellbeing and public safety. Meanwhile, compared to the preliminary ambitions and notwithstanding quite an investment of public funding and a growing number of professionals involved, the actual outcome in “facts and figures” might look disappointing. And still, “forensisch welzijnswerk” survives and seems to have found it’s place for a long term stay in the complex social landscape.

As a former practitioner in this field of social work for many years, the research I’m currently involved in is above all driven by an aim for “understanding” how we got where we got, what and whom we were and became. An aim for looking back with others at thirty years of “forensisch welzijnswerk” as an inter-subjective learning-process, a challenging representation of the past for the future, to be discussed and overruled.