

The Common Ground Amongst Social Professions in Achieving Social Justice: Dream, Wish or Illusion?²

Panel Discussion – January 2007

*You should sleep nine hours without dreams. Then you have
the day for dreams.
(Herbert Marcuse)*

The task of wrapping up has always the two sides to it: being limited by what had been said – though having the advantage of having something like the last word after having been inspired. Speaking of the last word, I promise the last word is meant to be just an opportunity to open a new debate with many subsequent words and sentences. For the moment take the fact that I am speaking as representative of the European Foundation on Social Quality just as expression of some kind of schizophrenia – not knowing where I belong as I could represent as well the Department of Applied Social Studies where I am at least in a part-time position. Schizophrenia refers however more to the fact of not knowing if and to which extent I am anything as a social worker, a youth and community worker, social politician – or perhaps just an *animateur* as some of us understand ourselves in France. – So, first: ex-post animation, i.e. review.

The crux mentioned by the presenters and questions raised from the plenary

The title of the event could have well been something as ‘Public – Private – Power’ or ‘Problems and bureaucratic systems’. It is interesting that – taking the originally given title of the panel discussion, i.e. *The Common Ground Amongst Social Professions in Achieving Social Justice: Dream, Wish or Illusion?*, actually a large part of it had been left outside of what had been issued, namely the common ground. Supposedly *Oscar Wilde* once said ‘If one cannot change the world anymore, the world will change oneself.’ And as social professions have to a large extent stopped to change the world, actually stopped thinking about changing the world, the profession itself has changed indeed its face – and continues doing so by refusing to investigate the common ground as centre stage. Instead the profession looks at how it is possible to adapt to a changing world, following the slogan: I want to wash myself though I refuse getting wet. We are speaking of social problems in the sense of people – individuals and/or groups having problems with adaptation or even people being a problem within

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² The following are the preparatory notes from the author, edited and added after the event on grounds of presentations and debate.

society; we are speaking of problems of the profession in dealing with the environment: bureaucratic overburden, financial restrictions etc.; we point on processes of de-skilling and increasing market orientation of students; there is mention of the need of cooperation between different strands of social professions. And we are pointing on political aspects, the need to (re-)claim social justice, policies for social cohesion etc. And all this is without any doubt extremely meaningful. However, only little is said on the positive definition of social profession: matters of socialisation and the genuine and positive role social professions (can) play. The latter means as well to deal with social professional activities not least in terms of a process – complex and dealing with contradictions and contradicting in itself. Model-building and model-thinking under these conditions had been shown as problematic. And with this it had been shown that the claim of being expert actually fades out the core of the entire debate: the consideration of what actually the social is. Thinking the social in terms of we (the experts) and they (the users, clients, customers ...) leads necessarily into the wrong direction. It has to be clear that the experts of the social are people who live in a social setting, people who are social beings. If anything, we are experts in (part of) social steering.

Conclusions – Four Theses



From the book cover of Erasmus Schöfer: Ein Fruehling irrer Hoffnung. Die Kinder des Sisyfos (Spring full of terrific hope. Children of Sisyphus; Koeln: Dittrich Verlag, 2001) drawing by Barbara Manns

Introducing myself as representing the European Foundation on Social Quality is not only flaunting schizophrenia; in my view, another reason is that we have to relocate ourselves – which may be a matter of schizophrenic reality. Still, it may be better than paranoia.

From my point of view, the entire debate on – in which way ever it is defined in detail – the crisis of the social political setting and the social professional activity has something of the character of a wounded animal, caught in a corner without seeing the exit, and getting rapid in looking for the last loophole to safe its skin. The effect, however, is that it finally carries his coat to the market, ascending the scaffold.

At the end of this discussion I want to propose four theses for further consideration and debate – and I will try being at least somewhat provocative.

1

Social professions are fundamentally defensive. Throughout their entire history, they never really criticised the system in which they worked – and as soon as they did this step it equalled to a large extent not voice but exit (*to allude to Hirschman's Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations and states, 1970*). Raising the voice was seen not as part of professional activities in the strict sense but as stepping out of the professional role which is continuously defined as being a social technocrat – then criticised from outside. The reason for such a statement is not that I want to suggest political opportunism – actually many opportunists had been much more honest than somewhat verbally radical opponents. Reason for seeing professional activities as taking a defensive stance is, that most of the debate is lead on the one hand by negation and on the other by moral standards, wishful thinking. If we continue to counter liberal arguments unsophisticatedly by defending something we do not properly define, it is even worse than what one can call honest opportunism. We have to acknowledge that many opportunists have at least a clear understanding of what the social is. And we have to equally acknowledge that 'the profession' does not have any well-founded understanding of the social. At most, the social is defined by moral standards of good-doing, by ideological 'wises and dreams' or something that is today in a position to replace and substitute *Hegel's* absolute idea or the *Kant'sche* imperative. In short, I am convinced that social work has to regain a genuine identity and liberalise itself from the role of a service – slave of others. Only in this way it is possible to overcome the individualism underlying current debates and practice.

2

Coming to a fundamental methodological challenge we have to face – and we frequently push out of the way – I want to come to dialectics and the twofold character of *Aufhebung*, the fact that sublation and supersession fall into one – the unity of opposites. It is by strictly applying this rule it is possible to find a way that takes reality into account not as given structure but as space for action that aim on realist change.

3

Beginning with defining the social, the following dimensions and their definition may be helpful.

Socio-economic security

is the degree to which people have command over material and immaterial resources over time in the context of social relations.

Social Inclusion

is the degree to which people are and feel integrated in the different social relations (systems, institutions, organisations and structures) that constitute everyday life.

Cohesion

is the strength of social relations between people (including networks) which are a function of the integration of the integration between integrative norms and values (including trust and solidarity) in society.

Empowerment

is concerned with the means and processes necessary for people to be capable of actively participating in social relations and actively influencing the immediate and more distant social and physical environment.

Taking these definitions as point of reference, we can see major issues raised throughout the previous discussion in another light.

- * Professions and disciplines – all this has to consider meaningfully as well questions for example around causing discipline, asking for discipline, and being disciplined
- * ‘Working with’ – the usual stuff on consumer, customer, client, user, co-producer – why is it so difficult to speak just of citizens?
- * Vulnerable groups – what is with a society and social conditions violating rights of individuals and groups – meant in every day’s life? And I do not speak of the violation of rights in countries from the so-called 3rd world or the so-called new member states of the EU. I speak of the violation of rights in the old and core countries of the EU. Already a couple of years ago, Amnesty International pointed out that the EU could not be member of itself as it disregards its own claims as far as social rights are concerned – and Shengen and Dublin are just one example.
- * Are we really – any of the professions – providing a service and if so to whom? Considering that it goes back to *servum* (nom. *servus*), i.e. ‘slave’.
- * From here we can better grasp what it means to talk of genuine social rights rather than rights for individuals in regard of social issues.
- * In terms of teaching the question then is if we actually want to serve students – teaching, educating and serving the professional interest rather than markets and demands has to be seen as the actual point of reference of teaching and research.

Coming to international debates now, we face a similar problem. The EU and national governments ask us for *good practice* – and in the professional debate we are naïve enough to follow this notion. I am speaking here for instance from experience I have right now from being involved in a politically highly sensitive major project, so-called project of excellence. I can only say that I am not sacked yet – but I am experiencing since about one year, i.e. the time of the project work began, a tension of which I hope that nobody has to go through. Having said this, the fundamental problem is that we allow others defining what international stances are, what globalisation is about. I do not want to preach martyrdom. But I want to remind you that we can refer to experiences of honest international work – *Thomas of Aquino, Zsuzsa Ferge, Paolo Freire, Walter Lorenz, Hans-Uwe Otto, Alice Salomon, Peter Townsend,*

Juan Luis Vives. For them, international work meant and means experience and practice and reflection without prejudice – at least to large extent, although they have (had) national backgrounds and even some kind of very traditionalist approaches, defending their social pedagogy or whatever their position was and is. But at least it had been and is connected to something which is much more important than their heritage. The thinking about and the collaboration for a common future. – And at least some of you can imagine why I mentioned some of the names that I mentioned.

In any case, nothing is gained by looking mainly at work done in the colonial powers of each nation. I could say as well, if – taking the Irish example – our international ambition stops at the neighbouring island we are badly advised (I say this having myself a multinational status which makes it rather difficult to find a positive point of reference).

Dream of a jester and child

Standing at the beginning of a new year I may be allowed to end with a wish for this and for the subsequent years: Let us not talk about professions, their differences and commonalities and their respective contributions to improve the system, to defending standards. Let us first discuss what these standards are: what social rights are, what empowerment is about etc. – and I do not mean the moral dimension, but the real dimension, the dimension after a dreamless night.

Children and jesters

*Children and jesters need freedom
They love truth, sun an light
Children and jesters ridicule the gold
Despise the power that men promises to give
Only children and jesters are playing with dreams
They talk with trees and know; it is possible for men
It is only children and jesters who live in fairy tales
They live in magic worlds – and they believe in them to make
them true.*

(unknown source)