



Social work and the search for meaning under conditions of modernity

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ABSTRACT

Social work is a clear product of modernity although it builds on values and helping traditions of pre-modern times. Therefore, its practice reflects and needs to confront many of the ambiguities that characterize processes of solidarity and ‘helping’ under conditions of modernity. Both the progress of secularization and the widespread re-emergence of religious affiliations bear witness to this ambiguity and require differentiated responses that neither pay naïve homage to rationality nor advocate an authoritarian ‘return to traditional values’. It is proposed that a critical acknowledgement of the importance of dimensions of human finality, derived from, for instance, the theological thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, can provide a basis for a sensitive, value-oriented form of social work practice that acknowledges the fundamental openness and vulnerability of the human condition without condoning suffering fatalistically.

Husserl states at the beginning of his famous Vienna Lecture of 1935: “*To live as a person is to live in a social framework, wherein I and we live together in community and have the community as a horizon*” (Husserl, 1965, p.150). For him, “living” goes far beyond physical existence and means “purposeful living”, or “creating culture within historical continuity”. Measured against this criterion he perceived Europe at that time to be in a deep crisis, dating back to the ravages of the First World War and the consequent fragmentations between and within nations. Europe was in desperate need of a remedy for this crisis. But this diagnosis did not inspire him to simply look for a technical solution, but to explore more fundamentally the question what kind of scientific enterprise could offer a remedy for that crisis — the reliance on empirical science, which seemingly had triumphed with the advent of modernity, or rather the strengthening of human science which had difficulty in keeping pace with the natural sciences under those conditions. Human sciences were concerned with phenomena and hence with the meaning people give to nature as well as to social processes and the development of phenomenology as a philosophy therefore has immediate practical consequences. The following considerations concerning social work’s scientific paradigms are inspired by phenomenology.

The diagnosis of a crisis sounds familiar to us today; the European project is in deep crisis, and not just because of the imminent Brexit. The appeal to a European Universality and Unity has faded in view of growing nationalisms and separatist movements in many member states, which in turn reflects the growing importance egoism has assumed in economics and hence also in politics (Schain, Zolberg & Hossay, 2002). It seems as if in view of the constant confrontation with diversity, the

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availability of an infinite range of possibilities of life-styles, of entrepreneurial ideas, of choices among ways of making sense of life our ability to cope with this diversity and to find the binding elements in diversity has come to its limits. Instead of finding tranquility and security in this “new world of possibilities” as the full realization of the modern dream of freedom and autonomy, contemporary societies are characterized by restlessness, insecurity and an increasing amount of internal controls (Bauman, 2000).

This discrepancy is nothing new, however, despite the infinitely intensified challenges of diversity in the age of globalization and instant electronic communication. Rather it lies at the core of the project of modernity. Modernity by itself did not increase the cultural diversity that distinguishes societies — if anything, it has had the effect of reducing it for instance in the availability of native languages which have rapidly disappeared, particularly on the continent spearheading modernity, our Europe. It is the meaning that diversity assumes which became problematic in the wake of modernity (Wagner, 1994). In traditional societies cultural identity was a collectively lived experience, something one got born into and over which the individual had no influence. Since the times of the Roman Empire cultural diversity did not count as a problem as long as the different cultural communities showed loyalty to the empire and particularly as long as they paid their taxes. The diversity that existed outside the boundaries of the empire was written off as ‘barbaric’ and was largely of military importance only. In the empire’s European successor, the “Holy Roman Empire”, the Church, meaning the only, all-embracing, Catholic Holy Church carried this unifying function and ensured loyalty through the threat of exclusion, extermination or damnation (Wilson, 2016).

The scenario in Europe changed in connection with the events which we commemorate this year particularly, the 500 years since Luther pinned his 95 theses to the gates of church of Wittenberg, commemorations in which the achievements of a Jan Hus, John Wycliffe or Jacob Hutter often get obscured. The reason why the Catholic church hierarchy ultimately could not suppress these movements as mere heresy was that they struck a chord with people inspired by a gradual intellectual and cultural turn towards a different location of authority: Renaissance, Humanism and the Enlightenment represent movements towards locating authority within the grasp of individuals, of endowing the individual person with the capacity to see and thereby to judge for himself, movements which eventually resulted in the enlightenment with its the appeal to rationality as the unifying principle (Israel, 2001).

Both the spiritual as well as the scientific protagonists of these transformations were confronted with the profound dilemma of on the one hand wanting to validate the individual and hence giving subjectivity a key function in procedures to establish truth and authority, and on the other wanting to establish a seat of authority that was universal and hence objective. Luther and the other great reformers solved this dilemma by bestowing such authority on the bible as the word of God and thereby as the only legitimate, universally available way of knowing about God, leaving the natural scientists free to find and rely on the laws of nature. With these the physical universe could be grasped as a coherent whole that functioned rationally and thereby independently of various cultural conventions which had previously described its nature.





But these compromises were brittle and the seed of subjectivity flourished nourished by the simultaneous promise of freedom and power, and this particularly in the political sphere where the question of authority raised the question of legitimacy with ever greater urgency and without having recourse to objectivity. Modern democracy resulted from this desire of individuals for autonomy and subjectivity as a new basis for authority, but not without this process having gone through the horrors of the Thirty Years' War and particularly those of the French Revolution of 1789 and not without being accompanied to this day by the threat of totalitarianism and dictatorship. Totalitarianism could get a grip on societies not only through the use of military power, but also through taking ideological recourse to natural science paradigms in the sphere of human affairs, by describing the course of history as something that follows the laws of nature and of declaring the dominance of certain elites as the automatic and inevitable consequence of natural selection (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002), thereby attempting to legitimate the Gulag as much as the Nazi extermination camps, the Cultural Revolution of Mao Tse Tung's Red Brigades and the Killing Fields of Pol Pot, to say nothing of the slaughter of indigenous peoples in the Americas, in Asia and in Australia and the horrors of colonialism in Africa (Bauman, 1989).

All these developments are somewhat related to the overall process of secularization (Taylor, 2007). Religion increasingly assumed the character of a private affair with the widespread separation of church and state at least in Europe and this allowed not just a greater differentiation of denominations within the churches but also a fundamental shift in the legitimation of the truth claims made by religion (Meister, 2011). 'Belief' was no longer grounded in authoritative dogma but in subjective convictions without recourse to a 'higher' authority (Berger, 1967). From a purely scientific point of view religion appeared to be more and more a kind of social arrangement for political purposes, Opium for the masses.

And yet, even in the light of these challenges, modernity could not do without religion, and as witnessed in our present epoch, religions have far from disappeared in modern societies but are enjoying growing popularity (Pew Research Centre, 2015). Scientific explanations for natural and social phenomena do not quench the thirst for meaning that occupies modern man and rituals or habits shape everyday life without any reference to their rationality or effectiveness. Weber's thesis of the "Entzauberung der Welt", the disenchantment, did not happen or rather, people miss the enchanting in their lives and constantly seek it or seek to reconstitute it (Jenkins, 2012).

What has all this to do with social work? To understand the relevance and the intricate connection with these issues one has to understand social work as a thoroughly modern phenomenon and profession. Granted, there had been antecedents of organized helping in traditional societies, charity and benevolence were community phenomena that helped to maintain the cohesion of traditional communities within the bounds of culture and hence with all the discriminatory side-effects like stigma and exclusion. But the need for social work as an organized and professional activity goes alongside the realization that solidarity structures in society had changed fundamentally with the advent of the industrial and the political revolutions of the 18th and particularly the 19th century. Belonging to a social unit under the conditions of modernity was no longer something that one was born into and that could therefore be taken for granted — all solidarity structures had to be re-created and legitimated

because people became essentially strangers to each other. Before that, when somebody had fallen into poverty it was usually the parish that formed a place of rescue and last resort — now people came to live in anonymous industrial towns where no parish structure existed, where families were split up, where migrants from different parts of the country had to live together. Charities played an important role to rescue people from sheer destitution, but this was not enough because relying on charity was considered to be a-moral and an offence against the work ethic. Why should you get something for nothing — at least you had to show willing to make an effort to belong to the new age and the new working conditions, and so social work assumed a political and a moral function, educating people to cope with modern conditions (Lorenz, 2015).

Social work therefore inherited all the features and hence all the ambiguities of the modern age, and we should not be surprised that this profession is characterized by tensions and some fundamental contradictions. These are not signs of incomplete professionalization and weaknesses in the conceptual and theoretical grounding of that profession, but rather show the professions enmeshment in the incomplete process of modernization which needs to be worked out not so much at the theory level but in every act of intervention (Lorenz, 2012).

Some of the contradictions social work inherited from the ongoing process of bringing about modernity are the following:

The approach that social work theoreticians take to ground interventions conceptually is caught up in the tension between seeking a scientific model according to the criteria of natural science and those of the human sciences. The arguments for the former are that in dealing with peoples' social needs we have to have a clear understanding of causalities in the development for instance of poverty or maladjustment in behavior in order to be able to correct those causes and arrive at a successful change. This model is assuming renewed significance in the age of evidence based practice (EBP) where such causal connections are supposed to have been researched and documented in order to allow practitioners to choose the most effective mode of intervention (Mullen, 2014). At the same time, we are also conscious that the same cause, for instance living in a deprived neighborhood or having been brought up in a damaging way has very different effects on people, some manage to cope better, others are destroyed by those circumstances. We are therefore justified in locating our methodology more within the realm of human sciences in which individual meanings of given circumstances are recognized as influencing and modifying the results, because what matters in the coping with adversity is the ability to give those circumstances a particular meaning and significance, or taking away a given significance. This is what humanistic (and also cognitivist) interventions are aiming for and which open up a whole new perspective on change processes (Soydan, 2012). Therefore, the split between natural and human science paradigms as the basis for effective interventions runs right across social work and it cannot settle easily for one camp or the other and making that distinction has direct implications for practice.

Related to this tension is also the discrepancy between the attention to the individuality of each 'case' or rather of each person, which the intervention needs to respect as the carrier of 'agency', an aspect that has become so central in the development of modern mentality as it is so closely related to aspirations of freedom and au-





tonomy (Bandura, 2006). Each categorization carries the risk of applying stereotypes and denying this individuality which every person values not only psychologically but which constitutes also the civil and human right to personhood and the individual choice of identity.

At the same time social workers, unlike psychotherapists or counsellors, are never simply contracted by individuals to deliver them a service. They are always also representatives of the public and hence have a mandate to consider the well-being of whole communities, the impact of an individual intervention on wider society and the general rules and laws of behavior of a particular nation state. Their actions have a general, if not to say universal dimension from which they cannot escape.

A further characteristic of modernity reflected in the dilemmas of social work is the impossibility to reconcile the demand for individual freedom and in that connection the right to be different with the principle of justice and equality. One could say that the entire process of law making in modernity is a constant attempt to come to terms with this tension, of guaranteeing the rights of individuals in the exercise of their personal preferences such as life-style, ideological affiliation, choice of partner or exercise of a profession, and at the same time ensuring equality with no reference to differences of gender, race, religion or sexual orientation. 'All same and all different' is the magic formula for this principle which sounds attractive but is notoriously difficult to practice. For social workers this means on the one hand an appeal to approach their work without prejudice or preference according to the motto 'people are people', and on the other a very explicit attention to personal characteristics. In the wake of a second wave of social movements in the 1970s and 80s we saw the development and formulation of 'feminist social work', 'black social work', 'gay social work', and it would be unthinkable for instance for a male social worker to work in a women's refuge, and the placement in care of black children with white foster parents became increasingly problematic.

Social work is also at one and the same time a profession with strong international characteristics, and a profession that always makes specific reference to national and indeed local conditions. This profession was international right from its origins when the pioneers of the profession, mainly women, sought to base professionalization clearly on international contacts and comparisons in order not to become subjected to and reduced to the execution of national social policies and regulations (Hering-Calfin & Waaldijk, 2003). But quite apart from the re-emergence of nationalisms also within the European Union which emphasize differences particularly in national social policies, there has also been a tendency in social work towards 'indigenisation' in the form of an emphasis on national and cultural traditions in recognition of the risk of becoming instrumental in a kind of cultural colonialism that seeks to impose universal standards on specific and indigenous cultures. This connects also to principles of practicing social work with intercultural competence and giving recognition to collective identities that have historical roots (Houston, 2002).

And finally, can social work be called an entirely secular profession? In some countries the answer seems a clear yes, but one need only to look at countries like Germany or Norway, and also the Theological Faculty at Charles University Prague that educates social workers to realize that there is still theology based training institutions for social workers. This points to the importance the churches had in founding

modern social work, and this not as a continuation of previously existing approaches and institutions, but as their specific contribution to modernity. Because it has to be recognized that also the churches underwent fundamental transformations with the advent of modernity. Not only did those churches that had a strong basis in urban and industrialized contexts recognize the importance of adopting social responsibilities and basing their Christian message on tangible projects for the benefit and welfare of existing and potential members, but entire new churches sprang up like the Salvation Army which was specifically dedicated to a 'social mission' (Hill, 2017).

It would make social work highly suspect if it operated through direct or indirect pressure to make clients dependent on belonging to a certain church or denomination and in that sense a strict adherence to secular neutrality is appropriate. But this does not mean that social work practice and education can be divorced from the kind of ethical questions which are the domain of religion (Crisp, 2008). All social work interventions have an ethical dimension and require a firm basis in normative arguments (Banks, 2001), and here the dilemma of social work which it shares also in this respect with the whole project of modernity has a particular and positive significance. The dilemma is a reminder that this issue cannot be resolved by one-sidedly opting for either an agnostic position in which matters of religion or more generally of ethics can be solved purely with reference to facts or to regulations as a higher substitute for security or for an explicitly religious, faith-based position which allows for no other certainties and hence can have highly discriminatory effects.

What is required of social work with this as with the other ambiguities which connect it to the unresolved process of modernization is to sustain the inherent tension, because it is the same tension that people living under modern conditions are grappling with daily. This is true particularly with regard to the issue of secularism because when there is currently astonishment that religions have not only not lost their attraction in modernity and have not yielded to secularism but, on the contrary, are gaining in popularity, this astonishment stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of modernity as being identical with secularism. No philosopher has perhaps identified this fallacy as clearly as Friedrich Nietzsche who in the famous passage of *The Gay Science* has the Madman look for God and declare, 'We have killed him — you and I. We are all his murderers', but then goes on to say, 'Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?' (Nietzsche, p. 119). He knew well that modernity has not resolved this tension and that the existence in a world without God requires of humans that they substitute themselves for God — with all the catastrophic consequences that both god-less authoritarian regimes and zealous God-states continue to demonstrate to this day.

And closer to the praxis of social work, this means that in a secular age we have to beware of the danger that we might carry out our work by placing ourselves in the position of an all-knowing, all competent authority that rules over other people's lives. It means that even when, or particularly when we are faced with ethical questions and dilemmas we have to beware of playing at being absolutely right and being God, or taking recourse to religious teachings and deriving our unexamined certainty from dogma. Such misuses of religion, just as the total elimination of religious considerations from our work, are the greatest dangers of secularism.





This is particularly the case because practically all situations and tasks social workers are confronted with touch on people's search for meaning. People who encounter financial adversity struggle with questions of injustice, people who confront crises of health, of disability, of broken relationships are intensely driven by the "why" question, parents who maltreat and abuse their children express therein their helplessness in finding meaning in their lives. Nietzsche's Madman sets the scene for practical approaches to ethical questions of meaning and reminds us that it is the task of modern, secular social work to accompany people in their search for meaning, not to give them answers.

Because in modernity the meaning of religion has also changed fundamentally and has become infused with the same sense of humility that accompanies serious and honest natural scientists in their quest for understanding the world (Horgan, 1997). The more they understand, the more questions open up, the more the limits of understanding become apparent.

At this point the intricate link between Christianity and modernity becomes relevant for both, as several contemporary philosophers have implicitly or explicitly recognized (e.g. Giorgio Agamben's (2005) interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans; Aalan Badieu's (2003) claim that in Paul the foundation of universalism can be found, Slavoj Žižek's (2014) claim that Christianity is the access route to materialism). Christianity is not the victim of modernity but one of the driving forces of modernity. The immediacy with which Jesus and the early Christian apostles and churches proclaimed the relationship of the individual with God initiated a process which, through many stages in which figures like Augustin and the Reformers at the dawn of modernity played a central part, shaped the modern self as an autonomous, self-responsible entity. But in this newly proclaimed immediacy with God was implied that it preserved the fundamental difference between humans and God, which means the autonomy can only develop appropriately when it recognizes its boundaries and limitations, which practically means not overstepping the limitations that are given in our human existence. And this becomes apparent very specifically in situations of relationship crises such as social workers are called upon to deal with.

What we can conclude from this is that social work can well be exercised without reference to religion as long as there are other supports in place to help social workers — and thereby their clients — to bear the realization of their limitations and of the impossibility to resolve everything in human relations.

Beyond that it can be argued that a strand of Christian theology is particularly apt to lead further into these questions concerning secularism and can help to maintain the particular character that religion can and must play in modernity. This Christian message in modernity does not take the form of an unambiguous answer but that of a question, a question accompanied by the faith-based hope that in supporting communities (with other people and with God) we can find the strength to leave this central question without a final answer, the question of meaning and of making sense of our lives.

To understand this seemingly paradoxical contribution of theology to the age of secularism we can turn to the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who particularly in his letters from prison talked not so much in terms of 'modernity' but in those of a 'world come of age'. In a letter of June 8, 1944 to Eberhard Bethge he writes: "*Man has learnt*

to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the “working hypothesis” called “God”” (Bonhoeffer, 2017, p. 117). For him the God that Jesus proclaimed according to the New Testament is the opposite of the notion of God proclaimed by religion. Christians in this coming of age of the world are called upon to live “etsi deus non daretur”, as if God was not a given entity, or did not exist in our understanding of existence. The God of Jesus is not the superhero that fixes everything, he is weakness incarnate in Jesus. This is a comforting rather than an uncomfortable message in a world that seems to be driven by the search for certainty, false autonomy and risk elimination.

This does not mean that only Christians with a deep theological understanding can be good social workers. But it means that Christians have a political responsibility particularly in social affairs to correct those one-sided developments of what has been called ‘late modernity’, developments which seek to resolve the dialectics inherent in modernity and turn the project of liberation into a nightmare of control and oppression. Many social workers and not least their clients demonstrate what courage it takes to live in a world without God, but also what freedom it brings to accept our human limitations and weaknesses unsentimentally and with hope. Meaning is what we grant each other rather than impose on each other, this is the essence of good secular social work.

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