

Social work in Greece – history and present

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This article introduces an insight in the historical evolution, the social role, the ideology and the orientation of social work in Greece.

Introduction

Society is a space that guarantees democracy, social justice, equal opportunities and welfare to all its members. However, a large number of scientific studies show that equal opportunities are not a feature of western societies. Social work in Greece as well as other European countries begins with the establishment of charitable associations, which means that the evolution of social work aimed at the social integration of individuals when it was realized by the state that social problems could not be overcome through repressive measures, which were later complemented by public policies.

1. Historical evolution of social work in Greece

The history of social work in Greece begins in antiquity. The city of Athens had very early recognized the importance of health for its citizens (i.e. personal and general welfare) and promoted a line of measures that guaranteed free medical care (what is commonly known as public doctor) and social welfare. This welfare was later expanded to include the relief of handicapped as well as adolescent children, who enjoyed the welfare of the state until adulthood. This provision was later expanded to include the elderly, the sick, the helpless, the blind and so on. These social measures were also continued during the Byzantine period, under the influence of Christian teachings.

During the Ottoman Empire period (1453-1831) there was no form of social welfare for the enslaved Greeks. However, during this period, the Greek communities were activated, and this activity was very significant both during the classical antiquity and the Byzantine era. In parallel to the Communities were the guilds and the unions, for all three of which, the obligation to support the poor and the handicapped, as well as the people who were in need of social welfare, was included in their activities. Along with the bodies mentioned above, the Church also offered social welfare to the enslaved nation.

The newly founded Greek State (1831) was seriously interested in the social welfare of children, especially the orphans of war, and towards this direction, special measures were promoted for their welfare as well as their education. In the context of this attempt, there was a significant amount of contribution from the benefactors of the nation (i.e. Greek citizens who lived and worked abroad), who funded the establishment of schools and charitable institutions, in order to help the orphans and relieve the misery of the poor.

In 1915, one of the most important social institutions of Greece was founded, the “Patriotic Institution of Social Protection and Custody” (PIKPA in Greek), which among its obligations had the protection of mothers, children and the youth under its auspices. The disaster of Asia Minor (1922) brought about the migration of one million Greek people from Asia Minor to Greece. This emigration caused tremendous social problems. The Ministry of Hygiene, Welfare and Custody (1922) was greatly activated in order to deal with the problems of adults but mainly of children. The establishment of four institutions was then promoted, the National Orphanage, the Nursery School, the National Rural Kindergarten and the Rural Housekeeping Schools. Especially in the Health Sector, a line of measures was then promoted for the medical care of the citizens. For instance, doctors were appointed in great cities having the obligation to examine and treat patients in order to eliminate various transmitted diseases (malaria, tuberculosis). At the same time, special regulations were promoted for the improvement of the national health system as well as the training of suitable medical staff, particularly nurses (1930). For this reason, the first Medical School and the first School of

Nurses were then founded.

In parallel with the state's measures, initiatives from private bodies were undertaken for the provision of children. Among these initiatives are the professional training schools, further education schools as well as institutions for homeless children. Similar initiatives of international character, worth mentioning, are the YWCA (HEN in Greek, 1923)(offering help, support and education to young females) and the YMCA (HAN in Greek, 1922, offering young males education and material support).

In 1937 the Free School of Social Welfare was established, providing education to young girls desiring to engage in social work. This school was shut down due to World War II.

Concluding, the main characteristics of social work in Greece before WWII can be summarized in the following: Social work, despite the lack of state programs, exhibits some progress and relative development in the treatment of social problems, which is complemented and expanded by private initiatives as well as the Church of Greece. The WWII and later the Civil War (1944-49) caused a great disaster in Greece, both in human lives (10% of the population –men, women and children- were killed, 10% suffered from tuberculosis, 10% suffered from malaria, 25% of the children were orphaned) and in material damage (20% of the population became homeless). In order to deal with such tremendous problems and damage, Greece received help from International Organizations, like the UN, as well as from countries like the USA. At the same time, the government tried to help the population through various programs in order to overcome this emergency situation. In this context, the Royal National Institution was founded in order to help dealing with the social and educational needs.

However, the greatest amount of help in social welfare was provided by two institutions: the National Welfare Organization (initially Royal Welfare) and the Northern Provinces' Welfare. The National Welfare Organization put initial emphasis on children who were unprotected after the war. Around 40,000 children received provision in child centers of the organization. In collaboration with helping groups, the organization took over the repair and construction of schools, churches, public buildings, water supplies and so on. In the 1950's the organization maintained 263 institutions in northern Greece, the so-called "Children's Homes", which were later renamed as "Social Centres". Today, there are the so-called Family Care Centres working under the supervision of the Social Welfare.

2. The role and direction of Social work in Greece

If we take into consideration that social work in order to fulfill its emancipating demand, should present theories and approaches that maintain a critical attitude towards the social reality and consequently the practice of social work itself, then the present summary constitutes a minor contribution that we hope to prove useful.

Through this historical review, it appears that, like in other countries, also in Greece, social work began with the establishment of charitable associations that were founded by wealthy people and were supported by the church. Charity, that is, was a form of bringing balance aiming at material equalization. Also, the ideology behind charity intended to create the attitude that charity would contribute to the elimination of poverty. In this context, a number of institutions were founded (orphanages, kindergartens, nursery schools, as above mentioned) and the institution of the public doctor was promoted.

These attempts continued in the later years, during which, social work exhibits an interesting progress towards the preservation of the present system. Particularly after WWII, the officially recognized practice of social work is expressed through measures concerning medical social work, psychiatric social work and child provision. In recent years, the sector of child provision has been under development, with the sector of school social work following immediately after.

Based on the following, in relation to social work in Greece, one can notice three distinct approaches that developed in different eras, but remain active until today and influence the entire field of social work. These are namely the approach of private provision (focusing on the weak and provision deriving from the wealthy), the approach of state intervention (the state undertakes a controlling role of the citizens' condition) and the approach of social action (offered collectively by all citizens).

The general view of the context, role and aims of social work in Greece nowadays, focuses on a triple scheme, which includes, in mutual interaction, the maintenance of social class and the provision of services in groups with increasing needs, the personal "reinforcement" of individuals and the facilitation of social transformations. In the same spirit, the social organizations try to adjust and help those affected.

What also needs to be emphasized is the fact that irrespective of the level of social work in Greece in comparison to other countries of the EU, social work in Greece is lacking, to a great extent, the critical approach towards the theory as well as the practice of it, which is necessary for the qualitative enhancement of the profession of social work. Moreover, the rate of progress for the profession of social work, which has been significantly promoted in the past few years, will depend on whether social work schools prepare professionals who can realize a prospect aiming at social transformation.

3. Social Work in Greece today

Today, the most important actions of social work are undertaken by the Social Welfare (previously National Welfare). Its actions focus on the provision and education of the family and the child, the provision of adults, people with special needs and the financially weak, the social housing and so on, aiming, like in the past, at the "partition of sporadic cases" and the individualization of problematic situations in contrast to a collective treatment. The administration of the Social Welfare (on a national level) consists of the Departments of Social Relief, the Departments of Social Services Provision, the Departments of Control and Supervision and the Departments of Social Research and Social Insurance. At the same time, the services mentioned above, are adjusted in groups of individuals with similar problems and interests (for example unemployed young people, adults, foreigners etc.). These services materialize programs for all ages. The rapid evolution of society and constantly arising social problems, require the readjustment of the Social Welfare programs and social work, in order to deal with the social problems that constantly increase and become complicated.

In 1982 the General Secretariat of Young Generation was formed, having as its main purpose, the formation, the surveillance and the coordination of the state policy for the young generation. The General Secretariat of Young Generation undertakes a number of actions and programs in the core of the policies for the youth, particularly in the following sectors:

Participation, Information, Spare time, Venturing.

It pays great attention to the cooperation with the social bodies, particularly the organizations of the youth and the local forces dealing with the youth and childhood, basically aiming at the alleviation of problems and their resolution.

Summarizing, we could say, that in relation to social work in Greece we notice three distinct approaches that developed in different times but remain active till today and influence the whole spectrum of social work. Namely, that of private provision (focusing on the weak and provision derives from the wealthy), that of state intervention (the state undertakes a controlling role of the citizens' condition) and that of social action (offered collectively by all citizens).

In recent years there is an ongoing discussion expressing the view that the new social policy should rely on the basis of the cycle of life, as the earlier distinction of the citizens' periods of age does not correspond to the new demographic, family, social and technological data. What is suggested, is mass investments in childhood, education, the youth and women, that

guarantee the well-being and prevention of social exclusion in later stages of life. It remains to see the future of these initiatives.

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