

Social Work as ‘Political Economy’



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Social work definitions create an idealistic image

In general terms it can be said that the definitions of social work are characterized by narrow and idealistic pictures of their objective. The definitions distort the reality. They emphasize the social work's ethical and moral nature in a one-sided way. The definitions ‘downgrade’, or even ignore the social work's political and economic nature. Also, the over-historical characterizations of social work constitutes a problem relative to its definitions. The definitions guiding construction of paradigm of social work have to reflect the reality of its own given place and each time.

Societies and challenges of social work and social work itself change in the course of time. In order to disclose a more specific definition and a paradigm which reflects more accurately today's social work and economic reality and social problems. It is needed a critical reflection on social work. The current social work should be viewed in relation to respective society along with its economic, political, and ethical-moral principles. When society along with its social problems takes a new course, also social work and its characteristics change. For this reason, the definitions and guiding paradigms must be corrected in order for the social work not to drift into a crisis as a social practice or applied social sciences (Cf. Kuhn 1962).

The crisis of the existing social-work paradigm manifests itself in the fact that social work is only seen as a practical activity, or as an ethical or critical counter-force of economics. Social work acts mainly as a critic without disputed contributions and suggestions. It has not convincingly or plausibly presented economic solutions or effective alternatives for social support measures. Social work has been quite silent and outside effective practical economic policy discourse.

My key thesis or theory implies that social work does not exclusively comprise implementation of the social laws and acts or over-historical ethical-moral manifesto in which issues or injustices can be mirrored. It is a delusion to think that social work should in nature consist of charity. Social work has developed each time period deep roots into politics and economy, along with cultural values exhibited by the society.

Social work encounters citizens' everyday life and its practical problems. Field presentations and speeches are powerless if they only offer an ethical and moral manifesto. If statements are rooted in a paradigm reflecting the society's economy, politics and values, the social work is empowered and able to critically and argumentatively raise issues along with its political and economic consequences. Social-work's real-time paradigm is able to analyze the capacity of policy and economic criteria and options with regard to their effects on citizens' daily lives. Therefore, social work constitutes both a societal and critical power, if its paradigm reflects the real, existing society and its social problems and economic relationships.

In order to attach the social work to a critical social force to be reckoned to a social practice or applied social science, social work should be seen as connected to the economy with a structure similar to that economy outlined by Aristotle's in the form of a practical and moral science. Over time, Aristotle outlined the economy as a form of applied and practical social sciences. To him, the economy included both practical sciences as well as an exigency linked to the citizens' daily lives as cornerstones for a good and virtuous social life. As a practical social science, Aristotle introduced into the economy two elements: target-orientation and morals. First of all, in his view, a practical science relates to an idea or essence which enhances the understanding of the objective linked to matter or activity. The implementation of the objective is not possible according to Aristotle, if you do not understand the idea.

The carpenter cannot build a chair, if he has no idea of the chair and the concept for making it. On the other hand, in a social context it is required that applied, practical science goes hand in hand with virtue and respectability, as well as with taking the other into account. Morality does not represent any irrationality, but reflects the issue and the idea of implemented actions.

Aristotle revealed that the citizens' success was made possible only through a thriving and virtuous behavior between people. Economics, politics and morals along with accomplishments turn out to be – according to Aristotle – seamlessly intertwined. Issues are to be organized in terms of joint political decisions (Aristotle 2012). Aristotle's economic philosophy emphasizes virtue and morality, and consequently has features of the idea of modern social capital as a resource for society with financial resources as complements.

Social work features as 'political economy'

Aristotle created an image of economy, which contains a lot of elements that are included in the so-called political economy. Economy and politics are connected to each other, as well as to certain fundamental ethical and moral requirements. These same features are inherent also in social work, if it perceived as an economic factor in society. This, however, is done hardly ever.

The most common definitions and characterizations of social work point to some of Aristotle raised aspects of economy: ethical and moral issues and governance with political determinants. Social work is often characterized as a special administration, policy area. On the other hand, social work also examines the ethical and moral aspects while coupled with academic research and teaching areas. However, these descriptions of social work do not indicate usually contact with economy which however is real.

The world takes shape in a two-fold way. On one side there is economy and the other side ethical and moral social concerns are found. This dichotomy is partly due to the so-called positivistic economic thinking, or non-normative understanding of the financial and economic liberalism.

The economy comprises, according to the general characterizations, the operating range or markets in which various economic units function. They take care of investments, production, consumption, savings and favorable conditions for economic growth. The role of social work is primarily to provide support for individuals and families in deprivation and poverty, who do not have access to the economic growth and to the financial resources needed to survive in everyday life.

Social work, when it is connected to the financial aspects, is often confronted with a critical attitude. Social work is seen as a mainly cost-triggering activity which weakens people's own activity and incentives. Social work is rarely seen as a promoter and activator of economy or as a social economic developmental resources or as a force that strengthens the social capital.

Positive economy-thinkers consider social work as a kind of ethical-moral manifesto. Social-sector representatives agree with this line of thinking when they mirror social work in the functioning of the economy or economic sciences. Social work is not considered to comprise economic rationality in the form of economic efficiency and precise mathematical economic analysis. Social work is less accurate and more normative compared to economy. The key issues are not magnitudes that can be measured with the same rigor as those in economy. Social work – as a kind of counterbalance to the economy- is considered to represent mainly human values e.g. human rights and social justice, as well as a decline of inequality. These issues cannot be defined and measured with the same rigor as financial magnitudes. For this reason, things are often considered to be related to irrational vagueness. However, economy is not value free. Values of positive-economics are implicit, these are in social work explicit.

The values of social work do not represent the Christian ethics, which was criticized as irrational by the Enlightenment. Social work for instance, does not equal lay work of churches. The values of social work are criteria of rationality for its actions and functions. Values are historically rooted in post-Christian value critique of Enlightenment. On the other hand values of social work are based on critique of the Enlightenment and its irrationality and failures in politics.

In social work values are explicit and laid the foundation for secular and political ethicists. In liberalistic economic thinking, values are implicit. They are not indicated. Rational economic thinking emphasizes the 'invisible hand', reflecting a market operating in a rational individual for his/her own good. However, it would be problematic if the human being is subjected to reduction by a narrowed view on man: Homo economicus, whose life is based purely on market mechanisms and economic calculations.

In fact, the functioning of society and its development is not simply based on market and economic capital and activity. These issues are also fundamentally affected by the so-called human capital and social capital. Economic capital is a key asset, which, however, needs trained, skilled people (see, for example (Shulz, 1961), and people who are able to solve problems and build social trust (see e.g. Putnam 1993 and Kajanoja 1998). In order to function without interference tangible economic factors should be accompanied by intangible 'capital' forms. The construction of these requires ethical and moral principles to safeguard the fairness and to fight against an increased inequality. Increased inequality and feelings of injustice jeopardize improved human and social capital formation (see e.g. Wilkinson and Pickett 2011).

There is a need for 'interference' of the ethics' and morals' 'visible hand', hindering people from missing out on education and mistrusting the society and its activities. The role of the ethics' and morals' 'visible hand' is to regulate the market economy's 'invisible hand' in accordance with Aristotle's spirit of understanding of virtuous economy and society.

Aristotle's practical political economy highlights the wise, teleology and social person instead of Homo economicus. The position of an individual citizen and his possibilities is not only determined by the economy and its criteria. The wise and teleological, virtuous man is in his development and well-being as 'zoon politicon' linked to the community and to the spirit of

togetherness. Social work, as a political economy, builds connections between individuals and their families relative to the community and its other members as well as between social institutions.

Social work is also responsible, in the absence of resources or when these are scarce, to organize tangible and intangible resources that are needed in everyday life. These activities and their research happen at the micro, 'grass root', level in a given social context. In these activities the focus is on the acute problems of everyday life. Social work looks towards the future and its goal is to alleviate social dysfunction. In a way, the future of social work can be characterized as a constructive 'life politics'. In another way, social policy compensates for losses of social risks based on past-determined criteria. 'Life politics' social work is similar to the economic and social assets – stressed by Aristotle, who emphasized the importance of virtue in economy and politics-, if social work submits to the guidance from the 'visible hand' stemming from the political economy's virtues, morals and ethics.

Social-work activities as political economy

Social work is usually addressed in two ways: Critically and pragmatically. Critics are suspicious of and even a little belittling towards social work. The most common criticism of social work comes from the outside.

Pragmatists see social work related to social and personal benefits. They are in favor of social-work practice, at least to some extent, and in some forms. Social work is criticized primarily because of its use of financial resources and activities. The costs of social work tend to increase and the costs of the whole are considered to be high. In order to save budget are cut, often in the field of social activities. In addition, it is proposed to undertake other forms of savings for customers to reduce costs. Critical politicians who want to save are willing to give up two basic principles: Universality and subjective right. These two principles constitute the cornerstones of the Nordic welfare. At the same time we are about to change criteria for problem assessments for individuals and their families. Until now, the traditional definition of social problems or their basic idea has comprised the view that the problem is solely created by an individual. The problem stems besides from individual choices also from social background factors. However, all do not agree with this idea that social background factors are involved. They emphasize that individuals possess equal chances to create their own happiness.

Today, social problems are individualized. The backgrounds of the problems are not perceived as related to people's social life or world. Instead of stressing the collective responsibility the focus is laid rather on the individual responsibility. If problems occur, corrective actions are directed towards the person. Societal factors and normative ethical principles are left out – in the spirit of liberalism economy - from corrective actions, because it is thought that interfering with the 'invisible hand's' guidance, may hinder the mechanisms of social processes and make the situation worse, because then at least the economic self-reversibility is hampered.

When social work is not seen as an economic force in the development of society, it cannot be trusted as a mere ethical and moral practice or research area. Real criticism applies in particular to the protection of children and to work with elderly, as well as to situations where management of customers with multiple problems is at hand. The core of the critique is directed to the fact that social work does not hold the so-called concrete outcome tools and proofs compared to parallel helping professionals.

Today, problems traditionally addressed by social-work are attributed to medicine, criminal care or education, leading to an increase in evidence-based results relative to efficiency and economy. At the same time, social-work tasks are passed on either to health care, health-care professionals, the legal field, the police or the courts, as well as to schools, teachers and pupils' support staff. Behind the passing on and individualization of tasks prevails the assumption that other professionals have some sort of technical tools that allow things to be resolved more cost-effectively. If one would have to address the institutions and their activities in relation to customers, the costs grow to a substantially larger extent compared to the costs of handling an individual case. It is thought that jointly designed institutions are almost complete and rational. Individuals who act alone are irrational and make mistakes or are imperfect while drifting into problems.

The model of thinking as to delegation and individualization of social problems includes a number of problems. Success in the world of education, work, and many other social arenas shows that people do not hold the same opportunities in society. When considering that people are not creators of their own happiness, social structures provided by a variety of conditions such as impact of policies along with changes of assessments, are released. For example, the thresholds for people with disabilities may remain high and accessibility does not come true for them. If the risks and problems are not seen as communitarian and as belonging to all, the universality is unloaded and social work gets the remaining, means-tested features of the policy. At the same time people are divided into two unequal groups and the social-work power as an asset for social capital withers.

Another delusion is that individualized problem-solving takes place in analogy with professionals from social engineering. Social work faces social problems which cannot be resolved by means of professional social engineering. The social-work client largely resolves his problems himself. The social worker's role is to support and provide tangible and intangible tools to the customer to build up a new life horizon for the future where the problem has disappeared or will be resolved.

Social work and its research have during the last few years been subject to quite vociferous criticism. Despite this, the approach has been pragmatic. It is a generally accepted consideration that the public sector, central and local government, owes ethical and moral obligations towards the citizens. This responsibility has convincingly been handled over to social work. The ethical and moral fulfillment of the obligation is not only to assist individuals and families in difficult life situations. Social work also includes important public policy issues. By helping and supporting people in difficulties social work resolves not only individual and family problems but also societal dysfunctions along with society's own problems. Social work is also supported by international agreements and national laws relative to obligations imposed on it by the implementation of the criteria for well-being. Any support measures or other types of interventions on people's lives are not possible to execute without laws or ratified legislations in use. Social-work activities are organized by clear-thinking political decisions. The activities concentrate on issues that are politically defined and enshrined in the legislation as social problems. Besides the definition of the problems in addition to the legislation which empowers the operators and the activity types, the resources are defined as well as clients' legally guaranteed procedures.

Social work is intertwined with the economy and economic processes in many different ways. First, it has besides a legal basis for a fiscal budget also in the public budget a resource base for specified activities. In addition to a budget for administrative activities, it encompasses financial resources, which are used as tools for social work in its helping people to build a

new life horizon along with the alleviation/resolution of problems. If we look at social work only in the light of budget figures, social work appears to be costly. But if we look at social work in a wider economic context, we find that it includes social and economic value-increasing features. These investments cannot be achieved if a strong social work budget is cut down, and if the sector has to operate with too limited resources.

By means of scarce resources social work is not able to solve the problems. Unresolved problems again become over time quite expensive. In natural science there is an area known as 'the law of conservation of matter,' according to which in chemical reactions the substance does not disappear, even if it is deformed. However, in social work we meet a kind of economic and social cost conservation law. Unresolved problems do not go away. They are just transformed and the costs are transferred to new places. I want to give some examples.

Think of the waiting lists for health care. The formation of queues for social-work services and offices may not directly increase costs. However, waiting in queues prevent a higher quality and cheaper development of therapies. E.g. a long waiting list for respite care is not promising. Relatives do not necessarily care for the client on the waiting list, even when the conditions would be favorable, because they know how difficult and laborious it is to obtain treatment when a client really needs help again. As a result of the queue is that operations cannot be developed and costs cannot be cut.

Let us take another example from young people's world. In the compulsory education a young person displays school problems, and he begins to disturb. Teachers get tired of the situation and get the principal in order to restore the peace to relegate the student from school. At the same time access to labor market conditions are poor. The improved atmosphere of the school generates over time costs for the labor authorities. Unemployed young people can find friends who try any kind of activity to pass time. Substance use may lead to substance abuse treatment or mental health services, and so forth, where costs arise. The labor authorities may find that the young is not fit for the labor market. Labor administration costs decrease unemployment payment in the end. The costs will eventually be transferred to social services, because income security is regulated by means of subsistence. This young is not satisfied with the social worker's proposals and his level of income. He begins to improve his financial situation by committing offenses. After him being caught the costs are then transferred to the judiciary, policing, or possibly prison administration.

A problem of its own consists of social problems' unresolved solutions and the costs of 'the conservation law' because it causes a fragmented service or financial system. The different departments in pursuit of economic savings and efficiency can be used as a tool to help customers' transfer to another sector and /or unit. The greater the efficiency and productivity of the unit is achieved, the more severe and costly clients are transferred elsewhere. Social work along with its position is problematic because its services are the only remaining options of helping forms. Social work pays in one way or another the rest of the unsolved problems.

The above mentioned issues highlight the fact that social work includes an important social economic potential, which is not always perceived. On the other hand, social work is relevant for building the individual human life. Social work supports the citizens' connections to social arenas and prevents social exclusion by means of social and economic investments. Social work activates the citizens in situations where they have lost their autonomy and competence. Dependent people lose their ability to determine for themselves the content of their lives and living conditions and living environment. Their control over their own lives is narrowing down and the potential to perform when facing the future challenges becomes more difficult.

The control over one's own life is reduced. Competency revocation is all about the fact that people are not performing independently when facing the challenges ahead. Their independent life management is made more difficult.

In both situations, the people are not free. They possess, in principle, the so-called negative freedom which means that various prohibitions, orders, and commands do not limit their functioning in a certain goal-oriented direction. However, they lack positive freedom, namely the tools and support needed for advancement in a particular course. In a free environment, people are more or less not free. Autonomy decreases by a number of factors: Social factors e.g. related to the individual, such as aging, and diseases or decreased activity caused by the limitations of freedom, lack of autonomy, competence, and other limitations. Social-work background factors are slightly different. A wide range of society-related issues, such as lack of earning opportunities due to resource depletion and management problems may be hidden in the background of the problems.

Resource shortages occur in the form of problems with money for subsistence, in addition to problems with insufficient knowledge and skills as well as with complications in social relationships. These traditional forms of poverty can be found alongside the new forms of poverty, which are produced by the change of society. New forms of poverty include lack of employment and scarce training opportunities, or remote services, non-existent transport and communication links, distant housing for remote areas which lost their development opportunities. The rapid social change adds to the difficulties of life also comprising shocks of culture and future (see, eg, Toffler 1981). A cultural shock is related to the fact that people do not have adequate skills and cognitive resources to adapt to the changes in their environment and its altered requirements. The shock of the future is caused by the fact that the alterations are rapid and sustained and that people have no time to adjust to them. Rapid changes undermine the predictability of life and complicate life and make the construction of a guiding life horizon more difficult.

Failure of autonomy and competence, as well as loss of a positive freedom is not just an individual's own problems. These factors may also cause social distress. People are not always able to meet societal expectations directed towards them. Parents have difficulties to cope with educational responsibilities for their offspring. Children's academic performance is weakened. Relationships in families and communities become critical. Retraining and continuation education is shunned. Under-qualified people do not reach the labor market. Employment along with necessary relocation fails, which issue was recognized by Bengt Pohjanen along with his presentation. Society cannot access all social and economic resources. When social work promotes people's autonomy and competence, it strengthens simultaneously social resources of individuals and social capital.

Summary

I started my presentation by moving forwards from crisis and criticism of the current social-work paradigm. For social work is not solely enough to underline ethical and moral aspects. It has to perceive itself as an economic factor and a resource. Social work must reflect on and build its own paradigm within the framework of Aristotle's practical economy. Then it is possible to perceive social work in everyday life as a functioning political economy and presents disputed contributions, suggestions and alternative solutions. Social work in the form of a political economy links to economy and politics, in addition to its responsibility of virtue. Social work stresses solidarity and ethical-moral considerations but must not simultaneously perceive society and its connections to society in a narrow restricted way

while forgetting its own economic significance. Social work can be a real societal force not only a counter-force of economics by increasing justice and quality of life.

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