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Towards a Political Theory of Social Work and Education

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Abstract

The article focuses on Gramsci’s elaboration of the concept of hegemony to analyze the function of Social Work during the periods of Fordism and post-Fordism. It discusses the limits and opportunities for a democratic development in the theory and praxis of Social Work.

Keywords: hegemony theory, social work, intellectuals, post-Fordism

1.

In order to suggest a political education of social work along the lines of Gramsci’s hegemony-theory, this paper aims to achieve two things:

(1) it seeks to contribute to the development of a political/radical analysis and justification for social work, a profession with a consistent and radical political self-understanding.

(2) on the other hand, it attempts to consciously shape this accepted political component; it tackles the question: by what means can political education be made an integral component of social work?

The paper attempts to realise these aims within the context of Gramsci’s hegemony theory, based on an understanding of the two interrelated areas involved, namely political analysis and theory and the actual practice of social work and political education. In this attempt, the political understanding of social work is grounded in a critical-materialistic theory. In this context, individual and collective formation processes are understood as moments of self-performance, what Marx calls, in the Theses on Feuerbach, ‘revolutionary practice’.

It seems reasonable to provide a rough outline of Gramsci’s thoughts at this point. One must keep in mind that Gramsci provided not a Theory of Hegemony handbook but repeatedly revised notes; these fragments were not intended to be published but served mainly as a means of self-assurance. His notes therefore are not to be seen as a source for a final theory. Nevertheless his thoughts about a new concept of Marxism as a ‘philosophy of praxis’ can stimulate an analysis of one’s conditions: ‘the prison notes remain a painful document, not because they provide finished explanations, but because they bring up difficult and unresolved questions and an antidote against self-satisfaction.’ (Buttigieg, 1994, p. 554).

Gramsci’s initial thoughts focused on the reasons why a revolution did not take place in industrialized and highly developed West-European states. Even economic crises seemed unable to threaten the reproduction of bourgeois society. In addition to traditional Marxist views of the State, Gramsci shed light on the many ways, apart from the use of force, by which the consent of the subaltern classes to bourgeois rule is secured and organised (see Gramsci Gef. 7, H. 12, §1, 1502 and Gef. 4, H. 6, §88, 783).
Refuting simplistic theories of manipulation and conspiracy, Gramsci argues that this established consent is based on the actual *leadership ability* of the ruling class; he argues that the subaltern expect to reap advantages for themselves, and are incapable of exploring and articulating alternatives.

Hegemonic domination is not the prerogative of specific sites. Hegemony is diffuse; it is produced through a wide array of agencies and institutions such as the mass media, schools, churches and associated organisations, street names and architecture. They are as much involved in the construction of hegemony as are such features of social life as philosophical debates, travel agencies, Nobel prize awards, parliamentary debates, the German ‘Stammtisch’ (synonymous for reactionary political discussions in a pub), military action, scientific publications, corporations’ investment strategies, nuclear waste transportation, fast-food outlets, advertising campaigns, medical care provision and organisation, space travel, stock prices, soccer, unemployment and the internet (see Gramsci Gef. 2, H. 3, §49, 374). According to Gramsci all of the above, the list of which is by no means exhaustive, comprise civil society. Within the complex of ‘civil society’, as conceived of by Gramsci, no part can be *substantially* distinct from others, including such areas as ‘politics’ and ‘economics’. On the contrary, according to Gramsci’s understanding, civil society only serves as a heuristic conceptual tool to help one identify its different constitutive elements. It is meant to enable one to comprehend the dynamics of hegemonic domination that entails a *real unity* of ‘economics’ and ‘politics’. It is intended to underline the coherence of the hegemonic process. It reveals how areas where domination does not occur in a *violent form* are implicated in this process. These areas should therefore be subject to critical enquiry in view of their role in supporting the reproduction of social relations within bourgeois society.

The contemporary slogan of the ‘private being political’ becomes redundant in Gramsci’s conceptualisation of hegemony where ‘private’ and ‘public’ become one. ‘If Gramsci repeatedly talks about the “so called private organizations” of civil society ... , it is to arouse sensitivity to the problematic nature of these old concepts. Within the context of Gramsci’s conceptualisation of hegemony, “the private” is not simply the “opposite of the public” anymore’ (Jehle, 1994, p. 519).

Within this context *common sense* has a special meaning since it forms the starting point for every political movement and therefore [is] to be carefully analysed’ (PIT, 1979, p. 65). The battles for ‘common sense’ and therefore hegemony (hegemony is not limited to common sense) are waged by intellectuals. It is they who organize the ‘spontaneous consent’ of large masses of people and also the latter’s possible refusal of and resistance to alternative concepts. This function is not limited to ‘academics’, writers or philosophers. Intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense of people engaged in ‘organizing and connecting’ (Gramsci Gef. 7, H. 12, §1, 1502), *also* include police officers, union leaders, student representatives, soccer stars—and social workers.

In simple terms, hegemony entails a successful mix of force and moral leadership, of economic structures and a political distribution of power. It also entails a
common ideology (around which there is consensus) and the inclusion and exclusion of subaltern groups in a societal process of reproduction under the leadership of one or more classes. The alliance of these groups under the leadership of one or more classes constitutes the *historical bloc*. This is a constellation that provides relative stability in its processes. Within the historical bloc, different societal practices form an organic unit, which is cohesive both in terms of chronology and space. Constituent parts are separated and identified only for analytic and heuristic purposes.

The depth and power of a historical bloc can be determined by how seemingly indisputable terms are being defined. Definitions and constructions of ‘objectivity’, ‘the popular’, ‘good’, ‘beauty’, ‘help’, ‘welfare’, ‘health’, ‘youth’ and ‘aging’, to mention just a few, are related to questions of power. “The ‘objective truth’ constituted as the societal form of science, therefore is the truth of the ruling/dominating classes, thus a hegemonic effect produced by the balance of power in the historical bloc. Science itself can be regarded as a historically specific manifestation of the coordination of consensus and dissent of what is generally considered and accepted as the truth under the conditions of a “balance of societal conditions” dominated by the bourgeoisie’ (Demirovic, 1989, pp. 84f). If these terms appear to be indisputable and irrefutable, then it is obvious that a certain hegemonic arrangement is in place.

2.

Social work’s politicisation is conditioned by changes occurring in the nature of its social responsibilities. This is particularly true of the conceptual changes regarding action-based intervention. For decades social work practice had been seen as a ‘politics of passive and active proletarianisation’ (Lehnhardt & Offe, 1977). As such, social work practice entailed the integration of ‘deviants’. A normalisation exercise was carried out in this regard. Because of this, the area, viewed in both its academic and practical aspects, became the object of much criticism. The area’s focus on ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ came in for much criticism in the course of which calls for the ‘client’s’ autonomy and self-determined lifestyles were made. Recall that these concepts, fashionable in contemporary professional discourse, represented minority positions, in social work practice, at the time.

One would be mistaken to assume that only the more reasonable arguments prevailed in these debates and that traditional positions were abandoned simply because of the provision of novel and better insights. The changes in approach to the field in both its academic and practical aspects must be viewed in light of the socio-economic changes that took place during the last twenty years. Once the notion of ‘regular employment’ began to lose its significance, social work conceptualised and carried out with this purpose in mind became questionable (see Schaarschuch, 1990).

In the first place, the objectives governing both the academic and practical aspects of social work originally emerged to support its ‘normalisation’ and
‘assimilation’ orientations. Later these objectives served to provide alternatives to these orientations. These orientations represented not an isolated and unorthodox type of social work but one that was mainstream, reflecting dominant, albeit contested, political tendencies.

One feature of social work practice is that of enabling clients to accept and adjust to a situation of exclusion from paid labour—a permanent and not a temporary situation of exclusion. This situation concerns not only individuals (as far as individuals are concerned, this situation had existed in the past) but also and more significantly whole groups (e.g. youths). Through pedagogical support, members of these groups are being prepared for a life lived in permanent ‘poverty’. The socio-political objective here is to eventually remove such groups from the job market.

The replacement of homogenisation of labour, a characteristic of the former Fordist style of production with its emphasis on ‘full employment,’ by the present situation of multiple societal fragmentation, has led to a reorganization of social work. Systematic assimilation is no longer the primary goal. The concern now is with controlling the different marginalised groups in order to avoid a threat to the whole system. It is therefore ‘not the objective of regulation to impose a very specific type of normality; social policy’s task is the regulation of a fragmented society’ (Schaarschuch, 1995, p. 78).³

At this point one needs to keep in mind that opposed to the clearly naïve impression that the target groups of social work are not the ‘clients’, the ‘disenfranchised’ or the ‘social problems’, but as Kunstreich and Peters (1988) pointed out, the economic and political power groups, which have very opposing interests in specific societal reproduction modalities, which, translated into social work and—repeatedly argued and changing—are being suitably defined.

According to this understanding social work is not only a hegemonic battleground of the different classes and class fractions, but also a room in which groups and projects from outside social work are articulated.

Social Work becomes a central tool for socio-political action, which utilizes the common sense of ‘clients’ in a specific way. By acknowledging autonomy and selfdetermination (on a low material level) to those concerned, social work organizes self-understanding within the context of bourgeois domination. Or in other words:

social work tries to offer the excluded patterns of explanation, which are meant to interpret the exclusion as opting out, heteronomy as one’s own decision, and total dependency as autonomy. With this in mind, social work can only be successful by taking up decisive elements of the common sense of the ‘clients’.

3.

One cannot entirely comprehend the emergence of the post-Fordist change in objectives only through the ‘Verinselung’ (‘like being on an island’) of certain
cultures (Hirsch, 1994, p. 15) and the ‘Sozialmanagement der Spaltung’ (‘social management of division’) (Schaarschuch). The changes in production, that amount to higher expectations for workers, who are committed to the process of production but at the same time, do not question the overall purpose of the productive arrangement, facilitate the adoption of (cultural) and social work measures in factories. The dependence of the new production model on the subjectivity of labour and its willingness to entirely give itself up to the factory, calls for a ‘protection’ of emotional relations and ties. It is obvious that no mechanical nomination is possible here. The production apparatus is actually directly handed over to the passions, the motivation and the intensity of the workers, even if they experience this ‘handing over’ as discipline. There is no free time for ‘breaks’ as work occurs within the context of just in time production. This production system is highly vulnerable ‘even to crises from the periphery’ (Revelli, 1997, p. 35)—and periphery in this context cannot be limited to suppliers or economic subsidiary regions, but also includes those personality traits of workers that have a disruptive impact on the production process and high productivity ‘from outside’. While Fordism aimed at the ‘trained gorilla’ (but whose thoughts were believed to be free, or at least independent; see Gramsci Gef. 3, H. 4, §52, 533), the new post-Fordist work processes demand something that the neo-liberal religion of every day life calls ‘the total commitment of the whole person’. Examined scientifically, it is a form of self-defined action that is in keeping with the prevailing hegemonic arrangements (see Frigga Haug, 1997).

Simultaneously the gap characterising ‘subaltern participation’, that occurs between stimulated and satisfied expectations, between the propagated ideology of creativity and the actual practice of subalternity (Revelli, 1997, p. 36), widens. Even in Automationsarbeit (‘automated labour’) there is no participation in tactical corporate decisions, let alone strategic ones. Furthermore in the new trans-national corporate model, the place for strategic decisions occurs apart from the actual place of production. The finance network controls the work network, dictating place and time of production, without ever being in direct contact with the latter. The only connection occurs through the abstraction of capital (see Revelli, 1997, pp. 45ff).

The organisation of the workers’ efficiency/productivity, loyalty and identification with the corporation becomes an all-pervasive task. Managing this task will involve the following: company sports teams, festivities, supervisions, minimal capital stock as well as social work intervention taking the form of individual and collective counselling, support and advice.

The tasks, concerning the diverse fragmentations of society, are organized as ‘public’ social work (the principle of subsidiarity—Subsidiaritätsprinzip), in particular, proves to be a concept that suits the various individual groups with their different cultures. The second field, as a new form of corporate welfare/social services/social work, is directly or indirectly under the control and management of corporations.
Furthermore activities and experiences meant to enhance individual social character (and therefore to enhance the value of labour) are of strategic importance for the new requirements of high-tech production. It is immaterial whether these opportunities are offered by private or public organizations: but it is obvious that the customers of social work will have to pay for the use of these services, a process that is already occurring in the educational field. It is obvious, however, that this translates into socially and spatially differentiated opportunities and this brings about greater societal fragmentation.

These indicators of a fundamental change in social work—part and parcel of the (radical) changes characterising the elimination of the Fordist historical bloc—mark unresolved tendencies; there is no automatism in their assertion. Last but not least it is also a matter concerning the still open political shaping of these processes. The theoretical analysis of hegemony (hegemonietheoretische) enables one to contribute to this: the investigation of social work cannot be limited to the general statements mentioned before, but has to be examined closely. This process entails an examination of the hegemonic concepts manifest in all relevant fields of practice.

The operation in question and the argumentation brought forward to support it can be completely or partially contradictory: while an official position of the association/lobby group is being presented to the public, the individual street-worker/social worker engages in an everyday social work practice that is at odds with some of the claims made by the social work association or organisation. Regional differences have to be taken into consideration in addition to chronological/time differences. The interior design of a social welfare agency (shabby, confined, dirty or user-friendly) is just as much a target of the hegemonic battles being waged by social workers as the social workers themselves. These extensive investigations would be mechanistic if they are viewed one dimensionally without taking into account the manner in which they are contested, reinterpreted (see Willis, 1991), utilized and altered by those who are directly affected.

The terrain for research is wide and varied.

4.

Even though political/radical education within social work practice (and theory) has to be in sync with the ‘policy of the social’ (see for example Redaktion Widersprüche, 1997), some principles can still be outlined regardless of that development. These are principles for a process of social work which is conscious of its political/ radical elements, thus capable of initiating and supporting individual and collective educational processes.

Political/radical education in social work cannot be seen as taking the form of a course or seminar. Even if in some instances (e.g. youth work) conventional educational methods are being used, this still constitutes the exception. Political/ radical education can lead to a change in social work and its impact on society
only if the participants of social work practice consider political/radical education as a dimension that is integral to their practice. This especially means adopting a critical research stance with respect to one’s practice and to examine whether the very forms of practice, where social work appears to be entirely ‘non-political/non-radical,’ are practices that support the existing hegemony—practices that serve to consolidate the bourgeois bloc. Long files and missing chairs in the social welfare agency of Schnödelcity convey to people, seeking counselling and making claims on the system, clear messages concerning their societal position: they are too many; they are unwanted; ‘your claims impoverish us’ etc. A critical approach to social work, in this context, contributes to the political self-definition of the ones affected by it. It also constitutes the foundation for further thinking about political/radical education.

If there is no choice regarding whether or not to politically/radically educate, then the decision needs to be made regarding whether this is to be done in a manner that is unnoticed or to a large extent consciously and with a purpose in mind. A coffee maker could be regarded by the visitors as an indicator of the social welfare agency of Schnödelcity, something to be welcomed by the employees of the agency.

To consciously carry forward the political/radical education dimensions of their work, social workers require a consciousness of their own position and function. This is structurally contradictory, which is why I would like to characterize them as ‘fractioned intellectuals’ (Hirschfeld, 1998, p. 199) with regard to Gramsci’s theory of intellectuals.

In their work, social workers are only effective if they develop a particular relationship with groups of clients and gain the self-confidence necessary to engage critically with their work. These situations appear as moments in which the social workers take over ‘objective/tasks of an organic intellectual’, because the social workers are more or less the assimilated intellectuals of these groups—except for those few instances when former users of social services, such as rehabilitated drug addicts, return to the relevant field as professional social workers. Even then, their official position as professionals can separate them from the users of the social services they provide. Their perception of the objectives/tasks of an organic intellectual is only partial—and therefore often instrumental. If someone would—not just partially—but entirely act as an organic intellectual of a particular group, he/she would not only jeopardise his/her own employment (there are numerous examples of this) but also not appear to be ‘professional’ in the strict technical sense of the term (see Nagel, 1996, p. 82).

This also has implications for the scientific preparatory education of social workers, which, despite the perhaps great efforts of individual faculty members, provides the students with the kind of self-understanding, through the hidden curriculum that places emphasis on ‘theory’ (isolated from practice) and related humanistic areas, that is typical of traditional intellectuals (see Bader, 1987, pp. 13ff.). Whether they do so successfully is another argument. Furthermore these
studies represent a process of social mobility for the students with respect to their family’s social standing (see Maier, 1995, pp. 48ff).

Therefore it seems appropriate to see social workers, generally speaking, as assuming the role of organic intellectuals of a social group—as constituting a cultural milieu of socially mobile educational achievers who are thus distinguished from the ‘deviants’, ‘losers’, ‘disenfranchised’. At the same time they have a sense of the insecurity/fragility of their career and their position, presenting themselves (and others) as the living embodiment of the current situation characterised by social possibilities, threats and social insecurity (see Nagel, 1996, p. 75; Maier, 1995, p. 48). This assumption ties in with the observation that most social workers today by large share the basic ideological ideas of their employers, who are loyal to state and economy—despite the increasing cuts in social services, cost-benefit orientation/economisation of social welfare and a deterioration of their own working conditions.

The characterization as ‘fractioned intellectuals’, as intellectuals who are in a contradictory position, is not the result of individual incompetence, but is rather an inevitable result of different predefined demands, which they usually could not meet.

It is striking that the figure/character of the ‘fractioned intellectual’ surprisingly correlates with the process of social fragmentation that characterises the terrain in which social work is carried out, its ‘Verinselung.’ (See above) It also correlates with the resulting goals for social work: it exemplarily embodies the kind of social character that is suitable for this society. The ‘Abteilungsdanken’ (Thinking according to departments) with its ‘Grenzschutzfunktionen’ (‘function of defending frontiers’) (see Nemitz, 1979, pp. 67ff) as a characteristic of common sense, is professionalised in the person of the social worker. It is generally known that in a class society, individuals ‘[stabilize] their identity and limited ability to act through establishing relatively individual forms of experience and coping ... this divisional structure of experience and coping allows the ideological subjects a manifold bookkeeping which makes unquestioned approval of contradictory conditions possible’ (Haug, 1993, p. 70). Social workers are not simply affected by this as participants in this society. They professionalize this skill/competence—not out of ‘stupidity’, but because they gain access to their clients by doing so. If they want to develop their social ability to act, they should do so within the borders of a bourgeois society.

Social workers teach their clients the ability to act within the given ideological contexts, by strengthening the ‘Abteilungsdanken’ (see above), supporting the ability to bear contradictions/tensions or even utilize them sparingly. It is about dealing with contradictions/tensions apparent in certain milieus/‘cultures’ or rather in the relationship with other social groups. They conduct ‘crisis management’ in a societal process which, in their view, ‘is characterized by crises in its normality’ (Nagel, 1996, p. 80) as reflected in the self-understanding of social work as a profession. That the quality of life can be strengthened and improved through these contradictions/tensions, requires a minimum of
acceptance of discontinuity and differentiations on the part of the affected. If they seem legitimate or even productive, then they are tolerable to the individual. Two things seem to be necessary for this: (little) self-confidence and a concomitant degree of collective integration. Incidentally the divided convictions of the group provide those contradictions/tensions or rather the strategies for coping with them, with the necessary legitimisation. Therefore it is central to social work practice to stop processes of anomie and/or create new connections (networks etc.).

In addition to the debate concerning the general political role of social work in contemporary society, a clear investigation of the respective organizational context in which it operates, has to be part of the development of a theory of political/radical education in social work. This provides a connection with Foucault’s institutionally embodied relations of power.

Critical social work, entailing political/radical self-understanding, has to and is capable of—operating within the contradictions of its objectives and conditions and the occasional liberties that arise from it. Nevertheless there are limits. Those have to be consciously acknowledged (even in the course of professional practice with those affected by social work) and openly discussed. These are to be seen as political frontiers, which are to be the object of critical reflection, but cannot be solved or changed solely through social work. It is important therefore that social workers engage in radical political work outside their professional and institutional boundaries. Even if this also applies to other professions such as plumbers, computer programmers, nurses and salespersons, the political/radical behaviour of (critical) social workers outside their professional contexts would enhance their coherence as social workers. The widespread point of view within social work to limit political/radical involvement to professional practice can lead to justifiable doubts and a possible sense of mistrust on the part of those with whom they work and with whom they want to engage in political action. This view can also result in there being little resistance to the worsening of one’s own working conditions.

5.

One can learn from Gramsci that there are indeed diverse forms of practice of knowledge, those of social workers and their ‘clients’ among them, but that none of them can claim any principal superiority. Even when Gramsci differentiates between common sense and philosophy (as a systemic, coherent body of knowledge), he insists that there is ‘no “qualitative” difference, but only a “quantitative” one’ (Gramsci Gef. H. 10, II, §52, 1345). The practice oriented forms of knowledge, be they common sense or science, not only do not differ in terms of their subjects (but only in terms of their respective thought operations), but all share the function of Vergesellschaftung (‘socialization’). No matter how much the outlooks on life and philosophies of a marriage counsellor and a homeless person may differ, they do not justify any superiority of one over the other. The basic common achievement is the Vergesellschaftung of the respective individual/group.

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The difference identified by Gramsci lies mainly at the level of its coherence. As for scientific theory, elements of the caveman are very much a part of this type of theory as the principles of the latest and most advanced science. One must avoid prejudice towards all past and local narrow-minded historical times and institutions of a future philosophy, inherent in a globally unified human race’ (Gramsci Gef. 6, H. 11 §12, 1376). Karin Priester pointed out that common sense is not just false consciousness but is rather characterised by its incoherence: ‘Remains of older traditions of thought, superseded cultural assets, prejudices, etc. are standing next to true/legitimate/rights and in some instances even critical insights’ (Priester, 1981, p. 19).

The bizarre ‘mixture’ that is ‘common sense’ is anything but the result of the people’s ‘stupidity’. The individual fragments have long proven to be effective to enable one to function in life. Also one has to consider that the ‘true/legitimate/right and in some instances even critical insights’ are isolated at the level of reflection, but are united in every day life, so that certain intellectual ‘saturations/investigations/penetrations’ of the societal situation can equally result in one’s ‘being tied’ to this state, to use Paul Willis’ terms (see Willis, 1979, pp. 183ff).

In the course of this, common sense has to be seen as existing in a subjective universal relationship with the world, as a worldview and interpretation. The development of common sense from the spontaneous, bizarre worldview, to a systemic, coherent philosophy is a process which does not necessarily spread through the ‘dissemination’ of knowledge. It is not a process that moves from empirical onesidedness to empirical universality. More so it is primarily marked by a process of the critical dawning of consciousness of the existing universal relationship of human beings to the world.

A result of this process, the worldview gains greater coherence, because the tested/proven/practical functionality of certain views of common sense is in itself a function. It is therefore contradictory to the totality and the relation of individual fragments/parts to each other: it is always just a partial functionality. It correlates with the relation of the individual fragments/parts. The real antagonisms and the real irregularities of society reproduce themselves even in the contradictions of common sense. They are changed in specific ways, condensed and intertwined. We can draw from this the insight that an individual is capable of action but this action occurs (as mentioned previously) in the ideological forms of a class society.

Political/Radical education does not simply attach something new to common sense; it does not add yet another ‘political division’. Gramsci stresses ‘that it is not about introducing a science ex novo into the individual life “of all”, but rather to renew an already existing activity and make it critical’ (Gramsci Gef. 6, H. 11, §12, 1382). ‘Activity’ in this respect is not limited to actual thinking, but it rather refers to those actions that constitute, above all, the lived (and not simply the thought) world view of human beings.
Since common sense contains ‘elements of the cave man’ as well as ‘elements of the latest and most sophisticated science’, actions can very much be found in the life of the individual that fit those sophisticated elements. It is about discovering those actions, recognizing them, realizing them and making them real. By doing so these elements become the focal points in the process of self-awareness: something that already exists is ‘renewed’, which means it is strengthened by the consciousness/realization of such an action. It can become ‘critical,’ to use Gramsci’s term. Critical in this context entails the ability to classify and identify relations (part of the critical culture). It is also a term that expresses the function of this renewed action within the totality of one’s individual life, which corresponds with the metaphor of ‘critical mass’ in the process of nuclear fission.

That this approach to social work exists is also a recognition of the individuality of those concerned with social work. Those personality elements, which are expressed through language, lie at the centre of attention. To social service users, these elements often seem to appear more replaceable, more irrelevant and less important as part of their person/personality, than actions and activities. The preoccupation with practical/everyday life, with the intention to make the subjects discover the consciousness of their action, acknowledges the active personality and at the same time gives the courage and strength to question others, to consider as well as come to terms with emerging tensions/contradictions, and eventually utilize them in a productive manner. Because even a developed, coherent and selfreflecting world view is a combination of theory and practice, and has to be implicit in practice.

At a certain point, part of the process of the development of self-awareness, crystallizing around the renewed action, has to be the understanding that language is a very relevant medium of societal action for the individual. The increasingly reflective debate, examination and analysis of verbal conscience explicated through actions occur in different phases, representing the respective relation between ‘talk’ and ‘action’. Even the unity of theory and practice [in the thoughts and actions of the individual] is therefore not a mechanically given fact, but rather a historic becoming. Its basic and primitive phase consists of the feeling of “difference”, of “detachment”, of an almost instinctive independence [of practice from theory] and which proceeds until a real and total possession of a coherent and universal world view is attained’ (Gramsci Gef. 6, H. 11, §12, 1384; see Hirschfeld, 2005).

Although the starting-point for social work should at first lie with the activities of practical/everyday life, social workers need to learn enough (from their ‘clients!’) in order to assess the possible results of such an action that is rendered ‘critical’. Those bizarre and contradictory elements of a common sense are very valuable to the owner, no matter how old fashioned they might sometimes appear to social workers. These elements (and the structure of their arrangement) have been tested by many in a similar situation. It is these elements that enable persons to cope with the demands that life make on them and they connect individuals with othermembers of their group, class, region and time. It would be irresponsible thoughtlessly deprive someone of this foundation. If a (self-)critical process is to
be started through the renewal of certain activities, ‘elements of the cave-man’ and ‘local prejudices’ etc, cannot simply be condemned. Social workers first have to recognize which actual problems are solved through them. Because those problems will not simply go away by doing away with the ‘prejudices’, which explains why all strategies for unmasking and exposing such elements have failed. In addition to creating insecurity and raising doubts, unavoidable but also productive elements in a process of self-awareness, one has to assist persons in developing problem solving strategies that serve as alternatives to those of the ‘cave-man’. These alternatives cannot just be abstract, but have to be at least equal to the old elements in enabling persons to cope with the demands of life; it would be better if they prove to be superior strategies to adopt in practical everyday life. Finally, the personal life style of the social workers is also a matter for critical discussion: their own life experience would enable social workers to examine the extent to which they can vouch for the ‘superiority’ of self-critical practices.

While at the beginning of this article, social workers were portrayed as ‘fractioned intellectuals’, one can now see the potential that exists in social work for a critical radically democratic social practice. One can easily agree that there are no guarantees for success, which cannot be secured solely by engaging exclusively within the boundaries of social work. It seems to me that there can be no other perspective for a radically democratic practice.
Notes

1. Gramsci wrote about Bukharin’s *Theory of Historical Materialism. A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology* in his prison notebook (7: §29): ‘If the doctrine in question has not yet reached this “classical” phase of its development, any attempt to “manualise” it is bound to fail, its logical ordering will be purely apparent and illusory, and one will get, as with the “Popular Manual”, just a mechanical juxtaposition of disparate elements which remain inexorably disconnected and disjointed in spite of the unitary varnish provided by the literary presentation .... But the vulgar contention is that science must absolutely mean “system”, and consequently systems of all sorts are built up which have only the mechanical exteriority of a system and not its necessary inherent coherence’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 434). This observation is still valid about the unlocked character of Marxist theory today.

2. The concept of ideology (as well as the concept of culture) is used, according to Wolfgang F. Haug (1993), to signify different forms of socialisation.

3. ‘One shouldn’t aim anymore at providing generally binding norms (“normality”) as from an ecological point of view one does not draw a distinction between useful plants and pest plants. One should accept every social group the way it is. However, not the groups, but merely the transitions between various social environments and social objectives should be moderate and flexible, for not having to fear the endangering of the complete system.’ (Kunstreich, 1996, p. 67)

4. Revelli claims that the ‘logic of presents’ is eliminating the ‘logic of contract’. The relationship of persons cannot be formalized to standards, ‘norms’ and procedures. It can’t, because it’s personal .... That’s why the employer-employee relationship which is formed in the postfordistic production model is in some ways similar to pre-capitalistic servitude. (Revelli, 1997, p. 32). On the other hand he articulates, in a later book (1999), that the post-fordistic model cannot reproduce social belongings. He, however, defines the challenge of the left as being not only that of political representation but also of providing a different form of socialisation (for a relevant comment on this topic see Hirschfeld, 2001).

5. It must be emphasized that social workers have to handle responsibly and carefully the problems brought about by social change, especially in times when one cannot identify a nameable, alternative democratic movement for a practical orientation to social integration. The menace of individual separation of the clients, caused by politically-blind social workers and provoked by the fading of cultural connections, is in this situation most hazardous. Particularly the politically interested social worker has to prove that his suggestions are opening an extended view of options for social action for his client that do not serve only his own political will. Sometimes the average or ‘normal-bad’ social work, trapped in the ken of civil society, is better than a social work fraught with political demands, which can’t satisfy itself and harms the client in the end. (Hirschfeld, 1999).
References


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