

Social Work in World-Society - Practice, Education and Politics

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Introduction

The point of departure in this paper is that the global socio-economic integration has led to a situation in which the whole mankind constitutes a loosely integrated world-society. Social policies and social work belong traditionally into the realm of national social policy regimes or national welfare states. The condition of world-society raises a question how national social work practice and education should relate to this broad social framework.

The above presented problematique is handled in this paper in three parts. First part defines the notion of world-society. Second part tries to identify global social problems and issues that constitute challenges to the present day social work. Third part arguments that in order to be able to react to global challenges social work education should try to overcome limitations imposed upon it by national and European policies.

This paper is a short preliminary version of a would-be article, it still lacks references and detailed treatment of some of its topics and its English has not been proofread. In short, all comments are welcome.

World-Society

A central premise of this paper is that global socio-economic integration has led to a situation in which the whole mankind constitutes a loosely integrated configuration that could be labelled as "world-society". The following paragraphs explain more in detail why this notion is feasible at the present time.

Let us begin with a classical basic definition of society. A society is a social system that has internal interactions; its members see themselves as belonging to the same social unit and a society is able to reproduce itself biologically and socially. This definition follows the classical definition that emphasizes the autarchy of a society (see, for example Luhmann 1997, 78-79, 88).

Autarchy is an especially important premise for the analysis of a social system because it defines and limits the relevant area of a research endeavour. This rationale evolves as follows. Each analysis and attempt to understand of a social system must deal with the problem of the boundaries of an analysed unit, and this issue of boundaries concerns both "open" and "closed" systems (see Luhmann 1987, 35). Defining the limits of a system is a fundamental operation when analysing a system since it is through this process that the relevant subjects, relations and processes of a study are defined. Without defining the limits of a system an analyst would end up endlessly questioning who or what the relevant actors, processes and relations might

be. With the aid of defined boundaries for a system and its parts an analyst can claim to be able to explain and understand social phenomena.

The great service that the notion of society does for sociology and the other social sciences is to be found exactly here. It is the notion of society that defines limits for the most important object of sociology: the modern state-society, the frame of reference for most sociological studies. These state-societies may be seen as open systems, but in most cases their internal actors, processes and relations are seen as sufficient elements when explaining and understanding these social systems.

The above stated rationale leads to radical consequences for our understanding of social life. If “society” is defined as a holistic notion which includes all the crucial social relations that must be taken into account when analysing social life, then a globally integrated world forms one world-society. In other words, inasmuch as the whole world constitutes a single closed social system, there exists only one configuration that fulfils the holistic criteria of society: world-society (see Luhmann 1997, 145-171). To prove empirically that global interactions have actually led to a sufficiently integrated world-society would mean displaying empirical evidence of global interactions, but gathering such evidence would enlarge this article too much (for empirical evidence of global interactions, see for example George & Wilding 2001; Scholte 2005).

It is worthwhile to note that interpreting the present global condition as “world-society” means a certain kind of interpretation of globalisation. “Society” refers to all kinds of human interactions and social configurations leaving room for social, cultural, economic and political interpretations and analysis. This approach rejects therefore narrow economic or political definitions of globalisation (see George & Wilding 2001). It rather raises an analytical question about how diverse political, economic, cultural and social factors intermingle and affect each other in a world-society.

Global Topics of Social Work

According to Vic George and Paul Wilding (2001, 192-200; see also George & Page 2004) global topics of social work include the following themes (the list has been slightly modified by me):

- human / labour rights,
- education,
- employment,
- health,
- environment,
- income / poverty.

Interestingly this list includes also themes like education and environment that are normally not regarded as aims of the social policy. Yet, the changing of the world transforms also environment and content of social policy. When the world changes objectively it would not be wise to ignore these changes subjectively by sticking into old definitions of social policy. These changes affect also the content of social work.

The above listed global themes seem to reflect global concerns but are these concerns shared by powerful proponents of global economic integration? This is an important question because the possibility of developing global social policies depends

on the political support of these policies and strong transnational actors play a decisive role when designing policies. In the following paragraphs this question is tackled by making a preliminary investigation of those global policy issues that a few central transnational organisations have raised in the recent years. These organisations include (sources used for this list are websites of each organisation):

- WTO (World Trade Organisation, est. 1995) “deals with the rules of trade between nations at a global or near-global level”.
- World Bank (est. 1944) handles global development topics. Gives loans, makes research, acts to diminish poverty and aims to strengthen good governance. 10000 employees in Washington and elsewhere: economists, teachers, environmental specialists, anthropologists, engineers and so on.
- IMF (International Monetary Fund, est. 1945) supports international currency system, economic growth and employment. Supports countries with financial difficulties. Produces statistical information, conducts research and has diverse projects around the globe.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, per 1961) supports global economic growths and trade, employment, financial stability and high level of employment. Produces statistics, research reports and policy recommendations.
- International Labour Organisation, ILO (per. 1919) tripartite (corporatist) organisation. Manages global labour legislation, diverse policy programmes and policy recommendations and campaigns, research activity.
- EU (European Union, est. 1993) is a political and economic community with supranational and intergovernmental dimensions.

In fact, it is foremost several international organisations that belong to UN family of organisations that deal with issues of global social policy (see Deacon 2001, 60-61) but I want to make a stronger point in favour existing of embryonic global social policy by concentrating on intergovernmental organisations that are normally not seen as advocates global social policy.

In Table 1 the above listed global topics of social policy are organised so that abstract and general problems are positioned on the top of the table the more concrete issues below.

Table 1 Global intergovernmental organisations and global topics of social policy

Problems	Organisations					
	WTO	World Bank	IMF	OECD	ILO	EU
Human / labour rights	x	x			x	x
Education		x		x		
Employment		x	x	x	x	
Health		x		x		
Environment	x	x		x		x
Income / poverty		x	x			

Sources: Websites of organisations.

Given the general assumption that the most of the above handled transnational organisations (the clearest exception being ILO) are supposed to strive for a neoliberal economic order in the world, it is surprising that these organisations nevertheless seem to take notice and even support a number of policies that could be subsumed under the general heading of global social policy. Especially the OECD has broadened its scope of activities during the recent years.

Certainly, a part of the concern expressed by the above organisations is not much more than a lip-service in the face of global public. Still, making statements that tie an organisation to certain goals may well lead to material results afterwards, and the policy makers of these organisations certainly aware of this. Hence, it is unlikely that these organisations make policy statements thoughtlessly. What factors may explain the above displayed somewhat surprising results?

First, it has to be taken into account that, similarly to nation-states, the above listed organisations are not unitary actors but they consist of a large personnel and diverse departments. Also similarly to nation-states, personnel and diverse departments represent diverse material interests and political ideologies. For this reason, a single international organisation may well publish studies and policy papers that contradict each other. The policy lines of these organisations change over time depending on internal and external political struggles. (See Deacon 2001.)

Secondly, it seems evident that social policy is not only a burden to the capitalist economy but it also fulfils diverse functions that support mature capitalism. This can be seen, for example, from a list of the functions of a welfare-state that includes (Sulkunen 2003, 274):

1. fighting poverty,
2. maintaining social peace (regulation of class relations),
3. supporting population growth,
4. supporting full-employment,
5. supporting industrialisation and
6. alleviating consequences of economic recessions.

In short, social policy supports the economy in many ways in mature capitalism by strengthening connections between mass production and mass consumption. This support assumes different functions in diverse national settings depending on national models of capitalism and social policy.

However, herein lays a fundamental weakness in the present world economy. Even though global economic integration has strengthened considerably in recent decades, the global capitalism is not mature capitalism in which the capitalist economy produces its own fundamentals by ensuring both mass production and mass consumption (see Nieminen 2005, 137-138). It is this dynamic relationship that ensures capital's profits in mature capitalism. Unlike in mature capitalism, in immature capitalism profits can be made by exploiting workers ruthlessly in one area and be selling the finished products elsewhere where consumers have purchase power (compare Marx [1894] 1980, chapter 14). In other words, capitalism has not yet really transcended its national and regional borders. Due to the immature character of global capitalism, the positive relationship between the economy and social policy is less evident than at the national level in developed capitalist countries.

Addressing Global Topics in Social Work Education

Policies and practices of social work fall traditionally into the realm of national social policy regimes or national welfare states and social work is normally exercised at micro level of larger societal entities. Indeed, supporting individuals, families and communities takes place in localized settings. Hence, how can it be argued that such a macro-level development as globalisation has interactions with local social work?

Local social work has at least three kinds of connections with global social issues. First, global material interactions affect local social policies by altering local communities. These interactions include phenomena like, for instance, international movement of productive capital which affects local (un)employment. Asylum seekers, beggars, foreign employees and other immigrants land in multitude of local communities. Drugs usage and diverse global cultural influences are every-day phenomena in just about any local surroundings in the world. Secondly, ethical principles and socio-political ideologies that affect national and local social policies are increasingly transnational and universal. Thirdly, social work is internally committed to support welfare of human beings. It would be against the ideals of universal modern moral and universal human rights to restrict this commitment only to the citizens of one's own nation-state.

Assuming that the above argumentation is valid, a question rises: how topics of global social policy should be dealt with in social work education? I will conclude this writing by presenting a few tentative answers to this question.

First, since social work education includes elements of social sciences, like sociology, a more academic part of social work education should include empirical and theoretical knowledge about diverse interactions within the world-society. For instance, the general curriculum of the Laurea University of Applied Sciences includes the theme of globalisation.

Secondly, methodologically students should be encouraged to perceive and understand how global interactions and issues affect and interact with local micro-level settings. Mixing of local and global knowledge is not an easy task but as argued above assuming such connections seems feasible from the point of view of social work. In order to be able to tackle this difficult task students should practice and improve their skills of conceptual thinking. This idea leads to a third point concerning teaching of global themes.

Thirdly, when the size of social configurations in which people live increases so does the need for abstract thinking. As long as our everyday living takes place in concrete small-scale environments much of our knowledge can be directly attached to this environment; and we do not have a great need for more general knowledge or insights. Large, differentiated social configurations require also knowledge and thinking that is able to understand and reflect complicated social relations. A world-society raises thus a dual intellectual challenge to grasp those general principles that regulate global interactions (e.g. rules of trade and general human conduct, human rights) as well as those cultural variations that exist in the world. It is especially the understanding of the dialects of general and particular in a world-society that requires developed conceptual thinking.

Captivatingly, this approach to professional knowledge is at least in principle a threat to traditional academic and professional hierarchies. This is so because practicing social workers are normally assumed to work in a localised concrete setting without much need for abstract thinking. According to the Taylorist principles of organising work, abstract thinking is reserved to higher levels of organisational hierarchies. Hence, intellectual challenges created by world-society transcend not only traditional structures of modern state-societies but also traditional structures of (professional) knowledge (compare Steiner-Khamsi 2004).

Fourthly, international exchange of students and teachers form a more traditional element of enhancing social work's capacity to cope in a world-society. On the other hand, exchange is itself part of the functioning of the world-society.

Lastly, because social workers are supposed not only to respond social needs, but also take part actively in forming of public policies, social work education should prepare students to reflect upon questions concerning transnational and global social policy. Reflecting macro-level issues means that one has to be able to think politics feely and be professionally more than just a tool of realising pre-given political task. These issues do not necessarily have to be large-scale socio-economic topics like distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor; they might also be questions like how to react to Romanian beggars when they come to Finland.

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