

voices from the frontline

The 'Dubrovnik Manifesto'

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As Editor-in-Chief of CRSW, I am delighted that we have been offered the chance to publish the 'Dubrovnik Manifesto'. The manifesto is the outcome of a collaborative process, written collectively by participants at the Dubrovnik social work conference in 2019. I would like to record our thanks for their permission to reproduce it here.

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The necessity of the social

In September 2019, over a hundred people active in social work praxis gathered in Dubrovnik to explore some of the most urgent current challenges and to reassert and reinstate social work. The Dubrovnik Manifesto,¹ discussed before, during and after the event, is the resulting collective statement on the importance of social work praxis in the contemporary context.

Facing an increasing brutalisation of society that goes hand in hand with the destruction of welfare systems, encountering old and new forms of structural and concrete acts of violence, we set out to explore how we can contribute to re-emphasise and revive the critical tradition of social work, and reinforce solidarity with those who are oppressed, at risk and vulnerable.

After decades of a diminished social, in a neoliberal conjuncture that has privileged the economic and neglected, marginalised and thoroughly downgraded the social dimension as the basis of our existence, there is an urgent need for the breakthrough of a brand new social, analogous to the one superseding classic liberalism at the end of the 19th century in the Global North. Social work not only has to be a part of this breakthrough, and would be strengthened by this emergence, being enabled to survive as an essential feature of society, but also needs to play an active role in bringing it to fruition.

In order to do so, we have to defy notions of 'professional neutrality', reclaim social work as a community-oriented, relationship-based activity that goes far beyond academia, and build strong coalitions of workers, academics, service users, movement activists, trades unionists and everybody else working towards social justice.

Radical social transformations

We are living through yet another great transformation. The transformation of the future will be radical, regardless of whether we give up and merely observe the collapse of civilisation, or try to bring about a more socially just world based on the common good and on the values of care – of living together with profound awareness of both our vulnerability and strengths as individuals and as a society. We need to actively preserve what is good, including the natural world and the ecosystem, and radically change that which does not work.

Globalisation, digitalisation, forced migration, demographic changes, a changing division of labour and so on have exposed us, in different ways, to unprecedented, and sometimes unseen, risks that are greatest for those who are excluded from privileges and experience exploitation, discrimination and poverty. The radical transformation has also created numerous new opportunities in terms of communications, mobility, diversity, productive capacities and culture. Yet, we crave for security (both social and physical) and fear violence, which keeps emerging in new forms and with a growing intensity.

The natural and political dimensions of the catastrophe merge into one through global warming, caused by fossil capitalism and the rush to turn natural resources into profit. They are epitomised by: migration, including migration forced as a result of conflicts, climate change and economic misery; fear, which is exploited by authoritarianism (and fuelled by fundamentalisms of many different kinds); the increasing inequality created by neoliberal regimes; the removal of liberties and freedom (gentrification for the rich; immobility for the poor); enforced hatred and discrimination towards all who do not conform to what is set as the male, white, heterosexual norm; growing exploitation through new forms of work in the so-called ‘gig’ economy; and an expanded precariat, with deep psychological and social consequences, making human existence precarious indeed.

Yet, there have been important developments towards an inclusive society. The rights of people with disabilities and children have been clearly stated and enshrined in global conventions, albeit with some hiccups and never fully implemented in practice. Furthermore, deinstitutionalisation and long-term care have been introduced, albeit not without obstacles, contributing to a re-evaluation of old age (old is good), childhood, madness and disability.

New social movements keep arising, desiring a better, more dignified, life, and connecting the grass roots and global scales. New, alternative, forms of economic relations are being developed and a new kind of urban revolution seems to be imminent, not least in the Fearless cities movements. Trades unions, including trades unions of social workers, need to be established where they do not exist and strengthened where they do, adapt to new forms of work, and advocate for measures that benefit the whole of society. New forms of fighting racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, as well as fighting the global, life-threatening, climate emergency, are emerging, calling for no less than a radical system change! Although the age of austerity seems to be waning, what post-austerity will look like is still under construction.

Wisdom of social work interfaces

To steer the transformation towards human solutions, practical wisdom is needed. The role of social work is to do just that; furthermore, it has to safeguard and promote

marginalised and disrespected local or indigenous knowledge so that it withstands and has impact on the global rule of abstract schemes. Ordinary everyday life – the Life World – should become the basic and pragmatic criterion of policy change and adaptations, ensuring the sovereignty of people.

Besides the inalienable mandate of social work to provide the everyday user's perspective on life and the world, the strength of social work lies in bringing together unseemly combinations of knowledge and logics of action. The major sources of social work action syntheses are ethics, organisation and politics. There is the need to know what is the right thing to do, how to organise the transition and where to obtain the power to do it.

Social work's ethics of inclusion and imperative of non-exclusion provide the humanist synthesis of the broken dialectics of reason–unreason. To follow its ethical imperatives, forms of self-management (rather than social service management) should be sought. Social work engagement in politics needs to stem from popular activism and an intersectional understanding and way of working, mobilising and struggling together, acknowledging and seeking understanding of existing differences, and constructively using them as a collective force for change.

The practical power of social work lies in its transversal, interdisciplinary, approach and intersectional position. The welfare state and welfare society need to be reinvented on the grounds of a critical evaluation of the post-socialist (with post-austerity in mind) syntheses (South-East European, Global East and Global South), and social work's role in the bottom-up construction of progressive social policies needs to be asserted.

Social work has to create productive links with other human disciplines and sectors. In education, social work can contribute to learning in action and provide the solutions to schooling problems (bullying, teacher protection and supporting teachers in building solidarity). In health care, constantly in relation to social work, social work can bestow the importance of the user's perspective, involvement and participation, leading to a holistic approach to health and well-being, while still keeping existing specific needs in mind. In both challenging and strengthening the legal frame, and combining it with social processes (in the law and administration), social work can counter debasing practices and bureaucratisation with empowering practices and advocacy.

Practical utopias (challenges for social work)

Social work is a practical, everyday utopia; it is always about becoming, searching for a better, more human and more social, place. It has to have a (utopian) sense of desire – be it about changing for the better or conserving what is good – and it has to live up to the dictum that 'action is the sole medium of expression for ethics'. Throughout its history, social work has developed many productive tools, which need to be re-strengthened and reloaded, with new alternatives sought and built. Social work's classic tools and stories must be joined by new ones and governed by the notion of users' emancipation and the emancipation of society as such.

Comparative social work should enable the transfer and translation of good practices, not only across diverse national and local contexts, but also over the life cycle in working with children and youth, older people, families, and groups facing multiple challenges, and with people with diverse labels: poverty, delinquency, disability, challenging mental health concerns and so on. An intersectional approach

should focus on the interrelationship between gender, age, 'race', class, sexuality and disability. It needs to focus on building solidarity and alliances with networks, as well as the self-organisation of marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ-identified persons, refugees and migrants, homeless people, and initiatives and campaigns such as 'Me too', 'Me two', 'blacklivesmatter' and many more.

Deinstitutionalisation, which has become a global platform in recent decades, needs an overview and a context, an appreciation of its achievements, obstacles and traps, and a vision of how to handle it as a techne and an ethical imperative. Simultaneously, it has to be sensitive to, and in a polemical relation with, the remaining elements of oppression, detention, constraint, punishment and even torture in the care system and beyond. Long-term care, which aspires to become a universal provision, is a challenge per se and needs to be consistently and radically implemented as such, and to connect with other types of existing provision in order to become universally available. Attention needs to be given to instances of the increased power of service users (for example, shared decision-making, co-managers, co-trainers and co-researchers), and more collaborative ways of working on the basis of self-determination and self-advocacy need to be realised.

There are new areas that social work is entering into (such as green social work) and new means of performing social work (such as through social media and new technologies). There is a constant struggle between social work and fragmenting governance and management. In the past decades, social work has been under attack from 'proceduralism' and projectisation, even if social work has invented practical solutions to resolve the formal contradictions between protection (care) and freedom. Increasing atomisation and individualisation of a practice based solely on individual social work calls for a reinvention of community social work and action (as well as to challenge the rise of religious fundamentalisms and authoritarian neoliberalisms).

The challenge for social work today is to build a vision that will guide us through new areas, and to foster and preserve freedoms based on (social) security, thus dealing simultaneously and comprehensively with diverse adversity, and enabling people (both professionals and users) to address life issues in a transversal and intersectional manner. In this way, social work will enable people to live together with minimum exclusion and the maximum availability of support for personal and communal projects, without fearing the consequences of oppression and without becoming prey to authoritarian power.

Staying neutral is not an option. Working passionately and fearlessly towards turning our social utopias into the reality of a good life for all is what is needed today!

Note

¹ The Dubrovnik Manifesto is based on ideas for the conference 'The Breakthrough of the Social: Practical Utopias, Wisdom and Radical Transformations – Social Work @IUC: Lessons Learned and Future Challenges', held at Inter-University Centre (IUC) in Dubrovnik, 2–6 September 2019, organised by the IUC's School of Social Work Theory and Practice.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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