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**Darja Zaviršek**

**Can Development of the Doctoral Studies in Social Work Resist the Neo-liberalism within Academia? Some Comparisons**

*In other words, if there is no possibility of getting an internationally accepted doctorate in social work according to the standards of IASSW/IFSW and European universities who offer Ph.D. curricula in social work, the chances offered by the Bologna reform will be mainly lost.*

Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, 2006

*When I started to work in social work in the 1970ies we were a kind of bureaucrats. Now we are asked to be intellectuals!*

Mirja Satka, lecture on the history of social work, University of Applied Science Luzern, 2008

*I would argue that the aim of social work education should be to enable students to explore the philosophical and professional bases of ethical judgments and actions within social work practice and managerial approaches, and from international and multi-cultural perspective.*

Brian Littlechild, 2009

**Introduction**

When presently in most of the European countries students and academics focus on the negative effects of the European reform of higher education (known as the Bologna reform), almost the opposite is true for a historically less exclusivist social work discipline. Critics of the Bologna reform claim that it has opened the gates for the commercialisation of public universities and the domination of the Anglo-Saxon system of higher education throughout Europe, which means greater standardisation and uniformity of academic institutions. On the one hand, higher education has been losing out in terms of quality and exclusivity, owing to the fact that more people are currently studying at universities than ever before (in 2000, an average of 19.4 percent of EU residents had a higher education; by 2007, this figure had increased to 23.4 percent) (Kocbek 2009: 33). On the other hand, some see in these numbers the reform's contribution to decreasing the high rate of young unemployed persons (in the EU, for example, 78 percent of young people age 18 are involved in education; in Sweden, this figure is 95 percent) (*ibid.*).

In social work, the same reform has (at least formally) provided an opportunity for the rapid academisation of social work education and facilitated an increase in research activities at schools for social work. Some critical social workers have even noted that this shift—from a highly under-researched discipline one or two decades ago to the desire for research and the utilitarian need to gain as much research funding as possible—has moved the focus of social work academics away from 'real' practice issues (personal communication with a social worker from Slovenia, 2009).

Another development in social work has been taking place parallel to the Bologna reform: the study of the history of the social work profession. Almost all research on the historical roots of the profession in the last ten years has shown (often to the surprise of the researchers themselves) that, within the core of locally specific ideas of social work, the demand for the scientific development of the discipline was undoubtedly imbedded in the development of the profession from its very beginning (Hering and Waaldijk 2003, see also Zaviršek 2005, 2008, Chytil 2009). These demands appeared alongside the charity aspect of social work. Tracing these strains of thought throughout the twentieth century, it seems that in countries where the charitable system of social protection was not dominant, which was the case in the former socialist and communist countries, there have been fewer obstacles to the

academisation of social work than in those countries where charitable or religious organisations remained powerful players within the social sphere (for example, Germany, Italy and certain other western European countries). These historical and ideological differences are influencing the development of doctoral studies in social work across Europe.

### **The establishment of Indosow and its innovative potential: Challenging the old power relations**

Soon after the School of Social Work in Ljubljana became recognised as a 4-year university degree programme and was renamed the Faculty of Social Work—a huge success following decades of struggles and refusal at the hands of more respectable and powerful university disciplines—a small group of teachers at the school decided to initiate an international doctoral study in social work. With support from friends and colleagues from other internationally oriented universities, five schools of social work applied for an EU Tempus grant in 2005. The EU granted the project, valued at half a million Euros, an amount equal to 50 percent of the total project costs; the money was given to the University of Ljubljana as the leading institution within the project ([www.indosow.net](http://www.indosow.net)).<sup>1</sup>

Working on commonalities and differences between five institutions of higher education, the project members became aware of the fact that social work programmes in Europe differ significantly not only at the undergraduate level, but also at the doctoral level. Some key points where differences arise include the formal conditions for the enrolment of doctoral students and the payment of their tuition; the quality and duration of the study; supervision styles and the number of supervisors involved in supporting students; the length of the required doctoral thesis; and differences in forms of doctorates. The search for compromises to overcome these differences in order to create a jointly shared curriculum and a joint programme was an important part of the project, and demanded a great deal of

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<sup>1</sup> The partnership institutions are: University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, Slovenia (the coordinating institution); Alice-Salomon Hochschule für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik, Berlin, Germany; Faculty of Health and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK; University of Jyväskylä, Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Jyväskylä, Finland and Siegen University, Germany. Other institutions/associate partners include: University of Colombo (Sri Lanka), University of Haifa (Israel).

work on the comparative perspective, as well as intercultural communication and a cross-country understanding of specificities in the language, definitions and practice of social work. Indosow had to establish a certain degree of uniformity among the educational institutions involved, but also managed to respect diverse contexts and differences among partner institutions.

Anglia Polytechnic University Cambridge, for instance, offers a Ph.D. programme as well as a professional doctorate (ProfDoc), while none of the other partner institutions offer a professional doctorate in addition to a classic Ph.D. Doctoral programmes in some partner countries, such as Finland, are longer than in other partner countries. Anglia Ruskin Institute of Health and Social Care Cambridge has a 3-year full-time programme on the postgraduate level, but most of the students study part-time and therefore study for at least 6 years. Germany and Slovenia have an open-ended Ph.D. programme. At the Faculty of Social Work Ljubljana, students are required to attend six obligatory doctoral seminars, but the university does not offer a full Ph.D. programme, and its doctoral study is—like that of the Alice Salomon University of Applied Science Berlin (in cooperation with the University of Siegen)—primarily individual-oriented and based on individual supervision. The format of the study reflects former times, when only the very best and most intellectually mature students studied at the doctoral level. At the same time, it creates and tolerates relationships which Michael Vynnytsky, the director of the graduate school at the Kiev Mohyla University, has called ‘the system slaved on a single supervisor’ (personal communication, July 2009). In contrast to Slovenia and Germany, students at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä have a number of supervisors from different fields involved in their work during the Ph.D. process. The Finnish system does not recognise the (often) strong bond between the student and the supervisor, thereby freeing the student from an (often) over-dependant relationship with an ‘all-knowing father/mother’ and similarly freeing the supervisor from the (often) unspoken obligation to ensure that the doctoral candidate successfully completes the tasks and finishes the doctoral study, (often) regardless of the actual quality of his/her doctoral work. The UK institutions do not use the European Credit Transfer System, which is used by other western countries and all other educational institutions in the project. There are

also differences in tuition fees, from a rather high tuition fee in the UK and Slovenia, to no tuition fees in Germany, where the majority of students receive scholarships in order to be able to conduct full-time research for their doctoral study. In Finland, a national database of doctoral degrees, including those from the field of social work, has been established (Karvinen 2003 in Lyons and Lawrence 2006: 62), which is, at least for the time being, a unique development among European universities. All of these differences made the process of creating a joint international doctoral programme an exciting journey as well as a long and difficult negotiating process.

One of the biggest obstacles—which has been only partially resolved—arose from the fact that, in some European countries with, paradoxically, the longest and strongest traditions in social work, such as Germany and Austria, social work education has been traditionally placed at universities of applied science, which are not eligible to have doctoral programmes at all. The Alice Salomon University of Applied Science Berlin offers a doctorate module for graduate students of social work and other social science disciplines as well as doctoral seminars, but cannot enrol doctoral students. Similarly, St. Pölten University of Applied Science in Austria can educate social workers up to the MA level, but not on the doctoral level. To date, the ‘third cycle’ of higher education (Ph.D.) has only been available at universities, and not at universities of applied science, despite the fact that the German pioneer of social work education Alice Salomon (soon after the establishment of the school in 1908, she became a well-known social work thinker and internationally known activist), as well as her Austrian counterpart, Ilse Arlt, emphasised the importance of social work becoming a scientifically based profession as early as the 1920s or 1950s respectively (Staub-Bernasconi 2006a, 2007, see also Maiss and Pantucek 2008, Maiss 2009). Since doctoral studies are inevitably linked to research, this barrier alienates social work education and social work practice from ongoing intensive research work.

One of the reasons for this situation is the persistence of classic universities in some European countries in maintaining their unique status as ‘real’ academic institutions by keeping social work outside of academia. Another reason might be sought within a traditional charity-based definition of social work closely identified with Christian ideology,

which views ‘helping the needy’ as ideologically more important than academic training and critical research.

Therefore, during the course of the project, it became obvious that both the Alice Salomon University of Applied Science Berlin and St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences would need to find a host institution that would be benevolent enough to carry out the doctoral programme in social work at the university level. This innovation was meant to challenge the old power relations, and it also had political consequences: it sought to ensure doctoral studies in social work for German and Austrian social work students instead of forcing them to find a host discipline to obtain a doctorate. The project initiators’ and partners’ strategy for finding collaborative host institutions involved negotiations with several universities from Germany and Austria, and was successfully completed in Germany, where, with the support of Prof. Sabine Hering, the founder of the European Network of the History of Social Work, the University of Siegen was willing to play host to Indosow in collaboration with the Alice Salomon University of Applied Science Berlin. Unfortunately, in Austria the educational structure seems to be more reluctant towards such a change. In spite of the initiatives of project partners who, together with social work academics<sup>2</sup> and professional social workers<sup>3</sup>, tried to invert the old power relations, the project was not able to find a host university in Austria which would be willing to carry out the doctoral programme in social work.

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<sup>2</sup> See the conference directed by Prof. Marianne Gumpinger with the title *Doktorhut fuer SozialarbeiterInnen?* Upper Austria University of Applied Sciences Linz, March 10 2008. <http://www.fh-ooe.at/campus-linz/aktuelles/fh-ooe-news-linz/fh-ooe-news-linz/article/doktorhut-fuer-sozialarbeiterinnen/> (July 17 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See the international symposium with a double meaning hidden in its title *Sozialarbeit hat Recht*, organised by the Association of the Professional Social Workers from Austria in Vienna, November 23-25 2008. <http://basw-bg.com/doc-published/Conference-Austria%202008.pdf> (July 17 2009).

Another set of power relations that was challenged by Indosow is linked to the fact that Indosow itself was initiated by an eastern European school for social work, a development which disturbed and disrupted the hitherto taken for granted dominance of western schools. The importance of this power shift has to be understood in the context of James Midgley's (2008) analysis, which showed that the relationships within international social work exchanges were not based on reciprocity, but were unilateral, meaning that the western approach in education for social work was dominant and exported to other parts of the world. The unilateral character of these relations is still in evidence today, especially in research (even comparative research) and academic writing. Almost without exception, social work academics from the west refer to and quote western authors from Anglo-Saxon countries, including non-western authors who migrated to the west (and the same is true for the majority of the non-western writers). Despite an increase in comparative research written and published internationally by non-western writers, the work of these authors is not used as a point of reference in written texts (this book is no exception). It seems that when promoting equality, many social work academics do so not for themselves, but for others (politicians, professionals, lay people, police, other social sciences).

### **The development of doctoral studies in different countries: Some comparisons**

As mentioned above, only since the year 2000—on the basis of the Bologna reform—have a number of schools of social work throughout Europe and beyond been developing postgraduate studies in social work. In addition, the Berlin Communiqué (2003) made sure that research has become an inevitable part of the activities within social work departments<sup>4</sup>, together with doctoral studies and the promotion of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional activities for improving higher education in Europe (Labonte-Roset 2005, Lyons 2003). Now more than ever, the internationalisation of social work schools is becoming an everyday reality and even a 'mainstream activity' (Midgley 2008: 39). The recent establishment of the first European International Doctoral Studies in Social Work—Indosow—is one result of these relatively new processes.

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<sup>4</sup> A rare exception is France, which does not yet offer social work training at universities or at universities of applied sciences (Labonte-Roset 2005).

In some European countries, schools of social work have developed Ph.D. programmes/studies, while in other countries (Austria, Italy, the Ukraine and others), the doctoral level can only be attained within other social science disciplines. Some countries have developed all three levels of higher education, including doctoral programmes (the UK, Sweden, Portugal, Brazil, India, Finland, the US, Hungary, Slovenia, South Africa, Estonia, the Czech Republic etc.) (Labonte-Roset 2005, see also Staub-Bernasconi 2006a, Chytil 2009). An early comparative analysis encompassing 12 European countries found that different universities in the EU have different approaches to doctoral programmes in social work; these differences include programme location, the duration of the study, the involvement of a ‘host discipline’ etc. (Laot 2000). Various studies have revealed some interesting differences between countries:

*1) Programme location*

Some programmes are located at universities, as is the case, for instance, in the UK, and some are located at colleges linked to the university, as is the case in Portugal (Laot 2000).

*2) The establishment of the doctoral schools*

Some doctoral programmes are organised within new structures at universities—doctoral schools—while others remain under the existing structure. In some countries, such as the Ukraine, the doctoral schools aim to ensure an interdisciplinary perspective within individual doctoral programmes, with a portion of courses being offered to students in all doctoral programmes. Doctoral schools make sure that students are supported not only individually, but also as a cohort group, and that they are closely linked to the university where they study (Ali and Kohun 2006).

*3) Duration of study*

Some programmes are of a limited duration, as in the UK, Portugal and the Indosow programme, while others do not require students to complete a Ph.D. thesis within a set timeframe. The duration of the study depends on whether students are studying full-time (the Ukraine) or part-time (the majority of European universities).

*4) The need for a ‘host discipline’*

Many European countries do not grant a Ph.D. in social work (Austria, the Netherlands, Greece, Switzerland etc.), but require social work students to choose a ‘host discipline’ for

their doctoral studies (frequently selected disciplines include sociology, social pedagogy, applied social sciences, societal science and philosophy, education, psychology and social policy). In the Ukraine, for example, where there are at least thirty schools of social work at the university level throughout the country, social workers who are interested in studying at the doctoral level (called *aspirantura*, which confers the title of ‘candidate of science’, the first step in a process ending in title of ‘doctor of science’) most often choose sociology, social relations, social policy or even the ‘psychology of social work’ as their host discipline; none of these study programmes are offered at the schools of social work.

*5) The need for a ‘host university’*

As explained above, the Indosow programme has launched an innovation by finding a ‘host university’ which agreed to carry out the programme in cooperation with a university of applied sciences. So far, this model has been introduced in Germany; in Austria, on the other hand, a host university could not be found.

*6) Different models of doctoral provision*

There are three different models of doctoral provision in Europe and elsewhere:

-Ph.D. (the most common format for original, scientifically based research work);

-Professional Doctoral studies (well-established in the UK and Australia, for instance).

Those who favour this type of doctorate claim that the professional doctorate ensures close collaboration with practice and the work place of the candidate (a triangular system between the student, the supervisor and the professional work team at the work place) and rightly reduces the status of the university as the exclusivist place of the creation of new knowledge and science. On the other hand, those who are critical of the professional doctorate emphasise the dominance of the neo-liberal tendencies in education which seek to transform the university into a factory for the production of the evidence-based and positivistic knowledge-based research that justifies policy changes in the social realm. This danger is evident in situations where an applicant is paid by a professional organisation to pursue a professional doctorate (Fink 2006).

-Ph.D. by publication (a certain number of articles published in journals scientifically recognised by the SSCI; countries where this system is found include Sweden, the UK, and Slovenia).

*7) The development of the joint doctoral programme*

Indosow—International Doctoral Studies in Social Work—is the first joint doctoral programme featuring the mutual recognition of doctoral diplomas to be established in Europe. However, it goes beyond Europe through the inclusion of associate partners in the Middle East and Asia, thus providing an opportunity for doctoral students to get involved in a comparative study of social work processes, social welfare and policy systems.

The programme promotes mobility, international supervision (each student has one local and one international supervisor), comparative research and learning from different locally specific contexts. The basic conceptual principles on which the shared programme is based are the social work theories and principles of social justice, inclusion, anti-discriminatory action, diversity, the right of self-determination and agency. Alongside the doctoral study programme, the founding members of Indosow have established a network of academics, practitioners, user groups and groups of carers, who provide both a source of reflexive knowledge and a foundation for good practice. In the last couple of years, Indosow has developed high-quality doctoral scientific meetings, seminars and exchanges between teachers, supervisors and students of social work and created opportunities for a scientific exchange of literature, concepts, applied studies, methodologies and current ideas in social work and social welfare and for the development of social work science in general.

Despite several differences in the doctoral programmes at different universities, the development of the doctoral studies and programmes in social work attains to several commonalities, including:

- Providing an opportunity for social work students, professionals, and researchers to obtain all three cycles of higher education without having to search for a ‘host discipline’, thereby preventing what Staub-Bernasconi (2006) has called a ‘dead-end of social work education’;
- Ensuring greater public recognition for the science and profession of social work;
- Making sure that academic knowledge, research and public debates about social work and policy are intertwined and enrich each other and that the academisation of social work contributes to the well-being of service users;
- Encouraging the unification of major stakeholders on the regional, national, and even international level (joint congresses, team work, research work);

- Ensuring the development of social work theories and the emancipation of social work from its old-fashioned dependency on other social science disciplines.

The last item is especially important, since even the global definition of social work (IASSW/IFSW 2004) does not recognise social work as an academic discipline with its own theoretical foundations. Instead of emphasising the scientific knowledge base of social work, it speaks of ‘theories of human behaviour and social systems’.<sup>5</sup> Staub-Bernasconi (2006) pointed out some reasons for the persistence of the distinction between the ‘scientific’ social science disciplines and social work as ‘just a profession’ without its own scientific knowledge base: a.) the vast variety of social work services in a number of welfare and health care systems such as education, psychiatry, law; b.) the fragmentation of social work into many different occupations, such as rehabilitation, care management, social management etc., prevents the formation of a common scientific knowledge base of social work.

### **The academisation of social work: A way to strengthen the discipline or a virtual endeavour?**

It is often assumed that the academisation of social work and the focus on (comparative) research has a unilaterally positive effect on professional practice and will inevitably strengthen the discipline. This assumption has to be questioned. It is precisely the positioning of academia in today’s world, in conjunction with the re-focusing of academic knowledge at universities in response to pressure from the corporate and political spheres,

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<sup>5</sup> The full definition reads: ‘The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising *theories of human behaviour and social systems* (emphasised by D.Z.) social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.’

[http://www.ifsw.org/cm\\_data/GlobalSocialWorkStandards2005.pdf](http://www.ifsw.org/cm_data/GlobalSocialWorkStandards2005.pdf). (July 10 2009).

which is transforming the academisation of social work and research activities into a virtual endeavour which does not support greater coherence, professional autonomy and critical thinking in social work.

It would even seem that the opposite is true: the two different societal sub-systems—the social realm of neo-liberal states and academia—actually encourage each other's dependency on market- and profit-oriented thinking. In spite of the expectation that academic processes would strengthen critical reflection upon the hybrid, dual and heterogeneous mandate of the profession manifested in the multiple roles of social workers (helpers of the needy, bureaucrats of the state, welfare officers, managers and advocates), it seems that neo-liberal, (nearly) bankrupt states have had their way in determining academic education. Critical thinking is no longer necessarily a constitutive part of academic discourse, nor is an orientation towards social action, development, change and social movements an inevitable component of social work curricula. Communication technologies of distance learning (E-learning) are promoted as progressive and the learning style of the future. One of the articles in a Slovenian daily recently claimed that pupils and students who “still today” have to go to classic schools, “are locked” in classrooms with teachers who follow the prescribed school programme (Finance, 27. August 2008, p.22). The articles portraits universities like a Zoo where people are locked in the cages, while e-learning symbolises freedom. There is a denial of the fact that e-learning actually means being even more locked, but at home in single rooms with an interface relation with the computer. For the states, this type of learning is cheaper, while the bodies are more volatile and mental health situation of the students often vulnerable. In Japan, which is the super power in computer technology a new mental health distress among young people is called *hikikomori*, which is a total withdrawal from social life, where the everyday relations among people are totally replaced by the e-communication and the freedom is limited through self-imprisonment into a private room. This kind of social withdrawal is already called a new epidemia and it is widening across Asia and beyond.

It is therefore obvious that academisation does not inevitably strengthen the profession's autonomy and social work's ability to engender social change and critical reflection. The problem is particularly acute in cases where:

- Academic processes and current social work practices demand *utilitarian knowledge without theoretical reflection*;
- There is a *widening gap between scientific, reflected knowledge and social processes* that happen in the practice;
- Social work is being developed at the level of higher education (the development of social work departments on the bachelors, masters and doctoral level), but, at the same time, the *social work profession is losing its generic professional autonomy through fragmentation into many different occupations (case manager, care planner, personal assistant, child's advocate etc.)*;
- Persons enrolling in doctoral studies are *primarily interested in upgrading their social work or professional education, and not in social change*.

Let's take a closer look at some examples. The first process described above can be observed in the widely recognised growing demand that social workers be able to carry out specific tasks for a particular service user, known as the managerial approach in social work. Littlechild (2009) describes it as a process based on the assumption that every social work activity can be managed in a rational way, without taking into account the emotional and social experiences of professionals and clients, power imbalances, or the ideological and value system on which actions are based:

Managerial attempts to try to make social work constantly more rational and predictable are having the consequences of deflecting social work from the essential elements which constitute its main strength. Traditional social work expertise has been built on the ability to establish relationships with a wide variety of people, survey the environment for resources and bring these together on behalf of service users, to negotiate with various individuals, groups and organisations and to mobilise their energies, and to enter other worlds and meanings in order to offer help. (*Op. cit.*: 242)

This expectation makes social work into a utilitarian profession susceptible to being used and misused by particular leading power players within the welfare sphere. As Karen Lyons (2003: 560) observed, ‘social workers are increasingly seen as front line workers (implementers of social politics) who must be “governed” (monitored, controlled, accountable)’. This development is not restricted to countries with a modest critical social work tradition. In western Europe as well, social workers are again becoming social administrators, who are responsible for seeing that persons entitled by the state receive social transfers (welfare money) according to the law and based on the principles of formal justice. In spite of social work’s academic development and the ‘third mandate’ derived from its theoretical foundation and critical standpoint (Staub-Bernasconi 2007), in everyday practice, social work skills are being reduced to the skills primarily needed to serve the interests and needs of the state instead of the service user and the critical profession itself. This development casts social work ‘back in time’. In the former Yugoslavia, for example, state socialism was a time when social work was defined as a profession that carries out the goals of social policy, and an indigenous or locally specific understanding of social work was related to its utilitarian function, which was delineated by the extent to which social workers were able to serve the political aims of the state (Zaviršek 2005, 2008).

Today, the same processes can also be found in the educational sphere, in what is called ‘competence-oriented social science knowledge’ (also supported by the Bologna reform). This implies a preference for more task-oriented knowledge as opposed to knowledge grounded in theory, and is intended to produce social workers who would be instrumental to the demands of state institutions. Some scholars have already observed a shift in the focus of social work curricula towards ‘competence-based social work programmes’ (Lyons and Lawrence 2006). Competence-based social work programmes can yield certain positive results, such as professionals who follow strict procedures and are able to use various social work techniques, regardless of their personal orientation and values. On the other hand, this type of curricula is marked by a lack of theoretical paradigms, critical knowledge, and an understanding of the historical, ideological and ethical paradigms on

which social work has been historically based and fails to partake of or convey an understanding of how the professional skills and their implementation are inseparable from the value base, personal ethics and orientations of social work professionals. Yan and Tsang (2008) provide an exemplary description of this rather disconcerting development (the reduction of education for social work to technical skills and the erasure of an understanding of social work ideas and values) in the Chinese context:

Whereas the idea of science, especially understood in a positivist-empiricist framework, has been subjected to critical scrutiny and challenge in Western social work discourse in the last few decades, Chinese social work scholars promote the use of scientific methods by professionally trained workers or evidence based practice as a defining feature of social work. This rhetoric presents social work as a scientific and apolitical form of helping. Members of this new profession are thus equipped with technical knowledge in the science of helping and are, therefore, less likely to be seen as advocates and practitioners of a subversive value system. (*Op.cit.*: 195)

While on the one hand, schools of social work promote the ‘scientisation of social work’ in the positive and negative forms mentioned above, on the other, neo-liberal states are responsible for the de-professionalisation of social work. For example, national governments are not willing to open new workplaces for professional and critical social workers, but are rather interested in employing masses of unemployed and non-professionally trained workers in the social sphere. It is a paradox that, at a time when social work schools are witnessing both a horizontal (number of schools and programmes) and vertical (level of degrees offered) expansion, governmental bodies are evermore keen to employ less trained workers, pursuant to their goals of controlling the social sphere, decreasing the unemployment rate, and maintaining social stability through non-critical masses of welfare workers.

In Slovenia, for instance, anti-racist social work was only developed in the past couple of years as a part of the core social work curricula on the undergraduate and postgraduate level; the very first Ph.D. student presented a thesis on ethnically sensitive social work practice with the country’s Roma population in 2009 (Urh 2008, 2009). In the meantime,

however, the ministry responsible for social welfare and policy has installed so-called field workers for Roma at various welfare institutions across the country and, by doing so, has brought some people back into the sphere of paid employment. These poorly paid and poorly trained workers found themselves unemployed after the Slovenian companies they had been working for were defeated in competition with companies that employ cheaper, globalised proletariat.

As field workers for Roma, they became an instrument of both the government and the social workers at the local centres for social work, as they have been asked to visit Roma settlements and deliver field reports about the needs of these people. Instead of employing recently graduated social workers who have been educated for anti-racist social work practice, the state employed semi-skilled workers to provide some ‘help’, but also to maintain the status quo and achieve one of the government’s economic aims: reducing the unemployment rate and, consequently, outlay for the social sphere to the greatest possible extent. In the meantime, new generations of trained social workers remain unemployed, despite their academically based knowledge about ethnically sensitive social work practice. Furthermore, older social workers who are already employed are asked to stay in the office and work in social administration, that is, deliver welfare money to those entitled to receive it. If a positive consequence of this kind of de-professionalisation is that some people with experiences similar to those of service users get involved in welfare activities, a negative consequence is the reduction of professional social work activities to those of ‘state bureaucrats’ who deliver welfare transfers according the formal system of justice defined by the social policy of the state or private humanitarian (religious) organisations.

Similar processes have been noted in China. Despite the rapid growth of schools of social work since 1989 (there are more than 200 schools in the country, and this number continues to grow; see chapter 9 in this book), the government has employed millions of low paid workers in newly developed community services in order to serve its economic interests through the employment of newly unemployed workers who were previously employed within the state social apparatus or young unemployed persons (Yan and Tsang 2008). At the same time, the government intended to lessen the welfare burden by

establishing a large number of state-controlled community centres. Yan and Tsang have shown how serving social needs has been interrelated with serving the political and economic needs of the state, which is interested in modernising its professionals through the implementation of a new social science discipline, but, at the same time, is not keen to challenge the existing social order. Critical social work would inevitably clash with the Chinese understanding of democratic rights and social justice in the areas of disability, gender, ethnicity etc.

The third example comes from the Republic of Kosovo (founded in 2008), where international social work academics, together with a handful of domestic university professors, have tried to establish social work education at the university level.<sup>6</sup> In Kosovo, as in other parts of Yugoslavia, social workers had been active since 1959; during the first decade of socialism, local centres of social work were the basic welfare institutions. As late as the 1990s, there were over thirty such local centres in what is today the Republic of Kosovo. Social work was carried out by people holding university social work degrees, just like everywhere else in Yugoslavia, which was the only communist country to have developed a system of professional social work (Zaviršek 2005, 2008). Since the beginning of the year 2000, different international stakeholders, including the United Nations Interim Administrative Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and numerous foreign humanitarian and nongovernmental organisations and experts in the social field, have set out to restructure the welfare system. Instead of transforming and improving the social and health systems and creating a welfare society in cooperation with the local population, these international players erased what was left from the past in order to establish a completely new system based on privatised social services and private capital.

In order to achieve their goal, the new international power players abandoned social work as a profession and created the impression that ‘there was nothing’ in Kosovo prior to the

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<sup>6</sup> See the work done by prof. Ruth Seifert from the University of Applied Sciences Regensburg, Germany at the Pristina University. Cf. Seifert, R. (Ed.) (2004), *Soziale Arbeit und kriegerische Konflikte*. Muenster: Lit.; Social Work in South Eastern Europe, DAAD Newsletter 1, 2008.  
[http://www.daad.de/imperia/md/content/hochschulen/stabilitaetspakt/newsletter/1\\_2008\\_en.pdf](http://www.daad.de/imperia/md/content/hochschulen/stabilitaetspakt/newsletter/1_2008_en.pdf) (July 20 2009).

arrival of international organisations and security forces. Social workers and pedagogues employed as social workers in the social field got a new official name: *menagjer i rastiti*, which is an Albanian translation of the American ‘case manager’. The reduction of social work to ‘case management’ implies the erasure of the theoretical foundation of the social work discipline and, consequently, its de-professionalisation and de-politicisation. Social workers and pedagogues were dismissed by the international organisations not because they were useless, but rather with the aim of creating conditions for the privatisation of the welfare society and its social institutions. Social services are increasingly becoming an object of the market economy introduced by the forces of neo-capitalism. In order to secure the success of this operation, the professional identity of those who had been working in the social field for decades and who believed in the value of the social state had to be completely destroyed. One way to destroy professional identity is by taking away the name that, among other things, constructs that identity. The introduction of a new name affects the persons’ professional identity and helps to destroy the roots of social work.

These three examples show that, on the one hand, social work has developed its own theoretical foundation of research and academic credibility; on the other, it has come to be widely viewed as a tool in the hands of social policy welfare players (politicians, religious humanitarians, international stakeholders) who are not only constructing welfare regimes, but also pursuing their own particular political goals. Task-oriented social work knowledge and know-how without a foundation in critical theory can easily be achieved, especially in countries which are characterised by a modest degree of service user involvement and a short history of social movements, such as Slovenia, China and Kosovo.

These are only a few examples of how the gap between social work as an academic, research-oriented discipline and as a practice profession is widening. In other words, although the interest in research, academic work, and social work publications displayed by academics and professionals within the discipline has never been greater and continues to grow (Lyons 2003, see also Labonte-Roset 2005), social work is becoming increasingly structurally marginalised, instrumentalised and de-professionalised in many countries in different parts of the world.

As emphasised above, the academisation of social work does not inevitably strengthen the profession's autonomy and social work's ability to generate social change and critical reflection. Yan and Tsang (2008) provide a radical interpretation of these developments when they claim that, in China, for instance, 'social work practice exists mostly in the virtual world of academic discourse' (*op. cit.*: 196). This is especially true in cases where doctoral studies target persons whose primary intent is upgrading their formal education. It is important to stress that, in countries with a modest history of academic social work and social work research (as is the case in eastern European countries), a relatively high number of doctoral candidates are coming not from social work, but from other disciplines, such as nursing, social pedagogy, and social management, many times in search of a quick and easy promotion. In some countries, social workers and other welfare officers who work in governmental jobs at ministries, welfare departments and the like are returning to the university to upgrade their formal degrees in ever greater numbers.

In order to prevent this, the new doctoral school at the Kiev Mohyla University in the Ukraine decided to accept only full-time doctoral students (personal visit and communication, July 2009). Welfare officers from different ministries and directors from large public care institutions or welfare departments were identified as those who would be most interested in upgrading their education, and, it was felt, this pragmatic view on education implies indifference towards the deeper values of social work, including its commitment to change and ethical principles (although, regardless of their initial motivation, welfare officers could potentially gain new perspectives on their work in the social sphere from the programme).

Something similar can be observed in Slovenia, a country with a population of two million and only one school of social work. In such a small country, it often happens that doctoral students are supervised by peers, long-time colleagues, or even friends. These types of familiar relations often negatively affect the doctoral process, as personal relationships inevitably influence the quality of the doctoral study. Not only does the dependency of the doctoral candidate on his/her supervisor hinder the quality of the doctorate. More

frequently, it happens that the supervisor is dependent on his/her candidate in cases where the candidate holds a politically or institutionally powerful position which can affect the supervisor's access to research money, extra job contracts, etc. The one-supervisor system, as already pointed out, actually enslaves both the student and the supervisor, who is often expected to ensure that the student succeeds in the study regardless of his or her capabilities for analytical thinking and research work. For this reason, the single supervisor system has been avoided in many countries through systems that use multiple or external supervisors (as is the case at Hong Kong University and Hong Kong Polytechnic University and in the Indosow programme).

In their analysis of how the Chinese government is installing a particular social work which would serve the political agenda of the state, Yan and Tsang (2008) revealed a similar phenomenon. The government wants to modernise the social system, a process which includes academically upgrading those professionals who already work at ministries in the social sphere, but, at the same time, wants to keep the existing power order intact.

Again, parallels between the current situation and 1950s socialist Yugoslavia can be found. Looking to upgrade the formal status of welfare officers already working at various jobs within the social sphere, the communist leadership introduced the possibility of a quick diploma in social work (two-year higher education with a system of scholarships, also for those who had only completed elementary school) (Zaviršek 2005, 2008). The government made use of those persons who had already shown a commitment to the new political system (since they had been active in the partisan struggle) and awarded them with a diploma in 'socialist social work'.

### **Concluding remarks: Resisting neo-liberalism in academia**

All of these examples show that, besides its importance for the development of doctoral studies and comparative research in social work, the critical perspective implies refusing to let doctoral studies become a virtual endeavour of academics or of those who would like to get their hands on a Ph.D. without having any influence on professional social work

practice. Therefore, truly critical social work academics and professionals would rightly reject doctoral studies and programmes which have no impact on social change, social justice, and lessening inequalities and discrimination. Not only a ‘Ph.D. fit for publication’, but a critical and analytical Ph.D., which would reflect current inequalities and people’s struggles, is what is demanded within the academisation of the social work profession.

Having been constantly in danger of being subsumed by other, more ‘powerful’ disciplines, for social work, the development of doctoral studies means academic independence from other social science disciplines. However, where they once faced the threat of being subsumed by traditional social science disciplines, social workers must now deal with attempts to force them to merge with newly established applied social science disciplines lacking critical theoretical thinking and traditions, such as ‘management in public health’ or ‘social administration’. Where the past dominance of traditional disciplines came from within academia itself, the new form of dominance comes from ‘without’. The corporatist logic of the higher education business, as well as the profit-oriented social business, demand courses and subjects which forego theory in favour of more practical and managerially oriented approaches (social and health management, social administration and financing etc.).

The corporatist orientation of education is not interested in viewing social work as a social science discipline, but rather as an agency for ‘helping the needy’, wherein the particular state defines who the needy are, while the profession is only free to choose the technical tools it will use to alleviate a portion of the suffering. In such a context, the powerful concept of empowerment has been replaced with the much less critical ‘strength perspective’. This move is in line with another well-known social work slogan which has also been used by international banks when advertising their services in poor parts of Asia or Africa (advertisements on the BBC): ‘helping people help themselves’. This shows how, in today’s world, social work ideas might easily merge with neo-liberal ones.

Therefore, it is important for social work academics to develop ways to create and sustain reflexive, theoretically based, critical research-oriented doctoral studies based on the

interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives which could support and strengthen social work. This chapter advocates for the development of this kind of studies and underscores the huge need for social work doctoral students who are willing and able to generate, over the course of their doctoral study, critical, reflective and transformative scientifically based social work knowledge, ideas, values and ethics which go beyond the formal descriptive knowledge demanded by either current welfare and social policies or today's academia.

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