„What Makes Us Belong?"
Building Social Solidarity for Post-crisis Times

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Abstract

The Corona pandemic of 2020 evidenced the immense discrepancies and divisions that befell modern societies in the course of its globalising tendencies. While the link between local/personal and universal/structural issues has accompanied the trajectory towards (post-)modernity consistently, this global crisis has finally suspended the hope for blandly reconciling both. Boundaries of solidarity have become almost impossible to delimit and justify and this leads to a widespread retreat to simplifications of a nationalist, often racist but mostly essentialist clamour for the reassurance that belonging has a "solid basis". Relating to the work of Susanne Elsen this chapter expands on the notion of "solidarity economy" to highlight that social cohesion requires the working together of material, organisational and normative/ethical factors. Community, as highlighted by the experiences of the pandemic, cannot simply be dissolved into virtuality and while the desire for haptic closeness is to be recognised, its fulfilment can only succeed when boundaries between distance and closeness remain negotiable and community can constructively comprise diversity.

1. Introduction − "The Social" as an Issue of Modernity

All versions of social work, including of course social pedagogy and community work, have as their (difficult to define) subject area and key concern "the social". The social dimension of human existence is by no means a discovery of the modern era as it represents an anthropological constant, given that humans are born into complete dependency on others and hence owe their existence to the social arrangements with others. Only the care of others can ensure our survival at birth, during maturation, in times of acute crisis

and illness and again in old age frailty (Held, 2006). Yet the form in which this care and solidarity is being provided and organised underwent a fundamental transformation with the advent of the industrial revolution. This brought about the capitalist division of labour and with that a completely new grade of inter-dependency in modern societies, in personal, economic and technological regard. What is more, the economic arrangements which accompanied the technical innovations capitalised on the widespread dissolution and disruption of traditional social bonds as they had been provided by the family, the local community and by organisations like the churches. They demanded a mobile and functional workforce and hence progressively brought about impersonal, calculated and largely exploitative forms of mutual dependency (Lorenz, 2017). According to the developing capitalist principles, self-interested participation in exchange markets of goods and services and the dependency of people who do not own capital on the marketable use that their labour had for the owners of capital, came to determine social relations.

These conditions framed the public social mandate of the newly emerging "social professions" that gradually replaced charitable and philanthropic volunteers. This mandate challenged them to pay attention in equal measures to fostering those capacities of individuals and groups that enabled them to engage actively in establishing conducive social relations under these "modern" conditions, and to the provision of structural and material resources that are necessary for those efforts to succeed. The reference to "social" in the title of these new professional groupings indicates that social cohesion and solidarity could not be regarded as inherent attributes of human nature whose coming into existence and workings could be left to develop by themselves, but that the social dimension of human existence requires careful organisation and constant attention. Without learning and practising supportive social skills modern societies would be threatened by deep social divisions, criminality and instability, which Durkheim (1933) classified as anomie and which in turn would have adverse effects for the capitalist economy.

It will be argued in the following that social work as a broad professional field came into existence historically on account of the necessity to soften

and to some extent reverse the disruptive effects these new economic and social principles of relationships had on the fabric of society. Accordingly, the theoretical and methodological paradigms that developed through the academic reflection on this task and which formed the beginning of professional education, resorted partly to personalised, psychology-based concepts and partly to concepts of political social reform (Bell, 2020). The resulting methodological approaches of both types (case work, community work, social pedagogy) corresponded broadly to the constitutive political demands driving the project of modernisation. They had to address calls for more personal liberty on one hand and for more social equality and justice on the other. The development of welfare systems in modern nation states, in which social work played always an important part, can be seen as an attempt at maintaining a balance between both demands and different versions of social work accordingly had to satisfy both demands in various proportions. This could only be achieved, at least approximately, in the context of social policies that made such a balance possible, which were broadly the conditions of democratic welfare state as they developed in Europe particularly after the Second World War (Briggs, 1961). Recent global crisis manifestations call these arrangements in doubt and social workers have to re-establish their social mandate.

2. Challenges to Keeping a Balance Between Personal Liberty and Social Equality

However, maintaining this balance became increasingly difficult in recent decades owing to the forced individualisation of human social and economic relations that formed a central part of the neoliberal political and economic agenda (Fox Piven, 2015). These policies culminated in a fundamental disjuncture of the guiding principles of liberty and social equality which manifested itself dramatically during the Corona crisis and in the political reactions it triggered (Aluffi Pentini & Lorenz, 2020). There were strong public expressions of the desire for maintaining personal freedom against imposed limitations in the form of protests, first against lock-down decrees and then

against compulsory vaccination. But the medical nature of the global pandemic convinced even neoliberal governments of the need to provide everybody equally with universal means of health prevention, treatment and vaccination. This disjuncture of political principles deepened social divisions in terms of wealth, ethnicity, gender, and social capital that had accelerated in recent times (Lavalette, 2017). These developments renew the fundamental challenge posed for social work through the disruption of social bonds in the 19th century. Once more, the social professions have to find models of practice that go beyond the "rescuing" of people individually from the effects of this disruption, as had been the basic orientation of 19th century charitable helping, and to promote and facilitate instead new and sustainable forms of solidarity at a collective level, as for instance proposed by Elsen (2018a). Current social and political conditions, in combination with the global climate challenge, which will be discussed below, renew the call for the implementation of social work's social justice and community orientation by building up the social capacities of individuals and communities (Kam, 2014).

2.1   The Divisive Social Implications of the Corona Pandemic

The Corona crisis that hit societies globally in 2020 has not so much caused social divisions and political polarisations but rather deepened and accelerated them. It exposed dramatically the neglect of social solidarity and social justice in public policies over several preceding decades. Therefore, from evaluating the effects and experiences of the pandemic more fundamental conclusions can be drawn concerning the quality, status and effects of the "social dimension" of contemporary societies, the threats it faces and the steps necessary for its full establishment.

2.1.1   National(ised) social solidarity

The rapid spread of the virus across countries and across groups with different vulnerabilities within societies called into question the guiding principle of neoliberal policies which charged individuals with the primary responsibility for making social provisions, protecting themselves from risks and showing their social responsibility by conforming to a pervasive work ethic

(Ross, 2021). Welfare reforms in the name of this ideology since the 1990s systematically withdrew or constricted public support systems that had characterised welfare state approaches in the post-WWII era. They focused on coercing people on welfare benefits to seek work or training under the threat of the termination of welfare support. The aim of these policies was not just the reduction in public spending on welfare measures but the transformation of social relations overall. As Dardot and Laval (2014) argued,

> Neo-liberalism is not merely destructive of rules, institutions and rights. It is also productive of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living certain subjectivities. In other words, at stake in neo-liberalism is nothing more, nor less, than the form of our existence – the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves, to relate to others and to ourselves. (p. 3)

Typically, the first governmental reaction to the spreading pandemic in the UK, the heartland of neoliberalism in Europe, was to appeal to the individual responsibility of citizens to protect themselves instead of resorting to what then Prime Minister Johnson called "draconian measures" which were not in line with the British tradition of protecting the liberty of its citizens (Nelson, 2021). This emphasis on liberal values was then soon replaced by references to the national interest which sanctioned the introduction of pervasive quarantine measures. "Solidarity" re-emerged as an issue in politics but focused on national boundaries, which hindered international cooperation in the development and distribution of vaccines that became necessary. African countries for instance were not even being given access to the research data that had allowed companies like Pfizer and Moderna to develop and market their immunisation products.

2.1.2 Divisive under-funding of public services

Despite the forced revision of social policy principles towards increasing public funding (Cantillon, Seeleib-Kaiser & Veen, 2021), social divisions in terms of access to and quality of treatment became most evident during the Covid pandemic in the public health context. Here inadequate investment in collective, preventative and comprehensive health resources left these services struggling with the sudden increase in demand. Not only did hospitals

find it difficult to give sufficient attention to Covid-19 patients, the capacities this absorbed had often to be withdrawn from ongoing treatment services in the public sector like in oncology. Already lengthy waiting lists for operations and treatment became even longer. Statistics also show that unequal access to public health services meant that disadvantaged strata of the population suffered more severely from the pandemic than those in better conditions, both in terms of their general nutritional health status and their ongoing and acute provision with medical support (Krumer-Nevo & Refaeli, 2021). In countries like the USA, with a health service largely run on commercial principles, minority ethnic groups quite clearly suffered higher losses of health and life during the pandemic than the majority white population (Laster & Whitney,2020).

What was particularly relevant in terms of a social (and therefore social work) perspective in the medical context was the widespread break-down of the social dimension of care through the imposition of quarantine and isolation conditions that did not bear any relation to the social needs of patients and particularly of dying patients (for Belgium see Kaelen et al., 2021; for Italy see Plagg et al., 2022). While isolation was advisable on epidemiological grounds, the largely "technical" implementation of rules and practices exposed a widening divergence in approaches to care in hospitals as well as in residential institutions between a purely functional and a comprehensive social orientation that tried to preserve the dignity of the person.

2.1.3 "Social distancing" as reality and metaphor

This splitting effect was amplified at the level of the general population under the legally enforced requirement of "social distancing", a term loaded with high symbolic significance. The regulations had actually aimed at "spatial distancing" of persons to avoid contamination and infection but the use of the term "social" hinted at how special arrangements are intertwined with social relations (Aluffi Pentini & Lorenz, 2020). These divisive social implications of the prescribed "distancing" were noticeable particularly in two regards. Firstly, there was little critique of the use of the term and its implications and this can be taken as a further indication that the pandemic did not cause a new social reality but that social distancing had been on the political

agenda for such a long time that the population seems to have gotten used to it. Secondly, social distancing in the wider sense acknowledges and evidences that population groups come to live more and more in separate spheres, whether these are geographically, socio-economically or virtually defined.

Urban space as social space – a historical excursus

As far as the geographic indicators are concerned, urbanisation in the wake of industrialisation has always implied a degree of segregation if the process was left to develop according to its purely commercial interests. The negative effects on the whole society of such "untamed" developments became quickly apparent in terms of criminality that threatened to "spill over" into "better" neighbourhoods. Social unrest could de-stabilise the whole political system, health risks arising from poor sanitation affected not just the population in the immediate neighbourhood but posed a threat to everybody (Stedman Jones, 2013). In this context, the settlement movement played an important political role that pointed beyond the alleviation of individual hardship and sought to involve whole communities in tackling structural issues (Köngeter, 2021). This movement gave rise to the methods of community work and community action which resume their actuality today in eco-social transformation initiatives (Elsen, 2018b).

The social experiences in the urban space were sporadically taken up by politics directly. The danger of "spill-over" led to counter- measures in urban planning like canalisation of waste water, creation of common spaces like urban parks, but also systematic policing and nationally in the first public social insurance schemes under Bismarck. An example of how to counter-act housing segregation was the housing policy of the social democratic city government of "Red Vienna" when in the years after the First World War social housing like the "Karl Marx Hof" came into existence and still exists there today (Sieder, 1985). The end of the Second World War then again triggered social housing schemes as part of the welfare state initiatives of several countries, but with the fading of such political commitments and the re-assertion of capitalist housing policies in recent decades under the impact of a globalising economy, urban segregation again increased. Dramatic evidence of this is the vast growth of favelas in mega-cities, but also the equiva-

lent emergence of "gated communities" of wealthy property owners who can afford to withdraw into such privately policed quarters (Roitman, 2010).

2.1.4   Social divisions in employment conditions

The socio-economic divisions in employment also became apparent in the pandemic in glaring form. The prescribed social distancing could only be maintained if there was a set of workers available to service the population in lock-down conditions. These ranged from nursing and care staff to police and emergency personnel, street delivery and courier staff who did not have the option of "smart-working" from home. Their services were often now symbolically celebrated with applause and praise for their "heroism" as "essential workers", while far less attention was still being given to their inferior pay and working conditions which in no way correspond to the suddenly apparent essential role they play in society. Studies found that their portrayal as "heroes" might actually lower the readiness by the general public to show sympathy and take action in solidarity than if they had been seen as "victims" of an unjust system (Yuan et al., 2021). The widespread strikes by nurses, ambulance drivers, but also of teachers and operators of public transport services that erupted after the ending of the pandemic in many countries evidence this lack of material recognition given to the social value of "direct services" generally, while other groups of employees were less affected by the pandemic when they were able to continue working online from home.

2.1.5   Social division in the digital sphere

The pandemic conditions generally shifted social contacts more to the level of virtuality, where social divisions gained a further foothold. First, access to the necessary hardware of computers and smartphones that facilitate work, educational and social contacts and activities, was highly unequally distributed. The reliance on these means increased the discrepancy between privileged and disadvantaged sections of the population, with the effects on children perhaps having the most long-lasting consequences in terms of educational achievement (Prime, 2020), mental health (Berger et al., 2021) and exposure to violence (Pearce & Miller, 2020). But the move of social contacts towards virtual media also reinforced the segregating effects that had been

building up among the users of so-called social media. These manifest themselves in the phenomenon described as "echo-chambers", where algorithms create feed-back loops that channel contacts and information flow according to the binary divide of likes and dislikes. This led to the increasing reliance on information circulating in social media according to search preferences of users. This allegedly democratic process in which everybody can give their opinion and express their preferences, eliminates the dominance of established "knowledge authorities", like scientists and recognised institutions, but in reality paves the way for fake news and conspiracy theories claiming equivalent legitimacy and authority (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). In this way, preferences turn easily into prejudices and hostilities so that open and informed dialogue between different positions becomes suppressed with serious consequences for the democratic system itself.

2.1.6   Political divisiveness through authoritarian populism

These effects can be related to political developments that show new lines of polarisations that replace the left-right scenario of established democratic politics. They are driven by authoritarian populism and are in one sense part of the fluidity political positions and visions have assumed with the large-scale transformation of political decision-making into consumer-satisfaction exercises and in another counterpose this volatility by offering fixed reference points for political positions, attitudes and above all a sense of belonging in the form of nationalism and racism (Cohen, 2019). This resurgence of nationalism, often promoted in neo-fascist terms mixed with references to racism, exploits the sense of being abandoned by mainstream parties and by established politics many citizens feel in view of rapidly changing global conditions. Authoritarian populism and nationalism offers instead "factual" indicators that promise adherents that they belong to a secure and superior political community constituted by genetic and taken-for-granted cultural indicators such as ethnicity, territory, language or religion (Fenger, 2018).

Within these ideological parameters, the existence and the particular characteristics of societal bonds are assumed to be simply given and clearly defined, a construct which, like in "classical" Nazism and Fascism, serves to legitimate the social exclusion of all who do not fit into those boundaries,

people of different creed, ethnicity or political conviction. These populist politics, which have become a political force in many countries, exercise this divisive pressure on social bonds by means of an ostensive recourse to traditional notions of nation and of folkish community. They thereby block the confrontation with the enriching and socially constructive capacities inherent in a democratic approach to diversity of various kinds of identity markers which would require politics oriented towards universal human rights and justice and the recognition of equality (Kymlicka, 2015). These political trends therefore pose a particular challenge to social work and whether it can maintain its social justice orientation and an approach to identity that, as stated initially, mediates individual choices with communal forms of belonging.

2.2   Global Divisiveness and War

The Covid pandemic was followed immediately by another global crisis originating in the political arena in the form of the Russian war against Ukraine. This adds a further, globally tangible and highly threatening dimension to the divisive tendencies highlighted above and illustrates the intricate connections between all forms of social bond disruption. As is becoming obvious with hindsight, this conflict also results from and exploits the neglect of social and cultural dimensions at the level of international relations compared to those guided by economic interests, where this neglect has similar effects to those arising at the interpersonal level. These acts of aggression try to derive their legitimation from resentments, from a sense of humiliation and lack of recognition experienced by Russia on the part of Western nations after 1989 (Kluth, 2023). These repressed collective humiliations felt in many former communist countries arose from the more or less open triumphalism that capitalism displayed as the "winner" in the 1989 revolutions and hence strengthens the rise of nationalism. This reaction manifests itself not only in Russia but feeds also into authoritarian and nationalist policies in other post-communist countries like Hungary and Poland. In many former communist countries, it is being realised that the capitalist emphasis on personal liberty and choice increased inequalities in these societies splitting it into winners and losers of the transformation (Cohen, 2019). In

Eastern EU member states the neglect of a recognisable European social policy agenda can be seen as further contributing to the current crisis of integration and demonstrates that emphasising economic self-interests cannot lead to social integration, neither at national nor at European level (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2015).

The war in Ukraine has furthermore contributed significantly to additional displacements of people which had already been going on in recent decades on account of other wars, but in the case of the Ukraine crisis another split in attitudes and policies towards migrants is becoming apparent in the form of the distinction between "welcome" migrants (probably on account of their European origins) and those that are considered a threat to national identities and stability (in relation to the treatment of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea). Two sharply contrasting versions of solidarity clash and involve politics in continuous contradictions which complicate further the debate on criteria and values that legitimate national social cohesion and solidarity. These divisive developments engage social workers in an ever more complex task in terms of negotiating and mediating between "mental borders" arising from geopolitical frontier-drawing (Collins et al., 2022).

2.3   The Ecological Crisis as a Challenge to Solidarity

Pandemic and war hit global society against the background of an even more comprehensive and unprecedented crisis in the form of the rising climatic temperatures. It has become evident in the stalemates of international climate conferences that the impact of pollution on the environment, a direct result of the industrial revolution first in limited regional, national, and now in a global context, now poses ultimately the biggest challenge for international solidarity. Despite the universality of the threat, all political attempts at limiting the impact by agreeing on joint strategies and commitments have failed to bring a decisive turn in political orientation (Peters et al., 2020). This is a further indication that not only have social bonds at all levels, personal, national and international, become more fragile, but that the means and political instruments by which to define the terms of social solidarity and establish reliable bonds across differing interests are proving inadequate. The chief instrument in this regard, developed and mobilised under conditions

of modernity, was democracy, but when democracy decays into a purely ritualistic exercise of chiefly creating numeric majorities instead of treating majority results as a commitment to acting in the best interest of the whole population, the social commitment to integration, which forms the centre of the democratic ideal, is being negated. This development can be understood not only in terms of the economisation and thus "de-politicisation of politics" (Kioupkiolis, 2018) but even more so from the perspective of the "de-socialisation" of politics. Through this, democracy becomes a cause of rather than being a remedy for social divisions in societies, thereby further undermining the public confidence in democratic processes. In this global political context, the question arises for social work, is its social mandate still meaningful under these changing conditions – or can these crises serve as a stimulus to renew social work's mandate so that it encompasses the concern for both solidarity and democracy, as was always implied particularly in the profession's community work and community action orientation. If conditions for citizenship and belonging can no longer be relied upon, those conditions need to be created in the first place.

3. Re-Defining the Social Mandate of Social Work

In view of these divisive tendencies and their implicit or explicit onslaught on the stability and legitimacy of all principles of democratic and universal "welfare", social work is challenged to once more take stock of its core principles and its competences. As historical reviews of the development of the various forms of social work show (Reisch, 2019; Lorenz, 2014; Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020), this profession has always been enmeshed and also actively engaged in processes of transformation that connect the well-being of individuals with the concerns for a society worth living in for all citizens. This transversal orientation constitutes a central characteristic of social work as a profession and as a societal institution (Lorenz, 2016). Despite being placed often in marginal positions at the fringes of society where people are in danger of being excluded from full participation in society, social workers are well aware that their work can only be meaningful if it practices not just

psychological skills but also addresses cultural, economic and political conditions that effect marginalisation and exclusion.

Embracing these perspectives in a methodical way leads to a re-evaluation of what the "social" means in the profession's title. The apparent "fuzziness" of this term actually makes reference to the complex factors that need to be combined to make up the social bonds that hold societies together. Some of these are spelled out for instance in the "global definition of social work" of 2014 as formulated by the world organisations IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work) and IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) which states:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. (IFSW, 2014)

This definition contains a comprehensive agenda, which these world organisations are in the process of implementing and monitoring. In this regard it is also useful to analyse the learning potential for social work that can be derived from the above listed crises affecting societies globally at this historical turning point by valuing the strong social movements that they gave rise to. This may help to identify and target concrete elements of the impending project of the re-connecting fragmented social bonds that are already active.

3.1 Making the Global Social Work Agenda Count

One indicator of the drive for strengthening the rights dimension of social solidarity was the Black Lives Matter movement. It was not a coincidence that it resonated so strongly around the world during the Covid pandemic. In a situation in which whole sectors of the population were experiencing restrictions on their freedom to fully participate in society, the discriminatory treatment of black people at the hands of powerful social institutions res-

onated with people well beyond the black community itself (Fekete, 2022). This sparked unprecedentedly widespread demonstrations of solidarity with black victims of intimidation, persecution and exclusion. The movement gave a warning that racism can become endemic in institutions when rights and provisions for equal treatment exist only formally but are not being practised or not being taken seriously. It furthermore made it clear that "giving voice" was not just a matter of marginalised people empowering themselves to play their full role in society, but is also the duty of the majority population to speak up against injustice on all fronts. This realisation sets the scene for situations in which social workers speak to justice not just privately while regarding only the individual work with people suffering from violence and exclusion as their actual official mandate. Taking position collectively and publicly on issues of injustice and racism is part of their mandate (Reisch, 2019). Their experience with and professional understanding of situations where violence has a clear social context, such as in cases of domestic violence, entitles them to criticise "the system", in their own organisation or elsewhere, when it fails to operate to principles of justice and equality. Such actions are one building block of grounded social solidarity.

A parallel movement that expanded again vigorously during the pandemic was the #MeToo initiative by women who had experienced sexual violence in work situations. It raised similar issues and had also an appeal not just for women who showed their solidarity across many divides of nation, ethnicity and culture, but also for men in reflecting on their contribution to the issue. The concern about women experiencing violence is of public and professional interest to social workers and extends beyond the area of domestic violence, which the increase in intimate partner violence against women during the pandemic evidenced (Evans et al., 2020) and their position-taking and organisational stance must reach the public dimension of the issue.

3.2 The Social and Political Significance of "Care Work"

Another "lesson" from the "social distancing" experiences of Covid-19 was the public appreciation of the caring professions and "caring" more generally. The value of this "service" suddenly occupied centre stage because of its concrete as well as its symbolic significance. Caring had been taking place

largely in the shadow of the "grand affairs" of enterprise and politics and now the "added value" in human care became evident in as much as it fulfils its function not merely in the technical aspects of medical curing, providing technical assistance to persons with limited mobility or delivering goods. Every gesture that goes beyond the "merely technical aspects" of a caring interaction, even the few words exchanged with a delivery courier, the hand of a patient being held despite hygiene regulations, the photograph of a relative left in sight of a dying patient, showed its potential social value. These experiences and their emotional quality show that many aspects of caring are hard to quantify and even harder to prescribe in regulations, but express what makes caring in all its forms valuable. They show that caring is inseparable from ethical frameworks (Held, 2006) and this dimension needs to be recognised and fostered explicitly at the risk of draining social relations of their essential quality (Moriggi et al., 2020). Social workers were not celebrated like nurses during lock-down as "essential workers" but they can take courage from those symbolic acclamations of the value of caring that their social role is indeed essential to society (Ross et al., 2021). Furthermore, their form of caring takes in those ethical and affective qualities while at the same time touching always on political issues. Social workers' comprehensive competences enshrine therefore exactly those democratic principles which a pure market economy ideology threatens to erode, which is that democracy goes beyond realising one's personal interests in that it is concerned for the quality of life overall (Tronto, 2013).

4. Social Work for a New Social Economic Model

These considerations are not meant to under-value the economic dimension of social solidarity, on the contrary, as can also be learned from the experiences of the pandemic. Examined at the economic level, the changes that the crisis forced even neo-liberal governments to make were simply astonishing. Within a short period, the usual neoliberal protest against measures to increase public expenditure was flung aside and governments incurred considerable additional debts when financing medical initiatives (Briceño &

Perote, 2020) and, what is even more astonishing, making payments available to workers and businesses forced to suspend their work and operations because of the quarantine conditions (Stuart et al., 2021). Suddenly the portrayal of unemployment as having its causes in the unwillingness of workers to seek suitable employment and of benefits as encouraging the population to become lazy changed for a rhetoric of such payments being a justified "social investment" in the recovery process to be expected after the pandemic had faded. These were exactly the Keynesian principles that had constituted the core economic arguments of welfare state policies in the immediate post-war period and which had fallen into disrepute. The furlough measures were largely revised once economic activities resumed fully after the pandemic, but then the next crisis occurred, triggered by the war against the Ukraine and its disruptive effects on the global energy markets. Huge increases in the cost of electricity and heating fuel for consumers forced governments across the political spectrum to confront the necessity to intervene in the "free energy market" to stop excessive exploitation of the situation and level prices through subsidies, and this not just for economic but largely for symbolic social reasons. If considerable parts of the society were to be left suffering from lack of heating during winter this would have serious health consequences (Limb, 2022). It would also put a blemish on the general sense of social responsibility of governments, an image factor which the neo-liberal period had not managed to extinguish entirely.

4.1 Social Work and Economic Justice

Social workers are indeed dealing with economic aspects of the personal crises in which they assist clients, but reflecting on current structural circumstances and developments highlights the need to take this economic responsibility a big step further. The economic vulnerability of people exposed by the current fuel prices has not its origins in contingent factors such as this war but has fundamental structural origins in the way goods and services generally have become commodified. The neoliberal dogma of privatisation intentionally eliminates the distinction between public and commercial goods and services and seeks to create market conditions indiscriminately in the areas of communication, transport, energy and increasingly in housing,

health and education, thereby systematically eliminating the social implications and values of those goods and services. The question needs to be and will inevitably be asked, is water for instance simply a commodity like iron or do its social qualities for health place it in a different category of goods (e.g. for Africa: Makwara, 2011)?

When considerations of whether service users can pay for health and other social services like education and care determine the extent and quality of services accessible to people in need, as happens under the impact of neoliberal principles (Cataldi et al., 2022), it confronts social workers with a fundamental decision which relates indeed to the Global Definition of Social Work: Do they only concern themselves with moderating the negative impact of this market-economic system in individual cases or do they become engaged in setting up alternative economic models that operate with different principles of ownership and distribution of goods and services. The latter is indeed the avenue being explored and promoted by the social economy and social cooperative movements, largely also as a response to the crisis (CIRIEC, 2017; Adam, 2018). Despite all their difficulties they are gaining momentum in view of the combined effects of the crises listed above and their orientation towards sustainability (Avagianou et al., 2022). Above all, social economy initiatives place social values and principles at the centre not just of economic but of all human activities. On account of this re-affirmation of the central importance of the social dimension these activities are gaining a notable presence in social work owing to the commitment of activists and scholars like Susanne Elsen, whose work has long focused on this topic (e.g. Elsen 2018a, Elsen 2018b; Elsen & Wallimann, 1998). Elsen's work underlines the intricate connections of today's re-evaluation of the role economic considerations have to play in social work with similar priorities identified in early forms of community work and the settlement movement.

4.2 Social Work and Ecological Justice

These socio-economic initiatives take on also the most serious global challenge, the climate crisis, and demonstrate this as an immediate and concrete issue for social work. Here the frustration with the ineffectiveness of official politics in confronting the necessary changes leads activists to treat envi-

ronmental issues not as a technical concern but as a decisive political issue that relates to the need to resolve social divisions in society (Elsen, 2019). Inequality studies show that sustainability cannot be promoted and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved at the expense of people who are already marginalised (van Niekerk, 2020). This requires action at the international level, and many of these eco-social movements have been developed in an international cooperative context, as well as at the local level, often in conjunction with the exploration of alternative local economic models that have a tangible effect on people's economic, social, and health position (Cuomo, 2011). This is where social work's historical dual orientation towards local issues in a global arena gains renewed actuality.

5. Conclusion

What is required of social work is a re-affirmation of its transversal responsibility for establishing relations of social solidarity in society, not just on a behavioural level but by transforming notions of ownership towards public goods as "commons" (Singh, 2017). The current global crises make clear that this can only be done by paying equal attention to the psychological, social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of human relationships in modern societies. Models for eco-social projects pave the way in this direction. "Caring for nature" cannot be limited to the physical and biological environment but must be based on a comprehensive understanding of "caring" at all these levels (Moriggi et al., 2020), an approach of which social work has always been the custodian and advocate. Its guiding principles combine an emphasis on personal freedom with that of social justice and equality. The experience of current crises gives a decisive impulse to practise in all forms of social work what Galafassi (2018) calls "transformative imagination". The restrictions on social contacts experienced during the Corona pandemic have reinforced a very basic human need to be "in touch" with others, but "touching" others responsibly – like "being in touch with nature" – can only come about through a process of the recognition of the dignity of a person in a wider social, political and environmental context that opposes exploitation

and fosters equality. Every social work intervention poses this challenge anew. Social work has a responsibility to transmit the competences required in this process and to thereby initiate continuous transformative learning occasions at all levels.

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