Chapter 4
Learning Democracy in Social Work

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Introduction: Social Work, Citizenship and Democracy

Social work and democracy are historically closely connected. The development of social work is often linked to the social question (Castel 1995; Rosanvallon 1995). Against the background of processes of industrialisation, proletarianisation and urbanisation, social work was developed as an answer to poverty and delinquency, which were regarded as problems of deficient social integration (Donzelot 1984). As such, social work's development should be understood in relation to the transformation of an estates society model to a modern model, with strong emphasis on the individual and, more specifically, on the figure of the citizen. Hence, in modern democracies, education and social work were defined as outstanding instruments to socialise the individual into the citizen and to teach these citizens uprightness and dedication to the law (Lorenz 2004). From this perspective, the educational dimension is essential to social work: social work is about understanding the relationship between the individual and society, as a key question in the debate on democracy and citizenship.

The development of democracy and citizenship are historical processes, characterised by conflicts and complexity. Through the successive recognition of civil, political and social rights (Marshall 1950), citizenship has become a layered concept. Citizenship is interpreted as both *political* and *social* citizenship. The political citizen is the entitled individual, whose freedom to act is protected by civil rights and who can participate in the political project of democracy. This political participation is grounded in the right to vote and the entitlement to be elected. The social citizen is the citizen acknowledged as a member of the community: social

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citizenship refers to an intersubjective identity, which implies the recognition of one's own identity together with the recognition of the other as equal. Whereas political citizenship is the fundamental condition of being acknowledged as an individual citizen in your own right, social citizenship is vital to the possibility of making an appeal to the solidarity of the society of which individuals are members (Raes 2003).

At present, the question of the relationship between political and social citizenship is extremely important due to an increased feeling of a democratic decline: low levels of political participation and a growing concern about different forms of anti-social behaviour give rise to a strong call for a 'new democratic offensive' (de Winter 2007). This results in a renewed appeal for social work to investigate socialisation for democracy. Remarkable in this appeal is an increasing tendency to emphasise social integration as a condition for citizenship. Biesta (2011) argues that the emphasis on social integration implies a shift from a political to a social *conception* of citizenship. C*itizenship as a political concept* refers to the citizen as subject, protected in his freedom to act by the recognition of civil rights and respected as equal by the recognition of political and social rights. *A social conception of citizenship* reduces citizenship to civic virtue, defined as the engagement to participate actively in the endorsement and further development of a model of democracy. In Biesta's view, the shift from a political to a social conception of citizenship is problematic for democracy, as it lays the focus on the question how society can be consolidated as a safe, stable, cohesive and inclusive project through the social education of its citizens. As such, this shift draws the attention away from the conditions in which citizens can participate in the making of society. In this evolution, Biesta reveals a shift from citizenship as a rights-based practice to citizenship as a duty-based practice.

Biesta's observation challenges social work to reflect critically and explicitly on citizenship and democracy and on the function of social work in the making of democracy. Social work has a fundamentally different position in both conceptions of citizenship. Biesta's observation suggests that in a political conception, social work supports citizens in taking part in the process of democracy, whereas in a social conception, social work becomes a policy instrument focusing on the citizen's duty to smoothly integrate in the prevailing democratic project and, in doing so, to contribute to social cohesion. In this chapter, we challenge this suggestion. We agree that there is a historical tension between a social and political conception of citizenship, but we argue that only in this tension the educational dimension of social work becomes clear, and it is through this dimension that social work can become a democratic practice. The educational dimension in social work is crucial to conceptualise democracy as an open and ongoing process and not as a predefined project. This argument results from a pedagogical perspective on social work. This perspective enables us to connect rather than oppose social and political conceptions of citizenship. It is in this dialectic tension that we find a meaningful answer to the question of how to relate social work to learning democracy.

Social Work: Carrier of Both a Private and a Public Mandate

In order to clarify social work's role in the process of democracy, we need to highlight an essential characteristic of social work throughout European history. Social work has always been concerned with mediating the relationship between the public and the private spheres (Jordan and Parton 2004). Of course, we can distinguish between countries with regard to the role of the state in running social work practices and shaping social policies. Despite these differences, however, a common element is that social work carries both a private and a public mandate (Lorenz 2004). The private mandate refers to social work as a relational practice dealing with the personal troubles of individuals, families and communities. Social work also carries a public mandate in negotiating the connection between private problems and public issues (Mills 1959). As Lorenz (2004, p. 5) puts it, it is 'important to recognise that the origins of social work are not just linked to social transformation processes at the core of the rise of modernity associated with reflexivity and the need for new life world forms of solidarity, but even more so to political agendas for their systemic stabilisation such as represented by the nation state project. As such social work, in all its forms, shares in the fundamental ambiguity of modernity in general and is also caught up in the contradictions that constituted the nation state, and this regardless whether we are looking at social work as a public or a nongovernmental activity'.

However, the relationship between these private and public mandates is not fixed. It is embedded in historical and societal contexts and developments. The shift from a constitutional state to a democracy went together with the introduction of new views on the role of education and social work. Another turning point was the construction of a post-war welfare state that occurred in many countries in a clear attempt to prevent the social unrest that paved the way for World War II (Pasture 1993).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social work (as well as compulsory education) was seen as a solution to the problems of the constitutional state (Dingwall et al. 1983). The main responsibility of the government was to protect civil rights by guaranteeing the application of the law. In this concept, the public and private spheres are well defined and clearly distinguished from each other. The basic idea is that modern societies are ruled by law. From this perspective, laws are characterised by their 'universality': the law is equal for all and does not take personal differences into account. The social sphere, then, can be regarded as a disciplinary connection between the individual and society (Butler and Pugh 2004). Simultaneously, in the attempt to bring the private sphere in line with the public interest, the construction of the social sphere results in a blurring of the borders between the private and public spheres. Next to its disciplinary function, the social sphere is also discovered as a forum to raise one's voice and to appeal to the solidarity of society. Thus, the social sphere evokes the possible tensions between a political and a social conception of democratic citizenship.

Transforming the Social

Democracy is not a static model. Throughout the development of Western countries, there has been a manifest evolution towards a widening and deepening of the concepts of democracy and citizenship. This evolution is related to the evolution from tributary suffrage to universal suffrage and to the introduction of the universal right to a dignified existence. Within the concept of tributary suffrage, social work carries a one-sided conceptualisation of social citizenship. Social work practices are charged with the socialisation of individuals into responsible citizens. Notwithstanding this clear focus on social integration as the core business of social work, social work practices were supported by two different educational ideologies (Simon and Van Damme 1989). On the one hand, a conservative educational ideology intended to teach citizens to act as 'good citizens', being aware of their duties towards the public good, and acting accordingly. The underlying concept of citizenship is one of *passive* citizenship, meaning that an individual has to act conform the dominant values in society and, in exchange, is recognised as a citizen. In such an approach, the 'social' in social work refers to a set of skills and values to be acquired. The underlying educational concept is one of discipline and adjustment to self-evident societal norms. On the other hand, a more progressive educational ideology intended to support the lower classes to emancipate from their marginalised societal position, by offering them possibilities to acquire knowledge and skills to contribute to their chances of social mobility. Here, the underlying concept of citizenship is a concept of *active* citizenship. Active citizenship is seen as the outcome of emancipative learning and as the result of individual achievement in a supportive context. In this approach, the 'social' in social work is linked to a broader social political commitment, creating supportive conditions in which individual competencies and individual aspirations can become real. In this sense the progressive ideology also carries a concept of *postponed* citizenship, which makes clear that it is still embedded in a social integrative conceptualisation of social work. It is this concept of active, albeit postponed, citizenship that laid the foundations of the post-war welfare state. The meaning of the 'social' in social work, also in this more progressive ideology, emerges as a 'pursuit' to support people to become aware of their need to be socially integrated and to offer them opportunities to meet this need.

So, historically, social work inevitably involves both control and care, although the relationship between both components can take different shapes (Jordan and Parton 2004). With the extension from tributary to universal suffrage, the understanding of citizenship is deepened from a focus on individual freedom to a growing emphasis on greater equality and equal access to societal resources. This emphasis went hand in hand with the recognition of Human Rights as universal basic rights, grounded in the right to live a dignified life. In the Final Declaration of the UN World Conference on Human Rights, which took place in Vienna in 1993, it was stated that 'democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing (…) Democracy is based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic,

social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives' (Vienna Declaration UN World Conference on Human Rights 1993, in Lemmens and Schaiko 2012, p. 391).

The widening and deepening of the concept of citizenship towards the recognition of social rights resulted in a substantial change in the definition of the 'social'. From a constitutional element of social order under the conditions of modernity, the 'social' grows into a relatively autonomous field of action, with a substantial impact on the public as well as on the private sphere (Raes 2003). The social becomes not only an institutional layer of the implementation of social rights but also a possible lever to transform private problems into public issues. Precisely in this transformation, a key question arises: is it the ambition of social work to integrate people in a particular order, or is it (also) the ambition to make political subjectivity possible? The meaning of the social in social work is dependent on how social work answers this question. If the focus is on problems of social integration, the social is – in line with its historical origins – a support as well as an incentive for people to participate in societal developments and to contribute to the public interest. The emphasis, then, lays on a social conception of citizenship. If social work focuses on supporting political agency, then, the social in social work is seen as creating a forum wherein different opinions on living and on living together are confronted with each other. As such, the social is not only a sphere that contributes to individual integration but also a sphere of public debate and a possible support of political emancipation. The nature of the social then shifts from dedication to a delineated democratic model towards the experience of a possible radicalisation of democracy, in the sense of human dignity and social justice for all. As a consequence, the meaning of the 'social' in social work becomes more powerful, yet much more ambiguous: historically linked to the nation state-building project of democracy, in the post-war concept of the welfare state social work can also be the bearer of a new understanding of democracy, not only as a model of social order but as a sense of living together in a democratic way – i.e. understanding human rights as a fundamental democratic activity. In addition, the social sphere opens up the possibility to contextualise and deepen fundamental democratic concepts of freedom, equality and solidarity (Mortier 2002). Development of the latter needs enquiry into how social work defines the 'social' in social work theory and practices (Bradt 2009).

The Temptation of Professional Autonomy Through Methodisation

The debate on the 'social' in social work related to the ambiguous position of social work in Western welfare regimes urges a critical analysis of the way in which social work responds to the relationship between individual and society. Lorenz (2011) points to the different traditions in Europe, distinguishing between liberal and civic

republican versions of citizenship and showing their correspondence with social work paradigms. Liberal versions of citizenship emphasise a functional orientation of social work focusing on those moments in which social cohesion is threatened. In this functional orientation, the important aims of social work relate to supporting individuals in their integration into society; the emphasis lies on the political conception of citizenship.

Civic republican versions of citizenship emphasise public virtue: the reproduction of civilising principles, practices and attitudes which ensure the stability of a society as a community of belonging. In this orientation, an important aim of social work lies in community building; the emphasis is on social citizenship as a condition of being recognised as a full member of society. In this tradition, the educational role of social work is to link citizenship with possibilities of appropriation of social and cultural identities. Both traditions meet each other in the question of how to create a frame of reference, shared by both the government and citizens, in which freedom, equality and solidarity can become real. Consequently, social work has to shift the orientation from citizenship as a condition or a set of skills and values to citizenship as a practice (Lorenz 2004). Through this approach people can experience solidarity as the possibility to appeal to societal resources as an integral part of their rights as a citizen and not as an alternative to these rights (Marshall 1992, as cited in Lorenz 2004).

It is true that such a contribution of social work to solidarity is not clearly defined, but it enables us to comprehend the changing position of social work in Western welfare regimes and more specifically the feeling that social work is increasingly demanding and controlling (Pratt 1985; Jordan 2004) and its emancipatory capacity seems to be eroding (Stepney 2006). For sure, the focus on control as a dominating rationale in social work (Parton 2000) has strengthened under the influence of neoliberal ideas and 'Third Way' thinking (Dominelli and Hoogvelt 1996; Biesta 2011). A main problem in social work, however, is that it has not been very critical about its own role in the development of the welfare state and has failed to deepen the link between social work and broader social political developments (Lorenz 2004, 2005). Throughout the development of social work, social workers have generally tended to consider their ambiguous position as a result of a lack of professional autonomy. They sought to build up this autonomy by making a stronger distinction between social work practice and social policy. In developing a pedagogical perspective on social work, it becomes clear that this pursuit only brings a fake solution. For, in this distinction social work refers to a welfare practice, while social policy refers to a governmental duty to create the social and political conditions under which social work can contribute to more social solidarity and equality. In establishing this distinction, social work has (re)locked itself into an approach to the social sphere as an instrumental connection between the private and the public sphere, ignoring its potentially powerful, yet ambiguous position. This explains why social work is often absent in social political discussions about defining social problems (Bradt 2009). Social work then restricts its critical task to the development of 'anti-discriminatory', 'empowering' methods rather than to investigate the connection

with lived realities of people and then critically analyse its position with regard to the state-citizen relationship.

There are several key elements in the development of this technical approach to social work. A first element is the increased focus on the early prevention of social problems. This might be important from a societal point of view, but it also re-establishes the distinction between 'the solution' and 'the definition' of social problems. Second, social work increasingly relies on its traditional concern with individual and family casework interventions. Therefore, current social work (research) is mainly focused on the micro-level, the relationship between social workers and their 'clients'. As a consequence, it is difficult for social workers to gain insight into how the micro-level is related to the macro-level. Finally, social work theory has tried to develop a welfare perspective on social problems as a distinct professional perspective, rather than as a distinct perspective in the broader social political debate (Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie 2009). Notwithstanding social workers' numerous references to human rights and social justice, social work practice often reduces itself to social policy administration (Roose and De Bie 2008). In that way, social work has mainly developed as a 'sedimentary practice': a practice that has lost its initial political orientation and is accepted as self-evident (Mouffe 2005). As such, social work has become not only a constitutive practice to existing society but also a self-referential practice (Harris 2008; Roose et al. 2012). The development of social work as a sedimentary practice runs parallel to an increasing methodisation of social work's inherent pedagogical dimension. Instead of deepening the meaning of social work as a pedagogical approach to social problems, emphasis is put on questions of how to solve predefined social problems, without questioning the underlying problem definitions. The basic idea behind this technical approach to social work is that social problems rise from educational deficits. Because of these deficits, public intervention in the private sphere – even if preventative – seems legitimate. This public intervention is directed by an appeal to people to *become* citizens: worthy members of society (De Vos et al. 2012).

As described above, this appeal is inherent to social work, which originated from a strong conservative and moralising point of view, but also knew more progressive, emancipative approaches. These moral and political tensions in social work practice were gradually overcome through the development of a scientific, yet technical approach. On the one hand, the reliance on rational principles of intervention did help to overcome moralism, but on the other, it ended up in an establishment of universal standards of normality. The pedagogical dimension was restricted to the implementation of habits, skills and values, functional to criteria of normal personal, social and cultural development. This focus on personal 'developmentalism' stressed the role of professional competency and diagnosis, but at the same time alienated social work practices from a perspective on social work as a reciprocal activity, grounded in the question of how to construct solidarity in a world of difference and pluralism. Therefore, we argue that social work needs to deepen the pedagogical perspective on social work, and learning democracy in social work requires a re-evaluation of the political dimension in social work.

Learning Democracy in Social Work

Social work is often promoted as a strong change agent, a 'heroic agent' (Marston and McDonald 2012) that solves social problems (Segal et al. 2009). From that perspective, societal development becomes a technical question instead of a result of human interactions (Heyting 1998). As a consequence, social work is seen as a field of action in itself, and a tension emerges between social work as a (limited) supply of social welfare services and people's possibilities of appealing to these services. This tension has its origins in the idea that criteria for deploying social services are to be defined in a universal way, independently of people's concrete lifeworld. So, criteria for deploying social services refer to predefined needs, excluding other questions that are experienced as urgent but do not fit the developed criteria. The broader societal debate on the balance between individual and societal responsibility remains silent.

However, from a democratic perspective, social work starts from awareness of the diversity of meanings of the same situation and from the responsibility to understand these meanings through interaction and communication with the people involved. Political agency needs public debate: a particular quality of interaction that makes it possible to acquire the capacity of joint action for transforming private problems into public issues. This quality of interaction is a source of democratic power as well as a call for the democratic account of institutionalised social policy. It shows how public debate can result in social political action (Tinnevelt 2010). This means that public debate is fundamentally not grounded in an endeavour for consensus, but in the creation of fora for dissensus and public debate. Social work can offer such a forum, under the condition that it sees its legitimacy not only in the 'needs' of people or society, but first of all in the quest to support the democratic discussion on the transformation of private problems into public issues. Herein, a fundamental key is the recognition of human rights. The recognition of the right to a dignified existence for every citizen involves the commitment of society to guarantee the realisation of rights necessary to realise equal opportunities to be recognised as a citizen and to participate in the definition of the objectives of social policy. This implies that social work has to be dedicated to guarantee the freedom of people to determine a personal position on the definition of an assumed need and/or a demand for social services, as well as to communicate its own position towards needs and/or demands. From this perspective, social work is a potential source of political agency and power.

Notwithstanding the fact that the political power emerging from public debate can influence social policy, the democratisation of social policy is also a question of transforming societal laws and rules. The public debate has to result in parliamentary debate, wherein the transformation of private problems into public issues is verified and reviewed in the light of democratic decision processes. In that light, the notion of 'public debate' is twofold. On the one hand, it refers to the quality of social interaction as a condition for political agency; on the other hand, it refers to parliamentary debate to transform public opinion in societal laws and rules and to

guarantee the possibilities of public debate in society (Habermas, in Tinnevelt 2010). In line with this insight, the link between democracy and human rights is that 'democracy fosters the full realisation of all human rights, and vice versa' (Commission of Human Rights 1999, in Lemmens and Schaiko 2012, p. 392). This does not mean that there is one universal model of democracy. The link between human rights and democracy is established by the awareness that human rights stand for some substantive elements of the notion of democracy, namely, the participation of the citizen, the existence of well-functioning state authorities to take positive measures aimed at protecting the fundamental rights of the citizens and private institutions protecting cultural and social heritage and respect for pluralism and diversity in society. In their analysis of democracy in Europe, from a human rights perspective, Lemmens and Schaiko state that 'pluralism and diversity in a democratic society not only reflects how society is, but in addition how society ought to be' (Lemmens and Schaiko 2012, p. 01). This statement refers to the necessity to shape social work as a participatory practice of 'cultural action' (Freire 1972). Then democratic learning is not so much socialisation into a specific model of democracy, but refers to an engagement in the 'democratic experiment' (Biesta 2011).

In acting and reflecting, it is impossible for social workers to take a neutral point of view. They simultaneously have to respect the freedom, rights and aspirations of the individual citizen and the collective expectations and considerations of solidarity and equality. This ambiguity of social work implies that, on a relational level, social work can never obtain a clear-cut solution to social problems, because by nature these problems are embedded in social political discussions. The vital issue at stake is the role social workers take with regard to social problem constructions. The tension between the private and public mandates of social work requires a social work practice in which the potential to explore a myriad of ways and strategies to define, construct and cope with social problems is a key element (Fook 2002). Social work cannot escape this ambiguity: it has to support people on an individual level, while at the same time opening up discussion on the democratic character of problem constructions (Roose et al. 2012).

We have argued that a pedagogical perspective on social work deepens the political dimension of social work. The educational relationship between social workers and the people in whose lifeworld they intervene is fundamental to approach social work as a democratic practice, as it connects social work practice with the lifeworld of people living in a diversity of social contexts (Coussée et al. 2010). From this perspective, education is understood as a shared activity, creating space for dialogue, uncertainty and unpredictability. However, uncertainty and unpredictability are not merely characteristics of the relation between clients and social workers, but basic characteristics of the 'social' in social work. Against this background, reflexive acting includes consciousness of the inevitability of unpredictable and undesirable outcomes and the impossibility of social work practices acting as a radical solution to social problems. In that way, social workers have to act from the perspective of being significant, yet at the same time limited (Roose et al. 2012).

The relationship between social work and democracy lays in practices which are aware of the necessity of learning democracy. Social workers as well as the people

they are involved with can learn to act political by being engaged in public debate, not as a conflict of interests, but as joint action to understand democracy as an engagement to human dignity and social justice. According to Biesta (2011), learning democracy emphasises the importance of the democratic quality of the processes and practices that make up the everyday lives of children, young people and adults in their ongoing formation as democratic citizens. Critical analysis of the democratic quality of social work practices includes theoretical, empirical and historical research. This research is neither a linear nor a comforting activity. A salient observation is that in current developments, the establishment of the 'social' as a central mandate of social work is being eliminated from the agenda, because service users are dominantly seen as individuals or groups of individuals defined by their own characteristics (Lorenz 2009). The appeal for social work to contribute to learning democracy means that social work must reinvestigate establishment of the 'social' as an important dimension of democratic citizenship: a dimension of belonging to the community, including the right to make a strong appeal regarding principles of human rights and social justice. Citizenship, as a rights-based status, requires engagement of the community in experiencing civil, political and social rights as recognisable and true in daily life.

Conclusion

Exploring learning democracy in social work seems to offer little cause for optimism about the 'democratic output' capacities of social work. Nevertheless, this conclusion is premature. Our argument for a pedagogical perspective on social work shows fragile but fertile impulses to construct social work as a democratic practice. It is important to see social work as a limited though significant task that takes the 'democratic experiment' seriously, while at the same time allowing for a critical positioning towards its own contribution to this experiment. Learning democracy in social work includes renewed curiosity about the construction of social problems as well as the historical shifts in democracy as both a political and a pedagogical project. A pedagogical perspective on social work is an invitation to a permanent questioning of the relationship between the political and social conceptions of citizenship. From that perspective, the meaning of the 'social' in social work has to be examined in relation to principles of human rights and social justice.

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