

## **Beyond the dichotomies of cultural and political relativism; arguing the case for a social justice based global social work definition.**

Vasilios Ioakimidis<sup>1</sup>

Since 2008 a rigorous and at times divisive debate has dominated much of the agenda of the two main organizations representing social work educators and practitioners internationally (IASSW and IFSW). Already more than five years have passed since these organizations expressed their willingness to proceed with and commit to updating the current global definition of social work, which was agreed in 2000 (by IFSW) and 2001 (by IASSW). Two interesting and distinctive facts linked to the process and timing of this decision reflect both the complexity as well as the powerful political contradictions embedded in the current debates. Never before in the *recent* history of global social work, has an agreed definition been subject to withdrawal so quickly since its initial approval. One needs to remember that the previous definition had been valid for over ten years. Moreover, never before has the actual *consultation process* for updating a definition has taken so long. We are already into the fifth year of debating and an agreement does not seem to be a very realistic prospect. So the obvious question asked by an observer might be ‘what is so complicated and contentious about updating this definition?’ or in sort ‘what is at stake here?’

Interestingly enough, the 2000/2001 definition is to be “scrapped” so quickly not because it has been unsuccessful or irrelevant. Undoubtedly, this has been the most widely cited and influential definition the profession has ever seen. Reviewing social work curricula, relevant literature and reports from the frontline (see below) will easily persuade even the most distrustful opponent, about the extent of dissemination and influence this definition had over the past decade. At the heart of its popularity rests the fact that for the first time in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Vasilios Ioakimidis is currently the Secretary of the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW). In this article he expresses personal opinions which do not necessarily reflect the position of EASSW

profession's history, a global definition has clearly and indisputably been linked to the principles of social justice, human rights and emancipation of the oppressed. Such a mandate has helped enormously in highlighting the political nature of social work and most importantly the uncertain terrain upon which social workers operate. The current definition recognizes values that have informed the practice and aspirations of a great number of frontline social workers across the globe who have joined the profession out of a commitment to social justice.

The publication of a long list of practitioners who have been murdered, arrested or 'disappeared' while promoting those values within the context of authoritarian rule is a testimony to such long but often neglected history of political activism (IFSW cited in *Servicio Social Portuges*, 2006). Apart from acknowledging the smaller or larger struggles of social workers, a definition emphasizing social justice, has helped to expose the nature and character of oppressive and bigoted social work practice, which has also been in existence since the creation of the profession. Historically, the latter tradition has been masked by vague declarations of political neutrality and professional sectarianism.

Recognizing and crucially taking sides is at the core of the current debate. The four official drafts (see appendix) that have been circulated so far are indicative of a delicate negotiation within IASSW and IFSW, mostly concentrating on the issue of the political nature of the profession. In the first proposal circulated in February 2012, there was an outright withdrawal of the term "social justice", while in the proposals that followed the term was restored but presented amid mutually conflicted terms and concepts (see below) that eventually rendered the definition unworkable. These drafts are also suggestive of a power struggle that could potentially endanger the achievements of the previous definition. As a result, instead of furthering and enhancing the commitment of social work to social justice and emancipation of the oppressed communities, we are facing the risk of a backward looking, socially conservative definition.

This article assesses the main aspects of the current debate focusing on the concepts and contradictions that have informed its process.. In particular there is an emphasis on the importance of understanding the contested history of social work and the main tensions between “social care” and “social control” as a way of comprehending the complexity and significance of the differing standpoints.. The article concludes that the adoption of an eclectic and mixed social work definition would rather obscure the profession’s commitments to social justice and weaken efforts to promote genuinely anti-oppressive and emancipatory practice.

***Exposing and challenging the structural causes of personal problems (or, ‘No part of the world is immune from neoliberal capitalism’)***

Social work as an activity is located in a rather unique position: the point of interaction between the state and the most vulnerable people in society. Therefore, frontline practitioners in much of the world routinely witness some of the most brutal effects of structural inequalities on people who, voluntarily or involuntarily, interact with social services. Despite the fact that social workers deal on a daily basis with the brutality of a sociopolitical system based on a profoundly illogical and unequal distribution of wealth, this knowledge and experience has not always fed into our theory and practice. Most importantly, in societies where discussions about poverty and inequality are customarily silenced, speaking about the truth of service user experiences needs to be the basis of an ethical, value based and meaningful social work practice.

Modern capitalist societies are agitated by one of the most overwhelming paradoxes in human history. On the one hand, tremendous advances and innovations in technology, industry and research have made it possible for humanity to generate unparalleled wealth. The global annual output of wealth is nowadays adequate enough to feed, educate and provide a good standard of living for the whole population of this planet. A research report commissioned by Oxfam revealed that the annual income of the richest 100 people is enough to end global poverty four times over (Oxfam, 2013). On the other hand, the main characteristic –and

tragedy- of modern capitalism is the immense concentration of such wealth in the hands of a minuscule minority of individuals and businesses. In 2006 a study by the World Institute for Development Economics Research revealed that the bottom half of the world population owns under 1% of all global wealth (Davies et al, 2008) while Oxfam (2013) indicates that this trend is not confined to rich countries *“In the UK inequality is rapidly returning to levels not seen since the time of Charles Dickens. In China the top 10% now take home nearly 60% of the income. Chinese inequality levels are now similar to those in South Africa, which is now the most unequal country on earth and significantly more unequal than at the end of apartheid. Even in many of the poorest countries, inequality has rapidly grown”*

As this report indicates, even though inequality is not a phenomenon unheard of in the history of societies, its extent, pace and ferocity in the age of neoliberal capitalism is unprecedented. Apart from the startlingly unequal distribution of resources at a global level, one has to consider the widening inequalities within individual country contexts.

The impact of structural inequality on individuals and communities alike is nowadays very well documented. Recent epidemiological studies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Stuckier and Basu, 2013), have confirmed that the more unequal societies are the more likely in which the poorest people die younger, suffer mental health problems, are affected by chronic illnesses, be exposed to criminal activities, experience racism, face exclusion from education. In short, neoliberal capitalism, a brutal system based on exploitation and unequal distribution of resources, is responsible for most of the causes pushing people to interact – voluntarily or involuntarily- with social services. Social work service users reach the social services not as a result of their own individual inadequacies, weakness or misfortunes. Neither because they are idle, malicious and greedy people who want to benefit from an overgenerous ‘nanny state’- as the dominant neoliberal rhetoric misleadingly claims. Poverty, inequality and unemployment are unambiguous determinant factors forcing the most vulnerable people into exclusion and alienation. Nevertheless, as I argue below, much of mainstream social work has turned a blind eye towards this reality.

Pathologization, stigmatization and surveillance have been the norm rather than exception in much of the history of top-down welfare (Jones and Novak, 1999). Omitting to highlight the structural causes of 'private ills' leaves space for 'blaming the victims' rather than addressing the roots of the problem. A genuinely non-stigmatizing and anti-oppressive social work practice needs to be organically rooted to the principles of social justice. Therefore, it is imperative that the global definition of social work reflects the struggle towards alleviating the structural causes of 'private ills' and does not legitimize the perpetuation of social injustice towards the people we work with. As I explain below, in the history of social work there has been considerable tension between on the one hand those social work approaches which endorse the need for social justice, and on the other "top-down" social work bureaucracy.

***Nunca Mas! (Never again!) Exposing oppressive practice and the dark history of social work***

In 2010, the disciplinary committee of the College of Social Service Professionals decided to expel and take legal action against a social work practitioner on the basis of his politically unethical practice during Videla's military junta (see Allayon, 2010). The practitioner in reference had collaborated with the regime promoting one of the most horrible examples of oppressive and punitive social work practice. While working at the Central Hospital of Neuquén he gained access to injured students and other activists who had participated in the movements for democratic change. He then used the pretext of professionalism and claiming confidentiality he "caseworked" the patients collecting information about their political actions. Further to this he routinely used to pass all this sensitive information the junta's intelligence services (Intelligence Battalion 601). Several of the activists involved in the case were arrested and tortured. The Argentinian Federation of Professional Associations of Social Service Workers (FAAPSS) justified the decision to expel him stating that "*It is important to promote the politics of memory, truth and justice reflecting the commitment of Argentinian social workers to the process of social emancipation for the peoples of*

*Latin America*” (Martins S cited in Allayon N, 2010). Such swift and powerful action against social workers who had collaborated with the regime and engaged with oppressive practice is part of a broader movement in Argentina which demands justice through the exploration of truth with reference to the ‘dark’ years of the military junta; the movement has adopted the short but powerful motto “NUNCA MAS!” (Never again!)

The open debate within Argentinian social work is rather unique in the context of the profession. Social work as a profession has long suffered selective amnesia (Reisch and Andrew, 2002). Literature about the history of the profession is scarce and shallow, emphasizing on the almost ‘inherent’ benevolence of social workers and their sacred commitment to ‘do good’. Mainstream histories about the origins of social work are monotonously structured around the brilliance of charitable individuals, known as the ‘pioneers’, who were committed to developing expertise in order to pull ‘dysfunctional’ people and families out of their misery (see Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2011). These kind of historiographies are filled with didactic clichés about the kindhearted “do-gooders” and the readily available toolkits of social workers that seem appropriate to nearly all known “dysfunctions” and “problems”. They hardly ever mention the fact that social work is the direct product of political calculations and the creation of the profession has always been bound to contradictory and politically opposing ideologies. References to the broader political context, the class nature of the pioneers’ activities, and the internal rife contradictions within the profession are almost nonexistent (Jones, 2012). Moreover, the existence of a rich radical social work tradition which developed in different parts of the world, and rejected top-down professionalism in favour of developing social alliances which could bring about social change are wiped off most mainstream social work histories.

The direct outcome of such selective amnesia seems to be the creation of a distorted, unrealistic and disabling self-imaginary, detached from social realities. Historically, such a lack of self-awareness has rendered social work an irrelevant activity in much of the world. Social work is an ‘almost invisible to society’

profession, which has struggled for recognition, while its very existence has puzzled service users' and authorities alike.

Tragically, the refusal to understand the political context within which social work operates has led to some of the darkest chapters of the profession's history. Despite the fact that research on the 'dark side' of social work is scarce, the findings available are strong enough to suggest that behind the pretext of 'political neutrality' social work has been involved in some of the most terrible cases of political oppression. Lorenz (1993), in his seminal work on the development of social work in Europe, has documented well the extensive collaboration of social pedagogues with the state authorities Nazi Germany. During this period most German social pedagogues never questioned the authority, mission and objectives of the state, providing unreserved -direct or indirect- support to the aims and subsequently the crimes of the Nazi regime. Jones (1983) in his account of the historical development of state social work in the UK has revealed the 'class specific', brutally punitive and routinely oppressive origins of social work in the country. He has also demonstrated the links between the origins of social work's knowledge base with the pseudo science of Eugenics. Other researchers have documented the centrality of social work in the colonial and imperialist agenda. In South Africa, mainstream social work was part of the divisive apparatus of "Apartheid", rarely questioning the unjust practices and objectives of the state (Patel, 2005; Smith, 2008). Racial segregation, surveillance and social control were undeniable elements of the Apartheid welfare state. In southern Europe and the Middle East, the origins of social work were interwoven with the cold-war political agenda promoted by the US government. Through the Marshal Plan, the US government channeled colossal amounts of money aiming both at the reconstruction of the infrastructure of war stricken European countries as well as shaping societies, markets and institutions in line with the Cold War political doctrines (Mazower, 2000). Among other activities, this project financed and developed a social work model that matched the interests and objectives of the superpower. Fierce anti-communism and suppression of political action within the profession was at the core of this agenda. For example, Ioakimidis (2011), suggests that the

development of social work in Greece was the direct product of an open collaboration between the US 'reconstruction mission' in the country and the local authoritarian regime responsible for the politically motivated executions, arrests and imprisonment in exile of hundreds of thousands left wing citizens. Social workers were centrally involved in the vicious process of 'political rehabilitation' of children from left wing families and their involvement in practices of illegal adoption is well documented. Traumatic cases of politically motivated illegal adoption and removal of children from 'dangerously left wing families' have recently resurfaced in Spain as a reminder of a painful history of political oppression and violence during the Franco regime (Guardian, 2011). Social Work in the country was tied to the conservatism of the Catholic Church and largely subscribed to the discriminatory welfare institutions fostered by Franco (Sanz Cintora, 2001).

These are only a few examples of social work's systematic involvement in political practices contrary to the ethos of the profession's public declarations and statements. The suppressed, yet substantial, history of politically oppressive social work practice and its willing collaboration with authoritarian regimes, is mentioned in the current article not due to a desire to brand social work as an 'unworthy' or 'oppressive' profession; quite the opposite. The main argument here is that unless we reflect on our history (even the grimmest chapters of it) and acknowledge the clear political nature of social work activity, we are unable to develop a global social work distinctly and unconditionally committed to social justice. It is imperative that any global definition of social work reflects this dynamic process of politically repositioning the profession towards social justice and clearly opposes epistemologically vague, abstract or a-political notions of social work. Otherwise, we risk the possibility of re-experiencing some of the ugliest cases in social work history.

### ***Recognizing and protecting practitioners who fight for social justice***

Ultimately, it is the behavior, ideology and practices of frontline practitioners who determine whether social work is a 'worthy' or 'unworthy' activity,



‘relevant’ or ‘irrelevant’ to service users and broader society. Since social work does not operate in a political vacuum, it is the way social workers endorse or challenge oppressive and unjust policies that resolves the historic contradiction between ‘social care’ and ‘social control’. In short, the decisive question social workers often need to answer is “which side are you on?”

Fortunately, alongside the cases of oppression I mentioned in the previous paragraphs, social work is entitled to boast some brilliant examples of steadfast commitment to social justice. These examples have also existed since the very beginning of social work history, thus forming a long-standing radical tradition. In the UK, in opposition to the elitist and punitive agenda of the Charity Organisation’s Society –which transformed charitable activity to ‘scientific’ social work- a reformist tradition emerged around the ‘settlement movement’ (late 19<sup>th</sup> century). Social workers and volunteers involved in this movement placed emphasis on the material context of poverty and deprivation, hence challenging the elitist belief that the poor are inferior and inherently incapable of leading meaningful lives (Ferguson, 2008?). Furthermore, the strengthening of trade unionism in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its subsequent suppression by the ruling classes across Europe, informed the creation of one of the most extensive networks of grassroots politically committed social work. The ‘Red Aid’ was an umbrella organization, which originated in Germany in 1919 and by the Second World War its operations covered many European countries, including Austria, Poland, France, Greece, Sweden and the UK. The “Red Aid” not only emphasized the class divisions and inequalities prevalent in the capitalist world, but also adopted a clear militant stance towards alleviating the structural causes of inequality and poverty (Schilde, 2003). Most importantly it provided support to groups and individuals who suffered from the criminalization of political activism and were excluded from state controlled welfare organisations. In practice, the Red-aid tried to combine multilevel support to political prisoners, refugees and their families while mobilizing the ‘masses’ against oppression and injustice. Many of the ‘interventions’ and methods, which mainstream social work discovered nearly sixty years later (such as ‘advocacy and legal representation’, women’s rights and the use of contraceptives, political

campaigning, non-judgemental moral and material support, social education) originated from this radical tradition. These activities were based on class solidarity and were in opposition to the ethos and traditions of ruling class charity. As Mentona Mosser, the founder of the first social work school in Switzerland and leading member of the 'Red Aid' explained '*The bourgeoisie is never so repulsive as in those cases, when they are doing charity work, "stinking" charity work*' (Moser cited in Sabine Hering, 2003: 90), while Clara Zetkin described the social work activities of the Red Aid as "*the aid squad of the class struggle*" (Zetkin cited in Schilde, 2003: 142)

Another large, social justice-based tradition that has greatly influenced social work in parts of the world (Latin America in particular) is this of liberation theology. Suffice it to say, that this tradition too has been excluded from mainstream social work textbooks and historiographies. Liberation theology emerged in the 1950s blending the influence of the Christian faith in the region with the optimism for social emancipation of the oppressed, embedded in the Marxist tradition (see Gerassi, 1973). In much of Latin America the old colonial systems were not overthrown after independence but were instead replaced by local corrupt and authoritarian elites, manipulated by imperialist powers. As the peoples of Latin America were disillusioned by the perpetuation of inequality, devastation and extensive exploitation, a distinct current of grassroots social solidarity shook the conservatism Catholic Church. This radical current focused its theory and *praxis* on two main elements: a) the material and spiritual support of the oppressed and b) their political "conscientization", a necessary stage in the process of broad political emancipation. The former was expressed through grassroots community work, based on genuine class solidarity - not charity - while the latter took the form of open confrontation (often violent) against authoritarian states and large land- owners. For liberation theologians the idea that the poor had to humbly accept the harsh realities of their lives hoping for spiritual redemption was simply unacceptable and had to be challenged by any means available. Such an ethos was reflected in the famous "preferential option for the poor approach" approach articulated by Gutierrez (1971). This revolutionary tradition was tremendously popular in several Latin American

countries (including Brazil, El Salvador, Paraguay, Argentina, Colombia and Chile) and led to the political transformation of social work (Norwood-Evans, 1992). The “*reconceptualization*” movement in these countries is still highly influential and has historically generated powerful examples of genuine anti-oppressive practice even when a wave of US sponsored military coups devastated most of Latin America - Brazil (1964), Peru (1968), Bolivia (1971), Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973), and Argentina (1976) (see Allayon, 2005). Radical social work theory and practice in Latin America has emphasized the importance of an holistic view of the challenges people experience in their lives, the primacy of understanding the material and political context of social work practice (conscientization), the need to develop social alliances and partnerships based on democratic values and mutual understanding and finally the importance of direct action in order to alleviate the structural causes of oppression. Paulo Freire, the leading educational theorist, specifically advocated for a social work practice based on political action (praxis) rather than professional elitism within social work. His remarks are so timely and important now, as we are facing the challenge of updating the global definition *“In this sense, therefore, the social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action. One of the inclinations that we sometimes have - and this is an offense, an illegality, that we imbibe in our technological society - is to think that the social worker is a very specialized person, a technician, who works in a compartmentalized technical area, and who has a sort of protection within this area, a sort of aggregate of rights, as a particular social group, to stand apart from the political battles of society. For me, this is impossible. It is an error. Social workers are compromised if they become convinced that they possess a technical expertise that is more to be defended than is the work of other workers. (Freire, 1990:5)”*

At the present time, the resurgence of punitive Victorian-type (anti-)welfare approaches has provided the context of the strengthening and enriching such a radical tradition. As described in a different section of the current issue, social workers across Europe have risen up against the politics of austerity, which are imposed by European states. Many social workers not only have participated ‘en

masse' in demonstrations in defense of welfare states and social services but have also engaged with acts of direct social activism and political disobedience against government policies that violate human rights (Ioakimidis, 2013). In this process social work networks and national associations opposing the politics of austerity have used the existing definition of social work as a *tool* in their campaigning work. In several cases the politically progressive content of the definition as well as the "statement of ethical principles" adopted by IFSW has provided the necessary justification and legitimization for activist social workers to pursue radical practice even when they faced criminalization and intimidation by their employers and the state.

Two notable examples of such practice come – not coincidentally - from countries recently bailed out by the notorious international troika of lenders (EU, European Central Bank and IMF). One of the most malicious characteristics of the austerity imposed in several European countries is that of absolute disregard towards constitutionally protected human rights. Such disregard towards the post-war "social contract" is safeguarded by crude authoritarianism and justified on the basis of the "law of necessity" often used in extreme circumstances in order to circumvent constitutional processes (See Pillay, 2011). Using such legal argumentation, in 2011, the Hungarian government passed a law making homelessness a punishable by fine or prison (BBC, 2011). At a time when violent austerity had pushed more than 10,000 Hungarians into homelessness in Budapest alone, the government decided to outlaw poverty rather than dealing with the causes of it. Norbert Ferenzc, a social worker who belonged to a local radical social work network, played an active role in the campaign against state violence targeting the most vulnerable in society. He actively participated in demonstrations against the municipal ordinance that classified "dumpster diving" (searching for food in rubbish bins) a misdemeanor, linked to the aforementioned law. His involvement in this campaign was considered by the police as 'incitement' a felony punishable to three years in prison. Ferenzc was eventually arrested and stood trial (SWAN, 2011).

His arrest triggered an overwhelming international movement of solidarity among social workers. Thousands of practitioners, students and academics signed a petition demanding his immediate release. At this point it is critical to highlight that legal and ethical justification of both Ferenzc's action as well as the international campaign in his support were based on the mandate to social justice stated in official documents of international social work organizations. The IFSW-IASSW definition and the Code of Ethics were effectively utilized in order to demonstrate that Ferenzc acted appropriately and in accordance with the guidelines of the international social work organizations. The solidarity petition that was initiated by the Social Work Action Network and signed by thousands of social workers stated that

*"As a social worker, Norbert was following the International Federation of Social Work's definition of social work as an activist occupation that confronts social injustices. The Hungarian Code of Ethics for Social Workers also makes it clear that practitioners have a duty and a responsibility to inform the public of the growth of poverty and inequality and the state's responsibility to address these problems. We demand that all charges against Mr. Norbert Ferenzc are dropped, as he was merely following his professional Code of Ethics. The Code states that "social workers [should] facilitate change through their activities and professional stance" (Point 11) and that "it is the social workers responsibility, as well as a right and duty of the undersigned professional organizations, to call the attention of decision makers and the general public to their respective responsibility for the emergence of poverty and suffering as well as for their obstruction of the alleviation thereof" (SWAN, 2011). Such argumentation proved effective and the Hungarian supreme court eventually acquitted Norbert Ferenzc. This case clearly demonstrates the importance of using a social justice based social work definition as a tool for defending social workers who fight injustices and work in partnership with service users.*

Another similar case emerged in Greece almost a year after the arrest of Norbert Ferenzc. In December 2011, the Greek government, desperate to raise the necessary funding for the re-capitalization of the banking sector (through

bailout) circulated a decree introducing a draconian “urgent” property tax payable through electricity bills (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013). At a time of vast unemployment such tax particularly targeted the most vulnerable and those living below the breadline unable to pay any further taxes. This tax was flat and variations in income were not taken into consideration; even people on benefits had to pay. The fact that it was payable through the electricity bill guaranteed that people unable to afford this tax would face having their electricity supply cut-off. The government, realizing that the law was clearly unconstitutional and would be dropped at the Supreme Court, decided to use social workers as a sweetener. Social work practitioners were thus instructed to participate in committees which would ‘assess’ poor households in order to decide whether access to their electricity supply should be cut-off or not. In reality, the already set targets in the national budget ensured that there was no space for meaningful assessments. Such an unethical use of social workers was met with fierce opposition. The Greek Association of Social Workers expressed opposition to this law (GASW, 2011) while the Greek Social Work Action Network and the trade union of local authority workers (POE-OTA) called for social workers to disobey the decree and consciously deny them to participate in these committees (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013). Once again, the global definition of social work and the IFSW ethical statement were utilized by social workers in order to justify their potentially punishable acts of civil disobedience against unethical and oppressive policies. The Greek Association of Social Workers circulated a statement vehemently rejecting the government instructions while making reference to the global commitment of social work to social justice “*the importance of a campaigning role under austerity and the professions commitment to social change, social justices and universal social welfare*”. (GASW, 2011). Likewise, SWAN-Greece explained that “*the international social work codes of ethics, recognizing that human suffering is constructed upon socially unjust policies and acknowledging that the idea of ‘political neutrality’ within social work is deceptive, **clearly define** the ethical commitment of social workers towards exposing and fighting against socially unjust policies and practices*” (SWAN-Greece, 2011). After the co-ordinated response of local authority social workers and the POE-OTA trade union, the government was forced to retreat. Even

though, the urgent tax went ahead, the idea of ‘assessment committees’ urgently invoking social workers as means of implementing this policy was scrapped.

Across Europe, while similar examples of political action against the dismantlement of social services have occurred, the largest movement in defense of universal social welfare has emerged in Spain. Known as the “Orange tide” and popularizing the motto “No Cuts! Don't Shut up!” the Orange tide brings together thousands of social workers, welfare officers and service users. Once again, striking social workers based their struggle on their obligation to defend human rights and dignity, which derives *inter alia* by the current definition of social work (IFSW Europe, 2012). The cases presented in this section clearly suggest that a withdrawal of a global definition unconditionally committed to social justice, would not only weaken the profile of the profession but would also harm frontline social workers who experience prosecution due to their ethical and value based practice.

***Supporting indigenous movements while challenging the conservatism of cultural relativism.***

In the 2011 Asia-Pacific Symposium on the Global Definition Henrickson described the “elements of an Asia-Pacific definition” highlighting among others

*“Social change, empowerment and liberation, social justice and human rights are not concepts that have shared understandings throughout the world. Concepts such as social harmony, interdependence, and collectivity are concepts that are more highly valued in many Asian and indigenous Pasifika communities (...) We agree that our attention remains focused on individuals in their environments or places, and we understand that we must maintain robust and informed relationships with governments and economies.”* (Henrickson, 2011:4)

The proceedings of this event the make an important read for anyone interested in understanding the existing tensions and diversity of voices within social work. Revisiting, these debates one can understand some of the main reasons behind the requests of the largest regional association of IASWW for a drastic change of

the existing definition. The issues of “indigenization”, “spirituality” and “cultural difference” have emerged as crucial within this region. Nevertheless, it appears that this debate has allowed space for the emergence and re-production of some very conservative and patronizing arguments masked by the obscurity of the catchy term “indigenization”.

Furthermore, the official “Asia-Pacific” line of argumentation seems to undermine the importance of “social change and social justice” focusing on the need for “*stability of society, harmony in relations, unique culture and traditions, responsibility*” (Agten and Paulsen, 2008). Henrickson (cited in Agten and Paulsen, 2008) explains that “*We have agreed that spirituality needs to be part of the way social work understands itself and its purpose*”. This arguments need to be scrutinized in relation to the broader political and social debates within international social work.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest around this theme, mostly deriving from the broad region defined in the IASSW as “Asia-Pacific” (see for example Gray et al, 2008, Yunong and Xiong, 2008). Historically, the indigenization paradigm originated from national liberation movements and the concept of “third worldism” which gained momentum in international politics in the early 1970s (Atal, 1981). Much of the debate revolved around the issue of professionalization and in particular concentrated on the question of “transferability”. With the notable exception of Midgley (1981), who provided a ground-braking analysis of the imperialist nature of international social work, mainstream literature at the time followed a largely developmentalist approach, attempting to provide narrow technical answers to the rather political question of ‘transferability’ (Shawky, 1972; Resnick, 1976; Walton and Abo El Nasr, 1988). In the early 2000’s the domination of post-modern theories in social sciences, reinvigorated the indigenization debate. Supplemented by the obscurity of postmodernism, the 21<sup>st</sup> century debate on indigenization placed an almost exclusive emphasis on the centrality of culture. As Gray et al (2008:8) suggest “*Not only is social work itself a cultural construction but whenever we are*



*attempting to make social work responsive to local contexts we are fashioning it in a cloth that is culturally embedded”.*

One of the main deceptions of the indigenization debate is its use of a language of “resistance” even though in reality promotes an implicitly conservative agenda. On the one hand indigenization seems to be dismissing nearly everything that derived from “modernity” or it originated from the west; heavy-handedly equalizing orthodox social work with the radical and critical kernel. On the other hand, the unconditional glorification of the local-indigenous traditions and systems, often presupposes acceptance of rigidly unequal and oppressive hierarchies.

These approaches are in essence conservative and seem to be representing a top-down understanding of social work in the context of Asia-Pacific. Their conservatism derives from the fact that a) they prioritize idealist philosophies over the material context which affects the lives of individuals and communities, masking this way the fierce inequalities and oppression which exists in the Asia-Pacific countries and b) this does not seem to be representative of popular indigenous movements who struggle to transform these oppressive structures *in unison* with other social groups (unlike the Latin American approach to indigenization).

Latin America is undoubtedly the region with the largest and most active indigenous movements. Historically, Latin American indigenous movements prioritized the creation of class based coalitions rather than ‘cultural exclusivity’ in their struggles against colonialism and imperialism. Nowadays, in the “post colonial” era, indigenous peoples continue facing persistent exploitation, marginalization and poverty as a result of the appropriation of their lands by multinational companies, privatization of natural resources and the accumulation of wealth and land in the hands of local elites (see for example the mission statement of the Colombian Organizacion National de Gobierno Indigena, 2010) This reality often requires indigenous movements and social workers working with them to oppose corrupt governments and the domination

of markets instead of maintaining “*robust and informed relationships with them*” as Henrickson suggested in the quote above.

Therefore, the Latin American approach to liberation of the indigenous peoples is diametrically opposite to the conservatism of the “Asia-Pacific”. This is clearly reflected on the manifesto of the EZLN, the iconic indigenous organization of the Chiapas in Mexico, who instead of prioritizing ‘cultural differences’, seek the development of critical alliances and common struggles with the other groups of oppressed groups of Mexican society.

*We are going to continue fighting for the Indian peoples of Mexico, but now not just for them and not with only them, but for all the exploited and dispossessed of Mexico (..) we are going to go about building, along with those people (...) a program of struggle, but a program which will be clearly of the left, or anti-capitalist, or anti-neoliberal, or for justice, democracy and liberty for the Mexican people’ (EZLN, 2005 <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/sdsl-en/>)*

Moreover, the question of spirituality is a complex one and indeed within specific contexts bears relevance to influential faith based approaches. In other contexts, as in the case of Turkey, the same issue (spirituality and religion) is a very contentious one and generates considerable tension between proponents of secularism and the rise of Islamism. It is worth focusing, however, on the cases of China and Japan whose large membership base in international social work organizations allows them to promote the idea of “harmony and stability” over “social change and justice”.

Over the last decade the rapid development of the Chinese economy and the gradual endowment of an ‘open market’ economy, did relatively little to alleviate poverty in inequality in the country. In fact, the violent urbanization has led to massive waves of internal migration readily available to be used as cheap labour. By 2002, the number of rural-urban migrants exceeded 100 million and the emergence of a new rich entrepreneurial class, largely benefiting from cronyism and corruption, provided an excellent case study of the various processes that

generate wealth inequality (Knight, 2013) . While urban china experiences considerable wealth generation –fuelling a sharp rise in inequality - rural china is still trapped in poverty. The World Bank (2010) estimated that in 2010 almost 486 million people lived on less than \$2.5 a day. The recent natural disasters, which affected rural China and exposed the extent of poverty and underdevelopment forced local press to recognize that *“The poverty and fragility that the earthquake has revealed are still pressing problems in China's rural areas and show that the country needs to expend more efforts to reach its target.”* (<http://english.people.com.cn/90882/8222866.html>).

Mainstream social work in China seems to be developing rapidly but however seems to be following a “top-down” bureaucratic approach. The creation of social work has been effectively decided and designed at the higher levels of the state apparatus rather than demanded by the poorest and most vulnerable in society. According to Wang (2012) it was the 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary session of the Chinese CPC Central Committee that decided to construct *“a large strong team of social work professionals”* aiming at ensuring stability and harmony in society. The concepts of stability here are presented in opposition to the popular struggles for social transformation towards a socially just society. In a country where poverty and inequality are still rife and past efforts to promote social change have been violently crushed (see Tien Anmen), invoking the concepts of harmony and “spirituality” in order to mask the existing class tensions is inextricably linked to the effort of developing a de-politicized, government controlled social work.

Interestingly, although never mentioned in mainstream social work platforms, let alone the international social work organisations, in China and Hong Kong a dynamic current of radical social work practitioners and academics already exists reflecting the class divisions and tensions of Chinese society. Their power and militancy was well represented when during the 2011 global social work conference in Hong Kong, striking social workers and trade unionists formed picket lines near the conference venue, and almost simultaneously to the main conference organized a well attended counter-conference entitled “Reclaiming Progressive Social Work” (Ferguson and Lavalette 2012). The group of radical

social workers involved in this conference afterwards produced a manifesto stating that

*We must launch a campaign for progressive social work and social welfare, and insist upon protecting the spirit of social work that is to promote human rights, justice, democracy and equality. We must resist any oppression against social welfare and its service users in order to establish a society that respects human rights and secures social justice”* (Progressive Social Work Network, 2011)

Similarly, in Japan a recent ESRC funded series of seminars revealed that “*In contrast to some recent influential British literature which has portrayed Japan as a more equal, and therefore ‘happier’ society, Japanese colleagues highlighted the wide range of social problems to which neoliberal policies have contributed including very high suicide rates, family breakdown, social isolation and withdrawal.*” (Ferguson et al (date?)), Moreover, the same report highlighted the impact of neoliberalism and managerialism on Japanese social work while Ito (2011) has explained that recent reforms have led to the erosion of social workers’ autonomy, marking a significant turn towards neoliberalism.

There is much evidence to suggest that despite the insistent statements, which surrounds the primacy of harmony in the region of “Asia-Pacific”, scratching the surface would reveal a similar nature of structural problems, class divisions and political contradictions rife in social work across the globe. A potential global definition which neutralizes the commitment of social work to social change, emancipation and social justice will harm and disarm social work practitioners in this region in ways very similar to that of the ‘west’.

### **Concluding remarks**

The evolution of the definition debates reflected in the circulated drafts indicates that the likely outcome of the current ‘consultation’ might result in a compromise, generating an eclectic definition which could be interpreted in various ‘convenient’ ways. The present study stressed that the current debate is reflective of political contradictions embedded in social work throughout its

history. It focused on the contrasting political traditions and histories of social work and dismissed the argument that social work can be a politically neutral activity. In fact, the history of social work suggests that in times of fierce inequality and sharp class divisions 'neutrality' is a conscious political stance: that of siding with the oppressors. Consequently, in the current climate of neoliberal domination and erosion of civil and human rights, the adoption of a social justice- based definition could provide frontline practitioners with the necessary tools and safeguards in order to defend the values and ethical commitments of the profession.

### **Appendix: Published drafts on the global definition since the launch of the consultation period**

**February 2012-** Social work promotes socially just and inclusive systems based on capacity building, human rights, responsible citizenship and fair societies for individuals, families, groups, communities and beyond. The social work body of knowledge enables practitioners to work alongside people and communities to support their sustainable interdependence. The profession is guided by the understanding that resourced, informed interdependent people and communities make the best decisions on their own wellbeing.

**June 2012-**The social work profession, which is contextually determined, promotes social transformation, as well as social stability, harmony, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human and people's rights, collective responsibilities, participation, sustainable development, interdependence and respect for diversities, where doing no harm and respect for human dignity are over-riding principles, are central to social work. Utilising theories of the broader social sciences, praxis and a range of socio-psychological-educational strategies, and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

#### **January 2013-**

The social work profession facilitates 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 wellbeing.

**Definition proposed by the Latin American Association for Teaching and Research in Social Work (ALAIETS), with the Brazilian Association of Teaching and Research in Social Work (ABEPSS) 2012-** Social Work is a

profession that falls within the realm of relations among social subjects and their relations with the State in the different sociohistorical settings of the professional activity. It develops a social praxis and a set of socioeducational actions that fall upon life's material and social reproduction from the perspective of social transformation. It is committed with democracy and the fight against social inequalities, by strengthening autonomy, participation and the safeguard of citizenship for the achievement of human rights and social justice.

**Current definition (adopted in 2000)-** 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, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

## **Bibliography**

Alayon, N. y Otros (2005) *Trabajo Social Latinoamericano a 40 años de la Reconceptualización*, Editorial Espacio, Buenos Aires Argentina

Allayon, N. (2010) "La Etica Professional y La Memoria", <http://www.margen.org/wp/?p=960>

Angten and Paulsen, 2008 "Review of the international definition of social work", paper presented in in Nairobi (29/06/11)

BBC, (2011) Hungary outlaws homeless in move condemned by charities, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15982882>

Davies, J.B., S. Sandström, A. Shorrocks, and E.N. Wolff (2006). 'The World Distribution of Household Wealth', [Foreign Press Association](#), London & UN Secretariat, New York

EZLN (2006) *Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona*, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/sdsl-en/> accessed on 10/02/2013

Ferguson, I. (2008) *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neo-liberalism and Promoting Social Justice*, London: Sage

Ferguson, I. and Lavalette, M (2011) "Critical and Radical Social Work; an introduction" <http://policypress.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/critical-and-radical-social-work-an-introduction/>

Ferguson, Iain, Baldwin, M. Lavalette, I. (2012). *The Impact of New Public*

Management Policies and Perspectives on Professional Social Work: a comparison of British and Japanese experiences.: *ESRC Impact Report*, RES-805-26-0005. Swindon: ESRC

Freire, P. (1990), A Critical Understanding of Social Work, *Journal of Progressive Social Services*, 1(1): 1-10

GASW (2012) 'Press release: GASW campaign against the electricity cut-offs, [http://www.skle.gr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=207:%CE%A0%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%AD%CE%BC%CE%B2%CE%B1%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%A3%CE%9A%CE%9B%CE%95](http://www.skle.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=207:%CE%A0%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%AD%CE%BC%CE%B2%CE%B1%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%A3%CE%9A%CE%9B%CE%95)

Gerassi J. (edt) (1973). Camilo Torres; Revolutionary Priest. His complete writings and messages Penguin Books: Middlessex

Gray, J. Coates and M. Yellow Bird (eds) (2008) *Indigenous Social Work Around the World: Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice*, pp. 13–29. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Gutierrez G. (1971). *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Orbis

Henrickson, M. (2011) "An Asia-Pacific Response to the Discussions on Social Work Definition" Keynote presentation, International Symposium International Definition of Social Work Review –A Voice from Asia and the Pacific– July 16, 2011 Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan Kana Matsuo,

Hering S (2003) *A soldier of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International; the social activities of the Swiss communist Mentona Moser* in Hering S and Waaldijk B (eds) (2003) "History of Social Work in Europe (1900-1960): Female Pioneers and their Influence on the Development of International Social Organizations" *Soziale Arbeit*, Opladen

IFSW- Europe (2012), Newsletter from Spain, <http://ifsweuropa-ifsweuropa.blogspot.com/2012/11/spain-newsletter-november-2012-of.html>.

Ioakimidis, V and Teloni D (2013) 'Greek social work and the never-ending crisis of the welfare state' *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 1(1)31–49

Ioakimidis, V. (2011) 'Expanding imperialism, exporting expertise: international social work and the Greek project (1946–1974)', *International Social Work*, 54 (4): 505–19.

Jones, C. (1983) *State Social Work and the Working Class* Basingstoke, Macmillan

Jones, C. (2012) *Social Work Transformed; the British Model*, in Ioakimidis V "Social Work for Social Justice", Ion, Athens.

Jones, C. and Novak, T. (1999) *Poverty, Welfare and the Disciplinary State*, Routledge, London.

Knight, J. (2013), "Inequality in China; an overview", World Bank, Capacity Building Unit, June 2013

Lavalette, M. and Ioakimidis V (2011) "International social work or social work internationalism?", in Lavalette M, *Radical Social Work in the 21st century*, Policy Press,

Lorenz, W. (1993) *Social Work in a Changing Europe*, London Routledge, M. Mazower (ed.) (2000) *After the War Was Over. Reconstructing the Family, Nation and State in Greece, 1943–1960*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Midgley, J. (1981) *Professional Imperialism: Social Work in the Third World*. London: Heinemann Educational Books

Norwood Evans (1992), Liberation Theology, empowerment theory and Social Work practice with the oppressed *International Social Work* 35(3): 135

Organizacion National de Gobierno Indigena (2010), Misión, Visión, Estructura, <http://cms.onic.org.co/sobre-nosotros/mision-vision-estructura/>

Oxfam (2013), *The cost of Inequality; How wealth and income extremes hurt us all*, Media Briefing ,18/1/2013, Ref: 02/2013 <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/cost-of-inequality-oxfam-mb180113.pdf>

Patel, L (2005), *Social Welfare and Social Development in South Africa*, Cape Town, Oxford University Press

Pillay, N (2012) 'Press Conference by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights', Press release, Geneva, 18 October 2012

Progressive Social Work Network (PSWN) (2011), 1 May 2013 <http://ifp.nyu.edu/2012/grey-literature/progressive-social-work-manifesto-hong-kong/>



Reisch, M. and Andrew J. (2002). *The road not taken; A history of radical social work in the United States*. New York, Brunner- Routledge.

Resnick, R. P. (1976) 'Conscientization: An Indigenous Approach to *International Social Work*', *International Social Work* 19(2): 21-29.

Sanz Cintora, Á. (2001). "Acción social y Trabajo Social en España: una revisión histórica." *Acciones e investigaciones sociales*(13): 5-42.

Schilde, K (2003) *First Aid Squad in The Class Struggle*, in Hering S and Waaldijk B (eds) (2003) "History of Social Work in Europe (1900-1960): Female Pioneers and their Influence on the Development of International Social Organizations" *Soziale Arbeit*, Opladen

Servicio Social Portugues (2006) "IFSW list of social workers who were detained and disappeared" available at [http://servicosocialportugues.blogspot.com/2006\\_10\\_15\\_archive.html](http://servicosocialportugues.blogspot.com/2006_10_15_archive.html)

Smith, L. (2008) 'South African Social Work Education: Critical imperatives for Social Change in the Post-Apartheid and Post Colonia Context' *International Social Work*, 51 (3):371-383

Stuckier, D. and Basu, S. (2013) *The body economics: why austerity kills*, Allen Lane, London

SWAN (Social Work Action Network) (Greece) (2011) 'Announcement with regards to the Ministry of Economics circular on property tax', <http://socialworkaction.wordpress.com/2011/12/04/185/>

SWAN, (2011), Defend Norbert Ferencz Campaing, <http://www.socialworkfuture.org/index.php/articles-and-analysis/news/170-defend-norbert>

The Guardian, online edition (2011) Spain seeks truth on baby-trafficking claims, Thursday 27 January 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/27/spain-baby-trafficking-claims>

Walton, R.G. and M.M. Abo El Nasr (1988) 'Indigenization and Authentization in Terms of Social Work in Egypt', *International Social Work* 31(2): 135-44.

Wang, S. (2012), "The new measures and directions for social work development in China" *Social Dialogue*, 2:14-17

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) "The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better", Allen Lane, London

Wolfe, V. A. (1972). *The Dilemma of Latin American Social Work*.  
International Social Work, 15(3), 48-56.

World Bank (2010) "Country Profile: China"  
<http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/CHN>