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SOCIAL WORK VALUES FOR THE XXI CENTURY: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ETHIC OF THE GIFT

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The current ethical values for social work are undoubtedly based on the idea of the human rights. Remember the Universal Declaration of the human rights in article 1 which says: *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”*

This universalistic approach of humanism is also reflected in the Code of Ethics of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW). In the definition about social work of the IFSW you find the following connection to the human rights idea: *“Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental for social work.”*

Therefore we can say that social work is a human rights profession. But how are human rights realized?

Human Rights and market economy

An essential precondition to ensure a decent life is the satisfaction of basic human needs.

In the following presentation I want to question whether it is possible to realize human rights within our form of economy and, if not, do we have an alternative? If we have an alternative to which ethics is this new form of economy connected?

In recent months the traditional market economy has been criticized after a long period of acceptance. This period was characterized by the fact that economic thinking has influenced many areas of society, including fields such as social work which traditionally stayed outside the logic of the market system.

The influence of economic thought resulted in social work clients being referred as customers. Social services, Universities, schools and even churches became customer-orientated.

But the neoliberal changes in many social areas were not particularly successful.

The gap between rich and poor has become greater in the last few years.

In Europe 20% of all children are in danger of poverty. In the year 2008 35% of children of lone parents were at risk of poverty.

The Western economy is also responsible for creating environmental disasters.

Remember the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or the Hungary's toxic sludge disaster. This and other disasters are caused by the character of capitalistic economy which needs ever-increasing economic expansion.

Also, the impact of natural disasters has become much worse because of the motives for economic profit as we saw in New Orleans or a few months ago in Fukushima. The traditional market economy failed in handling the challenges of natural disasters. On the contrary it often causes them.

The problem with the distribution of goods to meet human needs

So we can say that our traditional economy based on the expansion of the market has not proved to be very efficient in meeting human needs. More and more people drop out of the markets. Key needs remain unsatisfied, and people's existence is threatened. The traditional economy was not very helpful in meeting human needs which is a precondition for the realisation of human rights.

And this is strange that the economy fails in this respect because the market economy is justified by the idea that it meets human needs and satisfies them effectively. You can read this in nearly every textbook on economics:

"Economics studies the allocation, distribution, and utilization of resources to meet human needs. A central element in the economic problem, then, is the allocation of scarce resources among alternative uses. Resources (human, physical and financial) are limited in supply while human needs and desires are infinite." (Ison, Wall, 2007, p.4)

The traditional economy is based on the fundamental idea that human needs are infinite while the resources are finite.

But is this assumption true? Are resources limited and human needs are unlimited?

I think we have to question the key tenet of our economic ideology that needs and desires are infinite and the economic resources are scarce. Maybe it is true in terms of desires but not for our basic needs. In May 2011 UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) published that one-third of the world's food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted each year. With all the wasted food on earth we could feed the world population three times.

Human needs a basic of Social Work theories

The idea that the number of needs is limited is not new. We all know Maslow's hierarchy of needs. There is also a tradition in social work theory which is based on the concept of human needs.

I want to remember the great Austrian social work theorist Ilse Arlt who distinguished 13 different human needs that must be satisfied in order for men and women to live in dignity. These needs are

- Nutrition
- Housing
- Personal care
- Clothing
- Recreation
- Air
- Education
- Cultural development
- Access to legal safety
- Family life and social networks
- Medical assistance and health care
- Accident prevention
- Training for economic efficiency.

Arlt published her theory of needs in 1958.

She claims that, if one of these needs is neglected over a period of time, there is a risk to the existence of the whole person. Social work must therefore focus on creating the conditions under which needs can be fulfilled. Ilse Arlt laid the foundation for current theories of needs in social work.

A contemporary social work theorist is Werner Obrecht.

In his theory needs are tensions, which have to be balanced. He distinguishes three kinds of needs: biological needs; psycho needs and social needs (Obrecht 2006, 144)

Biological needs are physical integrity; regeneration; sexual activity and reproduction.

Psycho needs, for example are perceptual and sensory stimulation; needs for effective skills, rules, and (social) norms.

Examples for Social needs are emotional care; social participation, autonomy, social recognition.

These needs are just some of the 17 needs Obrecht distinguished.

This theory of well differentiated basic needs is related to the Aristotelian concept of the good life. The central question is, what do we need for living a good life?

Martha Nussbaum's (1998, 1999) capability approach takes us in a similar direction.

Nussbaum, a specialist of Aristotelian philosophy, created a list of capabilities.

The task of society is to create conditions so that people can develop these capabilities.

The same applies to the satisfaction of human needs. People must have access to resources to meet their needs. It is not enough if the access depends on the

system of exchange because then a great number of people are excluded from a life of dignity. The question is whether we have an alternative form of economic distribution to meet human needs.

The economy of exchange and the economy of gift

To develop capabilities or to satisfy our needs we have to interact with others. For some of these needs we have to get goods and services. There are at least two different ways to get the goods we need: we can buy them or they are shared with us.

And this leads over to two different kinds of economies in existence: the economy of exchange which is common in the public arena, and the gift economy which is important in our private sphere.

Now have a look to the assumption of the traditional market. In traditional economy goods are regarded as scarce and human needs as infinite.

The belief in the never-ending nature of needs is the engine of the market where the principle of supply and demand regulates the exchange of products. In this form of economy people meet as customers. A customer is defined by his or her capacity to be creditworthy.

But there is another economy, the economy of gift.

In our private sphere we still base our actions on a different principle than the traditional market system. Our family life is not regulated by the market system, at least I hope it isn't.

Imagine you have a family with 3 children? What will happen when you introduce an exchange economy into your private household? Will they ever have a chance to grow up? What happens to the members of the family who do not have anything of value to exchange? And what happens to the needs of people in our society who are not able to produce and earn money?

In order to find another form of rational distribution which does not neglect the very young, the old and the disabled. I think that the gift economy is an interesting supplement to our traditional economy of exchange.

The basic idea of the gift economy is that human needs are limited. Men, for example, can eat a lot of food but after a while everybody will be full.

Another basic idea is that enough resources are available therefore it is no problem to share them. In this form of economy the sustainability of the resources plays an important role. Next to the private sector the gift economy is also found in new movements often connected with new technologies, such as the free software movement (Stallman 2002), the so called 'costs nothing' shops or give away shops or free share shops and free services like 'Sofasurfing', and so on.

What does the gift economy mean?

Until now there are several theorists who have analysed the concept of gift in society and it seems that today scientists are rediscovering the phenomenon of the gift.

One of the first who analyzed societies in which the gift played an important role in public was Marcel Mauss, the nephew of Durkheim.

Marcel Mauss scientifically explored the gift economy in the 1920s. He analysed traditionally forms of economy of Polynesian people as well as Native Americans and old forms of practices of exchanges in Europe. There he discovered the so called "gift economy".

Mauss underlined that the acceptance of the gift leads to an obligation to respond. To give, to receive and to return are the three components of the gift economy.

At the end of the 20th century the great Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2007) dealt also with the gift economy. I think that Bourdieu's approach is very interesting for social work. For him the gift is characterized by the risk that no response will happen. Otherwise it is not a gift but an exchange. The gift recipient has the freedom to respond or not to do so. The gift recipient in contrast to the consumer can decide if he or she will give something back, what he or she will give back and when the response of the gift will happen.

Consequences for the field of Social Work?

If we follow the gift-economy than the client is not a customer who has to give something back. The client has the freedom to give something in return of the help but he or she can also refuse to do so. The gift is defined by two conditions:

Although there is an expectation for a response, the return of the gift has to be voluntary. There has to be a risk that the return will not happen. Otherwise it is not a gift but an exchange.

You also have to distinguish gifts from alms. Alms are a special form of gifts which cannot be responded to. If it is not possible for the gift recipient to change the role and to give something back, then he or she has received alms instead of gifts.

Think about beggars, they are not able to change role. Therefore, alms always go in one direction. Be aware that alms have the tendency to fix social problems by strengthening social hierarchies. They don't solve social problems.

But nevertheless alms may be necessary, especially in emergency situations.

Because social work as well as economics has to fulfil the task of meeting human needs we have to question in which form this happens: as an exchange, as gifts or as alms.

I think it is very important to distinguish between exchange, gift and alms and to question our activities in social work. Therefore, I want to analyze the role of the actors, the activity and the ethics of these different forms of economy.

The condition for the exchange of goods is that buyers and sellers are free and isolated from each other. They should not be related because it is always bad to 'do business among friends'. A further condition is that there is a balance of power between buyers and sellers. If the exchange taking place is done between two unequal people such as adults and children, the buying and selling is problematized.

To regulate the market it is important that both partners are equally strong. Equality is the main principle in the market system not only between sellers and buyers but also all customers have to be treated equally.

This is the strength of the market system because you can neglect the differences between people. Therefore, you do not have to consider factors such as different cultures.

In contrast the gift is not shared between equals, but with someone who is in a way special for the donor. Donor and recipient are connected by a special relationship.

They do not have to know each other. But the donor wants to achieve or obtain a special value by giving, for example solidarity, justice or human dignity. The donor is always in the stronger position but the roles are not fixed. The recipient can change the role and determine if and when and what he or she will give back.

People who receive alms are always in a lower position than the donor. They are not able to give something back. Alms have the tendency to fix the status quo, they stabilize the dominant power relations.

Therefore, alms are not an appropriate way to solve social problems. They consolidate them. But sometimes they may help a situation not to get worse.

The ethical basis of the exchange economy is that the partners are convinced about the procedural justice of the interaction. They would not buy or sell if they believed that they would thereby be disadvantaged. Other values, such as whether this product could be necessary for a good life, are unimportant.

Justice does not play an important role in the gift economy. But there is always a value and this is the motive for sharing gifts. People share goods because they love their children and partner, they want to improve the situation of people in a difficult situation or they want to realize human dignity, and so on.

They want to make a value come true. The gift economy is related to the Aristotelian teleological ethic. For social work this means that gifts have to be given to realize human rights. To guarantee human dignity and to realize human rights we have to guarantee that everybody can meet their needs.

Alms are often given because of religious reasons or an ethic of compassion.

Distribution by exchange economy excludes a lot of people – the young, the old, the disabled, and everybody who is not economically productive.

Alms are also problematic because they fix social hierarchies because the recipient of alms is not allowed to become active and to give something back.

Gift economy in practise

The gift economy in the form of the “unconditional basic income” is one possibility to establish an access for everybody.

A basic income is an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement.

That means everybody should receive enough money to meet his or her needs because of his membership in society. The unconditional basic income must not be alms as people have to have the possibility to participate in society. They should have the option to change the role and to give something in return as volunteer work, cultural work or political work, and so on.

The financial viability of the “unconditional basic income” has often been proved. It would go beyond the scope of this presentation to discuss this in detail. You can get more information about the unconditional basic income on the website of globalincome.org

It has also been proved that the gift economy works today, as the free software movement shows. The great hindrance to the implementation of the unconditional basic income comes from ideological thinking which strengthens the power relations of the exchange economy.

We have to deconstruct the terror of procedural justice. If we act as sellers and buyers everywhere (and not only in the marketplace), everything and everybody becomes a product.

If we let the exchange economy define social work, clients who are not able to exchange something will be soon labelled “social parasites “ as we call in Austria. If we consider people as animals, we are dehumanizing them.

To implement the gift economy in our society we need a new way of thinking:

First: The amount and nature of our needs are limited.

Second: There are enough resources to meet our needs.

Therefore Social work has to develop a theory of human needs and to point out that to meet human needs is more a distribution problem than a problem of shortage.

Finally I want to introduce a very interesting project which closely follows the idea of the gift economy. The so called “free stores” or “no costs stores” are shops where you can get everything for free.

For the purpose of this presentation I will refer to this shop as a “free store” in German they are called “kost nix”:

Money is not necessary to shop at the free store. One is able to simply turn up and find three objects that you may take away with you. Not only do you not have to pay but there is also no expectation of anything in return. People are encouraged to bring things that they no longer need at home. They can do this freely but it is not an obligation. In fact there are always more people bringing items than taking them away.

The organizers of these projects do not consider themselves as charities or social projects but rather as a fundamental example of how a gift economy could work.

At the end of my presentation I want to close with the words of Mahatma Gandhi who said:

‘There is enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed.’

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