

Reconnecting social work to social questions. A pedagogical perspective on social work.

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Social pedagogy as an academic discipline, but also as a frame of reference that motivates and inspires a wide range of social practices, has gained importance in many European countries during the last two decades. In some countries, like Germany or Denmark, this tradition has been continuously going on for a century. In other countries, especially in England the attention for social pedagogy is quite new. This popularity boost is all too often driven by the observation that social work has adopted a one-sided focus on individual needs and thus, does not address the roots of social problems. The pedagogical approach is then called to help in a desperate effort to solve recurrent social problems. Increasing the effectiveness of social practices, however, does not only lie in their re-pedagogisation, this is only part of the answer. Re-socialisation should be at least equally on the agenda. Therefore, it makes little sense to approach social work and social pedagogy as separate methodological fields. Instead, we need social practices that are able to cross the dividing lines between culture, welfare and politics and re-connect social practices to social movements.

Keywords: social pedagogy, social work, social movement

Social pedagogy, an answer to social problems?

Social pedagogues, as is the case for social workers, are often held accountable for the prevention and treatment of social problems. While this seems to offer them a crucial position in the social field, they are at the same time burdened with a mission impossible. In this paper we will argue that social pedagogy, if it wants to be a crucial player in the broad social, cultural and political debate, needs to be developed as a perspective on the social professions. In this perspective, social work is not merely a troubleshooter for a diversity of problems, but a facilitator in defining social problems and discussing individual and societal responsibilities addressing those problems.

First, we situate the broad concept of social pedagogy and, through a historical exploration, establish social pedagogy as a perspective on social work. Next, we illustrate how social problems inevitably are transformed into pedagogical questions. We take the field of youth work – in many countries a central domain of social pedagogy – as an example. Finally, we explore how social pedagogy today can regain its pivotal position in the debate on the relationship between individual and society, without becoming an instrument that serves the status quo or even the growing gap between the established and the outsiders in the current social order.

The recurrent rise and fall of social pedagogy

Social pedagogy as a discipline is highly dependent on the social, cultural and political context. This is inherent to this discipline, as it explicitly chooses to interpret human behaviour in its social context, which does not only refer to social relations, but also explicitly to the historical and societal context. This makes social pedagogy a very broad discipline. Therefore, through time and space, very different interpretations of social pedagogy have arisen (see Gustavsson et al., 2003, Kornbeck & Jensen, 2011, Niemeyer 2012).

In this paper, we do not attempt to produce an exhaustive list of these diverse interpretations. Instead, we consider the following main approaches:

1. Social education: in this approach, social pedagogy is focused on teaching social and democratic skills and attitudes, so that young people find their place

in society and can defend their interests without harming the interests of others. This approach is often focused on 'youth-at-risk', those groups whose social integration does not run smoothly or whose behaviour and attitudes seem to pose a threat to social cohesion.

2. A social perspective on education: this approach assumes that pedagogical goals cannot be defined independently of the social context in which people live and learn. A social pedagogical perspective starts from the study of the living conditions of (young) people and the interaction between education and society.
3. Pedagogy of the third sector: this approach starts from a strong interest in the so-called 'free youth movements'. In the 19th century, education was increasingly seen as a tool for the prevention and resolution of social problems. The third sector was institutionalised as a supplementary tool for integration and emancipation, next to schools and families. The discipline that dealt with the third sector (research, training, practice) was called 'social pedagogy'.

This differentiated approach to 'social pedagogy' is ambiguous for several reasons. The diversity and span of the concept renders social pedagogy both polyvalent and versatile (Thole, 2005; Hamburger 2007). But it makes social pedagogy also a vulnerable discipline, because of the risk of instrumentalisation and technocratic, indisputable interpretations of the concept. It is illustrative that an increasing '*social pedagogical embarrassment*' (Mennicke, 1937) often follows a wave of public concern about social cohesion. In Western Europe the interest in social pedagogy has faded away after the Second World War (also because of the connotations of fascism and state education, which made an Anglo-American approach to citizenship focusing on individual skills and attitudes more eligible). With the drastic transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, social pedagogy became popular again as the existing social order was confronted with new ways of relating to each other. Also during the economic crisis of the 1980s, an increased interest could be observed. Indeed, social cohesion came under pressure due to the increasing social uncertainty (youth unemployment, economic crisis) and growing ethnic diversity (new wave of migration from the Maghreb countries or Turkey). In this context, the education of (young) people became of utmost importance, although the social pedagogical sight gradually shifted its focus from the critical analysis of the social position of young people to the prevention and treatment of problem behaviour of 'youth at risk'. By the end of the century, social pedagogy had

completely faded away in many countries, supplanted by variations of developmental psychology (positive youth development!), special pedagogy (orthopedagogy) or youth sociology (leisure studies).

Quite recently, social pedagogy is gaining ground again in some countries. Even in the Anglo-American world, we can observe a strong rise of social pedagogy (Cameron & Moss, 2011, Schugurensky 2014). Yet, this is not due to a reconnection with social or pedagogical work. Rather, it is seen as a child-centred alternative to an individualised and technocratic social work practice of pedagogical practices in schools and youth work. However, in some countries, especially in Germany, the attention for social pedagogy also reveals a fourth historical approach of the discipline, namely as a perspective on social and pedagogical practices.

Social pedagogy, a perspective on social work?

The reconnection of social pedagogy with social work offers a more constructive approach than the juxtaposition of both practices. In doing so, we go back to the roots of our social disciplines. Many authors even go back to Plato's ideas on education for citizenship or Aristotle explaining the relation between education and the welfare of the polis. Others refer to the 'de subventionem pauperum' (1526) by the Valencian scholar Juan Luis Vivès. It is justifiable to take the roots of social pedagogy back to Vivès, a pedagogue who also engaged in social work, be it in the rather restricted sense of poor relief. Vivès called for an efficient approach to poor relief on the basis of thorough research into the living conditions and lifestyle of people in order to define who needed what kind of help and who deserved support (or not). In doing that, he explicitly interconnected education, social work (or what could be seen as premature forms of social work) and the desired social order. This political debate is still the context in which social workers work, but too often they seem to focus unilaterally on their well-defined and delineated practices and methods and in doing so exclude themselves from the political debate in which social problems are defined. The reframing of a passive welfare state into an active welfare state re-emphasises the moral and pedagogical role of social workers (Lorenz, 2008). However, social workers, be it youth workers, community workers, social care workers or adult educationists, do not seem comfortable with this pedagogical profile. Nevertheless, they are increasingly held

accountable or responsible for pedagogically addressing social problems. This feelings of uncertainty reinforce a rather technical thinking that tend to further depoliticise our social and pedagogical practices. Poverty and social fragmentation are no longer seen as a problem of social inequality, but as the result of (young) people's non-participation in the labour market and non-integration in the cultural community in which they are supposed to participate. This leads to the development of 'inclusionary strategies', as if participation self-evidently leads to inclusion. The mechanisms behind social exclusion remain unproblematised and participation is framed as a matter of skills and motivation. Research shows that these strategies lead to a widening gap between 'the established' and 'the outsiders' (Elias and Scotson, 1994), because exclusion is seen as a problem of non-participation and low aspiration. Those who have most problems to meet standards of normality are denounced and left with the responsibility to solve 'their social problems' by themselves.

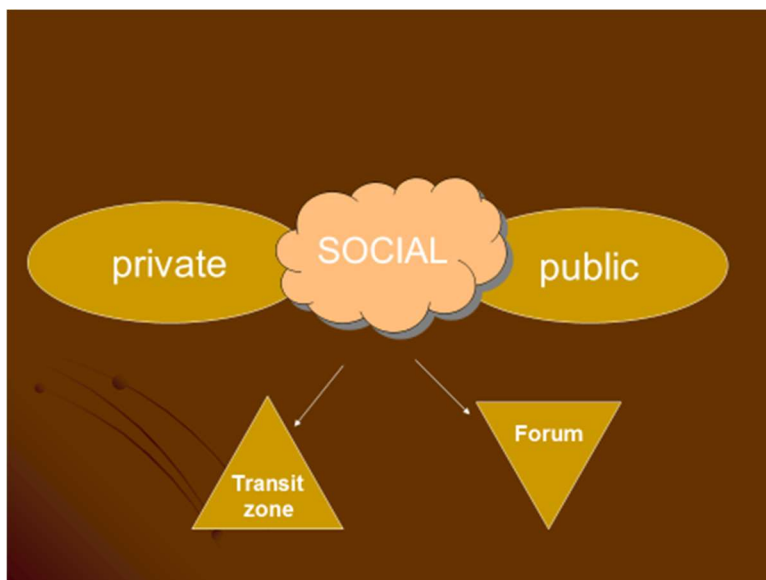
Hamburger identifies the relationship between individuals and society and the possible conflicts and professional solutions within this relationship as the main reference point of social pedagogy (Hamburger 2007, 14). Taking this broader perspective means that we do not only need a re-pedagogisation of social work practices, but also a re-socialisation and a professional attention for diverging and conflicting perspectives on social problems. As the purpose of pedagogical interventions cannot be disconnected from the societal context in which social problems arise, social conflict and democratic processes should be at the heart of our practices. As Freire (1970) argued: social pedagogy entails a critical reflection on the role of pedagogical institutions in society. Freire denominated this process as 'cultural action': questioning, demythologising, 'historicising' and changing marginalising processes by unveiling the social, political and cultural project underpinning educational institutions. Our own history and broad background should enable us not to drown in the deep sea of structural social problems, many times larger than we can handle. We do not need the 'lifeline' of technocratisation and individualisation, which is a lifeline for social workers, not for social work. A simple look at the redistribution of wealth in our society (take for example the Gini coefficient) tells us that our society has not become more just than almost a century ago at the conception of the welfare state. Our meritocratic societies feature a paradox of positional goods constructing perpetual and ontological limits to social mobility. Herbert Gans' (1970) '*positive functions of poverty*' are more actual than ever.

Pedagogues and social workers must dare to proclaim that they are not going to solve this societal mess. That is not a sign of impotence or a lack of expertise. It is the recognition that social problems have a socio-economic and political basis. It must be the mission of all social professions to define or redefine social problems, together with those who are seen as the bearer or even the cause of social problems.

The social in pedagogical work, the pedagogical in social work

In the footsteps of Vivès many people followed. Pioneers as Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and later Don Bosco (1815-1888) or Natorp (1854-1924) firmly established the key relevance of the *social* aspects of pedagogy and the pedagogical aspects of social work. While the term of social pedagogy itself found its first mention by Karl Mager in 1844, Paul Natorp could only later define the term with a more concrete and specified content. Natorps definition referred to Pestalozzi and also matches the ideas of Don Bosco: *“The social question is not primarily a phenomena of material poverty, but also defined in the lack of community and social cohesion that needs to be addressed with the interventions of social pedagogy”* (Niemeyer 2012, 63). Since then, the social in pedagogy often refers to working with marginalised youth. There is a clear target (abandoned children) and method (group work). Social pedagogues introduced care, love and trust in the work with the most disadvantaged young people and they pointed at the responsibility of society to provide education and care. Pestalozzi described it as ‘education by the community for the community’. He introduced a holistic thinking (man is a unity of thinking, feeling and acting) and launched the ‘head, hands, heart triad’. In his reflections however, the social is still restricted to a child-centred relationship in social work. His pupil Adolph Diesterweg (1790-1866) brings us closer to a current, critical approach to the social in social pedagogy. He pointed to the social changes and societal challenges brought about by new forms of division of labour and reframed relations between people and society. Individualist and functionalist educational strategies could not cope with these new challenges. Social cohesion was threatened by proletarianisation, poverty, criminality, diseases, ... Society was in need of new forms of community development and pathways to social integration (quite similar in fact to popular discourses today). On the basis of these ideas social pedagogy developed as a search for new integration mechanisms through what could be referred to as the social pedagogical sphere of society. Natorp, and later Carl Mennicke (1887-

1958), were the pacesetters. They followed the idea that “*man only becomes man through community*”¹ (Natorp 1899 cited by Niemeyer 2012, 63; Natorp 1899a, 84). These developments accompanied the birth of the nation states. Individuals must be shaped into active citizens supported by social pedagogues. Social pedagogical embarrassment focuses on those who are supposed to be are to become a threat to the existing social order. For those who enjoy increasing private freedom and space for initiative and self-development the social sphere in society, the sphere where private aspirations meet public expectations, is a forum to liberate themselves from the restrictive bonds of church and local community. For people that live in more vulnerable conditions (mostly due to a weaker position in a fast growing capitalist labour market economy) the liberation of the traditional social ties and compliments has a flipside, as increasing freedom for them also implies increasing uncertainty. Some of them are considered a threat to the new social order as they lose themselves and do not find acceptable ways to social integration. In the industrialising societies of the 19th century this was labelled as the ‘social question’ (Donzelot, 1984; Castel, 1995). For them the newly developing social sphere could not merely function as a forum to meet their aspirations, but was rather designed as a transit-zone, where pedagogues had to fit their aspirations into the meritocratic philosophy that characterised industrial capitalist market society.



Both social pedagogy and social work are historically closely connected to the social question and thus to the development of modern democracies. Education and social

¹ Original: „Mensch wird allein durch Gemeinschaft zum Menschen“ (Natorp 1899 cited in Niemeyer 2012, 63)

work were defined as effective instruments to socialize the individual into the active citizen. In this process, social practices were designed as a pedagogical answer to social problems. Therefore the critical analysis of this pedagogization of social problems lies at the heart of our practices and precedes the development of practices and methods to solve social problems.

From the 'social question' to the 'youth question'

Young people were a prime concern within the answers given to the social question. Therefore the rise of the youth work field in that era has an exemplary function, because it shows how social questions are made susceptible for intervention by transforming them into pedagogical questions.

Sources of inspiration in shaping youth work and youth policy were both the youth movements (as an expression of the social emancipation of young students) and the boys' or girls' clubs (aimed at the social education of working class youth). The enthusiastic spirit of young students and the moral concerns about young people will meet each other in 'youth work', a social pedagogical field focusing on additional support in the social integration of young people. This third pedagogical environment (according to Gertrud Bäumer the third field of education next to families and schools [Bäumer 1929 cited by Niemeyer 2012, 63]) is shaped in a synthesis between the 'youth question' and the 'social question' bringing them together in a tensed – at its best dialectical – relationship. While the social question dealt with the integration of a social class in society, the youth question dealt with the integration of a distinct age group. The focus on social integration implies that a group is being defined as 'non-integrated', be it in the middle class society or in adult society. The non-integrated group is supposed to need 'special' support to function in a desirable way. Depending on the perspective one takes, social pedagogical work should take into account the needs that result from either social class or a specific life stage. On the one hand, seeing working class youth in the first place as 'young people' could help them to emancipate (see the restrictions on child labor and the introduction of compulsory education), on the other hand it would disconnect their struggle for emancipation from the broader social movement supported by their parents and probably would imply adjustment to dominant definitions of the ideal youth stage.

The discussion between two youth work pioneers illustrates the transformation of the social question into a youth issue. A first serious attempt to define a single concept of youth work was made by Lord Baden-Powell. At the beginning of the 20th century, youth was increasingly seen as a distinct stage in the life cycle, with its own characteristics and needs (see Stanley Hall's 'Adolescence', 1904). Baden-Powell shared the concerns of his time about a moral and physical degeneration of the young, but he also knew youth movements such as the German Wandervögel and the American Woodcraft movements. He was well aware that young people are not passive recipients of the educational interventions by adults. Therefore, he made a synthesis of the student's spirit of self-government and the adult concerns about deficient development of working class youth. According to him, social care initiatives for young people were too conservative and the youth movements were rudderless and often turbulent. What was needed, was a method that 'guided without dictation'; a method that combined their longing for adventure and nature with learning different skills and instilling a sense of citizenship. Baden-Powell created a single concept of youth work, based on a single concept of youth. He was quite clear about the pedagogical aims of scouting: '*If the public schools were made to produce gentleman prepared to lead, the scouts must produce young man ready to follow.*' (Rosenthal, 1986: 104). Later on, the method grew into a worldwide movement reaching also Belgium, where a Catholic priest developed another youth work method that seemed to appeal to working class youth. Something that scouting did not achieve. Jozef Cardijn was also worried about the moral integrity of young workers, but unlike Baden-Powell he did not express these concerns in an exclusive orientation on individual skills, group work and leisure activities. Cardijn pointed at the responsibility of society to give the working class youth a decent position. Cardijn, who was also very well aware of the socialists gaining ground, wanted to set up a revolutionary movement, fighting for better working conditions, together with the young workers themselves. Very soon, however, both the Catholic Church and the Catholic trade union determined the limits of his movement and Cardijn was pushed back to the domain of 'youth work'. But where Baden-Powell created an ideal youth work method starting from an ideal image of an active citizen, Cardijn started with an analysis of the actual social situation of the working youth. Cardijn started where young people were, not where he wanted them to be. In founding the Catholic Workers' Youth, he was less bothered with the

youth question and took the social question as his starting point. Baden-Powell did it the other way around. Both movements conquered the world. The discussion between two founding fathers of youth work illustrates the fundamental difference between youth work based on a methodical synthesis, making abstraction of social context, and youth work based on a social pedagogical synthesis.

Baden-Powell and Cardijn met in London in 1911. According to the Cardinal, the General did not understand the need to start from a social analysis and not from a desired youthful development (Cardijn, 1948: 137, our *translation*):

- **Cardijn:** *Do you know that there are young workers with their very own problems?*
- **B-P:** *I do not know young workers. I only know citizens and I want to shape strong-willed men.*
- **Cardijn:** *Do you realise how young workers have to survive in factories and how they are influenced by the workers' milieu? How could we help them, not just to stay good, but even to have a positive influence in their milieu?*
- **B-P:** *I don't know the workers' milieu!*

This fragment shows how the development of 'youth work' was from the very beginning interwoven with questions of diversity and inclusion as well as questions about the relation between education and society. Do we invest in social pedagogical methods supporting the ideal development of young people and trying to reach out to all young people in order to transform them into active citizens and in doing so create *a cohesive society*? Or do we aim to realize a differentiated social pedagogical basic infrastructure that supports young people's aspirations, whatever they may be, and consequently attracts different categories of young people? Which investment gives which young people the best chances for empowerment? And which investment supports the development of a more social just society, and not only a more social cohesive society (Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2005).

Re-socialising the youth question?

Throughout the years, youth work has lost its potential political and social pedagogical character as it has been gradually transformed from a social movement into an educational method. Based on Scouting, a 'single concept of boyhood', youth work was shaped as a de-contextualized and a-political concept (Lewin, 1947) in which social conflict and redistribution were sacrificed for cultural renewal and character

building. Cardijn's fight for employment and decent working conditions is replaced by the rhetoric of employability. The student's fight for more democratic schools is transformed into a debate on youth work's contribution to prevent school drop-outs, from fighting the failure of schools to fighting the failure of students.

Looking at national youth policies, but also EU youth-strategies, we can easily recognise this a-historical and a-political analysis of young people's lives and their social positions. Take the following quote: *'Promoting the social and professional integration of young women and men is an essential component to reach the objectives of Europe's Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs, at the same time as promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship.'* (Council of the European Union, 2009: 2). There has been no period in our recent histories where this ideal has become reality. Possibly because there have always been people who seemed not too motivated to work hard for low wages in indecent conditions, even though we call this *'social inclusion'*. This raises the uncomfortable question if *'social inclusion'* is in the interest of all young people. The argument of adherents of social inclusion, positive youth development, prevention and many other *'positive'* strategies often shows a very uncritical line of thought, stating for instance that society has to support vulnerable young people to undergo a *'normal development'* and to become *'gainfully employed individuals, not reliant on public funds or services'* (Roth, 2003: 96). Such a perspective reframes public services from basic social and pedagogical provision to a *'residual'* and temporary service with a clear purpose: people may be dependent on labour market conditions, but they are not allowed to rely on public support. While people in situations labelled as *'socially excluded'* may be less than happy, this does not mean that their individual inclusion into the mainstream – if attainable – is a satisfactory solution. As Pitts (2001) pointed out the routine, alienation, exploitation and discrimination are inherently part of the bottom of the mainstream. Therefore, if youth work takes its principles serious, it is not in the first place an extra instrument for social inclusion, as the paradoxical consequence of strategies that concentrate on implying individual solutions to social exclusion is a *'pistachio effect'*, in which youth workers are tempted to leave the harder nuts to crack, at best, until later, or, at worst, simply disregard them (Tiffany, 2007). It is impossible to go beyond this pistachio effect if the remains confined in a straightforward logic in which undesirable individual behaviour is not just seen in correlation to social problems, but rather as a cause to their effect

(Colley & Hodkinson, 2001). The increasing 'colonisation' of youth work is sailing under the colours of empowerment and emancipation, but in the end, it contributes to the disempowerment of those young people who are already marginalised. Therefore, youth workers should support young people to develop lifestyles and cultural spaces, whether or not oppositional, that have personal meaning for them (Pitts, 2001). The theory debate in youth has developed a clear professional alternative (e.g. Deinet and Sturzenhecker 2013; Thole 2000). A synopsis (Spatscheck 2005) identifies the main features of youth work as a) an orientation towards the interests of young people, b) the creation of offers that are open and can be used voluntarily, c) the aim of participation and the enhancement of the autonomy of young people, and d) the creation of chances to take over responsibility and engagement in and for the society. This requires the ability to create informal learning settings. Youth work settings should be created along the ideals of a) discursivity and dialogic encounter instead of "teaching and preaching", b) the creation of protected spaces that help in gaining autonomy through trial, risk and also a space for failure, and c) the chances for an individual experience of the world that helps young people to discover and learn through personal action and feedback (Spatscheck 2005).

Moreover, youth work can also be significant in terms of societal learning processes, showing us the lived realities behind labels such as social inclusion and social exclusion. That is the specific place for youth work in society, revealing a social-pedagogical perspective on the pathways to social integration of young people, through culture and arts, through conversation and association, through new ways of community development. Here, youth work can build on a variety of methods. The methods chapter in the leading German handbook on youth work (Deinet and Sturzenhecker 2013) displays the methods of project work, street work, mobile youth work, working with individuals, counselling, relational work, working with groups, political education, rituals, working with conflicts, mediation, eating and cooking, humour and irony, and travel and international youth exchanges.

This is without prejudice to the existing provisions focusing on smooth social integration into the educational system, labour market or the broader market of housing, health and happiness, ... but it should be clear that the third sector is not a 'stop-gap' for the residue emitted by these provisions. The third sector should function as a forum where

the 'emission' of pistachios can be thematised. Or as Mills (1959) would argue: a forum for negotiating the connection between private problems and public issues.

Conclusion

Out of the synthesis from social question and youth question sprang our current concept of 'youth work', seeking to provide spaces for young people's association and voice as well as bridges for young people's transitions towards full participation in economic and civic life. It is a concept full of tensions. 'Full participation' can be externally predefined or it can be shaped in the process of dialogue and participation. This social-pedagogical mind-set can also be characterised by the concept of a pedagogy of the creation of learning arrangements for learner-centred settings (Lindner 2014)². This requires youth workers to be moderators, enhancers and creators of helpful settings, and to leave the idea of instruction and teaching behind. We should not try to enclose this kind of social pedagogical work into a merely functional understanding of integration, prevention, risk aversion and early intervention. This is a huge restriction of what the third sector work can potentially realise on both an individual and societal level. Since decades, our youth policy has increasingly been built upon the deep-rooted conviction that we can measure, monitor, plan and control social reality through optimising the individual development of children and young people (Giesecke, 1963).

This conclusion can be transferred to social work as a broad concept, supporting a democratic society by engaging with people and critical investigating the balance between individual and societal responsibility. A true democracy deliberately is in need of 'free zones' where people can orientate themselves on society and acquire biographical, institutional and political skills and spaces (Böhnisch & Münchmeier, 1990), and extend all too narrow definitions of 'inclusion'. The casus of youth work also illustrates how social questions can easily be translated into pedagogical questions, but many social problems are also reframed into questions of culture, language, identity, ... Therefore social pedagogues need to reconnect their work to the societal context. This broader conceptualisation of social pedagogical work would meet what

² In the original a „Pädagogik des Arrangierens“, a pedagogy of the “arranging”

Sandermann (2017) calls the social pedagogical perspective: a developmental approach to humans as subjects that should be able to develop their full potentials and aspirations according to their understanding and with mutual negotiation with other subjects in society. This also implies that social pedagogy asks for a pedagogical responsibility of society. Policymakers act as if all people are or should be entrepreneurs and be fully responsible for their own lives. If social workers withdraw from the social-political debate, they only reinforce this de-socialisation of social problems and social work as an answer to them. Notwithstanding references to human rights and social justice, many social pedagogical and social work practices today have lost their initial political orientation and are accepted as self-evident (Specht & Courtney, 1994). As such, social pedagogy and social work have become self-referential, methodical practices uncritical, even constitutive, to existing society (Harris, 2008; Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2016). There are few counter movements. Part of the problem is that also the discourses of social movements increasingly get bogged down in 'identity politics' (Smith, 1994) and tend to skip 'the social'. Children's rights, youth movements, women, migrants, disabled, senior citizens, LGBTIQ's, ... we all claim 'our rights', neglecting the inextricability of one's rights and the rights of other individuals or groups. In other words: we fail to connect to the social. Nevertheless, rights cannot be claimed in a social vacuum, they have to be realised in a collective way. The social is a forum to negotiate power relations, to get to know and understand each other and the interest of the others. It is not a transit zone to adapt to public expectations, nor is it an instrument to claim private rights.

Social pedagogy as a concept can bridge the gaps between the differentiated social professions and look for renewed coalitions with social movements. One evidence clearly shown through social research is that people, especially the most vulnerable people, are in need of projects that go beyond the boundaries between the different sectors, but also projects that go beyond the logic of 'social inclusion'. Social work, in a broad social and pedagogical sense, offers many possibilities to build a more flexible society, with a more flexible educational system and a more accessible labour market, where private aspirations can be much easier reconciled with public expectations. This demands policies that are enabling social work practices, instead of instrumentalising them.

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