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Toward postmodern social work

Summary

This scientific article is based on the analysis of socio-economic conditions of the formation of social work as a constituent element of modernity and its hidden controlling functions. Publication shows social work changes in the epoch of disorganized capitalism, and raises a question of the future of social work and its relations with postmodernity.

Key words: social work, capitalism, modernity, postmodern, Foucault

Modernity and its dimensions

Since the Enlightenment, modernity is perhaps the most common subject for reflection in social sciences (Delanty, 1999). The idea of modernity is deeply rooted in the German social philosophy and sociology from the turn of the 19th and 20th century, including among others the thoughts of Georg W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx and Max Weber, as well as Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel. Modernity is contrasted with tradition. Most importantly, modernity signifies the rejection of mythological and magical thinking, and also the decreasing role of religion. Striving for secularisation and rationalisation of all areas of human life is the essence of modernity. It is a process called by Max Weber the

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“disenchantment of the world” (Weber, 1989). It is marked by the growing dominance of scientific understanding, which becomes instrumentalised under the increasing influence of the technological requirements. The cognitive rationality finds its continuation in social, legal and aesthetic rationality. The principles characteristic for modernist mentality have universalistic nature, and their emergence is related to the belief in civilisational progress. Social life is subjected to a change, bonds with community are replaced with associations bonds, which are based on state organisation together with a network of institutions. Because of the increasing complexity of social relationships, an effective administration becomes essential, which leads to a bureaucratisation of social life (Niesporek, 2007, p. 20). These processes include also an emerging and increasingly professionalised social work.

Modernity and capitalism

With all the complexity and ambiguity of modernity as a conceptual category, it is ultimately related to the concept of capitalism (Jameson, 2002; Prendergast, 2003). Peter Wagner proposed four possible ways of conceptualising the relationship between capitalism and modernity. First, defining capitalism as a dominant or primary aspect of modern society. This thought is present in the classical Marxist tradition expressed in the dependence of the “social formation” (of modern society) on the “mode of production” (capitalism). Second, treating capitalism, or strictly speaking market economy, as a development function of modern society. Modernity creates conditions for development of freedom, which fosters the development of market economy. Third, the development of capitalism and modernity can be analysed as intertwined to an extent that is impossible to untangle. This approach is characteristic for the classics of the Frankfurt School, who emphasised the totalising dimension of social life. Fourth, capitalism and modernity are perceived as co-existing and can be analytically distinguished. At the same time, capitalism is more or less understood as related to economic phenomena, and modernity as related to political and cultural phenomena (Wagner, 2001). Equating capitalism with modernity is more typical for those thinkers who are positively biased towards capitalism. Its critic, regarding capitalism as the most important factor shaping modernity, define the latter in broader terms, assuming that modernity can exist, and even achieve its highest level of maturity, only in its post-capitalist stage (Arnason, 2001, pp. 100–101).

An important feature of capitalism is not only the differentiation of economic relations, but also their reification by commodification, i.e. meaning that these relations no longer serve the purpose of creating a usable value or satisfying needs. The effect of monetary economy, which is typical for modern capitalist society and linked to the processes of commodification, is the process of reification of society. Therefore, commodification and mechanisms of monetary economy constitute the actual grounds for the manifestation of society and culture as objective wholes (Simmel, 1997; Niesporek, 2007, chapter 2). In modern capitalist society, market functions as an “impersonal order”, regulated by its own rules. Social world is no longer perceived as completely dependent on interactions

between people and controlled by people. The autonomization of economic activities, and furthermore a separation of other social subsystems (politics, law, science, art), entails not only a diversification of social activities, but also a disintegration of the normative system, which finds support in a religiously- and metaphysically-based substantial reason and which is the foundation of traditional society (Habermas, 1987).

Organised capitalism and welfare state

Capitalism has been subjected to significant changes. Crucial for its contemporary form was the constitution of a capitalism subjected to state regulation, i.e. so called “organised capitalism”.² Its beginnings are rooted in the 1870s, whereas a spectacular growth of this form of capitalism could be observed from the 1930s and 1940s. The essence of “organised capitalism” is most often characterised by referring to a few of its crucial features. First, the ability of the state to ensure a social contract between capital and labour, and, therefore, to maintain the stability of capitalist production relationships within the state. It is enabled by a change in the state’s policy and the way the state bureaucracy functions, and which is no longer occupied in “maintaining order”, but becomes focused on solving problems and addressing the interests of various social groups. On the other hand, it is possible thanks to the emergence of national organisational structures of trade unions and employers’ organisations, and professional organisations of other kind. Second, the state’s interventionism and regulatory function in the area of economic activity. This includes, among others, undertaking key economic initiatives, absorption of surplus labour, income redistribution and satisfying needs by public expenditure, etc. Third, the state’s control function in international economic exchange, also by participating in international economic institutions. Fourth, the concentration and centralisation of industrial, banking and trade capital. The concentration of capitalist economic relationships on several key economic sectors in the area of a part of major countries, and the development of large industrial cities on their territories. The development of industry employing a relatively large number of employees and the dominating role of economy of scale and Taylor’s organisation of production (Lash, Urry, 1993, pp. 3–4; Castells, 1993, pp. 21–24; Harvey, 1990, pp. 175–176; Niesporek, 2007, p. 100).

The embodiment of the age of organised capitalism is the welfare state, which emerged in the post-war Western Europe. Notwithstanding the complex history, its variations and theoretical justifications for its existence, the welfare state became an answer to the strengthening of capitalism and the force of market. At the time of the increasing power and importance of the working class, it fulfilled particular socio-political functions, and also led to the decommodification of a part of socio-occupational activity of individuals (Esping-Andersen, 2010). The state became a complement to family, neighbourhood and local communities in coping with the social consequences of crises generated by capitalism.

² The notion of “organised capitalism” was first proposed by R. Hilferding in his paper *The Organised Economy*, in T. Bottomore, P. Goode (eds), *Readings in Marxist Sociology*, Oxford 1978.

On the one hand, the state became an essential subject of wealth redistribution, while on the second hand, of control, which was exerted within the welfare state also via social work (Parton, 1994, p. 19).

Modernity and social work

Social work at its beginnings—as many other increasingly professionalised forms of social activity—was connected to the process of shaping new social bonds, characteristic for capitalism in the stage of development, and related to the above-mentioned process of commodification and reification of social relations and the formation of objective basis for differentiation of society as a whole (Simmel, 1997; Niesporek, 2007). It concerns, first of all, the formation of mechanisms of social bond different from those typical for pre-capitalist society.

Social work, as a component of modernity, in both theoretical and practical aspect, i.e. embedded in social theory and expressed in methodology, performed mostly disciplinary function—in the meaning used by M. Foucault (Parton, 1994, p. 14 et seq.). According to Foucault, power should be understood in terms of multiplicity of relations, as a “play”, “network” or “complex strategic situation”. “In thinking of the mechanisms of power”, wrote Foucault, “I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into the action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault, 1988, p. 309). Power manifests itself in a complex network of power relations. It is an immanent feature of this network and has a “strictly relational character”. The power that interests Foucault is internalised with regard to those different relations. It can be said that it is constitutive to them, that the forms of domination are rooted in the very understanding of joint action, or search of wealth, or anything that forms the nature of such a micro-relation (Taylor, 1998, p. 87). What Foucault has in mind is a certain kind of “microphysics of power”, a description of multiple, local forms of manifestations of power, technologies of governing, which form in connection with many, often random, relationships and associations. Power is dispersed, ubiquitous and surrounds people like a net. Power exists in those people and through them, is supported on them, it even imposes the framework for protest against the power. As Foucault says, power “blocks” them (Foucault, 1998, p. 28). The nature of power is not solely repressive, power not only orders or prohibits, but also creates. It is productive. Power determines the boundary conditions for other social practices, including the cognitive and communicative processes that are characteristic and relevant to them. Through a complex play of coincidences, power as a network of relationships, together with its inherent technologies, constitutes the subject, which is at the same time an object of power and its actor. It creates a complex and, how was proved in Foucault’s analyses, a historically ordered whole of cognitive and material practices, in which “the individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him” is constituted. The elementary works of Foucault undertake the issue of genealogy of power that shapes historical forms of structured discursive and non-discursive practices

generating the subjectivity of an individual (the mentally ill, the criminal, the human as an object of humanistic reflection). Foucault presented the situation in a particularly incisive manner, analysing the changes in the ways of treating persons with mental disorders—madmen. The madman is a representative of a broader, larger and more general family of individuals who are an impediment in economic and social organisation of capitalism (Foucault, 2000, p. 95). The new economic norms, characteristic for emerging capitalism, brought a change to the way the persons that could not be subjected to any labour standards were treated. The madman is here only an example. It was reflected by the evolution in social measures. They evolved first from support to confinement, and, later, to empowerment. The confinement played an important role in the time of shaping the beginnings of capitalist economy. The purpose of confinement is not only “hiding away the unemployed, but now also of giving them work. (...) The cycle was clear: in times of high wages and full employment, they provided a low-cost workforce, while in a slump they absorbed the unemployed, and protected society from unrest and riots” (Foucault, 1987, p. 72). A classical example of such measures is the history of establishment and development of the English workhouses (Crowther, 1981; Fowler, 2007). The idea of empowerment, however, expresses a change of attitude to a rapidly arising social problems of the era of the development of capitalism and urbanisation that followed. It is related to the 19th century development of social sciences and so called “scientific charity”.

Social work seen from such a perspective is a part of the process of establishing and maintaining a new type of social order. It incorporates a vision of this order, the place and role of family and an individual within it, and, most importantly, subjects its practice to the mechanism of social and individual disciplining. Modern social work provided knowledge and a set of practices, which enabled the individuals experiencing problems to be included into society in line with moralising, normalising and guardianship. According to Parton, the space occupied by social work, what is “social”, emerges halfway between an individual action and the potentially omnipresent state. Modern social work is rooted in the possibilities of mental recognition of community and turning it into the purpose of political activity (Parton, 1994, p. 100). The perspective of looking at the whole society and the mechanisms of its functioning—functional dependencies constituting the basis for social cohesion, or social order—which was characteristic for the emerging social sciences, was also a theoretical perspective of social work. Whereas social work practice played a disciplinary role, subordinating the activities of individuals and families to functional social norms. It did not happen with the view of sovereign power, but knowledge, or “power/knowledge” as understood by Foucault (Niesporek, Trembaczowski, Warczok, 2013, p. 60).

Power, according to Foucault, is dispersed, exists in circulating social relations. Power is exercised by everyone, so to say, it circulates through social relations, and it is inscribed in them. Power creates a discourse within which the image of reality is articulated. Since knowledge is a tool for creating such a discourse, it is simultaneously a tool for exercising power. Knowledge is a medium that allows to distribute the binding rules of

the discourse in the structure of social relations and, what Foucault emphasises, plays an essential role in creating human subjectivity. The latter is then co-created by the practice of exercising power. The discourses of power/knowledge are not imposed by a centre of power, but created upstream. By abiding by the rules of a discourse, people sustain it, and, at the same time, are its co-authors. As stressed by Barry Smart, Foucault's concept draws attention to the fact of the existence of power relations at the threshold of social order, while what differentiates it is the identification of power relations with society itself (Smart, 1983, p. 87). Analysing Foucault's views, Sławomir Magala used in very the title of his interesting essay a significant expression: *power in blood and aerosol*, which very well characterises those views. "In aerosol" signifies that power is not a local phenomenon, but it is dispersed, penetrating all ties and bonds of a social being, slipping into the tiniest crevices of social life, as drops of aerosol do. "In blood" means that the domination and power in the contemporary times is, first and foremost, the domination and power over life, over the completely normal reproduction of life—biological, social, cultural—and over the tiniest reflexes of an individual, constantly trained in the ways of reacting and conduct (Magala, 1985).

Social work plays a significant role in clearing this bloodstream. It activates indirect methods of social regulation. Using its own strategies, and preserving the ideas of autonomous and free individuals, it simultaneously subordinates them to generalised rules. It is achieved not by repressions, but—in the name of norms, standards, health—by promoting subjectivity, shaping individual way of life, or the dependency of individual life projects on the acceptance of social order (Parton, 1994, p. 19). It concerns, for example, a significant for social work practice notion of *empowerment*. This notion has both emancipatory and regulative potential. The discourse using the term *empowerment*, on one hand, expresses so characteristic for modernity emancipatory and personal approach. It signifies being a master of oneself and of one's own life. On the other hand, this discourse is appropriated by professionals. They are the ones who set standards for autonomous life, compliant with the norms. Ultimately, "empowerment is taken out of the hands of those who are being empowered" (Parker, Fook, Pease, 1999, p. 150).

Social work and social sciences

The rejection of non-social, supernatural and enigmatic foundations for the existence of social order was typical for the social sciences emerging in the times of modernity. On one hand, they searched for rational foundations of social order, of the modern, industrial society that was emerging; on the other hand—because of the impossibility of anchoring it in the non-social world—they created visions of a new, more rational order. This type of society, as Bauman wrote, retrospectively described as "modern", emerged from the discovery that the human order has its weaknesses, is conditional and devoid of solid grounds. That was a shocking discovery. A response was a dream and an attempt to make this order more solid, binding and based of firm grounds (Bauman, 1992, p. XI). Nevertheless, the issue of social order became the main subject of sociological reflection.

The idea of social order, however, can be understood in two ways. Social order can be defined in terms of fixed, regular, predictable forms of conduct. It can be also understood as a system of mutually responsive, matching activities. Accordingly, an absence of social order may signify a lack of predictability, or a lack of social cooperation (Elster, 1994). The idea of social order implies a tension caused by the relationship between the idea of instrumental rationality and the regulatory concept of social norms. Between the concept of spontaneous forming of social order, and admitting the necessity of its pre-existing cultural and normative grounds. It reflects the tension that accompanies the formation of a new social order, based on commodity production. The tension between market, subjected to instrumental rationality and governed by its internal rules, and social life, which has been freed from the burden of transcendence and tradition.

Therefore, the issue of the bases for social order became, to a great extent, the issue of norms and mechanisms of social regulation that were established by the developing social and medical sciences. As stressed by Foucault, it became an issue of normalisation, disciplining and supervising, based on rational premises and legitimised by the developing sciences—especially psychiatry and psychology (“psy-complex”). Gradually, modern societies regulate collective behaviours through the use of knowledge and practices developed by new human sciences—notably medicine, psychiatry, psychology, criminology and social work. So called “psy-complex” refers, in this context, to the network of ideas related to the nature of human individuals, their perfection, reasons for their behaviour and the ways in which they can be classified, differentiated and controlled. It aims to guide and improve individuals by manipulating their qualities and attributes, and is dependent on scientific knowledge, professional intervention and expertise (Parton, 1996, p. 7).

The emergence of those new forms of social control or regulation of human behaviour, as has been emphasised, is an inseparable element of modernity. Modernity entails a realisation that human order is neither natural nor given by God (as in traditional and premodern society), but is inherently weak and unstable. However, through the development of science and application of its findings, it can be subjected to human control (Parton, 1996, p. 7). It means, among others, that the increase of knowledge in the area of social sciences, including especially the development of so called “psy-complex”, signifies an emergence of professions having a significant influence on the development of an individual and social welfare, and, as a result, operationalising more and more sophisticated mechanisms of social regulation (Parton, 1996, p. 8). They include also social work, which is even considered as the most general among all “therapeutic professions”. Hence the nature of social work should include “representation, control and protection” (Epstein, 1999, p. 6). The discourse characteristic for modern social work is, therefore, related to the discourse of other sciences, and its function is similar to the function of other sciences. Therefore, the emergence and substantial ambiguity of modern social work were strictly related to the development of new forms of regulation accompanying the increasing sophistication and complexity of *modern* society (Parton, 1996, p. 6).

Disorganised capitalism and the crisis of welfare state

From the 1980s, we can observe the process of restructuration of capitalism, as a result of both economic crisis of the 1970s, and the development of information technologies at the same time (Castells, 1993, pp. 22–23; Castells, 2000, pp. 53–54). The information revolution created new technological conditions for the development of capitalism, as well as a new capitalist and information economy. “In the last two decades of the 20th century, new economy has emerged around the world. It is certainly capitalist. Indeed, for the first time in history, the whole planet is either capitalist or highly dependent on capitalist economy processes. But it is a new brand of capitalism, characterised by three fundamental features” (Castells, 2001, p. 52). First, it is based on generating, processing and transmitting information. Second, it is global, because a substantial part of production, consumption and trade is carried out on a global scale. It concerns also the circulation of capital, workforce, information transfer, technology, methods of production or development of global market. Third, it is based on the development of networks, where, also on a global scale, production and competition operate (Castells, 2001, p. 52).

The changes in the functioning of the globalising capitalism of the end of the 20th century included both the process of expanding its influence, and the changes in the ways of capital accumulation, i.e. the development of commodification process and organisational conditions for accumulation (Scholte, 2005, chapter 5). Capitalism becomes ‘hypercapitalism’ or ‘turbocapitalism’, where expanding its areas of influence, i.e. “spatial globalisation”, becomes a way to accelerate and intensify profit maximisation. “For the first time in the history of mankind, everything can be produced and sold everywhere in the world. In capitalists economy, it means that each component is made and each activity is conducted in such a place on the globe where it can be done in the cheapest way possible, and that the resulting products or services are sold where the prices and profits can be the highest. Profit maximisation, which is the core of capitalism, means minimising costs and maximising income” (Thurow, 1999, p. 157). It entails the process of commodification of new areas of human activity. “Capitalism gradually penetrates deeper into the areas of the social relations which before were not subjected to commodity and monetary regulations. Recent moves related to including information and knowledge in the market area as commodities, and increasing commodification of activities that before pertained to a more general domain, are a part of an unprecedented division of labour” (May, 2002, p. 41). With the development of technical and information capacities of shaping the global market, global actors (international corporations) and deterritorialization of economic activity, emerges also a pressure to deregulate and shape new institutionalised and organisational conditions of the accumulation process, in which functions “a private enterprise free from governmental regulations, not controlled by trade unions, unrestricted by a sentimental care for the fate of employees or local communities, not limited by tariff barriers or investment restrictions, and not bothered with taxes as much as possible” (Luttwak, 2000, p. 42).

The change in the way of accumulation, characteristic for capitalism under transformation, is described in various categories, such as: flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1999, chapter 9), reflexive accumulation (Lash, Urry, 2002, chapter 4 and 5) or post-Fordism (Amin, 2000). The change process that capitalism is subjected to is defined also as a transformation of organised capitalism into its “disorganised” form. The basic characteristics of disorganised capitalism that are pointed out most often include:

- the expansion of capitalist principles of production to new sectors of economy (commodification);
- the development of global market;
- the deterritorialization of economic activity;
- the development of service sector (service economy);
- the use of new information technologies, “digitalisation” of economy;
- flexibility of work (changing positions, part-time work, working from home, flexible working time, undefined rank in a corporation’s hierarchy, income dependent on performed duties, etc.);
- the development of the network (“networking”);
- the crisis of welfare state;
- the increase of individual and social risk;
- the increase of cultural pluralism; (Lash, Urry, 1993, pp. 5–7; Castells, 1993, pp. 28–32; Rifkin, 2003, chapter 7; Niesporek, 2007, pp. 104–105).

Postmodernity versus postmodernism

In relation to modernism, postmodernism is defined either as a category used for periodisation, describing in terms of time that what follows the period of modernism, or, separately from the process of periodisation, as only a definition of certain attitude, the way of thinking and perceiving the world, as an intellectual attempt of defining contemporary times (Dziamski, 1993). While discussing postmodernism, on one hand, scholars differentiate a group of civilisational phenomena, defined as “postmodernity”. It is juxtaposed with a civilisational and cultural component of modernity, which represents the processes of industrialisation, applying the human knowledge to the quest of developing technology, great discoveries of natural science leading to relativisation of the concept of time and space, urbanisation, the development of mass communication and bureaucracy. On the other hand, they differentiate a domain of cultural and intellectual phenomena, defined as “postmodernism”. It is juxtaposed with a cultural and ideological component of modernism, characterised mostly by an artistic avant-garde (Przybysz, 1993; Szkudlarek, 1993). Anthony Giddens states it directly that “the term ‘postmodernism’, if it means anything, is best kept to refer to styles or movements in literature, painting and plastic arts, and architecture. It concerns aspects of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity. (...) Post-modernity refers to something different, at least as I shall define the notion. If we are moving into the phase of post-modernity, it means that the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity towards a new

and distinct type of social order. Post-modernism, if it exists in cogent form, might express an awareness of such a transition” (Giddens, 2008, pp. 32–33).

Postmodernity signifies changes in the socio-economic reality, expressed by the dimensions of the transformation of capitalism, discussed above. Whereas, postmodernism encompasses the cultural changes related to undermining the foundations on which the programme (project) of Enlightenment was built. It is related to the collapse of the three fundamental ideas of modern thought: the faith in progress, the sense of history and the opposition subject/object (Lyotard, 1997). A particularly important role in the postmodernist thought was played by the process of deligitimisation of scientific cognition based on the criticism of fundamentalist epistemology, the criticism of the ability of science to legitimise other linguistic plays, and also the inability of science to legitimise itself.

Postmodern social work

The analysis of the challenges faced by contemporary social work, and the changes to which it is subjected, or will be subjected to in future, prepares the ground for discussion over its postmodern nature. The internally diverse discussion concerns, on one hand, an evaluation of the value of applying the postmodern perspective in theory and practice to social work. The definitive rejection of postmodern perspective (Atherton, Bolland, 2002), as a nihilist alternative to the Enlightenment origins of social work, competes with the conviction that modern social work has to be inevitably replaced by postmodern social work (Noble, 2004, p. 292).

However, the supporters of the idea that both theory and practice of social work should open to changes draw attention to the fact that there are different conditions for this process. A considerable challenge that social work will have to face—related to the transformation of capitalism discussed above—is the crisis of the welfare state. From this perspective, as an expert puts it, “the world in which social work operates today is a very different world from that in which most of us took their social work training” (Lorenz, 2005, p. 93). Those changes, according to Lorenz, are profound. Their main indicator is the criticism of the welfare state, which is typical for the neoliberal perspective. As Nigel Parton states, “the attack on modern social work can be treated as a special case of neoliberal criticism, which dominated the government in the recent years: the antagonism towards the public spending in favour of the state’s social care, an increasing pressure on individual self-help and family support, a deepening commodification of social relations, as well as a general failure of the consensus which is the basis for «welfarism»” (Parton, 1994, p. 24). Neoliberal vision assumes the existence of particular relationships between what belongs to economy and what is social. Where market plays the key regulatory role in the economy, family is the most important institution for the social sphere. Such perspective, according to Parton, does not mean a complete disappearance of the state’s responsibility, but a reorganisation of this responsibility. New boundary conditions for services and forms of resources allocation, increasingly constitute the key elements of social work (Parton, 1994, p. 24; Niesporek, 2008, p. 29).

The new approach described above gives room for the formation of what is called the “welfare pluralism”, i.e. a diversification of the sources and forms of social care, including a visible weakening of public sector in favour of non-governmental organisations and private sector. What follows is a decentralisation and a shift of the burden of social support to local communities. Finally, an increase in the importance of different forms of contracting, in both cooperation between sectors and institutions and with their clients (Parton, 1994, p. 25). The extent of the changes causes the emergence of quasi-market rules in the functioning of public care sector (welfare sector), which includes social work, the development of new forms of managerialism and mixed economy, the development of the contract culture, as well as different forms of part-time and flexible employment. It leads to a devaluation of traditional role of social work and social workers employed in the public sector. To social workers it practically means high levels of stress, a career crisis, low morale and an attitude that assumes personal survival as the only vital prize for social work practitioners (Noble, 2004, pp. 294–295; Niesporek, 2008, pp. 29–30).

Therefore, the changes of socio-economic environment call for changes within the field of social work itself. The shaping of the new postmodern socio-economic reality, as discussed above, leads to changes in social policy, the shaping of “post-welfare state”, or “workfare state” (Jessop, 2000). Therefore, postmodern social work, or “post-welfare social work”, require a preparation for other forms of practical action (Hugman, 2001). The practice of postmodern social work gradually loses its therapeutic nature. It stops working on particular cases, but becomes rather a form of organisation, management and coordination. The main skills and activities are estimating, planning, support management, negotiation, coordination, the use of information technology and implementation of legal procedures. It is not surprising, taking into account that more time is devoted to administration: to meetings, preparing reports, establishing contacts, than to a direct work with clients or, as they are called now, users or consumers. It is not to suggest, as Parton writes, that we are dealing with new forms of social work activities and skills, it is simply that they constitute the main professional activity of a social worker. In practice, social workers become family life managers of some part of society (Parton, 1994, p. 26). Such a form of professional activity fits the idea of “workfare-state”, a state that creates conditions allowing an individual to shape one’s own future in the world of “disorganised capitalism” and “post-Fordism”. However, it does not provide a full and absolute, including material, support. It is no longer a welfare state.

Social work practice has to deal with a life in the world that is devoid of safety, assurance and order, the world of unpredictable circumstances and ambivalence. In its most pragmatic dimension, a question that emerges is: how are social workers, within their basic professional role, supposed to formulate opinions on their clients’ situation in the absence of rules? (Walker, 2001, p. 31). How can they support them in shaping their own future in the world without universal standards? Hence the situation of social workers is doubly difficult. In the postmodern reality of “disorganised capitalism” and in the world of relative values and cognitive perspectives, it becomes impossible to indicate approved methods, based on a widely-accepted knowledge and

universal values. Social works does not perform anymore its function of maintaining social order.

Postmodern social work, opening itself to above-mentioned new dimensions of practical acting, is seeking, at the same time, new theoretical grounds. The rejection of the modern striving for universal standards of truth, beauty and justice deeply unsettled the intellectual and practical foundations of social work. Culturally-transcendent notions of progress and order, which facilitated the shaping of the initial social work discourse are now questioned. Such questioning has a nuanced effect on this discourse (Howe, 1994, p. 523). It leads, as Howe emphasises, to the development of new grounds for the social work discourse, based on *pluralism, participation, authority and performing (acting)*. In the world without a universal truth, the idea of common theoretical grounds of social work has to be abandoned. There is not such a theory that could be applied to all life experiences of all clients. The focus is on the differences, not on the similarities. However, since there are no universal truths, the difference cannot be something merely tolerated, as in the classical social work. It should rather become the core of postmodern social work, an answer to polymorphic, non-uniform, and non-consensual nature of significant areas of social life (Howe, 1994, p. 524). Social work practice should then be based on a full participation of clients in taking all important decisions. This is necessary in the absence of a privileged cognitive perspective and universally accepted authorities. Only full participation can ensure an unoppressive character of social work. The assumption is that the foundation for this practice is a dialog, not privileged expert knowledge. It means that experts who “define both the problem and its solutions” lose their power (Howe, 1994, p. 526). The position of social workers is no longer defined by an external to the client, professional diagnosis and the ability to propose preventive actions. It becomes more an issue of the ability to look for “common conceptual grounds”, and of common language that would create a reality shared by both the social worker and the client. The latter stops being a “case”, but rather becomes a consumer or a counterparty. Therefore, the focus of social work practice is shifted from the subject, the performer of an action, to the action itself. It departs from the essential approach to a particular case. It is not anymore about subjecting to an action (treatment), but about supervision, and the collection and evaluation of facts. It moves from profound explaining to superficial acting (Howe, 1994, p. 529). Social work practice is less and less focused on the questions ‘how’, and more on ‘who’, ‘when’ and ‘how often’. It departs from the typical for modern social work inclination towards rehabilitation and corrective actions, in favour of the identification of potential risks, protection and prevention.

Conclusion

As a result of economic and social changes, social work faces the necessity of reformulating its values and principles, which were established at its origins. It raises a question about the scope of necessary changes and the capability of social work to survive as a profession. The alternative is a division of social work into many separate

professions, each with its own expertise and practical skills (Howe, 1994, p. 530). The changes observed and anticipated in the field of social work are, or should be, an answer to the gradual changes in the functioning of capitalism, and the changes in the area of politics, as well as to the end of “great narratives” and fading of cognitive and axiological confidence. The transformation of social work, as a part of these changes, triggers the reformulation of the traditional boundaries and mutual connections of its theory and practice. It is a quest to place social work in postmodern reality and postmodern culture.

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Ku ponowoczesnej pracy socjalnej

Streszczenie

W artykule są omawiane społeczno-ekonomiczne uwarunkowania kształtowania się pracy socjalnej jako składowej nowoczesności oraz jej ukryte funkcje kontrolne. Analizie są poddawane zmiany, jakim podlega praca socjalna w epoce zdeorganizowanego kapitalizmu. Stawiane jest pytanie o przyszłość pracy socjalnej i jej związki z ponowoczesnością.

Słowa kluczowe: praca socjalna, kapitalizm, nowoczesność, ponowoczesny, Foucault