12. Social work around the world: a comparative perspective

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Introduction

Comparing is a way to increase knowledge. It is so much used in the scientific discourse as well as in the common sense, that many authors argue there is no knowledge without comparison (Fideli, 1998). In this article the comparison is employed to underline commonalities and differences characterizing social work in different countries. As many authors state, the form of social work depends on the cultural and political views of social problems and service recipients, so that the cultural and socio-political framework, the social issues, the social work education and practice become the main focuses of this paper. The awareness of different meanings of the words, including social work, in different cultures induces to prefer a phenomenological approach to the comparison (Smelser, 1982). In this way commonalities and differences can be found directly in the articles of this issue and they can be appreciated with reference to a three-dimensional perspective (international, national and local or macro, meso and micro), considered by many au-

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thors as the best way to understand the origins and the development of social work (Dominelli, 2004).

1. The origins of social work

Since its origins, at least in the Western countries, social work has been characterized by a transnational and international dimension. The influence of English social work in the United States of America (Usa) (i.e. Mary Richmond and Jane Addams) and of American social work in Europe and in a few developing countries is well known. At the beginning of the 20th century (Paris international conference, 1928), the development of the international dimension became one of the social work community's aims (Campanini, infra), more widely pursued after the Second World War (i.e. in the European reconstruction phase, Zavirsek, Lawrence, 2012). However, many critical issues emerge in connection with the international dimension and the agreement about it cannot be taken for granted (Midgley, 2001). The same word 'international' is questioned. As Healy (1995) states, it is used referring to: the skills and knowledge which are useful to work in international agencies, social work practice with immigrants and refugees, the researches and exchanges between social workers from different countries and an academic field of social work comparative study. In addition, the international dimension often points out the theoretical approaches and practices developed in the Western countries (above all the Usa and the Uk). As Payne (2005) states, many historical approaches to social work «assume that a Western, Judeo-Christian (from Jewish and Christian historically tradition) democratic framework is essential to practising social work, or understanding its origins» and neglect many other traditions (as Muslim or Hindu or indigenous cultures, now represented in the most recent social work definition, Isfw, 2014). Despite this criticism, many of the topics pointed out by Payne appear in the articles of this special issue. Many authors actually recognize the western influence on social work inception in their own countries, above all regarding social work education (i.e. Costa Rica, Italy, Romania) and the de-

velopment of the social service system, often supported by international grants (i.e. Italy, Romania, Russia)[1]. Moreover, many features, which reflect American ideology (based on capitalism, democracy and individual responsibility, Orwat and Besinger, infra), characterize several articles of this publication. Specifically, the development of social work – which arose, in many countries, between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – is connected to the processes of industrialisation and urbanization related to capitalism; to the development of democracy (and the rising of the State-nation) and to the specialization and professionalization of philanthropy, which turning point was the definition of a method (Richmond, 1917; Payne, 2005).

On the economical side, the industrialisation caused a mass-migration to towns: poverty, illiteracy, delinquency were the main issues to face. At the same time, on the political side, the rising state-nation – which was not a natural evolution of the community, but a specific economic and political project (Lorenz, 2004) – provided the context for the development of social work. The state-nation needed legitimation and social solidarity could be a means – founded on the attractiveness of belonging to a collective identity, rather than on the coercion – to achieve it. Consequently, a lot of private troubles became public issues, worthy of attention by governments, and a professional authority, with an activity based on the principles of scientific rationality, was requested to face them. Hence, both acknowledgment of social nature of the problems and the relationship between political power and science contributed to social work inception. As Soviet (and, at-large, communist regimes, Hering, 2007) experience evidences (Pervova; Lazar, infra), the recognition of the social issues has been essential for social work development: in fact, without it, social work is «not needed» (Iarskaia-Smirnova, Lyons, 2014: 431). Moreover, as many authors state (i.e. Lazar; P.V. Molina; Martinez-Roman and Mateo-Pérez; Pervova, infra), the democratic governments have provided a suitable conditions to enhance social work, while totalitarian regimes led to degrade or vanish it. In the meantime social workers contributed, for instance, to the fight «against the dictatorial order» in Brazil (Santana,

[1] The choice of the examples is based on the contents of the articles referring to the countries aforementioned.

Garcia, infra) and in Chile (P.V. Molina, infra), against apartheid in South Africa (Engelbrecht and Strydom, infra) and at the moment they are involved in the Spanish social movements (Martinez-Roman, Mateo-Pérez, infra).

Hence, social workers have been instrumental in enhancing human rights and social justice, but, in the same time, they have maintained an ambiguous relationship with the political power. As aforementioned, this relationship rooted in a research of each other legitimization and this, for social work, depended on a scientific-based practice, which ultimately justified help/control of marginalized people. The professionalization of charity lies in this perspective and its turning point was the «development of social casework as a method» (Payne, 2005: 38)[2]. Based on scientific rationality, the method had to go beyond the moral categories (used to distinguish between deserving vs undeserving people) and ensure positive outcomes, verifiable through scientific criteria. However, as Lorenz states (2004), since the origins, the scientific-rationality has been an ambiguous tool for social workers, who found difficulty in applying the abstract scientific categories to the subjectivity of people. Moreover, social issues couldn't only be considered depending on individual responsibility, but they also had to be connected to structural factors so that their overcoming required individual care as well as structural reforms. These two components, at the beginning connected to charity organization societies and settlement movements, which represents the «social action and reform branch of the profession» (Hare, 2004: 411), persist in characterizing the social work profession, at present engaged in a direct, 'clinical' service as well as in community work, policy practice or social development[3].

[2] Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* (1917) is considered the first expression of social work method.

[3] As Hare (2004) points out, the professional activities having reference to settlement movements are different names in different contexts.

2. Social issues and social policy

The analysis of the social work inception draws the attention on the importance of economic and political power in recognizing social issues and providing a useful context to the social work development. Focusing on the social issues, the multi-faceted and multidimensional nature of the problems emerges along with the differences between countries and between local contexts inside each country, irrespective of the geographical size. However, every local issue is like a piece of a complex world mosaic, which becomes more understandable interweaving the economic and socio-political dimensions at three different levels (international, national and local).

Throughout the years, many social issues highlighted by the authors (i.e. poverty, illiteracy/education, marginality, mental disease) have gained the politicians and professionals' attention and different social services systems brought about[4]. Along with them, new issues – such as the so-called new poverty, new health emergencies[5], the widespread violence, the demographical change (i.e. lower birth rate and/or aging), the inequality in distribution of wealth (which, for instance, causes mass-migration), the environmental crisis[6] and the natural disasters – are emerging more or less everywhere. Moreover, in conjunction with the actual economic crisis, the unemployment, low paid and deregulated jobs and largely the families' impoverishment are growing. It doesn't seem only a matter of a longer list, what the authors are highlighting is an increasing vulnerability, involving people totally out in

[4] As Lorenz (2004) states, four welfare systems (Scandinavian model, residual model, corporatist model and rudimentary model), which permeated social work practice, are recognizable only in Europe.

[5] Specifically the authors report health problems connected to alcohol and drug addiction and the widespread Hiv-Aids infections (i.e. Pervova; Orwat and Besinger, infra).

[6] As many authors state, the environmental degradation impacts mostly on poor people, playing an important role in promoting injustice. Environmental racism, environmental injustice are the expression coined to identify «the society's failure to ensure the equitable distribution of the Earth's resources in meeting human needs, simultaneously providing for the well-being of people and planet Earth today and in the future» (Dominelli, 2014: 339).

the past, an emphasis on individual responsibility of successes or failures, a growing inequality and a weakening of social cohesion, often connected to the affirmation of neoliberalism.

As result of the economic and welfare state crisis and under the wave of neo-liberal ideology, social policies of many countries are affected by a relevant review. In the past the state provided to balance the negative impact of capitalism or, in communist countries, it was (or considered itself) social: a different relationship among state, market, third sector and citizens was developed to reduce inequality and ensure social cohesion[7]. Now, irrespective of the Welfare system model adopted, this relationship seems to be altered: the state is contracting its social role and in the meanwhile people or families' responsibility in social provisions is increasing. It is not only a mantling of responsibility, but, as Spolander and Martin state, it is the result of a specific economic, political and cultural project, which seems to undermine the rights of citizenship, established between the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s, and, at the end, the social cohesion (Lorenz, 2004; Payne, 2005; Handler, 2005).

The first advertisement of what would happen came from the Usa: at the beginning of the '70s the worry about benefits abuse, welfare dependence on one side, the focus on reducing professional errors and increasing service recipients' compliance on the other, brought to a requirement of work programs (Handler, 2005). The request remained outstanding, but the idea of workfare was incepted. Throughout the years this idea has grown up and it has gradually substituted welfare: the separation between deserving and undeserving people, cornerstone of the Usa welfare policy, has been deeply reviewed and means-texted based provisions have been re-actualized (Handler, 2005). Now, under the emphasis of the individual responsibility, a lot of social issues are turning into individual troubles while the deregulation of capital and labour markets is causing an increasing low paid workforce who can't count on social provisions and, rather, is subjected to a disciplinary ac-

[7] For instance the state was dominant in communist countries, market plays a relevant role in capitalistic one, a mix of private and public sector in providing social services has been developed in others and the families play an essential role in southern European countries.

tion by the state. Hence poor people are involved in workfare programs (which don't always guarantee adequate means of subsistence), marginalised and often criminalised (Wacquant, 2000).

On the European side, the collapse of Soviet regime advanced liberalism which «started to promote a more aggressive competitiveness, increased the neo-liberal ideology of work, and started to re-organise state institutions (ministries, welfare and educational institutions including universities) to serve the private rather than the public sphere» (Zavirsek, Lawrence, 2012: 438).

Although in different ways, the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on social policy and social work is highlighted in all the countries represented in this special issue. The accordance to political system or to the world vision is remarked by P.V. Molina and by Orwat and Besinger; the colonization of the public sector and the transplantation into activities (such as social work), out in the past, is underlined by Engelbrecht and Strydom and by Spolander and Martin; a drastic review of welfare state, privatisation of provisions, cut of public spending, new eligibility criteria (often means-tested based) are pointed out by Pervova and Lazar; contracting resources and social services outsourcing also characterize social policy in Costa Rica; a larger consensus gained by neoliberalism and managerialism and their increasing influence on social policy are highlighted by Sicora and the consequences of international organisations pressure on social policy are stressed by Martinez-Roman and Mateo-Pérez. As Spolander and Martin argues, social workers are weak aware about the consequences of neoliberalism on the human rights and on their own work as well. «The social work profession has been slow to articulate, theorize and consider the implications for practice» (Spolander, Martin, infra).

The implications of this assumption can be understood better analysing the development of social work education and profession in the different countries represented in this special issue.

3. Social work education

A scientific, recognizable knowledge has always been a crucial tool which the professional legitimation depends on. As observed above, the

'invention' of the method is considered the cornerstone in the recognition of social work profession and discipline. What can seem a straightforward process was actually a tortuous path towards the professionalization and the construction of an autonomous body of knowledge. As highlighted by many authors, the first social work trainings – which started between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century[8], according to the scientific mindful which characterized the modern view of the world (Molina, infra)[9] – were carried out by private schools in many countries, often thanks to other professionals' initiative (i.e. lawyers, doctors, etc.) or under the pressure of international organisations[10]. At the origins, many social work courses were embodied in other academic faculties (i.e. medicine[11], economy, etc.), which were relevant to social work practice. Throughout the years an academic accredited body of knowledge was structured and today public and private universities provide three, four or five-years Bachelor of social work in all the countries represented in this special issue. Master and doctoral studies complete the social work educational offer in many countries independently on their long tradition in social work training. Despite the development of social work education, which is, for instance, evidenced by the increasing number of degree and doctoral thesis underlined in this publication, a lot of differences in educational programs still occur. Moreover the lack of recognition of social work as an academic discipline (i.e. Italy), the different development of doctoral studies, the competition with other (often more profitable) programs[12]

[8] It is interesting to underline the concurrence of starting social work training (1925 in Chile, 1928 in Italy, 1929 in Romania, 1930 in Brazil and South Africa) and the first international social work conference (Paris 1928) aforementioned.

[9] As Bauman states, at the beginning of the 20th century the scientific mindful and, above all, the confidence in scientific progress, widespread in many countries, justified research and 'experiments' aimed to improve human race (Bauman, 1991).

[10] An excursus of the beginning of social work education is available in Healy, Link (2012).

[11] For instance Latin American social work evolved from «being an auxiliary branch of medicine to having a professional identity of its own» (Queiro-Tajalli, 2012: 52).

[12] As Zavirsek and Lawrence (2012) observe, social work doctoral studies can be carried out along with other programmes (i.e. management in public health or social administration) which better fit into managerial approaches.

seems to evidence the «ambivalence towards social work as an academic discipline with its own theoretical foundations» (Zavirsek, Lawrence, 2012: 442).

This assumption introduces the ongoing question about the contents of social work discipline. At the beginning social work courses were, in many cases, influenced by Anglo-Saxon social work theories, often translated uncritically into the local context and, sometimes, mixed up with other issues (i.e. Catholic values, philanthropy, socialism, feminism, Zavirsek, Lawrence, 2012). Then the local social work development along with the evolution of national social policies have contributed to reduce the dependence on the Anglo-Saxon theoretical approaches in favour of an autonomous knowledge. At the end of the 1960s and during the '70s, under the wave of protest movements, an important break with the Anglo-Saxon social work tradition occurred in many countries. Social workers criticized their own role in the society (considered as the long arm of the institutional power) and the methods (above all casework) which underpinned it. Emphasizing their political role, social workers questioned psychological approaches and implemented sociological theories, which stressed structural or collective explanations (i.e. criticism or Marxian approach, today again recognizable in some social work literature, Santana, Garcia, infra)[13]. Influenced by the national social policy development, different approaches advanced so that specific theoretical perspectives have been built up in many countries and notions as 'indigenization' started to spread in the international social work community (Midgley, 2001).

During the '80s and the '90s, the rising neoliberalism started to influence social work theorizing so that methodological reflection was getting mixed up with other issues (i.e. managerialism; Spolander, Martin, infra) which didn't belong to social work tradition. Although the impact of neoliberalism is different among the countries represented in this special issue, the risk of an uncritical translation of neoliberal con-

[13] Different issues about European and Latin American social work offer an evidence of the break with the American social work theories (i.e. Zavirsek, Lawrence, 2012; Queiro-Tajalli, 2012). In this special issue, the articles about Brazilian and Costa Rica social work underline the reconceptualization, which characterized the Latin American social work by the mid-60s.

tents into social work discipline seems to occur in all of them (Lorenz, 2013). Moreover, as Spolander and Martin state (infra), social workers find difficulty in theorizing new issues arising from globalization and they risk to be involved in neoliberalism approaches.

This short excursus doesn't acknowledge all the specificities of social work education in different countries, but allows to introduce some common criticisms. The first is the changing features of the discipline. As the authors highlight, social work theory develops and changes along with the evolution of society, social policy, social and human sciences so that the contents of the discipline can't be established once for all. Moreover, the ongoing question about the supremacy of theory or practice (science or art), the multi-referred knowledge useful to practice and the difficulty of establishing social work boundaries doesn't facilitate the achievement of agree-upon disciplinary contents. A competence-based approach is drawn up to overcome this impasse: particularly national and international associations try to identify key competence and essential contents of social work discipline, as, for instance, Orwat and Besinger underline (infra).

Despite these efforts the recognition of social work discipline (as a specific academic field) has not been taken for granted in all the countries represented in this special issue yet.

4. Social work profession

«Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being» (Isfw, 2014).

Social work is a relatively young profession and, as it often happens to young professions, it suffers from a controversial recognition, due to its ambiguous nature, the uncertain boundaries of its activities, the multidisciplinary base of its knowledge, a relative dependence from social

policy (and political power) along with an increasing scepticism, which affects all professional expertise. Moreover, the gender characterization and, in many countries, the social workers' employment in public sector[14] haven't facilitated the affirmation of social work in the arena of helping professions.

As well-known, the professional status of social work was questioned (and at the end denied) by Flexner (1915), who underlined the lack of theoretical knowledge and scientific method (Orwat and Besinger, infra), and since then it has been largely debated without achieving an ultimate solution. If social work can be considered a fully developed profession, a semi-profession, a professional group, a social profession (which embraces social workers and social pedagogues) is currently an open question (Hare, 2004) which reflects the difficulty in drawing the boundaries of this changing profession (Dominelli, 2004). In this context, five indicators will be useful to evidence the status of social work recognition in different countries: professional education, public recognition (licensing or registration required to work as social worker), ethical standards (code of ethics), professional organisation and professional standing (referred to field of work, remuneration, etc.)[15].

As observed above, the first training in social work began, in several countries represented in this special issues, approximately between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. However this occurrence neither implied a recognition of an academic accrediting body ok knowledge, which happened later also in the countries with a longer tradition in social work (i.e. in 1952 in the Usa, Orwat and Besinger, infra), nor ensured a structured professional entity, as evidenced by controversial accidents involving social work in many countries. Now social work education takes place at university in all the countries, but it means neither an equal development of educational programs nor the same recognition of social work as an academic discipline. Despite

[14] The employment at public organizations is considered a critical issue for two reasons: a loss of professional authority, due to be situated in a hierarchical scale, and the weakness in enhancing social work against a plethora of public servants' interests.

[15] Referring to the attributes which allow to distinguish professions from the other occupations, all these indicators appear in a comparative study about the professionalization of social work (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008).

these differences, theoretical and practical trainings seem to be interwoven in social work education: almost all social work trainings actually provide for field education, even if it can change in order to features, lasting and skills to be acquired.

The license or the registration to work as social worker is required in several countries and sometimes it is also requested to students during their social work education (i.e. South Africa). The regulated access to the profession, in its different forms, seems to have been present since the '50s-60s in a few Latin American countries (i.e. Chile, 1955, Costa Rica, 1967); it appeared later in Italy (1993), where, despite its history, social work profession was recognized only in 1987, in Spain (at the end of the '90s) and more recently in Romania (2005). Though this public recognition reduces, in many cases, the abusive practice, it doesn't ensure the monopoly over the social work fields of practice, as remarked, for instance, about the ex-communist countries, where professional social workers and a not-qualified workforce, also called social worker, coexist (Lazar, infra). Moreover, it's questionable if license or registration can enhance the public image of social work as well as it can reinforce the common professional identity. As the authors observe, different local social issues and policies have contributed to create a heterogeneous professional group (with different cultures, experiences and problems to face), also in the same country, so that referring to professional community as a unitary entity is quite awkward. Further, although the distinctive features of social work are increasing in interest, this heterogeneity doesn't help to develop a common belonging and identity, as the difficulty of sharing a social work definition in the Usa evidences.

Despite this criticism, the multiple identities of social work seem to settle on sharing a core value, which can refer to human rights and social justice (Hare, 2004), considered by some authors (i.e. Healy, 2008; Hodge, 2010) as unifying themes of social work practice and education and/or criteria in selecting human and social sciences approaches useful to social work practice (Dal Pra, 1985)[16]. Hence, the attention to ethical

[16] Particularly Italian social work literature points out the function of values in discriminating social science approaches, which can be embodied in social work knowledge (Dal Pra, 1985).

standards, evidenced by the first approval of ethical codes and the following reviews, is not surprising. The first social work codes of ethics were enacted between the '60s (Usa) and '70s (Uk) and they were subjected to review throughout the years until achieving the contemporary version, approved in 2008 in the Usa and in 2012 in the Uk. A similar process interested the code of ethics of the other countries[17], irrespective of the time of their first approval, so that all the actual codes of ethics turned out enacted between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. As many authors state (Reamer, 2014), despite the past, the contemporary codes of ethics are marked by a close attention to social workers' responsibilities (addressed to clients, colleagues, practice settings, professional community, broader society), which seem to reflect new trends not only of social work, but, above all, of social policy.

Moreover, an important role in achieving a common professional identity and enhancing social work knowledge and skills is also played by national and international organisations of professionals and social work schools[18]. As highlighted in this special issue, the national associations of social work schools have played a propulsive/active role in promoting the professional recognitions, in enhancing social work knowledge and skills and in developing a critical thought (i.e. Latin American countries). At the same time several national professional organisations have contributed to identify key competences of social work (i.e. Nasw) and essential contents of social work education. Besides enhancing social work profession and knowledge, international organisations are playing a relevant role in pursuing common identity and common goals: the world social work day and global agenda are the most important examples of it (Campanini, infra).

Despite the professionalization process and the actions pursuing more visibility and incisiveness of social work, the professional standings are still questionable, as evidenced not only by the field of work

[17] For instance, the Italian code of ethics was enacted in 1998, reviewed in 2002 and again in 2009.

[18] A lot of national organisation are affiliated to international ones: a cross-national network, denser in a few areas of the world, is developing, reinforcing the transnational and international dimension of social work.

and remuneration, but also by the de-professionalization process which takes place in many countries. The employment of social work workforce (and its wage) reflects the differences of social policies and social service systems not only among countries, but also among the regions in the same country. Where the private sector is well developed (i.e. the Usa), it absorbs the highest percentage of social work workforce and the social workers' income is higher than, for instance, the civil servants' one. Where social provisions are guaranteed by the public sector, social workers are easily employed as public servants, while, social work workforce can be employed both in the public sector and in no profit organisations where a mix of them provides social services[19].

Despite the location of social work training in the higher education system, the rate of social workers employed as university professors and/or researchers remains low, also in the countries with a longer social work tradition[20].

Another indicator of the professional recognition may be the ratio of social workers per people or the caseload. The Usa boast the widest social workers community (310,000 licensed social workers) with a ratio of 101 social workers per 100,000 people (Orwat and Besinger, infra); Brazilian social workers represent the second community with 120,000 registered professionals per about 200 million people (Santana, Garcia, infra). Coherently with geographic and demographic differences, the other social workers communities are smaller: about 10,000 social workers in Chile, 1,800 in Costa Rica, about 40,000 in Italy, 16,740 in South Africa, but, it has to be underlined, not all of them are employed in social services. As Engelbrecht and Strydom highlight, only 9,000 South African professionals are employed as social workers and their caseloads exceed 300 and more national standard (1 social worker per 60 cases). Moreover, as the authors underline, the standard can be different among regions of the same country: predictable in the largest countries (i.e. Usa, Brazil, Russia), the different standards also characterize the smallest ones (i.e. Romania, Italy, etc.), highlighting a gap

[19] For instance in South Africa 40% of social workers are employed in the public sector and the rest in Ngos.

[20] For instance, despite the social workers' wide community, only 9% of professionals spend time in research in the Usa (Orwat and Besinger, infra).

which usually penalizes the poorest regions (as witnessed by Italian regional standards, Sicora, infra)[21].

5. Challenges and perspectives

The professionalization process, which has engaged social workers in all the countries, has faced changing fortune: after an uncertain inception, social work ran up in conjunction with the development of capitalism and welfare state regimes. During this golden age, which occurred in the countries represented in this issue in different times, a lot of steps towards fully professional recognition have been done. Yet, nowadays social work seems to be at risk of involution or, even worst, extinction in connection to an emerging economic and political project, which deeply questions the relationship between state and citizens and, ultimately, the commitment of social work. Under the wave of neoliberalism and managerialism social work seems to be affected by an increasing process of de-professionalization: fragmented and standardized interventions, contracted resources, widespread control on the professionals' work undermine the professional autonomy and authority, while, on the other side, a loss of wage makes social workers share the same troubles as the people they serve. Moreover, the increasing deregulated work and unemployment have also involved social workers in many countries, bringing professionals to look for a job abroad or in other domains (i.e. Lazar, infra). In the meantime large sectors of social work activities seem to be no longer in use or be practiced by an alternative – and often less qualified – workforce. In addiction the social work training, often located at the higher education system, seems to be affected by an uncertain recognition (above all about the autonomous body of knowledge) and outclassed by more profitable educational programs. In other words, while the state changes its role and «alters the conditions of solidarity from collective-ensured to individually-earned» (Lorenz, 2004: 20), social work seems to be in danger of losing the support (de-legitimation) of both institutions and citizens.

[21] For instance in the Northern Italian regions the ratio of social workers per people is fixed at 1 per 2000 (referring only to professionals employed at the municipalities).

As Spolander and Martin underline, social workers seem to have a weak awareness of the implications of the globalization on their own work: due to the difficulties in theorizing and practicing, they risk to translate uncritically management ideology into their own professional practice.

In contrast to this situation, a few alternatives are emerging, sometimes as denounces or ideological debates, sometimes as a concrete effort of theorizing and practicing. Many authors actually suggest a re-conceptualization of social work along with a re-politicization of its role (Ioakimidis, Cruz Santos, Martinez Herrero, 2014). Despite the past, this advocated political role seems to be characterized by more pragmatic features, which are rooted in promotion of human rights and social justice (Ioakimidis, Cruz Santos, Martinez Herrero, 2014; Lombard, Twikirize, 2014) and widely pursue the dialogue among different social actors. In this perspective «the 'in-between space'» (Lorenz, 2004: 11) occupied by social work is not criticized, as happened in the past, but emphasized as a place where new forms of solidarity can shape. Promoting the dialogue between different social actors (i.e. institutions, Ngos, citizens) in the «in-between space», social workers can re-appropriate their constitutive mediation role, reinforce their identity and «external influence» (Wiess-Gal, Welbourne, 2008: 289) and enhance – through the democratic debate – the social solidarity along with the citizenship rights.

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