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Lohrenscheit | Schmelz | Schmitt | Straub [Eds.]

International Social Work and Social Movements

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Claudia Lohrenscheit | Andrea Schmelz
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I. Introduction

I.1 Utopias of a Good Life for All People: International Social Work and Social Movements

Claudia Lohrenscheit, Andrea Schmelz, Caroline Schmitt & Ute Straub

1. Introduction

This textbook aims to familiarise students with the basic concepts of international social work and to provide an insight into the interconnections between international social work and social movements. The background to this are the worsening global inequalities and the question which tasks a social work that thinks beyond national borders[1] has with a view to war, violence and flight, the climate crisis, sexism, racism and populism, discrimination and marginalisation of people with disabilities, LGTBIQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Bi, Intersex, Queer+) or BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) and how it can work with social movements.

The continuing reports of war and violence in the world, natural disasters or the Covid 19 pandemic and the destruction of planet Earth illustrate the complex challenges of our time. They leave many people with little hope for the future and sometimes lead to helplessness or the feeling that they can achieve little. Social movements refuse to give in to resignation. They stand for the politics of hope and have always fought for a transformation of inequality. In doing so, they are oriented towards real utopias and create these.

Social work is about acting in the interest of the addressees, supporting them in the face of problems and the loss of security in a world that has become confusing. This is linked to the task of building and helping to shape communities that strengthen the ability to act, creating sustainable support networks, and advocating for social change, human rights, inclusion, participation, equality, justice, equity and solidarity. The mission of social work in a global world is not limited to nation states. It neither stops at different origins or other diversity dimensions such as our sexual identity, our world view, or different physical, psychological or neuro-diverse conditions. Social work is there for all people, especially for those who are pushed to the margins of society. In our interconnected world, it must necessarily be internationally oriented. This textbook wants to broaden the scope even more and thinks beyond the human being to include the planet earth in social work – a perspective that is becoming increasingly important in the face of the climate crisis and makes clear that human beings should not dominate above nature and are not rulers over it but part of it.

1 The term "social work" in this volume includes both social work and social pedagogy degree programmes. The term "social workers" also refers to social work and social pedagogy professionals.

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When we think about who draws attention to the massive challenges in our world, such as the extinction of species, the violation of human rights in the accommodation of refugees, or femicides, i.e. the murder of girls and women because of their gender – to name just a few examples –, it is not always social work that first comes to mind. It is often social movements that denounce social ills and speak up when human rights are violated and the planet is destroyed. Social work can therefore learn from the "fire" of social movements (Harms 2015) to intersectionally stand up for human rights and socio-ecological justice as tangible utopias with creative and rebellious forms of protest. For social work, alliances with international protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, Solidarity Cities, Friday for Future or with indigenous activists can become places of solidarity and resistance.

2 Social movements as a yardstick

Social movements are fluid associations of people that arise when a need for social action becomes apparent in the eyes of those involved. Sociologist Friedhelm Neidhardt (1985) writes that social movements function in their respective social contexts as "disruptive events" that question what is supposedly taken for granted. They intervene in social routines with the aim of changing them. For this, they need to be perceived publicly. They need an approval among the population that goes beyond the movement, a certain form of acceptance, so that they can actually achieve their goals. If social movements reach their goal or if the intervention is difficult and even violently crushed, they can sometimes disappear, but they can also be revived.

The educationalist Susanne Maurer (2019: 367) highlights the difficulty of clearly defining and typifying social movements – characteristics that apply to one movement may be irrelevant to other social movements. Accordingly, it can be stated that one feature of social movements is precisely their heterogeneity. Nevertheless, loose cornerstones can be formulated: for example, the founding dates and memberships of social movements are less clear than those of highly formalised associations. Procedures and processes are characterised by a higher degree of fluidity. Above all, social movements are about reacting to a certain matter, a certain social condition, setting themselves apart from it and developing alternative ways of seeing and dealing with it. Roth and Rucht (2002: 297) point out as a special feature of social movements the distinction from short-term initiatives, on the one hand, but also the difference from more formalised contexts, on the other hand. One feature of social movements is a certain duration and permanence, which potentially enables a collective identity. In the authors' eyes, a social movement is only a social movement as long as it is not transformed into formalised structures such as a party, a club, or an association.

Alliance partnerships between social work and social movements are not yet a matter of course, even at the international level, although both share fundamental commonalities. As intersections of social work and social movements, Sabine Stövesand identifies in particular common core principles such as empowerment, participation, anti-discrimination, democratisation, participation, and self-deter-

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mination (Stövesand 2014: 35). However, the International Federation of Social Workers had to accept justified criticism that its global action plan, the Global Agenda, lacked interaction with social movements. Instead, the focus is on international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), or the European Union (EU) instead of targeted alliances with globalisation-critical social movements and civil society actions (such as the Occupy Movement, Earth Day, World Day for Social Justice), which deal with the actual causes of global inequality in a neoliberal world order (Gray/Webb 2014). Social work can learn from social movements to direct its perspective towards socio-ecological and intersectional real utopias of social change and to strengthen the imagination that another world is possible.

3. Spaces of possibility, gap-fillers and "shrinking spaces". Social movements as part of civil society

Social movements are considered part of civil society. The term civil society has a long tradition (Zimmer 2021). In ancient Greece, it was used to describe the free coexistence of citizens in the political community – but it should be noted that enslaved people and women were excluded from this. In the further course of history, the understanding differentiated. According to Geissel and Freise (2015), general welfare and action-related definitions can be distinguished from interest- and area-related definitions. Definitions related to the general good and action understand civil society as a bundle of civil modes of action that are, for example, oriented towards the common good and are non-violent. Interest- and sector-related definitions mean by civil society the area between the state, the market, and the private sphere. This area is sometimes also described as the third sector and used synonymously with the term "non-profit sector".

The textbook focuses on the potentials that social movements within civil society open up. It is an impressive testimony to how many people around the world are involved in social movements and civil society organisations. Civil society is more alive than ever – this is our thesis and observation! Particularly the recent developments of the climate protests of Fridays for Future, the mass movements against racism and sexism, and the uprising against the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine are proof of the multiple solidarity-based engagement of groups and individuals, as can be seen, for example, in the reception, support, and accompaniment of refugees from Ukraine. However, this positive results cannot and should not hide the sometimes contradictory developments. For example, struggles for emancipation have always met with strong resistance and hostility (Schutzbach 2021: 112) and have to develop enormous forces to achieve their goals, if this is possible at all. On the one hand, civil society groups and social movements take on tasks that should actually be handled by state organisations. These forms of "substitute action" are described in the most recent academic debate as collaborations (Terkessides 2015); this means that civil society cooperation and solidarity-based engagement step in wherever the state withdraws or provides services too late, in insufficient quantities or not at all. On the other hand, international scientific and human rights organisations have been analysing

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shrinking (action) spaces of civil society for years. All over the world, social movements and civil society actors have less and less space for manoeuvre. The current "Atlas of Civil Society" published in German by Brot für die Welt e.V. (2022)[2] shows that today only three percent of the world's population live in countries with open civil societies, while two thirds live in authoritarian countries.

The 194 states examined are divided into five categories (open, impaired, restricted, repressed, closed). Oppression and violence can be found on all continents and in many countries and cities: in Brussels as well as in Budapest, in repressive states as well as in (still) democratic states. In concrete terms, this means that social spaces beyond the state, the private sphere, and the economy are being touched – spaces in which associations, social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but also churches, religious communities, and foundations etc. operate. Democratic states based on the rule of law guarantee freedom of assembly and association as the basis of a free civil society; authoritarian states restrict them or ban them altogether. But "if the space for action, also known as civic space, is eroded by repression or violence, the central social corrections are lost. Progressive social change is replaced by creeping disenfranchisement. Social movements can exert less and less political pressure, powerful people cannot be held accountable" (Jakob 2022: 12, translation by the authors). As a result, critical reporting is hardly possible any more, governments are no longer democratically controlled and, at worst, become corrupt and authoritarian. Inequality, poverty, and violence increase. "When protests are no longer possible, mismanagement and corruption flourish. (…) The repression here is as varied as it is rampant. It can be deadly, even when people are only demanding things that are taken for granted" (ibid.: 12–13, translation by the authors). In 2022, the NGO Front Line Defenders documented almost 800 human rights defenders in acute danger, including arbitrary arrests, killings and attempted killings, enforced disappearances, torture practices, and sexual violence.[3]

Germany is currently still one of the three percent of states that are characterised as "open". But here, too, sea rescuers are not only criminalised by populist parties and climate protectors are sometimes stigmatised as terrorists. As one of the strongest leading countries in the European Union, the failure to take effective political steps against the dismantling of democratic rights at the EU's external borders and in the countries bordering the Mediterranean must also be criticised. Italy and Austria were downgraded from "open" to "impaired". The reasons for this include election victories of the right-wing parties Lega and FPÖ as well as political measures that restrict the degree of freedom of civil society in both countries.

2 The original "State of Civil Society Report" has been developed and published once a year for more than ten years by the South African NGO Civicus. Civicus, based in Johannesburg, is a global alliance of civil society organisations with over 10,000 members worldwide (see: https://civicus.org/ (retrieved at 28.02.2024).

3 See: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/violations (retrieved at 28.02.2024); similar data and figures can also be found at Amnesty International or Reporters Without Borders with regard to specific professional groups such as journalists.

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4. Making the conditions dance

In this textbook, together with all the authors, we take up the ambivalence of social movements with their practices and effectiveness and their simultaneous limitation, criminalisation, and destruction. Social movements want to move society and change current social conditions. Symbolically for the inspiration that emanates from social movements, we, the editors, refer to the image of dance at various points in this textbook.

We understand dance both literally and as a metaphor for movement, because, after all, social movements are at the centre of this volume. Moreover, dance, just like the music associated with dance, is a universal language that can be understood everywhere and intuitively, that connects people, even across borders and continents, and that can create new imaginaries and utopias. According to Lutz (2018: 41, translation by the authors), "dancing thoughts and people who give the round dance its own melody" are needed to make social conditions dance.

There are many dancing thoughts and melodies in this volume. The very concrete examples range from queer feminism to gender justice (cf. Lohrenscheit's chapters in this volume). Among others, the feminist collective Las Tesis from Chile is presented, which inspired feminist social movements internationally with its performance "Un violador en tu camino" (a rapist on your way). This choreography criticises patriarchal violence as a combination of domestic and state, individual and structural violence. The text states, among other things: "It was not my fault where I was or what I wore; the rapist is you." The dance/performance was performed in public places in numerous cities in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and on the African continent, and Las Tesis organised accompanying workshops to learn the choreography, but also to advance the discussion of sexism and violence against women, for example in 2020 and 2022 in Berlin under the title "Together we burn the fear".[4] The creative and resistant potential of dance, performance, and movement is not a new development. Not without reason do we know numerous historical examples of dance bans. For example, the tango was banned in Argentina at the time of the dictatorship, or swing in fascist Nazi Germany. Such anti-dance demonstrations of power can be traced back to the Middle Ages, where dancing women were persecuted as witches for allegedly performing satanic dances. "Strike. Dance. Rise!" is still an appeal that moves women* and FLINTA[5] in particular today. Social movement researcher Kristina Stein-Hinrichsen shows this in her current publication "Tanzen als Widerstand" (Dancing as Resistance) (2022), using the example of "One Billion Rising", among others. This choreographic intervention in public space is a worldwide campaign against violence towards girls and women, originally initiated by the New York artist Eve

4 The events were organised in cooperation between the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the HAU – Hebbel am Ufer theatre; see: https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/archiv/zusammen-verbrennen-wir-die-angst (retrieved at 28.02.2024).

5 FLINTA stands for: Women, Lesbians, Inter, Non-binary, Trans and Agender people (cf. Schutzbach 2021: 16).

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