The Return of the Political in Social Work¹

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This paper follows on from our article ‘Social Work as Art Revisited’ published in the International Journal of Social Welfare, 17(2). It extends and deepens the discussion of social work which we cast as an ‘art in the service of a politics of liberation’ (Gray and Webb, 2008: 182) as opposed to, say, a low-level administrative function in the service of calculating reason. In so doing, it takes us further into the political domain. Thus in this paper, we argue for a ‘return to the political in social work’ and contend that any reconfiguration of the politics of social work as a transformative practice is best conceived as post-Marxist, rather than postmodern. We thus attempt to lay the ground and to identify the parameters for some of the more general concerns that form part of this sort of critical endeavour in social work. More broadly than with our original considerations with art in the work of the social, we pay attention to the type of politics for social work as an element of the transformative agenda. We are very much encouraged by the prospect of the International Journal of Social Welfare staging an opening to seriously engage with some of the critical challenges that face social work during these times of political uncertainty. We are grateful for the invitation to explore the issues we raised in ‘Social Work as

Art Revisited’ further with the intention of engaging others to reconsider what a ‘Return of the Political in Social Work’ might entail.

The parameters of social work as art

In ‘Social Work as Art Revisited’, we engaged a range of disciplinary sources ‘outside of social work’, located in an authoritative field of inquiry, primarily that of phenomenology. Some might wonder why we found it necessary to cast our net so wide in seeking to address social work as art. Some might consider this a trivial charge, but there is a sober intent implicit within it. We should note from the outset that our paper was heuristic and experimental rather than prescriptive. Social work as art, as such, denotes only a very general set of aesthetic representation; it is indicative of what Kant called an ‘Idea’. In particular, the experiment highlighted the necessity of reintroducing the subject of social work as art, i.e., the universal and radical conception, into the contemporary situation. For us the conception of art in the work of the social is an ontological problem which demands a reconciliation of ontology with a new doctrine of the subject - as worker or as client. Modern philosophy has well and truly demolished the old-fashioned, but still dominant ‘subject of social work’ that is articulated in reflective diaries, case notes and supervision sessions. In other words, philosophy has proven that the subject can no longer be theorised as a self-identical substance that underlies change, or as the product of reflection, nor the correlate of an object. Implicitly, the basic question of our paper is what is the subject of social work? We followed a fairly straightforward path in addressing this that marked and situated our analysis. Our critique built upon some well-established traditions in aesthetic theory, especially those developed by the likes of Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, who all view art and aesthetic experience as a medium for the dissolution of calculated reason, an experientially enacted critique of what we referred to as
productionist and instrumental rationality. For us, phenomenology matters precisely because it is better suited than any other perspective to explore the consequences of calculative reason through its aesthetic engagement with art. Moreover, we noted that Heidegger’s phenomenology of art is radically different from the two dominant perspectives of art which have found their way into the social work literature. Most importantly, in constructing a phenomenological ontology, we wished to avoid the subjective closure inherent in the psychologism of social work as art. Bourgeois psychologism does not see the beautiful as a manifestation of the ontology of being but rather construes it as a product of experiential reasoning. We pointed to art as an intrinsic tension that connects to an agonistics of the work of the social, to art as a production, not a state or psychological disposition. For us aesthetic expression is much less a psychological endeavour than an ontological one; with Heidegger an art work unconceals a condition of Being. With this perspective, art is not only autonomous, following its own law, different from calculative reason, but sovereign: it subverts the rule of this narrow and one-dimensional form of reason. We suggested that the distinctiveness - the uniqueness of art for the work of the social - is that it sets itself apart; it separates off. According to our interpretation, art brings to bear potentialities, capabilities and insights for the social worker, which cut through the deadening vicissitudes of calculative reason to offer the pregnant possibility of being incorporated into social relations between practitioner and client.

On this view, the intensification of the lived relation that art promises as truth retains its purity through an indifference to calculative reason and productionist regimes. Truth is a militant part of the ‘given-ness’ of experience, and proceeds directly from within the event as a singular figure of rupture. To repeat, with art, truth is a production not a state or an accumulative effect. We were not so much asserting the superiority of one mode of experience over another, although
this logically follows and is implicit in the position we take, but rather, the irreducibility of the intense character of the lived experience of art and the aesthetic revelation associated with it. Like Heidegger and Adorno, we sought to bring to bear for social work the *processuality* of an intense aesthetic moment against the dominant order of calculative reason. This is a non-conceptual and non-discursive rationality that might be an alternative to a dominating systematising rationality that is the counterpart of an administered world. We wished to imagine social work in the service of art, rather than in the service of a particular variant of administrative science, or what Max Weber so aptly described as the ‘iron cage of reason’.

**Confusing ontology with epistemology**

Many in social work confuse ontology with epistemology (see, e.g., Healy, 2008). The trouble arises from asserting a necessary connection between what we do or can know, *and* what is. Many postmodernists in social work present an argument that falls within the broad remit of the former – epistemology - and is derived from a ‘way of *knowing* in the world’ with all its trappings that assist in making the case for either this or that type of knowing for social work, that is, they present an epistemological account. However, we are concerned only and fundamentally with an ontological argument, that is, one derived from ‘a way of *being* in the world’. We stressed this, stating that ‘we substitute a subjectivist reading of social work as art with an ontological analysis drawing on Heidegger’s phenomenology’ (Gray and Webb, 2008: 182). A *perspective* on the world yields epistemology - it reveals something about *how we know* what we (think we) know about the world. It does not reveal the *nature* of the world, which is the remit of ontology. The ‘ways of knowing’ perspective can talk about viewing the world from two complementary perspectives, e.g., art and – the much-denigrated - science, but it cannot talk about *the nature of the social world in itself* as it inheres with social work. Moreover, in order to
engage with the way art is conceived in our paper, one needs to establish an \textit{ontological} distinction between say art and science, understanding and evidence, to get to the root of our claims. Otherwise we risk an analytical impasse and simply talk past each other and at different levels. For us there is much more about social work as art and the way it can be conceived as a radical agonistics that is not simply dependent on forms of knowledge or caused by knowledge. We asked what kind of art inheres in \textit{the work} of the social and how this might be possible. Naturally art would not exist if it did not have an epistemological function, but it is still crucial to consider what the nature of art for social work might look like and ask, in general, what the conditions for its existence might be. Thus on two counts we are not ‘defining art in social work in opposition to scientific knowledge’ (Healy, 2008: 194): First we are not conceiving of the art of social work as knowledge, and secondly, we are not setting art up against science as knowledge. These points are important ones to make when criticisms are pinned entirely on various presuppositions based on a theory of knowledge. Alternatively, and implicit in our argument is the assumption that any headway in epistemology always remains contingent upon ontology. This is our starting point and why it is so important not to overlook this basic presupposition of casting social work as art. Therefore, any epistemological claims about such considerations as our knowledge base are always secondary to our primary concern of establishing a worldview based on the foregrounding of being-as-art in \textit{the work} of the social.

For most art is nothing more than a particular object proposed to the dispositions of knowledge, albeit dressed up as ‘creative’ knowledge, but still little more than a regional or parochial disposition of the generic activity of social work practice. Unless we are able to ground our doubling of art against science, understanding against evidence and so forth, as epistemological claims, in an ontological complementarity which \textit{distinguishes} being from
knowing, we run the risk of unwittingly committing ‘reductionism all over again’, despite our best intentions. In short, we run the risk of saying one form of knowledge is better than another or, worse still, that they all forms of knowledge are simply equivalent, each having value in its own right. It strikes us that this worrying tendency in social work is entirely heisted on us by fashionable postmodernist trends. With this trend, and its equally dubious ally social constructivism, it is usual either to deny that reality exists apart from our knowledge of it (usually understood in terms of discursive regimes or linguistic representations) or to deny that our knowledge in any way ‘reflects’ the world as it exists in and of itself. For us this is a dead end in thinking about social work and one that offers no solutions to the difficult issues or hopes about the transformative possibilities of social work, about what should be.

A social work out of context

Whether the art of social work can be found in the everyday practices of social work and whether art can be situated in the places where ‘social work knowledge and identities is produced’ (Healy, 2008: 195), presents an interesting and challenging issue for us. The short answer is both affirmative and negative. Social workers do not have to look outside their everyday practices for art; indeed, it was our claim that art as the work of the social inheres in all practice contexts and social relations. This claim about the ‘always-already-ness’ of social work as art is based on the premise that social workers can always de-differentiate or self-dissociate from normative regimes, that is, there is no necessary link between the role they perform or position they occupy and who they are. For instance, no social worker is defined by the forms of calculative necessity to which they are subjected. But we also claimed, more strongly, that certain types of practice context, e.g., proceduralist task-centered, militate against the possibility of an art for social work. As we have stated above, it was our contention that much of social work is increasingly in the
service of calculative reason which represents the colonisation of the professional task and identity of the social worker. Day-to-day practice is increasingly micromanaged, requiring a social work in which professional values are thinned and atomised, with a risk management and performance culture reigning supreme (Webb, 2006).

We did not intend to convey a unilateralist perspective for social work by insisting that only one form of practice was admissible on the basis of our speculative claims. It is self-evident that social workers will combine any number of perspectives, approaches or directions in their interventions. It is also inevitable that they will wish to justify their decisions on the basis of certain types of evidence. We also happily accept that social workers ‘are involved in diverse range of practice contexts and activities’ (Healy, 2008: 195). Our intention was not to suggest that: (i) only ‘social work as art’ will suffice; (ii) to reduce social work to art; or (iii) that our conception of the art of the work of the social is somehow superior to other conceptions, although we truly believe it is. Rather our concern was to set this stance of social work as art against prevailing tendencies and dominant preoccupations: Art as counterpoint and defiance. This works on two related fronts, the discursive and the practical: First, the very act of writing about social work as art is an event that defies the logic of calculating reason and cannot, therefore, be captured by it; the net effect of this is to specify that things do not need to be the way they are. The art of social work makes apparent some undecidability in the prevailing dominant order, and does so in such a way that forces us to decide on it. Put another way, it begs the question are you for us or against us? Secondly, the radical potential of art as the work of the social is that in the eyes of the calculating reasoner, it is inoperative, redundant, that is, under the instrumentalist regime, it is worklessness. The managers and bureaucrats regard such art as worklessness in the sense that the social worker is doing everything rather than confining oneself
to one’s proper work or task. Social work as art cannot be specified in advance; it is not subject to means-end rationality, and cannot be laid down as tasks within the categories of the situation. We noted that for Badiou situations are always partial, and experience and context cannot be made separate in this conception of art. To repeat:

… the composition of art as work comprises talents, actions and qualities of the social worker, which are indistinguishable from the process and the context – the relationship within which the work happens, the situation in which it is imbedded, personal, professional and social expectations (Gray and Webb, 2008: 192).

Because the art’s work in social work is always partial, it extends beyond the formal and normative requirements of calculative regimes. Moreover, by establishing itself in the open, art radically subtracts from these closed normative contexts and, in doing so, renders visible that which is concealed, made invisible or non-existent by State ideology. With this conception, we deliberately set out to cause some tension and, if there were anything calculated about what we wrote, it was conceived in terms of a disruption. Here we wished to push modern social work back towards some of its original meanings and intent - as political. In this respect we are close to what Jacques Ranciere (2007) has in mind when he defines politics as ‘the organization of dissent’. ‘Social work as art’ is only one such form of dissent. In setting up the speculative thesis of the art of the work of the social, our underlying rationale was to pose the question to the readership whether or not they accept the logic of the existing dominant order of calculative reason as the only viable logic for social work practice?

A return to the political

Moving in this terrain of the political relates to our aspirations for social work to experience, what Badiou refers to as a collective political moment of truth that endures and shines forth. We
adverted to Alain Badiou’s radical theorising of unity over diversity, sameness over difference precisely to displace postmodernist preoccupations with diversity and difference and to show them up for what they are as a sham and little more than facile mouthpieces of liberal capitalism. Badiou wants a *return to the same*, to equality and to an essentialist conception of ‘the good life’. He contends that conceptions of subjectivity that spring from the various forms of an ethics of the Other - as framed in human rights discourses on diversity and difference - rest on an *a priori* designation of the individual as victim. Against the tide of postmodernism, we propose that social work may want to consider following his lead on these matters. It is our contention that the new politics of a transformative social work will be post-Marxist and not postmodern.

How might social work constitute a politics in the current situation? Here again we feel there are good lessons to be learnt from Badiou. He is a keen observer of political history and under no illusion that the type of emancipatory politics required for the present age is very different from classical revolutionary politics (the worker’s movement, mass democracy and class politics dictated by the Party) of previous eras: ‘The (19th-century) movement and the (20th-century) party were specific modes of the communist hypothesis; it is no longer possible to return to them’ (Badiou, 2008: 37). Badiou also recognises that, in the current era, transformative politics are likely to be subdued during an interval dominated by conservative and neoliberal agendas of high capital. As an economic theory, neoliberalism enshrines capital as the sovereign force in the dominant order. The primary agencies it acknowledges explicitly are property-owning individuals, who are ‘free’ to engage in a constant and competitive race for improvement, with the market as sole regulator of the quest (Van Der Pijl, 2006). Badiou also notes that, whilst communist and socialist states made real progressive strides in such fields as
public health and education, the mechanism of the Party-State developed into new forms of authoritarianism:

... after the negative experiences of the ‘socialist’ states and the ambiguous lessons of the Cultural Revolution and May 68, our task is to bring the communist hypothesis into existence in another mode, to help it emerge within new forms of political experience. This is why our work is so complicated, so experimental (Badiou, 2008: 37).

Badiou wants to construct a politics that is not in the ‘service of wealth’ and one that involves a new relation between the political – social - movement and the level of the ideological. During the present reactionary era, a new radical leftist politics must concentrate on the struggle for ideas that was prefigured in the May 1968 notion of a ‘revolution of mind’. For Badiou the goal is simple: ‘We need to re-install the communist hypothesis – the proposition that the subordination of labour to the dominant class is not inevitable – within the ideological sphere’ (Badiou, 2008: 37). The forces of ‘State democratic’ opposition to this goal are formidable. He describes the recent Sarkozy victory in the French elections as affirming the absence of any genuine emancipatory program within the electoral system and the way in which this democratic system excludes any dissenting political will. Badiou recognises that the electoral process as embodied in the State form is essentially an apolitical procedure described as ‘capitoparlamentarianism’ (Badiou, 2008: 31). We accept that it is an open question, too, how much today’s dominant neoliberal order is genuinely vulnerable to incursions from a radical political attack and, indeed, whether social work as art remains a merely transgressive conception within this order.

For this a ‘modest approach’ (Healy, 2008: page) will not suffice. Against this liberal reformist conciliatory sentiment, we drew on the political philosophy of Badiou to posit a
definition of politics for social work as a collective form, organised by certain principles that aim to unleash a series of new possibilities which are currently repressed by the dominant order. Following Badiou, these principles are open to the realisation of a subtractive ontological truth in the four fields of art, love, science and politics. Social work straddles each of these fields but we wished to attenuate the first. For us, the enemy is acutely visible and ever present. It is in the perverse form of calculating reason and the manner in which it is ideologically mobilised in the name of managerialism, racism, scientism, neoliberalism, globalisation, advanced capitalism and so forth (Butler and Drakeford, 2001). We did not stress firmly enough that Alain Badiou is interested in nothing short of revolution, both in theory and in practice. We consider that social work can learn much from his conceptions of truth and politics that turn so strongly against the fashionable tide of postmodern relativism, identity-politics and discourses of multiculturalism.

There is a good reason why political philosophy should inform our thinking about social work. Badiou’s (2003) most searching description of modern philosophy is as a kind of ‘logical revolt’ linked to a ‘politics of endless thought’ whence he argues that ‘there is no philosophy without the discontent of thinking in its confrontation with the world as it is’. The present ‘world as it is’ - and specifically the form of liberal governance within it - which also rests on the necessity of ontological investigation, demands a revolution in political thought which, in Badiou’s view, has thoroughly given itself over to the regime of ideology. Beyond philosophical ideas, what does it take to have radical commitment? For Badiou, it requires that one maintain a certain dispositional stance as radicalism in the face of the hegemony of the neoliberal establishment. It requires an ontology of virtue, described as courage. He describes the formation of virtuous dispositions along these lines:
It’s a question probably of a new form of courage. We have to create the real possibility of our fiction, certainly. Create the real possibility of our fiction which is a generic fiction in a new form, the new localisation is probably a question of a new political courage. The question of finding the fiction is a question of justice and hope, of representation finally (Badiou, 2005: 13).

Following Aristotle, for Badiou courage as a response to the dominant order is the primary human quality because it is the quality which guarantees all others. Courage is not an innate quality but something that practically constructs itself in the face of a formidable opposition. The virtue of courage is an act of understanding our fears, both natural and logical, and the ability to keep the act of overcoming fear, of being courageous, between a lack of political judgment on the one hand and an excess of political judgment on the other (see McBeath and Webb, 2002). In calling for radicals to be courageous during these oppressive times, Badiou argues that ‘Courage … is the virtue which manifests itself through endurance in the impossible … time is its raw material. What takes courage is to operate in terms of a different *duree* to that imposed by the (dominant) law of the world’ (Badiou, 2008: 41). Badiou’s conception of politics rightly affirms the *primacy of commitment* as the basis of emancipatory politics. Thus, against the ideology of liberal conciliation, we may conclude - in solidarity with Badiou - that for social work, and for the people it serves, nothing less than a revolution will suffice.

**References**


blog.urbanomic.com/sphaleotas/archives/badiou-politics.pdf


