Abstract: The correlation among social work and the movements has been particularly emphasized by radical social work. This paper aims to analyze the connection of social work with the movements by a radical perspective focusing in the Greek case during the era of crisis. In the first part of the article the general context of contemporary Greece is presented followed by the analysis concerning the growth of the solidarity movement. In the third part the main gains for both social work and movements are discussed.

Keywords: Radical Social Work, Movements, Greece, Crisis.

1. Introduction: Radical Social Work and Movements

Historically social work has been enriched by the movements [1, 2]. In particular, radical social work highlights the link of social work with the movements (social/political movements as well as users' movements) as significant for social work. For example as several authors mention in the field, in 1990's the self-organization of the people using social services had promoted innovative and alternative ways of social services [3]. Moreover many authors highlight the importance of the alliances between social workers and users “to challenge the structural oppression and discrimination” [3 pg. 29].

In the 21st century, radicals in social work [4] describe the development of two types of movements as particularly important for social work; on one hand the service users and on the other hand the global movements against neoliberalism. Specifically, the authors suggest the alliances of social work with the users’ movements, such as the disability movement and the mental health users’ movement, “in challenging both biomedical notions of disability…and the services based on them” [4 pg.7]. As far as the mobilization against neoliberalism concerns, the link of social work with the movements against it is thoroughly discussed as an opportunity to challenge the business agenda in social work.

This article discusses the link of social work with the solidarity movements in the Greek case by focusing on the antiracist movement and the solidarity clinics (SCs) while in the final section the gains by the alliances of social work with the movements and vice versa are discussed. However, it is important prior to this analysis to present the general context in contemporary Greece.

2. Setting the Context in Contemporary Greece: Austerity Measures and Humanitarian Crisis

After the burst out of the crisis a chain of austerity measures have been applied in Greece, which in turn resulted in the well-known as humanitarian crisis. Some of the main austerity measures were the reduction of the workers’ and pensioners’ income. Specifically the workers’ income has been decreased up to –14.7% in public sector and at –11.8% in the private one since 2010 [5], while there is also shrunk of the pensions and in general shrunk of welfare provision [6].

In 2014, 34.6% of the population was at the risk of poverty while the risk of poverty for children has risen up to 26.9% since 2010 [7]. Moreover, in 2014 Greece holds the highest percentages of unemployment 27.5% across Europe while the unemployment for young people reached up to 60.0% [8].

Although, during financial crises there is a crucial need for public and free health and welfare [9] it seems that Greece followed a totally different trajectory. According to the report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [10] from 2009 until 2011 the public health expenditures in Greece have fallen up to 11.0%. This reduction of public expenditure for health, presented as an essential type of reforms, resulted in 2.5 millions of Greeks dropping out by the National Health Insurance system [11].

The applied austerity measures also had a number of devastating consequences for the general population. As already mentioned, there is a significant increase of poverty, millions of people without any access to public health system [11], rise of suicides up to 25% in the first half of 2011 compared to the corresponded period of 2010 [12], rise of HIV rates, children malnutrition, rise of mental health problems and so on.
In this context the fact that the majority of the population suffered by poverty and deprivation of access to public health and welfare services created a dangerous amalgam for the social cohesion of the Greek society.

3. The Response of the Society: The Growth of the Solidarity Movement

However, in the era of crisis in Greece there was a significant growth of both struggles of the people and hundreds of self-organized grassroots welfare initiatives. Specifically, from 2010 until 2014 more than 350 grassroots welfare initiatives have flourished during the first years of crisis [13]. These structures provide goods and services for free to the people such as food, clothes, primary health care – to those dropped out of the national health insurance system – and education.

As it was previously mentioned, 2.5 million of people dropped out of the national health system and consequently had no access in primary health care through the National Health System. These unmet needs of people have been covered to some extent by the Solidarity Clinics (SCs), which emerged mainly during the crisis and in response to the primary health needs of people who dropped out of the health insurance system. Many of these structures had a dual aim of solidarity and demand for public health care. Moreover, some new good practices seem to emerge in these initiatives such as the agitation for public health system, solidarity in antithesis to charity, involvement of hundreds of health workers in the SCs as well as abolition of the strict criteria of the so called ‘deserving/undeserving poor’, a notion that dominates in the public social services but it seems to have been overcome by many SCs [14].

Another significant example of the movements in Greece is the antiracist one. The antiracist movement has a long tradition in Greece (first established in 1995) with a number of innovative welfare initiatives. More specifically the antiracist organizations created a number of structures for the immigrants and refugees such as provision of legal advice, lessons to learn the Greek language, antiracist festivals, demonstrations, provision of food and medical care to refugees, advocacy, information for welfare rights, advocacy and so on.

Practically, the antiracist movement developed alternatives practices in both macro and micro level [15]. Firstly, the collective action of the movement (demonstrations, campaigns) had put pressure upon policy stake holders and political parties for the rights of immigrants/refugees. Secondly, the antiracist movement promotes through bottom-up procedures some good practices. For example, in 2008 the antiracist network of organizations started to register racist attacks on immigrants, a gap identified by Pavlou [16] and it denounced all repressive or racist incidents. This good practice of the registration of racist incidents was later adopted by NGOs [17]. Thirdly, the movement has developed grassroots welfare activity in the community. This was achieved either through the provision of food, medical help and support in the refugee camps (Patras, Igoumenitsa) or by other structures such as the Greek school for immigrants, language school or legal advice from lawyers. Finally, the antiracist movement intervened also on policy level such as suggesting Open Centers for Refugees in antithesis with the detention centers and hotspots, which result in systematic violation of human rights.

Overall, in this section the growth and development of the solidarity movement has been discussed. In particular, two cases - the one of the solidarity clinics and the antiracist movement - have been analyzed, focusing on their practice and interventions on various levels. In the following section the gains of the link between social work and the movements are discussed.


There are significant gains for both social work and movements by their alliance [17]. Firstly, this connection raise the awareness of the social workers for the structural causes of inequality and oppression or as [18] put it the analysis of how “the ‘public’ causes of so much of the ‘private’ pain” [18]. Secondly, it promotes critical reflection on everyday practice and helps social workers to understand political reasons and the procedures for the demonization of the marginalized. Thirdly, it shows alternatives practices by bottom-up procedures in opposition to the bureaucratization of the social work profession [17]. Finally, it promotes community action models and community work.

On the other hand social work is a valuable resource for the movements as well. First of all, the social workers have knowledge and skills for community work and interventions that are valuable to the movements. Secondly, the practitioners provide social support to the people through specialized techniques, which are useful in the grassroots welfare initiatives. Moreover, social workers can share the knowledge of social research and use it as a mean for social change.

Conclusively, the connection of social work with the movements is valuable for several reasons. The principles of social work are in conjunction with those parts of the society that struggle for social justice and social change or to put it differently the ‘social’ aspects is clearly linked with the ‘political’ aspect. Moreover, the connection of social work with the movements enrich both sides while also new forms of community action rise through “bottom-up”
procedures that enhance social work in both theory and practice. Finally, the aim and values of social work can meet the struggles of the movements for social justice and cannot but contribute to them.

5. References


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