Chapter 10
Tackling the Contradictory Nature of Social Work

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10.1 Introduction

In my current role as a university lecturer in social work, I regularly meet students in their first semester of the Bachelor of Science programme. In most cases, the first-year students enter the world of academia straight from upper secondary school. On their very first day, I usually ask the students to express their reasons for wanting to become social workers. They usually say something vague about ‘working with people’ or ‘helping vulnerable people’. These types of statements always take me back and make me revisit my own personal history in academia.

I was 22 years old when I entered the Bachelor of Science programme in social work at the University of Gothenburg in 2003. The forces which motivated me to apply for the programme were a bit muddled, but I did know that I wanted to work with something that could be considered meaningful in one way or another. I also knew that such a desire entailed a job in which positive outcomes could not easily be quantified into numbers or money. I also had a strong desire to enable change, but this aspiration was a bit befuddled, since I did not have a well-defined idea of what kind of change I wanted to be a part of. Now, I can see that I had rather narrow and moralising ideas of what constituted ‘a good life’, and as a social worker, I wanted to help individuals move closer to that ideal. Growing up in a working-class family, I was readily aware of social injustices and economic inequalities, but I had not yet fleshed out a more coherent analysis of the establishment and a reproduction of the dynamics of social forces.

It would be easy to disregard my motives, as well as my overall ideas about how the world functioned, as hopelessly naïve. The thought of ‘helping people’ through social work is indeed easy to dismiss as idealistic or uninformed. However, I believe that it can be helpful to evoke memories like these, since it tells us that our
identities, belief systems and political outlooks are always malleable to an extent. Through our lives, we will encounter countless experiences that shape us in certain ways. One such experience is university studies. To devote several years in an academic setting has the potential to serve as a foundational rite of passage in forming one’s views on how the fabric of the social world is weaved. However, it is important to recognise the fact that this sort of cultivation does not happen in a direct or pure linear manner. Rather, a more complex and developed idea of how the world functions is often the result of what may be called a dialectical learning process in which certain theories, conceptions and ideas that one comes across during lectures and seminars clash or coincide with important personal experiences. Out of this process, something new or transformed may see the light of day.

In this chapter, I will repeatedly come back to reflect upon the dialectical learning process. Dialectics is another word for thinking in contradictions. More precisely, a dialectical outlook helps us to focus on the process of contradictions clashing or interacting, something that could result in the emergence of new and sometimes unexpected phenomena. A thread through the chapter is the contradictions inherent in social work and how these have affected me, how I have tried to investigate them in my own research and how I try to communicate them to students. I will begin with an account of how I stumbled upon the contradictory nature of social work in my years as a social work student and as a social worker and how that shaped me and my way of perceiving the world. This is followed by a section in which I recount how I have examined contradictions in social work by studying the history of the practice and how the concept of social exclusion is used. Before I conclude with some remarks concerning the potential future of social work, I describe how the contradictions of social work could be touched upon in teaching.

### 10.2 Stumbling Over the Contradictions

My own years as a student on the Bachelor’s programme in social work are a good example of a learning process that was not exactly straightforward. At that time, the programme was quite focused on psychosocial interventions, and I can remember how this created quite strong dissonance and alienation in relation to what may be termed a ‘political awakening’ for me, coinciding with historical events such as the war in Iraq and the continuous dismantling of the Swedish welfare state. The experience of dissonance was further emphasised when I started to work as a professional social worker, mainly as a treatment assistant, assessing parental ability.

Although a truly meaningful experience in many ways, I often found myself thinking that I was ‘merely’ cleaning up the mess in a society deeply fraught by injustices and inequalities. Virtually all families I met in my role as a treatment assistant were losers in the economic race and struggled to make ends meet. It became apparent to me that the opportunities to uphold the standard of family life demanded by Swedish social legislation were not independent of class position. This was not a fact that our interventions as treatment assistants were expected to
consider or strive to change. Our job, and maybe rightly so, was to isolate the social problem at hand, namely, children who were exposed to danger or suffered from neglect. Do not get me wrong, I do not intend to say that our interventions did not have a valuable impact on the children and families I met. I simply say that I sometimes felt that I was entering the stage too late, when the damage was already done. I started to feel weary and did not always agree with the narrow criteria that determined if a person was deemed to be a good enough parent. Consequently, this was a moment when my professional experience clashed with the way I perceived the social world, and this led to my decision to return to university.

I entered the Master’s programme in social work and was immediately introduced to a bundle of critical social theories that conceptualised many of my frustrations. These theories did not treat social work and its practices as self-evident or given. Instead, the leap into critical theory made me recognise that social work was, and is, a historical practice. By historical, I refer to a socially produced practice bound up with economic, political and moral structures – a practice that is always subject to change. This was an extremely important insight for me, and I could suddenly start to put together my rather unsatisfying experiences from my professional career as a social worker with theories that seemed to illuminate and explain the forces at play. Put another way, theory made me understand my own feelings of incapacitation and start to reason more critically about why society and social work are organised in certain ways. It also helped me to consider what social work could be instead.

On the Master’s programme, I was introduced to the French philosopher Michel Foucault. If we strive to cultivate a critical gaze on social work practices deemed as ‘empowering’, ‘liberating’ or ‘transformative’, Foucault’s ideas of power as productive are seminal. Foucault’s historical examinations of social control and the normalisation by the state of its citizens into ‘docile subjects’ made me aware of new methods to analyse the relationship between society and individuals. His writings on discipline and biopolitics (Foucault 1977/1995, 1990, 2008), in particular, helped me to examine hidden motives in seemingly benign social reforms. Consequently, this made me realise that the aim of social work, and state interventions in general, is as much about controlling people as it is to help. Complementing my then rather static Marxist understanding, this was also a period when I started to gain a deeper understanding of the political economy in which social work is embedded. From my studies of the first volume of Karl Marx’s Capital (1867/1976), I took a deep interest in the production of wage labourers. This allowed me to discover a whole field of literature that helped me to contextualise social work historically. From then on, I started to comprehend the contradictions in social work as, at least partly, stemming from contradictions within a dynamic economic system that on the one hand created goods, values and infrastructure of unprecedented value and on the other generated misery and deep inequality and treated people as commodities on the labour market. Filled with academic enthusiasm, I wrote a master’s thesis on how a discourse on ‘welfare dependency’ and ‘outsidership’ legitimised austerity measures in the Swedish welfare apparatus (Davidsson 2010). This was my first attempt to map how political discourse interacts with the material base in order to
produce ‘docile subjects’, moulded in a specific fashion in order to meet their prescribed role as wage labourers.

The experiences gained from being a student on the Bachelor’s programme, working as a social worker and being introduced to critical theory on the Master’s programme contributed equally to shaping my basic understanding of social work as a fundamentally ambiguous practice. On the one hand, I regard social work as a truly important, if not necessary, remedy in a world where misery is continuously produced. On the other hand, I think this remedy acts as a saviour of the very economic system that produces misery in the first place, namely, capitalism. Consequently, social work in a modern capitalist society is somewhat of a contradiction in itself. Aside from this, social work is characterised by a continual political debate that brings numerous conflicting aspects to the fore. One such question is whether social interventions ought to be guided by reason or emotions, in turn leading to the question of whether social work is a calling or merely a job like any other. This conflict has been a part of the discussion on the nature of social work since at least the end of the nineteenth century, when modern bureaucratic systems of social support gradually began to replace the poor relief previously administered by the church. Today, this debate is pushed to the agenda by the advent of technological advancements and the rise of evidence-based practice, manuals and evaluation devices that characterise what is sometimes called ‘the audit society’. One such example can be found in the Swedish municipality of Trelleborg, where a robot has been used to assess applications for social assistance, prompting us to ask the question of whether certain aspects of social work could be algorithmised and totally automated.

Another conflict pertaining to social work, and deeply tied to ideology, relates to the question of who the optimal mediator of social welfare is. If a person leans towards liberal policies, he or she may prefer the market to administer social welfare. A professed socialist is likely to favour the state, while a conservative may argue that the church, voluntary organisations or even the family constitute the ideal source of social support. Just as political is the issue of whether social interventions ought to aim to reform societal structures or individual traits. When discussing this question, two American social work pioneers are often used to personify the conflicting positions. Jane Addams (1860–1935) was a settlement activist who advocated structural reforms to alleviate poverty and class conflicts, while Mary Richmond (1861–1928) promoted the idea of case work methods to improve the situation for individuals in need. These two positions have in turn spawned different traditions within social work. Other interrelated conflicts, such as the question of whether social welfare ought to be regarded as a human right or something one must make oneself worthy of and if social work should mainly occupy itself with supporting or controlling people in need, are built into social work and have to be addressed continuously. To conclude, the aim of including this long but far from complete enumeration of different conflicts that are more or less inherent in social work has been to demonstrate what I call the historical nature of social work and to emphasise that the forms and content of social work are always contestable and therefore, to a
certain extent, plastic. I will now tell you a little about how I have attended to the paradoxes of social work in my own research and teaching.

10.3 Researching the Contradictions

In my research, I have dived into the contradictory nature of social work time and again. In this pursuit, I am not really looking to resolve the contradictions at hand. Since I view the ambiguities as mere consequences of contradictions that capitalism cannot help to reproduce, they are after all imbued in the fabric of the modern world. Nonetheless, I cannot just leave them be. One reason for returning so persistently to the contradictions may be connected to a personal frustration pertaining to people either idealising or dismissing social work. If we consider the contradictions seriously and in detail, we will acknowledge that social work always contains aspects worthy of both admiration and criticism. If we are to transform the forms and content of social work in a direction we desire, it does not help our cause to dismiss social work as a whole. Likewise, it is not enough for us to invoke goodness or notions of justice and expect everyone to rally to our cause. These are, after all, contested concepts that signify different things to different people. Rather, an investigation of the contradictions and their historical roots can help us show that social work, at least in this economic system, cannot be either totally good or completely bad. Examining the contradictions then may help us to gain a deeper understanding of the processes bound up with certain aspects of social work. In other words, it can be a tool to contextualise certain practices and thereby illuminate the political economy of social work. Ultimately, these kinds of investigations have the potential to serve as a foundation when we think about the shape of social work to come.

10.3.1 Social Work and Capitalism

Mark Twain is reputed to have said that history does not repeat itself but it often rhymes. Thus, if we want to understand what is happening in our present time, it is often rewarding to go back in history. I would like to claim that this endeavour is especially important when investigating the contradictions of social work. When I entered the PhD programme in social work in 2010, I wanted to understand how the practice we now know as social work came about and to investigate the interconnectedness between the emergent social work and nascent industrial capitalism. In my thesis, I examined a period in Swedish history (1847–1875) in which Sweden was becoming industrialised (Davidsson 2015). In the same period of time, a newly established public poor relief system was facing much criticism. A central point of departure in the thesis was the tension between the logic of two dominant distributive systems: on the one hand, ‘work-based’ distribution as in wage labour and on the other, ‘need-based’ distribution through the provision of public relief for those
who are deemed as being ‘worthy poor’. Manoeuvring the tension between these two systems, by setting limits and boundaries, has been dubbed as ‘the distributive dilemma’ of principally every existing society in the history of mankind (Stone 1984).

Through my analysis, I found that public poor relief in a time of capitalist expansion and liberal reforms had to be designed in a manner that answered the needs of the work-based distribution. Therefore, the function of poor relief was only rarely articulated as a means to materially relieving the situation of people in misery. Notwithstanding the fact that Sweden suffered from a crop failure and subsequent famine in the late 1860s, the alleviation of structurally inflicted despair was rejected as a component of the rationality of relief. However, the criticised relief apparatus was accused of causing scarcity and misery because it supported vulnerable individuals. The more the relief system expanded, the worse were the consequences. The dominating assumption regarding poor people was that they, more or less naturally, would have developed into industrious and frugal subjects, capable of abstaining pressing needs, if only they were not supported by poor relief. Relief was said to paralyse ‘the invisible driving forces’ that led to ‘forethought, industriousness and deprivation’ when the poor were provided for, when the woe did not constantly remind them of their endangered existence, their bodies ran the risk of enervating.

Consequently, the main task was to create a new rationality for poor relief arranged in such a way as to promote industriousness. The most common assertion was that ‘correct poor relief’ could be designed if it could inculcate the link between labour and provision. A chief technique was identified: the demand for compensation in the shape of forced work as a condition of poor relief. This was assumed to have positive effects on the recipients, both morally and economically. So-called voluntary workhouses were established in Swedish parishes, wherein a distinct logic of quid pro quo should furnish the relationship between relievers and relieved. The ‘correct poor relief’ was also marked with a logic of self-help that would teach the poor that they bore the sole responsibility to provide for themselves and their families. This could mean that the poor boards chose to give access to the able-bodied poor who then gave up some of their rights and entered the subordinate position as paupers. The poor board gained a legitimate role as a master, something that was intended to enable a process of nurturing the pauper into industriousness.

The main result I took away from my dissertation was the close interconnectedness between capitalism and social work. Harald Swedner, the first Swedish professor in social work, once wrote that social work is ‘work of change at an individual, institutional and societal level with the aim to limit, transcend and prevent the ills and social problems that have prevailed in conjunction with industrialisation and urbanisation’ (Swedner 1996, p. 38, my translation). To an extent, I agree with this assertion, but the definition is still only partial. Social work is indeed occupied with the prevention of social problems, and there might have been times when it was aimed at transcending the social order, but in general, the organisation and scope of social work have always been confined by capital logic. In a capitalist society, the assurance of accumulation of value needs to be the superior aim, and even if social work constitutes an exemption to the laws of competition, it cannot threaten the order on a systemic level. At times, as I showed in the dissertation, social work has
even been used to feed the economic system with ‘employable’ subjects. Thus, if we are seriously determined to extend the values inherent in social work (i.e. equality, solidarity, emancipation, etc.), a prerequisite is to transcend the dominating economic system.

10.4 Theorising Social Exclusion

Another way for me to assess the contradictions of social work has been to investigate the concept of social exclusion, either as a sole writer or together with others. From my point of view, social exclusion as a concept captures the contradictory nature of social work in interesting ways. It can be deployed in what has been termed a ‘weak version’, focusing on the excluded position and concentrating on the flaws of excluded individuals. Thereby, the weak version strengthens already established power relations and reinforces the current and dominant neoliberal ideology (Veit-Wilson 1998). A ‘strong version’, on the other hand, addresses the destructive elements inherent in the same ideology by directing the focus at the structural causes for exclusionary processes.

A critical assessment of the political deployment of the weak version of social exclusion has been at the fore of my research on this subject. This body of work has been motivated by a personal political frustration with both the current state of affairs and the lack of meaningful and radical resistance. One of my desires has thus been to unpack the ideological superstructure of contemporary class composition and try to relate this to (the lack of) political resistance to neoliberal policies and rising social inequality. For example, I have studied how a certain political usage of the concept social exclusion has legitimised the establishment of a harsh workfare regime in Sweden (Davidsson 2010, 2016) and how the contemporary dominant weak conception of social exclusion discursively creates divisions, suspicion and separation within the working class and, as a consequence, undermines radical solidarity movements (Allelin and Davidsson 2017), and a theoretical review of influential usages of the concept in social sciences (Petersson and Davidsson 2016). In another study, my colleague and I explored how the concept of social exclusion has been deployed in Swedish social work research, and we specifically analysed how the usage corresponded to the weak version (Davidsson and Petersson 2017a). In the study, we found a frequent tendency within the retrieved studies to conflate exclusion with related concepts such as unemployment or marginalisation. Much of the work that we reviewed demonstrated a clear preference for denoting exclusion as a precarious position. Consequently, the proposed solutions often revolved around interventions at micro level aimed at transforming those supposedly ‘socially excluded’. In opposition to this, we proposed an alternative analytical framework in which social exclusion is conceptualised as dynamic processes located in given times and spaces, initiated and carried out by specific actors acting out of certain motives by means of specific techniques. In the article, we suggest an actor-oriented
research strategy involving a detailed analysis of the following four dimensions of exclusion:

1. Identify **who** the involved actors are. Is the excluding actor an individual, a group, an organisation or a government? Who is being excluded?

2. Investigate **what** an individual or a group is excluded from: supported housing, a city centre district or a nation state? What kind of resources are at stake – social, material, political and/or cultural?

3. Examine **how** social exclusion is executed. Which techniques can be discerned – material (such as reducing welfare benefit levels) and/or discursive (for instance, negative representations of welfare recipients as idle exploiters of the system)?

4. Consider **why** exclusion occurs. What are the involved actors’ explicit motives and accounts justifying and/or excusing exclusionary acts? How do these explanations relate to the specific setting and discursive environment?

This framework may sound banal, but judging from the existing body of studies on social exclusion within Swedish social work, it is necessary. Applying the framework enables studies that investigate the dynamic processes involved in social exclusion on multiple analytical levels. Who excludes? In what or whose interest is exclusion executed? Which methods, strategies or techniques are used to achieve exclusion? By which categorisations or discursive practices are exclusions legitimised? Answering these questions serves the purpose of shifting the analytical focus point from the supposedly ‘excluded’ to how, why and by whom borders are established and guarded.1 In a sense, one may say that we are proposing a similar inversion of perspective as sociologists such as John Kitsuse, and Howard Becker did with reference to deviation in the 1960s, i.e. instead of directing the focus on allegedly deviant individuals, they turned their attention to the normative conditions that make people deem others as abnormal. The research on the concept of social exclusion has helped me to further advance my understanding of social work as a contradictory practice and to problematise interventions expressed to aim for ‘inclusion’. Directing attention towards excluding actors and structures (rather than the excluded) is also a way of trying to imagine social work as something other, or rather more, than it is today.

10.5 Teaching the Contradictions

As I mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of the chapter, the bulk of the students I meet in my role as a university lecturer express that they wish to become social workers in order to help people in need. This is of course admirable, and it would certainly be a problem if they did not have the intention of offering support.

1We have also applied the analytical framework in one empirical study in which we investigated exclusionary processes and techniques deployed at the central train station in Gothenburg (Davidsson and Petersson 2017b).
However, as I have tried to demonstrate in this text, social work contains parts characterised by discipline and control, and the aim of interventions may not always coincide with what a social worker deems helpful to the clients. On the contrary, the person may feel that he or she acts as a gatekeeper or even a villain. In my role as a university lecturer, I firmly believe in the idea of communicating the contradictory aspects of social work to the students. In the best-case scenario, this could help future social workers to incorporate the contradictions in order to work with them. If not, one may be baffled and suffer from a sense of cognitive dissonance and depression when entering professional social work. As I have recounted in this text, I was quite unprepared for the alienation I came to experience as a social worker, and this probably led to my exit from the profession, pursuing instead a career within academia. However, escaping from the realities of social work is not the solution on a larger scale.

I do much of my teaching in the first semester of the Bachelor’s programme, and in a lecture called ‘The history of social work’ (the very first lecture in the programme), I always tell a tale from a book by American sociologist Stanley Cohen. The story deals succinctly with the contradictory nature of social work:

A man is walking by the riverside when he notices a body floating downstream. A fisherman leaps into the river, pulls the body ashore, gives mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, saving the man’s life. A few minutes later the same thing happens, then again and again. Eventually yet another body floats by. This time the fisherman completely ignores the drowning man and starts running upstream along the bank. The observer asks the fisherman what on earth he is doing? Why is he not trying to rescue this drowning body? ‘This time’, replies the fisherman, ‘I’m going upstream to find out who the hell is pushing these poor folks into the water’. (Cohen 1985, p. 236)

The story illuminates the limitations of individual casework in a striking manner. It also raises the importance of theory and asking questions about the nature of the originating causes of social problems. Even if a social worker cannot be expected to always think hard about the structural causes of individual suffering when faced with an acute case that needs to be solved quickly, it is still important to be aware of how society operates in a greater sense.

I also teach research methods and theory of science in the Bachelor’s as well as the Master’s programme. I see these courses as an opportunity to raise critical awareness of not only research but also in relation to what constitutes the social world in a more general sense. In the beginning of the courses at Bachelor level, the students quite often express a sceptical attitude towards studying the ‘theory of science’. They cannot really see the point of it; many of them just want to start working as social workers. ‘Why is it important for us to learn about how knowledge is produced? Just give us the knowledge necessary for us to do our job!’ This is a position I can sympathise with, but that does not mean that I can accept it. Everything a social worker is expected to do in his or her line of work is based on certain assumptions, often grounded in science. Being able to critically assess statements, causalities and scientific discourse is necessary in order to engage in the knowledge production that more or less determines the nature of certain practices. When teaching theory, I often think back to when I enrolled in the Master’s programme and was
introduced to concepts that helped me to formulate and address my sense of alienation. In some sense, the process of absorbing theory reminds me of the movie *The Matrix*, in which humanity is trapped inside a simulated reality and therefore unable to critically engage with the real threats, power mechanisms and structures of control. When the protagonist finally sees reality for what it is, he detects the code structuring humanity. This is of course fiction, but the process of really engaging with theory can produce similar sensations. Suddenly, you start to see patterns in the social world that you had previously failed to recognise. A regular trip on the underground on a Wednesday morning can turn into a social drama, and when you observe your surroundings doing everyday activities, you may start noticing greater social forces at play.

### 10.6 The Future of the Contradictions

Following the demise of the socialist countries in the early 1990s, liberal commentators (most famously political scientist Francis Fukuyama) proclaimed that history had ended. This was, of course, not true at the time, and today no one would even think of making such a statement. We are living in turbulent times and the future is indeed uncertain. With the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, Great Britain exiting the EU, the rise of far-right political movements, the lockdowns and the literal halt of the global economy following the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing process of climate change and millions of people around the world fleeing tyrannical rule, it is clear that history is alive and kicking. The naïve idea of ‘the end of history’ has therefore come to an end in itself.

However, if we truly are experiencing the end of the end of history, what are the implications for social work? First, we need to assess the nature of social problems in our present time and, most acutely, we need to address them as political. Even if we never bought into the theoretical foundation in the statement of the end of history, we acted as if the stipulation was true enough. Even if history did not take a rest, we did. At least in the Western part of the world, politics has changed from being an arena where different ideologies and visions are disputed to a situation in which we as voters are expected to elect the most qualified, whose aims and goals everybody agreed upon, to carry out a mission. The focus has changed from inherently political questions of class, inequality and housing to the politicians themselves. Who is most charismatic? Which one is the most skilled rhetorically? Who has the fanciest education? At the same time, material inequality flourishes and cities are becoming increasingly segregated.

Second, in order to combat these trends, we have to start acting as historical agents and shape the world to come. As I have stated repeatedly, social work is a social phenomenon, and as such it is shaped by us human beings. We need to start imagining a different kind of world, and we need to act in a way that brings us closer
to that. If we think dialectically about the current situation, we may find seeds of hope in the contemporary order. Neoliberal globalisation and the promotion of individualisation and competition have of course brought a plethora of social problems upon the world. At the same time, globalisation and technology have connected different geographical parts with each other in a way that is hard to reverse. The conditions for true global solidarity in which we see others as equals and dependent on each other may be closer than ever in human history. However, this is not an easy task; on the contrary, we are today witnessing how neoconservative forces try to pull us further apart. This is a situation that we have to analyse carefully, and most importantly we need to come together and be strong. For all of us, it is now imperative to intervene in the fabric of the social world, and as social workers, we do have a certain responsibility to stand up for justice and equality.

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