

Beyond the state: Developments and trends in critical social work in Switzerland and Hungary

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Abstract

This article examines the developments and current trends in the practice of critical social work in Hungary and Switzerland based on the international literature on critical social work, as well as Hungarian and Swiss publications that are less known to the international scientific community. The study concludes that contemporary Swiss and Hungarian critical social work is in close relationship with civil society and is particularly effective in intervening where state-run social services are less efficient. This includes the areas of migration aid and homeless care in both countries, and the support of the Roma people in Hungary.

Keywords

Comparative study, Hungary, nongovernmental organisations, social policy, social work, Switzerland

Introduction

Modern critical social work appeared first in the Anglo-Saxon countries based on critical civil movements and social theories developed in the 1970s (Payne, 2014: 319). Critical practice belongs to the macro-, social change-oriented models of social work (Sik, 2017: 73) and often appears in the form of community or group work. Critical practice fights social inequalities and systemic oppression, and promotes the protection of marginalised and vulnerable social groups by fostering their social rights and integration. It empowers individuals in need, and combats systemic social and political injustice that leads to the severe marginalisation of vulnerable groups (Payne, 2020: 196). Critical social work represents constant resistance (Moffatt, 2019; Morley, 2019) towards dominant neoliberal socio-political institutions (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013: 5–6), and attempts to reform oppressive structures in a way to ensure that the most vulnerable social groups have access to social resources and services (Martin, 2003: 21).

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Critical work refuses the institution-based practice of early social work models (e.g. psychodynamic, cognitive-behaviourist and task-centred practices) that dominated the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century (Lambers, 2015), and argues the importance of mandatory standards and protocols in social administration (Björk, 2019: 42). In addition, critical practice prefers non-bureaucratic forms of social care that is independent from economic and political interests (Payne, 2020). Of course, critical work means much more than the simple rejection of bureaucratic standards and protocols. Critical social work creates and improves its own professional standards in an innovative and liberating way, based on general practical experiences and comprehensive theoretical developments (Levin and Liberman, 2019).

The critical practice encourages social workers to be active not only in their social services, but in the broader socio-political environment, too (Morley, 2019). For instance, professionals of social work organise protests and flash mobs, take over various political positions in the community, or write about the problems of their clients in local papers to raise public awareness. This active and direct political representation is particularly important in the cases of vulnerable groups (like Indigenous communities or sexual minorities) who are the primary victims of social changes. Critical social work is able to respond to their needs, for instance, in the form of feminist, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practices (Dominelli, 2008; Payne, 2014).

Neoliberal social work internalises the Hayekian rules and logic of the capitalist society, and facilitates service users to be adapted to the capitalist market economics as consumers and producers of goods (e.g. through workfare programmes, conditional cash transfers or food stamps). Moreover, neoliberal social work significantly limits the professional activities (and increases the bureaucracy) in social services in terms of strict standards and protocols for ‘rationalising’ the operation (Ruoss, 2018; Spolander et al., 2014). In neoliberal social work, the needs of recipients and the traditional values of social work are regularly suppressed by the financial and political interests of social institutions (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018: 117). Despite the dominating neoliberal effects on social work, the critical practice attempts to be as independent from the ruling political and economic systems as possible (Carter and Hugman, 2016; Stepney, 2006).

Although Western European political ideas on the ‘new labour’ and the ‘third way’ attempted to tame capitalist market economies, neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies were actually reinforced in the international welfare politics in the late 1990s. An important moment of this trend was the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in the United States, of which political principles had crucial impact on the European welfare states, as well (Deacon, 2000). Similarly to other European countries, the governments of both Switzerland and Hungary followed the neoconservative global economic trends in the early 2000s, and national welfare systems were adapted to the individualist and materialist concept on modern market economies (Epple and Schär, 2015; Ferge, 2017; Tomka, 2015).

After 2010, besides the dominant neoconservative welfare policies, political ideologies belonging to the international rise of the ‘new global right’ also appeared in both countries. Accordingly, national welfare politics were reshaped in favour of the middle class through targeted tax credits, family supports and pension subsidies, and only the remaining services and allowances went to the poor. In the area of social assistance, means-tested in-cash allowances became dominant, unemployment benefits were reduced and activating workfare programmes were implemented in both countries (Scharle and Szikra, 2015). In the housing sector, the state retreated as a housing provider, and needy people were oriented towards the primary housing market. The reduction of state-run services was the most spectacular in the system of homeless care, where nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) took over the majority of institutions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictive social policy measures became stronger, and the majority of new social programmes were implemented based on the principles of residency and

less eligibility. It means that services primarily targeted people with residence permit and citizenship, and the others were practically excluded from the system of social supports (Aidukaite et al., 2021). However, critical social workers developed new, supplementary services for people who were abandoned by state-run institutions, and raised their voice for the downtrodden in Switzerland and Hungary alike.

This article first provides a general historic overview on the development of critical practice in Switzerland and Hungary. The study then proceeds to compare the current trends of critical social work regarding the most vulnerable groups like homeless people, undocumented migrants and the Roma. By doing so, we follow the theoretical concept of Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2018) on the triple mandate of social work that depicts conflict areas between the ‘three main domains’ of social work (pp. 113–114). Based on this concept, the practice of social work is affected by the following domains: (1) the social and political environment and institutions, including social legislation; (2) the social needs presented by the recipients; and (3) the fundamental values of social work.

The development of critical social work in Switzerland and Hungary

Both Swiss and the Hungarian social policy and social work can be characterised through the term ‘belated development’, referring to the fact that the progress of welfare institutions occurred later compared to the influential European welfare states (Ferge, 2017; Leimgruber, 2008; Lengwiler, 2007; Tomka, 2015). The development of social work and social policy mostly followed the Bismarckian, social security-based model of social welfare before the Second World War (Pik, 2001; Ramsauer, 2018; Sárkány, 2011).¹ However, the deviating historic and economic progress in the post-war period drastically changed the nature of social care in both countries.

Hungary (similar to other Central and Eastern European countries) came under the influence of the Soviet Union, which fundamentally affected the development of social work (Lakner, 2012; Maissen, 2012). Hungarian institutions and schools for social work and social pedagogy were closed for ideological reasons (Budai et al., 2006; Ferge, 2000). According to the socialist/communist propaganda, social problems like poverty and homelessness did not exist in socialism; therefore, professional social work was not necessary anymore (Lakner, 2012: 53–56). Civil society, including hundreds of organisations with social activities, was eliminated or controlled by the communist state party following the Soviet model (Szabó, 2002; Valluch, 2005). As a result, social work disappeared for decades and/or was limited to medical professionals like nurses, health visitors and doctors, who also had to handle social issues besides their regular work (Göncz, 1994: 79).

The remaining practice of Hungarian social work was mostly concentrated in the psychiatric institutions. In the psychiatric departments, social workers (mostly medical nurses with some social duties) were allowed to practise due to the growing number of social cases (e.g. homeless people, people with substance abuse and victims of domestic violence). After the political transition of 1990, many of these experienced nurses and doctors became teachers in the re-created system of social work education (Göncz, 1994; Szabó, 1994). Another important area where social work survived the years of state socialism in Hungary was the system of child protection. Hundreds of social workers (of course in different positions like educators or supervisors) were employed at residential children’s homes, mostly under insufficient professional conditions (Sik, 2020).

Besides psychiatric care and child protection, social work also appeared in the form of informal and illegal civil movements in Hungary in the 1980s. Despite the strong state control on civil society, there were enthusiastic young people who fought for the interests of the poor in a more or less organised way. A Hungarian organisation called Fund for Supporting the Poor (SZETA, *Szegényeket Támogató Alap*), established by students from the University of Budapest, supported poor people

and particularly poor children through donations and organising summer holidays. The socialist regime did not tolerate SZETA, and activists were regularly harassed by authorities (Solt, 1989). Apart from a few youth movements, confrontation against the ruling political order was mostly expressed through critical cultural movements, and open political criticism against the state appeared only rarely (Bauer and Szabó, 2011).

The practice and education of social work were rebuilt in Hungary in the early 1990s (Budai et al., 2006). Several new NGOs were established at that time in the area of social work to support poor and homeless people, although critical movements against the political and economic elite were not formed in the country until the 2000s (Szabó, 2002). One of the reasons for this passive and apolitical attitude of early civil organisations was that the main local NGOs were related to and financed by large international non-governmental organisations. These ‘western’ NGOs – like the International Red Cross or Maltese Charity Service – had no intention to criticise the new and fragile democratic political regime (Szabó, 2002).

On the contrary, Switzerland was able to continue the Western-type development of social work; however, the post-war improvement of Swiss social work deviated in several ways from the dominant Western European models that characterised the second part of the 20th century. This diverging practice is called ‘a different form of social work’ by Epple and Schär (2015: 14).

One of the alternative practices of social work was the so-called Socialist Welfare Care (*sozialistische Wohlfahrtspflege*) movement that first appeared in the 1930s, in a time when the other Central European countries introduced conservative and nationalist measures in their social systems. The movement of Socialist Welfare Care was founded in the north-western part of the country by practical social workers. They focused on the welfare of whole communities instead of individuals and considered needy people as victims of the meritocratic-capitalist society (Epple and Schär, 2015: 126–127).

Another special form of Swiss social work was the so-called ‘bound social work’ (*gebundene Sozialarbeit*) which was developed directly after the Second World War. Bound social work meant that political parties, trade unions, religious and other organisations were directly responsible for the well-being of their members, and these organisations had to support the poor using the resources (contributions) of active members. Another Swiss speciality was the Solothurn Model of Political and Radical Practice that originated in 1968 when the Catholic Church tried to take over the Solothurn School of Social Work. The vast majority of students and professors hindered this attempt with intensive protests as they were afraid that teaching would be affected by Catholic-conservative doctrines. As a result, unlike Germany, churches could not participate in the education at the Swiss schools of social work ever since (Epple and Schär, 2015: 194). After 2000, the Sans-Papiers Movement presented a special form of community-based critical social work in Switzerland. This movement was originally established to protect the rights of destitute undocumented migrants living in Switzerland. Social workers first supported only Eastern European citizens whose residence papers had expired and they remained in Switzerland as ‘over-stayers’, but later also migrants from countries of the Global South were involved within the scope of the movement (Epple and Schär, 2015: 291).

In Switzerland, several New Social Movements (*Neue Soziale Bewegungen*) appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s that openly criticised the unfair distribution of goods in the capitalist society (Epple and Schär, 2015: 278–279; Traunmüller et al., 2012). Swiss youth were fairly active in the critical protest movements of 1968 (Linke and Scharloth, 2008). During the so-called Globus Riots, for instance, thousands of young people protested in Zürich against the growing social inequalities and injustice. These politically active young people formed later a new, critical social-democratic movement in Switzerland that became a decisive political actor in many cantons.

Swiss women's rights groups also grew stronger in the 1970s. They fought mostly for the general voting rights of women and against the male-breadwinner-oriented social and political structures that 'objectified' women (Bucher and Schmucki, 1995; Ruckstuhl and Ryter, 2014). These early women's right movements were the predecessors of later feminist actions like the Women's Strike (*Frauenstreik*), when women refused working on a chosen day each year. The New Social Movements then continued in the 1980s too, but their main focus became more cultural than political. Nevertheless, the general development of critical civil movements opened new perspectives to the practice of Swiss social work. Social workers showed an increasing critical attitude towards restrictive and unfair social policy measures, primarily in the areas of housing policy, psychiatric care and child protection (Briksman et al., 2009; Martin, 2003).

Swiss child welfare services, for example, openly supported, or at least turned a blind eye on the forced adoption of children and young people from poor families (as exemplified by the 'system of contract children' until the end of the 1960s). The majority of adopted children came from impoverished one-parent urban households, and they were sent to farmers in the countryside, where they had to work, were regularly abused and not allowed to attend school (Meier and Galle, 2009). After the ordeals of these 'contract children' (*Verdingkinder*) became public, child welfare services came under significant pressure to reform their practice of adoption procedures (Leuenberger and Seglias, 2008). In the area of psychiatric care, often cruel and abusive medical therapies led to steady criticism against institution-based services among social workers and in public opinion alike (Ramsauer, 2018).

Current trends of modern critical social work in Switzerland and Hungary

In both Switzerland and Hungary, critical social work has undergone a considerable development over the past two decades. This evolution was affected simultaneously by the conservative, Bismarckian welfare legacy and the new social challenges of the 21st century (Germann, 2010). Below, we explore the current trends of critical work based on (1) the institutional and political background of social work, (2) the characteristics and needs of target groups, as well as (3) the development of social work values (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018).

Socio-political environment and institutions

Contemporary welfare states in Hungary and Switzerland can be characterised as 'hybrid' models of welfare, because, despite their conservative roots, they do not fit the welfare state typologies of Titmuss and Esping-Andersen (Ciccia, 2017: 2762; Tomka, 2015: 152). The Bismarckian, conservative roots of Swiss social policy can be observed, for instance, through the means-tested social allowances, the male-breadwinner model in social security (Fuchs et al., 2020: 53) or the relatively large number of faith-based social services. The novel neoliberal turn in the Swiss welfare state can be seen, for example, in the privatisation of profitable social services (such as elderly or early childhood services), the exclusive role of private medical insurers in the area of health care and the priority of private pension pillars (Ruoss, 2018; Wang and Aspalter, 2006: 42–43).

In the area of social assistance and poverty alleviation, Switzerland maintains a relatively generous system of social and housing allowances compared to other developed European countries (Nelson et al., 2020). However, residency is a quite important principle of Swiss social policy. It means that only Swiss citizens or foreigners with a residence permit are eligible to receive social supports. Undocumented migrants from the European Union/European Free Trade Association

(EU/EFTA) as well as the Global South are excluded from normative social transfers (Colombo et al., 2015: 8).

The Hungarian social state also preserved its conservative roots, primarily in the area of the contribution-based social security system that incorporates the main health and pension funds (Haggard and Kaufman, 2009: 315–321). At the same time, a steady state-socialist heritage can be seen in the example of outdated state-run institutions and low-quality services in the field of residential social institutions and health care facilities (Orosz and Kollányi, 2016: 349). In addition, neoliberal reforms occurred in the 1990s, when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) required several changes in the Hungarian pension system and family policy in return for the development loans (Tomka, 2015: 148). As a result of these austerities, state expenditures towards families and children were cut in half, and private pension insurers were implemented as competitors to the traditional social security model (Ferge, 2000: 352).

Both the Hungarian and Swiss governments strictly follow the principle of less eligibility, namely, that poor people should primarily be supported by the state's workfare programme, rather than through unconditional social allowances (Epple and Schär, 2015: 290; Kopasz and Gábos, 2018: 335). In both Switzerland and Hungary, conservative central governments are in power and shape the state-run socio-political agenda. For example, both governments expressed firm criticism against the bureaucracy of the EU, the EU's immigration legislation and the so-called welfare tourism from poorer countries (Epple and Schär, 2015: 307). One of the Swiss governing parties (SVP, Swiss People's Party) initiated a controversial campaign against the EU's migration policy in 2014. The Hungarian governing party (FIDESZ) also led a similar political campaign in 2015, blaming immigrants for taking jobs from locals and threatening national identity (Bartha et al., 2020: 77). In Hungary, in addition, leading politicians and the state media often blamed Roma and homeless people for the social and economic problems of the country (Evangelista, 2019: 321–323).

In both countries, the vast majority of social workers are employed by institutions belonging to the state administration and only a small but steadily growing segment of the professionals are employed by NGOs. Several smaller NGOs with social duties were formed in both countries in the last few decades to support the most vulnerable social groups who were abandoned or neglected by state-run social services. These civil organisations and movements were particularly active in three areas in the last couple of years: in the support of undocumented migrants, in the care of homeless people (in both Switzerland and Hungary) and in empowering the Roma (in Hungary). Swiss and Hungarian NGOs are able to represent the interests of highly vulnerable communities like the Roma people and undocumented migrants. Furthermore, these organisations can partly compensate the discrimination-based exclusion mechanisms at state-run institutions (like the exclusion of young refugees from public education and the discrimination of Roma women at hospitals' maternity wards) through alternative services (see Dominelli, 2008).

As we mentioned above, the restrictions in national legislation on migration and the firm criticism against the EU's migration policy are central elements of the national politics of both governments. The migration wave that marched through Hungary in 2015 shocked the country and caused insecurity and unpredictability among many people. This fear and anxiety were useful political munition for the weakening government party to develop an anti-migration political campaign, and position itself as the saviour of national identity (Bartha et al., 2020: 77; Juhász et al., 2017: 22). In Switzerland, recent intra-European migration from the new EU-member Central and Eastern European countries like Bulgaria and Romania caused insecurity among broader social groups. Particularly people with vulnerable labour market positions worried that their status in the labour market and the cultural identity of their country were threatened (Probst et al., 2019). As the previous examples show, migration means different challenges in Switzerland and Hungary. Switzerland

is not a member state of the EU; therefore, it has slightly deviating duties and responsibilities towards international migrants compared to the EU-member Hungary. However, the vast majority of migration-related international duties are similar in the two countries, as both of them are member states of the Schengen Area and have ratified the Dublin III agreement on the rights of migrating people.

The growing social needs of refugees have mobilised civil organisations in an unprecedented way in both countries since 2015. The Migration Aid and Shelter Association (*Menedék*) in Hungary or the No Human Being Is Illegal (*Kein Mensch ist illegal*) movement in Switzerland have established a new and critical way of civil courage and resistance against the hostile measures (like deportations and closed camps) of the state. These movements did not only achieve changes inside the community of social workers, but were also able to raise public awareness towards the severe needs and vulnerabilities of refugees. This novel multicultural sensitivity perspective that highlights cultural pluralism and facilitates social change is a new and promising element in the practice of Swiss and Hungarian social work.

In the area of homeless care, civil movements and organisations could develop an important and necessary secondary system that was able to compensate the deficiencies of state-run services in both countries. This was particularly so in the care of rough sleepers and/or undocumented homeless migrants in urban areas. In large Swiss cities like Geneva, Zürich and Basel, NGOs like *Schwarzer Peter*, *Anlaufstelle für Sans-Papiers* and *Carrefour-Rue* maintain services (e.g. soup-kitchens, meeting-points, street social work) and carry out various other activities for vulnerable homeless people. In Hungary, and particularly in Budapest, several new civil organisations are active in helping the homeless and other marginalised groups. Street Lawyers (*Utcajogász*), for example, provide free legal aid for homeless and other destitute people on the streets of Budapest, and Budapest Bike Mafia delivers free food for rough sleepers.

Needs of service users

The profession of social work is shaped not only by the macro-trends of social policy and the global socio-political challenges, but also by the specific needs and expectations of recipients (Payne and Askeland, 2016). New global social phenomena, such as mass migration from the Global South, structural unemployment in specific segments of the labour market, participation in the comprehensive digitalisation of daily life and global warming pose unprecedented challenges for the practice of social work (Goldkind et al., 2019).

As a result of these social changes, a new form of poverty has appeared in both Switzerland and Hungary: the destitution of a growing number of people who fell behind others in the global competition (Bundesamt für Statistik [BFS], 2019: 60; Dominelli, 2019: 18). The reappearance of long forgotten destitution means new issues for national social systems and institutions in both countries (Böhler, 2010; Böhnisch and Schröer, 2012: 64).

In larger Swiss cities, undocumented migrants (many EU citizens among them) are particularly threatened by severe exclusion as they live in the country without social rights and access to medical services (Roduit, 2020).² In Basel or Geneva, for instance, half of all service users at low-threshold homeless services came from one of the Central and Eastern European countries, and the majority of them live in the country without papers (Colombo et al., 2015; Epple and Schär, 2015). These people are EU citizens covered by the decree on the free movement of persons (also signed by Switzerland), but they are not eligible for social and medical services without residence permits. Particularly among the sex workers and the beggars, the vast majority of Eastern European migrants arriving to Switzerland belong to the Roma community. Studies from Geneva, Zürich and Basel show that besides the general residence-based rejection that they experience as unregistered

Eastern Europeans, the migrating Roma also face widespread racism at the state-run social services and other authorities (Colombo et al., 2015; Rathgeb, 2013: 17).

In Hungary, Roma communities living in the impoverished villages of the north-eastern region sank into a hopeless situation where social integration and participation in the labour market have become almost impossible (Virág, 2010). A total of 75 percent of the Roma population live in poverty (compared to 12 percent of the non-Roma) and only 27 percent of them are active in the labour market (compared to 60 percent of the non-Roma) in the 18–64 years age group (Bernát, 2016: 257). Despite the government's National Social Inclusion Strategy (2011) (*Nemzeti Társadalmi Beilleszkedési Stratégia*) and the substantial EU supports allocated to Roma integration projects, state-run services have been unable to overcome the poverty and social exclusion of the Roma communities (Ladányi, 2012: 173). However, critical social workers at civil organisations like *Bagázs* or *InDaHouse* have successfully implemented small but effective rural programmes (mostly early development programmes for Roma children like *Tanoda* or *Dobbantó*) that support social integration and human-capital development in an effective way. In urban areas, civil movements like *The City Is for All* (*A Város Mindenké*) introduced effective strategies against evictions and the penalisation of homelessness (Udvarhelyi, 2014: 821).

According to the information from low-threshold social institutions in both Switzerland and Hungary, the social consequences of the novel COVID-19 pandemic have further deepened the gap between destitute people and other social groups. Furthermore, the pandemic showed that the current system of social care is not able to adequately respond to the special needs of the most vulnerable groups like homeless people, sex workers or undocumented migrants. It has become visible that large and bureaucratic structures are hardly able to improve the living conditions of marginalised people in the time of crisis. The social problems of people who fell into poverty due to the pandemic are too complicated and multifaceted to be handled solely by social assistance and schematic state-run social services (Hegyesi and Rácz, 2020: 4). To alleviate the vulnerabilities of these groups, social, psychological and even biological components of the problem must be considered. Social work's interdisciplinary approach, as well as its internationality and intersectionality, are essential for modern social services in both countries. According to Zufferey (2017: 14–19), the analytical concept of intersectionality means that determining factors like gender, age and race must be taken into account in observing the nature and development of social problems.

As mentioned above, NGOs like the Forum for Critical Social Work (KRISO) in Switzerland or *The City Is for All* in Hungary have already proved that the new generation of social workers are not only critical towards the prevailing social, political and economic system, but are also able to develop their own strategies in the form of feminist and anti-racist social work practices, community actions and professional organisations.

Value system of social work

According to its fundamental mission, social work 'promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people' (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). In addition, the practice of critical social work is 'emancipatory, liberating and transformational' (Payne, 2020: 196) in interpersonal case work and community empowerment alike. Although social work was originally created and professionalised to help people with difficulties in a creative and liberating way, neoliberal politics demanded a widespread adaptation to the bureaucratic schemes of Western welfare states (Spolander et al., 2014; Strier, 2019). According to Epple and Kersten (2016: 125), this adaptation was a precondition of the broader acceptance of the social work profession and the price to be paid for being integrated into traditional social sciences.

Due to this bureaucratisation, social work is now determined by strict protocols and standards that make the profession more predictable, measurable and controllable for the political and economic actors, even if the ‘heart and soul’ of social work (like creativity, spontaneity and flexibility) are sacrificed during the process. As a result, social workers sink into a ‘double agent’ position where the representation of their employers’ interest is at least as important as the well-being of their clients (Martin, 2003: 22). The growing administrative duties at services shackle modern social work practice and further reinforce the profession’s administrative and executive functions.

In both Switzerland and Hungary, while the relevance of critical social work is growing (particularly in the area of non-profit services), state actors are only moderately open towards the critical and radical practices. Even the schools of social work often neglect teaching about the theory and practice of critical social work (KRISO, 2018: 8–9). A permanent dilemma for the critical approach is the following: How can the critical practice be integrated into the prevailing institutional structure, when criticism is directed towards the financiers and providers of social services? A beneficial synergy between critical work and mainstream (state-run) social institutions has not yet occurred in Hungary and Switzerland, as critical work is mostly reduced to the non-profit sector, taking advantage of the NGOs’ financial and professional independence. Nonetheless, there are some rare examples of critical social work being integrated into state or municipality practice. For example, after a new social-democratic leadership took over the management of Budapest in 2019, former critical social workers from The City Is for All were nominated to municipality commissions in the areas of social housing and assistance.

Despite promising local results, critical social work is unable to transform national social policies, and functions only in the form of community work in rural or urban communities in both countries. As critical practice openly criticises the ruling political order, authorities often handle critical workers and their organisations as renegades who offend institutional and political interests with their actions. In Budapest, after the government had made it illegal for homeless people to live on the streets, critical social workers confronted the authorities and organised protests for the homeless. For instance, they spent the night with homeless people in public spaces, or begged with them to express their solidarity – actions for which they were often arrested and summoned (Vári, 2011). In Basel, Switzerland, the so-called *Sans-Papier Movement* occupied churches with undocumented refugees to protect them from deportation (Epple and Schär, 2015: 303). These public actions aimed at protecting the poor and the vulnerable clearly expressed the real values of social work according to the Swiss and Hungarian code of social work ethics. However, they were not acceptable to the prevailing political order, and therefore social workers were penalised by the state through fines and short-term detentions.

Summary

This article introduced the development and current trends of critical social work in Switzerland and Hungary from the viewpoints of the prevailing neoconservative welfare systems, the needs of service users and the values of social work. Similar to many other developed countries, Swiss and Hungarian social policies are influenced by ‘new right’ political ideologies, and most of their services target the so-called ‘deserving’ poor fitting into the political image of a ‘good society’ or ‘work-based society’, while the ‘undeserving’ poor like homeless people and undocumented migrants are often excluded from statutory supports. These trends of ‘restrictive’ social policies were reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the need for state-run social supports rapidly increased in the whole society (Sommerfeld et al., 2021).

Amid the general emergency measures targeting the economic recovery during the pandemic, neoconservative central governments and their traditional institutions lose their focus on helping

the neediest layers of the society. However, NGOs were able to develop promising new services in supporting and caring for undocumented migrants, homeless people, street sex workers and other marginalised groups, creating a real alternative to the still dominant state-run system. Modern critical social work in Hungary and Switzerland is in close relationship with these new civil organisations and movements. Critical workers and their institutions are particularly active in areas where state-run services are less effective, such as in the fields of homeless care, migration aid and empowering Roma people. In Switzerland, critical social work occurs mostly in urban areas, while in Hungary, a significant base of critical work has developed in the form of rural social work supporting impoverished Roma communities. Swiss and Hungarian critical workers provide not only new and essential low-threshold services for needy people, but also appear as the only representatives of feminist, anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work practices, thus compensating the deficiencies of state-run institutions in the care of highly vulnerable groups.

Although critical social workers and their organisations are unable to reshape social policy at the national level and their presence is supplementary rather than decisive, they have considerable local results in the areas of community development and empowerment in urban and rural communities in both Switzerland and Hungary.

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Notes

1. The Bismarckian model of social welfare was established in Germany at the end of the 19th century, then quickly spread across continental Europe. The model was based on a state-run social security system sustained by the tripartite contributions of employers, employees and of state budget. The Bismarckian system provided financial protection to industrial workers and their families in case of accidents, illness or old age.
2. The estimated number of undocumented migrants in Switzerland varies between 80,000 and 100,000 people, the vast majority of whom arrive from countries of the Global South (Epple and Schär, 2015: 301).

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