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Solidarity. A Key Concept for Social Work

Abstract: This paper advocates an understanding of solidarity that is emancipatory, planetary, self-reflective and aimed at social justice. As global problems such as climate change, war and poverty worsen, it argues that solidarity should be a key concept of social work in the 21st century. It is then social work's task, as a discipline, profession and field of education, to promote solidary alliances with those conventionally considered to be research subjects, addressees or learners and with the planet itself. These alliances can be brought together under the heading of convivialism, envisioning and enabling a progression from criticising exclusion to achieving the real utopia of an international community based on solidarity. Convivialist ideas see themselves as an alternative to neoliberalism, and aim to transform social conditions, increasing inclusion and sustainability.

Keywords: Solidarity, convivialism, refugee migration, civil society, inclusion, green social work, social work.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the concept of solidarity and what it means for social work. It raises the question of how solidarity can be understood if solidary unity is to be achieved in a world characterised by increasing social inequalities – and what role social work can play in this process as a transformative profession and discipline.

At the latest since the spread of SARS-CoV-2, appeals for solidarity with people in the local communities, staff in the care sector and the nation as a whole have been seen on a daily basis. At the same time, many people are excluded from the frequently invoked solidary “us”. People who live in poverty or who are housed in refugee accommodation in Austria, Germany, Switzerland and other countries, or on Europe's outskirts, were already in circumstances requiring extensive coping behaviour; the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this (Lutz, Kleibl, 2020). In its report “Pov-

erty and Shared Prosperity 2020”, the World Bank’s projections (2020) indicated that the number of poor people worldwide would rise again for the first time in over 20 years. In 2020, it was possible that between 88 million and 115 million people would fall back into extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic, with an additional increase of between 23 million and 35 million in 2021, bringing the total number of people living in extreme poverty to between 110 and 150 million (ibid., xi). This intensification of poverty is interlinked with other catastrophic events. Walton and Van Aalst (2020, 4–5) speak of “overlapping disasters” and identify 132 climate-related disasters interacting with the Corona pandemic for the year 2020 (as of September). According to these estimates, 431.7 million people worldwide were affected by extreme heat in addition to the disaster caused by the virus, and 51.6 million people were affected by flood, drought and storm events.

This paper takes the challenges of the 21st century, such as the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the climate crisis, wars and the dangers posed by pandemics, as an opportunity for a fundamental exploration of what solidarity means for a social work that aims for inclusion in a “world risk society” (Beck, 1999). The *first step* it takes is to offer an insight into the history of the concept of solidarity up to the present. The *second step* is to show that it is civil society alliances, in particular, which are dealing with the pressing issues of our time and the worsening inequalities, and are coming up with new ideas for transformative practices. The *third step* the paper takes is to pick up the baton of that commitment and raise the question of what contribution social work can make to tackling contemporary global problems. It calls for a solidary professionalism and a global, planetary, cooperative and self-reflective social work that is aware of its present and historical interconnections with social movements. In the *fourth step*, the paper positions itself in relation to convivialist narratives which are currently mainly being negotiated in sociology and racism research, coming up with ideas for a transformative, convivial form of social work that is dedicated to the life-affirming coexistence of people, animals and the environment and regards solidarity as its central value. This is followed by the *conclusion*, arguing that social work could be on an equal footing with all the bodies that work for a socially just world.

2. Solidarity. History and theory

The concept of solidarity has thrived in many spheres of society. It has repeatedly been appropriated and shaped by different groups. Solidarity is a theoretical concept and an analytical perspective, but above all it is a social practice. Laitinen (2013) differentiates between four contexts in which it has been adopted. Firstly, the term is used to explain the quality of group interconnections. Solidarity is understood as the glue that holds society and communities together (“*social solidarity*”). Secondly, the term is linked to the ideal of fraternity, and negotiated as an aspired-for political situation and a principle of the welfare state (“*civic solidarity*”). Thirdly, solidarity is held up as an attitude and a desideratum by civil society in its struggles to achieve greater justice and combat oppression (“*political solidarity*”). The fourth context is as a universalist ethical principle and a moral response to human existence (“*human, moral and global solidarity*”).

Historically, engagement with the concept can be traced back at least as far as the Roman Empire, via the French Revolution and on to the workers’ movement and the institutionalisation of solidarity in the form of the welfare state (Bayertz, 1999). In the Roman Empire, the “*obligatio in solidum*” was a type of liability according to which each member of a community had to settle all existing debts, while, in return, the community was liable for the debts of each individual member: “One for all, all for one” (Brunkhorst, 2005, 2). In the course of the 18th century, the connotation of the term changed and solidarity was transferred to a political context. In 1804, the French expression “*solidarité*” entered Napoleon’s Civil Code (Laitinen, 2013). The principle of fraternity was laid down in the French constitution of 1848, and in the second half of the 19th century, the term “solidarity” was politically weaponised by the labour movement (Bude, 2019, 27). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels understood solidarity as a revolutionary Marxist, international maxim. In the Communist Manifesto, they called upon the oppressed working class to unite against the ruling class which owned the means of production, and against the capitalist economic order: “Working men of all countries, unite!” (Marx, Engels, 2014, 84). As certain countries developed welfare state structures, the principle of solidarity became institutionalised and separated from the idea of a class struggle, which was indeed now seen as something to be avoided. In these countries, a social safety net, e. g. by means of health or unemployment insurance, goes hand in hand with certain citizens having specific legal rights (Bayertz, 1999, 21–22).

In the social sciences, the term “solidarity” was adopted in German- and English-speaking countries from the middle of the 19th century. In Europe, figures such as Émile Durkheim, Axel Honneth and Jürgen Habermas got to grips with the concept, while the writings of Richard Rorty and Paulo Freire, among others, drew a huge response in the Americas and elsewhere. In his study *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1893/1960) differentiates between mechanical and organic solidarity. By mechanical solidarity, he means the unity that arises from similarities between individuals, collective identities, local interdependencies and commonalities such as religious affiliation. Organic solidarity describes how people in a society based on the division of labour depend upon one another, and how unity is established through a common focus on specific interests (ibid., 229–237). For modern societies, Honneth (1994/2012, 210) emphasises the importance of solidarity as the basis for a symmetrical balance of appreciation between individualised and autonomous subjects. He posits that solidarity is fundamentally required before a situation can arise in which competition among individuals no longer causes pain, i. e. it is not beset by experiences of disregard. For Habermas (1992, 70) the relationship between solidarity and justice is central. He sees these concepts not as two complementary elements, but as two aspects of the same thing. While the concept of justice relates to every single person enjoying the same freedoms, and demands that each individual’s dignity needs to be respected and treated equally, solidarity focuses on the well-being of people who are closely united in an intersubjectively shared way of life. To Habermas, solidarity is a component of a universalist morality and should not be thought of as particularist and ethnocentric (Habermas, 1992, 70). Rorty (1989) also addresses this central point in his work “Contingency, irony and solidarity”, distancing himself from an essentialist, reified understanding of solidarity as a given characteristic of humanity (ibid., 198). He writes: “In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away ‘prejudice’ or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved” (ibid., XVI). To achieve that goal, he argues, we need to cultivate

“the ability to see more and more traditional differences [...] as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’” (ibid., 192).

Rorty’s explanations are central to the creation of solidarity in a pluralised, global society. It is only if solidarity is viewed and – above all – practised in

an “expansive sense” (ibid., 196) that it becomes possible to tear down, rather than producing or reproducing, representations of “us” and “them”. Rorty sees utopias, employed as methods for stimulating this imagination (Scheel, 2010), as a central means of developing this kind of solidary global society. Utopias point towards the many shapes which social and political circumstances can take (ibid., 187) and the opportunity to step into the “world’s stories” (ibid., 201). In Paolo Freire’s (2005) “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, the creation of a solidary “we” means oppressors showing solidarity with the oppressed, and them transforming society together (ibid., 45). Freire sees solidarity as a radical act of entering into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity: “true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these ‘beings for another’” (ibid., 49). In his understanding, the oppressor “is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor” (ibid., 49–50). The ultimate goal is to free people from oppression and achieve “full humanity” (ibid., 53). However, that pursuit “cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (ibid., 53). Freire regards education and dialogue as emancipatory pedagogical approaches followed to achieve a solidary togetherness underpinned by love. Mergner (2002) gives recognition to Freire’s continuing significance, but replaces the thought of human *love* with a reference to human *rights*, underlining the special status of human dignity as inviolable and deserving of protection, a factor he believes Freire did not focus upon sufficiently. This factor connects to Habermas’ perspective on the interwovenness of solidarity and justice.

Against the background of increasing global inequality, the concepts of solidarity highlighted here offer important inspiration for an emancipatory definition of solidarity that transcends national borders, social classes and thinking in separate groups. Recently, Scherr (2019) has called for the concept of solidarity to be formulated cautiously, as it is also appropriated by right-wing extremists as a means of contriving homogeneous groups and legitimising the exclusion of people. He presents his conceptualisation of a universalistic understanding of solidarity that aims for social justice. Meanwhile, Lessenich (2020) emphasises that it is simplistic to view solidarity one-dimensionally as national social cohesion, and that this view is ultimately more exclusionist than inclusive. Lessenich argues that it would be useful to define solidarity as cooperative, performative and transformative. From that perspective, solidarity would then mean an interconnectedness

characterised by privilege being discarded and unequal opportunities in life being fundamentally reworked and changed. Solidarity, in this sense, is a “political practice” (Brodén, Mecheril, 2014, 13) that generates negotiations in society as a whole.

3. From single alliances towards an inclusive, intersectional solidarity?

As solidarity is first and foremost a lived practice that involves very specific actions, it comes as no surprise that inspiration for how to create a solidary society largely comes locally, from the “bottom up” (Hill & Schmitt, 2021). Major problems such as war, climate change and poverty have so far failed to be adequately resolved on the national, international and supranational levels. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), proclaimed by the United Nations in 2015, are in danger of being eclipsed by efforts to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the pandemic is making it especially clear which parts of the world do not, for example, have access to clean water. This throws into sharp relief the urgency of the SDGs with their call for sustainable and inclusive forms of global coexistence. As Contipelli and Picciau (2020, 31) put it, there is an urgent need for “global solidarity”: poverty, the destruction of the environment and disasters are problems affecting not just individual people or countries, but everyone in the world. As this paper argues, there are new ideas arising in the form of civil society alliances formed by a variety of different people coming together with a common goal and a common vision, based on their directly or indirectly shared experience of being oppressed and searching for just forms of living together (Stjepandić, Karakayalı, 2018). Such solidary alliances come about when social inequalities are perceived as too great. At present, a colourful potpourri of associations can be found. Examples include cities, municipalities and translocal movements showing solidarity with refugees and explicitly distancing themselves from national trends towards closing their borders to refugees (Bauder, 2021). Also on a small, neighbourhood scale, various initiatives have emerged since the “long summer of migration” in 2015 (Kubaczek, Mokre, 2021). These range from “good neighbours” schemes to tandem language exchanges or housing and art projects (Schiffauer, Eilert, Rudloff, 2017). One thing the various alliances have in common is that they deal with avenues of social inequality which have not been adequately explored by state actors. As Mayblin and James (2019, 391) show for the UK, it is third sector alliances which are “playing a significant role in

supporting those who have been failed by a state which has a duty to provide for all of their essential living needs”. Based on interviews with founders of refugee support organizations in Austria, Jong and Ataç (2017, 28) point out that “these organisations have managed to occupy a middle space between mainstream NGOs and social movements” and produced “a new type of organisation, which both delivers services and articulates radical demands” (ibid.). Schiffauer (2018, 29) argues that now, it is important to establish dialogues and balancing acts between civil society’s creativity and administrative and bureaucratic logic. These dialogues have the potential to enrich the search for a common European and worldwide asylum space and to lead to new, hitherto unthought-of solutions. At the same time, these civil alliances must not be overestimated in their reach and effective power, as they are themselves repeatedly the target of hostility and criticism, struggle to obtain resources to realise their ideas, and encounter limitations imposed by national and European policies (Schmelz, 2019).

Looking at the field of solidary alliances, it becomes clear that flight migration is one area among others to which their commitment stretches: the Fridays for Future movement, for example, draws attention to the situation of climate change, demands a transformation in the way we treat the world and creates a collective agency “due to its capacity to retrieve scientific knowledge and transform it into lived knowledge enacted in the real world” (Francesconi, Symeonidis, Agostini, 2021, 2). In the context of the financial crisis beginning in 2007, as Jaramillo and Carreón (2014, 392) explain, social protest movements such as the Occupy movements and the Indignados in Spain form a “new era in social movements” since they consist in a wide public standing together due to “economic inequality, job losses, and reduction of social safety nets” (ibid., 393).

As the suffering of people under the consequences of neoliberal policies, under wars and catastrophes is linked to our way of doing business, consuming and using the resources of the world, a *planetary view on solidarity* is increasingly coming onto the agenda (Wintersteiner, 2021). This involves thinking of the whole world, the environment and animals as the subject of solidarity. In this context, Von Essen and Allen (2017) discuss the “bridging potential of ‘interspecies’ solidarity” (ibid, 641), meaning a solidarity “with animals and [...] a political practice based on open public deliberation of universalizable claims to justice; that is, claims to justice advanced by human proxy representatives of vulnerable non-humans” (ibid.). With a view to an ecological consumption and to solidary economies, there are collective agriculture projects that organise the organic cultivation of fruit and vegetables on a cooperative basis and which are enjoying increasing popularity

(<https://www.solidarische-landwirtschaft.org/>). Here, a farm joins forces with a group of households. The goal is to share the harvest and its costs. Baier, Müller and Werner (2018) picture these new urban spaces in their book “Stadt der Commonisten” (City of the Commonists). They portray, for example, the urban gardening movement with photographs showing people’s ecological engagement in their everyday life. The urban gardening movement is in solidarity with the matters of concern to the international smallholders’ movement. Through urban practices of growing plants for all the people in a city, they raise awareness of the importance of healthy food and of campaigning for fair prices and access to land for the direct producers (ibid., 40).

Although solidary alliances come up with new ways of dealing with the planet, the impression should not be given that solidary projects consistently meet with an approving response and are unreservedly supported by society as a whole (Hill, Schmitt, 2021, 10). Their key characteristic, in fact, is that they emerge in response to the destruction of the environment, to capitalism, racism and to a nation-statist policy of closing borders: this is precisely what causes them to arise (Koos, 2019). With a view to individual alliances, it is important to ask which actors are involved, and probe into questions of power. For example, Sommer et al. (2020) determine that although an increasingly wide variety of actors are engaged in the Fridays for Future movement, the group is currently mainly shaped by young people who are seeking or have achieved a high level of education. Solidary alliances are not inclusive per se. They may equally cultivate exclusion by forming a collective “us” – as shown in analyses of the women’s movement in countries in the Global North from the end of the 1960s (e. g. Koppert, 2018). Although the women involved called for *all* women around the world to be liberated, the issues affecting Black women have largely been ignored. To prevent exclusionary identity policies from being created under the auspices of solidarity, the question is currently once again being raised of whether, and how, fluid solidary alliances can be brought into a dialogue. This could make it possible to connect forms of *intersectional, inclusive solidarity* (Ciccia, Roggeband, 2021) engaging in different fields of society, enabling them to gain an influence within society as a whole, to share resources and to mitigate and reflect upon the danger of a cementation of a specific form of group thinking and construction through solidary practices.

4. A planetary social work solidarity – global, cooperative, self-reflective

What do these considerations signify for social work? In this paper, social work is understood as a human rights profession (Staub-Bernasconi, 2016) which, on a firm basis of professional ethics and theory, deals with issues of social exclusion, and whose remit includes striving for social change, participation and inclusion (IFSW, 2014). Social work calls for the “rights of all for a life in dignity” (Franger, Lohrenscheit, Muinjangué, 2014, 14), but has a particular obligation to people who are threatened and affected by mechanisms of exclusion. Professionals work with them with the aim of achieving autonomy and giving all people an equal ability to live self-determined lives, following their own wishes. In the light of these professional tasks, it is mainly professional associations which use the term “solidarity” to describe social work’s mission (e. g. obds, 2017; Avenir Social, 2014), although it is occasionally also used in the academic literature (e. g. Seithe, 2012; Bettinger, 2013, 105). In well-known German-language handbooks such as the “Handbuch Soziale Arbeit” (Otto et al., 2018) or the “Grundriss Sozialer Arbeit” (Thole, 2012), it is not brought up as a key term belonging to the discipline and profession (Hill, Schmitt, 2021, 8). One exception is a treatise by Mückenberger (2017) on the concept of solidarity in the “Wörterbuch Soziale Arbeit” (Kreft, Mielenz, 2017). Mückenberger (2017) describes it as a pedagogical task to rise above divisive categories and to enable people to live a life in circumstances which allow them to come into communication (ibid., 809) despite and beyond their different biographies, skills and needs. Mechthild Seithe (2012, 35–36) also considers the concept of solidarity to be of great significance to social work. Rather than seeing solidarity among people and with the world as an alternative to professional social work, she views the creation and recreation of networks and solidary relationships as one of the profession’s genuine tasks. These expositions show that solidarity is central to social work and that solidarity with the marginalised is part of the field’s self-image (Hosemann, Trippmacher, 2003). In the light of the rise of racist, anti-feminist and homophobic movements and the precarisation of broad sections of the population, Hark (2019, 29) calls for a “new language of solidarity”. At a time when the richest one per cent of the world’s population owns more than 46 per cent of the global wealth, solidarity would need a global framework and must be an alternative to fascism, war and racism (ibid., 34).

The great and even growing importance of solidarity makes it all the more surprising that the term has not yet become established as a key con-

cept within social work; especially in German-language discourse, the concept has so far received little attention. One reason for this may lie in the fact that in countries in the Global North, such as Austria or Germany, social work is part of the welfare state. This goes back to the leaps and bounds in modernisation made as those societies became industrialised, releasing people from the ties of their lifeworlds in their milieus of origin and removing the safety barriers of their old lifestyle with its clear paths (Rauschenbach, 1994, 89). The support organised by the welfare state is intended to help mitigate the risks of individualised ways of life, and to deal with crises. However, the fact that social work is professionalised and organised at the national level also brings its own problems. The *first issue* is that it threatens to create a distance between social workers and their addressees. Rauschenbach (1994), for example, notes that the working relationship between social workers and their addressees is becoming increasingly anonymised, and that specialisation and a lack of connections between the different support schemes are contributing to a widening gap between the knowledge amassed by the actors themselves and by professionals (ibid., 97–98), and, if anything, stifling solidarity. The *second issue* is that until now, being part of nation states, social work has found it hard to sustainably establish solidary arenas for international action and pinpoint approaches to deal with global problems. This is despite the fact that social work looks back on a rich history of international networking that can guide its actions in the here and now (Chambon, Johnstone, Köngeter, 2015).

Social work's embeddedness in the welfare state and the sluggish expansion of its scope of action may provide an explanation for the as yet hesitant discussion on worldwide solidarity or on climate change in the German-speaking social work discourse. It equally shows that social work has to explore new paths if it is to address the pressing issues arising in this era of globalisation. A solidary conceptualisation may be one route worth further exploration if social work wants to work "towards making social relations viable under the conditions of globalisation" (Lorenz, 2005, 97). As civil society alliances have been shown to potentially be capable of thinking beyond the limits of the nation state, this paper thus argues for reflection on social work's historical connections with social movements. In the past, social work has been closely linked to civil society movements, such as the women's movement, which tackle the social problems also dealt with by social work (Wagner, 2009, 9). Some social movements have considerably affected the process by which the profession has become established (ibid., 13). The many new solidary initiatives also offer a variety of possibilities.

One professional way of thinking about this type of connection can be found in the works of Timm Kunstreich (2017). With the aspiration of releasing social work from the “impasse of professionalism” and thinking beyond a paternalistic pattern of providing aid, Kunstreich develops a vision of a solidary professionalism. This means a professionalism that reflects fundamentally on what social and political problems mean to the people they affect, and is united in solidarity with them. Kunstreich argues that by this means, social work could break away from its “structurally conservative position” in the hegemonic order (ibid., 123) and step down from its pedestal of supposed expertise about its addressees. Kunstreich’s argument revolves around the “with” social code (ibid., 124), understood as social work professionals and the people concerned collectively shaping society *together*. He envisions this shared sociality as disciplinary institutions being replaced by cooperating associations in the shape of social cooperatives and local resource funds which members – social work addressees and professionals alike – would implement productively (ibid., 124). In this understanding, solidarity is explored as imagined by Freire and Rorty, and means acting in partnership. It is focused on the creation of new social spaces along with the individuals conventionally categorised as being beneficiaries, and with other social actors.

Currently, there are certainly signs that social work has the potential to turn its attention in various ways towards Kunstreich’s “with” social code within *research, education and training*, as well as in *professional practice*. This engagement ranges from an upsurge in participatory research with displaced or poor people (e. g. Cool Kids, Tr an, 2020) to progressive pedagogical projects in practice and attempts to further open educational institutions such as universities to all, by putting questions of inclusion and diversity on the agenda. One example of an innovative teaching project in the context of solidarity is located at the University of Graz (Mikula, Klinger, 2019). In 2015, teaching staff, students and volunteers jointly developed a temporary caf e. People with and without experience of flight, politicians, city residents and students met at the caf e to talk and share ideas about how to get on together successfully in a diverse society. The initiator’s idea was to create a space for storytelling and for encounters and to enable contact between new arrivals and people who had already been living in Graz for a long time – and to create solidarity from below.

If, as Freire puts it, social work wants to show unconditional solidarity with its addressees, it will need to campaign for greater participation and autonomy not just *for* them, but *with* them. This requirement weighs heavier against the background of an activating welfare state that tends to regard

problems such as poverty as self-inflicted, the fault of the individual – and against the background of global inequalities. On this topic, the Arbeitskreis Kritische Soziale Arbeit (AKS, 2013, 2) makes a clear and urgent plea:

“To counter these developments, solidarity needs to be rediscovered and reformulated in social work. It has always been social work’s duty, following a self-critical, dialogical approach, to recognise clients’ interests [...] and to demonstrate what solidarity means both in practice and in its policy. Social work must return to its self-understanding as part of the historical process of emancipation” (ibid., 2, translated from German).

Seen in this light, social work is dedicated to the situations of the disadvantaged population as a public and political problem, is fundamentally democratic and shows solidarity with those on the losing end of neo-social politics. One central aspect is that social work based on solidarity never acts against the people involved (ibid., 3) and, referring to professional ethics and theory, refuses requests by politicians or other authorities to go against its principles – for example, by participating in deportations. Rather, one of its tasks is to intervene into social circumstances in a professional, scientifically well-founded manner and “draw on the experience of social movements [...] or on experience with self-governance projects and community work” (ibid., 4, translated from German). Positions like these tie in with international debates. Russell (2017), for example, from the initiative “Auckland Action Against Poverty”, advocates “competent solidarity” and aims to put an end to paternalism in the profession. Russell calls for a “paradigm shift” (ibid., 137) – moving from what he sees as an excessive focus on individual behaviours and patterns to create a social work that is politicised and critical of capitalism:

“Competent solidarity entails a consciously politicised method of working with people to achieve social change [...]. There is an explicit understanding that neoliberalism can lead to the wealth of only a privileged few. [...] Within social work, individuals are distinct clients. [...] The professional is the expert and the client is the recipient of that expertise. Within this relationship there is no shared interest [...]. By contrast, competent solidarity [...] recognises that political advocacy is integral to this. There is a shared interest between all the people involved” (Russell, 2017, 137).

For Russell, solidary social work revolves around a “collective awareness of oppression” (ibid., 138), followed by joint political action. This framing is in line with the demands made by Thole and Wagner (2020, 35) not to let socio-politically questionable developments in social work pass unchallenged, but to recall the discipline’s critical stances on society and social work – and to formulate criticism and to “revive political thought and activism” (ibid., 39).

In view of the fact that the exploitation of people is intertwined with the exploitation of the planet and animals, and that the climate crisis is a major global problem, a solidary social work can even be extended further and recognise the whole planet as social work’s addressee and partner. Following this line of thought, Dominelli, Nikku, and Ku (2018, 2) propose establishing a Green social work “to transform the socio-political and economic forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalised populations and secure the policy changes and sustainable social transformations necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet today and in the future”. Here, the focus is on a *planetary value system* that is committed to a fair distribution of resources and the preservation of planetary resources instead of their destruction. This would mean the intergenerational and interspecies coexistence of all people, animals, plants and generations on earth now and in future (ibid., 3).

A central part of this self-image is that, just like solidary initiatives, social work always critically questions its own actions, interpretations and concepts and subjects its own profession and discipline to ongoing power-critical analysis. This is of great importance, because neither social work nor solidary initiatives act outside of power relations (Maurer, 2019, 370): They are part of hierarchical orders that need to be constantly analysed, taking into account their own position, with the aim of changing direction towards more justice, more inclusion, more sustainability. This “radical reflexivity” (Kessl, Maurer, 2021) involves being aware of the own involvement in social inequalities, meaning looking at the own practices and concepts since even social workers can act in non-solidary ways that can marginalise or discriminate against people.

5. Convivial quests

An understanding of a planetary, solidary social work that considers alliances with social movements in world society can be strongly linked to debates on convivialism. Such debates involve progressing from the analysis and criticism of processes of social exclusion to real utopias of solidarity,

and shaping practice accordingly, raising and thus transforming the level of participation and sustainability found in communities and social conditions. The term “convivialism” (Latin *convivere*) describes a social quest and political real utopia in pursuit of socially just means of living together in a global society. Living together is defined in the solidary sense of caring for one another and for nature, with the awareness that natural resources are finite (Die konvivialistische Internationale, 2020, 35–39). The concept has been significantly influenced by Ivan Illich (1973), Paul Gilroy (2006) and, more recently, by an association of more than 60 intellectuals including Alain Caillé, Eva Illouz and Chantal Mouffe (Die konvivialistische Internationale, 2020) and by works by Erol Yildiz and Florian Ohnmacht (2020).

Illich (1973, 11) already understood this term in the 1970s as a critique of the idea of limitless, industrial growth: “Society can be destroyed when further growth of mass production renders the milieu hostile, when it extinguishes the free use of the natural abilities of society’s members, when it isolates people from each other”. By “convivial” he means a society in which technologies serve individuals rather than “managers” and in which actors act responsibly in the world. Gilroy (2006, 6) relates the term to living together in a migration society and thus refers to creative, resistant practices against racism and everyday forms of intervention under conditions of diversity. Yildiz and Ohnmacht (2020) follow up on Gilroy and search for a “convivial ethics” (ibid., 153). They elaborate that a convivial ethics must reach beyond nationalist, culturalist, classist and gender-based compartmentalised thinking. In year 2013, a group of mainly French intellectuals released ideas of convivialism as a “new philosophy” (Adloff, 2020, 35). They wrote Part I and II of the Convivialist Manifesto, composed in cooperation. The Manifesto understands convivialism as an alternative to the neoliberal idea; “conviviality, by contrast, is the lived praxis of this idea” (ibid., 36). It opposes limitless growth and argues that in a neo-liberal society, global problems cannot be solved in a socially just, ecological manner, and that new approaches are called for (Die konvivialistische Internationale, 2020, 33–42). These approaches would follow the goal of not just criticising prevailing problems and demanding changes in the global society, but also addressing the vision of an international community. The manifesto argues that this international community can only succeed if a new global awareness is created that conserves the world’s resources and takes responsibility for the environment, embraces decommodification and forms democracies (ibid., 73–86). To achieve this, the manifesto’s authors suggest – among other things – establishing unconditional solidarity with poor people and a universal, transparent tax system enabling a minimum level of purchasing

power to be transferred from the well-integrated to the poorest households (ibid., 76). They propose encouraging and pushing for a solidarity-based economy, collaborative forms of knowledge production, consumer platforms and trading posts, and reuse and recycling processes (ibid., 77–80).

Social work that is understood as solidary shares an aim with the convivialist idea: both would like to enable all people and living beings to live together inclusively, with a special focus on those who find themselves in marginalised and vulnerable circumstances. In social work, a reflection of convivialist narratives is still a desideratum; convivialist ideas are mainly taken up in Postcolonial Studies, in sociology, peace theory and critical race theory, as well as in postmigration research. Convivialist viewpoints may also offer social work a glimpse of the future as a profession and a discipline, and pave the way for new approaches. They have the potential to lead solidarity-based social work onto the global stage, and to enable it to cooperate with other professions, disciplines, political entities and civil society by reflecting on and further developing a perspective of convivialism. While focusing on this potential, Nowicka (2020, 16) reminds us not to overestimate the convivialist debates. She sees a great opportunity in a shift in focus from the individual towards sociality. At the same time, she warns that ideas of convivialism should not be reduced to a “utilitarian approach which relies [only, CS] on the sense of human capacity for achieving change” (ibid., 32).

6. Conclusion. Solidarity as a key concept of social work

This paper has underlined the importance of solidarity as a principle for social work in a world shaped by increasing social inequalities. It argues that solidarity could be more sharply defined as being aimed at social justice, and being global, planetary and self-reflective. An understanding of solidarity that transcends a narrow, national and group-specific solidary “us” and moves towards a broad solidarity between various actors in a globalised and pluralised world has potential to be a key concept and vision for social work. Solidarity then means a connectedness between people, animals and the planet based on collective sociality which evokes a sharing of experiences and knowledge. It creates encounters, but is not utilitarian in the sense that it serves only to achieve particular interests. Instead, solidarity conceived in this way creates an awareness of a fundamental interconnectiveness and responsibility for each other and of a conscious, sustainable use of the world’s limited resources. It advocates social work solidarity by further promoting solidary forms of collaboration on the level of the discipline,

the profession and of education and training – on an equal footing *with* those conventionally categorised as being the research subjects, addressees or learners (Schmitt, 2020, 406–407; Hill & Schmitt, 2021, 24). Working with civil society alliances that grapple with the issues of war, poverty, flight and climate change could offer social work new ideas for extending its practice beyond national borders and further moving towards a solidary professionalism. The source of social work’s legitimation would then not so much be providing professional support *for* its beneficiaries, as seeking a solidary, convivial version of society *in partnership with* all those affected by marginalisation, and with everyone engaged in implementing concepts of inclusive coexistence.

Questions that still need to be discussed are how a solidary social work can actually be implemented on a planetary scale, what organisations it needs for this, how it can be financed and what tasks this entails for the training of social workers at present and in the future. Another important task is to go beyond the approaches presented here and analyse what further understandings of solidarity have been developed in other contexts – for example in alliances in the Global South – in order to disembed the debate on solidarity from a possible epistemological narrowness.

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