

# The dialectics of concepts, aesthetics and politics in social work

Morten Nissen, Thomas Gylling Andersen, Sebastian Tobias-Renstrøm  
Department of Education, Aarhus University

## Introduction

The project that we are going to talk about today is one where we try to follow and articulate the emergence of a new social work practice that tries to address young people's motivation for many things, including more healthy drug habits, at a place called 18+, set up for young people "at risk of crime".

First a note on the word 'dialectics' in our title. Dialectics is not very fashionable. This is because dialectics is often seen as a fixed sequence toward an end we already know. There are 2 ways to deal with this: To criticize dialectics, or to rearticulate dialectics.

Rearticulating dialectics can take off from Ilyenkov: An epistemology of practice. Dialectics, not as a reflection of thought or language as convention - neither as a description of the laws of nature independent of us - but as a reflection of what we do.

Ilyenkov: Dialectics is logic is "the objective laws of subjective activity" (Dialectical Logic, 94)

Teleology does not come from God or Spirit or some iron necessity of History that determines our activity as a law. It is derived from the projects within which our activities make sense.

Reconstructing what we may have been doing without reflecting on it. And the hopes through which it makes sense, and through which that reflection itself makes sense.

In such a dialectics, concepts are no longer names for things. Firstly, concepts are the standards that practices are governed by - their ends, means, agents and objects - and the semantic networks of differences and transformations (negations) that derive from this. Secondly, those standards are objectified in tools, in material artefacts. Those artefacts then function as models of practices - as prototypes. And if they are specialized for that function, they serve as *ideal artefacts*.

The movement of thinking, or ideality

"exists only through the unceasing process of the transformation of the form of activity – into the form of a thing and back – the form of a thing into the form of activity" (Dialectics of the Ideal, 77)

Generalities exist first of all as forms of practice and as artefacts, in semantic structures of communities, cultures, infrastructures of artefacts and technologies.

In this view, it is possible to trace the movements of concepts between the general, the specific and singular. As historical differentiations of simple forms, but also as emergent realizations of universalities and syntheses. Abstractions that represent germs cells that evolve into complex wholes

also go on to exist as special forms or singular entities, some of which represent or deal with the complex wholes.

For instance, *the human being* as such emerged once in history, and it is remade as potential every time a child is born. Certain institutional practices work to generalize by stripping human beings of all qualities apart from their bare life (cf. Agamben: *Homo Sacer*), and finally, certain practices claim to realize the aspirations of humanity.

To take another example, '*society*' in its abstract, germ cell version can be said to have emerged historically as communities of humans that reproduced and developed through technologically mediated practices. It then developed in multiple forms and is a crucial aspect of all specific practices which are for that reason called 'social practices'. But it also exists today as singular entity, both as the universal global totality of praxis, and as all the singular concrete universals that sovereign states have had to deal with on their territory - and which established the relevance of the concept as it emerged historically.

This dynamic approach to concepts in practice is very relevant if one wants to understand social work. There is a way in which social work keeps moving between the general, the specific and the singular.

If we trace the historical emergence of social work, it was about the social problem that appeared as symptoms of a lack of cohesion with a rising capitalism. *The Social Problem* was soon differentiated into social problems. Certain specific problems such as pauperism, crime, prostitution, alcoholism, addiction etc. appeared. But they were still social, in the sense that they represented symptoms of the whole and resisted specialized intervention. The specialized institutions - schools and hospitals - did really not match them. And still do not.

This process occurs time and time again. Suddenly the ruling powers must confront problems that arise - e.g. young people suddenly shoot each other in the streets, or prostitute themselves in new ways. Each time, social work is then reinvented, in a kind of 'reinventing of the wheel'. New thin or abstract concepts appear, such as "young people in risk of crime or of radicalization", which are then fleshed out as concrete practices and collectives.

Social work performs two kinds of generality.

1. It addresses the community as a whole, since social problems appear as symptoms of a lack of social cohesion
2. It addresses persons as whole persons, since their problems cannot be pinned down to specific diseases to be cured or skills to be acquired

This is why social work is one tradition where *subjectivity* has been dealt with, mostly in conservative moralizing ways, but sometimes in more progressive ways where developing persons was seen to require developing communities and societies.

That does not mean that specialization isn't attempted. Often, the movement leads toward specialization. The abstract concepts are concretized through a differentiation into kinds - which then perform each their specific abstractions, carried by expertise and institutional regulations. But the complex whole still exists as the general without which the specialized practices don't make sense - and also in the special practices of communication, coordination etc. - and even in the auxiliary practices that arise to deal with the off-category problems that, once again, keep appearing, within every new field<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Every system has its 'garbage can' category of the uncategorizable

Further, to make it even more complicated, the specialized practices sometimes only *pretend* to specialize. For instance, trauma-based intervention claims to address those social problems that derive in specific ways from childhood trauma and now exist as brain dysfunctions. This connects to and expands the specialized practices of psychiatry or clinical psychology. But in reality, it becomes just a new moralizing vocabulary with which to address the interaction of community and person. I have called this a boundary objectivity.

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As mentioned, social work performs the generality in which the persons in question are addressed as unique individuals in their own right. Drawing from Mark Philp's theory about social work this is explained symbolically by saying that the task of the social worker is to emancipate the individual from a predominant societal discourse in which the individual is explained mainly through descriptions of its objective characteristics – this for instance educational achievements or lack of it. The task of the social worker is then here to turn the attention towards the subjectivity, or you could say the uniqueness of the individual.

But how do you conceptualize the ontological nature of the individual and its uniqueness? We will here argue, that in order to do this scientifically, a dialectical theoretical framework can be applied by which it is encompassed how the subjectivity of the individual is crucially embedded in intersubjective relations and societal structures.

We will now give two examples of how to grasp this empirically, and how it implicitly can be seen applied by the social worker. This we will do by presenting a part of my analysis of the social pedagogical practice 18+ working with “young people at risk of crime” in Copenhagen.

Our interviewee, the social worker Daniel, has told us a story about a day when he experienced that some of the young people were motivated to get out of their criminal way of life. In this situation he then encouraged them to smoke their marijuana in the posh neighborhood Frederiksberg instead of the socially and ethnically mixed Nørrebro – this in order to teach them about how this activity in various contexts sends certain signals to the police and the world around them. This example uncovers how the social worker uses his unique relation to some of the individuals in order to expand these young people's intersubjective awareness of themselves as being objects of other subject's awareness. With inspiration from Hegel and his dialectics of recognition it is explained how subjectivity is dialectically embedded in intersubjectivity. Self awareness is here developed and expanded in the process of acknowledging how “I see myself as an object of your perception, and I know that you do the same with me”. Thus, Daniel is potentially expanding the young people's self awareness when they possibly evolve their acknowledgement of themselves being the object of the policeman's perception and how this perception differs across contexts.

With reference to Ilyenkovs thoughts about ideal artefacts, we can say that the concept of 18+ moves between living practices and material artefacts and infrastructures of artefacts.

Within the theoretical framework of German-Scandinavian Critical Psychology a fundamental psychological process is the individual's endeavor towards being able to influence the structures under which the individual is participating. This influence seems rendered possible through Daniel's pedagogical work in 18+, which is exemplified in one of his stories from the institution. One evening he and his colleagues ended up talking to eight of the young people until the middle of the night about

all kinds of deep meaningful topics – and this occurred way passed the established structures of opening hours. This transcending of a very concrete structure, open hours, was only rendered possible by a specific type of participation by the young people, which encompassed the premise of contributing to the personal topics, this being about love, violence, childhood, family relations etc. It was made clear for us by Daniel, that the young people in question were aware that they were contributing to a transcendence and transformation of established institutional structures and the given social practice. On the basis of this example a hypothesis could be, that this situation creates potential for the young people's expanded acknowledgement of being able to influence the structures in which the young people participate.

This very brief outline of the potential of psychological development in a social pedagogical practice seems incompatible with social political goals for the young people in question and it is therefore likely to be overlooked. Deduced from social political descriptions of 18+ the development of the individual is ontologically reduced to a quantification of the young people's life conditions – for instance whether or not they are signed up in an educational institution or have a job. Goals like these seems to be a symptom of New Public Management structures that dominate current configurations of knowledge in the public sector. Here we are simply back to a definition of social work that is exactly the opposite of what Mark Philp believes social work should be: A negligence of the individual's subjectivity obscured by a mere description of objective characteristics.

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Another peculiar point that seems important when it comes to social work is that there is a very special field of possible problems that arise in the knowledge being used by social workers. French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2012; 2013; 2015) holds promise with regards to analysing how social workers deal with concepts such as motivation in their work. Through Stiegler we are able to see the technologies and knowledges that the social workers evoke as specific pharmaka. But what on earth does that mean?

Pharmakon as a concept connotes that something can function both as a poison and a cure. In Stiegler's philosophy technology functions as a transitional object in the Winnicottian sense, meaning that it helps us become who we are and be able to differentiate self from others, however this in a pharmacological way (Stiegler, 2013). This means that technology pharmacologically makes it possible for us to become something or other. For Stiegler the myth of Prometheus who brings fire to the humans, who were made flawed by Prometheus' often forgotten brother Epimetheus, shows us how humanity is lacking as a species. We need technology to develop, to transindividuate, but this is only made possible through technology, the fire that has the potential to warm us at nights or burn us alive (Stiegler, 2013)

But what has this got to do with social work? Well, technology for Stiegler needs specific material constraints, it needs to be made from inorganic matter in order to be termed technology, however, knowledge does not, yet *both* work pharmacologically (Stiegler, 2015). At a danish institution called 18+ that work with young people at risk a specific technology used intertwines itself with the knowledge the social workers have and the concept they use of motivation. The technology works as follows: The numbers 1 through 4 are used to designate in what state of motivation and how close to regular society a young person is. Category 4 are not motivated at all and are heavily involved in crime, whereas category 1 are very close to normal society and just sometimes visits the center in search of advice or the like.

What is peculiar is that the knowledge the social workers in 18+ have of what motivation is - which they characterise as a specific moment, a sudden want that peeks out from under the asphalt of crime and drugs that the young people are involved in. This moment must be nurtured and maintained or else it will be covered by asphalt again. So how do the social workers do this? By using an anti-method as method (Nissen, 2012). This means that the social workers rely on sustainable relations with the young people, that is - they *get to know them as persons* and through knowing them, they are able to spot the moments of want. This is what forms the basis of their standards of practice as described by themselves.

With regards to social work in general the stieglerian concepts of technology and knowledge both working as a pharmakon shows potential. In the case of 18+ the motivational categories and the knowledge the social workers have of motivation and how to work with it forms a uniquely pharmacological situation where they risk not producing what Stiegler terms long circuits of desire that aids in circuits of attention and care (Stiegler, 2012), which seems to be essential for the social workers and would be considered the curative side of the pharmakon, but might rather turn poisonous, where it instead turns the work that the social workers do into short circuits of drives where the aim is simply to produce normativity, to turn the youth at risk into consumers, who align with normal society. This potentiality, the way that the knowledge of motivation might both be curative and poisonous is best exemplified through a case, where our informant Daniel told us that a specific moment of motivation was, when a young guy told him that he wanted to buy a car. If the social workers at 18+ are not careful then their knowledge of motivation might only see motivation as a drive-based want and not one of desire. The minute the young people want something or other that is aligned with normal society, like buying a car, the social worker “strikes” and tries to aid the young person in gaining it.

But here the question is whether the car is treated as an object of drive or one of desire (Stiegler, 2012). Does the car stand for the hope of a life of freedom, for recognition, for agency - or does its value stop at being a ‘normal’ and ‘acceptable’ commodity? Is it treated as the practical route to an infinite cultural development or as a pragmatically ‘realistic’ goal that the young person can be coached toward achieving? The numbers used in the technology may seem very primitive, but they do enforce and stabilize the common sense of a linear movement from deviance to normalcy, which might risk short-circuiting the very knowledge of the young person and the sustainable relation that is the focus of an institution such as 18+.

All in all we think that this example shows the pharmacological element of social work and it helps us explicate the specific problem that lies between knowledge and technology in social work as always containing possibilities, be they either curative or poisonous, that never stop.

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The social workers whom Thomas and Sebastian interviewed at 18+ presented basically the kind of thinking that makes social work a philosophical practice. This is the anti-method that insists on holistic views of person and society and on what we might - with Gilbert Simondon (1989) - call the psychic and collective individuation as two sides of the same coin. Rendered in the form of anecdotes - as Simondon says, knowledge of individuation must itself be individuated.

Daniel describes how he teaches the young people to deal with society. He shifts the perspective to that of the young people, “speaks on behalf of them” as Mark Philp would say. With them, he looks at society from the outside. As Howard Becker argued, the marginalized and the sociologist can share the view of society as such.

Here are lessons to be taught and learnt about class and neighborhood. But the dialogue he describes is not the impartment of knowledge to the ignorant. It is - at least so we wish to rearticulate it - a self-reflective welfare state that grows through recognizing the perspective of its outsiders. What in GSCP was called "Verallgemeinerung", a process of generalization that is at once epistemological and ethical (cf. Nissen & Mørck, in prep.).

This dialogue sets off from the humanism of recognizing the individual as potentially human in the full sense. This is practiced in the form of responding to each and every arbitrary want that can be developed into the long circuits of desire. At least potentially.

However, from this point, the process of concretization moves toward specialization. The form of knowledge of social work moves away from the empty but potentially full generalities of anti-method into a technology of categorizations. The motivational categories on a linear scale from 1-4 are quite similar to the “Stages of Change” model by Prochaska and DiClemente (1986). Characteristically, the similarity is probably a reinventing of the wheel rather than based on the reference. Further, we cannot quite know how the categories are practiced. In some places, they would serve merely as communication with management, in a kind of double book-keeping. In other places, they would be imposed onto the interaction with the young people, as in one example from Norway where social workers had cards in their pockets with individual treatment plans written in simple words to make sure they would hold on to them and not be distracted by the singularities of the situation and the person.

The locally reinvented conceptual structure probably does not really connect to a strong infrastructure of categorizations, as it would if it were e.g. a psychiatric diagnostics. This means that what appears to be specific is probably much more diffuse in practice. It is a kind of evidence light. This could be said to carry democratic dangers because the professionals escape from accountability.

But if the infrastructure of categorizations evolves to be more powerful and pervasive, the toxic aspects of the technology will grow. The specification of motivation into categories reduces it of its most vital and generous aspect - that which Stiegler calls desire. Compared to Daniel's anecdotes, social work knowledge has been developed, specified and objectified. But it is no longer social work - or it is so only through a boundary objectivity.

As we know from many penal, social and psychiatric institution, the combination of poverty and categorial rigidity amounts to a kind of violence that adds to that of the criminal gangs. The crucial aspect of violence here is the dehumanization that comes from the oscillations between the general humanity as blank, as residual, as bare life, and the categorizations through which humans are reduced to wantons at various specified levels. Wanting a car might appear innocent, but if the self-image cultivated with such categories is taken to its full implications, we move toward a dehumanizing technology of drives that match pre-given social positions. The descriptions of how Holocaust survivors navigated through various arbitrary categories to fulfill their most desperate needs come to mind.

On the other hand, the blank unspecificity of Daniel's anecdotes must, for the same reasons, be developed, if it is to provide a real alternative. That development must work through the technology, the standards, but constantly resituate them, recultivate them, rearticulate them.

How might this be understood?

In Siri Hustvedt's essay "A plea for Eros", a Belgian philosopher visits an American campus. He is asked what he thinks about the so-called 'Antioch Ruling' that requires explicit verbal consent at every stage in sexual encounters. One would think, perhaps, that his Latin sensualism would protest against this Protestant obsession with law and regulation. But no - surprisingly, he smiled and replied "It's wonderful. I love it. Just think of the erotic possibilities: 'May I touch your right breast? May I touch your left breast?'" (Hustvedt, 2012, 100)

Could the technologies of categorization at the 18+ centres be turned on itself to become poetic?

The aesthetic approach is relevant to us because we have collaborated with other social workers who have experimented with what they call "Aesthetic Documentation", where they have cultivated the individuating but generalizing construction and performance of singular generalities as art. See <http://www.stuffsite.org/>.

Many teachers, pedagogues, therapists and other social workers have worked with various kinds of art and performance. But the interesting thing about these experiments is that they are done with the intention to overcome the toxicity of categorization technologies and infrastructures. A lot of young people struggle with the ways they are categorized and the ways this establishes moral demands on them to be motivated in specific ways. Artworks might be a way to turn those processes of self-presentation and self-categorization around by creating other kinds of ideal artefacts.

Jacques Rancière (2014) can help us understand the politics of such aesthetic practices. In his theory of the aesthetic regime, art breaks with function, not as something ideal in the sense of outside of practice and life, not as art for art's sake, but by creating new ideal artefacts that form contradictory regimes of sense, that is, contradictory ways of connecting the sensuous with the sensible. This is called dissensus.

It is political because precisely new regimes of sense are required for marginalized or oppressed voices to be recognized. In fact, Rancière views politics as such as the historical conflicts, negotiations and practices that arise from dissensus, from incommensurable logics, sensibilities and forms of perception and feeling - dissensus is produced because new kinds of people are struggling for recognition precisely on account of being simply human. Democracy is the recognition of the rights of humans with no qualifications, humans who do not fit into the given categories of established society. Humans whose human potentials can only be realized in a process of recognition that transforms society and state. So, as you can see, in this view, aesthetics is not only connected to politics, but also to social work.

The hegemonic technocracy that neoliberalism substitutes for democracy because *TINA - there is no alternative* - is one that engenders ever new kinds of management of drives. It keeps catching up with democratic challenges by pragmatically helping individuals manage themselves under given conditions. Not - or mostly not - in the conservative way by the moralizing enforcement of norms, but in a liberal governance that controls behavior outwardly through nudgings and incentives and inwardly through coaching rational choices.

TINA is closely connected with Margareth Thatcher's "There is no such thing as society". In a way, this is the antithesis to social work. It only sometimes becomes social work, in a bad way, when the management of drives becomes a parody, a new kind of conservative moralism, after all.

But the business of evolving managerial practices is a battleground, precisely because they evolve and are often recreated under new circumstances. There is a potential for turning it on itself as and reinserting its technologies into long circuits of desire, of situating its specifics into the generalities through which they make sense and at the same time are overcome. Overcoming the specialized common sense and instead remake sense as the regimes of sense of new commons, new meanings for new collectives. And one way to think of this resistance, this creative rearticulation, this construction of new community, is as art.

Let us finish this presentation by giving just one example. The artform in this example is *the joke*. A kind of everyday art that creates dissensus by playing on semantic contradictions in cultivated and ritualized forms.

I had been introducing the ideas behind a series of memory work sessions on the theme of 'motivation' at a drug treatment facility. These sessions were performed as a kind of research method, but they were also performed as social work.

One of the young people who participated then recapitulated my description of the issue of motivation in this way - in one beautiful stroke flipping around the easy-going user-friendly motivation discourse into the infinity of a utopia that strikes one as expressing directly what it would take to actually address his wishes as desires:

"Okay. An example: So, Trine (counsellor) asked me this same thing, and then she went on to ask directly, too: "What might motivate *you* to stop smoking grass?" And my answer was this: "We-ell, a trip to Africa wouldn't be too bad!" (laughter)"

This is what deconstructing the hegemony of neoliberalism might mean.

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