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# SELECTIVE WELFARE: PARADIGMATIC TWISTS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

*ABSTRACT: The social investment paradigm has been gaining importance within the social policy of post-industrial countries. Investments are made in human capital and aim at shaping productive citizens capable of satisfying the demands of flexible labour markets. The article refers to a research project that aims to explore contemporary changes within everyday practice. The article adopts an ethnographic perspective to analyse the current transformations of everyday practice in the field of unemployment insurance and welfare in the context of activation policies and the investment paradigm.*

*KEY WORDS: social investments, welfare, labour integration, transformation, unemployment*

## Selektivna blaginja: paradigmatični obrati v praksi socialnega dela

*IZVLEČEK: Paradigma socialnega investiranja pridobiva pomen v socialnih politikah postindustrijskih dežel. Investirajo v človeški kapital in imajo namen oblikovati produktivnega državljana, sposobnega zadovoljiti zahteve prožnega trga dela. V članku predstavimo rezultate raziskave, ki se je usmerila na učinke teh sprememb v sodobnih vsakodnevnih praksah. Z etnografske perspektive smo analizirali sedanje transformacije vsakodnevnih praks v kontekstu aktivacijskih politik in investicijske paradigme.*

*KLJUČNE BESEDE: socialno investiranje, blaginja, delovna integracija, transformacija, nezaposlenost.*

## 1. Introduction

When there is nothing “left to optimise,” welfare recipients are said to end up at the “bottom of the pile.” Counselling time is also said to be minimised in such cases. These statements, from the field of Swiss social welfare, fundamentally question the welfare state’s claim to safeguard social justice. Social transfers are no longer aimed at offsetting disadvantages with direct transfer payments. Instead, the focus lies on purposeful investments in human capital where the fewest possible resources are expected to deliver economically measurable success. This article examines the paradigmatic twists in European social and labour market policies on the level of local practice.

How do the modernisation of European welfare states and the increasing influence of economic principles manifest themselves at social services departments and their front desks, and in counselling? We studied concrete work situations in local authority settings, in which social workers translate current social changes into everyday action strategies and observable human interactions. The local context investigated was the social services department of a medium-sized Swiss town. The professionals observed were chiefly social workers. [1] Welfare policy was studied "on the ground" as everyday social work practice.

Swiss social policy is a part of "changing Europe." Just as in other Western industrial countries, Switzerland's social and labour market policies are oriented toward the paradigms of activation and social investment. Swiss unemployment insurance was overhauled in the mid-1990s in line with the activation paradigm. Social welfare and disability insurance were reviewed in 2005 and 2008 respectively.[2] Following legislative reform, persons with an "unfortunate" relationship to labour suddenly find themselves on the edge of society (Castel 2011), where the ice is thin and where they risk social decline or even disconnection. Reform also meant that the free spaces to which the gainfully employed can retreat, albeit only temporarily, from selling their labour have become even more constricted. Persons entitled to state benefits must now provide a return on investment.

Swiss social security and unemployment insurance rely on activation measures. The orientation toward the social investment paradigm means that the financial resources invested in the social sector must yield a "profit." Investments in social policy are made where resources promise the greatest possible effect, whether in the present or—and here lies the current emphasis—in an anticipated future. Remedying current problems and distress is considered far less effective (Jenson 2009: 450). In this regard, early childhood intervention, which has elsewhere become a desirable objective, is not paramount in Switzerland. The country's conservative and liberal traditions complicate government measures aimed at families, the labour market, and occupational training. Conservative models of the family repudiate early intervention programmes, which, in turn, influence family education. According to Giuliano Bonoli (2010), in this respect Switzerland is moving toward a light version of the social investment paradigm. Its focus lies on intensifying and specifying labour-integration efforts.

This article explores everyday social work practice at a social services department (see Hauss 2014a). As such, it examines how society deals with poverty (Paugam 2008)

1. As a rule, Swiss social services, particularly in larger catchment areas, are staffed with qualified social workers. One exception is a small number of non-professionalised social service centres where cases are managed by administrative staff, who delegate specific social-work-related issues to external professionals.
2. Unemployment insurance, disability insurance, and means-tested social welfare are the three pillars of the Swiss social security system for the working age population. Whereas unemployment and disability insurance are subject to federal jurisdiction and legislation, social welfare is characterised by a lack of standardisation, with each of the country's 26 cantons having its own legislation.

and unemployment "in the frontline," "over the counter," "eye to eye." Political strategies also provide evidence for the transformation of social security toward activating, that is, investment-based strategies (Magnin 2005; Nadai 2009; Wyss 2005). Scant attention, however, has thus far been given to how this policy translates into concrete practice and everyday interaction. With frontline workers being important actors amidst the ongoing social transformations, what follows closely analyses "street-level bureaucracies" (Lipsky 1980). In "everyday worlds," as sociologist Dorothy Smith observes (2005: 32), people engage in everyday interaction. On this level, social policy developments become observable in "issues, concerns, or problems that are real for people and that are situated in their relationship to an institutional order" (Ibid.). Here, in the microsociology of social institutions, the "ruling relations," which far transcend the investigated field, can be studied (Ibid.). Social transformations manifest themselves in the concrete strategies adopted by social workers in local working contexts. How are clients categorised? Which measures are selected? Which orientations become evident, and how do they shape everyday action (Nadai 2014)? This article carries out a microanalysis of welfare state practice in the field investigated, namely, everyday social work practice. To begin with, I outline the current debate in social work theory and research.

## 2. Frontline work under changing rules of the game

The professional debate on Swiss social work within a changing welfare state takes up the European discourse (see Staub Bernasconi 1995; Sommerfeld 2013). Activation and the social investment paradigm have initiated a broad debate in both social work theory and practice. Changes in the labour market and social policy, and the position(ing) of social work, are now the subject of intense and critical discussion (Böhnisch and Schröer 2001; Lorenz 2006: 137–177; Anhorn, Bettinger and Stehr 2008; Dahme and Wohlfahrt 2008, Leskošek 2009: 1–6; Ferguson 2009; Leskošek 2010). The restructuring of the welfare state and the intensifying of the social investment paradigm have changed the starting point for social work in Western industrialised countries. This is particularly true, as Walter Lorenz has remarked, because in no country has social work managed to overcome its dependency on the respective welfare regime (Lorenz 2006: 165). Lorenz gets to the heart of the changes accompanying the restructuring of the modern welfare state: "Social work is becoming an instrument of commodification, of increasing the market value of human labour and personal transactions, even care itself. Social relations are to be transformed into commodity transactions on which a globalised digital capitalism depends, and the absorption of social services themselves into a limitless commodity market is but one sign" (Lorenz 2006: 138).

Regarding the criticism levelled at the changing welfare state and the related economisation of social work, the expansion of the welfare state after the Second World War is usually considered a positive counterpoint. At the time, a type of social work emerged that functioned beyond socio-political and material security systems. During Fordism, gainful employment was neglected in social work theories and concepts.

Theorists and practitioners instead concentrated on holistic education and training. Various concepts adopted from the United States, such as casework, group work, and community work, came to determine tertiary social work training programmes and their curricula (Maier 2009: 17). Social work at the time has been described as "a social infrastructure for coping with life" (Hering and Münchmeier 2000: 231). It functioned largely beyond socio-political and material security systems (Rauschenbach 1999: 28). Society provided labour, and thus income security. Until the late 1960s, employment security, continuity within employment relations, and increasing per-capita income within advanced Western industrial societies meant that social work could position itself as a form of compensation in relation to production. Capitalist societies called for the demands of work to be offset. Accordingly, the welfare states sought to create free spaces, that is, "protectorates," in which the commodification of social relations could be kept in check (Esping-Andersen 1990). Compared to other European countries, the Swiss welfare state was expanded rather late and private sector actors performed important welfare state tasks. What emerged as a result were mixed-welfare economies and manifoldly ramified delegation structures between government, public law, and private facilities on the federal, cantonal, and municipal levels. Within these structures, social work considerably expanded its provision in the areas of reproduction and education.

Going further back in history soon reveals that whereas social work participated in postwar prosperity during Fordism, it has previously been closely entwined with material security systems. Poverty remained a real threat for wide sections of the Swiss population well into the twentieth century. Large portions of the working class, but also of the rural underclass, were affected by insecure working and precarious income conditions. Welfare tied public assistance to harsh conditions and severely curtailed the rights of welfare recipients. Adults were obliged to earn their own living and to contribute to the upkeep of the residential institutions housing them. This policy was soon expanded to youths, and in many cases also to children (Hauss 1994; Hochueli Freund 1999; Hauss and Ziegler 2010; Hauss et al. 2012; Lippuner 2005; Leuenberger and Seglias 2008). Welfare workers coupled the struggle against poverty with the obligation to work. They had a wide range of measures at their disposal, including sectioning and the removal of children. Historical studies suggest that public welfare did not always manage to balance support and disciplining for the benefit of its clients. Human labour was exploited and coercive welfare measures were enforced that must be condemned from a present-day perspective. [3]

3. Several European countries have recently undertaken efforts to reappraise the social isolation, compulsory work or even sexual or physical abuse which was in many cases associated with placing children in foster families or residential child care. On 11 April 2013, a memorial service was held in the Swiss capital Bern The confederation, the churches, and various associations acknowledged the difficult circumstances in which the victims were raised and issued a public apology for the wrongs committed. That was the starting point for the "Round Table" meeting the first time in June 2013 in order to discuss reparations for those concerned.

Let us return to professional practice amidst the current transformations of social policy. In this field, social work is once again challenged to take position, in the dilemma between the orientation toward economic principles and its genuine mandate to foster its clients and to support their efforts to cope with everyday life. Reflective historiography (Maurer 2009) enables social work to raise critical questions about its role as a profession amidst changing social policy and the ensuing new "rules of the game." The following discussion starts from the local practices observed at a social services department (Hauss 2014 a, b). How do social workers deal with the existing force fields in their everyday practice? Which strategies do they develop? How far does the microcosm of the department reported here reflect the role played by social work amidst new social policy rules?

## 3. Research Field and Methodological Perspective

Observing a Swiss social service centre might lead one to expect insights into how an affluent society deals with poverty. Despite low unemployment, and although poverty remains largely invisible in Switzerland, it nevertheless exists and shapes lifeworlds and biographies, perhaps even more embarrassingly and individualisingly than in countries where the shortage of labour has obvious structural reasons. Not everyone can enjoy Switzerland's high living standards. Approximately every seventh person in the country lives under precarious conditions, including men, women, and very many children. Up-to-date statistical data reveal that out of a total population of 7.5 million, 1.07 million people (14.2 %) are threatened with poverty while 7.9 % (approximately 600,000 people) are affected by severe material deprivation. Compared to other European countries, unemployment is low. According to the definition of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 4.1% of the Swiss working population were unemployed in the fourth quarter of 2013.

Currently, Swiss unemployment insurance and social security as a field of practice is a vast and barely comprehensible market of labour-integration, occupational, and educational measures, true to the country's typically federalist structure and the manifold responsibilities of the confederation, cantons, and municipalities. What are widely differentiated measures coincide with the intense selection practices of the local authorities responsible for allocating individuals to programmes. The regional employment centres, operated under the jurisdiction of the federal unemployment insurance, and social services, operated under the jurisdiction of federal social security, categorise their clients and allocate a large number of welfare recipients to diverse labour-integration programmes. The same applies to the country's social services, which decide which welfare recipients must participate in which programme, who is assigned to which educational measure, and who is sanctioned for failing to cooperate with labour-integration efforts.

The empirical basis of this article is an extensive research project, "Profitable Investments: Promoting Gender Equality through Social Investment and Activation

Measures?”[4]. The selected research results discussed here refer to the social services department of a medium-size Swiss town and focus on the function of social work within that department.

“Profitable Investments” was a multisited ethnographic investigation. It examined its subject in various fields, each of which provided partial responses to the overarching research question (Maeder 2005). The ethnographic field was considered not so much a concrete physical location than a network of sites, actors, ideas, and events investigated over the course of the research (Cook et al. 2009). As mentioned, the project focused on unemployment insurance and social welfare. Within these fields, two kinds of strategic sites were selected for analysis: first, the state welfare agencies and unemployment offices deciding the measures to be taken and allocating clients to such measures; second, agencies implementing measures in practice. The study involved in-situ participant observation and guided interviews with clients and staff (see further Nadai, Hauss and Canonica 2012). Data collection and analysis were based on Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This article focuses on social work in general and, as said, on observations and interviews at a social services department in particular (Hauss and Cannonica 2012; Hauss 2014a).

## 4. Everyday Social Service

The social workers at the social services department under study are subject to the impact-oriented Cantonal Social Welfare Act passed into law in 2002. The appointment and employment conditions of the social workers both reflect high professional standards. The social services department cooperates closely with a centre for professional integration, which offers various programmes aimed at employability assessment and labour-market integration.

### 4.1 Selection

Only selected client groups are eligible for intensive counselling. Social workers are instructed to commit their time increasingly to cases promising the greatest possible return. Enforcing this policy presupposes client selection. Investments are thus future-oriented. One crucial question in this respect concerns the attainable return on investment. However, this “economisation of public administrations and social services providers’ (Dahme and Wohlfahrt 2008: 53) is reaching its limits in the social services sector. Here, in the “final safety net” of the social security system, considering returns

4. This article is based on “Profitable Investments: Promoting Gender Equality through Social Investment and Activation Measures?“ (Nadai and Hauss), a research project conducted within the Swiss National Science Foundation Programme No. 60 on Gender Equality (NFP60) and investigating social investment practices in the area of unemployment. (see Nadai, Hauss and Canonica 2012). The research was conducted as an ethnographic study undertaken in six institutions concerned with the labour-market integration of unemployed persons: a regional employment centre and a city social services department deciding on client-to-measures allocation and four integration programmes carrying out the ordered measures.

on investment has only limited value. At the social services department studied, intervention aimed exclusively at professional integration was deemed unrealistic, not least due to the large number of "social security pensioners"—a point that could hardly be made public, however. Social integration and building everyday skills, two objectives pursued by the social workers together with their clients, proved almost impossible to calculate in terms of a return on investment. Public pressure, moreover, made it difficult to preserve some leeway for social services to support people in a sector that resists economisation.

The new steering models, whose orientation derives from investment logic, are changing the traditional, bureaucratically structured counselling practices followed at the social services department investigated. Clients no longer receive the same amount of attention. Clear, objectifiable criteria are now adopted to categorise clients according to the calculable effects, also in economic terms, of counselling resources. One such criterion is age. Using increasing resources for young adults aims to avert the danger of long-term welfare dependency. Various measures, including special counselling settings, a specialised young-adult advisory team, and allocation to specific programmes, reveal that resources tend to be focused on young adults. Older people, however, have only a few years left on the labour market and are considered to have less opportunities of finding employment. A second social service criterion used to justify programme allocation are educational and childcare responsibilities. Families with children are invested in heavily, in order to break the transgenerational, life-long cycle of poverty and thus to achieve a socially and economically highly esteemed impact.

Besides these relatively unambiguous criteria, new social services steering models require clients to be assigned to different groups according to their resources and cooperativeness. However, resources and cooperativeness resist easy operationalisation and need to be translated into practical action guidelines for everyday social-service interactions. On the level of everyday action, social workers classify clients into different groups. Depending on classification, clients are provided either much or little counselling. At the social services department investigated, two questions guided client selection. First, the situation-specific need for clarification and orientation. Experience shows that it is feasible to invest time in unclarified, complex situations where much remains unresolved. Such cases contrast with ones where, as one social worker put it, "a lot is already on track," and where clients "have their paperwork under control and circumstances are stable." Two to four meetings a year are enough in such cases. This client group includes the working poor, for instance, who are looking for work of their accord and who merely require financial straits to be offset. Second, the specific case perspective: oriented toward the future, this classification criterion involves greater risks. The key question in this regard is whether or not changes are foreseeable. Social workers justify intensive counselling in such cases on the grounds of "scope for optimisation" or that clients are working on changing their situation. It remains open what change is aimed at precisely. Objectives are negotiated individually and may occur in small steps. This contrasts with the evident lack of prospects for unmotivated clients, who are kept on file merely as "administrative cases" and are offered no counselling.

As one social worker remarked, “no professional social work is done in such cases.” Another staff member, echoing a concept evidently familiar from her training, observed that such cases amounted to “administering exclusion.” Those concerned, who actually need advice, experience being shifted to the subsistence sector as degrading. One client likened this experience to being relegated to the “bottom of the pile.” Wherever possible, social workers defer or avoid assigning their clients to this category. Plainly evident in such cases are the role conflicts between organisational rules and professional self-concepts described by Maeder und Nadai (2004: 109). Summing up this point, one staff member commented, “I want to be able to invite those clients for a talk who simply need contact, but who offer nothing else in return.” No longer being able to invest time in cases promising no tangible impact fundamentally challenges the social workers’ concept of help.

### 4.2 Getting back on track

Clients visit the social services department studied in emergency situations. Their lives have derailed and thus—as the field puts it—consultations are about helping clients to “get back on track.” Clients are first explained their position as welfare recipients, including their rights and duties. Clients must provide full disclosure of their personal circumstances. They are threatened with prosecution for failing to reveal all sources of income. We observed that social workers intrude into the personal sphere of clients while stigmatising them as potential benefit fraudsters. The social workers studied are aware of the humilation and status degradation such intrusion involves for their clients and in response attempt to cushion this asymmetry as expertly as possible. Getting clients back on track begins with an agreement on objectives, which hinges on many factors. Even if social and professional integration are the final objectives, small steps may first need to be envisaged. Getting clients back on track also means registering and cross-linking them with other services. Work capability assessment takes priority. Getting clients back on track is reflected not least by fully documenting their situation, that is, compiling a corresponding file. This involves requesting missing documents, completing forms, and pooling information. Consultations often begin with the same standard question, “What have you got with you?” In return, clients present their documents, which serve to complete and update their file. Counselling intensity is reduced only when clients are considered to be well on track.

### 4.3 Getting clients moving

The ethos prevalent among the social workers studied is to *achieve the best possible outcome* for their clients, provided the latter actively contribute to the efforts made on their behalf. One social worker explained the limits of the presumed cooperativeness: “I can go to all possible lengths, but if someone is going to drag their feet and not move, then that’s that.” The social workers have a wide range of measures at their disposal, from motivational discussion skills to threatening sanctions, to get their clients moving or to keep them on their toes. To establish a motivating working alliance within the bureaucratic context, restrictive rules and regulations are explained in terms of institutional

requirements and thus are located outside the counselling setting. Social workers tell their clients, “Look, I’m afraid guidelines are guidelines, and I can’t change them.”

The professionals seek to gain their clients’ trust through “relationship building.” This approach is emphasised in particular in working with young adults. The social workers offer support to clients seeking greater self-determination in daily life. For instance, the professionals welcome clients making their own health insurance payments. Besides motivating clients through building a working alliance and promoting self-determination, the social workers also enforce sanctions. Assessing which role is appropriate under which circumstances not always proves straightforward because pressure does not always have the desired impact. Discussions amongst social workers often referred to the difficulty of achieving client objectives: “Bans don’t make sense because they’ll do it anyway; so you force them into a programme, and then neither measure works.” Pressuring young adults is considered especially counterproductive. One social worker observed, “If you confront them, they’ll block you.” And yet the social workers nevertheless resort to sanctions. Clients are admonished and reprimanded, or threatened with benefit suspensions. In some cases, cuts are imposed; in others, the social welfare inspectors or unpaid work trials are deployed as outsourced supervisory or sanctioning instruments. The requirement to get clients moving bears potential frustration and conflict. Considerable irritation may arise from breaches of trust, such as client statements proving to be false. Counselling thus has an emotional side and the working alliance within bureaucratic structures not only leaves both professionals and clients vulnerable to personal injury but often also involves great emotional strain.

### 4.4 Funding and overseeing the support system

Social work is not always so eventful. On same days, it seemed very relaxed and almost boring. One social worker told us, “A social services department resemble a large accounting firm. We prioritise funding over countless other matters, to ensure other institutions can do their work.” Public welfare always involves administration and oversight. For the social workers, supervisory and regulatory duties take up too much space and threaten to oust actual social work. Counselling, assessment, and guidance are partly outsourced. One example is the delegation of employability assessment and job placements to a centre for occupational integration. The department employs “labour-integration specialists” with expert knowledge of the labour market, of application techniques, and of corporate human resources management (Nadai and Canonica 2012, 29). The social workers at the social services department investigated consider themselves “process monitors.” Depending on the case, they check whether a client has made the required number of job applications. They work on the *meta-level*, as one social worker observed. One staff member explained that “things were pretty cushy, in inverted commas” when clients were signed up at the occupational integration centre. She knew that the case was outsourced and that the other office was overseeing her client. Evidently, this applied merely to labour-integration cases. The files of unplaceable clients are soon returned to social services where they remain on the table, just as housing and accommodation do. In the context of unemployment, homelessness, and changing or looking

for accommodation, can lead to existential emergences. No "specialists" are available for such cases. Responsibility remains—and stops—with the social workers.

### 4.5 Pushing clients out of welfare dependency

Welfare is aimed primarily at what the field terms "detachment." Detachment, when it does occur, is hailed as a major achievement. One successful social worker put her hand on the impressively thick case file lying on the table and asserted, "We detached her." She added that the client had taken a moment to be pleased, to realise that detachment was "cool." Social service staff should clink glasses, the client said. Celebrated as an achievement, detachment fits the logic of social service administration. Whether the solution is subjectively a positive step for the client, or whether the quality of professional integration is thereby ensured, does not seem a primary consideration.

The swiftest possible termination of financial dependency has utmost priority. Social service workers know that chances of achieving this objective are greater if clients can be discharged into independence within the first six months of signing on. The longer detachment takes, the more clients settle into dependency and take the attitude, "So be it." Given the heavy caseload per social worker, social services develop their own particular, stress-inducing dynamics. One social worker illustrated these dynamics as follows: cases were fed into counselling at one end, but it was impossible to funnel out as many as were funnelled in. Stress arises from the requirement, she continued, to "detach, detach, detach." Failing to close no more than a few files each month prompted adverse comments from the management from time to time.

Such pressure contrasted with the formulated objective to ensure sustainable client detachment. Thus, a family with children would not be exposed to a precarious situation. The responsible social worker would establish whether the family's existence were secure after benefit payments ceased. Correspondingly, social work criticises what the field calls "knee-jerk detachment."

Pushing for the swiftest *and* most sustainable detachment at one and the same time leads to the blending of operational- and social-work issues, and thus also to the entanglement of pedagogic, economic, and social policy concerns. Amidst this entanglement, the means and the ends are often no longer clearly distinguishable. In many cases, the obligations to reduce the social work caseload and thus social service costs, to consider client autonomy, and to meet the demand for long-term professional and personal integration are barely reconcilable. The drive toward detachment plainly reveals the tensions between the demands of professional casework, administrative logic, and operational principles.

## 5. Conclusion

When there is nothing left to optimise, welfare recipients are said to end up at the "bottom of the pile." This statement characterises a new rationale underpinning everyday social service practice in what has become a contested field. With the underlying orientation toward "human capital" welfare is challenged by employment and economic

policies and in risk to be detached from the debate on social rights and social justice. Entrepreneurial thinking now comes up against the everyday work of local authorities, implicit professional values, emotional states, and specific team constellations functioning according to specific self-dynamics. The link between local practices and social policy discourses proves to be ambivalent and contradictory.

The evidence gathered suggests that, "on the ground," current social policy fosters selective social work. The focus on perspectives and potential effects aligns measures with cases. Alignment is aimed at perfectly matching benefit recipients and measures, so that only little or only short-term support is needed to achieve autonomous subsistence. This applies in particular to highly resourceful individuals. "Good cases" are swiftly discharged from welfare and its programmes, thereby producing a creaming effect. "At the bottom of the pile" remain individuals with poor forecasts. In such cases, social work action as a rule needs to make do with minimal resources and creates a strong need for legitimation.

Yet are matters really as unequivocal as that? And have the two prevailing principles—activation and social investment—impacted on social work practice as straightforwardly as widely assumed? Our study does not encourage such a conclusion. On the level of everyday practice, the observed economic orientation is often controversially bound up with local circumstances and social work professionalism. "Frontline" social workers employ specific skills to establish rapport, motivation, positive thinking, and concrete behaviour changes among their clients. Clients are regarded as human beings of a certain age and gender, with biographical "baggage" and stumbling blocks to overcome, and who often reject unequivocal categorising processes. Translating the paradigmatic twists into concrete actions leads to the entanglement of different rationalities. Our study observed an orientation toward professional standards aimed at enhancing client autonomy as well as educational and life opportunities. In everyday social service practice, the concept of small steps, guiding clients through transitions, and allowing them to make up for previously missed developments clashes with an economic, selective orientation allocating resources in terms of their anticipated effects and expected returns. Controversial lines of argument and tension-filled interstices emerge amidst the orientation toward "detachment" from welfare as a foremost priority, amidst the endeavours to devise sustainable alternatives, amidst the hesitation about placing welfare recipicients on the lowest rung, and amidst the many detours and intermediate steps involved in everyday social work.

Whether these contradictions can be maintained or whether social work methods will eventually bow to an economic logic seems undecided as yet. Whereas the "absorption of social services themselves into a limitless commodity market" (Lorenz 2006: 138) is an undeniable tendency, this proves to be empirically more controversial than hitherto theoretically assumed.

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