Postmodern dialectic of social care

Key words

Social care, the Enlightenment, postmodernism, dialectic.

Abstract

In contemporary literature concerning public social care a clearly critical trend emphasising the weaknesses and shortcomings of this care is noticeable. There are authors (Michel Foucault, Lech Witkowski) who even claim that social care has transformed into its opposite – instead of helping the poor it excludes them. This current of thought also includes reservations, expressed by many social workers, as to whether the institutional optimism of the law of social care is adequate for the practice of providing the care. In the text I take up these themes and look for their intellectual and moral roots. A starting point for my work is two Enlightenment models, British and Continental, and their different sensitivity to social issues. I demonstrate, following a contemporary American philosopher of ideas, Gertrude Himmelfarb, how the two models were created and transformed. I concentrate on the Continental model, which has also been adopted by the Polish social care system. I highlight milestones in the development of the model – Marxism, critical theory and postmodernism. In my analyses, I aim at showing what the postmodern social care dialectic consists of and whether it is possible to overcome it.

Introduction

Social care is one of the states of affairs which is never a source of full satisfaction. This is true in the case of those who provide the care as well as those who take advantage of it. A review of the contemporary literature on this issue confirms this thesis unequivocally. Alicja Kurcz (2002) from Opole University observes as follows:

In M[ariola] Mirowska's research, dissatisfaction from work was indicated by as many as 73% of social workers surveyed. In the categories of dissatisfaction most frequently mentioned was lack of professional satisfaction (20%) … The lack of job satisfaction was also listed by the workers when describing

negative aspects of social work and the shortcomings and excessive workload resulting from it, experienced almost on a daily basis (p. 162).

In turn, Stanisław Kawula (2003) from Warmińsko-Mazurski University writes that "trends are moving towards the expansion of phenomena of marginalisation (which, unfortunately, are increasing), and people in the age of globalisation (of one huge village) are undergoing exclusion to a higher and higher degree" (p. 47). The awareness of the inadequacy of care offered to the needy is not a new phenomenon. It already accompanied the first authors, who, on the threshold of a new era, undertook systematic thought on the issue and aims of social care. Juan Luis Vives in his work published in 1525 titled *De subventione pauperum sive de humanis necessitatibus* (*On Assistance to the Poor*) wrote:

Beggars are rotten, commit crimes, waste everything they get, pester people, parade their diseases, mar their own bodies, kidnap and mutilate children and simulate illnesses. They have brought begging into profit. They fight in defense of their poverty not worse than others in defense of their wealth ... On the pretext of poverty they ignore everything (p. 22).

The conviction as to the imperfection of methods supporting the poor is long-lasting. In this respect contemporary social workers do not differ from 16th century members of city councils responsible for registering beggars.

Nowadays, this belief sometimes leads to surprising conclusions. Certain authors question the positive role of social care, especially that organised by public authorities, and they call for withdrawing from it for the sake of authentic care for the poor. They claim that social care stigmatises people, pushes them into a rut of ineptitude and dependence on others, which results in a state called learnt helplessness. This aspect of social care has drawn the attention of some Canadian researchers who, for their analysis of the phenomenon, applied heuristic categories created by a 20th-century French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Also in Polish literature a similar approach to social care can be found. Lech Witkowski in his text *O paradoksach marginalizacji* [On Paradoxes of Marginalisation] postulated that a traditional understanding of marginalisation, exclusion and poverty is an obsolete issue and new cognitive categories which would be able to adequately describe those phenomena should be sought. He claims that their essence is the fact that every man is in a sense marginalised, every man lacks something and everyone experiences some inadequacy. Therefore, saying that some need more help than others is a misunderstanding.

Such extreme analyses are something unique in the rich literature on the subject of social care, yet they deserve attention. They result from a deep lack of satisfaction with the assistance provided for the needy. They can be called

the surprising and final conclusions drawn from what Alicja Kurcz and Stanisław Kawula say along with many other scholars dealing with social care and social work. The analyses are also, to some extent, an answer to the complaints and grievances of social workers for whom a permanent problem is wasting time preparing administrative decisions and keeping bureaucratic statistics instead of offering real help to the needy. Postmodern thinkers convey a clear message to both groups: the weakness of social care is not this or that institution or feature of the people engaged in it; its fundamental weakness is the very fact that it exists and is still maintained.

In this text I take up the issue of two types of social sensitivity which originate from the European Enlightenment in England and France, respectively. I show what constituted the nature of the approaches as well as how each of them influenced the understanding and organisation of social care in the 18th century. Next, I focus on what representatives of the Frankfurt school called the dialectic of the Enlightenment and what led straight to the creation of postmodern thinking. I present Michel Foucault and Lech Witkowski as representatives of this thought along with an analysis of both the concept of normalisation elaborated by the former and the concept of marginalisation suggested by the latter. In the conclusion I ask if and to what extent the category of compassion characteristic of the English Enlightenment could complement the continental category of rational-legal bureaucracy, which nowadays supervises social care organised by public authorities.

1. Lord Shaftesbury and the Encyclopedists

Social care organised by public authorities was over many centuries the history of pity and the gallows. *Litość i szubienica* (*Pity and the Gallows*) is the title of a book written by Bronisław Geremek, in which the author documents that from the 16th century towns tried to deal with the problem of poverty by organising compulsory work for beggars and imposing severe punishment on those who tried to evade it (Geremek, 1989). The Enlightenment changed the attitude towards the poor. Severe punishment was abolished and they began to ponder how to treat the poorest in the new social and economic conditions. However, the Enlightenment was not in that respect homogeneous. The issue of social care was understood differently by the English and the French. Gertrude Himmerlfarb, a contemporary American historian of ideas, points out that the differences immensely influenced not only how in both cultures the poorest were treated, but also how in the 18th and 19th centuries the history of both countries developed.

The English Enlightenment was not created by philosophers but by moral philosophers. Adam Smith, who is known above all as the author of the first

treatise in political economy titled *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 2003), was a professor of moral philosophy at the university in Edinburgh and also an author of an extensive work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 1989). Lord Shaftesbury, who is considered the father of the English Enlightenment, introduced to the 18th century discourse on the British Isles such expressions as "social virtues", "moral sense", "moral sentiments", "benevolence", "compassion" and "mercy". The impact of Shaftesbury's moral philosophy was tremendous. It is reflected in the fact that when his concepts were attacked by Bernard Mandeville, in his defence stood, among others, the aforementioned Adam Smith and an outstanding historian Edward Gibbon. Shaftesbury stressed that in social life a key value is compassion and not following self-interest. This is what nature and instinct teach us. The feeling is altruistic; it emerges from a concern for another human being and not for oneself. The concern for another person gave rise to a phenomenon which gained a reputation as a social religion. To the emergence of the phenomenon contributed the Methodist movement initiated by John and Charles Wesley. Methodists gave religion a clear social dimension; they socialised religion. They preached that the poor are Christians and each of them deserves to be saved, even one who is steeped in dishonesty, acts in bad faith and deceives others. Also Adam Smith's new political economy included clear threads of concern for the poorest, disapproving of egoistic attitudes of manufacturers blindly chasing a higher profit and insensitive to the fate of workers. A maxim of the entrepreneurs of that time "All for us, nothing for others" was explicitly condemned by Smith.

These three sources – moral philosophy, religious revival and a new political economy – contributed to the formation of an attitude held by contemporary Englishmen towards the poor and social care. That period in the history of England is called "the age of benevolence" or "new humanitarianism". Thanks to such an attitude, England, where the industrial revolution took place on the largest scale, avoided a political revolution. That perception of social care highlighted not "the problem of poverty" but "the poor person", and it was connected with the postulate not of "a complex solution to the problem" but "turning towards a person in need with compassion". Not pure reason but a feeling of friendliness directed the attitude of the English towards the issue of social care. The care itself was always directed at a specific person, taking into consideration their needs and not claiming a right to solve the phenomenon of poverty in an abstract or general way. It was aware of its limitations, it did not formulate too ambitious aims and it recognised that in certain situations an effective improvement of the fate of the poorest was not possible, and the only thing which could be done was to accompany the excluded on their way and surround them with compassion and respect.

The Enlightenment developed fundamentally differently on the Continent. In France, where it took the most dynamic and creative forms, it was shaped by encyclopedists – philosophers, authors of entries in the *Encyclopaedia*, published between 1751-1780. Encyclopaedists did not appeal to feelings towards fellow citizens, but to the findings and demands of reason. Himmelfarb (2001) writes: "While the British idea of compassion proved useful in various practical projects aimed at alleviating social problems, the only possible reply to the French appeal to reason could be the 'regeneration' of man" (p. 15). Regeneration meant rebirth, thus actually creating a new man, a new type or species of human, free from various weaknesses and imperfections of the former life. The entry "compassion" aroused only the minor interest of the encyclopedists; a mere few lines were devoted to it. Neither did Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* from 1751 find any room for compassion among feelings governing social life (Rousseau, 1956). It is true he admitted that compassion played an important role but only in the state of nature, in which it balanced the feeling of self-love. However, in the state of social life compassion gives way to vanity, which destroys both equality and liberty, subjecting mankind to "labour, slavery and wretchedness". A similar dynamic can be noticed in the work *Émile: or, on Education* by the same author. Émile acquires social virtues with difficulty; he must learn them. He does it through directing his positive feelings not at any specific poor individuals but at mankind as a certain abstract entity. Rousseau writes that:

> To prevent pity from degenerating into weakness, it must, therefore, be generalised and extended to the whole of mankind ... For the sake of reason, for the sake of love of ourselves, we must have pity for our species still more than for our neighbour (p. 253).

This attitude was characteristic of Rousseau and other encyclopedists. When they talked about virtue, they generalised it and referred it to the whole of mankind, losing sight of an individual in their specific life situation. They looked at people like at a species and not individuals. Therefore, when they talked about the common good, they did not have in mind the total of good of every single man, but something abstract – the common good of humanity. This was a significant feature of the French Enlightenment – there was much talk about good and the progress of mankind, but not much attention was devoted to the issue of real poverty of real people or ways of alleviating their misery.

Moreover, among the encyclopedists there were quite a few voices openly stigmatising beggars as "young and strong idlers" who prefer living off what they get from the state than working honestly. Such opinions were delivered

by, for example, Denis Diderot. What is also puzzling, as Himmelfarb (2001) points out, is the fact that the French Revolution of 1789, apart from abolishing the feudal system, did nothing specific to alleviate the fate of the poorest. The few attempts which were taken in this direction usually ended in fiasco. Revolutionists preached that social problems required systemic solutions, changing the social structure and leading to a rebirth of mankind. They strove towards total and ultimate changes. What was problematic, though, was that in their ambitious and rational enterprise they were losing sight of the individual human being.

2.   Dialectic of the Enlightenment

The Industrial Revolution in Britain as well as the social revolution in France determined trends of development in 19th c. Europe. The ideas of the Enlightenment went through different stages in their evolution. They were very complex processes. It would be worthwhile to discuss many concepts which were an extension of either the English or the French Enlightenment. Examples of these concepts would be, on the one hand, liberalism and, on the other, Marxism. The reason why I do not elaborate on these ideologies are the time constraints of my paper. However, I will jump to another topic, which is German philosophy after World War Two and its attempts to understand and describe what happened to the idea of the Enlightenment on the European continent.

A starting point in the analyses should be an explication of the concept "dialectic". Dialectical logic, as it was understood by Hegel, does not refer to language but to particular states of affairs. It highlights their internal contradictions. While in formal logic, the one which took its origin from Aristotle, the same state of affairs at the same time cannot be contradictory, while in dialectical logic not only can it be but it is necessary, since this is the character of reality. Hegel and his disciples (including Marx) talked in this context about thesis and antithesis, which lead to synthesis. In such an understanding, the same person at the same time is rich and poor – rich in one respect, while poor in another. Similarly, the same state of affairs is both a help and a hindrance, a success and a failure. If this way of reasoning is applied to the whole Age of Enlightenment, it will turn out that in some respects the epoch was a blessing for people, whereas in others a curse. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), showed in what sense the Enlightenment, in fighting the myths, transformed itself into a myth. Before the Enlightenment, they claimed, myths were created to tame Nature. They gave man hope that he would dominate dread-inspiring Nature. The Enlightenment, for the sake of reason, regarded myths as an anachronism; it rejected them, proclaiming the thesis that in life, also social life, there is no place for mystery. At the same

time, however, the Enlightenment was becoming a myth, defending the principle that it was able to know all the secrets of life, that it would succeed in liberating humanity from poverty and exclusion. The Enlightenment is totalitarian, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) declared, since "only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows" (p. 4).

The criticism of the Enlightenment undertaken by the Frankfurt school naturally had its direct context. It was the Second World War and the staggering question how the Germans could do anything like that to other people, especially the Jews, their fellow citizens. However, the philosophical reflection was wider. It concerned what reason is and what restrictions it is subject to. It also referred to all the projects undertaken in the name of reason, so also to all the social projects aiming at solving such issues as poverty and exclusion. Adorno and Horkheimer showed that the character of reason is dialectical, that there is an internal conflict in it and that, striving to civilise the world, it plunges the world into the new barbarism. That is the process Leszek Kołakowski had in mind when giving one of his books the title *Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych* (...) [Civilisation in the dock]. From such a fundamental criticism of the Enlightenment there was only a step to questioning the meaning of reason in general, to the deconstruction of rational thought. This was accomplished in the field of French thought in the 1960s and 1970s and it was named postmodernism. When speaking of deconstruction, a parallel existence of numerous views on the reality is assumed, where none of them is able to reflect the whole truth about the reality; sources of knowledge about the world should not be searched for in great philosophical systems, called grand narratives, but in texts characteristic of a given culture, particularistic and limited to a specific point of view. Focusing on improving the world is not recommended either, as melioristic projects are doomed to failure. Instead, what should be explored are various regimes of truths which function in this world. It should not be asked what social solution is good and real, but who will benefit from it and in what way. Deconstructuralists claim there are no universal truths and values; however, there are local truths and values which are imposed on others.

This radical criticism of reason is in fact a criticism of the French Enlightenment. It is tantamount to rejecting holistic approaches aiming at the rebirth of mankind and at giving it a new face of happiness. Postmodernism admits that it was the Enlightenment which suffered defeat and that despite numerous attempts it failed to create a new social system, free from traditional shortcomings. Society proved to be resistant. It happened so despite the fact that people implementing Enlightenment projects were ready to pay a high price for their success and to sacrifice their wealth in order to succeed. The example

of Communism arises here. It was an ideology which many of us experienced personally. The failure of the Enlightenment also means that nobody can be made happy by force, against their will, compelling them to accept solutions which are believed to be rational, thus objectively true. The saying: "We know better what is good for you" became completely discredited. It showed its inhumane face and was another sad confirmation of the Roman law maxim that the extreme law is sometimes the greatest injustice.

3. Postmodernism and social care[1]

Postmodern criticism of reason and its holistic social projects was reflected also in the area of social care. Jacek Hołówka from the University of Warsaw in his text titled *Profesje przeciw wykluczeniu* (*Professions against Exclusion*) presents selected notions from social care filtered by the postmodern philosophy of Michel Foucault (2005, pp. 57-75). Foucault's concepts fascinated specialists in social work from the University in Toronto, who published two collections of texts oriented towards a postmodern analysis of social work as a theory and practice (Chambon, Irving, 1994; Irving, Epstein, 1999). The main assumption of the proposed analyses is that all the programmes of social work applied so far are burdened with modernist errors, among others, a belief about the possibility of controlling the fate of other people as well as the primacy of expertise over everyday experience. The implementation of the programmes is supposed to lead the excluded to so-called normalisation, that is achieving a life standard considered to be free of pathology. "Normalisation is a process in which an individual voluntarily agrees to a public announcement of his/her low social rank and to a transformation of his/her status. In return he/she expects help. However, the person is actually subjected only to the authority of social customs, expectations and institutions. He/she becomes re-socialised and taught passive submission to fate. Normalisation does not so much solve problems of people at risk of exclusion as induce them to accept their status and even their progressing marginalisation" (Hołówka, p. 60). Normalisation means agreeing to the standard that mainstream society considers to be the standard. Therefore, exclusion is not an objective state but it is dependent on social recognition.

Canadian researchers point out that exclusion is a relative process. It appears first in the minds of people and only then is it objectified. At the moment when people agree to their exclusion, a process begins which, with the help of social workers, leads to a social confirmation of this state. Social workers, by

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[1] This point of my work is based on a fragment of chapter one from my book *Wykluczanie jako problem filozofii edukacji* (2008).

surrounding their clients and those in their charge with care, stigmatise them; trying to strengthen them, they send a socially clear signal about their inadequacy. The criterion is always the same – identity or lack of identity of their life with middle class standards. The individuals who, as a result of poverty, are not able to achieve this standard are treated as excluded. When commenting on this, Hołówka notes as follows:

> It is true that poverty makes life more difficult, limits the ability to meet one's needs and gives the feeling of not deserving respect. Yet, in fact, it does not degrade. Individuals suffering privation do not lose self-respect. They lose respect for society, which ignores their ambitions and needs. However, they adopt a negative attitude towards poverty as a result of protectionist identification with the rich through accepting their criteria of assessment (p. 62).

Is that a way of negating the existence of exclusion? Not at all. The presence of the process in social life is recognised, although it is claimed that we initiate the process ourselves. How, then, to prevent it? Above all, by avoiding simple solutions based on the belief that standards set by mainstream society should always be desirable, and deviations from those standards stigmatised. Making this assumption is wrong, as normalisation itself is not unequivocal. This is clearly illustrated by the operation of the educational system. Foucault emphasises that school reflects all the social inequalities which trouble a modern society.

> Also abandoning school is mistakenly regarded as an episode in which an ill-adapted individual undergoes exclusion. In fact, exclusion occurs earlier. Schools do not really facilitate a start in life or professional success. They are rather an instrument of social differentiation. They prepare some students for a business career and others for work at Burger King. However, for ideological reasons all students are kept together for a long time at neighbouring desks, in the illusion of social equality (p. 64).

Hołówka notes after Foucault's commentators that school plays an ambiguous role in the process of exclusion. On the one hand, it gives some individuals an opportunity for advancement but, on the other hand, it pushes others into a state of degradation.

A slightly different argumentation, although pointing in the same direction, can be found in a text by Lech Witkowski (2007) from the Educational Research Committee titled *O paradoksach marginalizacji* [*On Paradoxes of Marginalisation*].

The author presents marginalisation as a polymorphic phenomenon (pp. 301-324). He highlights the multiplicity of its forms and indicates that

along with the emergence of new forms the status of marginalisation in society and in social sciences is changing. Showing meanings of marginalisation which cancel each other out, Witkowski questions the traditional way of interpreting this phenomenon, in which the unidirectional dynamics of people, states of affairs or situations moving to the margins of society is emphasised. Arguing with Tadeusz Kowalak, who defines marginalisation in this way, Witkowski points out that this phenomenon is not characterised by unidirectional dynamics. Moreover, sometimes it is difficult to talk about it as something dynamic at all.

> The cognitive value of the category of marginalisation requires it to be detached from the assumption concerning the existence of the margin or the formation of an integrated social phenomenon, despite popular associations with the obviousness of the attitude exactly contrary to the statement. Besides, it is not possible to associate the phenomenon exclusively with the negative aspect, filled with a state and a sense of deprivation, without impoverishing understanding of the phenomenon (p. 304).

Witkowski illustrates his thesis with 22 points, deconstructing in them the traditional idea of marginalisation. All the points are formulated in a similar way; the traditional perception of marginalisation is opposed to its current understanding, claiming at the same time that both approaches can (should) coexist with each other. For example, the author notes that, on the one hand, marginalisation means a deviation from a norm; however, on the other hand, what is marginalised often becomes a norm. Similarly, a margin is usually mentioned in the context of its clear social location, indicating groups, classes or subclasses classified to the category, whereas often the location cannot be found – lines determining the margins run across the traditional divisions and stratification. Shame and ostentation are another tension described by Witkowski. What traditionally was hidden as shameful, today is often ostentatiously presented and it demands recognition. Further, according to Witkowski, talking about a margin was traditionally combined with the conviction that "the margin is the others", usually worse than us or at least less accepted than us. Today it is changing – in many milieux, it is perceived as good tone to stress one's own marginalisation, understood as a rebellion against and disagreement with the mainstream culture, existing moral principles or even legal standards. This directs our attention to the tension between the traditional belief that margins should be rejected, and the present conviction that we all live on some margins. That and other points are meant to illustrate a transformation in perceiving marginalisation and social sciences. There is no one dominating understanding of the phenomenon. It was replaced by local, contextual and paradoxical perceptions. Meanwhile, when we agree that everybody belongs to some margins, "it should

be accepted that in society there are no places left open by 'the logic of marginalisation'" (p. 322).

The significance of the analyses for understanding social care and social work is great. Firstly, they question the positive role of supporting the poor by public authorities, and secondly they suggest abandoning in social discourse the categories of "marginalisation" and "exclusion" as inadequate. Postmodern philosophers reveal with full force the dialectic of institutionalised social care, announcing that what was assumed to help the poor harms them, while what was meant to brighten the image of social life obscures it. These extreme opinions may certainly bring a smile to the faces of those who, engaged in the practice of social work on a daily basis, can see tangible positive results of their involvement. What may also be surprising is how it is possible to postulate abandoning melioristic social projects, to want to resign from ventures which bring relief in suffering and support in privation for hundreds of thousands of people in each Polish province. This kind of reaction is understandable and justified. Nevertheless, when listening to the words of postmodern philosophers one should ask oneself the honest question whether the modernists' description of reality is totally wrong. Is the type of social sensitivity presented by them a mere expression of subjective idiosyncrasy, i.e. sensitivity, or rather oversensitivity to some ideas. In other words, how can contemporary social workers and other people providing social care on behalf of public authority benefit from reading and analysing postmodern texts?

4. Return to compassion

A deeper analysis shows that postmodern reflections on social welfare are intellectually interesting but extremely impractical. The idea to resign from institutionalised social welfare in defence of the poorest is potentially even explosive. Support offered by public authorities to individuals and families is often the only regular provision the people can count on. Similarly, it can be easy to see intuitively that there is a fundamental difference between exclusion involving lack of money for basic necessities in the family, and exclusion whose essence is, for example, lack of a good ear for music and an inability to enjoy a concert or symphony. However, it is necessary to differentiate between conclusions drawn from postmodern analyses and reasons underlying them. The reasons, then, are a deep lack of satisfaction from rationally funded social projects aiming at eliminating or at least substantially reducing exclusion. The French model of the Enlightenment, supported by German philosophy, is not very effective in the area of social help. General and abstract solutions work well with certain individuals and in certain situations; however, they are completely irrelevant in reference to other individuals or situations. Meanwhile, contemporary bu-

reaucracy, based on the rational-legal planning model does not take into account what is special, unique or individual.

What can the British Enlightenment model offer contemporary social care? The model reminds us of the value of compassion in social life, compassion not for abstract mankind but for a specific poor person, unconditional compassion, accompanying social workers even when they well know they are deceived, cheated and exploited by their clients. Compassion will not replace what Max Weber (2002) called rational-legal involvement, but it will complement it. This compassion is needed in contacts with every social care client; nevertheless it is particularly important in contacts with those who, despite statutory assurances, will never "stand on their own feet" and will not "overcome their difficulties with public authorities' help". Compassion expresses respect for those people in the situation they found themselves in and which they will most likely never get out of.

The Polish model of social care, to a considerable extent taken from French philosophy and German pedagogy, is firmly embedded in the Enlightenment trend, which highlights the key role of rational system solutions. Such solutions satisfy a rational need for order; however, they are usually ineffective in practice. Therefore, they raise frustration, since it is impossible to solve the problem of alcoholism, drug addiction or poverty. What can be done is to help an individual alcoholic, a drug addict or a poor person. However, the ambitions of people organising social care, especially those creating legal norms regulating the help, reach much further than the fate of a single person. They would like to cover the whole problem and solve it in a comprehensive way.

Such a system-oriented attitude is usually accompanied by official optimism, a belief, that ambitious aims placed before the social care system are achievable. This optimism is clearly visible in the Polish social care law. Reading both Polish Acts passed after 1989, the one from 1990 as well as that from 2004, leaves no doubt about that. Lawmakers highlighted the situational aspect, i.e. the temporality of poverty. The 2004 Act, Art. 2, § 1 provides that social care is an institution of state social policy, aiming to enable individuals and families to overcome difficult life situations, which they are unable to overcome using their own rights, resources and possibilities (see consolidated text, Dziennik Ustaw 2008, No. 115, item 728). This record is specified in Art. 3, § 2, which states that the responsibility of social care is to prevent situations mentioned in Art. 2, § 1 through taking measures leading to the independence of individuals and families, and their integration with their environment. Such a formulation of social care objectives proves that the legislator is convinced that the poor, with the public authority's help, are able to "overcome the difficult life situation they find themselves in" as well as to "become empowered". The structure

of both regulations is clearly based on the assumption that there is a chance for a change in the situation the poor find themselves in, and that the change will result in, so to speak, the poor "standing on their own feet". The law explicitly posits that a need for social care appeared when certain people found themselves in a difficult situation. However, the structure of the regulation is evidence that the situation is temporary. We come across a similarly optimistic interpretation of social care in a later part of the Act. Here are some examples:

Article 39 of the Act states that in the case of a long-term illness, disability or unemployment, poor people may apply for a temporary allowance. The very name of the allowance implies that it is provided for a certain period of time, after which the beneficiaries are assumed to have successfully overcome the difficult situation they found themselves in. The period of time the temporary allowance is given for is determined by the Social Care Centre on the basis of the facts of the case. It is worth mentioning that in practice the time is usually quite short, and after its expiry another decision to grant the allowance is taken. Article 80 states that a child's whole-day stay in a 24-hour childcare centre should be of a temporary nature – until the child returns to its natural family or is placed in a foster family. Article 88 states that a person who has learnt to be independent, when leaving one of the numerous institutions listed in the regulation, is granted assistance aiming at his/her life empowerment and integration with the environment. Article 91 states that a refugee is granted aid aiming to support the process of his/her integration. Each of the regulations, as well as many others not mentioned here, highlights the possibility of overcoming the difficult situation of the person, gives hope for a possibility of returning to the mainstream of social life, for "normalisation" of their life. It should be repeated here that it is a very optimistic mission. It assumes confidence in the effectiveness of social care as well as the good will and engagement of the poor themselves. It highlights the need for cooperation between social workers and the poor and emphasises the importance of such features as honesty and responsibility on the side of the poor.

Social workers' experience is not that optimistic, though. In the case of many people taking advantage of social care, a return to normality is not possible for various reasons. Many individuals and families do not have enough strength to overcome difficulties piling up in front of them, many alcoholics will never give up drinking, many drug addicts will ultimately ruin their life, many perpetrators of domestic violence will never be reconciled with their victims. This will happen regardless of the amount of effort put into work with them. The world, then, will not be as it should be, it will not change under the influence of the established law, it will not adapt to the declared norm. A belief in a possibility of regenerating all social care clients is unfounded and naďve. It leads to constant

disappointments, frustration and even a deepening sense of guilt. The French model of the Enlightenment one more time shows its limitations: it promises a great deal, but it does not give much. It is this kind of constant frustration that makes such a large proportion of social workers unsatisfied with their job.

A desirable thing would be a more realistic attitude to social care and its capabilities. An attitude in which the role of compassion would be highlighted. Saying this does not imply that so far social workers or other individuals involved in providing social care services have not sympathised with the poor or the excluded. They certainly do it, but it is not about compassion understood as an emotional state but as a social attitude. The fundamental element of the attitude is a conviction that a more important thing than systemic changes is solidarity with a person in need. This solidarity includes respect for the person, which is independent of his/her efforts to escape from the state of poverty, but it arises from the fact of his/her humanity. We should recognise a right of each person to manage their life in the manner they consider appropriate. The choices of some people may seem irrational, yet they are their own choices and they must be accepted. What is, then, the aim of social care? To engage forces and means in order to, in the name of the rationale, extract the poor person from poverty or to support compassionately the person in his/her state? What does an excluded person expect from other people? Effective help in overcoming obstacles and leading him/her, so to speak, "to turn the corner", or perhaps emotional empathy and respect in the situation that person finds himself/herself in? It is clear that although such questions may be raised alternatively, they cannot be answered in this manner. A poor person usually wants both. However, even if he/she is not always able to undertake effective cooperation with a social worker in order to overcome their difficulties, that person always expects compassion and understanding, as well as respect, which he/she has a right to, even when it worsens the statistics of social welfare.

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