Chapter 3

Social Work Between Individualism and Collectivism

Dan Ioan Dascalu
Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to present several viewpoints concerning the way in which the individualism and collectivism as ideologies or ethic options meet, confront, and complete each other in the social work activity. We consider that a debate on this subject is all the more necessary in Romania at present time, when our country has transitioned, in the past few decades, from the communist collectivism to the market economy and democracy, namely to an economic and political system that intrinsically implies the predominance of the values of individualism. We aim at bringing some arguments in favour of the idea that, in social work, both the individualism and collectivism are not two antagonistic perspectives, that are not mutually exclusive but can coexist, and even complete each other. The social work contemporary systems are based on a different type of social solidarity, which does not exclude the individualism but integrate it as one of the fundamental values of social work.

INTRODUCTION: INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIAL WORK

At a first glance, it would seem that individualistic thinking is contradictory to the idea of social assistance. It is a viewpoint that has been theorized since the nineteenth century, by H. Spencer (1876; 1884). The extreme individualism of the English sociologist has undergone, ever since that time, very severe criticism (see, for example, Durkheim, 1987; 2007). We believe

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that, in the contemporary world, such a viewpoint is totally outdated, and that, on the contrary, the values of individualism can be a starting point for building up social assistance systems. We have in view, on the one hand, the transformations individualism has undergone as a social worldview, which G. Lipovetsky called the second individualistic revolution (1983), the conception of individualism as a real humanism (De Singly, 2007), but also the fact that, ultimately, the objectives of individualism are fully compatible with those of social assistance.

We are witnessing today, all around the world, debates over the social assistance system and attempts to reform it. Of course, these efforts are also related to the fact that the model of the welfare state has proved that it has pretty serious limitations, and to the fact that the current economic and financial crisis leaves an increasingly oppressive mark on the whole world. The sovereign debts of states have skyrocketed, sometimes over the limit to which they can still be bearable, and the requirement to reduce public expenditures has become a command widely accepted by most governments. In this context, the rethinking of the social assistance system and reducing costs in this field are major concerns in the field of public policies.

We think that the reforming of the social assistance system should also include a resumption of the debate on the values that underpin this system. But the issue we want to focus on is part of this very topic. More specifically, we try to express some views on how values of individualism can be a starting point and a support in reshaping the social assistance system. We believe that the relationship between individualism and social assistance has, in Romania, and in other former communist countries, a particular meaning, which is related to the profound transformations from the post-communist transition period, transformations that obviously affect the social assistance system as well.

On a general level, it seems we can speak, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, about a revival of individualism. Some call it “second individualistic revolution” (Lipovetsky, 1983, p. 19), different from the modern era. It is a new individualism, with a system of values and behavior patterns which are slightly different. To the process of rethinking individualism and its expansion have contributed a series of processes that marked society in recent decades. Among them, we can mention globalization, the imposition of consumerism all over the world, the affirmation of the knowledge-based society, but also the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.