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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Mobilizing moral outrage: agonistic social work through coalition-building practices

Mobiliseren van morele verontwaardiging: agonistisch sociaal werk door praktijken van coalitievorming

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ABSTRACT

Recent literature on the political role of social work increasingly highlights “conflict” as essential for advancing social change. These studies often draw on Chantal Mouffe’s democratic theory. This article examines how and in which contexts a coalition of social work organizations applies principles of agonistic social work. Our case study focuses on Belgium, a neo-corporatist welfare state with a long tradition of collaboration between policy and civil society. Based on qualitative research with members of Woonzaak—a coalition advocating for the right to quality and affordable housing—we explore how social work practice relate to pluralistic agonism. Findings indicate that agonistic practices are organized around dynamics of escalation and de-escalation. We identify three interrelated principles central to these practices: (1) coalition formation; (2) mobilization of moral outrage through a shared human rights framework; and (3) political strategy. These principles illustrate how social work can engage in democratic contestation while maintaining constructive relationships with institutional actors, offering insights for theory and practice in politically engaged social work.

SAMENVATTING

De literatuur over de politieke rol van sociaal werk benadrukt steeds vaker “conflict” als essentieel voor de missie van sociaal werk om sociale verandering te realiseren. Deze studies putten doorgaans inspiratie uit Chantal Mouffe’s democratische. In deze bijdrage analyseren we hoe en in welke context een coalitie van sociaalwerkorganisaties principes van agonistisch sociaal werk toepast. We voeren onze casestudy uit in België, een typische neo-corporatistische welvaartsstaat met een lange traditie van sterke en intensieve samenwerking tussen beleid en het middenveld. Op basis van empirisch kwalitatief onderzoek bij leden van Woonzaak, een coalitie van sociaal werkers die streven naar het recht op kwaliteitsvolle en betaalbare huisvesting, stellen we principes voor over hoe sociaalwerkpraktijken zich kunnen verhouden tot het concept van pluralistisch agonisme. We stellen vast dat agonistische praktijken worden georganiseerd rond noties van escalatie en de-escalatie. Drie onderling verbonden principes die centraal staan in agonistische praktijken worden geïdentificeerd: 1) vorming van coalities; 2) mobilisatie van morele verontwaardiging via een gedeeld mensenrechtenkader; 3) politieke strategie.

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Introduction

Scholars increasingly emphasise notions of ‘conflict’ as essential to political social work aiming to realise social change (Bečević & Herz, 2023; De Corte et al., 2022; Naert et al., 2024; Oosterlynck & Carré, 2021). Some have called for political approaches to social work to refute technocratic managerialism that obscures the political nature of social interventions (Garrett, 2021; Lane & Pritzker, 2018; Morley & Ablett, 2016). These authors have embraced agonistic theories to theorise political social work practice while criticising approaches based on consensus-oriented deliberative theories (e.g. Habermas). Agonistic theory argues that conflicts are ineradicable and indispensable, and must be seen as an inherent part of democratic practice (Mouffe, 2005).

However, agonistic theories, surprisingly, lack a sound empirical analysis of how conflicts work in everyday reality (August & Westphal, 2024). August and Westphal (2024) argue that these theories fail to properly analyze conflict dynamics, leading to a limited understanding of political conflicts in democracies. In response to this call for empirical research on agonistic practices, the aim of this article is to analyze how and in what context agonistic practices realising the right to decent housing are employed. We specifically study the practices developed by a coalition of social workers and their organisations to actively influence the Flemish government to take measures to establish the right to housing. We address the following research question: Under what conditions, and through which practices, do social workers and their organisations engage in agonistic practices to realise the right to decent housing in Flanders?

Empirical research plays a vital role in identifying and evaluating the diverse practices that facilitate conflict transformation across different social contexts. By integrating empirical research into the application of normative democratic theory, guiding principles on the transformative value of democratic practices can be delineated (August & Westphal, 2024). While empirical research provides the necessary insights into actual transformative practices, normative theory ensures that these practices align with democratic principles and effectively address current issues.

Our analysis draws from Bečević & Herz’s framework (2023). They list five implications of transforming theory into practice, namely: mobilising passions, engaging in agonistic confrontation, identifying opponents, adopting an action-oriented political strategy, and building counter-hegemonic coalitions. We further develop their conceptual framework by conducting qualitative research with members of *Woonzaak*, a coalition of social workers aiming to establish the right to quality housing, through litigation. In 2019, *Woonzaak* submitted a complaint against the Flemish government to the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR), because of the government’s housing policy. Litigation is an atypical and conflictual political strategy in the prevailing neo-corporatist context in Belgium. This case contradicts the long tradition of strong and intensive collaboration between government and civil society in Belgium and could therefore provide insight into the meaning and context of agonistic social work practice. Our findings confirm August and Westphal’s (2024) claim that agonistic democratic practices consist of processes of escalation, as well as de-escalation and reconciliation. While escalation refers to igniting passions and perceptions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, de-escalation and reconciliation refer to interventions through which relations are restored and transformative outcomes are made possible.

Agonistic theory and contested civic spaces

Recent literature calling for recognition of the political dimensions of social work often advocates conflict as a central principle that could lead to a ‘renewal of critical social work’ (Bečević & Herz, 2023; Morley & Ablett, 2016; Naert et al., 2024; Oosterlynck & Carré, 2021). These attempts to reimagine political social work in terms of conflict and contentious approaches have been exacerbated by recent political developments, in which social workers and their organisations are subjected to pressure to conform to state expectations and a perceived shrinking of civic space (Strachwitz & Toepfer, 2022; Toepfer et al., 2020). Studies have shown that the concept of ‘shrinking spaces’

applies not only to typical illiberal and authoritarian contexts such as China and Russia, where liberal democracy never really took root, but also to typical liberal democracies such as Germany (Hummel, 2022), Austria, and Greece (Anheier et al., 2019; Makrides, 2022; Swiney 2019).

Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism' is arguably the most prominent agonistic theory positioning social conflict as a constitutive element of liberal democracies (Bečević & Herz, 2023). This concept forms the core of her theory, setting it apart from other approaches, such as those found in Habermas' political liberalism (Wenman, 2003). Habermas (1984) explicitly criticises the colonisation of the lifeworld by systemic forces, such as the market and bureaucratic state, and their corrosive effects on democracy in the deliberative meaning of the term. He thus emphasises the importance of inclusive, rational debate, which can be seen as a counterweight to domination by the state and the economy. In this liberal conception of 'pluralism,' it is argued that we live in a world with numerous perspectives and values, which we can never fully adopt due to empirical limitations. Nevertheless, by fostering dialogue between these perspectives, a harmonious and non-conflicting outcome can be achieved. However, Mouffe (2005) and Fraser (1992) contend that power cannot be fully erased by communicative rationality in the public sphere. In their view, power inequality between participants remains, fuelled by status, resources and class differences.

Mouffe (2005) therefore argues that such liberal thinking fails to adequately address the pluralistic nature of social reality. Coding 'conflict*' throughout her monographs, three major characteristics of social conflict have been formulated by August (2024): (1) a social ontology of conflict; (2) a strong affectivity of conflict; and (3) its identity-building function.

Agonistic pluralism is grounded in a social ontology of conflict, positing that conflict is an inescapable phenomenon inherent to all societies: '*negativity is constitutive and can never be overcome*' (Mouffe, 2013, p. 130). This view bears a resemblance to Simmel's sociology of conflict (Simmel, 1904), particularly in his emphasis on the relational aspect of conflict. Relationalism, in general, presents a dynamic and pluralistic perspective on social life, which is held together by interconnected networks of interactions. However, while Simmel views conflict as a positive force that contributes to societal unity, Mouffe acknowledges its potential for negativity, without dismissing its constructive aspects. In contrast to structural-functionalist traditions and consensus-based approaches which primarily regard conflict as having disruptive, dissociative, and dysfunctional outcomes, Mouffe argues that conflict cannot be eradicated and that conflicts are a given constituent of any society. In addition to the socio-ontological assumption, Mouffe identifies two further characteristics of conflict: affectivity and identity formation. She argues that conflicts mobilise emotions, which enhance the internal cohesion of groups and facilitate the creation of collective identities.

This perspective is in contrast to deliberative democratic theories, which aim to establish a connection between politics and morality through communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984). In deliberative models, all participants are expected to be free and equal, collectively striving to identify the most compelling argument. The focus of this consensus is not so much on disseminating the 'correct' decision, but on establishing procedural rules that ensure fair decision-making, grounded in the conditions for rational communication in the public sphere. Mouffe (2005) criticises this rationalist conception of the political, arguing that it shows an inability to understand the way power hierarchies shape our societies; these are not, she says, merely technical questions to be solved by experts. In contrast to this rational perspective, Mouffe highlights the power of strong collective emotions that unite people in their struggles. In this regard, affectivity and identity-building are interdependent aspects of conflict. For political action to occur, emotions must be felt in order to mobilise the 'passions' they evoke. Mouffe's focus on the important role of 'passions' resembles the concept of 'moral outrage', which Williams and Briskman (2015) define as collective emotional responses to perceived injustice (see also McAuliffe et al., 2016; Jiménez-Leal & Cortissoz-Mora, 2024). Moral outrage reveals the norms perceived as violated and is anchored in shared standards of what ought to be. These standards, however, are not fixed; they are continuously contested through complex processes of negotiation (Jiménez-Leal & Cortissoz-Mora, 2024). From a social work perspective, Williams and Briskman (2015) illustrate how professionals have responded to

the treatment of asylum seekers with moral outrage, prompting public inquiries and advocacy efforts. Thus, moral outrage becomes a catalyst for political practice. For researchers, attending to such emotions is crucial, as they provide insight into the normative dimensions of the sociocultural systems in which these emotions are embedded (Jiménez-Leal & Cortissoz-Mora, 2024). In this way, moral outrage clearly resonates with the mobilising force Mouffe attributes to 'passions,' underscoring the need for researchers and practitioners to attend to emotional expressions in political life and action.

Mouffe further contends that the affectivity of moral outrage emerges when we distinguish an 'us' from an imagined 'them'. As such, collective identity is only possible through the recognition of a 'constitutive outside', which defines and contrasts the group's identity. In agonistic theory, however, the premise is that in this us/them opposition, the conflicting parties which confront each other are adversaries and not enemies. Here, Mouffe distinguishes between agonism and antagonism: the first emphasises dissent between opponents, while the latter highlights fierce opposition, using hostile discourse, between enemies (Mouffe, 2005).

Agonistic practice and social work's ontology

Social work is typically situated at the intersection of multiple ontological positions, reflecting the field's inherent complexity and diversity in the real world (Howe, 2008). In synthesising this body of literature, Ornellas et al. (2016) distinguish between four ontological approaches: (1) interpretivist-therapeutic approaches, which emphasise individual meaning-making, personal growth, and empowerment; (2) individualist-reformist perspectives, which focus on gradual, pragmatic improvements in individuals' lives, without fundamentally challenging the broader social order; (3) neoliberal-managerialist frameworks, which conceptualise social work as a service-oriented enterprise, prioritising efficiency, standardisation, and measurable outcomes; and (4) collectivist approaches, which advocate for structural change through political action and the redress of systemic inequality and oppression.

It is within the collectivist tradition that Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism can be situated. Against the increasing concern about the profession's depoliticisation under neoliberal-managerialist regimes, and the rise of technocratic practice driven by New Public Management (Suykens et al., 2025), Mouffe's work underscores the enduring role of conflict in democratic life. In this light, social work can be reimagined as a democratic profession (Dzur, 2008). Social workers are situated in contested institutional terrains, navigating and at times amplifying conflict rather than resolving it. Agonistic social work could thus help resist depoliticisation, to create space for critical voices (Naert et al., 2024).

In order to study how these democratic professionals pursue and construct conflict, we follow August and Westphal's (2024) process approach to study conflict dynamics. August and Westphal (2024) put forward the idea that conflicts involve a disruptive and destructive risk. They therefore emphasise the importance of transformational democratic practices that make it possible to change the dynamics and nature of a conflict to achieve positive outcomes. These involve practices and institutions that manage and transform conflicts, ensuring they are beneficial rather than destructive. Conflict transformation recognises that conflicts can have both integrative and destructive effects, depending on how they are managed.

In order to fully capture the transformative potential of conflict, democratic practices include both escalation and de-escalation as essential components. Escalation is defined here as a self-reinforcing process in which the intensity and scope of a conflict increase. It involves rising emotional commitment, cognitive biases, and increased hostility among the parties involved, fuelled by intended tactics, misunderstandings, or unintended consequences. Escalation can lead to more severe and widespread conflict, often making resolution more challenging. Understanding escalation dynamics is crucial to managing and mitigating conflicts effectively. De-escalation is the process of reducing the intensity and scope of a conflict. It involves institutional interventions such as diversion and cross-cutting relationships. This process can occur naturally over time or be facilitated by deliberate

actions and strategies. De-escalation is essential for preventing conflicts from becoming destructive and for promoting peaceful resolutions. Finally, agonistic practices refer to reconciliation. Reconciliation is the process of restoring relationships and integrating conflicting parties after a conflict has been settled. Reconciliation aims to foster a genuine relationship and to ensure long-term stability. To conceptually underpin the transformations of conflict in social work practice, we analyze agonistic practices through the lens of ‘escalation’ and ‘de-escalation’ as processes in which conflicts unfold. To our knowledge, the only attempt to date to conceptualise agonistic social work practices has been conducted by Bečević and Herz (2023), providing a theoretical exploration of how ‘pluralistic agonism’ can shape the political role of social workers.

Based on a literature study, the authors identify five key implications of an agonistic perspective to social work: mobilising passions, engaging in agonistic confrontation, identifying adversaries, adopting an action-oriented political strategy, and fostering counter-hegemonic coalitions. The authors describe the importance of **agonistic confrontation**, which embraces the use of the profession’s ethical-political core values as a lens to look at policy and practice that are at odds with notions such as social justice and human rights. In the agonistic framework proposed by Bečević and Herz (2023), the politicisation of social work therefore needs to be structured around collective forms of identification, inciting a broader concept of democracy. They propose to **identify opponents** and opt for **an action-oriented political strategy**: Building on Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) conceptualisation of **counter-hegemonic coalitions**, coalitions are defined as ‘chains of equivalence’ in which diverse marginalised groups and their representatives converge to devise innovative and impactful political strategies. Coalition-building is often seen as key to the construction of political practices (Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021). For example, studies on community work illustrate that coalitions mobilise people in vulnerable positions, excluded groups, grassroots and social movements to claim that access to power and resources need to be restored (Raeymaeckers et al., 2023; Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022). Coalitions arise among allied social groups seeking to establish an ideological and material counter-power. These alliances enable social groups to unite and coalesce into a new political identity capable of challenging the dominant ideology and practices of the status quo. Through this process, they construct a cohesive political identity that transcends their differences (Bečević & Herz, 2023).

Case selection: *Woonzaak*

Our study is conducted around a case in which social work organisations actively escalate conflicts arising from social issues as part of their political engagement. More specifically, we investigate *Woonzaak* – a coalition (Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021) of 50 social work organisations dedicated to contesting Flemish housing policy. We use the term ‘social work organizations’ to refer to organisations that employ social workers to pursue varying goals such as service delivery (material and non-material support), empowerment, individual counselling and political practice. *Woonzaak* comprises several organisations that employ social workers pursuing different objectives (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviews.

Type of organisation	Respondent
Adult education and civic engagement organisation	Educational coordinator
Organisation supporting tenants	Policy advisor
Umbrella organisation of poverty associations	Policy advisor
Organisation focused on superdiversity and migration	Social worker
Social organisation focused on community work	Social worker
Association of social housing companies	Chairperson
Social platform representing tenants’ interests	Coordinator
Network of volunteer organisations addressing poverty	Policy advisor
Organisation combatting poverty and social exclusion	Staff member
<i>Woonzaak</i>	Two spokespersons of <i>Woonzaak</i>

Individually, these organisations bring to bear a variety of skills and expertise while pursuing a range of goals such as education, civil engagement, empowerment, provision of material and non-material services. In this sense, the coalition aims to unlock the expertise of individual organisational members to adopt political action.

Specifically, *Woonzaak* has pursued legal action at the European Court of Social Rights (Cardoen, 2022, p. 187), contrasting with the traditionally cooperative relationship between government and social work in Belgium's neo-corporatist context (Pauly et al., 2020). The primary political strategy of *Woonzaak* is the filing of a collective legal complaint with the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR). This legal procedure allows designated actors to allege violations of the European Social Charter (ESC) by a member state. However, the right to file such a complaint is restricted to trade unions, certain European non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and employers' organisations. *Woonzaak* has overcome this procedural barrier by receiving support from FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless, which holds the necessary authorisation to submit collective complaints to the ECSR (Woonzaak, 2023).

The selection of *Woonzaak* as a critical case is informed by its atypical approach in the Belgian context, which traditionally features a cooperative relationship between government and social work organisations. By pursuing legal action at the European level, *Woonzaak* exemplifies a departure from conventional advocacy methods, offering a valuable opportunity to study the dynamics of conflict in political social work. To analyze the political practices of *Woonzaak*, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with representatives of social work organisations involved in the coalition.

We are aware that we cannot claim neutrality when our scientific fieldwork and valorisation are deeply entangled with the struggles and aspirations of the case studied in this paper (Gillan & Pickerrill, 2012; Lewis, 2012; Roose et al., 2015). This embeddedness calls for reflexive ethics that acknowledge our responsibility to challenge social injustices. For social work researchers, engaging with politically active groups and coalitions often means that the ethical imperative is to actively support the transformative goals in terms of social justice (Roose et al., 2015). Ethical research in this context requires recognition of the researcher's role, not as an external observer but as a participant in broader struggles for justice. We therefore consider this research – on how social workers and their organisations engage in conflict to establish social justice – as a way to support their claim, especially by making visible the context that leads to agonistic approaches of politicisation. We understand that making the coalition's strategies visible may involve risks, especially given the tensions with opposing actors. Our goal is not to reveal sensitive tactics, but to highlight the broader conditions that make agonistic engagement necessary. This visibility helps support the coalition's claims within wider debates on social justice and contributes to research on how social workers deal with conflict in politicised settings. Guided by notions of ethical transparency (Roose et al., 2015), we remain in close dialogue with coalition members. In doing so, we aim to balance inquiry into agonistic practices with care for the coalition's strategic position.

Method

Interviews

The interviews were designed to elaborate on three primary areas: coalition formation, political strategy, and conflict engagement. We investigated the motivations behind the establishment of broad coalitions among social work organisations. This line of inquiry is grounded in the literature emphasising the significance of collaborative advocacy in enhancing mobilisation and pooling resources to address complex social issues (LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Mosley, 2010). Recognising that conflict can be both a catalyst for change and a source of tension (August & Westphal, 2024), we examined participants' perceptions of conflict in the context of their political activities. Questions were designed to elicit connotations of 'conflict', evaluations of their political strategies as confrontational, and

reflections on the conscious choice to engage in or avoid conflict with the government. We conducted a total of eleven interviews.

We interviewed respondents with ample experience regarding *Woonzaak's* political strategy. All of the respondents were very actively involved in designing, coordinating and implementing the political actions of the coalition. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured, individual interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. This approach was chosen because the topic is highly exploratory. Participants were provided the flexibility to actively shape the conversation and introduce relevant experiences or perspectives beyond the predefined questions. The semi-structured format enabled a balance between comparability across interviews and openness to new insights, ensuring both depth and nuance in the data. This method supports ethical transparency, as it clarifies how participants' voices were elicited and how the dialogue unfolded within a guided yet adaptable framework. We interviewed two official spokespersons of the coalition and nine key respondents affiliated with member organisations (Table 1). The respondents were purposively selected, meaning that we included the most prominent representatives with active experience who could offer us the most relevant information about the coalition, affiliated with 10 organisations. We interviewed directors, chairpersons, coordinators, and social workers.

Data analysis

In the initial phase of data analysis, we transcribed the recordings verbatim (Yin, 2014). We then utilised NVivo software for both open and axial coding. Open coding enabled us to systematically identify and extract topics (Lune & Berg, 2017). We developed codes to capture various aspects of the political practices of *Woonzaak*. We labelled these open codes during the axial coding process to differentiate between different types of 'conflict' practices (Lune & Berg, 2017; Morris, 2006).

In the final step, we connected these grouped codes to concepts from the literature. Specifically, we organised these codes by focusing on how processes of escalation and de-escalation are shaped in the agonistic practices of *Woonzaak*. Our results section was structured according to the key principles guiding coalition members in gaining support and engagement from target group participants, and in selecting appropriate strategies. These principles are detailed in the results section. Our analysis, from the respondents' perspective, revealed a step-by-step approach adopted by the *Woonzaak* coalition to build agonistic practice. To enhance the validity of our research, we implemented several measures. Firstly, the coding process was supported by a codebook, which was reviewed after each interview analysis and coding round. Additionally, we interviewed a diverse set of respondents from various organisations, to ensure a balanced representation of views from different actors within *Woonzaak*.

Results

We elaborate on the main principles which *Woonzaak* applies to construct its agonistic practice. Our results show that agonistic practice can be conceptualised as a balancing act between strategies of escalation and de-escalation. Escalation processes are developed by: (1) the formation of counter-hegemonic coalitions; (2) mobilisation of moral outrage; and (3) the implementation of political strategies such as legal procedures and public action. At the same time, a key component of the political strategy involves a concerted effort to de-escalate the relationship with the government.

Developing counter-hegemonic coalitions

Woonzaak is a coalition of about 50 social work organisations advocating for the right to housing. These social work organisations work together based on a common concern.

So, I think it's stronger than each of us bringing forward signals from our own organization and target audience. We are the Network Against Poverty. We represent people in poverty. But *Uit de marge* represents more the youth. Yes, who else is there ... also the trade unions, I think. So, everyone has their own target audience and represents them, but the signals are roughly the same, so by bundling them and forming a coalition, we are stronger. (Respondent 7)

These coalitions are conceptualised with what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) describe as 'chains of equivalence'. The concept refers to bringing together various target groups and their representatives in a divided society to create often short-lived, creative, and profound political strategies. This way, they can contest the current political hegemony and propose hopeful alternatives (Bečević & Herz, 2023).

Although each coalition member retains its identity and mission, they coordinate around a common agenda. For example, Catholic Education Flanders also supports *Woonzaak*. They justify their role in the *Woonzaak* coalition by stating: '*Children and young people need sufficient quality space to learn, move, and play at home. Their housing situation affects their learning and school trajectory. Poor housing quality leads to unequal educational opportunities and educational disadvantage (Woonzaak, 2023).*' Additionally, social organisations from the health and welfare sectors have joined to show that quality housing also affects overall health.

The scientific literature increasingly highlights the importance of nonprofit advocacy coalitions in policy influence (Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021). These coalitions offer several advantages: they enhance stakeholder mobilisation and participation, facilitate resource and expertise pooling, and improve policy impact by increasing government access and credibility (Buffardi et al., 2018). Traditional nonprofit coalitions typically operate within institutional frameworks, seeking incremental policy improvements while maintaining constructive relationships with policymakers.

Counter-hegemonic coalitions, such as *Woonzaak*, differ slightly in both their purpose and strategy from typical nonprofit coalitions. While advocacy coalitions are typically focused on optimising existing policies through collaboration and expert input, counter-hegemonic coalitions seek to challenge and replace dominant power structures by constructing an alternative hegemonic project (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Their objective is not merely policy refinement, but the transformation of the broader political and ideological discourse surrounding issues such as the right to housing. While traditional nonprofit advocacy coalitions play a crucial role in policy influence by leveraging expertise and government access, counter-hegemonic coalitions aim, rather, for deeper structural transformation. *Woonzaak* exemplifies this approach by not only advocating for housing policy reform but also seeking to disrupt the dominant policy paradigm that prioritises homeownership over housing as a social right. *Woonzaak* seeks to transform the right to housing, from an obligation of effort into an obligation of result for the government. This shift would require the Flemish government to ensure concrete and enforceable housing outcomes, rather than making efforts to improve housing conditions without binding accountability. Specifically, this demand implies that citizens whose right to housing has been violated should have the legal means to hold the Flemish government accountable for failing to fulfil this fundamental right.

Mobilising moral outrage: the right to housing as a shared field of action

The second strategy of agonistic practices involves choosing a shared field of action through which passions of moral outrage can be mobilised. Social workers often encounter issues that prompt perceptions and feelings of social injustice. As stated by Williams and Briskman (2015), this moral outrage is exacerbated by a perceived tension between factual situations and normative principles. Our interviews clearly show that this perceived discrepancy is fuelled by concerns that are often formulated in terms of 'violations of human rights'. Many of our respondents express strong moral sentiments when they refer to human rights as an external norm that is breached.

We are, in fact, allies of citizens, organisations, and governments. However, since the beginning of our housing project, we have noticed a barrier that cannot be overcome. Our goals are very different from those pursued at the Flemish policy level. Many of the measures they take are in direct opposition to the needs and rights of the groups we work with. (Respondent 3)

The coalition partners of *Woonzaak* are guided by concerns about the right to housing and the empirical evidence that this right to decent housing is not guaranteed, especially for the ‘most vulnerable of all, such as people in poverty’. As a result, they expect the government to act upon their demand to realise the right to decent housing.

Belgium is a Member State (of the EU), and given that housing is regionalized, the regions are responsible for developing it. So, we ask the government to act. (Respondent 1)

Specifically, our findings show that the tension between fact and desirability is not only a rational consideration. These perceptions of injustice are emotionally charged. In the case of the right to housing, our interviews confirm a widely felt frustration over the erosion of this right and the lack of political action to ‘do something about it’. Our respondents feel that political social work involves recognising and articulating issues relevant to social work and broader society.

Ultimately, this has to do with the fact that I am somewhat frustrated with the way policy handles the available instruments. For example, the Flemish Housing Codex 2021 includes a number of elements that are still very relevant and important today, but which are not being properly implemented. The idea behind that code is that it aims for inclusion, while current policy seems instead to focus on or tends toward the exclusion of rights. (Respondent 1)

The role of emotions in coalition-building among social work organisations aligns closely with literature emphasising the role of emotions in political action. Political engagement is not purely rational but deeply affective, as collective identities are constructed through shared emotional investment in particular struggles. In the case of social work organisations mobilising around housing rights, affective bonds play a crucial role in uniting diverse actors in a common cause, transforming individualised frustration into a collective political project.

Woonzaak did not arise solely from ‘my frustration’. A few organizations already took the initiative in 2009, with the idea at the time: ‘Wouldn’t it be good if we could file an international legal complaint to do something about this policy?’

Treaties are meant to systematically and progressively realize rights. (Respondent 1)

I think almost everyone, almost every organization working with people in poverty, with vulnerable people, has been convinced for years that we have a big problem with the shortage of social housing. (Respondent 4)

Political strategies: balancing escalation and de-escalation of conflict

Another essential part of political social work is choosing the most appropriate political strategy. While escalation refers to actions undertaken to ignite perceptions of opposition through coalition-building around a shared field of action, interestingly, we notice that the search for an appropriate balance between escalation and de-escalation shapes political strategies.

The legal procedure: legitimising the government’s role through litigation

The most important part of *Woonzaak’s* political practice involves a legal procedure before the European Committee of Social Rights. The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) monitors compliance with the European Social Charter through a collective complaints procedure. This procedure allows social partners and (coalitions of) non-governmental organisations to file complaints about violations of the Charter. The ECSR examines these complaints and issues decisions. The procedure aims to ensure that States Parties adhere to their obligations under the Charter, promoting social

rights and good faith in treaty observance. Through this procedure, the coalition partners have positioned themselves against the housing policy decisions of the Flemish government. The political strategy thus makes it viable to define a 'constitutive outside', as the legal procedure more clearly establishes the two opposing parties. Additionally, the legal procedure is considered an atypical political strategy in the Flemish context, as political work is typically conducted through in-depth dialogue with elected politicians, officials, and representatives of political parties.

I think that when we talk about housing, so many policy recommendations have already been made, so much dialogue has occurred, that it's just obvious that something has to change. And if that dialogue doesn't work, you look for other strategies. (Respondent 9)

When respondents were asked about their overall need to employ diverse strategies and measures in response to the housing crisis, a more in-depth perspective on democratic conflict emerged. Many respondents argued that the importance of the litigation strategy can be explained by the abolition of the '*Woonraad*'. *Vlaamse Woonraad* was a strategic advisory council in Flanders, established to provide expert advice on housing policy. It facilitated dialogue between civil society organisations, independent experts, and (local) government representatives. The *Woonraad* aimed to address housing issues by incorporating diverse perspectives, including those of vulnerable groups, into policy recommendations.

This collaborative platform allowed for a comprehensive and dialogue-based approach to housing policy, ensuring that the voices of various stakeholders were heard and considered in the decision-making process. However, in 2019 the *Woonraad* was abolished as part of a broader reform of strategic advisory councils by the Flemish government. This change has strained the relationship between the social sector and the government, especially in the field of housing policy. Respondents argue that the *Woonraad* enabled constructive conversations about housing policy in a collaborative atmosphere, but now social organisations feel that their demands regarding the 'housing problem' in Flanders have been marginalised and ignored. The abolition has fragmented the advice on the housing needs of vulnerable groups, forcing social workers to find alternative ways to make their voices heard. This shift is seen as part of broader concerns regarding shrinking space, whereby increased government control and regulation is reducing the autonomy and critical voice of civil society. As one of the respondents said about the atypical litigation strategy:

For us, the starting point remains that we are allies and try to talk and come to constructive solutions wherever possible. So yes, I think this approach is quite atypical for us. But it also says a lot about the state of the housing crisis. (Respondent 6)

The limited receptiveness to demands from social work organisations provides an equally significant explanation of the agonistic approach, alongside the conflict surrounding the housing crisis itself.

The primacy of politics is very strong ... I have the impression that in recent years the politicians are taking it much more on themselves to make a decision. And when we don't come out of it together, it makes their support within those different interest groups diminish, and that causes conflict. (Respondent 8)

The coalition partners, to some extent, perceive a more 'closed' political environment, manifested, they argue, through an intensified emphasis on the primacy of politics. Emphasising this primacy suggests that policymakers within the government are adopting a more authoritative stance by making independent decisions and expecting civil society and social work bodies to implement them, often without consultation. The respondents fear that their roles may increasingly become reduced to merely providing methodological support for change processes, detached from deliberations concerning the ultimate goals or outcomes of such processes. This could result in social work being confined to a service-oriented role, rather than being recognised for its broader political function (Vandekinderen et al., 2019).

An additional example illustrates this concern: the Flemish Minister of Housing convened a stakeholder consultation regarding conventional rental housing. A conventional rental home, defined here as a property built by a private developer or housing company, is offered at a rent

that is at least 15% lower than the market rate. This initiative is part of the Flemish government's strategy to subsidise private developers and housing companies, encouraging the creation of more affordable and high-quality rental housing.

A stakeholder meeting was organized at one point where at the beginning of the meeting it was announced that they were not going to change their policy anymore. They just wanted to talk to us about how they were going to implement it. While fundamentally, we had a number of objections to the way in which it was worked out. If that is how you are working on an issue, you do wonder what we are putting our energy into. (Respondent 4)

In this case, politicians asserted their authority in a manner that leaves little room for alternative perspectives or competing interests, thereby marginalising minorities whom social work organisations often help to voice their concerns. Such dynamics evoke attempts to redefine political social work in terms of conflict, which are exacerbated by pressures to conform to state-driven expectations (Strachwitz & Toepler, 2022; Toepler et al., 2020). The ability to voice dissatisfaction with current circumstances is considered an essential part of democratic practice.

I believe that the conflictual side of our political strategy serves as a means to drive progress. Our goal is not to create a paralyzing conflict; we seek a solution above all else. Naturally, from a policy perspective, they do not believe that taking legal action is the right approach. (Respondent 7)

Although the litigation procedure can be seen as an instrument to install conflict through an open judicial procedure, many of our respondents perceive this procedure as a way to maintain legitimacy for their demands at the European level, in such a way that they 'hope' that the Flemish government could be 'convinced' to take the necessary steps.

... we hope that with the ruling in hand, we can say, look, Flanders has been condemned because it did not keep its word regarding housing. Then we can collectively lead the discussions on how we are going to do this in the future. (Respondent 2)

This quote shows that our respondents still perceive the (Flemish) government as a legitimate partner in the fight against social injustice.

Non-conflictual action strategies

Next to the legal procedure, another aspect of Woonzaak's political strategy involves strategies focusing on public action in public spaces. These strategies are often conceptualised as 'outsider strategies' and involve a significant distance between social workers and policymakers. These strategies aim to influence public opinion so that public opinion, in turn, influences policymakers (Carré et al., 2024, 2025). For example, Woonzaak provides information on its demands by creatively highlighting the housing issue in social media. It also organised a weekly 'housing challenge' for more than two hundred people and organisations, by, for example, applying tattoos, creating artwork and visiting vacant homes. The goal of these strategies is to raise awareness among the general public and provide a platform for those suffering from housing problems. Interestingly, our respondents frame these attempts and activities as ways to inform the public and not attempts to ignite a sharp conflict.

By stressing the 'non-conflictual' component of outsider strategies, the respondents emphasise that they still aim to maintain 'relations' with government officials to realise social change in the housing market. The outsider actions in public spaces are thus seen as attempts to apply pressure on the government 'without burning bridges'.

But we are now also starting to roll out a campaign, so we hope to become very visible in the media and on the streets. We have our Woonzaak caravan, and we hope to be able to stand in various places in Flanders, such as at the Ghent Festival, and we have considered other festivals to make the housing crisis visible. (Respondent 6)

This quote illustrates how visibility in public spaces is used as a strategy to raise awareness. The caravan and festival represent a broader effort to make the housing crisis tangible to a wider

audience. These actions reflect a careful balancing act. The coalition mobilises public support while preserving the possibility of dialogue with policymakers. In doing so, Woonzaak demonstrates how outsider strategies can serve as a form of agonistic engagement that fosters dissent without escalating into antagonism.

In order to avoid escalating and ‘damaging’ the relationship with the government, many of our respondents were very aware that ‘conflict’ is a loaded term. One of our respondents expresses this concern by making a distinction between ‘conflict’ and ‘dissent’. This distinction resonates with the ideas of August and Westphal (2024) on how agonistic practices are carefully constructed ways of finding legitimacy for political demands while being aware of the danger of escalated conflicts resulting in disrupted relationships.

These are conflicts in the sense that they are just ways to organize a democratic contradictory debate, which can be through individual conversations or various other means. So, it's not that I say it's not a conflict; it's actually dissent. (Respondent 2)

The increasingly closing civic space perceived by the coalition partners ultimately compels them to sustain contestation, ensuring that dissent has a platform and that the institutions necessary for its expression continue to exist. One respondent points to this need for dissent: ‘*A good democracy organizes its own dissent*’ (Respondent 9). We thus find that ‘conflict’ is not pursued for its own sake but as a strategic tool to force progress. This resonates with Mouffe’s (2000) claim that democratic contestation requires the recognition of legitimate adversaries rather than the suppression of conflict.

Conclusion

This study empirically investigates how social workers employ agonistic practices in their efforts to realise social rights, with a particular focus on the case of *Woonzaak*. Building on August and Westphal’s (2024) critical analysis of agonistic theory’s limitations in addressing conflict dynamics, this study offers an empirically grounded framework that refines our understanding of agonistic practices in political social work. August and Westphal (2024) argue that democracies are macro-arrangements involving several organisations and institutions (meso) that facilitate specific ways and practices of conflict-waging. Through an analysis of the coalition’s strategies, we identify three inter-related principles, building on Bečević and Herz (2023), which underpin agonistic practice in social work: (1) the building of counter-hegemonic coalitions; (2) the mobilisation of moral outrage within a shared human rights action framework; (3) the balancing of escalation and de-escalation through political strategies such as public action and litigation.

We find that processes of escalation through the formation of coalitions are tied to emotions of moral outrage experienced by coalition members. Our findings thus confirm research emphasising the important role of collective moral emotions in initiating political practices (Williams & Briskman, 2015). Specifically, two key mechanisms were found to exacerbate escalation processes. First, we find that the moral outrage concerning deep inequalities in the housing market, embedded in a human rights framework putting forward the ‘*right to housing*,’ fuels strong collective moral emotions. Second, our findings also reveal that the perception of closing or shrinking of political spaces is connected to intense emotional frustration. The legal action taken by *Woonzaak* exemplifies a strategic escalation, designed to confront the Flemish government’s housing policies by utilising international human rights mechanisms. Simultaneously, our study underscores the role of de-escalation efforts, in which social workers continue to engage with policymakers, positioning the government as a legitimate, albeit contested, actor in the pursuit of structural social change.

We encourage further studies on the political role of social workers, to empirically assess the context and specific characteristics of various strategies employed by social work practice to ignite and de-escalate conflict in current society through agonistic practices. Drawing on Hummel (2022) and Strachwitz and Toepler (2022), we argue that the apparent rise in opposition and conflict in society may stem from structural developments in society and in the characteristics of

civil society. At the structural level, we assume that contentious practices will be exacerbated when civil society and social work are challenged by attempts to close off the political space to critical voices (Carré et al., 2025). This contribution illustrates that agonistic social work does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is triggered by structural transformations in the governance of welfare states. The abolition of *Vlaamse Woonraad*, an advisory council, exemplifies the shrinking spaces for institutionalised dialogue, prompting social workers to seek alternative, conflictual strategies to assert their political agency. Our case study on *Woonzaak* therefore demonstrates the assumption that agonistic forms of social work practices find their roots in shrinking political spaces with diminishing opportunities for dialogue. That said, we could argue that reconciliation is not always desirable (and possible), especially in contexts where social workers and their organisations are confronted with authoritarian or oppressive ideologies. In such contexts, escalation-driven agonistic practices not only strengthen the critical dimension of social work but also offer a theoretical lens for viewing social work as a space of ongoing democratic contestation.

Second, regarding civil society and social work, Hummel (2022) and Strachwitz and Toepler (2022) also point out that since the rise of social movements, there has been a proliferation of new and diverse organisations representing different social groups, interests, and political orientations. This increased pluralism makes contestation more visible and multifaceted. Hummel (2022) emphasises that the greater interest in critical practices cannot be explained solely by external pressures, but also arises from the internal evolution of civil society itself, with organisations adopting varied agendas. Strachwitz and Toepler (2022, p. 179) therefore claim that ‘while shrinking space mechanisms are observable, civil society is nevertheless experiencing new activism and growth’. This growth brings a multitude of new actors into the public sphere, making it easier to express dissenting voices. Further empirical investigation is therefore needed to differentiate between the effects of actual civic space restrictions in liberal democracies and the consequences of a more heterogeneous and politically engaged civil society.

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