

## Chapter 5

### **'Another Social Work is Possible!' Reclaiming the Radical Tradition**

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#### **Introduction**

For more than two decades, the notion that 'there is no alternative' to the free market as a basis for organising both economy and society has exercised an extraordinary influence over almost every aspect – economic, political and academic – of social life and thought. Such market fundamentalism, or neo-liberalism, as it is usually known, has become a kind of global 'common sense', reinforced on the one hand by 'end of history' theories of the sort advanced by US State Department official Francis Fukuyama in the wake of the fall of communism in 1989 (Fukuyama 1992), and on the other by postmodern analyses which dismiss all attempts to make sense of this 'new world order' as antiquated 'grand narratives'; at best, these are written off as misguided; at worst, they are decried as the harbingers of a new totalitarianism (Lyotard 1984).

Social work, like other social professions, has been profoundly affected by this neo-liberal onslaught. As one would expect, the specific forms in which these ideas and policies have shaped social work services and forms of practice have varied from country to country and have been, to some degree, 'contingent on context' (McDonald et al. 2003). In the Global South, the context has usually been one of Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund, which have required governments to privatise whole swathes of the public sector. By contrast, in the West, 'neo-liberal social work' has mainly been the product of the twin processes of marketisation and managerialism, underpinned by theories of New Public Management. Despite these regional variations, however, the global prescriptions of the Washington Consensus have left few countries – and few welfare regimes – unaffected (Ferguson et al. 2005).

This dominance of neo-liberal ideas, policies and practice has not gone unchallenged. At a global level, the anti-capitalist (or global justice) movement which came into existence following the protests against the meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999 has sought, through regional and global social forums over the past decade, to offer an alternative model of globalisation, based on a rejection of markets and militarism (Calinicos 2003). Within the narrower field of social welfare and social work,

where resistance to neo-liberal ideas, values and policies has been less than one might have hoped, there is, nevertheless, evidence of growing resistance to the ways in which these ideas and policies have moved social work further and further away from its core values. Some of the specific forms that this resistance has taken will be considered in the final section of this chapter.

Until recently, however, the resistance to neo-liberalism was hampered by two factors. Firstly, while there is widespread consensus on the weaknesses and limitations of the 'pure' form of capitalism which neo-liberalism represents, there has been much less agreement on what form (or forms) an alternative might take. As Wilkinson and Pickett note in their ground-breaking discussion of the effects of inequality, *The Spirit Level: Why more Equal Societies almost always do Better*, 'for several decades, progressive politics have been seriously weakened by the loss of any concept of a better society' (2009: 240). That lack of clarity was reflected in the message of a placard seen at an anti-WTO demonstration: 'Smash capitalism – and replace it with something nicer'.

The second factor has been the apparent capacity of the neo-liberal form of capitalism for indefinite expansion and its seeming ability to have overcome the tendencies to crisis inherent in classical capitalism first identified by Marx over 150 years ago. According to Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Lucas in his presidential address to the American Economic Association in 2003, for example, 'the central problem of depression-prevention has been solved, for all practical purposes' (cited in Krugman 2008: 9), a view shared until recently by many leading economists and politicians, including British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. In the face of this apparent success, any criticism levied against neo-liberal globalisation (most obviously the huge inequalities it has generated) could be met with the response that 'it works', at least for a section of the world's population.

Until now. In 2007 a crisis began in the US sub-prime housing market. It has since led to the unravelling of the entire global financial system, the collapse or *de facto* nationalisation of some of the world's biggest banks, and the development of what is now generally recognised to be the deepest crisis of capitalism since at least the 1930s<sup>1</sup>. While different writers offer alternative explanations for the roots of the crisis, what can be stated unequivocally is that its effects will be felt most strongly by the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society, both directly, through the effects of rising unemployment, house repossessions and cuts in services, and indirectly, through, for example, the increased racism and xenophobia to which the crisis is already giving rise. And this relates to the first factor noted above.

At a societal level, the collapse of the neo-liberal certainties of the past two decades makes the need to develop alternative notions of 'the good society'



<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the roots and causes of this crisis, see: Krugman 2008, Turner 2008, Choonara 2009.

much more urgent. The same holds true of social welfare and social work. Many of those affected by the crisis will be forced to seek support from a range of social professions, including social work. However, as I have indicated above and shall argue in more detail below, the forms of social work practice that have developed over the last twenty years are often woefully inadequate in their ability to address people's needs, and will be of even less help in responding to the much greater levels of need that we are likely to see in the near future. Faced with this situation, in this chapter I will argue that we need to look afresh at the tradition within social work which does not shy away from addressing these wider political and economic realities and which seeks to place issues of social justice at the heart of what we do: namely, the radical social work tradition.

### **The radical kernel**

Radical social work, as a distinct and consciously articulated model or approach within social work, only really emerged in the 1970s, above all in Britain, Canada and Australia. The reasons for its emergence at that time and in these places, as well as the specific forms that it took, will be explored in the next section. Since its earliest beginnings, however, social work has mirrored wider ideological conflicts and debates within society regarding the roots of social problems and how to best address them. Not surprisingly then, alongside the dominant models of theory and practice, which, reflecting Marx's dictum that 'the ruling ideas in every age are the ideas of the ruling class', have often been fairly conservative or at best reformist in content, there have also been more radical conceptions of the role of social work, as a brief discussion of the early British and American experiences will illustrate.

#### *Social work in Britain 1870–1914*

The earliest social work organisation in Britain was the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in 1869. COS displayed all the prejudices of the English middle-classes of the late Victorian era. Thus, its members' primary concern was less with addressing the factors producing the poverty and squalid housing conditions which affected so many people in the poorer areas of Britain's largest cities (described so powerfully by a young Frederick Engels almost thirty years before [Engels 1844/2009]) than with ending 'the scandal of indiscriminate alms-giving', which they saw as undermining individual character and self-sufficiency. The main aim of the 'scientific' casework method which they developed, therefore, was to distinguish between the 'deserving' poor (those whom they judged would use the financial help given in ways that were felt to be appropriate) and the 'undeserving' poor (those who they felt would not). Not surprisingly, many applicants went away empty-handed. Consistent with this individualist and often punitive approach, COS was also opposed

to any measures by government which were seen as undermining individual character, including, for example, the provision of free school meals and old age pensions (Stedman-Jones 1971, see also Jones 1983, Lewis 1995).

Such a harsh ideology, however, was not without its critics. Opposition to the ideas and practices of COS came from three main sources. Firstly, there were those within the organisation who had reservations about its approach. These included individuals such as Maude Royden, a volunteer in the 1890s with the Liverpool Central Relief Society. The Liverpool Society shared many of the ideas as the London-based COS. Despite coming from a wealthy background, Royden seems to have struggled with the philosophy and practice of the Society. She hated, for example, the class superiority which underpinned its 'friendly visiting', and wrote to a friend that 'I shouldn't be grateful if Lady Warwick, e.g., came to see me every week, to get me to put a few shillings into a provident fund... I should be mad' (cited in Pedersen 2004: 86). While it is difficult to quantify the extent of such dissatisfaction with COS ideology on the part of volunteers like Royden, the fact that, according to Jones, a major reason for the introduction of professional social work training in the early 1900s was to prevent the 'contamination' of friendly visitors by those with whom they were working (in the sense of becoming too friendly) suggests she was not an isolated case (Jones 1983).

A more significant challenge to COS came from the settlement movement, which is usually seen as the second major source of contemporary social work in both Britain and the US. Like COS, its aim was to promote social harmony through active citizenship, an aim which was to be achieved by persuading the educated middle-class young from universities to spend a period of time living and working among the poor, assisting them through education and example and promoting social reform on their behalf (Powell 2001: 38–40). In the UK, it was initiated by Canon Barnett in the wake of the rise of mass unemployment in the early 1880s and reflected his growing conviction that state aid, rather than the 'scientific philanthropy' practised by COS, was necessary to eliminate poverty. While it would be wrong to exaggerate the differences between the views of the leaders of COS and individuals like Barnett, it is probably fair to say that, in general, the approach of the settlement movement was more humanistic and less punitive than that of COS, and it is often seen as the precursor of later community development approaches (Mullally 1997, see also Powell 2001).

The third source of opposition to the ideas and approach of COS came from socialist and feminist campaigners, whose concerns often went beyond the immediate amelioration of hardship (though they were also involved in activities that sought to do just that) and envisaged wider structural and economic change. In that sense, they were often explicitly political (though hardly less so than the leadership of COS, one of whose leading members described the theory and practice of casework as 'the antithesis of mass or

socialistic measures and...proving that there is still much that can be described as individualism' [Milnes, quoted in Walton 1975: 150]).

Campaigners such as Clement Attlee, Sylvia Pankhurst and George Lansbury often made little distinction between their political agitation and their social work activities. These activities included the establishment of communal restaurants providing cheap and nourishing food; the organisation of soup kitchens for the families of striking dockers; the creation of hostels and meeting places for the poor, where they were given help and support with their individual problems; and the establishment of co-operative dressmaking businesses for young women. Alongside such communal activities, they were also frequently involved in individual casework and advocacy. As we have argued elsewhere:

Attlee, Pethick-Lawrence, Hughes, Pankhurst, and Lansbury are relatively well known as political activists from the east end of London. Yet they are not viewed as part of any social work tradition. The demarcation of a 'professional history' has led to their campaigning, social and voluntary work being excised from a broader social work history. But there is no doubt that they (and many of their followers) offer a glimpse of another, more radical, social work past. Their committed advocacy and community action strategies to address the needs of local communities and poor working class 'clients' prefigures developments often associated with the next period of social work radicalism in the 1970s. (Ferguson and Lavallette 2007: 19)

#### *'The Road Not Taken': Social work in the USA*

Social work practice in the United States of America is often assumed to be inately conservative, limited to individualistic, clinical approaches carried out in private practice settings. While much contemporary practice undoubtedly does take this form, it is very far from being the whole picture, either now or in the past. Not only does such a portrayal fail to address the activities of social workers within the public sector, but it also ignores the rich tradition of community organising in the US, much of which was based on the ideas of the radical writer and activist Saul Alinsky (1971). Moreover, as Reisch and Andrews have shown in their important study *The Road not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States* (2002), at particular points over the last 100 years, radical ideas have exerted an important influence on both social work education and practice, often in the face of fierce opposition from the state and from more mainstream social work colleagues and organisations. One example is the settlement movement in the period before the First World War.

While the inspiration for the settlement movement in the US came from the British experience, in practice, US settlements, including the most famous one, Hull House in Chicago, developed in a much more radical direction than their British counterparts. They developed, for example, a progressive

education system, concerned not only with helping immigrants integrate more easily into American society, but also with helping them challenge sweatshop and child labour systems. According to Reisch and Andrews, the settlements were regarded with suspicion by more traditional social workers, including the American counterparts of COS:

Perhaps this was because they were not engaged in social service in the traditional sense. In a manner reflected in the late twentieth century by proponents of empowerment theory and practice, radical social workers did not work for their clients and constituents but with them... They recognised the strengths of low-income groups and the potential to establish mutual interests and mutual goals. This clearly represented a threat to traditional conceptions of charity. (Reisch and Andrews 2002: 27)

### **The 1970s: The emergence of radical social work**

As the examples cited above suggest, social work has always harboured a radical potential or kernel, which has manifested itself at different times and in different places. It was not until the 1970s, however, that radical social work really began to emerge as a distinct approach to practice. The first part of this section will explore some of the reasons why this new form of theory and practice should have emerged at this particular time. Next, the key elements of radical social work will be discussed, along with examples of the forms of practice to which they gave rise. Finally, some of the reasons for the decline of radical social work in the early 1980s will be considered.

#### *'Be realistic – demand the impossible!' The experience of the 1960s*

Several factors contributed to the emergence of more radical forms of social work practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Within the UK, these included the 'rediscovery of poverty' by researchers in the mid-1960s; the re-organisation of social work services based on new legislation in both Scotland and England, which led to the creation of large, generic teams, giving workers a stronger sense of their collective strength and professional identity; and the appearance of influential studies of service users' views. The most important of these was Mayer and Timms' study, *The Client Speaks: Working Class Impressions of Casework* (1970), which was highly critical of the then dominant psychosocial approaches for their failure to address problems of material poverty.

However, the fact that radical social work movements appeared at the same time in Canada, Australia and, to a lesser extent, the US suggests that other, more global forces were also at work. Foremost amongst these were the end of the 'long boom' (the period of sustained economic growth which followed the Second World War), which led to the re-emergence of economic crisis in many parts of the world, and the growing global movement of resistance

to America's long war in Vietnam. These factors helped bring about the most radical decade in world history since the years immediately following the First World War. The period between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s saw the emergence of social movement after social movement. These movements fed into and inspired each other, partly through the influence of television (Harman 1988, see also Kurlansky 2004). Thus the black civil rights movement in the US in the early 1960s was followed by the appearance of the women's liberation movement (and also inspired the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland); the Gay Liberation Front took its name from the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, and so on. These movements in turn were linked to and fuelled by the emergence of a global student movement, with students playing a key role both in the Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia and in re-igniting the French workers movement in May of the same year, leading to the largest general strike in history, which caused the country's President, General de Gaulle, to flee in panic to a military base in Germany.

#### *The radicalisation of social work*

Social work was profoundly affected by these global convulsions, particularly in the countries mentioned above. At an ideological level, the growing popularity of sociology as an academic discipline meant that prospective social workers were often exposed to new and radical ideas about the family, mental illness, the impact of structural factors on individual behaviour, and the socially constructed nature of 'deviancy'. At the level of practice, the recognition that many clients' problems were rooted in their material circumstances and experience of oppression, rather than in alleged personal inadequacies, alongside the daily evidence of the effectiveness of collective struggle, led to a growing critique of casework approaches and to a greater appreciation of the potential of community work and community action to bring about change. The more radical approaches that emerged in this period were extremely diverse and reflected a wide range of ideological positions – socialist, feminist and libertarian/'hippie' (Pearson 1989). The socialist critique was most clearly articulated in *Radical Social Work*, an influential collection of writings edited by social work academics Roy Bailey and Mike Brake which appeared in 1975 (Bailey and Brake 1975). The book addressed such issues as the potential of systems models to be a basis for more radical practice; the limits and potential of community development approaches; the relationship between sociological theories and social work practice; and issues of gay rights and social work. The connecting thread, however, was a concern with the way in which the then dominant casework approaches individualised and pathologised clients and ignored the structural factors contributing to their problems (a concern also reflected in the title of the main radical social magazine of the period, *Case Con*). By contrast, radical social work was defined as 'essentially understanding

the position of the oppressed in the context of the social and economic structure they live in' (Bailey and Brake 1975: 9).

Other elements of radical social work articulated in the *Case Con Manifesto* attached as an appendix to the book included its critique of the oppressive and controlling aspects of the welfare state; its call for a different relationship between workers and clients, both at the individual level (predating current models of user involvement) and in respect of alliances between social workers and collective user organisations; its emphasis on collective approaches to addressing clients' problems, including community work and community action, which contributed to the rise of movements such as the disability movement in the 1980s; and its insistence that social workers involve themselves in trade unions and build links with other groups of workers.

It is difficult to quantify the impact of these arguments on day-to-day social work practice, whether in the UK or elsewhere, though a subsequent volume edited by Bailey and Brake did provide examples of what such radical practice might actually look like (Bailey and Brake 1981). What is certainly true is that the 1970s saw much greater interest in collective approaches in social work, reflected both in the increased adoption of group work and community work approaches as a means of responding to clients' problems and in the rapid expansion of trade union organisation amongst social workers. Where the impact was perhaps greatest, however, was in social work education and training, where welfare rights and community work teaching became core elements of the curriculum in many training courses, and radical or Marxist texts, such as Corrigan and Leonard's *Social Work Practice under Capitalism* (1978) or Simpkin's *Trapped within Welfare: Surviving Social Work* (1979/1983), were standard texts on many reading lists (with the latter going into a second edition within four years).

#### *The 1980s: Radical social work in decline*

Radical social work, both as an approach to practice and as an informal social movement, suffered a decline in the early 1980s. There were two main reasons for this. The first, and by far the more important of the two, was the shift to the right in all areas of social and political life following the election of a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and a Republican government under Ronald Reagan in the US the following year. Social work in particular became a synonym for all that New Right politicians and ideologues such as Charles Murray perceived as problematic about the welfare state, and above all for its alleged encouragement of 'dependency' (Murray 1990). In such a climate, defending social work in any form, let alone radical social work, was a considerable challenge.

The second reason for the decline of radical approaches was a rather different, albeit related, one. The defeat of the class-based trade union struggles of the 1970s in Britain, France, Italy and elsewhere (with the low point in the

UK being the crushing of the 1984–5 miners' strike by Mrs Thatcher and her allies) led to widespread disillusionment with class-based politics. That disillusionment took different forms.

In France, for example, it was expressed in the rise of the *nouveaux philosophes*, a group of philosophers (some of them former Marxists) whose disappointment over the failure of the struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s to overthrow the existing order led to a profound pessimism concerning both the possibility and the desirability of radical social change which was articulated in a worldview which became known as postmodernism (Callinicos 1989). In the UK, the US and other English-speaking countries, an emphasis on class was increasingly replaced by an emphasis on *oppression*, *identity* and *difference* (Williams 1996). Within social work, the radical movement of the 1970s was increasingly criticised for having over-emphasised class at the expense of a range of oppressions, notably women's oppression and oppression on the basis of 'race'. Consequently, some radicals within social work began to prioritise issues of 'race', gender and disability (Dominelli 1988, see also Dominelli and McLeod 1989). Some measure of their success in this respect can be seen in the prominence given to anti-oppressive practice within the new Diploma in Social Work, introduced in the UK in 1989. While this was in almost every respect a real step forward, the fact that the Diploma also ushered in a much more mechanistic, competence-based approach to social work education, in keeping with the market-based approaches to social welfare being introduced at the time, suggests that the inclusion of anti-oppressive practice was to some extent a fig-leaf concealing the generally much less radical implications of the new qualification<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the greatly increased awareness of a range of oppressions which developed within social work in the 1990s (and was reflected in the growing popularity of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive perspectives [Thompson 2006]) was one of the few gains of this period.

### Neoliberalism, managerialism and social work

At the same time as adherents of postmodernism were proclaiming the 'end of grand narratives', in the sense of theories which seek to explain the world as a totality, a new and very powerful 'grand narrative' of neo-liberal globalisation was establishing its dominance – ideological, economic, political and social – in almost every corner of the globe. Its origins lay in the world economic crisis of the mid-1970s and the confidence which that crisis gave to that (hitherto marginal) section of the ruling elite which argued for a return to the 'pure capitalism' of the pre-Keynesian period. In practice, this neo-liberalism, as it became known, involved governments in seeking to remove all perceived



<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the critical social work approaches which also emerged in Australia and Canada during the 1990s, see Ferguson 2008, chapter 7

barriers to the free operation of market forces, primarily through privatisation of previously state-owned utilities, such as electricity, water and rail services, and the weakening of trade unions (Harvey 2005, see also Harman 2008).

Such policies were given a huge boost by the collapse of the communist regimes of the former USSR and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. The following decade was characterised by the dominance of the Washington Consensus, implemented through the mechanisms of the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, which emphasised, *inter alia*, privatisation, financial deregulation and fiscal discipline as the basis for economic growth in every country, regardless of its particular situation (Hubbard and Miller 2005).

Unsurprisingly, welfare regimes, including the provision of social work services, were profoundly affected by these changes. A study of social work in nine different countries published in 2004, for example, showed that it had been left unaffected in none of them (Ferguson et al. 2005). In countries of the Global South such as India and Senegal, policies of trade liberalisation had often destroyed local industries, such as the fishing industry in Kerala, while a reduction in state support for social work had led to increased reliance on NGOs often funded by foreign donors. Meanwhile, in advanced capitalist countries such as Britain and France, the push for labour market flexibility was undermining the traditional roles of social workers and contributing to 'de-professionalisation', in the sense of the creation of new layers of less skilled, poorly paid workers.

Within the UK, the main vehicle through which neo-liberal ideas, policies and practices were introduced into the public sector generally and into social work in particular was New Public Management (NPM), or, as it became popularly known, managerialism. Broadly defined, managerialism is the idea that 'managers should be in control of public organisations and that they should run those organisations in line with business principles and concerns' (Evans 2009: 146). More specific elements of NPM approaches identified by McDonald include an emphasis on generic management skills rather than professional expertise; an emphasis on quantifiable performance measurements and appraisal; the break-up of traditional bureaucratic structures into quasi-autonomous units dealing with one another on a user-pays basis; market testing and competitive tendering instead of in-house provision; strong emphasis on cost-cutting; and limited-term contracts for state employees instead of career tenure (McDonald 2006: 69).

In his study of the development of the 'social work business' in the UK, Harris (2003) has provided a convincing account of the ways in which professional social work practice, organisation and education were subordinated to and transformed by the imperatives of managerialism (with a more recent publication highlighting some of the nuances and contradictions of this process [Harris and White 2009]). Three separate studies from the past decade

have vividly highlighted how these changes have made an impact on the actual practice of social work.

In the earliest of these studies, conducted ten years after the passage of the NHS and Community Care Act of 1990, which laid the basis for more market-based approaches, Jones interviewed forty highly experienced frontline workers (minimum eight years post-qualification experience) across the North of England to see in what ways, if any, their jobs had changed as a result of these reforms. He found a group of highly stressed workers, unhappy at the way in which their jobs had changed and frustrated by their inability to work in the ways which they believed were in the best interests of their clients. Importantly, at the root of these workers' frustration was not the content of their interactions with their clients, but rather the nature of the agencies within which they worked and the highly procedural forms that their work now took:

We are now much more office based. This really hit home the other day when the whole team was in the office working at their desks. We have loads more forms which take time to complete. But we social workers also do less and less direct work with clients. Increasingly the agency buys in other people to do the direct work and we manage it. (Jones 2004: 100)

As this last point suggests, at the core of social work reform in the UK has been the introduction of a purchaser/provider split, meaning that local authorities now purchase care from private or third sector organisations rather than providing it directly. In the process, social workers have primarily become care managers, co-ordinating care rather than working directly with clients – the reason, of course, why many came to social work in the first place. One worker summed up the frustration to which this gave rise:

I feel so deskilled because there are so many restrictions over what I can do. Yes I go out and do assessments, draw up care plans, but then we aren't allowed to do anything. I can't even go and organise meals on wheels for somebody without completing a load of paperwork, submitting a report to a load of people who would then make the decision as to whether I can go ahead and make the arrangements. I just wonder why I am doing this. It's not social work. Many of my colleagues in the adult team are looking to get out of social work altogether. They say they don't want to take this garbage any more. That's how they feel. The will to do social work is still there. They are still committed to work with people in distress. That heartfelt warmth has not gone away, but the job is so different. (*Op. cit.*: 102)

As noted, Jones' study took place at the end of the 1990s. More than six years later, however, the authors of *Changing Lives*, a major report into the state of social work in Scotland commissioned by the (then) Scottish Executive, came up with very similar findings:

Working to achieve change is at the heart of what social workers do. Identifying needs and risks through assessment and developing and

implementing action plans to address these will achieve nothing without an effective therapeutic relationship between worker and client... Yet social workers consistently told us that it is this very aspect of their work which has been eroded and devalued in recent years under the pressure of workloads, increased bureaucracy and a more mechanistic and technical approach to delivering services. (Scottish Executive 2006: 28)

Finally, similar findings have emerged from a survey of 369 children and families' social workers carried out in 2009 by the trade union UNISON as part of its submission to an official enquiry following the highly-publicised death of a child in London, 'Baby P', at the hands of his carers in 2007. Alongside discontent about the size of caseloads and the lack of resources, workers also complained about the level of bureaucracy associated with managerial systems and approaches:

The focus of social work has become entirely procedural and the meaning of the work has been lost. The needs of children have become secondary to the needs of agencies responsible for protecting them. The contents of assessments appear insignificant as agencies are far more concerned about whether they are completed on time. (UNISON 2009: 9)

### **'I didn't come into social work for this': Reclaiming social work**

As the studies cited above show, the direction taken by social work over the past two decades has left many social workers feeling dispirited and demoralised. Nor is such despondency confined to the UK, even if the development of social work as a business has gone further there than in most other advanced capitalist countries (with the obvious exception of the US). In the past few years, however, there have been encouraging signs of resistance to the dominance of managerial values and priorities in social work. Here, I shall mention three of these.

The first is a growing re-assertion of social work as a value-based profession. Central to the neo-liberal transformation of social work has been the minimisation or excision of values and an emphasis instead on social work as a largely *technical* process, based on skills, knowledge and a concern with 'what works'<sup>3</sup>. 'What works', at least in the sense promoted by New Labour governments in the UK, has tended to involve a focus on prescribed behavioural change, to be achieved through pre-packaged programmes which can be bought and 'rolled out', with little concern either for the relationship between the workers and service users involved or for the factors, structural or otherwise, that give rise to the unacceptable behaviour. In contrast, social workers have begun to emphasise the ethical content of their work. An obvious example is the rightly celebrated inclusion of the statement that



<sup>3</sup> The last item in this list, that is, a purely pragmatic approach, is closely linked to the evidence-based practice movement (Webb 2001, see also Sheldon 2001).

the 'principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' in the 2001 Definition of Social Work issued jointly by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (quoted in Ferguson et al. 2005: 207). Another is the work carried out in defence of asylum seekers, refugees and 'erased' groups by social workers and social work academics in Britain, Australia and Slovenia, often in direct opposition to the racist and scapegoating policies of their national governments (respectively: UNISON/BASW 2006, Briskman et al. 2008, Zorn and Lipovec-Čebren 2008). Finally, social work academics at Nottingham Trent University in England have been involved in organising a biennial, 2,000-strong, conference entitled *Affirming our Value Base in Social Work* (Barnard et al. 2008).

Secondly, resistance to dominant trends has also come from organisations and movements of service users who have challenged not only medicalised, paternalistic modes of service and practice, but also the narrow consumerist, and often tokenistic, forms of involvement which officially approved forms of 'user involvement' have created for them (Oliver 1996, see also Beresford 2007, McPhail 2007).

A third source of resistance (in which the current writer has been directly involved) seeks to incorporate both the value-based critique of managerialism referred to above and the active involvement of service users as participants in a collective movement into a new, or revitalised, model of practice. Its origins lie in a meeting which took place in Glasgow, Scotland in late 2004, entitled 'I didn't come into social work for this!' The basis for the meeting, at which Chris Jones presented the research findings discussed earlier, was that it was necessary to move beyond simply lamenting the current crisis of social work and to begin to actively challenge current trends. The meeting, attended by around sixty social workers and social work academics, adopted a manifesto entitled *Social Work and Social Justice: a Manifesto for a New, Engaged Practice*. The Manifesto was made available online, and within a very short space of time, more than 700 people had added their names to it (Ferguson and Lavalette 2007: 197).

Out of these humble beginnings, the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) was born. The Network does not seek to compete with or replace existing organisations of social workers, be they professional associations or trade unions. Rather, it is a radical, campaigning voice within social work, made up of social workers, academics, students and service users. Since 2006, the Network has organised three major national conferences, each attended by over 250 participants. In addition, there have been major local SWAN events in Bristol (where 300 people attended a conference on radical social work) and in Liverpool and Glasgow (both attended by over 200 people and organised around the case of Baby P, a child whose death in one of the poorest areas of London in 2007 at the hands of his carers was the occasion for a new bout of scapegoating of social workers). SWAN also organised an online petition against

such scapegoating, and the Network's website has hosted a lively debate over how social workers can best help to protect vulnerable children<sup>4</sup>. Evidence that concern over the impact of neo-liberal policies and ideas on social work as discussed in the Manifesto is not confined to the UK is provided by the fact that, to date, the Manifesto has been translated into several languages, including Spanish, Greek, Slovenian, Cantonese, Japanese and Bangla.

### **Conclusion: Radical social work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Like similar organisations and social movements that have emerged over the past decade, SWAN often seems clearer on what it is opposed to – the marketisation and managerialism of social work – than what it is for, other than a fairly broad belief that 'another social work is possible' (mirroring the slogan of the global anti-capitalist movement: 'Another world is possible'). To address this imbalance, two of us have recently sought to summarise what we would list as four key elements in a new, radical practice for the twenty-first century (Ferguson and Woodward 2009: 153–163). It seems appropriate to end on these points.

#### *Radical practice is retaining a commitment to good practice*

Collective approaches, such as group work and community work, have not been the only victims of the budget-driven managerial approaches which have dominated social work for two decades. The same fate has also befallen good casework practice, which, at its best, can provide individuals with an empathic, trusting relationship in which they can explore issues that may be troubling them. 'Someone to talk to' was identified by service users with mental health problems as the most important component of a social crisis centre in East Scotland (Stalker et al. 2006). The fact that traditional features of social work, such as an emphasis on relationship, process and values, have also been undermined by neo-liberal practices means that many workers who would not otherwise have seen themselves as 'political' have also been radicalised in recent years. In a climate of managerialism and technocratic approaches, humane and holistic value-based approaches can also be radical.

#### *Radical practice is 'guerrilla warfare' and small-scale resistance*

Good social workers have always sought to find ways within the rules and regulations that govern their practice to get the best deal for their client, even if that means 'bending' the rules on occasion. For that reason, one writer in the 1970s referred to social workers as 'middle-class bandits' (Pearson 1975)



<sup>4</sup> Visit the website at [www.socialworkfuture.org](http://www.socialworkfuture.org).

and, in a much-cited study, Lipsky sought to demonstrate the ways in which 'street-level bureaucrats', including social workers, exploited the discretion available to them to obtain resources for their clients (Lipsky 1980). In a more recent study which explored the views of experienced frontline workers, some respondents felt that, even though some of the 'spaces' previously available to them had been curtailed or even closed down by managerial practices, there was often still scope for imaginative and creative practice:

Our team has very strong social work values... We're unafraid to challenge the internal system and we have an excellent manager as well so we can see ourselves as a force... insisting on creating that kind of dialogue. ('Kathryn', quoted in Ferguson and Woodward 2009: 74)

*Radical practice is working alongside service users and carers, but not when they do not need social workers*

Working alongside and learning from the experience of service users and carers has to be at the heart of any new radical practice. The ideas and practices of new social welfare movements, such as the disability movement or the mental health users' movement, have underpinned many of the most progressive developments in service provision over the past decade (Oliver and Campbell, see also Beresford and Croft 2004, Tew 2005). That does not mean there will not be tensions and debates from time to time over the best ways to achieve the end goals of increased autonomy, for example, in relation to approaches such as individualised budgets; but these issues need to be addressed in a spirit of open and friendly discussion. It also means recognising that social workers need to know when to back off – most people prefer to live their lives without a social worker around!

*Radical practice is collective activity and political campaigning.*

As noted above, individual approaches can be radical in bringing about changes in people's personal situations and in the way in which they see themselves. However, collective approaches have a qualitatively greater potential for change at the community and structural level, a potential which has been almost completely lost over the past two decades (Ferguson 2008). Collective approaches are relevant for social workers at three levels. Firstly, there is the use of community work as a method of practice. In the UK at least, community work theory and practice has fallen off the curriculum of most social work programmes and has also disappeared from many agencies (other than in the very narrow, top-down form of 'consultation' with service users). We need to apply pressure to restore radical, campaigning community work to its rightful place within social work. Secondly, there is the issue of the collective organisation of social workers, primarily through trade union

involvement. Radical social work practice cannot take place in a vacuum. On the one hand, it needs resources; on the other, those involved in it will, from time to time, need protection from managers who are less than enthusiastic about workers who are active in advocating on behalf of their clients. Strong workplace-based trade union organisation continues to provide the best means of achieving both these goals. Finally, social workers need to be involved with wider social movements. In the past, social work benefited enormously from the energy and ideas of the women's movement, the disability movement and so on. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the real critique of neo-liberal globalisation came not from politicians, but from the activities of the anti-capitalist or global justice movement, a social movement born out of the demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999. Similarly, social workers who wish to see a real alternative to the neo-liberal models of social work which currently dominate need to be involved in and learn from such wider movements for social justice.

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# THEORIES AND METHODS OF SOCIAL WORK

Exploring different perspectives

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