

**The new radical social work for new times**  
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## **Introduction**

The current period is dominated by two significant realities which have enormous implications for social work: first, the increasing evidence of the damaging and dysfunctional nature of our economically divided society; second, the banking collapse and bailout. The former poses serious questions about the efficacy of individualised interventions which predominate through much of contemporary statutory social work, while the latter flatly contradicts every argument ever made about the cost of welfare being "too great". In this context, there is an opportunity for re-articulating radical traditions within social work that focus on structural, collective and non-pathological models.

We begin by offering a critique of 'old' Radical Social Work (RSW) noting its emergence from the so-called 'crisis of Labourism' of the late 1970s, and the leftward shift within key sections of society in the context of working class radicalisation and the emergence of the New Social Movements (NSM), chief amongst these being feminism, anti-racism and service user activism. Paradoxically while the language of opposition to 'oppression', which RSW took from the involvement in NSM's into social work, has become mainstream, the project of wider social transformation and equality of outcome, which it also saw itself as part of, has been completely marginalised within social work.

The second half of our paper seeks to outline some of the ways in which we can individually and much more importantly collectively develop our praxis which genuinely challenges the kinds of managerialism, that have impoverished and demoralised front-line practice, as well as defending and reconstructing the best traditions within social work's rich history. We do this in particular by revisiting the work of Paulo Freire and his idea about emancipation and education

## **The neoliberal moment**

One cannot even begin to reappraise radical social work without uncovering some of the wider political currents that have resulted in the annihilation of any meaningful left socialist project, of which radical social work was certainly one. This political leaning towards socialism is replete in many of the iterations of radical social work

during the late 1970's and 80's. (See for example, Brake and Bailey, 1975 and 1980, Jones, 1983; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978). As Brake and Bailey (1975) note in responding to the rhetorical question if there can be a radical social work:

**Radical social work, we feel, is essential understanding the position of the oppressed in the context of the social and economic structure they live in. A socialist perspective is, for us, the most humane approach for social workers (p9)**

If Brake and Bailey talked of adopting a 'socialist perspective', CaseCon the radical social work collective went further in suggesting that aim of radical social workers should be to struggle for the creation of a workers' state. The simple rationale here was that the problems and oppression faced by 'clients' was a direct consequence of the capitalist system and without its replacement, the fundamental causes of social problems would remain. But alas, if the counter culture movement of the 70's gave rise to the possibility of a socialist realist, 40 years on this seems like a distant dream. Given this, the question needs to be posed, is it reasonable to suggest that radical social work was a failure?

Before answering this question and the possibilities of a new radical social work, it is necessary to look at the socio political context that has shaped much of social work and public welfare over the period following the days of CaseCon. The process of privatisation goes back 30 years. What Margaret Thatcher did to the public utilities, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did to our public services health, education and social care etc; transforming social work clients into customers, the growth of managerialism, the huge expansion of auditing mechanisms (counting beans), the displacement of critical practice with competence and evidence based notions of professional learning, to name a few, are directly or indirectly all products of the globalisation of capital and the neoliberal project that has unfolded over the past 30 years (Jordan and Jordan, 2000; Harris, 2003).

The forces of globalisation and neoliberalism have impacted social work professionals in very specific and corrosive ways. Within the UK, and we would guess to a lesser extent elsewhere, we have seen the massive growth of a phenomena called 'neo-liberal managerialism'; which, amongst other things has wrestled power away from professionals, academics and clients (who became service users and are increasingly term customers), into the hands of managers/employers/private providers. John Harris, in his book '*The Social Work Business*' gives a very precise account of how this transformation has happened. For Harris (2003) Social work in the pre-business era i.e. the period up to the Seebom period of the late 1970's was operating in a relatively autonomous way as a 'bureau-profession' as part of the post war democratic welfare state capitalist state. Then came Thatcher and then New Labour and through the 1980s and 1990s a raft of policies we saw the complete inversion of the values of the aims and values of social work in practice.

Why did this happen? There are essentially two parallel but interlinked strategies at play, political and economic. Crucial to the political marginalisation of radical currents resides in the question of the relation of social work to the neoliberal capitalist state. The idea of being "in and against the state" was cleverly appropriated by the New Right, who had their own agenda to dismantle the welfare state. It is this that explains radical social work's current difficulty at an analytical level - its language of "liberation", "empowerment" and "anti-oppression" are no longer 'radical' in the sense that they now sit comfortably within a neoliberal managerial discourse.

On the economic front, despite all the New Labour and now about increasing spending on public services, be it health education of social care, the primary aim of neoliberal policies has been to reduce spending on public services. And this trend is likely to continue if not become accelerated under the new ConDem coalition government. The perverse economics of neoliberalism is that income inequalities are encouraged, indeed, seen as virtuous for this provides incentives for people to do well! It has therefore been to reduce primary taxation in order to give more money to the so called 'wealth creators' the rich on the false assumption that they would recycle their wealth back for the benefit of all; what is known as the 'trickledown theory' to wealth creation.

The result tragically has been the very opposite – if one looks, for example, at the work of Richard Wilkinson, income inequalities which are directly correlated with health life chances, have never been greater (Wilkinson, 2005 and Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Using data on 'developed societies' collated over the past 30 years, Wilkinson and Pickett in the recent book entitled '*The Spirit Level*', demonstrate that where income gaps are greatest in societies such as Britain and the United States there is a much higher frequency of problems such as, life expectancy, ill-health, illiteracy, stress, and a high crime rates. And where income and wealth inequality is less, gaps in these aspects of life are proportionately less.

But most importantly, neo-liberalism isn't only just about what is 'out there', in some 'other place', but in fact is also about the phenomena that is able to influence minutiae of our personal and professional existence, it is about ontology or our sense of being and the sense of despair and powerlessness, indeed fatalism, that this can engender. Accelerated by the wonders of information technology in particular, he suggests that bureaucracy is so pervasive that it has colonised our very beingness to the extent where we find it difficult to imagine being anything else. Not a question of I think therefore I am, but "I fill out forms, therefore I am". And of course the battery of bureaucratic procedures is not confined to Social Work but can be found in most public services. This is a condition that, in his book *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher, 2009) Mark Fisher argues reflects reality in which we are led to believe there are no alternatives, a kind of 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992); a world of no alternatives, where the immediacy of the marketplace have drained us of all hope and all belief, where there is no future but simply the present and therefore, to imagine a different future is itself a futile activity.

Given that neoliberalism is as much a politics of 'no hope' as it is an economic project aimed at serving the interests of late capitalism in very particular ways, it is crucial that a new radical social work project operates at both ideological and political levels. It needs to look both at the extent and nature of the resultant suffering, if you like oppression, and the bigger project questions about how we might imagine an alternative ways of imagining and running society and its various public services.

Given its universality, we think such a project must begin by re-entering the idea of social justice. A social justice perspective can offer is to draw attention to human suffering, to the social production of poor health, education, crime and deviance and most importantly, of understanding the effects of power and powerlessness at the micro, mezo and macro levels and the attendant forms of violence, both physical and symbolic. Pierre Bourdieu, in a work he undertook with others to investigate the contemporary sociology of 'suffering', focussing on poorest areas on the periphery of France's cities noted that the central difficulty facing the Social Workers who were employed to deal with the problems of those individuals and communities trapped in these areas was that they were required to fight on two different fronts; on the one hand, demoralised clients and on the other 'against administrations and bureaucrats divided and enclosed in separate universes' (1999)

The most powerful critique of neo-liberalism comes generally from the Marxist tradition, and I would strongly argue that this kind of analysis is absolutely crucial for social workers to understand the relationship between contemporary politics and economics and their role in framing Social Work roles and tasks. However it is in dealing with these issues at a personal level that I see the limitations of 'old' marxist analysis. Marxism has traditionally understood the phenomenon of urban social marginality as either a process, which has historically sought to claim 'the poor/marginalised' either for political collectivity on one hand ("the class for itself) or as so irredeemably damaged by social despair as incapable of political redemption ("the lumpenproletariat").

The weaknesses of this polarised view are expressed in the limitations of the Radical Social Work, As Mary Langan notes, the central paradox of Radical Social Work is that so many of its ideas and concepts have now become commonplace, yet the tradition as an active force, is all but dead and buried. Radical Social Work belonged to the period of political awakening in the late 70s and has disappeared alongside much of the counter-cultural of that mileau, yet in terms of evaluating this tradition we would argue that an inherent weakness within it was the inability to move beyond critique and opposition and address the 'real' conditions in which social work has been practiced. The result was that Radical Social Work offered those social workers who espoused this position very little space to manoeuvre, other than as subversives.

This is inherent in the rather mechanistic and simplistic understanding of the State and by - extension State social work - which is espoused by much of Radical Social Work. If the purpose of the State is simply the containment and repression of the working class, then all social work intervention becomes either impossible or oppressive. In his later work on the consequences of globalisation, Bourdieu pointed to an altogether more optimistic view of working within the state. He argues that it is too simplistic to view the state simply as an instrument of the ruling class. What must be resisted according to Bourdieu is what he calls '*the involution of the state*'; that is the state regressing into a 'penal state concerned with repression and progressively abandoning its social functions' (1999:34). He expresses this same idea again when he talks about the 'left hand' and 'right hand' of the state (1999:2), where the left hand represents those new professionals whose frontline practice brings them in contact with the everyday problems faced by the users of a wide range of public services, and who increasingly find themselves in conflict with the right hand of the state, being those administrators and managers whose role it is to impose those new arrangements required by the neo-liberal privatised state; outsourcing, PFI projects, competitive tendering etc. In this sense, the state becomes a site for struggle and in this sense we would extend the old slogan of being 'in and against the state' to also being 'for and beyond' the state. Against the onslaught of neoliberal privatisation of public state services, then what can be more radical than to defend those services?

Radical Social Work's central focus at the political level lay in its emphasis on working class collectivism as the solution for both practitioners and service users. This meant that its central practice was Trade Unionism. Again while we think Trade Unionism is very important for Social Work practitioners, and much more needs to be done to raise the profile and activities of Unions within Social Work, it has only rarely acted as the vehicle of broader changes in Social Work practice toward more emancipatory approaches. The nature of Trade Unions and the role they play in the workplace on a day to day level offers little space for creative and critical engagement with contemporary practice; and while they play an invaluable role, we would reject a strategy which places them at the centre of a project concerned with constructing a politicised social work practice and strategy.

This latter point brings us back to the problems with Marxism itself. While the entire Marxist project is predicated on the notion of social transformation, this is understood purely as driven by material deprivation. We want to raise a question relevant to both Social Work and Marxism about the place of the self in processes of social transformation, and in addition, the place of personal transformation within the social. In this respect we see the work of Paulo Friere on Critical Pedagogy to be of central importance. Paulo Friere was born in 1922 in Recife, in the north-eastern corner of Brazil. Though from a middle class family, Friere was acutely conscious of the oppressed position of the peasantry around him following troubles in his own family after the crash of 1929 wiped out much of the family's material wealth. Friere was raised a Catholic and central to his early process of activism around poverty and illiteracy was his concern about the gap between Christian teachings and the real

lives of the poor. Though he went on to integrate areas such as existentialism and Marxism into his thinking, his idea of hope and struggle is embedded in an optimism of possibility. In this sense the struggles for social justice and liberation are always imminent, i.e. in the present, in the everyday encounter between human beings as much as they are about grand political projects. Here one can develop a much more expansive notion of pedagogy as something beyond the classroom – all of life, all human encounters are then essentially pedagogical in nature, and therefore and work to enforce oppression or promote liberation.

After completing a Ph.D on adult literacy in 1959, Friere began working within a movement known as the Popular Culture Movement, within which he developed a highly successful literacy programme. In 1963 a reformist government took power and Friere's programme was extended to the whole country. Unfortunately this radical experiment came to an abrupt halt in 1964 after a military coup deposed the elected government. Friere was imprisoned and only released on condition that he accepts exile; hence later in 1964 he and his family were forced to relocate to Chile. These experiences had a profound effect on Friere. On one hand it was clear that it was the very success of his programme which had led to him being forced into exile, however he was aware that he had not as yet addressed the relationship between his emerging theory of critical pedagogy and the wider relations of power in Latin American society. It was out of this experience that Friere wrote his most influential book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this book Friere sought to deal much more specifically with the political basis for why particular educational methodologies were used. Central to this was his insight that:

Educational practice and its theory can never be neutral. The relationship between practice and theory in an education directed toward emancipation is one thing, but quite another in an education for domestication (1972:12)

Friere begins *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with an extended discussion of the *existential* dynamics of oppression. He characterises this saying that:

The oppressed suffer from a duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalised. The conflict lies in the choice between...following prescription or having choices, between being spectators or actors...between speaking or remaining silent (1972:30).

For Friere education was one of the most essential parts of the struggle of the oppressed to become more human, to speak rather than remaining silent. His attempts at challenging this state of affairs was thus based on insights into this "duality of being", which he sought to understand and incorporate into a different kind of educational experience. Friere also noted that oppressed people always

devalued the knowledge of life which they already possessed, thinking instead that it was their teachers and professors who 'knew things' which were important:

Almost never do they realise that they "know things" they have learned in their relationship with the world and with women and men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is not surprising that they distrust themselves (1972:45).

### **Conclusion**

To formulate a new radical social work one needs to begin by developing with a critical understanding of the mechanisms for the production of material inequality, power differentials within and between different social groups. One then needs to understand the kinds of group and individual responses that such circumstances of powerlessness and social exclusion tend to produce. In other words, one need to address cultural, economic, psychological and political issues simultaneously; not an easy task! We end by making a couple of suggestions about some underpinning principles for moving forward.

A new radical social work will resist all attempts to punish human beings for fleeing oppression, falling into deprivation and poverty. This will involve the development of collective and creative responses to human need. It will also involve constructing a 'civic society' where every member of that society can become an active citizen. It is this collective life of the community underpinned by democratic responsibility of its members that is more likely to produce socially included citizens than a mixture of stick and carrot that has become the hallmark of neoliberal policies

Further, in confronting a particular 'common sense' notion that professionals should be 'non political' and that their practice should be governed by 'evidence', as if evidence was devoid of ideology, a new radical social work seeks to develop politically conscious practitioners and service users, by incorporating the language of politics and nurturing the skills for both practitioners and service users/clients etc to locate themselves, as Gramsci suggests, in history as subjects. So, as we have argued elsewhere (Cowden and Singh, 2007), the relationship between services users and professionals is not based on a consumerist model of 'customer knows best' but a dialogical approach that characterises the approach taken by Freire.

It also extends the idea of 'citizenship' to the global level. Here, as Harding (2006) points out this view of citizenship recognises the dependence of humans on the integrity of our finite global life support system.

At the practice level, one must seek to promote ethical awareness and moral practice that confronts relations of power and oppressive social practices. It's also about the realisation that ethical discourses themselves are always understood within concrete historical realities that need to be carefully understood. In this regard we feel the idea of virtue ethics has something useful to offer, because it goes beyond checklists but to the essence of beingness. This is a system that is built on the idea that moral

and ethical considerations concern us all and are central to our human functioning and flourishing. The idea of human flourishing or 'eudaimonia' is very useful here. In his discourses on virtue Aristotle suggests that eudaimonia is a condition through which human flourishing is possible. Although important, this is not simply about the subject feeling of being happy – one may feel happy by taking drugs or shopping; it is based on an idea that a key to happiness is living virtuously, i.e. realising that everything one does has an ethical dimension in that it is done with a goal in mind that is 'good'

**Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly, every action and choice of action, is thought to have some good as its object. This is why the good has rightly been defined as the object of all endeavour. (Aristotle, 199, NE 1.1)**

And therefore, for Aristotle, virtue is predicated on practical living in which one is able to express and develop:

1. Arete (excellence – linked to craft and creativity) -
2. Phronesis (practical wisdom – must deal with real problems: moral will and moral skill),
3. Eudaimonia (flourishing – nurturing reason and intellect)

In terms of this last point we believe that to nurture intellect of self and others is an absolute necessity for building radical practice. Don't be duped by the profound anti-intellectualism of the managerialist approach to professional development. Nurturing and developing intellectual identities, not as privilege but as essential to democratic participation is, as we have argued elsewhere, critical to being radical. (Singh and Cowden, 2009). For us the problem isn't too much intellectuality but too little. What we need is mass intellectuality, where everybody is enabled and encouraged to question and doubt, to offer alternative ideas and be given the support to develop these.

We would like to end with a poem from Bertolt Brecht, the dissident German poet, playwright and theatrical reformer who through his 'epic theatre' sought to encourage audiences to think rather than becoming too involved in the story line or actors. It is a poem entitled "In Praise of Doubt," which invoked to listener to think and act.

*"There are the thoughtless who never doubt.  
Their digestion is splendid, their judgement infallible.  
They don't believe in the facts, they believe only in themselves.  
When it comes to the point  
The facts must go by the board.  
Their patience with themselves  
Is boundless. To arguments  
They listen with the ear of a police spy.  
The thoughtless who never doubt  
Meet the thoughtful who never act.  
They doubt, not in order to come to a decision but  
To avoid a decision. Their heads  
They use only for shaking. With anxious faces  
They warn the crews of sinking ships that water is dangerous.  
Beneath the murderer's axe  
They ask themselves if he isn't human too.  
Murmuring something  
About the situation not yet being clarified, they go to bed.  
Their only action is to vacillate.  
Therefore, if you praise doubt  
Do not praise  
The doubt which is a form of despair.  
What use is the ability to doubt to a man (sic)  
Who can't make up his mind?  
He who is content with too few reasons  
May act wrongly  
But he who needs too many  
Remains inactive under danger.*

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