

BOOK REVIEW

The New Politics of Social Work

Mel Gray and Stephen A. Webb (Eds.)

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Gray and Webb's (2013) edited collection provides an invigorating breath of air for any reader interested in the critical tradition of social work and its application to practice within the hostile environment created by neoliberal capitalism. In the introductory acknowledgements it is stated that the editors hope to provide "...a bold challenge to the orthodox, mainstream and conservative elements of social work, as many social workers continue to acquiesce in the face of the neoliberal capitalist onslaught of austerity, injustice violence and virulent greed" (p. viii). This editorial intent is developed in the first chapter of this volume. The tone is unashamedly polemic, committed as it is to a reinvigorated neo-Marxist "new politics of social work". The articulation of this position will clearly resonate with fellow travellers but is also likely to appeal to less ideologically committed readers. The fact that a passionate political position is adopted in defence of social justice and equality as the central pillars of the value system which informs social work is both powerful and refreshing. I suspect that many practitioners who anchor themselves to these principles will identify with Grey and Webb's assertion that the compromises required in the practice of social work can mean that "... we behave as ourselves only after hours or post-retirement" (p. 7), or, I might add, after embarking upon an academic career.

In stark contrast to conceptions of social work which reflect the practical and theoretical accommodations which often characterise the profession, the editors unequivocally identify capitalism, neoliberalism and management as the enemy: as antithetical to the values of social work. It is asserted that social work must develop a reinvigorated political stance and it is argued that guidance for this project can be derived from the new left political thinkers such as Badiou. The intent is to realign the agenda of social work with the drive for social justice associated with the heritage of the Frankfurt School and evident in emerging left political activism since the recent crisis of capitalism. A rejection of "post-politics"—the postmodern turn and the diffusion of critical social work associated with it—is explicitly tied to this analysis. This book attempts to walk a difficult line. It eschews the idea of a clear manifesto for the new politics which is spoken of and is perhaps more of a "call to thought,

solidarity and dialogue” than to action. As suggested, the political stance is blatantly and provocatively plain, but the issue of *what is to be done* is far less prescribed and is dealt with in a much less satisfying manner.

There are two related problems at play. First is the stubborn resistance embedded in the Marxist tradition to name the world beyond the revolution and, secondly, the perennial challenge for radical social work: that of reconciling the embedded, and often constrained and conflicted reach of social work practice, with a revolutionary political agenda. The editors are at pains to make it clear that the varied contributors to the book are not wedded to a particular new left agenda. A wide selection of prominent social work academics from Britain, Ireland, Australia and Canada are represented. Their commonality lies in a concern with social justice and a search for liberationist forms of practice. All the chapters contribute in some way to the resistant re-thinking of social work which has developed against the tide of the nascent neoliberal political project in the past decade. The broad critical church approach is exemplified in the inclusion of contributions by Greg Marston on the validity of Foucault-inspired critical discourse analysis and from Harry Ferguson in relation to his micro-analytical conception of critical best practice. Ferguson articulates the second of the difficulties referred to in asserting that the “... legitimate agenda to pursue social justice and social transformation...” articulated by the academic social work critic often lacks “... careful attention to the messy realities and complexities of the actual work practice under consideration” (p. 117).

In the final chapter, Gray and Webb return to the question of *what is to be done?* It is argued that daily practice constantly gives the lie to the primacy of the individual self as constructed through neoliberal economics and that social work is duty bound to act on this insight. The place of social work is located within a wider call to energise militant resistance to the violent and destructive agenda of global neoliberal capitalism. The question of how this sort of political agency will be generated given the powerful hegemonic repertoire of late capitalism is considered. As with the opening chapter, the analysis is lucid at times and the ideological directness is refreshing. However, there is also a convoluted circularity to the argument and a tendency to descend into polemic critique which generates a degree of frustration in the otherwise sympathetic reader. The removal of hindrances to new forms of political thought is advocated—predictably the abandonment of the post-modern turn which is cast primarily in the role of legitimising neoliberalism. It is suggested that social work resistance must target its managers, engage with localised protest and in acts of refusal and solidarity. The obstacles are not underestimated and a sense of hope is extolled in the challenge to re-imagine a post-capitalist social world. Given the rich promise of this text, these conclusions are less than compelling. However, this book does provide a much-needed, articulate and committed interrogation of the present state of the critical social work project in relation to contemporary left political thought and possibilities for action. It is a courageous beginning and, as such, is part of future social work action founded on the resilient Marxist vision of social justice and equality. It is recommended as an essential text for advanced undergraduate and post-graduate social work programmes.

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