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Social work and macro-economic neoliberalism: beyond the social justice rhetoric

Travail social et néolibéralisme macroéconomique: au delà de la réthorique de justice sociale

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Macro-economic policy shapes and structures social welfare policy, services, and their implementation. As a result, the commoditisation of social welfare services and the use of markets as well as private sector management philosophies and tools have colonised and fashioned the design, provision and implementation of social welfare policy and structures. The impact has been far reaching, from limiting social welfare responses of elected democratic government to shaping the profession in a range of intended and unintended directions. Written from a UK perspective, this paper proposes a discussion of the impact of macro-economic neoliberal policies in the field of social welfare and explores the implications for social work practice. The paper also promotes a debate within the profession regarding the importance of macro-economic analysis and possible responses, as well as suggesting a way forward within European and, more broadly, international practice contexts.

Keywords: neoliberalism; ordoliberalism; international social work; social welfare policy; professionalism; democracy; social movements

Les politiques macroéconomiques orientent et structurent les politiques sociales, le développement de services et leur implémentation. Elles mercantilisent les services sociaux en utilisant les principes du marché ainsi que les outils et philosophies du secteur privé, ce qui a pour effet de coloniser et de façonner le développement, la provision et l'implémentation des politiques sociales et de ses structures organisationnelles. Les politiques macroéconomiques. ont des répercussions importantes sur l'organisation des services sociaux, de l'établissement de limites aux réponses qu'offrent les élus démocratiques en lien avec les systèmes de protection, aux orientations, intentées ou non, de la profession. Rédigé à partir d'un point de vue britannique, cet article propose une analyse de l'impact des politiques macro-économiques néolibérales sur les politiques sociales et les services et explore les implications pour la pratique du travail social. L'article encourage également un débat au sein de la profession, en lien avec l'importance d'engager avec les analyses macroéconomiques et de ses réponses possibles, suggérant ainsi des pistes de solutions pour la pratique du travail social en Europe et à l'international.

Mots clés: Neolibéralisme; Ordolibéralisme; Travail social International; Politiques sociales; Professionnalisation; Démocratie; Mouvement sociaux et action sociale

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Introduction

An understanding of the origins and influences of social distress, and the corresponding way in which this distress is manifested, forms the backbone of many social work interventions. Indeed, the orientation for the profession in many countries has been toward individual and community interventions, with social workers often neglecting to engage in critical interventions at national and international social policy levels, as well as their training often being aimed at instilling knowledge and awareness of social policy (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2014). For many social workers, political-economics is the antithesis of why they entered the profession; many do not appreciate its fundamental importance in understanding social welfare policy development, its impacts on day-to-day practice such as fragmentation of professional work (Garrett, 2009) and resulting implications for resistance to neoliberal policy implementation.

Starting from an exploration of the UK experience, this paper argues that it is critical that the profession in Europe, and outside the European context, understands the role and influence of macro-economic policy on the profession, society, and on social welfare policy at both national and global level. Within a neoliberal world, it is vital for social workers to appreciate the theoretical context of their work and their role within the wider society (Garrett, 2013, p. 215).

This paper will discuss the importance for social work to understand macro-economic policy, and more specifically, neoliberalism as well as its German variant ordo-liberalism, and the impact these macro-economic policies have on social policy development and implementation. As such, the paper proposes to initiate a professional debate about social work's role within a macro-economic perspective, as well as the potential responses that may emerge from it. This is particularly important because without macro-economic analysis, grassroots resistance and collective action initiatives may be limited in their impact. Indeed, as we argue, the impact of neoliberalism is affecting decision-making beyond policies promoted by national governments. A broader knowledge and understanding of macroeconomics and its implications, as well as its impact on decision-making, can therefore contribute to enhancing social action, support the development of coherent strategies and appropriate actions to resist implementation, and the promotion of alternative approaches. To achieve this, the paper will explore the nature of neoliberalism within the UK context along with the rationalities of government and the implications for social work. Finally, the paper aims to promote debate amongst social workers and to influence critical professional social work engagement in policy debates by proposing future action and encouraging wider professional responses.

Financial crisis and responses

The focus of this paper is on macro policy and whilst we draw upon examples from a UK perspective, there are regional differentiations as a result of the four countries that make up the Union, related to unevenness of implementation and practice. However, the UK experience and the corresponding observations are important to European and other global social workers as the UK is often seen as a leading proponent of neoliberal policy implementation. For example, Britain has been the proposer of potential solutions in the last global financial crisis (Couldry, 2010), is often further advanced in its neoliberal policy implementation, and is active in the global and regional agencies

and bodies that promote neoliberal policy realisation. For the past three decades, UK public-sector services and social work have been heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology. Successive governments have implemented this neoliberal macro-economic theory, which is used to promote capitalist market forces across all parts of social-political and economic life together with reductions to the welfare state (Jessop, 2002; Larner, 2000).

In terms of economics, it is also important to point out that the UK is different from most of Europe, especially with regard to supporting the banking sector. The UK is highly exposed to the long term costs of attempts to resolve the financial crisis due to 20% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (the value of all goods and services produced in the country within a year) being used to support the banking sector in the 2008 crisis (Couldry, 2010, p. 48). This was almost three times more than any other country in Europe, with the exception of Norway, which used 13.8% (Couldry, 2010). This borrowing to support the banking sector has had important financial implications for social work due to the cost of the financial support and the availability of funding to support other aspects of the economy, such as health and social welfare. From initially being identified as a banking crisis, the governing narrative has changed to being a crisis '*in* the system', rather than '*of* the system' (Jessop, 2012, p. 25). This shift in perspective has critical implications, either for citizens to demand for more fundamental reform of the financial system, or for the governing 'elites' being able to return the system to some form of status quo (Jessop, 2012). He argues that by locating the problem as being 'in the system' the narrative aims to prevent more fundamental reform to capitalism; it is easier for elite groups to construct narratives that shift the costs of the financial crisis to non-elite groups, by means of so-called austerity programmes.

That said, while many important differences can be noted between European Union (EU) countries, much of the macro-economic dynamic at work affects social work in the same way. Its impact is felt through much of Europe and North America today. Therefore, while the paper draws mainly on UK related experiences, the discussion should also address much more broadly the European and other international contexts.

Neoliberal macro-economics

Neoliberalism is understood as a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.(Harvey, 2010, p. 2)

Not only does this political economic perspective highlight the importance of understanding neoliberalism in the context of capital accumulation strategies but it also draws attention to the role of penalty (Wacquant, 2009) in enforcing and supporting the capitalist system. Others identify a number of overlying and interrelated components to neoliberalism: its relation to models of 'embedded liberalism' which it replaced; changes to the role of the state; the notion of resource accumulation through dispossession, with corresponding reallocation of these to the rich; promotion of 'insecurity and precariousness' as can be seen in financial and work security; belief in incarceration and 'new punitiveness' as well as inconsistency between

practice ideas and rhetoric of neoliberalism (Garrett, 2013, p. 81). Thus, political economy is important in understanding and developing social work strategies to current challenges (Garrett, 2009).

For this paper, the authors have principally located the discussion using the work of David Harvey and a reworking of Michel Foucault's work on governmentality alongside the notions of political rationalities and the technologies of government (Miller & Rose, 2008). Within this context, political rationality is structurally embedded through the use of technologies and governance (Walker, 2011). This context includes the accumulation of people, techniques, instruments and institutions for the shaping of conduct and the government rationality that believes free markets are preferable to state intervention (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 16). These aspects collectively enable the reconfiguration of the social as both an economic and individual entity.

Within a European context, it is also necessary to understand the importance of German ordoliberalism, a variant of neoliberalism, which seeks to ensure limits to an unfettered market economy and state control (Peck, 2008). It differs from neoliberal theory in that it believes that markets should be regulated by government in order to achieve what might be considered as a theoretically perfect competitive market (Dullien & Guérot, 2012). Ordoliberalism, might be viewed as capitalists attempting to save capitalism from itself (Rustow, quoted in Bark & Gress, 1998, p. 207). In this regard social policy is used to secure the sociological and ethical preconditions of free markets, such that it becomes statecentric neoliberalism, in which a robust state is the political arm of free markets with responsibility for enterprise and compe-tition (Bonefeld, 2012). Ordoliberalism believes that the state should develop the necessary rules to hold the market to account, clearly identifying the institutional arrangements to ensure economic order at the level of policy and analysis (Watrin, 1979). Ordoliberalism established a price market system and private property rights and policies to promote competition, along with institutions to promote community-based religious orientation and a strong state with policy competence so as to counteract the pressures of special interests (Rieter & Schmolz, 1993, pp. 104–107). The ordoliberal ideology has been influential in a European context through attempts to promote a 'third way', 'social market' order that sits between the laissez-faire approach of liberalism and market socialism (Müller-Armack, 1998), by balancing the demands of free markets and social security. The UK New Labour project under Tony Blair claimed that it was seeking to implement similar policies as part of its third way approach (Ferguson, 2004; Garrett, 2010). In this regard the EU social market is constructed around cooperation based on rules of market competition as well as cultural arrangements that would self-transform (Ebner, 2006). Whilst ordo-liberalism may have influenced provisions such as the European Social Chapter,[1] its macro-economic ideas are not fully accepted by all EU members.

In contrast neoliberalism aims to reduce the size and influence of aspects of the state, increase deregulation and promote private enterprise, with the belief that as the state has less responsibility its financial requirements diminish, resulting in lower taxation rates, which is considered good for economic growth (Harvey, 2010). The resulting theorised economic benefits would trickle down to all, including the poor. The paradox is that rather than requiring a weak state, this ideology needs a strong state primarily to impose, maintain and manage the market within society.

Indeed, Harvey (2010) views neoliberalism as also being a political project that facilitates capital accrual, rolls back previous gains in social equality and restores economic elites to power. However, the consequence of neoliberalism has been the widening of social inequality and consolidation of wealth by the richest in society (Piketty, 2014). Neoliberalism has contributed policies that are affecting health outcomes across Europe (De Vogli, 2013) and the resulting economic crisis also impacts on social, mental and physical coping mechanisms with increased suicide rates (De Vogli, Marmot, & Stuckler, 2013), infectious diseases, HIV outbreaks and reduced access to health care (Karanikolos et al., 2013).

For many citizens, the personal experience of socio-economic and political difficulty is being framed within a neoliberal Foucauldian disciplinary discourse of socio-economic dysfunction, criminality, recklessness and social insecurity (Wacquant, 2010). Thus, neoliberalism is more than an economic doctrine; it also frames public discourse as well as the resulting economic, political and social options for society. The emphasis on individual blame and responsibility discourages collective solutions that promote solidarity and social justice (Gill, 2012). In particular within social welfare, the effects can be seen in the form of increasingly restricted welfare benefits and services, as well as professional ambivalence towards service users who may be viewed either as customers or scroungers (Grover & Piggott, 2005; Murray, 1994), particularly in countries such as the UK.

The rationalities of government

Neoliberal policy options have gained political traction in many countries, resulting in the implementation of less regulated models of capitalism, reductions to the welfare state, changes to corporate and public-sector structures and accountability, increased workforce casualisation, promotion of ideas of service users, promotion of incarceration and 'new punitiveness' as well as cultivating more entrepreneurial, self-reliant and risk aware population (Pratt, 2006). For example, policy to promote service user involvement contains a number of conflicting agendas having its origins in the disabled people's movement in the past and reimagined to support neoliberal implementation (Slasberg, 2014). In particular the implementation of policies such as 'personalisation', by which we mean the provision that enables direct payments for marketised care in the UK and which, reportedly, promotes choice and control as well as support and advocacy (Duffy, 2010; Ferguson, 2012). Not only does this promote marketised care, but it also promotes shifts from collective approaches to services and consultation, as well as encouraging competition for resources, reduced transparency in resource allocation and moves away from the values of social justice and equity (Slasberg, 2014). A critical aspect of neoliberalism's success has not only been to promote polices but also to secure constitutional change and ensure international liberalisation and trade agreements such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and North Amer-ican Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Gill, 2012).

This globalised dimension of neoliberalism has been promoted, supported, enabled and undertaken by a range of supranational organisations which lead and co-ordinate global economic development such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), WTO and World Bank, together with a range of regional organisations which seek to promote trade liberalisation. Internationally, these organisations have emphasised the use of corporate management in public service and so helped transfer

public-sector work to the private sector by means of what has been called 'the corporate takeover of the state' (Monbiot, 2000). The implementation of New Public Management (NPM) is thus a tool in neoliberal efforts to transform public services into market mechanisms and management (Davidson, 1993).

Whilst much attention has been focussed on the large international economic institutions such as the WTO, we should also consider the growth of standard-setting bodies, which have been described as the 'globalized' world's remote, faceless masters (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). They have become de facto regulators, rather than simply setting the standards for national state regulators (Higgins & Halstrom, 2007). Global market apparatuses, alongside their organisations and those agencies setting standards, often create and order socio-economic activity that previously was undertaken by the state (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000, p. 21).

Thus international bodies alongside a range of financial and market forces have a significant impact on national policies, that is to say government spending and fiscal policies are increasingly constrained by the markets' view of what these policies should be (Leys, 2001). The reaction of these market organisations to budget expenditure, whether state or not, can have an impact on credit ratings and therefore on the interest rates charged on borrowings for the country concerned (Sinclair, 1994). As a result, markets have both a direct and indirect influence on national social and health care policy and what once might have been seen solely as a political decision is now a concern of the market. Governments have lost their independence in strategically setting foreign exchange rates and using fiscal policy to promote industrial or development targets (Yeldan, 2006). National policy such as budget deficits or the promotion of social programmes may negatively influence global markets' perceptions of a national economy, resulting in financial capital flow changes causing a currency crisis or increased international debt interest rates or investor confidence (Yeldan, 2006).

As a result of these international forces and treaties, politicians have more limited options to affect change and improve the social well-being of citizens. To counteract these constraints, governments often propose solutions within a limited policy frame (Leys, 2001, pp. 26–28): (1) utilising macro-economic strategies to intervene within their economies, for instance reducing unemployment through using 'anti-dumping'[2] measures against some imported goods that compete against similar but more expensive locally manufactured goods; (2) supporting global attempts to regulate markets such as the implementation of the 'Tobin tax'[3]; (3) using partner states such as those of the EU to implement policies, that is, the 'Social Chapter' to enact minimum labour legislation to protect workers; (4) the devolution of policy making and promoting ideas of choice (Leys, 2001). However, devolution and choice are the only policy solutions that do not require or are not subject to international treaty or agreement and it is therefore not a surprise that the governments are now seeking to shift responsibility from the state to individuals.

An illustration of the devolution policy in the UK has been the greater use of marketisation under the auspices of the discourse of personal choice, through the availability of individual budgets to those requiring help and who are eligible for that public support to purchase services for their own health and social care needs from the private sector (Dunning, 2010). This macro policy of choice is important in highlighting why there appears to be little practical difference, in reality, between for example, the UK Conservative and Labour policy (Harris & White, 2009).

However, there are inconsistencies in the implementation of the neoliberal doctrine, in that whilst the UK government espouses commitment to market deregulation and mechanisms, it has no compunction in using public finance to support ailing private banks, thus enabling what has largely been termed 'privatising profit and socialising losses'.

More broadly, to manage the markets' perceptions, national welfare policy options become increasingly narrow, as politicians seek to appease the markets and ensure that policies do not exceed international norms promoted by global organisations such as IMF. This has fundamental democratic, as well as social work and welfare policy, implications. For example, even if a society elected a socialist government committed to increased social welfare and strengthened free public health services, this government may struggle to implement those left-orientated policies since it has to answer to international pressures maintained by the neoliberal macro-economic policies described above. In this sense, implementing transformation requires more than political shifts at a national level; change demands significant activism or citizen mobilisation, which is already being promoted by a number of social movement groups such as Occupy.

Governing from a distance

In the 1980s the distinctions between private and public services began to be increasingly blurred in many countries through the use of models imported from the private sector (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Hood, 1991; Starks, 1991). NPM has been described as '… management which increased both direct and indirect methods of control, in order to enhance productivity, increase profit and/or reduce costs' (Macalpine & Marsh, 2008, p. 116). Gregory (2007) highlights that NPM's principal aim is to achieve efficiency and accountability, whilst other core values such as equality, equity and participation are de-emphasised. Therefore, whilst prioritising some contexts, the approach also fails to recognise core and highly prised values in the social work profession, such as commitments to social justice, empowerment, social change and collective responsibility, as fundamental values of social work (IFSW, 2014).

NPM is seen as being an aspect of the organisational implementation of neoliberalism, through the use of mechanisms such as the use of explicit standards and per-formance measures; management of the public sector using private sector techniques and values; an emphasis on results rather than processes; increased competition in public-sector service provision; and increased discipline in resource utilisation (Hood, 1991, pp. 4–5). Pollitt (2001) highlighted additional organisational changes of NPM that included: greater use of specialised, flat and self-determining organisational units rather than large, hierarchical bureaucracies; increased use of contractor type relationships; and the use of market processes to deliver public services. This may be best seen through the processes that result in privatisation and internal markets, shifts from equity, security, universalism and resilience to individualism and efficiency, and blurring the edges between public and private sectors.

Connell, Fawcett, and Meagher (2009) believe that these changes have resulted in cultural changes in which there has been the commodification of aspects of society that previously were considered impossible to marketise such as social welfare, pollution and water. Thus, the very basic requirements for life such as water and health have become subject to market forces and governed by neoliberal institutions (Gill, 2012). Even organisations which have been based on the model of

cooperatives have been co-opted to become profit seeking organisations (Connell et al., 2009). Additionally many non-governmental organisations have lost their traditional critical voice, as they are captured by the state through performance, contracts and partnership arrangements in the delivery of state services.

Impact of neoliberal macro-economic policies on health and social welfare services

The development of so-called experts and private actors who lead on policy development, governance and international treaties has been a further sign of neoliberal implementation. This has resulted in a greater focus on throughput and input accept-ability (Wolf, 2006), with the corresponding litmus test being the need for decisions to be haven taken by appropriate 'stakeholders' and the variety of interests that they may represent. These may differ from democratic control. However, whilst important, this reliance on experts and input variables does not address other important questions such as who should make decisions, how they should be made, according to what criteria and the process of doing so (Bodansky, 1999). A further example of the loss of this democratic control is the currently negotiated Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) which is being negotiated by the EU and the USA and has gained little press coverage, and which has enormous implications for government procurement, public services (including the National Health Service), finance, food and the environment (Strickland, 2014). If agreed and implemented, there is further loss of national democratic debate and accountability, despite its significant national implications. Arguably politicians will lose even more national decision-making capability, power and democratic accountability.

Market solutions and market ideology are sold to citizens as being key to provide improved and affordable services and have gained traction due to concerns about the affordability of the welfare state and the implementation of neoliberal policy measures that are believed to restore growth and stability by raising savings and improving economic efficiency (Yeldan, 2006). Alongside demands for democratic accountability for public expenditure, ensuring that social welfare services are effective, the neoliberal doctrine has resulted in the commodification of social welfare services also under the purview of 'experts'. Social welfare services, standards and delivery are now being regulated, legitimised and governed through the use of market mechanisms, non-professional 'experts', contract specialists, managers, lawyers and regulators, rather than by members of the social welfare professions that deliver those services or the citizens who utilise them.

Thus, the pervasiveness of the neoliberal doctrine is evident in how market logic has become embedded across society, not by the use of political force, but through the internalisation of its ideas and thus implanting the values within people's social and personal lives (Brown, 2003). This situation is echoed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) who asserted that as a result of political spin, the true nature of neoliberal projects is often either disguised or presented as fresh and reformist.

Policy implications and challenges for social work

Neoliberal policy reforms raise concern about a lack of legitimacy, particularly by whom and where key welfare reform decisions are being made (i.e. are these decisions

by elected politicians or by the international markets?). Yet neoliberalism presents the market as being the most efficient, effective mechanism of resolving society's problems. However, this model of development, which is often prodigal, consumerist and highly energy-demanding, serves the wealthy and is ecologically short-sighted (Gill, 2012). Consequently, this may also be cultivating further problems for social work.

An example of the impact of neoliberalism on social work includes the deskilling of social work through McDonalization of systems, whereby quantity is often equated to quality (Ritzer, 2011). Within this process, tasks are broken down into smaller discrete tasks so that the exact resources required for their delivery can be calculated for production, with workers following clear management guidelines and instructions, governed by manuals, policies and procedures and trained to carry out tasks in a specific way (Ritzer, 2011). The key is management control of the process, staff and even customers through regimented rules and procedures. This process is important when we consider the diminishing professional discretion amongst social workers, managerial concern about efficiency and effectiveness, increased emphasis on standardisation of tasks and the widespread use of targets, codes of practice, and the use of national occupational standards (James, 2004). A further way to reduce service costs often requires the use of bite-size competence-based activities, encouraging competition between groups of workers. As a result, under the discourse of flexibility, efficiency and modernisation many tasks previously undertaken by social workers are now undertaken by unqualified workers or other professionals. Additionally, less qualified staff are often cheaper to employ and easier to control (Rogowski, 2010). The implementation of neoliberalism results in the continued erosion of critical social work voices with lowered resistance to market based solutions. For social workers, the greater use of unqualified staff, the fragmentation of their roles, the lack of clear professional identity and robust professional training all point to current and future professional risks.

Other impacts of neoliberalism on social work practice include changes to social work discourse: to illustrate, the terms 'clients' and 'citizens' recast to that of 'consumers', whilst at the same time public organisations are remoulded to be replicas of the business world (Cowden & Singh, 2007). Additionally, there is an increased emphasis on regulation, which suggests a distrust of professional social workers and social work agencies, implying that social work has failed (Ferguson, Lavalette, & Whitmore, 2004; Harris & White, 2009). This also results in the regulation of discourse through powers given to professional regulators 'to regulate and decide on' the appropriateness of what workers do in their non-work life (McLaughlin, 2007, p. 242). That said, the Munro report (2011b) has re-emphasised the importance of emotional dimensions in working with children and families as well as highlighted the replacement of professional discretion with managerial based performance systems (Munro, 2011a). Changes post-Munro have been slow and ambivalent, with contradictory messages and perverse incentives (White, 2014), with many of the disciplining processes of organisational inspection, procedural policy and limited resources remaining.

The promotion of job and financial precariousness and insecurity has often been experienced in the UK through the outsourcing of services and jobs to other occupational groups (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambley, Spolander, & Cocker, 2014). To promote cost reductions, the government has agreed that staff hired by independent sector organisations can be offered inferior terms to those who are transferred to

that organisation from the public sector (McGregor, 2011). Social workers often face ethical issues; service users' needs often exceed the available resources (Lymbery, 2001). As a result, social workers, rather than their managers or politicians, have to shoulder the blame for resource shortfalls or errors occurring as a consequence thereof, and this situation then has important consequences for professional well-being by leaving social workers feeling helpless and alienated from their professional role (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2011). Politicians and managers often allow this perception to prevail (Lymbery, 2001), and without strong professional champions to publically critically discuss or defend the social work profession, this scenario is unlikely to change.

Social work has therefore not so much become a casualty of neoliberalism, but may also have proved adaptable (Jordan, 2005) and uncritical of its own role in these changes (Lorenz, 2005a). However, this uncritical stance, whilst initially helping the profession to maintain some influence, is increasingly exposing social work and the people it serves to the margin.

Revisiting paradigms of practice

A macro-economic understanding of changes experienced in social work offers an opportunity to reflect on the consequences of neoliberal macro-economic policy within their own context. It is clear that social work finds itself at a pivotal point where it can accept increased professional competition from other professions seeking to do work it has traditionally undertaken (Cree, 2009) or reject the changes impacting on it. Dominelli (2009) points out that there is a danger, as a result of growing inequality and unemployment, housing shortages and increased food and fuel costs, that the profession might in time be regarded as irrelevant, with detrimental implications for social work and its commitment to social justice.

The relationship between the profession and political populism has been under-investigated and resulted in fragmented social work responses (Fazzi, 2013). There have also been efforts by the profession at various international and regional levels to take action against neoliberalism but this has not been uniform and the professional voice has often been muted (Spolander et al., 2014). The diverse nature of practice in different national contexts also makes centralised co-ordinated European or international understanding and resistance a challenge. This has enormous potential implications, and an approach of 'just doing the job' may further weaken the profession, reduce its confidence in its unique contribution and approach, reduce professional solidarity and weaken it politically.

The current crisis in social work is well documented, particularly in respect of professional identity and ethical practice (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2011), professional boundary erosion, use of non-professionals (Asquith & Clark, 2005), recruitment and retention of qualified staff (Spolander, Martin, Cleaver, & Daly, 2010), work pressure and burnout (Evans et al., 2006; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002), pressure to develop more personalised services (Needham, 2011), and job satisfaction (Lymbery, 2001; Morris, 2005). This crisis may partly relate to the consequences of neoliberal change.

As we highlighted earlier, at a political level governments have limited their policy choices as a result of international agreements within the global economy. However many social workers and citizens do not appear to fully understand this constraint and the reasons why governments of the right and left produce similar policies. Indeed, it is difficult for a country to initiate major welfare reform (e.g. to increase the amount of

support for the unemployed) because of the immediate global market forces and repercussions for the country's economy. This could result in a re-rating of the country's credit, which would consequently increase the rate of interest the country would have to pay to international financiers, thus affecting the amount of money available to the government and so limiting resources to spend on social programmes such as social welfare. Thus, political choice and action from governments may be self-limited due to global macro policy and international financial markets. This is not to say that political action is impossible; Nordic welfare countries had previously seen this as an important social cost but this solution will require greater citizen and political demand for this action. European social workers often avoid taking political positions concerning the changes and challenges of government welfare policies (Lorenz, 2005b). Lorenz (2005b) suggests social workers often withdraw to privatisation and therapeutic approaches or accept models of NPM without opposition. This raises questions within Europe about the role of social work to promote debate, inform citizens and provide professional leadership to support and promote democratic engagement in social policy decisions.

Key challenges for practitioners are the ongoing development and consolidation of their understanding of the systemic linkages between critical policy analyses, the complexity of the policy-practice nexus and management. As social work is practised within a wider political, economic and social framework, social work practitioners should routinely view service users' difficulties within this framework. That said, by providing services to vulnerable people and not addressing the wider professional commitments to social justice and citizen participation, the social work profession is in danger of unintentionally enabling the further eroding of hard won citizenship rights to comprehensive and universal social work input, support and advocacy.

To address these powerful forces, social work must review its professional role in supporting those who are disadvantaged, injured, distressed or stereotyped. It needs to critically review the diverse and contested milieu in which it operates (Harrington & Beddoe, 2014), in order to assess the problems and plan its interventions, which might include debates about civil practice or being a human rights profession (Ife, 2001; McPherson, 2015). For instance, should the profession seek to address problems arising from social inequality, neoliberalism or social policy more proactively through human rights legislation and the courts? Human rights complaints at national and European level are long-winded processes, but may allow, in the long term, greater and more sustained changes to those policies that are at detrimental to social work practice or citizen's social well-being.

The profession needs to reach beyond the immediate one-to-one assessments and intervention to resolve problems, but in order to develop critical public discourses, engagement in policy and politics is required, together with social solidarity and support for wider political, organisational, social, educational and economic debates on these key issues. This inevitably means being more vocal in policy debates, contributing to macro and micro welfare policy and practice development, and helping communities to understand the implications of social inequality. This will inevitably mean the need for the profession to develop policy specialists and forging greater links with citizens and civil movements. Within this 'age of austerity' it is easy to forget the human costs associated with uncritical neoliberal policy, and the intended and unintended consequences and management implementation. We must also be mindful of the risks of the profession being used as a tool for greater

oppression, as has occurred previously in Europe (Lorenz, 1994). Thus the social work profession must be more active in debating, demanding social welfare policy transparency and critically engaging with citizens, managers, social policy advisors and politicians to understand and question the evidence base, philosophy and implications for policy, management and practice changes.

Conclusion

The impact of neoliberal macro-economic policies on social work and on those who are socially excluded does not come as any surprise. Social work's inability in recent years to develop high profile public critical leadership and to articulate an alternative vision for the future, as explored throughout the paper, does not augur well for the future of the profession or its commitment to social justice. Traditionally much of social work is practised at a micro level with individuals and groups and whilst there is a clear impact at this level, there is a danger that the impact and influences at a macro level could be overlooked. For instance, aligning responsibility for poverty to an individual level colludes with and supports macro level policy that locates the problem at an individual level rather than recognises structural causes. Without this approach, the profession may itself (unconsciously or consciously) be aiding neoliberal reform (Lorenz, 2005a) and facilitating its own demise.

There are numerous developments and increasing resistance to reform through groups such as the UK's Social Work Action Network (SWAN) and the Spanish Orange Wave. These strategies are important, with the profession articulating a clearer way forward, encouraging critiques of neoliberal development, and promoting credible and democratic alternatives which would resonate with all citizens and which are based on social justice values. As public services continue to be withdrawn, the evidence of failures of the market, such as those identified in England by the Care Quality Commission (2010) and the OFT (2005), should be highlighted by a profession that is committed to values of social justice and equality. International debate within the pro-fession needs to understand neoliberalism as a socio-economic and political policy, with multiple levels of complexity, interests and impacts. These should also be combined with democratic engagement with citizens to explain that everybody benefits from reduced social inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Lastly, to be true to its fundamental values, social work must find its voice and confidence to promote the importance of universal access and delivery, and demand greater social policy transparency, as well as recognise that all members of society can benefit from equality and equity to professional support and critical perspectives. The questions are, therefore, is this role part of the social work mandate; are we up to the task and courageous enough to take action?

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Notes

1. The social chapter is attached to the Maastricht Treaty highlighting broad social policy objectives to improve living and working conditions and enables the Commission to improve social legislation (Williams, 1993).
2. 'Anti-dumping' measures often involve imposing higher import tariffs on certain imported goods to support local producers. However, this is normally only a short-term measure as for most countries this breaches 'free trade rules' as enforced by the WTO.
3. The 'Tobin Tax' is a proposed tax to be imposed on foreign exchange transactions with the aim of impacting on short-term currency speculation (Pignal, 2011).

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