

XAVIER, A.G., ORNELLAS, A., SPOLANDER, G. and BUSCEMA, C. 2016. Returning the 'social' to social work: recommitting to social development in an age of neoliberalism. *Indian journal of social work* [online], 77(3), pages 295-310. Available from: <https://journals.tiss.edu/ijsw/index.php/ijsw/article/view/82>

Returning the 'social' to social work: recommitting to social development in an age of neoliberalism.

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2016

Returning the ‘Social’ to Social Work

Recommitting to Social Development in an Age of Neoliberalism

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In the context of globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation there is a tendency to marketise and monetise essential services. Erstwhile fundamental services that were considered to be life saving are being marketed and sold. Education soon followed the same trend; unsurprisingly the profession of social work also is being subjected to the treatment of the markets in an uncharacteristic manner. Social work and social welfare are being regarded as marketable services. This has led to an exclusivist approach which is fundamentally different from the tenets of the profession. This paper explores the way social work is transforming under economic liberalisation as a response to this trend.

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INTRODUCTION:

The neoliberal agenda has redefined the problems that humanity faces. It has intensified the issue of poverty, discrimination and polarised development, dividing the world incrementally in terms of caste, class, gender, race and creed, with a widening gap between the rich and the poor (Harvey, 2010; Dominelli, 2002; Hay, 2002). With its ideological belief in market dominance, individual responsibility and economic development above all else, the welfare state is seen as creating an unhealthy dependency and service users, particularly the poor, have been reduced to ‘customers or scroungers’ (Grover and Piggott, 2005; Murray, 1994). Many have written about this phenomenon, such as Sen and Dreze (1995), who in their work, lay emphasis on this exclusive nature of development promoted by the market; Stiglitz (2002) points out that through

such neoliberal reform, the weaker sections of society are being reduced to live at the mercy of minimal, and diminishing, welfare. From a position of being able to participate in development, the poor and marginalised have been reduced to victims of the new structure, being blamed for their own poverty (Jones, 2001), often casualties of not being able to adjust to the new system.

Much as society is learning to dance to the tune of the neoliberal market, the same demand is being expected of the social work profession. The implications of this has been recognised by many writers and social work academics (to name a few, Ferguson, 2005, 2008; Dominelli, 2002; Garrett, 2010; Harris, 2014; Jones, 2001; Lorenz, 2005; Midgley, 1997; Spolander and others, 2014), resulting in a social work that is highly individual-centric, diverting its attention from the structural and systematic problems that underlie individual challenges. Social work education and practice, as a result, have been directly influenced by such ideology, focusing on and advocating for, client self-determination, individualism and client responsibility for wellbeing, over and above a focus on social justice, social cohesion and community engagement. This suggests that an empowering profession has been reduced to one that ‘applies band aids to cancers’. Garrett (2010: 350) refers to this influence within social work practice and education as an attempt to “achieve neoliberal hegemony”. Not discounting individual-based interventions, which hold a significant place in social work practice and knowledge-development, it is important to recognise the role of social work within the realm of issues that remain as a consequence of systematic failures.

The Neoliberal Ideology and Context

Harvey (2010: 2) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom 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”. Overall, neoliberalism believes in the absolute supremacy of the market (Marobela, 2008).

At the outset, it looks very attractive. When there is an even playing field, all the players can be allowed to start at the same point and have a common finish line. The rules are deemed to be fair and those who have the capacity will emerge victorious; those who lose will get a chance in the next race. A fair competition, such as the one described, is considered to improve quality, ensure transparency, and put power in the hands of the people. This is the essence of the free market and neoliberal ideology. Governments are seen as spectators, with a limited role in ensuring that the gates of investment are open to allow the free flow of funds; additionally, governments are given authority to remove any barriers that arise. The role of the educational institutions is to develop individuals who are effective in taking forward this agenda. It is believed that in this process, people are given the opportunity to work their way out of poverty.

It sounds like a form of utopia; if it plays out as envisaged. However, if scrutinised in greater detail, one can begin to see that such a fair game does not exist. Instead, such freedoms are only granted to those with the economic, political and social power to frame the rules of the game, thus establishing an uneven playing field based on privilege and inequality. According to Sen and Derze (1995), a marginal one percent of the world's population possess the ability to effectively compete in this global market. The poor tend to remain in the last rungs of the ladder, unable to climb up to secure prosperity. With the roles of government being reworked, the control remains in the hands of the power of the market and large international organisations. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are examples of such key role players in this emerging trend, as instruments of global capitalism (Harvey, 2010; Pentaraki, 2013; Stiglitz, 2002). The policies of free market that are enforced by these organisations stress unbridled investment and profit earning opportunities, with a glaringly apparent focus on transferring resources from the working class to the rich (Harvey, 2010; Pentaraki, 2013). "They impose Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), designed to restructure society around the needs of the market, thus creating rising socio-economic inequalities" (Pentaraki, 2013: 702). This can be seen, for example, in the austerity measures implemented in Spain, Italy and Greece. As proposed by Pentaraki (2013: 701), "A number of unfounded assertions are used to build consent in support of the austerity policies by relocating the blame from structural factors, such as neo-liberalism and capitalism, to factors supposedly 'individual' to the country".

Furthermore, Hickel (2013) demonstrates that for every 130 billion given in aid to developing countries, one trillion is lost due to capital flight and tax evasions from such multi-national corporations. Economist Robert Pollin (2012) suggests that the developing world has lost about 480 billion to the developed world, in terms of capital flights, tax evasions, cheap labour and so on. The New Left Project (Hickel 2013) claims that the World Bank has privatised assets worth two trillion in the developing world, thus making it accessible to the market to recolonise the developing world.

The result of such an uneven playing field is demonstrated in the evolution of issues surrounding poverty and inequality. Unemployment, drug/alcohol addiction, lower income levels, increase in infant mortality, morbidity rates, reduction in the dependence on agriculture, increase in debts and so on are dramatically connected to the global pattern of wealth distribution. Furthermore, within this emerging trend and neoliberal agenda, intellectual domination seems to have accentuated the misery of the world's poor. An example of this can be found in the Intellectual Property Rights regime's attempt to take control of indigenous wisdom, by dictating terms to agricultural farmers to make them more market dependent. Vandana Shiva (2000) observes that there are attempts to make the majority of poor farmers dependent on the patented seeds, fertilisers and produce; both food crops and cash crops are tactfully being trapped in the name of intellectual properties. Over and above this, the reversal of the subsidy schemes that international bodies such as the IMF and WTO promotes, is a cause for great concern. The aim is to decrease subsidies to the farmers and make sure they buy seeds, fertilisers, electricity, and other essentials for agriculture at a market price. While this applies to poor farmers globally, the corporate farmers in the US get subsidies to continue their agriculture. Harvey (2010) points out several more inconsistencies in this emerging neoliberal system, elaborating on the foundational contradictions of the neoliberal project. Keynes (2012) characterises this era as being one where the lust for money becomes a semi pathological issue that requires actual treatment.

Although the scope of understanding, implementation and impact of neoliberalism is much broader than described above, these few examples do demonstrate that the neoliberal ideology is creating a world where social work is ever the more needed. However, it is also equally ever the

more influenced by such policy changes, and undergoing significant reform at the national and global level. It is within this context, that, there is a need to take a fresh look at the role of social work within society.

Locating Social Work within the Neoliberal Context

Understandably, the role of a social worker is very often dictated by the systems that it tries to serve. According to Lymbery (2001: 369) “the contribution of social work to society has always been contested”; however, more than any other health or welfare profession, social work has particularly suffered from the shift in the political climate during these years, with the influence of neoliberal ideology causing social workers to be “susceptible to public devaluing of the services they provide” (Lymbery, 2001: 369). This influence on the profession can be most evidently seen within the context of three key processes (Harris, 2014: 8-9): marketisation, where markets are introduced in as many and as wide a range of contexts as possible; consumerisation, where individuals are made responsible for themselves and run their own lives (this is fast being adopted in social work practice through principles such as ‘client self-determination’ and ‘individualism’ (Ferguson, 2008)); and managerialisation, with services in the public or voluntary sectors being modeled on management knowledge and techniques drawn from the private business sector.

Neoliberalism has also resulted in increases in social inequality, including racial, health, education and housing in both the global north and global south, alongside governments increasingly being concerned with market orientated policy (Reish, 2013). This raises questions about how the values and aims of social work are being enacted both in the training and research academies, but also in practice. Where the profession is not regulated, and even where it is, various groups and interests increasingly claim its language and even its ethos, often to achieve their own objectives resulting in a variety of intended and unintended consequences, which may impact adversely on the profession.

The result is a social work profession, particularly within the Western world, but increasingly evident at an international scale, that is largely individual-centric, task and performance-

measurement orientated, shifting from depth to surface work (Howe, 1996), and demonstrating a measure of professional ambivalence towards service users who are seen as customers, solely responsible for their wellbeing (Grover and Piggott, 2005; Murray, 1994). Within this context, Jones and Novak (1993: 211) recognise that "until the political climate changes and there is a widespread revulsion against current trends and inequalities, social work might continue as an occupation but perish as a caring and liberal profession".

Social Work Structure Matters

The structure and environment in which social work is practiced is important. We understand this idea intrinsically with the communities we work with, but do we consider this sufficiently within social work? How do these structures in our communities, professions and countries shape our ideas of what is possible, what might be and how we try to achieve them? Allsopp (2011: 78) when reflecting on globalisation shaping South African practice quotes the Irish philosopher John O'Donahue, "the 'global village' has no roads or neighbours; it is a faceless, impersonal landscape from which all individuality has been erased". It is therefore important for us to reflect on our professional sense of belonging, how the icons of international business shape our knowledge and values and how cultures vanish due to the loss of their languages (Allsopp, 2011). Likewise we need to understand our place in history and how this history shapes our debates, resilience and the challenges for us to undertake our practice and achieve social justice. The use of more rational forms of management as advocated by neoliberalism, whilst asking important questions about accountability and the use of resources, also has the potential of neutering or destroying social relationships and values.

For many countries with less established welfare states, the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been an important aspect alongside communities and families in supporting those vulnerable and in need. However, whilst NGOs in many parts of the world have traditionally provided both services and also sought to be a critical voice for advocacy and holding the state to account, neoliberalism is changing this. The state's use of contracts rather than grants with NGOs to provide services is introducing contract cultures to these organisations, with consequences for bureaucracy, fixed contracted deliverables and a lack of security due to

short term contracts (Carson and Kerr, 2010). NGO experience in the UK has seen the promotion of the sector as an alternative provider of social welfare rather than the state, and, through which, has been easier to force radical service reform (Taylor, 2012). The use of short term contractual funding, the availability of this funding and the types of services which have been tendered for have all been used as mechanisms to drive change, and at the sector's cost are their large salaries for the mostly female staff; their salaries and employment conditions have been adversely effected (Taylor, 2012).

In countries such as Australia, prescriptive contracts have also been used to govern internal organisational issues such as quality assurance and management practice (Cunningham, 2008). Guha (2015) similarly identifies that the Indian government has sent worrying signals to curtail the freedom, financing and extent of NGOs operating within India. The result of this at this stage is uncertain, but it does have implications for democracy and the role of social workers in communities.

Redefining Social Work: The New International Social Work Definition

Against this backdrop of neoliberal reform, challenges to global social work, and the emergence of professional resistance across EU and non-EU countries, the newly revised international definition of social work, as formulated by the IFSW in 2014, holds a significant shift in thinking and renewed understanding of the role of social work within society. Despite the differing influences and responses of social work across countries, it is important to recognise the global changes taking place within the profession and the call for action that the international definition is offering social work academics, educators, managers, and front-line workers.

The newly revised international definition of social work states that,

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by

theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (IFSW, 2014).

As described earlier in the text, neoliberal reform and the changing global world is resulting in an increase in macro-scale social problems; however, neoliberal principles continue to emphasise the responsibility of the individual (Harvey, 2010: 2; Ornellas, Spolander and Engelbrecht, awaiting publication). This individualised focus has been a dominant force within Western social work, and the previous international definition (IFSW, 2010) was highly criticised for its individual focus, and its failure to acknowledge the importance of collectivism and interdependence (Jones and Truell, 2012; IFSW, 2014).

However, the new definition, in contrast to its predecessor, demonstrates a significant shift toward a more macro and collective focus, and a call to engage with ‘people *and* structures’ (IFSW, 2014; Ornellas, Spolander and Engelbrecht, awaiting publication). This shows a movement that contradicts the individual-centric values of the neoliberal agenda and commands a recommitment to matters of social justice, social cohesion, collective responsibility and social development. Thus, it redirects the social worker toward the need to both understand and address the economic, social and structural challenges brought about by neoliberal reform, and to recognise this as a key role within our mandate as social work professionals. With the increased involvement of Asia-Pacific, African and Latin-American countries in the formation of the new definition, it could be suggested that the highlighting of values such as collectivism, structuralism and social development are as a direct result of the influence of indigenous knowledge from these non-EU participants, who have long upheld such values (Ferguson, 2005; Gray and Mazibuko, 2002; Rankopo and Osei- Hwedie, 2011; Truell, 2014; Yunong and Xiong, 2012). This supports the new definition's commitment to the development and adoption of indigenous knowledge frameworks within the social work profession (IFSW, 2014; Ornellas and others, awaiting publication).

This is not to say that the new definition does not recognise the individual, but rather recognises the need for social work to expand the way in which individual problems are understood and

addressed, for just as the Global Definition continues to acknowledge the significance of relationships within social work practice and knowledge, it is necessary to recognise that neoliberalism “undermines not only radical or structural approaches but also ‘traditional’ relationship-based social work” (Ferguson, 2008: 14). Thus, the call to challenge neoliberal reform within society and the profession is not only for the radical approaches, but for the very values and frameworks upon which the overall profession stands. In this light, while still recognising the importance of relationship-based and individualised intervention (IFSW, 2014), the revised definition suggests the need for social work to ensure it does not become solely individual-centric, but rather actively engages with critical, collective and macro-focused interventions as a means of supporting the individual (Ornellas, Spolander and Engelbrecht, awaiting publication).

Returning the ‘social’ to social work: The Challenge for the Social Work Profession

The debate about the impact of neoliberalism in welfare systems, social services and social work has been taking place actively (Ferguson, 2005; Salamon, 1995; Spolander and others, 2014). Evidence from many of these debates suggests that social work has been trending in the way of the market, adjusting its sails to suit the situation. However, resistance within the profession is also keenly apparent and developing rapidly across the globe. Social work has a critical role to play in the neoliberalism debate, and rather than silently adopting its principles, should begin to critically question how neoliberalism is impacting upon civil society and vulnerable populations, as well as how the profession should effectively respond (Ornellas and others, awaiting publication). The profession needs to begin to develop its understanding of the interactions between global trends, socioeconomic changes, and community and individual needs (Healy and Rosemary, 2011; Jones and Truell, 2012; Payne and Askeland, 2008; Pettifor, 2004; Spolander and others, 2015), thus essentially returning the ‘social’ to social work. There are key dilemmas which need to be debated by the profession, including whether or not the state should take any responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, or whether it should open up the space for private players to operate in this sphere? Furthermore, can the market be allowed to determine who is vulnerable to avail essential services? Does this not vest disproportionate power in the hands of the market forces and cause service users to be seen as a liability? Perhaps the argument that the

tide lifts all the boats with it, in this case, does not hold true, as many people are not in the boats, but instead are in the water, weighed down by social and political inequities. Hence, social work needs to begin to critically question and challenge the notion that a globalised and marketised approach is best for civil society.

This debate requires both international and local elements, with critical discussion around the collective and macro-focused changes in the new definition; the impact of austerity measures in the EU, and wealth distribution in developing countries; the changing role of the social worker and/or the poor recognition of the social work profession; the impact of managerialism and welfare reform; the development of indigenous knowledge; and the nature and impact of social work professional resistance across various country contexts. Within this debate, the new definition of social work carries the much-awaited thrust. The challenge here is trying to infuse the spirit of social work into the wider spectrum of the profession. We believe that this can best be done through critical debate, greater international collaboration and resistance, as well as a movement toward a more collective and macro-focused social work, that seeks to truly uphold the values of social development, social cohesion, social justice and the empowerment and liberation of people (IFSW, 2014). As is underpinned by Ferguson (2008: 13), “this wider dissatisfaction with neo-liberalism finds a strong echo from within a social work profession whose knowledge base, skills and values have been distorted and undermined by the imposition since the early 1990s of a pro-business ideology”.

It is recognised that there is considerable risk in trying to align with the issues of poverty, inequality and justice, and resisting the neoliberal agenda. Social work professionals will be defending themselves and their actions against their very paymasters and the systems that employ them (Baines, 2011). This is a risk, which also needs to be properly discussed and understood by the profession. On the other hand, Ross (2011) articulates that such resistance really need not be acts of overt public action, but rather can very well be small acts of resistance that are consistent over a period time. Baines’ (2004, 2013) example of Social Unionism in Canada case study outlines one of the many strategies of resistance within such a system, or her presentation on how social issues are addressed by social workers in the developed world (2011). Other academics such as Ferguson (2005), however, call for much stronger and collective

resistance. These are just a few examples of many, and the nature, scope and degree of such resistance will differ according to context and professional capacity. However, the underlying principles and values of such action are universal and underpinned by the profession at large. This is echoed by Pentaraki (2013) in her commentary on the austerity crisis in Greece,

“Since the profession was founded, some have engaged in collective struggles for progressive social change – a notable example being Jane Addams; others have sided with authoritarian and repressive regimes (Ioakimidis, 2011), while many have remained in the middle. To address this crisis, social workers would need to examine and develop their role as agents of social change... Despite difficulties and because of their social justice value base, social workers can be agents of social change...” (2013: 705).

As suggested by Ferguson and Lavalette (2006: 312), one of the primary areas of change needed within the neoliberal context is the “limitations of a social work based on a narrow ‘what works’ agenda, focused primarily on managing risky behaviors”. The act of returning the ‘social’ to social work raises questions as to whether “a social work concerned primarily with behavioral change, with surfaces, which does not get to grips with the meanings or complexities of people’s lives” (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006: 312) is truly upholding its professional and global mandate.

Thus, against the backdrop of today’s global context, there is a need within the profession to concentrate on the global and national issues that are linked with the micro issues; to work on understanding the social, economic structures that contribute toward much of the problems experienced by society; and to adopt an empowered and collective approach to deal with the root causes of the problem. The conversion of the welfare state to a commercial enterprise is not only to be condemned, but requires strategic action to restore the role of the state in caring for the welfare of the people. Social work has to retrace its roots to dealing with not only the poor, for example, but with actual poverty itself. This requires a multilayered approach to respond to the local, national and international issues. The methods of social work should be directed to looking at the complete picture of problem solving in connection with the local, national and global

trends. Social work should actively engage with social policy, shifting emphasis toward social sustainability, social reproduction and systemic change, emphasising the fact that social welfare is an investment in society and not expenditure. As in the words of Ferguson and Lavalette (2006: 311), “How can we begin to develop alternatives to the neoliberal social work that has brought us to our present impasse? Where might these alternatives come from? Where might we look for the green shoots of a new, engaged social work practice?”

The importance of this debate and movement is deeply seated in the very significance of the profession itself. “There is a project called social work that is worth defending, not because it keeps us in a job but because at its best it can improve people’s lives; can help them make sense of and deal with their pain, distress and problems; can challenge stigma and discrimination; and can be part of the struggle for social justice” (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006: 316). The challenge is to return to our values as a profession, to reignite our commitment to social justice, and to truly challenge the socioeconomic, political and structural forces that seek to undermine the social work mandate; essentially, to return the ‘social’ to the social work profession. For,

“...In contrast to theories of society which locate the roots of social problems within the individual, most social work theories...have tended to emphasise the interaction between the individual and society. To that extent social work challenges explanations of social problems, which seek to reduce them to the behaviours of individuals. It is this emphasis on the ‘social’ which on the one hand permits a holistic approach to the understanding and response to people’s problems and on the other, which has allowed social work, to a greater extent than any other profession, to contribute to the development of social models of disability and mental health over the past two decades (Oliver, 1996; Tew, 2005)” (Ferguson, 2008: 18).

CONCLUSION

Social work finds itself at a difficult crossroad and one in which the reality of the profession in different contexts faces a variety of challenges, which, on the face of it might be very different within the individual contexts of socioeconomic, political, religious, historical and cultural

differences. It is without question that these contextual factors impact on the profession and communities in different ways and that the discourse in this regard is different. However, despite these differences it is important that the profession reflect on the professional challenges globally, understand the macroeconomic forces that are shaping globalisation and their effects on communities and individuals. The importance of international dialogue, reflection and lessons of a global profession seeking to make an impact locally has never been more vital.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Programme FP7-PEOPLE-2012-IRSES under grant agreement No 318938.

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