Towards a History of Critical Traditions in Australian Social Work

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This article situates the social work and human service professions in a long view of history, born of the clash between liberal-individualist and socialist-collectivist responses to the social miseries of modern, Western capitalism. In this long view, critical social work is conceived as heir to struggles for social justice that predate but are amplified in modernity. In Australia, as elsewhere, liberal-individualism was dominant in social work’s beginnings but always amid currents of social reform, whose intensification significantly impacted the social welfare occupations in the early 1970s. The ensuing radicalism, sought not only to relieve people’s suffering but to change the social conditions engendering it. The radical social work of the 1970s has subsequently developed in diverse ways under the successive influences of Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, postmodern and various other approaches to constitute the diverse family of critical social work today.

Introduction

When the American economist Simon Patten, invented the term ‘social work’ in 1900 (Dorman 1996: 3), anticipating a new profession to address the social problems of modern Western societies, there was already a diverse history of charitable and political attempts to do so. Most efforts were focused on adjusting individual behaviour to fit the prevailing social order without challenging its inequalities. This has been an enduring characteristic of mainstream social work until the present time. Others, however, sought to transform unjust social conditions to relieve suffering and meet people’s needs, engendering various ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ social work approaches. This article sketches the historical emergence of social work and its more radical orientations in responses to the oppressive divisions of modern society and the attempts to combat these. In doing so, it situates critical social work within these much broader, longstanding and, in many instances, ongoing struggles for social justice, with particular reference to Australia.

Social work is a product of modernity, and modern societies differ markedly from their traditional forbears. In hunter-gatherer societies for instance, there were no rich or poor, and people’s means were proportionate to their limited wants, (Flannery and Marcus 2012: 3-66) hence, no need for social workers. More pronounced inequalities and social problems, however, emerged in agrarian civilisations several millennia ago. Paradoxically, these inequalities were often justified on religious grounds but many of the world’s religions also articulated principles of social justice that criticised inequality (Reisch 2002: 343). These principles held that society, not the individual, was ‘responsible for the undeserved suffering of its members’ (Irani and Silver 1995: 4). In medieval Europe, the Christian churches took responsibility for what we might call ‘social services’ until the 1600s. The Tudor monarchy in Britain assumed greater control of poverty with less charitable ‘Poor Laws’ (1601), instituting punitive distinctions between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor (Horner 2012: 19). This was part of broader, ‘modernising’, social changes taking place in Europe and its colonies from the seventeenth century onwards.

Capitalist Modernity

In modernity, the basis for knowledge shifts from religion to science; governments increase their power while claiming ‘democracy’ as their justification rather than the ‘divine right’ of kings; industry replaces agriculture as the main source of wealth; and merchants or financiers rather than nobles form the most powerful elite (Van Kriek et al. 2017: 8). By the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism, based on the private ownership of productive resources and market exchanges for profit, became the dominant economic order in Europe and North America. Capitalism subsequently concentrated more material wealth for its elites than any system in history but also created more inequality and deprivation (Bodley 2011: 331). Modern societies produced modern problems, such as mass urban-based poverty and unemployment, sweat-shop factories, mechanised warfare, epidemic illnesses and unprecedented environmental destruction. These things were globalised through colonial imposition and the decimation of other cultures. The practices that became social work embodied all of these.
changes, including the secular-rational (non-religious) understanding of social problems, that gave rise to notions like ‘social science’ and ‘scientific philanthropy’ (Morley et al. 2014: 83).

The problems of capitalist modernity engendered conflicting responses and by the mid-1800s, major struggles emerged between the advocates of liberal and socialist ideas. Liberals advocated individualistic solutions to social problems, arguing that poverty resulted mainly from poor choices (or ‘moral failure’) and that if individuals worked hard, free from state restrictions on business, everyone would prosper (Horner 2012: 14-16). Socialists, by contrast, favoured collective approaches to poverty and inequality, arguing that these resulted from unjust social structures. Consequently, they supported market regulation and public provision to promote social justice. While all socialists opposed capitalist inequality, some pursued gradual reforms, whereas others (like Karl Marx) were revolutionaries, seeking its complete replacement by a socialist society (Mullaly 2007: 115-116).

Social work is a contested project, born of the clash between the liberal-individualist and socialist-collectivist responses to the social miseries of Western industrial capitalism. However, the dominant nineteenth century response was liberal, opposing state aid (except for the infirm in ‘poor-houses’) and promoting charitable activities (e.g. missionaries, voluntary workers and middle-class, ‘friendly visitors’ to the poor) that targeted individual character rather than social reform.

Contested Origins of Social Work

By the 1870s, charities in Britain and the United States became coordinated under umbrella Charitable Organisation Societies (COS) to ration relief funds (using ‘scientific’ survey and assessment methods to identify the ‘really poor’). The COS was transplanted to colonial Australia in 1887, where it prospered in Melbourne (but not Sydney where the older Benevolent Society had some state aid). However, the COS’s liberal, self-help individualism was discredited in the 1890s depression when its leadership begged London headquarters for financial support (Peel 2008).

A noted COS leader and pioneer of professional social work in the United States, Mary Richmond (1861-1928), successfully advocated university training (with Colombia University) in what she called ‘social diagnosis’ to assess, categorise and treat the poor on an individual, ‘case-work’ basis. This model of diagnosing and treating individual problems in isolation from social context, weighs heavily on mainstream social work today (Agliass et al. 2016: 7-8) but it has always engendered critical counter-currents.

The critical currents have roots in the ‘settlement movement’ that split from the COS in the 1890s, because its members developed a social framework for understanding and combating poverty. Their prototype was Toynbee Hall, established in London in 1884. The idea was for university-educated visitors to live amongst the poor in their communities, and learn from them, while participating in community-based organising, education, research, cultural and livelihood projects. Breaking with COS’s paternalism, it became apparent to settlement workers, including social workers and future Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, that emphasising free markets, individual morality and private charity, perpetuated rather than solved the enormous sufferings of class-division (Ferguson 2008: 91). So, the settlement workers sought social solutions to social problems, including government welfare reforms, like universal healthcare, pensions and free public schooling.

The most famous social work founder to promote the settlement model was Jane Addams (1860-1935), the first woman president of the United States Social Work Conference (1910), a feminist, anti-imperialist, labour campaigner, sociologist and Nobel Prize winning peace activist. Addams transplanted the settlement model of live-in, community-centres for education, activism, cultural and livelihood projects by founding Hull House in Chicago in 1889. Her vision of social work as a non-violent movement for social justice and democracy transcended the individualistic, charity model and remains a provocation for the possibilities of critical social work today (Weinour and Reisch 1989: 38). The settlement movement had limited impact in Australia but former Toynbee residents propagated the model in 1891, working amongst the Sydney slums. They established a house in 1908, moving it to Darlington in 1925 and in 1928 proposed that social work be taught at Sydney University. The house continues today as a neighbourhood community centre, with a particular focus on Aboriginal rights and local empowerment (Sydney University Settlement 2008). While social work in Sydney had this broader beginning, in every other state it grew mainly out of COS-style case work in hospitals, siloed from social advocacy (Gleeson 2006: 43).

The American settlement movement and the social workers it inspired campaigned for social reform rather than revolutionary change. However, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, there arose a militant ‘Rank and File movement’ amongst social workers, dissatisfied with the limitations of President Roosevelt’s welfare reforms. These workers fought for more radical changes,aligning with the labour movement, left-wing parties (including Communists) and the anti-racist struggles of the day. A leading rank and filer, Bertha Reynold (1887-1978), the most popularly published social worker of the 1930s, taught Marxist analysis to explain the ways personal suffering was rooted in exploitative social conditions that needed fundamental transformation (Ferguson 2008:...
95). She advocated solidarity with clients as fellow-workers, reminding social workers that to be agents of progressive change necessitated coalitions with other movements and not going it alone (Reisch 2002: 38). Unfortunately, Reynold’s Marxism and union-organising on campus led to her dismissal and (like other radicals) ostracism from the profession in the anti-Communist era that followed. However, Reynolds and her colleagues did inspire a later generation of radical social workers in the 1960s and beyond. This sort of activism continues in the Social Welfare Action Alliance (formerly the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society) in the United States and is akin to the various contemporary movements that Lain Ferguson (2016) refers to in his contribution to this edition of Social Alternatives. In Australia, the emergence of a specific, social work, radicalism (Healy 1993: 4) began later than in America because the associated struggles for social and economic justice occurred under quite different circumstances.

Social Work’s Emergence in Australia (1788-1970)

Australia is the outcome of a colonial-settler invasion (1788), which dispossessed the Indigenous inhabitants, and was designed to relieve the social problems of late eighteenth century Britain. Having lost its American colonies (1783), Britain needed somewhere else to transport convicts. The situation for the first colonists was quite different from home. The Poor Laws did not operate in Australia because the convicts were already under direct state control (Hirst 1984: 85). There were no church parishes or gentry capable of sustaining charities until the early 1800s and even these required state support, as with the Sydney Benevolent Society. Catholic religious orders arrived in the 1830s, particularly nuns like Mary McKillop, founding some basic social services. These grew throughout the colonies (McMahon 2003: 86), as did social divisions between capital and labour. Unlike in Britain, the labour movement had some early successes, as did the women’s movement for the vote (1895 South Australia; 1902 Commonwealth).

Free workers formed trade unions with ‘friendly societies’, providing members financial support in times of sickness, unemployment, disability or funerals (Nichol 1985: 20). Working-class men also benefitted from chronic colonial labour shortages (unlike in America and Europe), strengthening their bargaining position with employers over pay and conditions. Consequently, Australian and New Zealand workers were among the first in the world to attain an eight-hour day. Historian Stuart McIntyre (2012: 214) claims that by the 1880s Australia’s working class ‘probably enjoyed the highest standard of living in the world’. Conditions hardened during the 1890s’ depression when the union movement was defeated in the ‘Great Strikes’ but this only galvanised their political organisation in founding the Australian Labor Party (1891). Initially, Labor supported progressive Liberal administrations until it was capable of forming the world’s first Labor governments (Queensland 1899; Commonwealth 1904 and 1910), instituting reforms such as the old-age pension (1909), invalid pension (1910), maternity allowance (1911) and binding arbitration for industrial disputes by an independent body (1904). The latter set a basic wage (1907) on principles of social justice, rather than market-forces, which governed wage-setting for over eighty years (Pusey 2003: 41, 48).

These principles created what Castles (1985) called a ‘wage-earners’ welfare state’ where the profits of capitalism were in some measure redistributed through wage regulation and full employment. The downside of this egalitarianism was its racial exclusion of non-whites (with the Immigration Restriction Act 1901), forced assimilation of Aboriginal peoples and devaluing of women’s work.

As in America and Britain, nineteenth century Australia produced numerous activist forerunners to social work. Most of these were educated women, who saw charitable work as part of a broader movement for a just and democratic society, including increased wages for workers, poverty relief and equality for women. Women like Mary Gilmore (1865-1962), Vida Goldstein (1869-1949), Mary Lee (1821-1909) and Jessie Street (1889-1970) were comparable to Jane Addams as public figures and reformers. Many women activists joined the National Council of Women (NCW), the leading organisation for women’s rights between the World Wars. A number of these women, including leaders of the Sydney University Settlement, advocated social work as a profession in the late 1920s (McMahon 2003: 89). One leader in the NCW network was Norma Parker (1906-2004), an American-trained social worker involved in Catholic social justice programs for welfare and workers’ rights in the 1930s (McMahon 2003: 89). In 1940, Parker helped establish the first Australian course in social work at Sydney University, becoming its Associate Professor. She was also inaugural President of the Australian Social Workers Association (1946-1954) and in 1956 helped found the Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS).

Although social work in Sydney had a broader community base, the COS methods of assessing the poor and medically supervised hospital almoning prevailed elsewhere in Australia (Gleeson 2006: 75). Professionalisation cemented the conservatism of mainstream social work in Australia. It meant greater government or institutional control, encouraging a narrow orientation on the part of social workers themselves. Australian social workers from the 1940s to the 1960s generally embraced the individualising psychological and casework approaches to social problems that had become dominant in Britain and America. Mendes (2003: 19) observes that social workers in the fifties and sixties did not want to be associated with anything ‘left-wing’, including the Labor Party and unions. In 1965 the
Radical social work publications appeared simultaneously in Australia (Throssell 1975), Britain (Bailey and Brake 1975) and North America (Galper 1975; Moreau 1979). A group of Marxist social workers called Inside Welfare was formed in 1975 at the University of Queensland, spreading interstate, producing a bulletin and hosting a national conference on ‘Marxism and Poverty’ in 1976 (Mendes 2009: 20). They critiqued social injustice and the complicity of mainstream social work in reproducing it, calling for alternative forms of practice. Similar to the earlier British socialist collective, Case Con, Inside Welfare viewed traditional casework as a confidence trick, misleading professionals into an exclusive focus on individual cases, consequently ‘victim-blaming’ their clients for personal insufficiencies rather than addressing the structural source of their problems in unemployment, poverty, or oppressive divisions (Weinstein 2011: 13-22). Inside Welfare criticised decontextualised casework as effectively serving the capitalist state and ruling class by requiring disadvantaged clients to adjust to unjust social conditions; thereby controlling them (Mendes 2009: 20). Instead, Inside Welfare promoted collective action with the disadvantaged to pursue reform.

The liberal-individualist ideology that Inside Welfare exposed in traditional casework was also to be found in mainstream social work’s notion of ‘professionalism’. Just as casework could control the poor, so too, professionalism could control social workers. Professionalism, in this view, was not about ethical or intellectual standards but a device for re-directing social workers away from political action into concerns for career advancement, status and accreditation etc. (Hennig 1975: 1). Historically, the radicals believed that professionalism with its claims to expert status and knowledge could only reinforce capitalist hierarchies and state control, alienating social workers from other welfare workers and from the people they served. More viable forms of organisation for socialists, according to Inside Welfare, were to be found (as Bertha Reynolds had advocated) in social movements and trade unionism (Thorpe and Petrujenica 1992: 185).

Radical Social Work (1970s)

Australian social work radicalism was inspired by renewed Marxist critiques of capitalism in the broader political movements of the 1960-70s (Pease 2013: 22). These critiques identified class division as the underlying cause of most disadvantages experienced in housing, healthcare, the legal system and employment, despite the welfare state. The latter in fact was problematic because while conceding certain hard-won benefits to the working class, it still preserved the class inequalities of capitalism. Marxists and other socialists argued for more fundamental changes to the asymmetries of power and resources within society, advocating various reformist and revolutionary alternatives (Pritchard and Taylor 1978: 5).

Australian social work was affected by these changes and the critical consciousness they generated. Demands grew for the profession to engage in social policy advocacy, community organising and social movement activism. Consequently, by 1975, the President of the AASW, Whitlam Government advisor and Australia’s first woman professor of social work, Edna Chamberlain (1921-2005) was able to declare in 1975 against the conservative view, that ‘social justice ... rather than social functioning’ was the goal of social work (Cooper 2009: 146). Chamberlain was a moderate reformer however, compared with the radical social work that emerged.
Australian Services Union), which pursued 'industrial and social action' (Thorpe and Petrushena 1992: 181) for all welfare workers. Today SACS represents 24,000 welfare workers with a history of defending social programs and improving wages for its predominantly female, community-sector, workforce (Bottomley and Judge 2012), including a record 20-41 per cent pay increase in 2012 (ASU 2012).

Unionism, social movement activism and community organising opened up new fields of collectivist practice for Australian social workers in the 1970s. However, these practices proved difficult to sustain in the 1980s and 1990s when governments embraced neoliberalism, a renewed faith in markets to optimise social outcomes and then cut progressive social programs. In Australia, unlike the United States and Britain, the onset of neoliberalism was more gradual because the Hawke-Keating Labor governments (1983-1996) attempted to combine the opening to global markets (including deregulation of the labour market and wage restraint) with an expansion of social provisions in healthcare, childcare support, gender equity and Aboriginal land-rights. This left a contradictory legacy for Labor supporters with large numbers of manufacturing jobs destroyed and the socially marginalised distrusting both major parties. The succeeding Howard Liberal-National Coalition Government (1996-2007) expanded the neoliberal deregulation and privatisation of the economy (including social services) much further and cut the social wage for the disadvantaged, under the banner of ‘mutual obligation’ with new testing, surveillance and disciplinary regimes for those seeking assistance. As social policy analyst Jamrozik (2009: 84) said, there was a return to ‘the vision of a two-tier society of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor’ indicative of a ‘post-welfare state’.

Subsequent Australian Labor (2007-2013) and Coalition (2013-) Governments have not fundamentally altered this trajectory. The institutional dynamics of welfare provision are very different today from what the original radical social workers dealt with in the 1970s and radical practice has changed to deal with these challenges.

From Radical to Critical Social Work: Renewing Emancipatory Visions

Radical social work has evolved and this is not simply due to neoliberalism. It also changed through internal criticisms of its own analysis, such as Marxism's primary focus on class oppression and how this can overlook other forms of oppression based on gender, disability, age, sexuality and racialised identity (Ferguson 2008: 101). The resurgence of feminism and the women's movement in the 1970s both challenged and broadened the radical agenda by targeting patriarchal oppression in addition to capitalism. A Radical Women's Group (RWG) was formed by Victorian social workers in 1973 (Mendes 2009: 23). Linking personal experience with political structures they questioned sexist discrimination against women within their own predominantly female profession, particularly in leadership roles, and the treatment of their largely female service users. Feminism drew attention to the patriarchal confinement of women to the domestic sphere as wives and mothers in Australian history. Key social measures like the basic wage (1907) excluded women who were legally paid half the wages of men until the 1970s, and women were often sacked for becoming pregnant or married until such practices were outlawed in the 1980s. Feminist critiques of the disparities disadvantaging women in Australian society and tackling issues of particular concern for women (discrimination against pregnancy, sexual assault, maternity leave, women's health, childcare) slowly filtered into social work (Nichols 1977: 52-54; Marchant 1985: 41-42). However, by the 1980s gender inequality was widely recognised as a major form of structural oppression in need of social reforms and a distinctly feminist practice addressing women's issues emerged (Dominelli and McLeod 1989: 13). However, this too revealed its limitations in the face of critiques from Aboriginal and migrant women for its neglect of racial and ethnic discrimination. The issues of racial oppression and anti-racist practice provide ongoing challenges for social work (Briskman 2003; Bennett et al. 2013).

The recognition of differing forms of oppression has led to renovations within the radical/critical tradition. Canadian structural social work (Mullaly 2002: 196-216) has attempted to account for these intersecting oppressions with more inclusive lists of structural divisions in society. Others, however, have insisted on making one or more of the categories of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality or age central to their distinctive analysis. While there is a common anti-oppressive (Dalrymple and Burke 1995) and anti-discriminatory (Thompson 1992) theme in these approaches, it would be a mistake to conflate them or to attempt to solve all forms of oppression in the same manner.

In Australian social work, the radical spirit has been marginalised but never entirely abandoned. Inside Welfare disbanded in the late 1970s but its influence filtered into diverse struggles without any centralised organisation. In the 1990s, however, there emerged in Canada (Rossiter 1996) and Australia (Ife 1996: 127-151) a self-identified movement of ‘critical social work’, broadly inspired by neo-Marxist ‘critical theory’. Critical theory was the term used by the unorthodox German Marxists of the 1930s known as the Frankfurt School, who sought to recover the critical core of Marx's theory in opposition to both liberal capitalism and the state-socialist regimes that claimed Marx's legacy (Bronner 2011: 2-3). Critical theory has a broader notion of oppression than orthodox Marxism's class exploitation. It exposes multiple forms of domination, not only in economic relations but also in politics, culture, knowledge, media, entertainment and everyday life. More than this, critical theory aims to be practical, not simply interpreting the world but provoking critical consciousness to transform it for human freedom and social justice (Ife 1996: 133; Salas et al. 2010: 92).
Many critical social workers, especially in Australia and Canada, also combined postmodern and poststructural critiques with critical theory, under the banner of ‘critical postmodemism’ (Leonard 1997: 100-107; Pease and Fook 1999: 116-117). They do this because they find postmodern analysis offers a more nuanced appreciation of the complex and constantly shifting power dynamics of particular and local social settings and problems. In such contexts, it may be the case that there is no clear cut or fixed distinction between oppressors and oppressed or rather these identities can shift with the unfolding context. In such situations, universal and grand narratives of liberation risk being imposed in a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution that is not helpful. Today’s critical social workers, committed to just outcomes, must also deal with the demands of diversity and multiple perspectives, which they and their clients negotiate in the construction of problems and the possibilities for addressing them.

Looking back at the history of social work through the lens of struggles for social justice, there is an enduring legacy that stems from earliest radical traditions that continues to energise a range (modernist and postmodernist) of contemporary critical social work approaches. At its base the radicals sought to fundamentally change the power relationship between social workers and service users; collaboratively engaging with them as equal, fellow citizens; addressing their problems with explicit understanding of the social context. This radical conception of social work involved both (1) a rejection of the establishment social work and (2) the construction of something new that would faithfully serve their service-users’ interests both individually and as part of society. This rejection meant a refusal by social workers to accept the ‘top-down’ expert or social control role and to help demystify the welfare process with their clients, pointing out the social causes of their problems (Moreau 1989: 15). The construction of alternatives meant attempting to find ways to counter or change these social conditions while meeting an individual’s immediate needs.

Viewed in this way, despite enormous obstacles, many social and human service workers strive to imagine how the radical social work agenda can be pursued not just in overtly political movements, unions and community work but also in more conventional fields like hospitals, nursing homes, jails and government departments (Wagner 1990: 23; Fook 1993: 20-23). This is why Bob Mullaly insists that any critical or structural social work can and must be conducted both ‘outside and against’ and ‘within and against’ the dominant system: ‘using social work skills and techniques in such a way that we “demystify” it by discussing its origins, purpose ... and by encouraging service users to ask questions’ (Mullaly 1993: 174).

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this historical sketch, social work is a contested tradition. Since its birth in the late nineteenth century there have always been those who have emphasised treating individuals’ problems and perceived inadequacies on a case-by-case basis, where the aim is to adjust the individual to conform to social order. This remains the dominant paradigm in much mainstream social work today. But, there have also always been practitioners who emphasised the impact of various social divisions and inequalities on individuals’ lives and attempt to collaboratively change those conditions to address people’s needs (Drakeford 2002: 294; Mendes 2009: 17). This is the common heritage of all critical social work perspectives, which despite every attempt to marginalise them, continue to provoke diverse practices for social justice and human rights.

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