

# Reclaiming Social Work

## Introduction

In August 2006, along with other British social work academics, I was fortunate enough to attend the International Association of Schools of Social Work Conference in Santiago, Chile. The Conference was memorable for many reasons. The keynote speech at the opening ceremony, for example, was given by the recently elected President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet. Bachelet's presence at the Conference was powerful and symbolic, not so much because of her politics (which are less radical than those of other Latin American leaders like Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez), nor solely because she is the first woman to hold the office of president in Chile (though in a continent where notions of *machismo* are still influential, this is no mean feat). Rather, Bachelet's presence was particularly powerful because she is a survivor. Like many thousands of others, she, her mother and her father suffered horribly at the hands of the Pinochet dictatorship which overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende on 11 September 1973. All three were held at the notorious torture centre, the Villa Grimaldi, on the outskirts of Santiago. While she and her mother were released after an ordeal involving horrors which one can only imagine, her father, a navy admiral who was loyal to the elected government, died, like many others, at the hands of the torturers. When Bachelet spoke, therefore, about the importance of the social work profession and the struggle for human rights, there was an awareness amongst those present that this was no empty politician's rhetoric but that she was speaking from first-hand experience, both of the suffering she experienced and of the help she received.

Also memorable were the Conference contributions from the Latin American delegates. For several years, Latin America has been at the forefront of the global struggle against neo-liberalism, the ideology which tells us that everything – public services, the environment, life itself – should be subordinated to the requirements of the market and big business. That experience of struggle was reflected in many of the papers from Latin American social workers and social work academics, both in their willingness to employ the language of a radical Marxism (with the ideas of the Hungarian philosopher George Lukacs underpinning several contributions) and in their attempts to make connections between social

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work and the social movements in recent years, including the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, and the Piquiteros movement in Argentina.

For some of us, however, the most moving part of the whole week came on the final day, with a Human Rights trip organised by the Chilean Association of Social Workers. This began with a guided tour of the Villa Grimaldi, now a Garden of Remembrance to victims of the dictatorship. It continued to the small rural town of Paine where the thirty or so delegates met with the families of the seventy-nine local men who had 'disappeared' following the coup, due in part to their involvement in the land reforms introduced by the Allende government. The trip ended at the headquarters of the Chilean Association of Social Workers. Here, the walls are lined with photographs of (mainly young) social workers who had 'disappeared' or had been murdered by the military, with each room in the headquarters named after one of those who died that way. Social workers, the President of the Association explained, were particularly distrusted by the regime and a disproportionate number of them were tortured or murdered. In addition, social work education was downgraded during the years of the dictatorship and only recently has it become once more a university-based profession.

The experience of social workers under the Pinochet dictatorship was, thankfully, an exceptional one and in most respects, very different from the experience of most social workers in the liberal democracies of the West, where the risk of stress-related burnout is a more common occupational hazard than the risk of violence, imprisonment or torture. Nevertheless, the experience of those Chilean social workers connects with the current experience of social workers in Britain and elsewhere in two important ways. First, while 'Thatcherism' in Britain and 'Reaganomics' in the USA are often thought of as the first attempts to implement economic policies that opened up every area of life and society to market forces, in fact, as Susan George reminds us, the real test-bed of neo-liberalism was Chile. It was there, under the ideal conditions of the Pinochet dictatorship, that the group of economists known as the 'Chicago Boys' because they had taken their degrees at the most neo-liberal university economics department in the USA, swung into action, opening up the whole economy to privatisation, removing all social safety nets and impoverishing huge numbers of people (George, 2004: 20).

Since then, neo-liberalism has become the 'common sense' of most governments throughout the world, whether the ruling party is right-wing and conservative or, as in Britain, a Labour (or social democratic) Party whose role in former times was seen as being to defend working-class people from the harmful effects of these very same market forces. The promise of neo-liberalism was that it would create a more prosperous society, not only for those at the top, but also, as a result of wealth 'trickling down', for those at the bottom. In fact, as I shall argue in the early chapters of this book, the pursuit of neo-liberal policies in Britain, first under

Conservative governments and, since 1997, under New Labour, has created a much more unequal society, in which the lives of millions (including millions of children) are still blighted by poverty.

While those who rely on State-provided welfare services have suffered most as a result of such policies, neo-liberalism has also profoundly transformed the jobs of those who provide such services and the organisations in which they work. As Harris has shown in his important study of the 'social work business' in Britain, every aspect of social work has been profoundly affected by the imposition of a culture of managerialism and competition over the past decade and a half (Harris, 2003). As recent government-funded reports have shown, one consequence of that culture has been to create a profound dissatisfaction amongst social workers over what their jobs have become, a sense of a growing gap between their day-to-day tasks and the values which brought them into the job in the first place (Scottish Executive, 2006a).

Some flavour of how far that managerial culture has moved social work from its original aims and ideals can be gleaned from the following e-mail flyer sent out to social work staff by the trade journal *careandhealth* in March 2007, advertising its forthcoming training programme for managers:

#### **2007 Is The Year For Advanced Performance Management**

If you have not been trained in the latest advances in *Time Compression* and *Waste Elimination*, or if the words *Kaizen*, *Gemba*, and *Kanban* are unfamiliar, you need to re-tool your management skills to meet the demands of the next phase of service delivery. The Certificate in Advanced Performance Management' equips senior managers with the skills to achieve radical and tangible advances in the performance management of their organisations.

I am writing to remind you about *CareandHealth's* upcoming Management Training course – The Certificate in Advanced Performance Management – that will be commencing in a few weeks, so book now to ensure your place. This City & Guilds and CIPFA accredited course has been specifically designed to meet the needs of senior managers charged with leading the performance improvement of their organisations and sets new standards in developing performance management in health and social care. It will provide you with intensive and demanding training in leading edge tools and techniques that have proven success in world class organisations. Integrates Lean and Six Sigma with powerful new methodologies specifically tailored for the UK health and social care sector. This advanced course has been designed specifically for high-level experienced managers with the vision to achieve rapid service improvement and the drive to acquire the skills necessary to affect it. The course is open to experienced, senior performance managers wishing to further their skills with the latest advances, as well as those who have previously completed and passed *Care and Health's* Certificate in Performance Management course. After an intensive immersion in the latest tools and techniques, you will stand out amongst your peers. ([www.careandhealth.com](http://www.careandhealth.com))

Brave New World that has such managers in it!

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Paradoxically, however, as I shall argue in this book, in the dissatisfaction that this managerial culture has bred lie the seeds of hope for the future of social work, as well as the second point of connection with those Chilean social workers. For despite the ways in which social work in the UK and elsewhere has been undermined over the past twenty years, and castigated by government and media as a 'failing' profession, the belief that a concern for human rights should be at the core of social work and that social workers should be on the side of the poor and the oppressed, remains strong throughout the global social work community. It is a belief reflected, for example, in the influential definition of social work suggested by the International Federation of Social Workers ([www.ifsw.org.com](http://www.ifsw.org.com)) and one which is present, if often unacknowledged, in the day-to-day practice of many workers. In addition, as Cree and Davis have shown in their study of the views of social workers, service users and carers in the UK, the desire to 'make a difference', both to the lives of individuals and to the society in which we live, remains the main motivating factor for becoming a social worker (Cree and Davis, 2007). It is, above all, the frustration of these hopes, beliefs and desires by ideologies and policies which insist that the primary role of social workers is to 'manage' 'high-risk' families or individuals, to ration increasingly meagre services, and to collude in the demonisation of groups such as young people and asylum seekers which is giving rise to current discontent. Neo-liberalism in social work, in other words, is creating resistance. Moreover, since managerial policies undermine *all* forms of social work practice and values, 'traditional' as well as 'radical' or 'emancipatory', it is a dissatisfaction and a resistance which goes well beyond the ranks of a small number of politically committed individuals and embraces very large numbers of workers who might not think of themselves as 'political'.

That resistance has also been fuelled and reinforced by the emergence of two types of social movement. First, there have been social welfare movements such as the disability movement and the mental health users' movement which have challenged traditional models of relationships and services and which have also, in recent years, been at the forefront of the struggle against government attempts to reduce welfare spending. More significant in terms of overall impact, however, has been the global movement against neo-liberalism – the anti-capitalist or global justice movement – which has developed since the turn of the century and whose central slogan, that 'The world is not a commodity!', reflects the widespread feeling amongst many social workers that their practice should be driven by values of respect and social justice, rather than budgetary considerations (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). As I shall argue in Chapter 6, in the past, social work's commitment to social justice and social change has been strengthened through its contact with wider social movements. In the same way, social workers today can draw on the wider resistance to the domination of every aspect of life by money to recreate new forms of practice, while also re-discovering its own radical past.

These factors, then – dissatisfaction with what social work has become, the rise of new movements of service users and their allies, and the emergence of new global movements against neo-liberalism and war – are the ‘resources of hope’ which were initially identified by some of us in the Social Work Manifesto in 2004 (Jones et al., 2004), and out of which, as I shall argue in this book, a new engaged practice, rooted in social justice, can emerge.

## **Structure of the Book**

In Chapter 1, I argue that, despite Conservative hostility and New Labour ambivalence, social work has not only survived into the twenty-first century but has actually expanded, both in Britain and internationally. As radical critics foresaw, however, it has often done so in the form of a neo-liberal social work which places budgets and managerial priorities above social work values. This chapter begins the discussion of the possibilities for a different kind of social work, rooted in social justice, through consideration both of the new movements against neo-liberalism and war which have emerged in recent years, and through identifying some elements of the ‘radical kernel’ which have been present in social work since its inception.

Chapter 2 explores the promise and reality of the ideology which, for most of the past two decades, has been the common sense of governments throughout the world, regardless of the political party in power: neo-liberalism. Focusing mainly on the experience in Britain under New Labour since 1997, I shall examine the ways in which neo-liberal policies (often wrapped up in the language of the ‘Third Way’) have impacted on poverty, inequality and insecurity, categories which most users of social work services know only too well.

In Chapter 3, the focus narrows to explore the roots of New Labour’s oft-noted ambivalence to social work, and to examine the specific ways in which governments under former prime minister Tony Blair have sought to make professional social work ‘fit for purpose’. On the one hand, this will involve discussion of the ways in which the moral authoritarianism underpinning New Labour policies in areas such as youth justice and asylum clash with core social work values, on the other, consideration of three key elements of the modernisation agenda: managerialism, regulation and evidence-based practice.

A core objective of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 was the creation of a market in care, with the private sector playing a greatly increased role. Through consideration of the voluntary (or Third) sector, the private sector and individualised budgets in the form of direct payments, Chapter 4 explores the ways in which the provision of social care has been transformed since the early 1990s, and critically assesses the neo-liberal assumption that competition between service providers is the best guarantor of high-quality services.

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It is now common in discussions of service user involvement to distinguish between top-down, consumerist models, on the one hand, and democratic models, often associated with collective service user movements, on the other. In the first half of Chapter 5, I shall critically assess the argument, propounded by John Harris amongst others, that the potential of consumerist models for service user empowerment (or social development) has been understated. In the second half of Chapter 6, through discussion of the contribution made by the mental health service users' movement in the areas of worker/user relationships, new services and policy and legislative change, I shall suggest that it is to the collective discussions and activities of such service user movements that we should look in the first instance for ideas and strategies which can contribute to the development of genuinely empowering practice and services.

Chapter 6 explores the radical tradition in social work. While often identified exclusively with the movement which developed in Britain, Australia and Canada in the early 1970s, I shall show, drawing on examples from early British social work and from American social work in the first half of the twentieth century, that radicalism in social work has a much longer history. That said, the 1970s radical social work movement was of particular significance and the second half of this chapter will be given over to an assessment of its ideas and activities, as well as its legacy for social workers today. A core concern of this chapter will be to highlight the ways in which social work in the past has often been radicalised by social movements in the wider society.

One element of that legacy has been the emergence since the 1990s of critical social work, particularly in Australia and Canada. In Chapter 7, I shall discuss two models of critical social work: a *broad* model which, while critical of what it sees as radical social work's overemphasis on class and underemphasis on oppression, nevertheless, like its radical predecessor, recognisably belongs to a tradition with roots in modernist or Enlightenment assumptions; and a *narrow* model, based mainly on the ideas of postmodernism. While acknowledging the commitment of critical social work theorists of all hues to challenging oppression, I shall suggest that postmodernism fails to provide social work with a clear foundation for doing so.

Chapter 8 explores the ways in which growing opposition to the neo-liberal consensus of the past two decades is opening up spaces for the development of new, engaged forms of social work practice. One aspect of that opposition, albeit as I shall show a rather limited one, is the 'Happiness' movement which has emerged in recent years and whose central tenet is that consumerism does not provide a basis for satisfying living. Much more significant is the anti-capitalist or global justice movement, already referred to in Chapter 1. That movement, and its central assertion that 'The world is not a commodity!' finds a strong echo from within a social work profession shaped much more by budgets and competition rather

than by core values. Dissatisfaction with the dominance of financial and managerial priorities is, I shall argue, creating widespread resistance across very broad layers of social workers. If that dissatisfaction can be given voice and organisation, it may yet become an important resource in the creation of a different form of social work, rooted in social justice and more able to address the poverty, inequality and oppression which continue to be the lot of a majority of service users in the twenty-first century.

## ***A Profession Worth Fighting For?***

### ***Introduction: After Social Work?***

Throughout much of the world, the 1980s were tough years for those involved in fighting for social justice and social change. The 1960s and early 1970s had seen the emergence in many countries of powerful new social movements, against war in Vietnam and for the liberation of women, gays and black people, coupled with a resurgent trade union movement in Britain, France and elsewhere. The rise of these movements had led many to believe that real social and political change was on the global agenda (Harman, 1988; Kurlansky, 2004). In contrast, the 1980s saw the old ruling order re-establish itself in Britain, the USA and elsewhere, through the vehicle of a new, aggressive neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005). There was, of course, still resistance, both internationally and in Britain. Whether it was workers in Poland fighting to establish *Solidarnosc* – the biggest trade union in the world – in the early 1980s, the campaign against Margaret Thatcher's hated poll tax at the end of the decade, or the magnificent, and ultimately successful, struggle of trade unionists and activists in South Africa to overthrow the brutal apartheid regime, people continued to fight for change. Yet in the main, the social and political struggles of these years were often bitter and defensive attempts to hang on to some of the gains made during earlier periods, whether in the form of trade union rights or a woman's right to control her own body.

More than any other health or welfare profession, social work suffered from the shift in the political climate during these years. In the 1970s, social workers in Britain and elsewhere had begun to break from the narrow, individualised and often pathologising focus which had characterised much social work practice till then. The 1980s, in contrast, was a period of retreat. As the decade progressed, a combination of factors which included the rise of mass unemployment, a financial squeeze on social work spending and a hostile government and media intent on portraying social work as a 'failing profession' combined to reduce the scope for progressive practice (Clarke, 1993). Again there was resistance, and even some progress in social work education in the areas of anti-racist

and anti-oppressive practice (albeit of an increasingly 'top-down' nature and within a narrow context of regulation and control – Penketh, 2000; Langan, 2002). The growth of managerialism (or New Public Management), however, from the late 1980s onwards, underpinning the extension of market forces into social work, further squeezed the potential of social work to act as a force for social change and added to a sense of alienation amongst many front-line workers (Clarke and Newman, 1997; McDonald, 2006).

Given this climate, it is hardly surprising that a mood of despondency and pessimism should occasionally have affected some of those who earlier had been in the forefront of the development of more radical social work approaches. Jones and Novak, for example, writing in the *British Journal of Social Work* in 1993, suggested that

It would appear 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. (Jones and Novak, 1993: 211)

Further into the 1990s, Clarke, in a paper entitled 'After Social Work?' reflected on the ways in which managerialism and marketisation were fragmenting both social work organisations and the social work task, and posed the questions:

How can one struggle over what a 'client-centered' social work would look like when the client has been abolished and replaced by 'a customer'? How can commitments to 'anti-discriminatory practice' be articulated within a managerial agenda which is dominated by the quest for efficiency? The old points of leverage have been marginalised, to be replaced by corporate visions, competition and confusion. That multi-faceted dislocation matters both for those who practise social work and those who receive it. For both, the future looks bleaker after social work. (Clarke, 1996: 60)

Clarke's paper was extremely prescient. The intensification of managerialism under New Labour governments since 1997 has indeed meant that many social workers in the UK do now work in organisations with managers who have no background or training in social work. In the interests of 'joint working' and 'integrated services', social work departments have often been merged with other local authority departments, such as housing, and in some cases have been closed down altogether, with staff relocated into departments of education or health. The growth of the social care sector and the increasing individualisation of services is contributing to the process of de-professionalisation, both within the voluntary sector (or Third Sector, as it is now usually referred to) and within local authorities. Others, meantime, are relocated into call centres owned by private multinational companies like BT.

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Yet despite these changes, and despite a profound ambivalence and distrust towards social workers on the part of New Labour which has led to their exclusion from key welfare programmes (Jordan with Jordan, 2000), the profession has not disappeared, either in Britain or elsewhere. On the contrary, on a global scale, as Lorenz has noted:

Social work is very much in demand, enjoys a boom, represents a growth industry even in countries that ideologically would rather do without it. (Lorenz, 2005a: 97)

In part, this expansion is itself a reflection of these same political and economic processes discussed above – national, European and global – which are aimed at creating greater integration of markets and increased government regulation of professional education and practice (Penna, 2004). In the UK, for example, an expansion of social work education has resulted in part from the Bologna process of harmonising European social work education, which means that social work in the UK is now a graduate profession (Lorenz, 2005b). In addition, the development of new forms of governance under New Labour has given rise to a raft of new social work bodies, including the Social Care Councils, the Commissions on Social Care, the Social Care Institute for Excellence and its Scottish equivalent. In Scotland, *Changing Lives*, the Report of a major enquiry into social work commissioned by the Scottish Executive, is likely to give rise to major legislative changes, creating a new framework for the profession for the coming period (Scottish Executive, 2006a). Meanwhile, as noted by Lorenz, on a global scale it does appear that social work in one form or other is seen by governments as having a role to play within advanced market societies. The fact that social work schools are springing up rapidly in the newly marketised societies of Eastern Europe, and also China, suggests that the governments of these countries see a use for professional social work in situations of growing social and economic inequality and dislocation (Yip, 2007). It seems likely, then, that social work will survive, though the fact that it will often do so in a truncated and sometimes punitive form means that in itself, this is hardly a cause for celebration.

More importantly, however, in terms of the *form* in which social work survives, there has been a second development in the years since these articles were written which gives grounds for genuine hope, since in important respects it represents the beginnings of the ‘widespread revulsion against current trends and inequalities’ which Jones and Novak saw as the basis for social work’s re-emergence as a liberal, humane profession. The late 1990s saw the emergence of a powerful reaction against the neo-liberal version of globalisation which had become the common sense of most governments, both conservative and social-democratic, during that decade. For much of the past two decades, as the radical journalist George Monbiot observed, the great advantage of the neo-liberals had been that they had only one idea: that society should

subordinate all other concerns to the interests of big business (Monbiot, 2001: 5). It was that idea above all, however, that came under attack at the end of the decade. The turning-point in the development of opposition to neo-liberalism, the 'fork in the road' as the American anti-corporate campaigner Ralph Nader described it, came in the city of Seattle in November, 1999. There, 40,000 demonstrators, drawn from a very wide variety of constituencies, brought the proceedings of the World Trade Organisation to a halt and, in doing so, initiated a global movement which has since challenged neo-liberal governments and neo-liberal policies on every continent (Charlton, 2000; Danaher, 2001). Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Prize-winner and former Chief Economist at the World Bank, and a critic of the dominant version of globalisation, has explained the significance of this new movement:

Until the protestors came along, there was little hope for change and no outlet for complaints. *Some* of the protestors went to excesses; *some* of the protestors were arguing for higher protectionist barriers against the developing countries which would have made their plight even worse. But despite these problems, it is the trade unionists, students, environmentalists – ordinary citizens – who have put the need for reform on the agenda of the developed world. (Stiglitz, 2002: 9)

In the years which followed Seattle, this anti-capitalist movement (or global justice movement, as it is sometimes called) has grown and developed in four different, though connected, ways. First, there have been the demonstrations. Since 1999, each time the world's business and government elites, notably the World Trade Organisation and the G8 group of world leaders, have met to discuss ways in which the liberalisation agenda can be taken a stage further, their deliberations have taken place against the background of large mobilisations by angry protestors, drawn overwhelmingly from the country in which they are meeting (Callinicos, 2003). More than 300,000 protestors, for example, gathered in Edinburgh, Scotland in July 2005 to demand that the G8 leaders meeting in nearby Gleneagles 'make poverty history' (Hubbard and Miller, 2005).

Second, the movement has developed its own structures and discussion points in the form of the World Social Forum and Regional Social Forums, where the experiences of opposition to the free-market policies of the G8 and WTO can be shared and alternative policies proposed and debated. Since 2001 such gatherings, typically involving tens of thousands of participants, have regularly taken place in cities across the globe including Porto Alegre, Cairo, Mumbai, Florence, Paris and London (George, 2004).

Third, the influence of this movement, coupled with people's direct experience of neo-liberal policies, has fuelled mass movements against privatisation in many different countries and contributed directly and indirectly to political change. This is most obviously the case in Latin America, where struggles against the privatisation of basic utilities such

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as water and electricity have given rise to huge popular movements in countries like Colombia and Ecuador and elsewhere, as in Venezuela and Bolivia, that have led to the election of new radical governments (Ali, 2006). Meanwhile in Europe, opposition to the neo-liberal agenda has led to the creation of new political parties which, in several countries including Italy, Portugal, Britain and Germany, have gained parliamentary representation.

Finally, since 2003, the movement has been central to the development of an even bigger global social movement in opposition to the devastating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (as well as the ongoing occupation of Palestine by the Israeli state). Following the events of 9/11 in New York in 2001, there was a widespread assumption, voiced by the *New York Times*, that the global justice movement would wither away, unable to withstand the patriotic fervour engendered by George W. Bush's 'war on terrorism'. Instead, the movement rapidly developed in an anti-war direction, with many people easily making the connection between the economic policies of the world's most powerful states and corporations and their military policies, summed up in the popular slogan 'No blood for oil'. The result has been the biggest anti-war movement the world has ever seen, with 10 million people marching globally on 15 February 2003, including 2 million people on the streets of London (Murray and German, 2005). One indication of the extent to which this movement has shaped popular consciousness is the fact that the term 'imperialism', long associated with some of the more esoteric sects on the far left, has once again become a term of common use in describing the behaviour of the major powers. As one prominent critic of the wars of recent years has noted:

I used not to use the word imperialism. I thought young people wouldn't even know what it meant. Then Robert Cooper [formerly foreign policy adviser to Blair] writes a pamphlet in which he openly calls for what he describes as a new imperialism. Suddenly I find that everyone is using the words imperialism and anti-imperialism and I think that is a jolly good thing. If something looks like a duck and walks like a duck, the chances are it is a duck. That's exactly what we've got going now – a new imperialism. All sides are using its real name. (Galloway, 2003: 117)

### **Challenging Neo-liberal Social Work**

What might be the significance of this global movement, and this shift in popular consciousness, for those seeking to recreate a social work profession rooted in notions of social justice? First, without understating the extent to which neo-liberal ideas and policies continue to dominate the political landscape in Britain and in many other countries, the movement has been successful in challenging the notion that neo-liberal globalisation is the only show in town. One indication of the shift in ideas that has taken

place is that some of those who, less than a decade ago, were arguing that social democratic governments need not concern themselves overmuch with issues of inequality are now to be found arguing for a 'new egalitarianism' (Giddens and Diamond, 2005).

Second, as Thompson has argued (Thompson, 2002), social work in the past has been profoundly affected by its contact with social movements and the shifts in popular thinking which such movements bring about. This is most obviously true of Britain, Canada and Australia in the 1970s. In important respects, radical social work was a product of the great social movements of these years, notably the civil rights movement, the movement against the war in Vietnam, the women's movement and the struggles of trade unionists. On a smaller scale, in the 1980s and 1990s, 'new social welfare movements' such as the disability movement and the mental health users' movement have similarly exerted an influence on professional social work, reflected in the widespread acceptance of social models of disability and health. However, as I shall argue in Chapter 6, the links between social work and social movements go back much earlier than the 1970s and are not confined to the countries mentioned above. The ways in which the social movements of the twenty-first century – notably the anti-capitalist or global justice movement on the one hand and the anti-war movement on the other – can inform the development of a new, radical practice will be considered in Chapter 8.

Third, 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, sometimes referred to as New Public Management (NPM). McDonald identifies some of the key elements of NPM as being:

a shift of focus by public sector leaders from policy to management; an emphasis on quantifiable performance measurements and appraisal, the break-up of traditional bureaucratic structures into quasi-autonomous units dealing with one another on a user-pays basis, market testing and competitive tendering instead of in-house provision, strong emphasis on cost-cutting, output targets rather than input controls, limited-term contracts for state employees instead of career tenure, monetized incentives rather than fixed salaries 'freedom to manage' instead of personnel control, more use of public relations and advertising and encouragement of self regulation instead of legislation. (McDonald, 2006: 69)

One of the main effects of these changes has been to hugely reduce the possibilities for social workers to undertake direct work with service users. The desire to 'work with people', alongside the aspiration to 'make a difference' have historically been amongst the main reasons for people coming into social work. Yet as *Changing Lives*, the Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review in Scotland published in 2006,

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makes clear it is precisely these aspects of the job that have been undermined by the changes described above:

Working to achieve change is at the heart of what social workers do. Identifying needs and risks through assessment and developing and implementing action plans to address these will achieve nothing without an effective therapeutic relationship between worker and client . . . . Yet social workers consistently told us that it is this very aspect of their work which has been eroded and devalued in recent years under the pressure of workloads, increased bureaucracy and a more mechanistic and technical approach to delivering services. (Scottish Executive, 2006a: 28)

The social workers interviewed by Jones in one of the few studies to explore the experience of frontline social work in England in the year 2000 expressed very similar views:

We are now much more office based. This really hit home the other day when the whole team was in the office working at their desks. We have loads more forms which take time to complete. But we social workers also do less and less direct work with clients. Increasingly the agency buys in other people to do the direct work and we manage it. (Jones, 2004: 100)

One factor underpinning this shift has been the reduction of professional social work to care management, reflecting the introduction of a purchaser/provider split aimed at creating a market in social work and social care. Another factor creating worker dissatisfaction is the increasingly authoritarian climate in which workers are required to operate, particularly in the areas of asylum and youth justice. As another of Jones' respondents commented:

I was talking to a youth justice worker last week and she told me how much she loved her job until the recent changes. Now she hates it as they do less work with kids, have got to be more concerned with disciplining them and have to work with police officers and the like. It seemed to her that it was all based around a punitive approach and that Jack Straw [Labour minister] was as bad as Michael Howard [Conservative Minister]. Both seem to hate youngsters and seem more concerned with criminalising the kids who are seen to be of no use. (Quoted in Jones, 2004: 103)

What is significant about this dissatisfaction is that it appears to affect much wider layers of social workers than those who were influenced by radical social work ideas in the 1970s. The reason is that neo-liberal social work, to use Jones's phrase, undermines not only radical or structural approaches but also 'traditional' relationship-based social work. The weakness of professional social work organisation in Britain and the failure (until recently) of the main social work trade union to seriously engage with these 'professional' issues means that the dissatisfaction and unhappiness which exists has until now usually been expressed in individualised ways – through sickness, moving job or leaving the profession.

In Chapter 8, however, we shall return to a discussion of the ways in which that dissatisfaction might be collectively channelled into the construction of a new engaged practice.

### **A Profession Worth Fighting for?**

Both implicit and explicit in the arguments of these radical critics of current trends within social work is the view that the disappearance of a social work profession rooted in social justice would be a defeat for those committed to challenging oppression and inequality. Conversely, it would be an encouragement to those in positions of power who seek to blame the poor and oppressed for their own poverty and for the problems they experience (see also Jones et al., 2004). That view, it has to be said, is not a self-evident one. For much of its history, social work has been seen by the State – and experienced by those on the receiving end of social work services – primarily as a form of social control, with social workers the ‘soft cops’ who differ from ‘hard cops’ only in the technologies that they employ. At its most extreme, that social control remit over the past century has allowed for the involvement of social workers in Australia in the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and the placement of these children in white institutions or with white families (Briskman, 2003); social workers in 1930s Nazi Germany employing the transferable skills of ‘assessment and counselling’ to sort out those who were not seen as part of the nation’s ‘healthy stock’ and helping them to ‘come to terms emotionally with measures to which they had been subjected... i.e. institutionalisation, sterilisation or deportation’ (Lorenz, 1994: 68); and closer to our own times, the expectation (and statutory requirement) that social workers in Britain will be involved in removing children from the families of asylum seekers who have been refused leave to remain (Hayes and Humphries, 2004). On a more day-to-day level, the statutory powers of social workers to remove children from their families, coupled with their roles of assessment, rationing of scarce resources and surveillance of poor families or ‘risky’ individuals means that they have frequently been viewed with fear and mistrust by the poorest sections of the population, and are seen in a much less positive light than other welfare professionals (Donzelot, 1980). Movies such as Ken Loach’s *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), or Holman’s collection of writings by parents in a deprived area of Glasgow highlight the ambivalence which many poor, working-class people feel towards social workers (Holman, 1998).

For much of its history, it is these controlling features of social work that have been to the fore. What is also true, however, is that historically, social work, to a greater extent than other health and social care professions has, from time to time, been an *awkward* or *troublesome* profession. It is a profession whose members have sometimes sided with their clients against the State and challenged dominant ideologies in a way that other professionals have not.

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If social work is mistrusted by its clients, it is no less true that it has often been mistrusted by the State. In this respect, as Butler and Drakeford suggest, 'social work is heir to a radical, emancipatory and transformative ideal, or at least, it has the potential to promote such an ideal' (Butler and Drakeford, 2001: 16). Some sense of this potential for change is evident in the quote with which Cree and Davis end their 2007 study of service users' and workers' views of social work. For Sarah, a care-leaver who is about to begin her social work degree programme:

I'm really passionate about social work – we *can* make a difference and inform practice and legislation. I know the difference social services made in my life, and I think I could do it, and do it really well. I know there's a lot of regulations and a lot of pressure – but I really want to do it and I think that I can make a difference. (Quoted in Cree and Davis, 2007: 159)

It is this 'radical kernel' of social work, the inherent tension between its controlling role on the one hand and its potential to be a force for social change and social justice on the other, that make social work different and social workers more than just 'soft cops'. In Chapter 6 I shall explore the nature and history of this radicalism in more detail. Here, however, I shall identify some of the elements which make social work, at least potentially, a troublesome profession and a profession worth fighting for.

### *A Site of Ideological Conflict*

The most general explanation for the radicalism lurking within social work lies in its location within capitalist society. Since its inception, social work has acted as a prism which mirrors – and often distorts – the most fundamental divides and antagonisms of the society in which we live. Precisely because of the human material with which it deals, it is a site of ideological conflict. Its concern is to make sense of, and respond to, the ways in which human beings relate to each other as family members and as citizens; with questions of individual responsibility versus public responsibility; and with the role of the family as both heaven *and* hell. It is concerned with 'difficult' or 'risky' behaviours, and with the reasons for these behaviours. It is concerned with the ways in which inequalities and oppressions impact upon the psyches and the relationships of human beings and the cumulative impact of these. It is, in C. Wright Mills' famous phrase, concerned with 'public issues' and private troubles' and the relationship between them (Mills, 1959/2000). Given the essentially contested nature of its subject matter, for this reason, if for no other, it would be strange if social work itself did not reflect the contested nature of issues.

### *Guilt by Association*

Since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, social work has had the particular societal mandate of going amongst the poor, and working

with the poor, but with the clear injunction 'not to go native' (the analogy with Christian missionary work in the remotest parts of the Empire is, of course, exact and early social work was often seen explicitly in these terms: Stedman-Jones, 1984). Jones refers to the ever-present danger of social workers becoming 'over-involved' with their clients as the problem of 'contamination' and sees the development of social work education as being part of a strategy to arm budding social workers against this danger (Jones, 1983). The dilemma this involved was evident from the earliest days of the Charity Organisation Society (COS). The Society's philosophy, which finds many echoes in the current moral authoritarianism of New Labour, will be discussed in Chapter 3, but it is worth noting here that even the strong, free-market ideology of the COS could sometimes be challenged by the contact of COS volunteers like Beatrice Webb with the realities of poverty:

it was difficult to see how such [COS] principles could be 'made consistent with the duty persistently inculcated of personal friendship with the poor'. (Lewis, 1995: 56)

That threat became most pronounced during the 1970s with the advent of radical social work, when many social workers explicitly rejected the dominant explanations of the roots of their clients' problems in favour of structural explanations which led them to seek ways of engaging in joint action with clients against the policies of local and central government. However, even during periods when social workers have been much less politically involved, the simple act of 'friendship' with service users who are being demonised by government or the tabloid press, such as asylum seekers or young people in poor areas, can be seen as evidence of 'soft-headedness' or more recently, 'political correctness'. For many social workers, such guilt by association may be seen as 'coming with the territory', as the price to be paid for working in an ethical manner which only demonstrates respect for clients. In an article on political correctness and social work, Douglas cites the case of Alison, a social worker with Barnet Social Services, who

'sees the lack of resources as more relevant than ideology' . . . . She sees no evidence of political correctness in her workplace. In her view, social workers have a responsibility to defend the rights of groups like asylum seekers who are treated poorly and with considerable prejudice at times by other professionals like benefits agency staff. If social workers are politically correct, that is fine if it helps to mitigate hostility to vulnerable groups. (Douglas, 1999: 46)

### *Troublesome Values*

As the comments from Alison suggest, a further source of social work's awkwardness lies in its value base. This applies most obviously to the more radical social work values developed through the 1970s and 1980s,

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which became the basis of anti-oppressive practice (Shardlow, 1989; Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1994) but increasingly, it also includes more traditional social work values, such as respect for persons. As the demonisation and scapegoating of particular social groups, such as young people and asylum seekers, have continued and even intensified under New Labour governments (Butler and Drakeford, 2001), even these traditional values can begin to take on a radical edge and can force social workers to begin to challenge existing policies and practices. That 'being treated like a human being' was the thing homeless people valued most about the services they received was a key finding of research into homelessness and mental distress in Glasgow (Ferguson et al., 2005; more generally on the importance of respect, see Sennet, 2003). Conversely, the implications for mental and physical health of *not* feeling respected is evident in the following comment from an Afghani asylum seeker 'dispersed' to one of the most deprived areas of Glasgow:

When people look down on you, when they don't respect you as a human being, then you feel very belittled. We think that people don't respect us like human beings. We have a responsibility to be part of the society but if people don't want us to be part of society, then we feel very segregated, very isolated. That affects us psychologically and mentally because we feel that nobody needs us, they don't respect us like any other human being. (Quoted in Ferguson and Barclay, 2002)

Another traditional social work value which finds itself increasingly at odds with dominant ideas is a belief in people's capacity to change. Several writers have noted the shift in social policy over the past two decades from a discourse of rehabilitation, which emphasised people's capacity to change, to a discourse of risk management which emphasises risk minimisation and control (Parsloe, 1999; Webb, 2006). That discourse is now dominant within a number of areas, including mental health (particularly in relation to people with the diagnosis of personality disorder) as well as criminal justice (particularly in relation to sex offenders).

### *Emphasis on the Social*

In contrast to theories of society which locate the roots of social problems *within* the individual, most social work theories, including most mainstream theories, have tended to emphasise the interaction *between* the individual and society (or 'environment'). 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).

## Making Sense

Gee, Officer Krupke, we're very upset;  
 We never had the love that ev'ry child oughta get.  
 We ain't no delinquents, We're misunderstood.  
 Deep down inside us there is good!

(*West Side Story*, Sondheim, 1957)

Sondheim's witty parody on the perceived tendency of social workers to seek to explain every form of human behaviour, no matter how dreadful or anti-social, has been mirrored in recent years in a much less amusing discourse which eschews such explanations in favour of a harsh moralism which seeks primarily to blame and punish. Its founding credo might well be the (then) Conservative Prime Minister John Major's response to the death of the two-year-old child Jamie Bolger at the hands of two other children, when, in an interview with the *Mail on Sunday*, he suggested that society needs to 'understand a little less and condemn a little more' (*Mail on Sunday*, 21 February 1993). 'Understanding' in this case should, of course, have meant acknowledging not only the dreadful upbringings experienced by the two children who had killed Jamie but also the fact that the murder of children by other children is extremely rare and that the numbers have not risen in recent years (Ferguson, 1994). The way in which this shift from 'depth' explanations of social problems, in the sense of explanations which look for meanings, to 'surface' explanations whose primary aim is to manage and control (Howe, 1996) will be explored later in this book. What is true, however, is that since its inception, a central concern of social work has been to *make sense* of people's behaviour, and to explore the *meanings* of clients' lives and relationships (England, 1986; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990). This is not, of course, an inherently radical activity. In the early days of social work, the main purpose of 'making sense' of clients' behaviour was to determine eligibility for charitable relief; while at other times, the framework for making sense has been a narrow individualistic one which precluded a whole range of possible explanations which emphasised wider societal processes (Mayer and Timms, 1970). Nevertheless, the recognition by almost every current in social work (other than, perhaps, some behavioural schools) that looking at alternative explanations of behaviour, 'hypothesising', is an essential part of the process of social work assessment and intervention is a given within most mainstream social work approaches (Hughes, 1995; Milner and O'Byrne, 2001). It is for that reason that a broad, in-depth knowledge base, which since the 1970s has included sociology and social policy as well as developmental psychology, should continue to be a core part of social work education (Simpson and Price, 2007). Part of the current impatience with social work stems from a dominant discourse which would prefer not to try to make sense of 'difficult' behaviours (not least since this might raise wider questions about the society in which we live)

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and rely instead on 'common sense' to locate the blame within 'dangerous' individuals or 'risky' families.

### *Holistic Practice*

The recognition, drawn in part from a sociological knowledge base, that the roots of service users' problems often lie not with the individual or the family but in oppressive social structures and disempowering social processes pointed to the need for holistic responses which address service users' problem at whichever level seems most appropriate, be it individual, group, community or structural. Despite their limitations, it was this recognition which gave the ecological or systems approaches that came to the fore in the 1970s whatever radical potential they possessed (Leonard, 1975).

Ironically, thirty years after that 1970s' critique of the dominance of social work practice by one method, psychosocial casework, like community work, has also been eclipsed by the domination since the early 1990s of another US import, care management (Schorr, 1992), as the preferred vehicle for the introduction of market forces into social work (Harris, 2003). Rediscovering and re-valuing the full range of social work methods which permit a genuinely holistic response would seem to be an essential task in reclaiming social work.

### **Conclusion**

Not all of the features described above are unique to social work. Other professions espouse similar values, emphasise the importance of process and relationship, draw on a knowledge base or use similar approaches. Social work, however, is more than the sum of its parts. The combination of a value base of respect, empowerment and social justice; the emphasis on a relationship between worker and service user founded on trust and non-judgemental acceptance; a knowledge base which embraces both developmental psychology and also an understanding of social structures and social processes; and a repertoire of methods ranging from individual counselling to advocacy and community work; all these give social work a holistic perspective which makes it unique amongst the helping professions. That perspective is reflected in the definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers in 2000:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. ([www.ifsw.org.com](http://www.ifsw.org.com))

It is also that combination of elements which gives social work the potential to be an *awkward* profession, as well as a profession worth preserving. Like Jones, Powell also argues that

Social work's capacity to survive depends upon its legitimacy as an authentic 'humanising voice' rather than simply a conservative profession conveniently wrapping itself in the rhetoric of the market. (Powell, 2001: 16)

Later in this book, I shall explore some of means by which social work might rediscover its humanity, as well as its radicalism. Before then, however, it is necessary to examine in more detail the philosophy, policies and practice of the ideology that has shaped the experience of most of the world's peoples for more than a decade, as well as having created the current crisis in social work: neo-liberalism.