

THE IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS INHERENT IN SOCIAL WORK: THEIR RELEVANCE

TO TEACHING *

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**Recent (2006) editorial comment by the Author has been added in Ariel font.

Abstract

The, Australian social welfare system consists of a confusing array of programs. Politicians and administrators claim that the ultimate aim is to provide a comprehensive caring network which will ensure that those in greatest need are helped. Welfare programs purport to support motherhood, the family, the aged, youth, widows, orphans and other worthy groups. There is a generally accepted assumption that in this country we are moving to abolish poverty.

in effect many welfare policies reinforce inequalities, destabilise families, are riddled with stigma, divide the workers from the workless, maintain the poor in poverty, assist the service providers avoid poverty, and because they interfere with necessary structural adjustments to the work force ill serve the interests of capital.

Arguing from a socialist humanist perspective (informed by some recent feminist literature and through involvement in Aboriginal issues) I wish to look at some welfare debates and point to the role of social work teachers in the struggle for a more sane, equal and fair society - one which might provide the base to challenge the racist, classist, sexist, urbanist and ageist welfare system on the way to an attack on capitalist social relations.

Before we start on this paper I would like you just to spend a minute thinking about why we are engaged in the process of training students in social welfare. Are we training them to become:

soft cops; activists; ideological purists

future tutors; husbands and wives of the bourgeois

malcontents; helpers

departmental operators; administrators

cool out caseworkers

Richard Nies may be content to train SAITerist** and Jim Ife WAITerist** hopefully others are training them to become:

Empowers; whistle blowers

urban guerillas; or at least urbane social critics.

** Richard Nies was , at the time, head of social work at SAIT, the South Australian Institute of Technology and ** Jim Ife was, at the time, head of social work at WAIT, the Western Australian Institute of Technology.

We know that by the time most students have passed through our courses we have trained or is it drained their sense of empathy with the poor out of them, we've taught them to distance themselves from the horror of poverty through non-emotional involvement and to be quite about it - confidentiality.

But just sometimes a few students get through the courses with their sense of anger intact. I wish we provided courses which trained students to understand other people's plight and to do something about poverty and misdistribution, courses which sharpened their anger and showed them how to tear down the existing system on the way to building a better more equal world.



Throughout this paper I shall be speaking of the state and I will be concentrating upon the repressive aspect of state intervention in the lives of poor people but I don't want to give the impression that I conceive of the state as a unidimensional repressive apparatus. The state supplies benefits and protection to the powerless, at the same time it controls them. [1]

In much the same way as the basic physics of light can be understood either from the perspective of light as wave theory or light as a particle, and that a fuller understanding is often obtained using both explanations of the behaviour of light because light sometimes behaves as if it were a particle and at other times as if it were a frequency: the contradictions within the state manifest themselves in different ways. Some writers have conceived of the state as a superstructure [2] and others have seen it as a system of relationships. [3] When I speak of the state I am referring to both the superstructure (its physical presence and hierarchical service systems) and the system of relationships. The relations influence the simultaneously affect the system of relations. Perhaps more clearly than in any of its other forms the state or that part of it called welfare state expresses these contradictions most clearly. Those of us who bled through the years of Fraser's** fascism witnessed cutbacks in welfare provisions. Aborigines in particular suffered massive expenditure cuts during the reign of those born to rule, whilst they paraded on the world stage as the bearers of the white man's burden in Southern Africa. We now have a reformist social democrat government in power, but even if the Hawke Government claimed to be doing so, "it is not good enough to talk simply of I 'restoring the Welfare State' Too often the Welfare State reflects and feeds the class, sexual and racial inequalities we need an alternative social policy to complement and build on the alternative economic strategy. " [4] or strategies.

Need or the satisfaction of need has been the justifying ideology of the welfare state [5] and I would like now to quickly review the meaning of need but before doing that I'll explain what I mean by charity. Charity is a concept derived out of a belief system started by some Jewish bloke who began the first cost cutting exercise at excutions when he agreed to cross his legs because the legionnaires only had three nails. I am indebted to Helen Creed who pointed out that if he had clasped his hands they'd have only needed two nails. There would be nobody here today who is not aware that the social work profession grew out of the charity organisations of the last century. We all know agencies where the charity tradition is alive and well which employ social workers. We realise that integral to the helping professions is the concept of doing good. Yet we often get well paid for our work. It really is a case of "doing well by doing good." I realise that this phrase was used by Tom Learer, the American comedian, to describe the old dope peddler who gave free samples to school kids, but it also seems to have widespread applicability to the social work profession.

**Malcolm Fraser was Prime Minister of Australia 1975 – 1983.

NEED

The concept of assisting people in need is predicated upon the liberal desire to assist those having difficulty coping with the diswelfares caused by market forces. The liberal view of need embodies a "passive" conception which is closely interrelated to traditional worthy categories and administratively defined wants.

[6]

The liberal desire to assist all those "in need" is in effect a determination to refuse assistance to all those whose circumstances do not fit into some societally approved, arbitrarily defined (albeit undeclared and somewhat flexible) set of rules. Such a concept of need is a far call from the way that socialists conceive of need.

The clearest expression of the socialist conception of need is found in Engles** famous dictum "from each according to his (or her) ability, to each according to his (or her) needs". Need, as described in much socialist theory, is difficult to translate into material terms because the concept has generally been taken over unreflectively from Marxist/Leninism and many socialists consider that real needs will only be addressed after there has been a progression through the phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Need in this sense is seen in utopian terms. But socialist practice has meant that it has been necessary to satisfy basic needs by historically specific, ideologically specific, emotionally specific, and economically specific means. In a true state of communism the individual would satisfy his or her needs within a context of the collective definition of wants and where the individual in satisfying his or her needs would at the same time be striving to satisfy all. [7]

Until we reach such a state of bliss, socialists have to content themselves with a definition of recognized need (the acceptability being defined by the state) - but socialists do demand that such definitions of need are clearly spelt out, that they are universal and are widely publicised, e.g. aged pensions. Socialists see such a process as a step towards the ideal. Bob Deacon makes the point that "under socialism what constitutes human needs and how they are to be satisfied becomes for the first time the central question of politics." [8]

The relationship between needs, services and the family is a very close one in the social work field. Often the justification given for recognising and responding to particular needs is that such services are necessary to support the family. The use and abuse to which the family is put in the social welfare industry suggests it could be helpful to make a few passing comments about it.

**It was in fact Marx who wrote this in : Marx, K. "Critique of the Gotha Programme"

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>

The Family

A lot of social work teaching, even some of the more progressive, stressed the importance of the family, kids we know are better off in most families than in most institutions. The whole decarceration debate is centred on such thinking. But we do not ask at what cost to caring parent (who are overwhelmingly women). If the State is really concerned about the rights of and well being of children, why does it give so little to support children in their own homes and so much to support children in institutions. If the family is so important why is it that the state usually intervenes only after it breaks down? Why is so much of the social work literature dealing with family related to the stereotypical nuclear family when we all know that the stereotypical nuclear family constitute something like 20% of the households with children in this society?* Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the society avoids or limits its responsibilities for children by relying on the family and often in so doing oppresses those family members who are left with the responsibility of caring for children. The myth of the stereotypical nuclear family provides a useful support for capitalist patriarchy. That is why activists have suggested that the "struggle against sexism and the many aspects of the family that seem to us constraining and deforming is an essential part of the struggle against the 'state form'." [9]

The Workers

There is no major structural distinction between the lady bountiful distributing largesse and the professional caseworker helping a client maximise his or her innate potential. The professionalisation of welfare ensures that the workless are devalued in the presence of a paid professional.

There is a major segmentation in our society between workers and workless and the welfare industry, with the exception of the Family Income Support and family allowances, is structured in such a way as to reinforce that divide. The terms employee and "client" appear at times to be mutually exclusive categories.

I want to look at the effect that the exclusion of low paid workers from the benefits of the welfare industry has had in holding back more progressive advances in the welfare state. The average man or woman on mean (no pun intended) wages is aware of the fact that their income is not far above some welfare beneficiaries. The Henderson 1966 poverty line was set a little above the then minimum wage. [10]

* Footnote ASW Impact March 1984 p12 Man and Woman households with dependent children. 1971 - 30.55% 1981 - 28.64%

** In 2006 it is now possible to gain some assistance from the tax system in instances where a licensed Nanny is employed. This assistance goes to highly paid workers. There is also a means tested child care subsidy which assists low paid workers.

These low wage workers are, well aware that everyone else in on the take but being PAYE taxpayers they don't have much room to manoeuvre. Social work lecturers at this conference are writing off their expenses against their tax. But if our low wage man, lets call him Bob, has a wife Heather and they decide that Heather should go to work, then they know that it will cost them \$1500 over the next year for child care for each preschool child and they can't claim that on tax* nor can they claim fares to work - yet we can claim the cost of the fares to this conference because we claim it is necessary for our employment.

Bob and Heather have been hearing about the Bottom of the Harbour and Cherry Picking tax scams. The lawyer he saw last week had just come back from a weeks holiday in Hong Kong, in fact everyone who worked in the legal office went on that yearly junket. The bloke who built the spare room on their house wanted to be paid in cash. Heather's sister has never had it so good since her old man left, she gets the supporting parents benefit and has a new boyfriend. The house next door is full of young people, most of them are on the dole, who never seems to go to work, and seem to coincide their late parties with those nights when he's got an early morning shift. When an interviewer knocks on Bob's door and asks him what he thinks about people on welfare it is of little surprise to find that the interviewer, after deleting the expletives, can codify his answer in the square "feels they are getting too much". Do we lump him with the Stephen Lushers* of the world or do we try to link the tax and social security systems together and work to introduce processes which eliminate fraud at both ends? Wouldn't this be a slight improvement over the present system which discriminates against the honest and rewards the cheats. Is there any justification for having a tax system which can't make the rich pay any tax and 86% of income tax is paid by PAYE earners.

The working class pay for the social security system and yet low paid workers are prevented from obtaining benefits from that system. It is therefore hard to convince workers to forgo wage increases to extend the welfare system.

A Guaranteed Minimum Income, integrated with the tax system, plus increased surveillance of tax avoiders, particularly if combined with effective wealth and capital gains tax would create the situation where by low paid workers as well as the workless would obtain benefits from the state and that would lessen workers-resistance to improvements in the welfare state. But we have a social welfare industry which would rather concentrate on the very poor and leave the issues affecting low income earners to one side.

** Stephen Lusher was a conservative Federal politician who spent a deal of time waging verbal assaults on unemployed people.

Poverty:

We need to move away from a concern with poverty and begin to address the real issue of equal and/or equitable distribution of wealth and income. Adam Jamrozik's 1984 ANZAAS paper makes the point at least for Sydney that inequalities of average household income between different local government areas was only of the order of 2 to 1, that inequalities of wealth were of the order of 9 to 1. [11] Australia wide the average income of the top 10% of individuals is 18 times greater than the average income of the bottom 10%. [12]

As long as we tie our thinking to the issue of the alleviation of poverty (in Pat Tulloch's term "poverty engineering") then we are automatically trapped by two constraints:

- (1) We are forced to conceive of the alleviation of poverty in terms of crumbs from the table - the charity debate;
- (2) Our time is taken up in deciding what constitutes poverty – in arguments over whether one artificial poverty line is better than another. The Fraser government provided us with a perfect, though expensive, example of that when they instructed the Social Welfare Policy Secretariat to find out what poverty was. Their report entitled Report on Poverty Measurement determined they could not measure poverty.

Redistribution:

There are some real obstacles to redistribution in Australia and many of them hold senior tenured positions in the schools of social work I know one shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but I will because they have one real advantage over the moribund. The dead can't sue for libel yet. Though if Gareth Evans* has his way they will still be able to for three years after doctors have managed to rip what parts they want from the skeleton, the undertaker has got his cut, and the social worker has completed bereavement counselling.

Tom Brennan, one time Head of the Social Work Department, at the University of Sydney said "the social services should not be used as political tools. They are not designed to) redistribute income nor should they specifically preserve the status quo. They provide a line below which people are not allowed to fall". [13] Just in case someone is going to claim useless reactionary old fools have a right to one stupid statement I refer you to his article in Mendelsohn's Social Welfare: Selected Papers.

** Gareth Evans was Attorney General at the time.

Now let's return to the Bulletin article for it represents the sort of lies which in social work academe sometimes pass for scholarship. The suggestion that the social security system provides a line below which no-one falls is crap. The holes in the safety net are there and they're there for a reason: to force compliance of the workless, particularly the unemployed, dependent women and Aborigines. The only accurate statement in the whole quote is when Brennan says the social services "are not designed to redistribute income". The working class pays for its own welfare services because there has always been too little political will to force the rich to pay their taxes. If you are serious about changing the welfare system towards a more equitable one then it is important to seek out the reactionary members of staff and confront them - if they don't change - expose them for the fascists they are. After that you can start on the fence sitters. After all you'll be doing them a favour because if you let them remain fence sitters all they'll get is splinters up their arse.

Expose the System

I don't want to depreciate the efforts of those of us who spend a lot of our time teaching students to understand the existing system or the historical basis for the programs which now operate, but if that is all we do then we fail to help students to see what possibilities exist to change current welfare programs. A significant part of Marxist analysis relies on placing processes in their historical as well as materialist context. But any critical appreciation of social processes is dependent; upon the depth of explanation of the ideological as well as the physical manifestations of events. The "objectified" historicism of social events makes unintelligible the underlying ideologies it reifies the past and weakens current analysis.

Perhaps I should give an example of what I mean. As a student I was told that the existing welfare system grew out of the poor law administration in England and that somehow we arrived at a phase where along with the South Sea Island Poms** we became "the social laboratory of the world" - we had created "socialism without theory". I never quite got to understand how the transition occurred.

Then a couple of weeks later someone told me about the Bismarkian social insurance programs of Germany in the 1880's. But I did not tie the two systems together; no-one pointed out to me the underlying unity between laboratory of the world and Bismarkian social insurance; it was not until some years later that I realised that both systems underlay the benefit-control nexus. No-one bothered to explain how it was that Aborigines and Asians were excluded from all social security payments until 1942 when some became eligible for unemployment benefit, or why it took until the 1960's before Aborigines began to get pensions and benefits on similar terms to whites.

** Colloquial name for New Zealanders

There was no discussion of the fact that though the state paid more women than men, that it "was often a more jealous husband than the man they'd left". *

There was little acknowledgement neither of the plight of rural people nor of the way that the young and the old were often discriminated against in social policy. Now, of course things have changed, and we all know that it is racism, sexism, ageism and urbanism which are the underlying ideologies which result in the segmentation of welfare recipients and that these ideologies added to classiest values result in the division between the workers and the workless.

Now that we all have an understanding of the major ideological forces informing the welfare debate in this country, we need to confront our past reluctance to look beyond superficial explanations of the Australian Welfare state.

The Lack of Debate

An interesting difference between the Australian social welfare scene and its British and American counterparts has been the relative absence of detailed ideological debate here. Britain has had its Beverages, Laskis, Crosslands and Titmuss' on one side and conservatives on the other. In America there were the New Dealers and the old Republicans. In both these countries a very real divide separated the opposing ideological forces during the 1930's and 1940's.

In Australia, the State undertook responsibility for income maintenance earlier, and with the exception of the social insurance/non-,contributory wrangle there was general agreement that the aged, invalid, then widows and finally the unemployed were worthy and should somehow be assisted, the arguments centered around how much rather than why we paid income maintenance. Both major political groupings happily excluded Asiatics, aliens and Aborigines.

Daniel Bell in his end of ideology thesis argued that in America and Britain there was a merging of ideological perspectives in the post industrial, era of the 1950's [14]. In Australia the debate had not really begun although the first signs, of emergence from the stultifying Menzies period were starting to become obvious in the Aboriginal Land rights and supporting mothers campaigns of the late 1960's and early 1970's. By then the Vietnam War, Civil Rights and welfare campaigns had successfully challenges Bell I s end of ideology thesis, in the United Kingdom and the United States.

*This concept was first used by Carol Glassman "Women and the Welfare System" in Morgan R, (ed) Sisterhood in Powerful, Vintage, New York 1970

The importance of this point for Australian social welfare lies in recognising the ease with which we have avoided coming to terms with the underlying ideological features which structure our welfare services. The discussions get bogged down in party political factionalism at one end and the complexities of administrative minutiae at the other thereby ignoring the central arguments which would allow an understanding of the reasons we have income maintenance payments at all. This has two effects, firstly it allows the continuance of the conservatising adhocery which passes for social policy and secondly it mystifies the failure to confront the maldistributive nature of the Australian economy [15]. The result is we have a social welfare system which ignores the financial needs of many of our poorest citizens because equity and/or equality are excluded from consideration.

One does not need to be a futurologist to have a conception of improvements which might be actualised in social welfare. The existing criticisms provide the directions for future changes. To take just one example, there are over 1,000 different eligibility tests for welfare services provided directly or indirectly by the state. This does not take account of minor discretionary decisions, such as, whether the Cunamulla CWA will assist or refuse assistance to the Aboriginal unmarried (in the Christian sense) mother of six whose humpy was bulldozed by the local council last week.

If it is not possible for people who teach welfare to know and understand all the welfare programs which exist in Australia, let alone the various detailed eligibility tests, then poor people, with little education have no chance of understanding what they are entitled to. Just making the welfare system simple enough so that poor people could understand it would be a major improvement.

I would like to leave you with one final thought as to how we might set about improving the existing system.

Accountability

During the last two years of the Whitlam Government, evaluators of social welfare programs started to appear. The years of Fraser's fascism saw them proliferate like rabbits, they left a few minor programs unravaged but virtually ignored evaluating the major income maintenance programs. The reason for this is clear - if evaluators had been let loose to look at the failure of the incorrect maintenance programs to deliver stigma free welfare in an efficient manner, in a way clearly understood by the recipients, based on equity considerations then the evaluators would have actually been evaluating the performance of the government of the day.

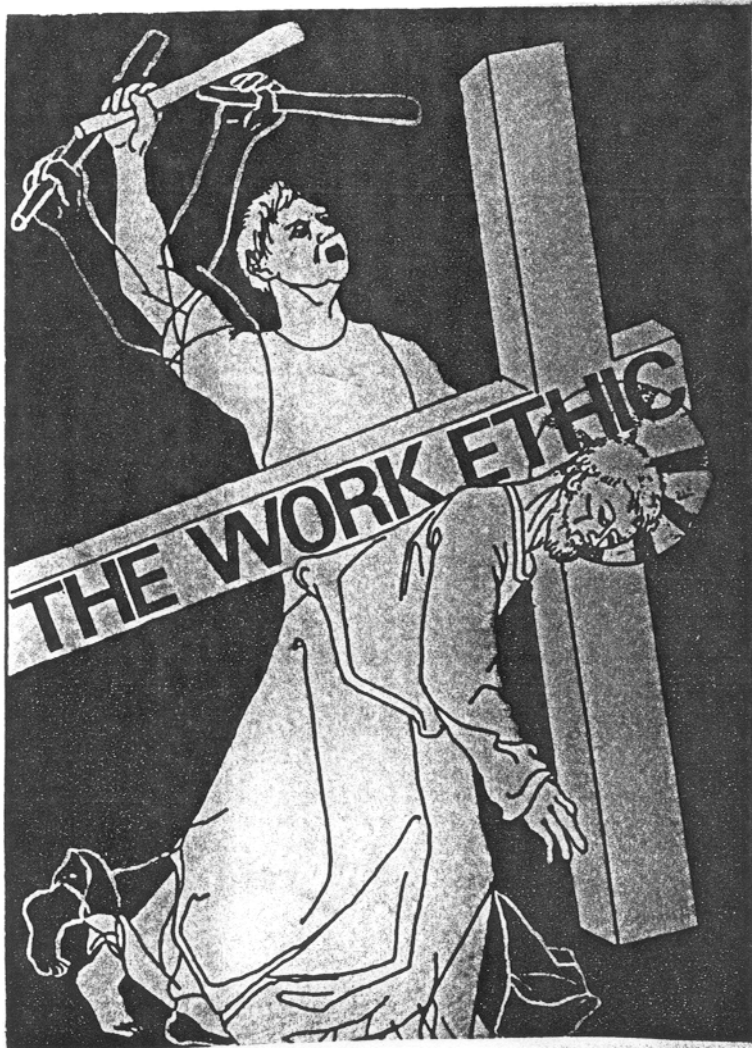
Recently I was at ANZAAS and heard a paper delivered on the consultative process which a committee of child welfare experts had been engaged in by way of grounding their recommendations for revised child welfare legislation in Victoria. The speaker claimed that the best way to come up with a detailed and wide ranging review of child welfare practice and needs was to engage in a multidisciplinary approach through consultation [16].

One alternative would be to proceed to extensive funding of actions by clients for professional malpractice; but such proposals would operate against the interests of front line workers and leave the agency administrators free to carry on their existing practices.

There is another approach which would provide a direct incentive to encourage welfare ministers to implement decent welfare legislation and would ensure that welfare workers and their agency administrators provided a service in line with clients' wants.

This would consist of a WELFARE CRIMES TRIBUNAL based on the Nuremburg War Crimes Tribunal. The welfare crime tribunal would have all the powers of a Royal Commission plus the power to sentence welfare workers, their agency administrators, and in certain cases the relevant minister. Special legal and social work advocacy centres would need to be set up to monitor a department's performance and collect complaints from clients of the department and to initiate prosecutions before the tribunal.

I realise that this process would turn on its head the current review tribunals, and inter-departmental review procedures. The Welfare Crimes Tribunal would by due legal process proceed to hear clients complaints of the treatment they received rather than simply determine whether an officer had acted according to the orders of his or her superior. It needs to be remembered that at Nuremburg the defense that one was carrying out orders (in social welfare jargon "operating according to the act") was not considered a sufficient defense for crimes against humanity [17].



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- (16) Carney, T., 'Deforming child welfare law: diverting by-ways on the road to Utopia. "Paper given at ANZAAS, Canberra, May, 1984.
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