

REVITALIZING POLITICAL IDEOLOGY IN SOCIAL WORK SYSTEM; A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The article contends that social work is politically constructed, that its values, principles and commitments are deeply shaped by ideology through the political dimension at all levels of social work intervention, and that social work needs not only to embrace, but also to reshape its political ideology, discourse and political movements. It is argued that the articulation of social work values and principles are an expression of ideology, and that political ontology of social workers' lives precedes their epistemological and methodological choices. From this premise, the article claims that socialism informs progressive social work values, and that a materialist analysis can influence our understanding of social problems and social relations within deregulated capitalist societies. Firstly, this article synthesizes the Marxist approach of ideology and its relations with ideology in social work. Secondly, it draws out the key insights about the so-called "radical" or "structural" perspective in social work, and the commitments and challenges of its advocates. Finally, it explores and proposes insights on the political ideology of social work for the 21st century. KEYWORDS: Social work; ideology and political

Introduction

The potential of reshaping and assuming a clear political ideology for social work constitutes the commitment to an active participation of social work in the political and public arenas. Such commitments are necessary in order to represent and speak on behalf of the most vulnerable, who fall outside the "neoliberal normativity," i.e., the poor and the homeless, the unemployed, racialised people, women, children and youth, ethnic minorities, older adults, people with disabilities, and the refugees and migrants moving across international borders, fleeing conflicts and persecution or other life-threatening situations. This leads us to think about ideology. According to Phillipe (2021), the idea of ideology involves the claim that people's ideas, beliefs, attitudes and values cannot be taken for granted, but they may contend a coherent explanation. Thus, in order to interpret those explanations, one requires an understanding of ideology. The presumption that social work needs to be able to participate in the political and public arenas "without shame" has become central to contemporary debates about the nature of the politics of social work (McKendrick & Webb, 2014).

In order to appreciate that social work is politically constructed, one must understand two main propositions. First, social work values and principles are an historical and social cultural expression of ideology. Social work values emerge from inside a political ontology. As argue by Phillipe (2021), "social work involves articulating an ontology of the political

subject.” By political ontology, I point to the social organisation, which contextualises and specifies an ontology of being. The recognition of a political ontology for practice was expressed earlier in the development of the profession in the work of Jessica Taft and Virginia Robinson, the founders of the “functional school” at the Pennsylvania School of Social Work in the 1930s (Lundy, 2011). Second, social work commitments have their origins in struggles between human beings as to the means by which rights and wellbeing were progressively acknowledged or achieved. Throughout the history of the profession, social work has been committed to promote human rights, social justice and address the root causes of poverty, oppression and inequalities (Gray & Webb, 2013). The political ontology of social workers is logically antecedent to epistemological and methodological choices. Social work finds itself inside politically generated social systems or agencies, organisations, and the apparatus of the state. This claim is deeply rooted in the ontological assumptions about the nature of the political reality in all societies (Hay, 2006). The recognition of a political ontology in turn undergirds McKendrick and Webb’s (2014) ideas about forms of life which make possible the lineaments of what may count as a just society. By examining the political ontology of social work, social workers can examine their political ideas and values. Hay (2006) explains that, “ontology relates to being, to what is, to what exists, to the constituent units of reality; political ontology, by extension, relates to political being, to what is politically, to what exists politically, and to the units that comprise political reality.” Political ontology thereby provides a conceptual ground to begin to examine the ways that ideology shapes social work. An understanding of the social work values, principles, commitments, theories and approaches is an exercise shaped by ideology. Such reflection shows the constitutive features of how social work is politically constructed at all levels of its intervention. In this sense, Hay (2006) explains that “the analyst’s ontological position is, then, her answer to the question: What is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated? Alternatively, what exists that we might acquire knowledge of?”. Clearly, it can be argued that the political ontology of social work precedes the epistemological and methodological choices. Manifestations of ideology are found in the social forms of life, especially the work of social workers. Arguably, the profession was born with a political stance.

As Lundy (2011) explains, “social workers such as Jane Addams, Bertha Reynolds, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Mary van Kleck were leaders in the early human rights movements,” and in political and social work activism. However, nowadays that political stance remains a notoriously difficult construct to capture. The detailed elaboration of these arguments entails some complexity, but the central tenet is quite simple. Social workers need to engage in a reflexive examination of the ontological roots of their political ideology. How to manoeuvre inside the ontology of place, location, and work? What do people do to make social work? How do they reflect on, talk about, and create abstractions and generalisations from their practice to constitute the social work profession as such? How social work made and what is made of? What are its constituent parts and how do social workers make them fit together? What kinds of values, principles, commitments, theories and approaches govern its functioning and its changes? What imaginary or ideology drives social workers and their projects? These questions immediately establish a simple analytical agenda for social work to assume a political stance (Duarte, 2016).

However, “no political analysis can proceed in the absence of assumptions about political ontology”. Among others, Hay (2006) suggests that one of the ontological issues by which political analysts formulate assumptions is related to “the relationship between structure and agency, context, and conduct”. Thus, social workers make ontological assumptions in either direct intervention or the field of education and research, these assumptions shape their approach to political analysis and cannot simply be justified by an appeal to an evidential base (Hay, 2006). McKendrick and Webb (2014) acknowledge that the aspects of social structure and agency justify the need for reshaping political ideology in social work. Likewise, Gray and Webb (2013) emphasise the need for “redefining the project of the Left in social work in terms of a ‘radicalisation’ of theory and practice. The epistemology of social work refers to the “philosophy” of its knowledge. It refers to the assumptions that social work makes about the knowledge of reality, its social norms and problems. What legitimates its knowledge, theory and practice? The answer is epistemology. The point is that the claims of social workers are shaped by manifestations of a working and applied ideology, and they embody a preference for certain political explanations. As Hay (2006) observed, “epistemological assumptions are invariably ontologically loaded.” This implies that social work must reflect about the nature of its ontology to establish or reshape the significance of its ideology. To advance this reflection this article examines the political ideology of social work. Thus, the debate offered by this article lies not only in whether social work is a product of what can be termed as left-wing ideology but where on that spectrum the readership of the article perceives social work as being formed.

The Role of Ideology in Social Work

The point about ideology is that “mainstream” social work in the world has failed to clarify its own ideology and to reflect critically on the origins of their own values, principles and commitments. Peters (2008) argues that “social work has identified itself as both an academic discipline and a profession and in doing so has created a space where science, theory, ideology and ethics exist together.” The expression of a political direction following from the political ontology of social work needs to be negotiated. Such negotiation and participation occur at the macro, mezzo and micro levels of the political realm, but are also informed by competing or complementary conceptualisations of identity politics. As Ferguson (2009) observes, Gray and Webb’s (2009) article (“The return of the political”) was a welcome contribution to this debate. As Ferguson does emphasise however, in order to assume a political stance, social work needs “to draw on whatever theoretical resources of wider critique are currently available; social work’s theory base is not, and cannot be, a closed system” (Ferguson, 2009). The discussion proposed here focuses on the political stance of social work and its ideological identity. We regard ideology as inherent to social work values, principles and commitments but also to its theories and approaches. The idea of taking a political stance requires reshaping social work ideology, a formal, ideologically derived conceptual framework which constitutes and reflects social work values, principles and commitments, its theories and approaches (Lundy, 2011).

The common view of ideologies is that they are systems of belief that guide our choices and behaviours, and indeed justify our thoughts, actions and theories. As Bailey and Gayle (2008) explains, structures, systems of power and advantage play a central role in maintaining the development of points of view. Carey and Foster (2013) also emphasise that ideology can be used to manipulate, distort or generate illusionary thought or feelings or actions. Thus,

ideology has a whole range of useful meanings, and not all formulations are compatible with one another. In contrast, Marx and Engels (1976) in lundy (2011) see ideology as a problematic or faulty method for generating accounts of the world. For them, and for a generation of Marxists that followed, ideology was a pejorative, rather than an inevitable or necessary element of social thought. Thus ideology was most often associated with idealism: that is, with the circulation of ideas, of thought, of concepts, rather than with the lives and activities of actual people. Ideology came to be characterised as a manifestation of a ruling class, as hegemonic, and as oppressive. The first step in ideological practices follows from entering into any social space or social interaction to lift out certain details or data from that space. Just why this or that is selected as noteworthy or significant may be explicit, hence driven by the theory, or might be implicit or elided. Yet, once the details from a social occasion are lifted up and out of the interactive context of their production they are reorganised, not according to the logic, intentionality, and in vivo orientations of actors, but according to the analytic projects of the researcher. As reconfigured, the various types of data are joined through “mystical” connections. Finally, a generalised and abstract theoretical formulation is generated which, post facto, is applied to explain that which was observed. Yet, if ideology is approached via Marx and Engels (1976) as problematic, or as arising from idealism, or a turning away from a reflexive, historical, dialectical materialism then it is postulated that there is a possibility of working non-ideologically. It is in this second negative view of ideology that it is important to recognise the world through an ideological lens. Why? Because ideology relates to power and the distribution of power in society. By questioning the relationship between ideology and the power of the dominant class, social work has the opportunity to achieve a new momentum for social and political action in accordance with its own values and commitments. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify common ideological ideals and beliefs within social work values, principles and commitments stated in the International Federation of Social Workers Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2012), defines social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, 2014) The analysis of this international definition requires us to accept social work, as a profession and academic discipline, as a site of dialogue and a site of struggle. Thus far, this international definition entails a process of negotiation of ideas, beliefs, attitudes and values that can be viewed as embedded in certain ideological beliefs that guide the social work profession’s core mandates. Thus, to interpret these core mandates and principles requires an understanding of ideology. If this is right, we must rethink and reshape social work’s approach to ideology. As argued above, social work is politically constructed. Therefore, the social conditions, and social contradictions and conflicts of life in globalized advanced capitalist societies informs social work values, principles and commitments, and can deeply influence the understanding of social problems and social relations within capitalist society. It is this social ground which, in turn, gives rise, variously to fascism, conservatism, liberalism, socialism, anarchism, communism, and so forth. As people come to be positioned inside complex and refractory social relations, so too do they variously come to articulate their positions and their interests. No less is true for

social workers. However, as a profession, a cognoscenti, or intellectual leadership has attempted to articulate and to develop an ideological framework of professional attribution. Thus social work is x, y, z, and if practitioners are to legitimately claim their place inside the profession, they must adhere to these elements. Some social workers found expression by joining and allying with working-class movements struggling for equality and social justice and became, in time, mediators between the state and the people (Ferguson, 2009b, 2013; Lundy, 2011). It could be argued that socialism (or democratic socialism) informs social work values, principles and commitments. Both socialism and social work have a common understanding and shared interests about the collective needs in relationship to the individual. They also share a belief that social justice is a goal for all in society, and that those actions and policies to achieve social justice should emerge from a more equitable distribution of wealth and knowledge among classes.

In other words, the functions of social work ideology can be clearly identified. Social work should become clear about the ideological nature of its own values. The political ontology can be easily identified and expressed in the everyday life of the social worker as social workers identify and reflect on the organisation of their every-day work in situ, on the funding of their workplaces, on their participation in wage or salaried labour, in the organisation of unions, in critical reflection on policies and procedures, and in participating in political and social movements. A recognition of the ideological foundations of social work informs the demand that social workers should take political positions, and that social work practice is inherently and incorrigibly political as Gray and Webb (2013) posits. The presumption that social workers need to be politically engaged has become central to much contemporary social work theory (Gray & Webb, 2013; McKendrick & Webb, 2014). Despite the call for political engagement, the political gains achieved by social workers do not seem to be widely recognised.

The Radical Perspectives in Social Work: Commitments and Challenges

Radical and structural perspectives on social work emphasise how the oppressive structural relations of capitalism are the root causes of social problems and inequalities. To some extent, radical social work follows a socialist-collectivist perspective of society that rejects capitalism and economic neoliberal approaches to economy, i.e., market justice, because that is inconsistent with a reasonable level of welfare provision (Pease & Nipperess, 2016). Radical social work brings a critique of capitalist structures and the production of inequality and exploitation. It embodies a Marxist view of ideology and progressive social work values. As argued above, Marxist-based approaches, like radical and structural social work, rely primarily on a structural analysis and place their emphasis on social, economic and political relations that influence social and material conditions and create alienating social structures.

Mainstream social work applies a different framework of thinking about how to respond to social problems. It is a framework in which economic and social systems are treated as neutral. They argue that ecological and systems theories, solution-focused social work, strength-based perspectives and evidence-based practice deny the influence of social and political forces in people's problems. The language and ideas of radical and structural social work should not be dismissed by mainstream social work as they provide an insightful frame for doing what mainstream social work does not do, and that is interrogate the underlying political dimension of social work (Baines, 2011). But, we would argue that the underlying

values, principles and commitments of both radical and mainstream social work are the same: they both share the same outlook. Nevertheless, our argument is that those values, principles and commitments define and inform the rationale of social work ideology. The issue therefore is not about what social work practice should do but if, and to what extent, a political stance is adopted, a more encompassing analysis, ideologically driven according the values, principles and commitments of social work. With a focus on class-based oppression, radical social work provides useful insight into forms of resistance against neoliberal capitalism. According to Erik (2009), Marx “conceives classes as being structured by mechanisms of dominance and exploitation, in which economic positions accord some people power over the lives and activities of others”. This means that the power exercised by the dominant class shapes the formulation of laws, the definition of social institutions, and the allocation of funding, which leads to several structural inequalities among classes, i.e., wealth, power, status and others

The Political Ideology of Social Work for the 21st Century

The idea of proposing a political agenda for social workers and their professional corpus can be dangerous. Perhaps it cannot be achieved universally on a global basis, but the negotiation of such a political agenda can be driven by a set of political assumptions formally articulated by social work values, principles and commitments. Ferguson (2009) challenged Gray and Webb (2009) asking, “Where’s the beef?” He suggested that, to assume a political stance, social workers’ commitments needs content. Arguing for a political agenda entails the identification and recognition of progressive (enlightening, emancipatory and anti-oppressive) forms for social work ideology. If this is right, then social workers need to work for a social work ideology which is progressive, left-oriented and rooted in socialist principles.

1. A commitment to work towards greater social justice and equality for those who are oppressed and marginalised within society;
2. A commitment to work alongside the oppressed and marginalised populations;
3. A commitment to question taken-for-granted and dominant assumptions and beliefs;
4. An analysis of power relations which serve to marginalise and oppress particular populations in society;
5. An orientation towards emancipatory personal and social change”. These are binding principles that back up the social work values, principles and commitments stated in the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2012a), in the National Codes of Ethics of Social Work adopted by IFSW member organisations

A political agenda for social work, surely entails the framing of social work ideology. As we argued before, much of what passes for social work values, principles and commitments, despite objectivist, evidence based, therapeutically individualist, and positivist methods and approaches adopted by many in the profession, there remains a foundation or root in socialist ideals and beliefs. Mullaly (2007) argues that there is a need for a progressive social work vision, a conceptualisation of society, a setting of goals to be achieved. Without a vision, social work cannot change society. For example, using the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics as a point of departure, Mullaly (2007) argued that a progressive social work view needs to be included in the social work code of ethics, through a clear philosophical

statement rooted in humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. He claims that these two ideals provide a vision of society characterised by humanitarianism and egalitarianism. Thus, to reshape its political ideology, social work needs to define and adopt a consistent set of social, economic and political beliefs consistent with progressive (egalitarian, emancipatory and anti-oppressive)

Social work ideals to confront and transform the nature of capitalist exploitation that affects the most vulnerable human beings and working-class citizens.

Conclusion

The underpinning argument of this article is that social work values, principles and commitments represent an expression of ideology, rooted in socialist ideals based on a materialist analysis of society. These progressive social work ideals have found expression in radical and structural perspectives on social work. Although it could be argued that social work values, principles and commitments define and inform the rationale of a progressive social work ideology, left-oriented and rooted in socialist ideals, these principles need to be more explicitly articulated and adopted by the profession/discipline as a whole. This would include ensuring that all social work programmes educate students on political ideologies and indicate the relationship of social work to socialism.

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