



The Politics of Social Work

FRED POWELL

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 2001

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash - I
New Delhi 110 048

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 0-7619-6411-8
0-7619-6412-6 (pb)

Library of Congress catalog record available

Typeset by SIVA Math Setters, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Athenaeum Press, Gateshead

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Introduction

Making sense of the politics of social work is a challenging task. Very strong ideological positions have been taken up, which tend to be unduly reductionist. Much of this debate has focused on the relationship between social work and the state. Radical critics of social work view it as the victim of the totalising influence of the state (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1980; Jones, 1983, 1997, 1998). Ironically, many of these Marxist critics of state control in the United Kingdom and other Western countries share common ground with the opponents of Marxist regimes in Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe, dissidents sought to counterpose the idea of civil society to state tyranny (Gellner, 1994; Powell, 1998). Stubbs (1999: 57) has commented on this apparent anomaly 'in a strange parallel with the UK debate, theories and practices of "civil society" tended also to essentialise the state and fail to distinguish between different kinds of state forms'.

Globalisation has widened intellectual horizons by reframing the old parochial debate about the role of social work in the nation state into an international concern with the state–civil society debate (Lorenz, 1999: 10). As Stubbs (1999: 57) puts it 'in other words, the globalisation of the state–civil society debate, in a world in which nation states and their civil societies no longer exist in a vacuum, is a key piece of the jigsaw missing from much current discussion'. We are undoubtedly part of a 'global society' but it would be naïve to underestimate the complexity, diversity and culturally specific nature of the world which we inhabit. Stubbs (1999: 58) notes in this regard: 'To address these complexities, new frameworks and approaches are needed, going beyond a simplistic treatment of the role of "external" actors on "internal" social processes'.

The social sciences during recent decades have become increasingly preoccupied with meaning and the processes of social construction (Hughes, 1998). This book seeks to investigate what social work 'symbolises' and 'stands for', how it has been represented historically and how it is represented today, its relationship with the welfare state, citizenship and civil society. This will involve a deconstruction of the policies, discourses and practices that have shaped social work. Ultimately the book argues that social work is confronted with three options: (1) marketisation; (2) radical resistance and (3) social inclusion.

It is important to define terms at the outset. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989: 912) defines social work as 'work of benefit to those in need of help, especially professional or voluntary service of a specialised nature concerned with community welfare and family or social problems arising mainly from poverty, mental or physical handicap, maladjustment, delinquency etc.' It defines social service as 'service to society or to one's fellow men especially exhibited in

work on behalf of the poor, the underprivileged, etc.’ While the language may be slightly archaic, the definitions are sound. This book is based upon the assumption that social work has professional, voluntary and community forms. The vision of social work informing the book is of an activity that goes to the core of an ethical civil society. The nationalisation of social work in the post-war welfare state complicates this vision. Moreover, in recent years the transformation of social work through the emergence of quasi-markets in the public sector, complemented by private practice in therapeutic and counselling activities, has added to this complexity.

The framing of social work within the context of the political domain links it directly to the idea of citizenship. Social work in its professional form has traditionally been formulated in the language of clientisation. Brown (1997: 102) has observed: ‘Clientisation refers to processes whereby bureaucrats’ claims to expertise and control over information and resources places citizens in positions of dependency and need *vis-à-vis* the state’. It is a basic contention of this book that the client, as a citizen, is an actor in making his or her own history. The term ‘service user’ has been preferred in the text, though it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the service user may often be a victim of social exclusion. In other words the citizenship experienced by the poor and oppressed is of a degraded variety. The political task of social work is to respond to both the reality of exclusion and the underlying injustice. This implies a politics of conscience. Vaclav Havel (1999: 54) commented, on receipt of the First Decade Prize in Poland:

It has been our absolutely basic historical experience that, in the long run, the only thing that can be truly successful and meaningful politically must first and foremost – that is, before it has taken any political form at all – be a proper and adequate response to the fundamental moral dilemmas of the time, or an expression of respect for the imperatives of the moral order bequeathed to us by our culture. It is a very clear understanding that the only kind of politics that truly makes sense is one that is guided by conscience.

In this statement Havel links the political and the moral, arguing that the social good provides a transcendent purpose:

I don’t say this as a moralist who wishes to preach proper comportment to people and politicians, or to hold himself up to them as an equal. Not at all. I am speaking exclusively as an observer, as one who is convinced that ethical behaviour pays in the long run. To be sure, such behaviour can often lead to suffering, and can’t always be expected to deliver immediate and obviously positive results. I don’t need to dwell on that here, in a country in which entire generations have shown their willingness to suffer and die for freedom. Ethical behaviour pays not only for the individual, who may suffer but is inwardly free and therefore fortunate, but mainly for society, in which tens and hundreds of lives lived thus can together create what might be called a positive moral environment, a standard, or a continually revitalised moral tradition or heritage, which eventually becomes a force for the general good.

The underlying themes of social work resonate with Havel’s moral imperative: concern for the poor and oppressed; the hope for social justice and an enduring belief that human action can create an inclusive society for all citizens.

The book starts out, in Chapter 1, by posing the question ‘Postmodernity: the End of Social Work?’ The following chapters examine both historic and contemporary paradigms of social work. Three chapters are devoted to historic paradigms. Chapter 2 reviews the Victorian origins of social work in voluntary organisations and active citizenship. Chapter 3 charts the development of reformist practice in the welfare state. Chapter 4 focuses on radical social work. The remaining three chapters examine contemporary paradigms of social work in response to social exclusion (Chapter 5), the renaissance of civil society (Chapter 6) and multiculturalism, feminism and anti-oppressive practice (Chapter 7). The conclusion (Chapter 8) examines the options facing social work in the twenty-first century and argues the case for a civic model of social work based upon the pursuit of social justice in an inclusive society.

I would like to thank the two research officers at the Social Studies Research Unit of Cork, Donal Guerin and Brendan Hennessy, who have worked with me on a series of research projects over the past five years. These projects have embraced civil society, community development and citizens’ charters. My work with them has helped inform my vision of contemporary social work and where it may be going in a rapidly changing world. I would also like to thank Norma Griffin for typing the manuscript with great patience and good humour. Finally, I wish to thank my eight-year-old son, Caleb, who has been a wonderful source of inspiration and support.

Postmodernity: The End of Social Work?

Critics of the welfare state have identified a structural shift in postmodern society, which has brought the dirigiste Fabian model of social democracy into disfavour. The public no longer perceives social democracy to be self-evidently emancipatory in practice. As Keane (1988: 2), writing in a British context, puts it: ‘formerly recognised as the main procedure for limiting the abuse of authoritarian power, democracy becomes an ally of heteronomy, and democratic socialism becomes virtually synonymous with the bureaucratisation of existence within the domains of State and society’. Marsland (1996: xvii) argues from a neo-conservative perspective that welfare reform is an urgent imperative:

State welfare is causing grave damage in the United Kingdom, in the United States, and elsewhere throughout the free world. It is impeding the dynamism of global economic competition and thus slowing world economic growth. Through bureaucratic centralisation and the underclass dependency, which it mentally creates, it poses a serious long-term threat to liberty and to the stability of democracy.

The emergence of social movements and identity politics, based on race, gender, sexuality, disability and age, has questioned the traditional universalist assumptions of redistributionist social policy, which extolled the civic virtues that created the basis for a moral community. It has also challenged the notion of class as the basis of inequality. In postmodern society the unidimensional nature of traditional social politics has been challenged by identity politics with a particularistic or fractured definition of inequality. This has created a crisis for the welfare state that in turn has generated a crisis for social work. This opening chapter examines the postmodern debate about welfare reform in the age of globalisation and how it has impacted upon social work.

The changing politics of welfare

The post-war world sought to lay the spectres of mass unemployment, hunger and destitution, which had characterised the 1930s, to rest. Keynesianism provided the economic strategy which underpinned the welfare state. The welfare state has been described by the distinguished German social scientist, Claus Offe (1984: 147) as ‘the major peace formula of advanced capitalist democracies for the period

following the Second World War'. The welfare state not only guaranteed a modicum of social rights, it also offered trade unions influence over policy-making in return for a disciplined and collaborative approach to economic management. This was corporatism (associated in the inter-war years with Fascism) in new democratically acceptable clothing. While the welfare state has been widely perceived as the apotheosis of social democratic values and the realisation of the Fabian socialists' dreams, Marxists have tended to view it as a treacherous arrangement which has tied the poor into the capitalist system, leaving basic social inequalities intact. But even Marxists have had to concede that despite its limitations the welfare state has substantially improved the living standards of the majority. Electorally the reformism of the welfare state has proved highly popular, attracting conservative political parties into a broadly based political consensus which fostered the growth of the welfare state.

Until the emergence of the New Right phenomenon, advocating a return to Victorian social and economic ideas in the mid 1970s, the welfare state enjoyed widespread support across the political spectrum. The New Right in fact consists of two distinctive elements: libertarians and traditionalists. The libertarians are preoccupied with a return to the free market *laissez-faire* conditions of the nineteenth century. The traditionalists on the other hand are concerned about the growth of 'the permissive society' and advocate a return to Victorian social morality. Both are united in their support for capitalism and renunciation of the welfare state. This political viewpoint, so long on the margins of political discourse, quickly entered the mainstream and became the dominant ideological influence in the 1980s. Novak (1988: 179) has concluded that it gave rise to a 'fundamental assault on the expectations and achievements of working people'. Novak's language is perhaps overly apocalyptic. Nonetheless, it is indubitably correct that New Right commentators, such as Gilder (1981), Murray (1984) and Marsland (1995, 1996) have called for the dismantling of social rights and a return to unfettered free enterprise and the Darwinistic principle of self-help.

Ironically, the New Right critique of the welfare state was shared in a number of important respects by leading Marxist theoreticians including Gough (1979) O'Connor (1973) Offe (1984) and Habermas (1989). While there is an element of caution in their predictions, the logic of the Marxist analysis leads inexorably to the conclusion that in the long run the crisis tendencies inherent in the capitalist system (arising from conflicting expectations) will ensure the disintegration of the welfare state. For example, the influential American Marxist, O'Connor (1973), might well have been commenting from a New Right perspective when he made the following observation:

Every economic and social class group wants government to spend more and more money on more and more things. But no one wants to pay new taxes or higher rates on old taxes. Indeed nearly everyone wants lower taxes.

But while the New Right ultimately favours the abolition of the welfare state, Marxists view it as an essential part of society. Offe has highlighted both the similarity and discontinuities between New Right and Marxist theorists. He has observed, 'the embarrassing secret of the welfare state is that while its impact

upon capitalist accumulation may well become destructive (as the conservative analysis so emphatically demonstrates), its abolition would be plainly disruptive (a fact systematically ignored by the conservative critics)'. He concluded: 'the contradiction is that while capitalism cannot coexist with, neither can it exist without, the welfare state' (Offe, 1984: 153).

In reality the pessimistic predictions of the crisis theorists of both the New Right and the Marxist Left have proven premature. The welfare state remains significantly intact despite unremitting attacks by its opponents both in and out of power. A series of international and national studies demonstrated that support for the welfare state remains undiminished (Coughlin, 1980; Taylor Gooby, 1985). What does emerge from these studies is that public support is qualified for certain marginal groups such as the unemployed, recipients of means-tested benefits, single parents, asylum seekers, etc. But this has always been the case and points to a fundamental weakness in the welfare state apparatus. The failure of the welfare state has not been to satisfy the expectations of the majority (as the crisis theorists have suggested) but to include the minority 'underclass' in a social order which is predicated upon a fragile balance between collective responsibility and possessive individualism. The 'underclass' represent a poignant reminder that the welfare state has eliminated neither poverty nor inequality: indubitably, the 'underclass' are second class citizens. Yet the welfare state has brought relief from the stagnation and despair of the inter-war years through the promotion of social and economic development.

Nonetheless, there has been a shared consensus between parties of both Left and Right on the need for welfare reform geared towards a new and looser compact between the self-reliant individual and an enabling state. The parallels with Victorian social attitudes are unmistakable. In an editorial comment, the *Guardian* on 6 September 1999, observed in relation to the British Prime Minister, Mr Blair, 'Immoral means to him what it did to Octavia Hill in the 1880s: the evils of poor people fornicating'! A new moral economy is being defined in postmodern society.

Postmodernity, globalisation and the shrinking state

As the old certainties propounded by Fabians have disintegrated, new perspectives are emerging. Many of these new perspectives arise in the context of globalisation. But there is also a sense of timelessness in some of the debates about welfare that are rooted in antiquity. Concepts such as civic virtue, civil society and citizenship are all derived from classical civilisation. Yet, in postmodern civilisation classical values have re-emerged with a renewed sense of importance and vigour. This is partly due to the growing sense of fragmentation and social disintegration that postmodernity has engendered.

Globalisation is the defining paradigm of postmodernity. Albrow (1996: 4) observes: 'Fundamentally the Global Age involves the supplanting of modernity with globality and this means an overall change in the basis of action and social organisation for individuals and groups'. He cites five major ways that globality has impacted on human life: environment, economy, warfare, economics and reflexivity. Albrow (1996: 5) concludes that 'the total effect is of a social

transformation which threatens the nation-state in a more extensive way than anything since the international working-class movement in the nineteenth century'. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman (1992: 65) has concluded that postmodernity has undermined our conceptual understanding of the nation state. Bauman in a general comment on the transformation that is being experienced by society at the end of the twentieth century, has observed: 'Postmodernity is marked by a view of the human world as irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order' (Bauman, 1992: 32). Other commentators have pointed in particular to the impact of this fragmentation on social inequalities and the implications for increased polarisation within postmodern society (Bradley, 1996; Jordan, 1996).

Globalisation has become a major focus of public debate. Professor Anthony Giddens, Director of the London School of Economics, in his 1999 BBC Reith Lecture series, entitled 'Runaway World', made globalisation the 'main theme'. Giddens identified two schools of thought, namely 'radicals' and 'sceptics'. Radicals, according to Giddens (1999: 2), argue:

that not only is globalisation very real, but that its consequences can be felt everywhere. The global marketplace, they say, is much more developed than two or three decades ago, and is indifferent to national borders. Nations have lost most of the sovereignty they once had, and politicians have lost most of their capability to influence events. It isn't surprising that no one respects political leaders any more, or has much interest in what they have to say. The era of the nation state is over. Nations, as the Japanese business writer Keniche Ohmae puts it, have become mere 'fictions'.

Echoing Albrow and Bauman, Giddens is asserting that a historic shift has taken place in our civilisation, wrought by globalisation.

Sceptics, on the other hand, retort that globalisation is essentially a myth. Politicians do have the power to intervene in the economy, but lack the will. They, as Giddens acknowledges, point to a powerful popular consensus for maintaining the welfare state in place (Giddens, 1999). The sceptics perceive globalisation as a process of Westernisation, or simply Americanisation. Global cosmopolitanism boils down to the icons of American popular culture: Hollywood, Coca-Cola and McDonalds.'

The distinguished French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in his book, *Acts of Resistance*, published in 1998, has challenged postmodernity as one of the 'new myths of our time'. He asserts:

I have used the word 'globalisation'. It is a myth in the strong sense of the word, a powerful discourse, and *idée force*, an idea which has social force, which obtains belief. It is the main weapon in the battles against the gains of the welfare state. European workers, we are told, must compete with the least favoured workers of the rest of the world. The workers of Europe are thus offered as a model to countries which have no minimum wage, where factory workers work twelve hours a day for a wage which is between a quarter and a fifth of European wages, where there are no trade unions, where there is child labour, and so on and it is in the name of this model that flexible working, another magic word of neo-liberalism, is imposed, meaning night work, weekend work, irregular working hours, things that have always been part of employers' dreams. In a

general way, neo-liberalism is a very smart and very modern repackaging of the oldest ideas of the oldest capitalists. (Bourdieu, 1998: 34)

Bourdieu regards globalisation as a counter-revolution or 'restoration' of pre-socialist society in which politicians have lost their moral courage and social vision, capitulating to the global capitalist order typified by the all-powerful International Monetary Fund (IMF). Globalisation, concludes Bourdieu, is nothing more than a neo-liberal myth that has elevated the economic over the social, copper-fastening inequality as an inevitable part of life. Bourdieu views the state as the bulwark against the global market tyranny and calls for a strengthened European Social State. Bourdieu's critique finds echoes in Mishra's 1999 study *Globalisation and the Welfare State*, which also argues that globalisation is a neo-liberal myth, supported by the United States, world markets, the IMF and the OECD.

Sceptics are undoubtedly right to point to the essential continuity of global capitalism. They cite the *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in support of their position (Leonard, 1997: 1). In this seminal revolutionary statement, Marx and Engels saw global capital as the enemy of equality and harmony. In the *Communist Manifesto* they wrote:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois era from all other ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. (Marx, 1994: 161–162)

This powerful piece of writing is deeply prescient of globalisation. In essence the argument running through the *Communist Manifesto* is that the economy and social structure in every historical epoch determine its historical and intellectual debates. The globalisation debate is fundamentally about the reassertion of bourgeois hegemony.

Teeple (1995: 56) argues that there has been an evolution towards a global economy that has allowed markets to expand, but while more interdependent, a system of national capitalism remains in place. He concludes: 'one of the central effects of this internationalisation of capital has been the shift of key or core economic policies informing government practice in the industrial world from Keynesianism to Monetarism'. Keynesianism promoted the state as the dominant partner in the management of the economy. It has been displaced by a return to the *laissez-faire* economics characteristic of the nineteenth century, widely referred to as 'monetarism', but also known as Reaganomics, Thatcherism or neo-liberalism. This economic liberalisation has produced a powerful political synthesis with authoritarian conservatism, generally referred to as the New Right or neo-conservatism. The social consequences of this economic and political shift in public policy have been catastrophic for the welfare state, because it has undermined the values that underpinned its commitment to distributive justice and social citizenship.

Karl Marx is reported to have observed that 'social reforms are never carried out by the weakness of the strong but always by the strength of the weak' (cited

in the *Guardian*, 9 October 1999). The twentieth century allowed organised labour to have a voice in politics. As we enter the new millennium that voice has become much weaker. Postmodernity has witnessed the decline of the organised labour movement and the collapse of the Soviet Union. That has redefined capitalism as a global force, in which humanism has an increasingly precarious position, as the anarchic and antinomian values of the market reassert themselves in every aspect of life. Through a process of delayering and downsizing the working class have become reprotoletarianised in a project that has dismantled societies' defences against the free market (Gray, 1998).

The global markets that dominate postmodern society evoke the *belle époque* of 1870 to 1914. Whether a similar outcome, of war and revolution, as social and economic tensions increase, is in prospect cannot be predicted. However, it is clear that the social market that supported the welfare state is being undermined by the free market, with its lower social costs. We are witnessing the phenomenon of 'the shrinking state' (Crook et al., 1992: 79–105). Leonard (1997: 1) has observed in this regard: 'throughout western countries, it now seems self-evident that the role of the state as provider of a wide range of public services rooted in the promise of dramatically evening up the life chances of individuals and populations is coming to an end'. He argues that the explanation for this profound change in the role and authority of the state cannot simply be located in the economic sphere. Rather, it is necessary to look at the structure of cultural production, the changing nature of individualism and growing value diversity. This observation raises profound epistemological issues (Leonard, 1997: 1–2).

Postmodernity and social theory

Postmodernity as an analytic construct has transformed the discourse of social science, from an analysis of social structures into a study of social meanings and the way they are represented in cultures. 'Grand Narratives' of human progress, including humanism, Christianity and Marxism, are rejected by postmodernists as foundationalist, essentialist or totalising theory. Influenced by French structuralism, notably the ideas of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, attention has focused on discourses or social constructs. In this reconstructed world view, Marxism and Fabianism have become outmoded because of their inherent authoritarianism. According to the distinguished German sociologist, Ulrich Beck (1993: 87): 'we increasingly confront the phenomenon of capitalism without classes but with individualised social inequality and all the related social and political problems'. This analysis would appear to suggest the death of collectivism. 'All power to the workers' has been replaced by 'all power to the individual'. However, this may be an illusion. One of the basic problems with postmodern social theory is its 'deconstruction of the subject'. In the postmodernist intellectual project, individual agency is dissolved into social construction. Seligman (1998) suggests that with the decline in individual moral and social agency there is an accompanying decline in trust. Modern individualism dates from the Renaissance and is predicated upon moral self-knowledge. Seligman views waning trust as an episode in the career of the modern subject and concludes that in the postmodern social order personal

and social responsibility have been delegitimised. If Seligman's analysis is correct, there is little room left for emancipatory action. Humanism has lost its civilising influence.

Leonard (1997) has rejected this perspective in his book *Postmodern Welfare*, in which he sets himself no less a task than 'reconstructing an emancipatory project'. Utilising critical theory he argues the case for a 'confederation of diversities' (Leonard, 1997: 177). However, Leonard does not underestimate the complexity of the task, in a society where civic trust is challenged by an anarchic and all-pervasive market and a shrinking state. Essentially, the case for welfare ultimately boils down to a recognition of shared human needs and the desire for greater social justice in a more virtuous society.

Traditional values, welfare reform and the workfare state

In recent years political parties, of both the Right and the Left, have begun to grapple with the issue of welfare reform. Much of the focus has been on traditional family responsibility, as opposed to dependence upon state welfare. This 'new consensus' devolves on a belief that something must be done about long-term welfare dependency. The problem for the exponents of welfare reform (as the Blair government in the UK has learned) is that the level of consensus is very limited. In reality this 'new consensus' seems to be predicated on the flimsy structure of acceptance by the Left of the neo-conservative critique of the welfare state – epitomised by the politics of the third way.

Central to the 'new consensus' thinking is the espousal of a belief that it is a mistake to provide welfare benefits without imposing on recipients the obligations that other citizens have to endeavour to become self-sufficient through education, work and responsible family behaviour. In essence, the argument is that government sets the moral climate – properly directed, it can promote a philosophy of self-reliance and moral rectitude for all the citizenry. British Chancellor Gordon Brown's claim that there are many opportunities for the unemployed, which they should take up, even though few are worth having, is a good example of this moral economy of conduct (*Guardian*, 29 February 2000).

Workfare (or welfare to work) is the centrepiece of the 'new consensus'. Governments of both Right and Left have been united in their demand that welfare recipients should be required to work (or to participate in work training placements) as a condition of receiving their welfare entitlements. Much of the attention has focused on single mothers, who were the sole beneficiaries of the main US welfare programme, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Moral crusaders have demanded that young mothers be required to complete their schooling and prepare themselves for the labour market; older mothers (with previous work experience) are expected to find work in rapidly expanding secondary labour markets – notably in the voluntary sector.

A conservative American social theorist, Charles Murray, has been at the centre of this debate about welfare reform. In *Losing Ground*, published in 1984, Murray argued that a new welfare-dependent underclass was being spawned by

women who were having children out of wedlock. Murray held the welfare state responsible for this supposed moral decline. Politicians of the conservative Right have seized upon Murray's analysis to traduce the moral basis of the welfare state and attack single parents. There is nothing new in this attack. Two decades ago Keith Joseph, a former Tory Secretary for Social Services, remarked that women from poor backgrounds were breeding the delinquents and denizens of our Borstals of the future (*Guardian*, 9 July 1993). Recently Murray apocalyptically warned that British society is in danger of self-destruction (*Sunday Times*, 13 February 2000). Once again single parents were identified as the main culprits in this British malaise in an age-old argument that seeks to provide a moral basis for damning the poor.

In 1994 the Republicans gained control of the US Congress for the first time in forty years. They issued a ten-point programme that put welfare reform at the centre of the political agenda. It was called *Contract with America*. This manifesto pledged itself to 'end welfare as we know it' (Gingrich, 1994: 65). Welfare beneficiaries, primarily identified as single parents, were to be required to work. No state funds were to be made available to support teenage mothers. Instead, *Contract with America* declared, 'the state will use the funds for programmes to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies to promote adoption, to establish and operate children's group homes, to establish and operate residential group homes for unwed mothers, or for any purpose the state deems appropriate' (Gingrich, 1994: 70). These proposals clearly represented a return to the moral economy of the Poor Law.

In August 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children, replacing it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which contained no entitlement to benefits. The control of welfare was devolved to individual states. Federal funding was to be cut, in order to ensure that welfare rolls were halved by 2002. Teenage mothers were to be prevented from receiving TANF unless they were living at home and attending school. There was little that was new in this programme of welfare reform. Workfare has been practised by a variety of states for over a decade, including California, West Virginia and Wisconsin. What was new was the federal government's decision to sweep away the New Deal at a stroke. This was 'the end of welfare as we know it'.

Britain's welfare to work programme seeks to mimic the United States' welfare reform agenda. The policy to remove benefits from asylum seekers and replace them with vouchers and demeaning pocket money is indicative of policy shift towards stigmatising and impoverishing marginalised communities (*Guardian*, 9 November 1999). Critics of workfare have detected a deep misogynistic purpose. Christine Pratt-Marston, Co-Chair of the US National Anti-Hunger Coalition, has asserted in this regard:

Workfare is a 'stick' instead of a 'carrot' and sticks tend to produce hostility, anger and passive resistance. The person or agency forced to use the stick and the poor person – usually a woman – who is hit with the stick are both in no-win situations. With carrots – education, job training, safe affordable day care and affordable health insurance – sticks would not be necessary and the situation becomes win-win. (*NASW News*, November 1984)

Lemann (1986: 34) has observed that welfare reform 'is a polite way of asking what we do about the black underclass'. The reality is that the welfare reform debate is substantially directed at the lifestyles of excluded minority groups, raising fundamental questions about the ethical basis of caring for people in need.

Ethical questions also arise for the voluntary sector from its participation in workfare programmes. The Canadian Workfare Watch group argues that workfare 'threatens the entire ethic of voluntarism' (*Workfare Watch*, 1996: 1). It explains its reasoning:

Workfare is one of the most divisive issues ever faced by the voluntary sector. There are numerous issues that the voluntary sector has to consider in relation to workfare. We need to recognise that requiring work outside the home in exchange for social assistance represents a fundamental shift in the nature and purpose of social programs. Workfare moves assistance away from eligibility based on need, towards providing assistance only to those who prove their deservedness through work. (ibid.)

Workfare, as a crusade to promote traditional family values, would seem to challenge the ethical basis of civil society. It evokes the former tyrannies of slavery and coercive poor relief stratagems. As such, workfare is arguably the very negation of the values that it purports to advocate. It seems that postmodern society overlooks the fact that the humanism contained in the universalist principles of the welfare state was only partially accomplished and that the underlying truth it represented was a counterweight to the hollow claim that society is inherently just. Noam Chomsky, the celebrated American social critic, in his rollback theory points towards an explanation that brings together, in a very disturbing critique, both Western and Eastern dimensions of the movement by corporate propagandists to revive the Poor Law as an alternative to state welfare:

For a long time the purpose was to resist and contain human rights and democracy and the whole welfare state framework, the social contract, that developed over the years. They [neo-conservatives] wanted to contain it and limit it. Now they feel, in the current period, that they can really roll it back. They'd go right back to satanic mills, murdering poor people, basically the social structure of the early nineteenth century. (Chomsky, 1996: 17)

Chomsky may be right: concern with the rollback of the welfare state goes to the core of contemporary *angst* about the future. It raises seminal democratic questions regarding the ethics of removing social citizenship. This is the basis of the rollback strategy that sustains the neo-conservative attack on the welfare state. On the other hand, *Contract with America* (Gingrich, 1994: 125) views the 'roll back of government' as the key to prosperity and modernisation of industry. The price is the end of welfare as entitled citizenship, with social work as a prime target for rationalisation, ideally abolition. Social work as a profession has responded by retreating from its historic mission to support the poor and oppressed rather than confronting the spectre of welfare reform – which is profoundly at odds with the notion of an inclusive democratic society.

Social work, postmodernity and uncertainty

Ife (1997: 92) in a discussion of the implications of postmodernism for social work practice concludes:

For our present purposes it is sufficient to note that postmodernism fails to incorporate a vision of a better society, or a universal understanding of social justice and human rights. As such an understanding is fundamental to social work, it is clear that postmodernism, while it has important contributions to make to an alternative social work, is not sufficient to form a basis for practice.

Howe (1994: 158) sees social work as the product of modernity, which has shaped its purpose and character: 'in its own way social work has pursued the beautiful (aesthetics), the good (ethics) and the true (science) as it attempts to bring about a pleasing quality of life and a just society by using the insights of the social services'. Postmodernity has accordingly shattered the basis of social work, which was informed by the Fabian verities of care, control and cure, that provided its coordinates within the welfare state. Outside 'the shell institution' of the welfare state, social work has had to wrestle with the postmodern reality of uncertainty, fragmentation and polarisation. This scenario promises a very bleak future.

Specht and Courtney (1994) in *Unfaithful Angels*, suggest that social work has abandoned its historic mission to the poor and oppressed for the pursuit of therapeutic individualism, private practice, autonomy from bureaucratic welfare agencies, and augmented status and income. In similar vein, Hardcastle et al. (1997: 9) observe: 'the problem is not so much that individual social workers have abandoned the traditional mission of the profession and, in a sense, the profession, but rather that the profession itself has abandoned its historic mission, the community, and the community's most needy and vulnerable citizens'. They argue that the National Association of Social Work (NASW), in the United States, has over the past two decades refocused its political lobbying away from promoting social legislation and towards professional recognition issues and state approval of payment for private practice for therapists. Many of these therapies 'lack any scientific basis; instead, social workers embrace faddish interventions resting on spiritualism and mysticism' (Hardcastle et al., 1997: 8–9). According to this critique the profession is removing the 'social' from 'social work' in favour of the entrepreneurial path of therapeutic individualism. In allowing the market to determine the agenda, 'social work forsakes its claim to professionalism' (Hardcastle et al., 1997: 9).

While the United States has diverged from Europe and most of the rest of the English speaking world in the minimalist nature of its welfare state, in an age of global capitalism it may be setting the trend. If social work is breaking its links with the welfare state in favour of the market this certainty represents a paradigm shift. In Britain this shift towards market values is manifesting itself in the emergence of consumerism and privatisation in the delivery of personal social services. Consumerism has become a key paradigm in welfare reform, reflexively restructuring the welfare state and the social work role and task in the shape