

Introduction to the special section on dissent in social work

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It is an honour to be asked to write a short introduction to this special section. Last year, I wrote the book, *Dissenting Social Work: Critical Theory, Resistance and Pandemic* (Garrett, 2021), in which I tried to challenge the idea that social work educators and practitioners ought to serve as handmaidens of capitalism and the institutional orders that it requires. However, I also maintained that it would be mistaken to valorise all forms of dissent, because it can also be associated with politically and professionally retrogressive tendencies and movements. Alert to the definition of social work provided by the International Federation of Social Workers and critically drawing on a range of theoretical approaches, I tentatively outlined how “Dissenting Social Work” (DSW) might be constituted in relation to a range of themes and across several, potentially interlinked, activist sites.

Clearly, the areas I identify are far from exhaustive and are a foundation for discussion rather than a bombastic “manifesto”. Underpinning the arguments I made was my sense that if there are no sustained attempts to generate more expansive and dissenting forms of thinking and acting, then “social work” is at risk of being emptied out of socially benign content. In contrast, DSW interrogates dominant ways of understanding the social world within the discipline. It might, therefore, be interpreted as a form of neo-social work, adding to those efforts bent on pushing back against moves to curtail progressive possibilities for educators and practitioners. Dissenters need, therefore, to try to get a sense of our present conjuncture and the serial interlocking crises that confront us. What are some of the key factors shaping

the world, our lives and, after Bourdieu, the “field” that we inhabit? Seeking to decipher what is significant, albeit in very general terms, is crucial in enabling us to calibrate the prospects for DSW.

In a number of countries, there are moves to re-orient social work and, from above, to remake it. This was starkly illustrated in Ireland, for example, by the actions of the profession’s regulatory body, CORU. In its revised *Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics*, the organisation deleted mention of the phrase “human rights”: a rather extraordinary redaction given the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) definition of social work situates the aspiration to safeguard and promote human rights as central. In short, CORU is the perpetrator of an act of symbolic violence against the ethical base of social work.

Inspired by the work of Gramsci, we might argue that we are at an “interregnum” in which the course of history is manifestly uncertain. In the book I emphasised issues relating to forced migration, the threat of neo-fascism, surveillance culture, neo-colonialism, the Black Lives Matter resistance movement and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. Ian Hyslop and his comrades and friends in Aotearoa New Zealand have been keen to generate discussion on these and related themes. This has been clear across a number of innovative spheres of comment and intervention—for example, within the Reimagining Social Work Collective. Indeed, this range of activities reflects very practical and vital attempts to create oppositional “structures within structures” aiming to provide solidarity and direction within social work’s often stultifying

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institutional domains. What is more, this special section of *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* productively extends this work. For me, what is tremendously important is the willingness to explore, define and champion forms of dissent which are rooted in the struggle to combat racism and to decolonise economies, social structures and ways of *thinking* and *doing* social work. Readers have much to gain by reading, debating and acting on the issues raised.

Reference

Garrett, P. M. (2021) *Dissenting social work: Critical theory, resistance and pandemic*. Routledge.