

Poverty, inequality and social work: The impact of neoliberalism and austerity politics on welfare provision

Ian Cummins, 2018

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Ian Cummins' book, *Poverty, Inequality and Social Work*, is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature focused on neoliberalism and social work. The book provides a necessary challenge to the profession in arguing that, while social work is practised in the context of inequality and poverty, we have failed to clearly focus on these issues.

The book starts from a broad perspective, providing a conceptual overview of neoliberalism, and explaining how it came to dominate economic and social policy in the West. The book progressively covers a range of issues, looking at discourses regarding the poor, changing social attitudes, and how social work has been affected by changes in the political, economic, and social spheres.

Cummins explains how neoliberal ideology has had pervasive social impacts, undermining structural explanations of poverty and social connectedness. These shifts are illustrated with examples showing how media, and politicians, have stereotyped the poor as lazy and undeserving. Through such stereotypes governments are able to avoid responsibility for increasing poverty, and are able to justify cuts to service provision.

The wave of austerity which has been imposed across the West following 2008's financial crisis is presented as a continuation of the neoliberal project. Cummins clearly demonstrates the ideological nature of austerity and how it has functioned

as a pretext for the hollowing out, and outsourcing, of social services.

Cummins describes how the imposition of neoliberal reforms has dramatically altered the environment in which social work is practised; simultaneously increasing need while decreasing resources for social services. As well as increasing need, neoliberal policies have changed how social services operate, forcing services to act as if they were subject to the free market.

Cummins highlights how this political and social environment creates the risk that social work practice could become a tool of the neoliberal state. In this role social workers are expected to practise in an increasingly standardised and punitive manner. This risk is amplified by deliberate attempts by politicians to undermine the structural focus of social work education.

The final chapter devotes a considerable amount of space to various conceptualisations of justice, introducing a range of philosophies, and discussing how the role of the state could be re-imagined. Whilst stimulating, this space might have been better devoted to further discussion of how social workers can respond to the challenging conditions Cummins describes.

One of the overarching themes of this book is that social workers must have a strong awareness of poverty and the impacts of neoliberalism, both in the lived experiences of those we work with, and as a

political ideology. Through this awareness Cummins believes social workers will be able to critically evaluate our work, how we may be part of harmful systems, and how we can practise differently.

Cummins also highlights the need for the profession to take a clear political stance, resisting the imposition of austerity, and advocating for a more humane state. Cummins argues that the social work profession must be an active political force, and that failure to do so represents an abandonment of the profession's values.

While the book is highly readable, providing a good introduction to a range of concepts, Cummins does presume a certain degree of familiarity with political terminology

and sociological theories. Thus, while the book will be useful for students, it may require some degree of scaffolding for undergraduate students.

One of the strengths of this book is its relatively short length, as well as the impressive array of references, statistics, and examples which Cummins draws on. Despite traversing a wide range of topics the book remains engaging and highly readable.

Cummins draws primarily on the UK context to illustrate trends in politics, the media, and service provision. The global nature of neoliberalism, and austerity, means that these examples are still relevant to a broader audience.

Reviewed by **John Darroch**, PhD candidate, University of Auckland