

# From dissent to authoritarianism: What role for social work in confronting the climate crisis?

Joe Whelan, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** As the environmental crisis deepens and the effects begin to emerge in the form of disruptive and destructive climate events, more nation-states have ostensibly committed to carbon net zero by 2050. Achieving this target will require a major reconstitution of economies, societies and, thus, the lived realities of peoples. This reconstitution or shift will need to occur most forcibly and rapidly in the developed economies of the global north whom, since about 1850, have been responsible for approximately 92% of surplus global emissions. Social policies, therefore, will need to be reworked and reimagined so that, in practice, they are aligned with “planetary boundaries”. Recent geopolitical summits, such as COP 26, have, arguably, resulted in lacklustre and vague commitments rather than any serious attempts at creating agreement on how to reconstitute the economies of the global north. Moreover, a model of economy predicated on continuous, and exponential growth and thus the continued metabolization of the natural environment, still appears immovable despite the threat it poses.

**APPROACH, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:** It is against the backdrop of the global context described above that two questions are posed. The first is concerned with creating a focus for social work and asks: “What sustainable social policies should social work align with?”. The answer to this is presented as a means of progressing the task of social work in the context of climate justice. The second question builds on the answer to the first and asks, “Does arriving at an adequate response require dissent?”

**KEYWORDS:** Climate; climate justice; social justice; dissent; social work; social policy; welfare states.

Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth, they are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations...

(Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3)

In attempting, to explore the questions posed in this contribution, I find myself

confronted by a veritable, and growing, smorgasbord of commentary, research and literature—much of which crosses both jurisdictional boundaries and disciplinary lines. For expedience and efficacy’s sake, I primarily confine my analysis, therefore, to the liberal welfare states of the anglosphere, and my corpus of literature to the disciplines of social policy and social work in the main, particularly where both the former and the latter encounter the concept of environmental sustainability. In doing so, I

AOTEAROA  
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL  
WORK 34(3), 21–33.

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**  
Joe Whelan  
jwhelan9@tcd.ie

aim to explore the following two questions: “What sustainable social policies should social work align with?”, the tentative answer to which is presented as a means of progressing the task of social work in the context of climate justice. The second question builds on the answer to the first and asks, “Does arriving at an adequate response require dissent?” In attempting to begin to answer the first of these, and after looking briefly at some social work literature which has explored the issue of climate change, I synthesise some select contributions from an emerging social policy literature which has begun to explore questions of environmental degradation and its potential repercussions, along with solutions to the former and the latter in the context of welfare states and policy responses. I base my suggestions for what social policies social work should seek to align itself with on both how social work is globally defined and on what social policies overlap with, and encapsulate, the social work value base. To answer the second question, I open up a brief and explorative discussion which examines the possibility of *dissent* or the potential for a turn toward authoritarianism in the context of social work. What is presented is undoubtedly tentative and therefore intended to prompt conversation and debate. It is intended to be instructive without being authoritative. Importantly, what is written here responds to a prompt which asks us to consider the role of dissent in the context of social work. This is important because a fulsome response to the climate crisis may well require either dissent from the bottom or authoritarianism from the top. Just what role social work has, or will have, in either facilitating or thwarting dissent, remains an open question.

### **The global picture: Rampant growth and rampant inequality**

In the first instance, and at the outset, it is necessary to confront the truth that the current growth model of economy in the global north is unsustainable from the perspective of human and planetary survival

(Bailey, 2020; Fanning et al., 2020; Gough, 2017, 2022; Koch, 2021; Walker, 2012). It, therefore, either has to change or lead to our destruction, there is no in-between and this is not and should not be taken as polemic. The current model of economy is based on exponential growth and so makes demands upon production and consumption, and therefore upon the natural environment, that are impossible to satisfy. Aligned with this model of economy, welfare states in the global north are predicated on ensuring production and consumption (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2021; Koch, 2021). One way to illustrate the phenomenon of the exponential curve is to consider the wheat and chessboard problem. This may be familiar yet it remains powerfully illustrative and so is worth including briefly:

There are 64 squares on a chessboard. If you place one grain of wheat on the first square and then double the amount of wheat for each subsequent square so that 1 becomes 2, 2 becomes 4, 4 becomes 8 and so on, by the time you get to square 64, there are over 18 quintillion grains of wheat on the board.

This power of the exponential has never been unknown. As far back as 1772 (Price, 1772, p. 19), Richard Price, whose words were later taken up by Marx in his own contribution to political economy, spoke of the power of exponential growth as being the effect of long-term compound growth when he noted that:

Money bearing compound interest increases at first slowly, but the rate of increase being continuously accelerated, it becomes in some time so rapid, as to mock all the powers of the imagination. One penny, put out at our Saviour's birth to 5 per cent, compound interest, would, before this time, have increased to a greater sum, than would be contained in a hundred and fifty millions of earths, all solid gold.

When illustrated like this, it must become obvious that sustaining exponential growth at the rate and in the manner described by Price as far back as 1772 is an unthinkable economic proposition. Furthermore, when we think about what this means in real terms, it is also unsustainable from a human and environmental perspective. Viewed from a human perspective, growth rates measured by things like GDP tell us absolutely nothing about people's general well-being, leaving the need for inference in the context of the unknowable (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2021). Conversely, a rate of growth such as that described earlier tells us much about the effect this can, and must have, on the natural environment. If humans make of nature a commodity in the general sense, the rate at which we do so reveals Marx's metabolic rift (Burkett, 1999). The environment is continually metabolised to create capital through cycles of production and consumption thereby causing tremendous harm. Orthodox, liberal economics, founded on a model of more and continuous growth, not only continues this harm but exacerbates it (Gough, 2021; Laruffa et al., 2021). In the face of this harm, we must also ask who this situation benefits as it does not appear to benefit the poorest in our societies in any tangible way. A recent report by Oxfam (2022) entitled "Inequality kills" and which looks at global social conditions since the onset of COVID-19 aptly demonstrates this by noting that:

The wealth of the world's 10 richest men has doubled since the pandemic began. The incomes of 99% of humanity are worse off because of COVID-19 (Oxfam, 2022: n.p.).

Bearing out the thesis presented here, the report further notes that:

These issues are all part of the same, deeper malaise. It is that inequality is tearing our societies apart. It is that violence is rigged into our economic

systems. It is that inequality kills. (Oxfam, 2022, p. 8)

Finally, in explicitly apportioning blame for environmental degradation alongside denoting the beneficiaries of the current global economic system, the report also notes that:

Twenty of the richest billionaires are estimated, on average, to be emitting as much as 8000 times more carbon than the billion poorest people. (Oxfam, 2022, p. 17)

It is clear then, that the people whom social work are most likely to encounter are not the beneficiaries of the current global economic system. Furthermore, it is clear that many of the world's poorest are actually harmed by it and that this has been exacerbated by circumstances wrought by COVID-19. As climate breakdown proliferates, this harm is likely to be further exacerbated still. Given social work's overt commitment to the realising of social justice through the obliteration of inequality, these are global circumstances which are deeply incongruent with the values at the core of the profession and have been for a long time.

### **Sustainability and social work: Where, how why?**

Climate change and environmental sustainability are issues which have begun to capture the social work imagination across both scholarship and practice and an array of contributions made in recent years demonstrates this (Boetto et al., 2020; Harris & Boddy, 2017; Holbrook et al., 2019; Lucas-Darby, 2011; Lynch et al., 2021; Noble, 2016; Philip & Reisch, 2015; Ranta-Tyrkko & Narhi, 2021). These are just some examples over a number of years; see also a recent policy document from the International Federation of Social Workers (2022). In a recent and passionate editorial in the *British Journal of Social Work*, Maglajlic and Ioakimidis (2021), reacting in part to the lacklustre outcome of the COP26 summit in Glasgow, call for

climate justice to be placed squarely on the agenda of the global social work community. In doing so they point to the already developing effects of the climate catastrophe from the creation of climate refugees due to wildfires in Greece to the effects of devastating flash-floods in the German regions of Rhineland Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. Through drawing attention to both of these examples, they illustrate the very real practice of social workers acting and reacting in the face of conditions created by climate change. However, they also note that:

...environmental justice had not been a central theme in social work practice and scholarship. (Maglajlic & Ioakimidis, 2021, p. 2870).

This assertion is undoubtedly true. The reasons for this truth are arguably less clear than the truth of it but must, in part, devolve upon the nature of social work in residual welfare states of the global north where social work is largely administered as a reactive, bourgeois, profession as part of the repressive state apparatus (Whelan, 2022a). However, it could also be argued that a further, and perhaps more central reason for why social work has been slow to encompass climate work and climate justice comes down to the simple proposition of “not knowing how”, that is, not knowing how to confront the overwhelming nature of a global and wholly existential phenomenon. Social work, of course, is a multi-dimensional entity meaning that an adequate response is required in multiple contexts including in social work practice, in social work education and in social work scholarship and activism. Where sustainability-based, green, practice responses have found a way into *socialworkesque* activities, early research has shown that these have tended to be individualising, (de)moralising and potentially stigmatising, effectively aiming to *greenwash* the poor by shaming them into sustainable behaviour, thus eschewing the fundamentally structural nature of

the climate challenge (see Malier, 2019 for example). With respect to social work education, early research has shown that the inclusion of environmental issues as part of the curriculum for social work programmes, while growing, is patchy at best (see Dominelli, 2014; Drolet et al., 2015; Harris & Boddy, 2017; Holbrook et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2021; Teixeira & Krings, 2015) meaning that future practitioners are unlikely to incorporate climate issues into existing frameworks where they do at all. Finally, where social work scholarship has attempted to tackle issues of climate and climate justice, the response, while spirited, has ultimately been disjointed through lacking a singular focus or cohesive mission. Space here does not permit for issues across practice, education and scholarship to be fully and meaningfully engaged with and so, though what follows will ideally have implications for each, it is to the latter issue, the issue of how social work scholarship might attempt to forge a path forward with respect to matters of climate and climate justice, that attention is now turned. The method I employ for charting this path is to look toward what social policies and what policy programmes social work should seek to potentially take up, champion and align with on the basis of what is sustainable and also with due regard to an already established social work identity, present in how the profession is defined and in its value-base. Through aligning social work with social policies which tick these boxes, we potentially give ourselves something to aspire toward, to engage in activism for, to shape our practice and to educate our future partitioners alongside giving us meaningful alternatives through which to frame dissent.

### **Sustainable welfare: Social policy responses**

Having earlier established that the current model of economy in the global north must change in order to ensure planetary and species survival, the question of what role social policies and welfare states will play

against this backdrop remains. Interestingly, if not altogether fortuitously, the still very live and evolving COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic, and the global, social and economic crisis it has wrought, potentially tells us something here. There can be no doubt that the onset of the pandemic saw the idea of welfare and the role of welfare states come into sharp focus virtually overnight (Whelan, 2022b). In the face of the global developments arising out of the pandemic, the social contract was rapidly rewritten, and the social safety net rapidly expanded as emergency welfare payments were rolled out across jurisdictions (Hick & Murphy, 2020). This tells us that welfare, in the form of a social safety-net necessarily forms a major part of responses to social and economic crises. However, the crisis wrought by COVID-19 may ultimately pale in comparison to the social and economic crisis that climate change will undoubtedly precipitate and so, some thinking about long-term and necessarily structural welfare state changes is not only necessary but a matter of pressing concern. In this respect, a literature in the context of social policy has begun to emerge. This literature is a literature of ideas and alternatives. In a recent special themed section of *Social Policy and Society*, many of these ideas come to the fore and so I draw on a number of these contributions here. In doing so I suggest a number of policy areas with which the value base underpinning social work is arguably naturally aligned and through which social work scholarship, but also practice and education, might chart a way forward in the context of setting a new green agenda.

### **An overarching framework: A capability approach**

In an entry which acknowledges that welfare states in the global north are now sharply confronted by the ecological crisis and in need of reform as a result, Bonvin and Laruffa (2021) propose a capability framework approach to the delivery of social services in a way which eschews

the necessity for growth and, in doing so, calls for a debate about (and a potential re-evaluation of) the meanings of quality of life and human well-being. In doing so, they echo much of the thesis of destructive growth presented by these authors:

The present circumstances suggest that alternative views to this economic growth-led welfare state have to be designed. There is indeed a growing consensus that the economic growth model is reaching its limits, both in terms of environmental sustainability and intergenerational justice. To put it briefly, the pursuit of economic growth on the present terms risks depleting planetary resources, thus putting at risk environmental sustainability. (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2021, p. 2)

The idea of a capability framework is not new and Bonvin and Laruffa (2021) draw on a growing body of literature (see Bonvin, 2012; Burchardt & Hick, 2018; Bonvin & Laruffa, 2018; Laruffa, 2020, for some examples). The capability framework Bonvin and Laruffa proposed also draws inspiration from the work of Amartya Sen (1985, 1987, 1999, 2004, 2009) and they argue that by following a capability approach, social policy, as a driver of the sociological experience, can move beyond the need only to ensure and support material well-being toward a focus on expanding the capabilities of persons in a way that values their freedom to live valuable and fulfilling lives. In doing so they suggest that:

... the capability approach allows rejecting the identification of social progress with economic growth, opening instead a democratic debate on the concrete meaning of wellbeing and quality of life and on the best ways to promote them. (Bovin & Laruffa, 2021, p. 10)

The capability approach is presented here as an overarching idea that aligns well with

social work values and there are specific ideas within this idea which I will turn to further on. As an overarching idea, and while others (see Koch, 2021) have written in a way which illustrates the complexity of meaningfully aligning social policy with sustainability in practice, it nevertheless has the potential to go in different directions in terms of the policy and policies it ultimately begets. Crucially, as an overarching idea, it must be noted that taking a capability approach to the welfare of people in this way chimes resoundingly with the social work value base and with how social work is globally defined wherein it is suggested that “social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2022, n.p.). If it is possible, through a capability approach, to uphold this aspect of the global definition while also promoting sustainability, then such an approach must be given serious consideration within the social work community.

### ***Universal basic services***

If a capability approach which draws inspiration from the work of Sen (1985, 1987, 1999, 2004, 2009) is an overarching idea, it must necessarily be realised through discrete social policies. Let us say, with one eye to the social work value base, that, at its core, the idea of a sustainable capability approach means organising societies around the following key principles:

- Value people and their inherent human rights;
- Develop social policies which are aligned with an ethic of care and not with capacity for production;
- Promote an idea of well-being that is not reliant on production, consumption, or the means to achieve these through the market;
- Encourage people to look after themselves, each other and the natural environment.

The next question necessarily becomes “How do we begin to go about achieving or actioning these ideals?” There are many potential responses here which encapsulate a plethora of ideas and go across many ideologies. I will focus on two, universal basic services (UBS) and participation income (PI) both of which naturally align with the ideals of social work and both of which have the potential to be pivotal in the fight against climate change. I begin with the former and I draw here primarily on Coote (2021) along with Coote and Percy (2020) who have explored the concept of universal basic services with an eye to environmental sustainability.

In considering the function and purpose of welfare states as part of the post-war settlement, Coote (2021) noted the collectivist ideals and pooling of resources at the heart of the ideas of that time. However, in doing so, she has also noted the steady decline of these ideals and the practices which underpin them through the pervasive effects of a neoliberal, market-based, ideology. The implicit suggestion here then is that, we need, to some degree, to turn the clock back to reconsider the idea of a welfare commons consisting of things like health services, education, adequate housing provision, transport, childcare and income maintenance. Coote (2021, p. 2), puts this in the following terms:

The normative goal of UBS is to ensure that everyone has access to life’s essentials – the things that every individual needs to participate in society and lead a life they value.

In other words, the basic essentials that persons need to do and to be well. As with the idea of a capability approach, the fundamental idea of universal basic services as a protected and guaranteed minimum is not new, indeed, it builds of the ideals of Beveridge and FDR among others (Coote & Percy, 2020). However, Coote’s (2021) analysis also proposes to move the

clock forward to take account of planetary boundaries so that resources are pooled collectively, yes, but also sustainably. The key to the success of UBS as a sustainable social programme is that, through removing the competition of the market, it combines universal entitlement with sufficiency thus providing a secure social foundation for all within planetary boundaries (Coote, 2021). Using the examples of food, housing and childcare, and drawing on earlier work, Coote (2021, p. 9) illustrates this in the following way:

Childcare, housing and food occupy different points on the collective-individual spectrum for securing life's essentials. Together, they illustrate the inescapable logic of exercising collective responsibility to meet human needs in ways that are universal and sufficient. Applying the UBS framework to provide in-kind benefits can bring substantial gains in terms of equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability.

For the purposes of this article, and in terms of sets of social policies which align with social work and with the social work value base, Coote (2021) notes that UBS really only represents one side of a coin, the other side necessarily being income based. Specifically, she names participation income (PI) as being on the other side of that coin and so I take this idea up here. In doing so, I draw attention, in particular, to an article by Laruffa et al. (2021) whose own contribution revises Atkinson's (1996) concept of PI with one eye toward the potential for environmental sustainability. Again, I argue that, particularly when coupled with the idea of UBS, PI is an idea that is sustainable and that works in the context of social work and aligns with the social work value base.

### **Participation income**

Setting their sights on a *post-productivist* social landscape wherein an ethic of care allows for the primacy of social reproduction

over and above economic reproduction, Laruffa et al. (2021) revise Atkinson's blueprint of a participation income to incorporate the idea of a *green conditional basic income*. The conceptualisation of a green conditional basic income, not unlike the notion of sustainable UBS, requires a sort of double movement consisting of a shift away from workfarist, sanction-based conceptualisations of income support (McGann, 2021; Whelan, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2022b) and toward policies that would:

... re-shape the focus of social policy on individuals' capability to 'take care of the world', thereby shifting the emphasis from production and employment to social reproduction and environmental reparation. (Laruffa et al., 2021, p. 2)

The first aspect of this double movement is again, a movement *back*, that is, back towards the ideals of collective welfare in the form of a welfare commons (Whelan, 2021d). This, the authors argued, will, in the first instance be efficacious in removing the taint of stigma from human welfare, a taint which has long been empirically evidenced and has garnered much scholarship in recent years in the context of austerity capitalism (see Baumberg, 2015; Bolton et al., 2022; Patrick, 2017; Whelan, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c). The second aspect of this double movement requires a fundamental shift in thinking about how and why income support as a form of welfare is administered. Laruffa et al. (2021) stop short of calling for a wholly universal basic income and so conditionality remains a feature of their conceptualisation of a green conditional basic income. However, where conditions *do* attach these are very much based on the concept of coproduction which involves an:

... enabling approach that relies on appealing to claimants' intrinsic motivations through the quality of participation options available. (Laruffa et al., 2021, p. 513).

This immediately, and obviously, aligns with a wide range for social work values from client self-determination to working in partnership and with a host of social work practice approaches, from strengths-based perspectives to empowerment approaches. Moreover, taken alongside the introduction of UBS and couched within a capability approach, such social programmes offer a platform for social work to coalesce around and to advocate for and agitate toward. The next then must be, how do we get there?

### **How do we get there? Dissent or authoritarianism...**

Social work has found itself often on the wrong side of history. It has, as a profession, played a part in causing great harms to a great number of peoples and there are myriad examples of this (see for example the racial oppression of First Nations communities in Australia (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2004), Aotearoa New Zealand (Gray, 2019), Canada (Czyzewski & Tester, 2014), USA (Jacobs, 2009) Apartheid-era South Africa (Smith, 2014)). There is no guarantee that, in the struggle for climate justice, social work will not find itself on the wrong side of history again. In fact, given the current residual and reactive nature of social work in the global north (Whelan, 2022a), there is every chance that it might. In this final part of the contribution, I want to make what may, at first, seem like a jarring suggestion to suggest that ultimately, social work as a global force must, in deciding what side of history it wishes to be on, choose either authoritarianism or dissent. Authoritarianism in this instance means enforcing the climate mandate of the state, whatever that mandate may be, and whoever it may hurt and affect, potentially contributing to creating a “state of exception” as given by Agamben (1998) wherein the political life, or *Bios* of service users and the population in general is suspended, and bare life or *Zoe* of persons is closely policed. As a part of an authoritarian

approach, the governance of bare life begets a type of biopolitics in which human life, the human body and human habit become the target of the organisational power of the state which governs at the level of population but in ways that filter down to the level of the individual by measuring, examining, calculating, recording and potentially punishing. Dissent, on the other hand, will require social work to agitate and advocate for a just transition, underpinned by sets of social policies such as those introduced here in earlier paragraphs. This is a broad proposition and, like all aspects of conceptualising the climate emergency as the extinction event that it is, it requires imagination. We must confront then, that through climate change, we *do* now face an extinction event and a cliff-edge over which we are bound to lurch if we do not seek to recruit our imaginations to think of and subsequently action alternatives and so I hope that in finishing this piece, imaginations are inspired.

Turning first to authoritarianism, there is surely truth in the assertion that, in order to ensure planetary and species survival, forms of undemocratic and authoritarian governance, the creation of a “state of exception” may ultimately be required; particularly where democracy fails to provide easily agreed upon solutions. To flesh out this point, I cross disciplines to take in political science and I draw on the recent work of Mittiga (2021). In his essay, Mittiga (2021) probes the question of whether or not the wielding of authoritarian power can ever be legitimate, particularly as it appears to run counter to fundamental tenets of rights-based democracy. However, the question, which may seem to evoke an instinctive answer at first, is qualified by the notion that governments are tasked with ensuring safety at times of emergency. To bear this out, Mittiga (2021) pointed to the many steps taken in what would be considered liberal democracies to keep people safe during the various stages of the Coronavirus pandemic. These were often steps which

may not have been what some of *the people* wanted, yet they were arguably steps that were nevertheless what the whole of the people needed. These were exceptional steps taken in a state of exception. He brings this analysis forward to ask, *could* and, indeed, *should* government power be similarly wielded as a means of beginning to take the necessary steps to allay the climate crisis. In doing so he first notes that...

As the climate crisis deepens, one can find a cautious but growing chorus of praise for “authoritarian environmentalism”. (Mittiga, 2021, p. 1)

...before going on to suggest that:

... it is undeniable that nearly all wealthy democratic states have failed to respond adequately to the climate crisis. By contrast, various less affluent authoritarian regimes have been successful in implementing stringent climate policies. (Mittiga, 2021, p. 1)

In posing the problem in the way that he does and in attempting to explore under what circumstances authoritarian climate governance might be conceived of as legitimate, Mittiga (2021) inadvertently poses a dilemma for social work in the context of the climate challenge. It is well documented that, both as a charitable endeavour and as part of a state apparatus, (Whelan, 2022a) social work has often been as much about ensuring social control as it has been about striving for social justice and in this respect, it is a profession that is arguably ideally placed to *do* the social control and the *soft-policing* that may be required in myriad ways as the climate crisis deepens (see Robinson et al., 2021; Dillon et al., 2021, for contributions on how social work adapted in potentially problematic ways during the Coronavirus pandemic). It may even be that if social work (as an entity operating across the domains of practice, education, scholarship and activism) does not take meaningful steps to confront climate justice as a real,

pressing and central concern, it will evolve without requiring much evolution to begin administering the mandate of the state in a climate context. It will not really need to morph to do so, so much as it will need to merely continue to exist in its current form. Social work must confront then, the looming authoritarianism that it may soon be expected to help enforce.

Yet, despite the number of harms that it has helped perpetrate, and undoubtedly there are many, social work has a long and strong history of critical thought (see Brake & Bailey, 1980; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Fook, 1993; Galper, 1980; Healy, 2000; Ife, 1997; Lavalette, 2011; B. Mullaly, 2002; R. Mullaly, 1993; Turbett, 2014, for just some examples). Various authors have also recently called for a reconstitution through dissent (Garrett, 2021), through disruption (Fieldman, 2021) or through a return to “ideas lying around” (Whelan, 2022a). There are also many fine examples of social work practice that affirm a commitment to social justice (for diverse examples, see the PAP [Poverty Aware Paradigm] in Israel (Krumer-Nevo, 2016); Promise Scotland, 2021 [Plan 21–24] and the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (Bywaters & Featherstone, & The Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, 2020), see also Fieldman, 2021 for numerous examples of social workers using “disruptive power” as a form of dissent in various contexts). Garrett (2021), for his part, has called for a re-alignment of social work through the introduction of a type of *neo-social work* which contests and problematises the idea that educators and practitioners should enforce the mandates of the state. As one part of calling for a dissenting form of social work, Garrett (2021, n.p.) suggests that social work should seek to “eradicate the harms caused to humans, other species and the planet by capitalism” denoting a strong consciousness of the need for social work to develop its green credentials in doing so. One way to arguably begin to achieve the

eradication that Garrett (2021) wrote about is for social work to align with sustainable social policies while advocating and, where necessary, agitating for their introduction and implementation as per the thesis at the heart of this contribution. Garrett's (2021) project is one which fundamentally challenges a managerialist conception of social work under neoliberalism and so builds on the radical foundation laid down by other scholars over many decades (see above) while also taking up the more recent work which has sought to accentuate the human rights component of the social work identity (see Fronek & Chester, 2016; Hyslop, 2018; Ife, 2018, for examples). In charting a similar path and through introducing the concept of disruptive social work, Feldman (2021, p. 15), while remaining conscious of the institutional challenges' social workers face, reminds us that:

Social workers are committed to social justice and human rights and they have an ethical responsibility to engage in *political action* [my emphasis] that contributes to the promotion and realisation of the profession's stated mission.

Engaging in political action may otherwise be interpreted as engaging in dissent. A core tenet of the mission Feldman (2021) references, particularly if we are to uphold an espoused and core mandate of social work, is now, surely, deeply intertwined with the need to react to the looming spectre of climate change. A telling piece of the global definition of social work, referred to in part here earlier, notes that the profession "engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing" (IFSW, 2022, n.p.). A key word in this very important sentence is the word *structures*. Social work, as a global entity, across practice, education, scholarship and activism must quickly and forthrightly seek to engage with and attempt to change structures as part of a response to the climate emergency. Indeed, it must become a central

and expressed goal of the global social work community to seek to reimagine and understand our critical interconnectedness as part of charting a path away from authoritarianism and toward dissent. Organising around a set of social policies which align well with both the fundamental values at the heart of social work and with a sustainable and just transition in the context of climate change is suggested here as being an effective starting point.

### Conclusion

The method employed in this contribution has been based on tentatively exploring and attempting to answer two questions. The first asks "What sustainable social policies should social work align with?" and the answer to this is presented as a means of progressing the task of social work in the context of climate justice. The second question builds on the answer to the first and asks, "Does arriving at an adequate response require dissent?". In answering this latter question, it is suggested that an adequate response may ultimately devolve upon either authoritarianism or dissent and that therefore, social work, as a global force, should, through a dissent which advocates and agitates for sustainable social policies, ensure its place on the *right side of history*, a place where it has not always been found. To return to the first question, the central thesis at the heart of this contribution suggests that, in order to permit a degree of focus, in order to place climate justice and the environment squarely on the social work agenda in a real, coherent and meaningful way across practice, education, scholarship and activism, aligning social work with sustainable social policies which naturally speak to the social work value base, provides a natural starting point. In terms of actual policies, I have suggested that a capability approach which encompasses universal basic services and a participation income have much to offer social work and fit naturally with the broad mission of the profession. Importantly, an

endorsement of sustainable social policies also provides a focal point for social work and, if needed, for dissent. If social work is to dissent, it must dissent *from* something. In this instance, social work may need to dissent in the context of how the climate challenge is managed, particularly if it is to avoid slipping on a type of *autopilot* basis into enforcing an authoritarian mandate on behalf of the state. However, dissent is, in reality, only one side of a coin and so, in order to meaningfully dissent, social work must also be prepared to offer alternatives. In this respect, advocating for rights-based and sustainable social programmes, arguably, naturally addresses what has previously been a theoretical, conceptual and practical lacuna.

Submitted: 27 January 2022

Accepted: 18 August 2022

Published: 23 September 2022

## References

- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2004). Acknowledgement statement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. *National Bulletin*, 14(1), 21
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford University Press.
- Atkinson, A. B. (1996). The case for a participation income. *The Political Quarterly*, 67(1), 67–70.
- Bailey, D. (2020). Re-thinking the fiscal and monetary political economy of the green state. *New Political Economy*, 25(1), 5–17.
- Baumberg, B. (2015). The stigma of claiming benefits: a quantitative study. *Journal of Social Policy*, 45(2), 181–99.
- Boetto, H., Bowles, W., Närhi, K., & Powers, M. (2020). Raising awareness of transformative ecosocial work: Participatory action research with Australian practitioners. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 29, 300–309.
- Bolton, R., Whelan, J., & Dukelow, F. (2022). What can welfare stigma do? *Social Policy and Society*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746422000185>
- Bonvin, J.-M. (2012). Individual working lives and collective action. An introduction to capability for work and capability for voice. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 18(1), 9–18.
- Bonvin, J.-M., & Laruffa, F. (2018). Human beings as receivers, doers and judges. The anthropological foundations of sustainable public action in the capability approach. *Community, Work and Family*, 21(5), 502–518.
- Bonvin, J.-M., & Laruffa, F. (2021). Towards a capability-oriented eco-social policy: elements of a normative framework. *Social Policy and Society*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000798>
- Brake, M., & Bailey R. (Eds.). (1980). *Radical Social Work and Practice*. Edward Arnold.
- Burchardt, T., & Hick, R. (2018). Inequality, advantage and the capability approach. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 19(1), 38–52.
- Burkett, P. (1999). *Marx and nature: A red and green perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bywaters, P., Featherstone, B., & The Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team. (2020). *The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report*. University of Huddersfield.
- Coote, A. (2021). Towards a sustainable welfare state: The role of universal basic services. *Social Policy and Society*, 1–11.
- Coote, A., & Percy, A. (2020). *The case for universal basic services*. Polity Press.
- Corrigan, P., & Leonard, P. (1978). *Social work practice under capitalism: A Marxist approach*. Macmillan.
- Czyzewski, K., & Tester, F. (2014). Social work, colonial history and engaging indigenous self-determination. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne de Service Social*, 31(2) 211–226.
- Dillon, J., Evans, F., & Wroe, L. E. (2021). Covid-19: changing fields of social work practice with children and young people. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2), 289–296.
- Dominelli, L. (2014). Promoting environmental justice through green social work practice: A key challenge for practitioners and educators. *International Social Work*, 57(4), 338–345.
- Drolet, J., Wu, H., Taylor, M., & Dennehy, A. (2015). Social work and sustainable social development: teaching and learning strategies for “green social work” curriculum. *Social Work Education*, 34(5), 528–543.
- Fanning, A. L., O’Neill, D. W., & Büchs, M. (2020). Provisioning systems for a good life within planetary boundaries. *Global Environmental Change*, 64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102135>.
- Feldman, G. (2021). Disruptive social work: Forms, possibilities and tensions. *The British Journal of Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab045>
- Ferguson, I. (2008). *Re-claiming social work: Challenging neo-liberalism and promoting social justice*. Sage.
- Ferguson, I., & Woodward, R. (2009). *Radical social work. Making a difference*. Policy Press.
- Fook, J. (1993). *Radical social work: A theory of practice*. Allen and Unwin.
- Fronek, P., & Chester, P. (2016). Moral outrage: Social workers in the third space. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 1–14.
- Galper, J. (1980). *Social work practice: A radical perspective*. Prentice-Hall.
- Garrett, P. M. (2021). *Dissenting social work*. Routledge.
- Gough, I. (2017). *Heat, greed and human need: Climate change, capitalism and sustainable wellbeing*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Gough, I. (2022). Two scenarios for sustainable welfare: A framework for an eco-social contract. *Social Policy and Society*, 21(3). pp. 460-472.
- Gray, C. (2019). "You look a little bit dark for my liking": Maori and Pasifika women's experiences of welfare receipt in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 31(1), 5-16.
- Harris, C., & Boddy, J. (2017). The natural environment in social work education: A content analysis of Australian social work courses. *Australian Social Work*, 70(3), 337-349.
- Healy, K. (2000). *Social work practices: Contemporary perspectives on change*. Sage.
- Hick, R., & Murphy, M. P. (2021). Common shock, different paths? Comparing social policy responses to COVID-19 in the UK and Ireland. *Social Policy & Administration*, 55, 312-325.
- Holbrook, A. M., Akbar, G. L., & Eastwood, J. (2019). Meeting the challenge of human-induced climate change: Reshaping social work education. *Social Work Education*, 38, 955-967.
- Hyslop, I. (2018). Neoliberalism and social work identity. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(1), 20-31.
- Ife, J. (1997). *Rethinking social work: Towards a critical practice*. Longman.
- Ife, J. (2018). Right-wing populism and social work: Contrasting ambivalences about modernity. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 3, 121-127.
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2022). *Global definition of social work*. <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2022). *The role of social workers in advancing a new eco-social world*. <https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-workers-in-advancing-a-new-eco-social-world/>
- Jacobs, M. D. (2009). *White mother to a dark race: Settler colonialism, maternalism, and the removal of indigenous children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Koch, M. (2021). Social policy without growth: Moving towards sustainable welfare states. *Social Policy and Society*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000361>
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2016). Poverty-aware social work: A paradigm for social work practice with people in poverty. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(6), 1793-1808.
- Laruffa, F. (2020). What is a capability-enhancing social policy? Individual autonomy, democratic citizenship and the insufficiency of the employment-focused paradigm. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 21(1), 1-16.
- Laruffa, F., McGann, M., Murphy, M. (2021). Enabling participation income for an eco-social state. *Social Policy and Society*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000750>
- Lavalette, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Radical social work today. Social work at the crossroads*. Policy Press.
- Lucas-Darby, E. T. (2011). The new color is green: Social work practice and service-learning. *Advances in Social Work*, 12, 113-125.
- Lynch, D., Lathouras, A., & Forde, C. (2021). Community development and social work teaching and learning in a time of global interruption. *Community Development Journal*, 56(4), 566-586.
- Maglajlic, A. R., & Ioakimidis, V. (2021). Social work and the quest for environment justice: A call to action. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(8), 2869-2871.
- Malier, H. (2019). Greening the poor: The trap of moralization. *British Journal of Sociology*, 70, 1661-1680.
- Marx, K. (1867/2013). *Das kapital*. Wordsworth.
- McGann, M. (2021). "Double activation": Workfare meets marketisation. *Administration*, 69(2), 19-42.
- Mittiga, R. (2021). Political legitimacy, authoritarianism, and climate change. *American Political Science Review*, 1-14.
- Mullaly, B. (2002). *Challenging oppression: A critical social work approach*. Oxford University Press.
- Mullaly, R. (1993). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory and practice*. McClelland and Stewart.
- Noble, C. (2016). Green social work: The next frontier for action. *Social Alternatives*, 35(4), 14-19.
- Oxfam. (2022). *Inequality kills. The unparalleled action needed to combat unprecedented inequality in the wake of COVID-19: Report*. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-kills>
- Patrick, R. (2017). *For whose benefit: The everyday realities of welfare reform*. Policy Press.
- Philip, D., & Reisch, M. (2015). Rethinking social work's interpretation of "environmental justice": From local to global. *Social Work Education*, 34(5), 471-483.
- Price, R. (1772). *An appeal to the public, on the subject of the national debt*. <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/14773/1/fulltext.pdf>
- Ranta-Tyrkkö, S., & Närhi, K. (2021). Striving to strengthen the ecosocial framework in social work in Finland. *Community Development Journal*, 56(4), 608-625.
- Robinson, K., Briskman, L., Mayar, R. (2021). Disrupting human rights: A social work response to the lockdown of social housing residents. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(5), 1700-1719.
- Sen, A. (1985). Well-being, agency and freedom: The Dewey lectures 1984. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82(4), 169-221.
- Sen, A. (1987). The standard of living. The Tanner lectures on human values 1985. In G. Hawthorn (Ed.), *The standard of living* (pp. 1-38). Cambridge University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Knopf.
- Sen, A. (2004). *Inequality reexamined*. Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Allen Lane.
- Sen, A. (2013). The ends and means of sustainability. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 14(1), 6-20.
- Smith, L. (2014). Historiography of South African social work: Challenging dominant discourses. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 50(2) pp. 305-313.

- Teixeira, S., & Krings, A. (2015). Sustainable social work: An environmental justice framework for social work education. *Social Work Education, 34*(5), 513–527.
- The Promise Scotland. (2021). *Plan 21–24*. <https://thepromise.scot/plan-21-24/>
- Turbett, C. (2014). *Doing radical social work*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Walker, G. (2012). *Environmental justice: Concepts, evidence and politics*. Routledge.
- Whelan, J. (2021a). Work and thrive or claim and skive: Experiencing the “toxic symbiosis” of worklessness and welfare reciprocity in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Sociology, 29*(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603520957203>
- Whelan, J. (2021b). Specters of Goffman: Impression management in the Irish welfare space. *Journal of Applied Social Science, 15*(1), 47–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1936724420983578>
- Whelan, J. (2021c). We have our dignity, yeah? Scrutiny under suspicion: Experiences of welfare conditionality in the Irish social protection system. *Social Policy & Administration, 55*(1), 34–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12610>
- Whelan, J. (2021d). *Welfare, deservingness and the logic of poverty: Who deserves?* CSP.
- Whelan, J. (2022a). On your Marx...? A world to win or the dismantlement of a profession? On why we need a reckoning. *The British Journal of Social Work, 52*(2), 1168–1181. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab132>
- Whelan, J. (2022b). *Hidden voices: Lived experiences in the Irish welfare space*. Policy Press.