

The origins of social care and social work: Creating a global future

Mark Henrickson

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It is common for introductory social work textbooks to have a section on the history of the social work profession, attributing its origins to the Charity Organisations Society and the Settlement Movement, from the second half of the 19th century, in both the United Kingdom and the United States. These two movements tend to be described as if they were both entirely secular, but also quite different in approach and totally independent of each other. In contrast, prominent social work academic (also an Anglican priest) Mark Henrickson rapidly dispels any notion that the modern social work profession (if it can indeed be called a profession, a theme explored in the book) has any monopoly on caring for people who experience deprivation, vulnerability or oppression.

In this volume, Henrickson ambitiously and, in my view, successfully overall, attempts to provide a comprehensive global history of expressions of care for the disadvantaged, with particular focus on the ideological, philosophical and theological foundations underpinning these practices. It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to conclude that some notion of caring for one another is an essential feature of being human; social care “has existed for thousands of years in all the societies that we know about” (p. 213).

Nevertheless, the book largely focuses on principles and practices of social care that have predominated in the Western world; as the author explains: “Love it or hate it, British social work history is what most social work in the world has adopted, evolved from, or is reacting against. If we

understand the implicit values, philosophies and theologies that have created that occupation, then we will be in a far better position to reassess those implicit drivers and make decisions about whether we need to retain or reform them” (p. 17).

Social care in Europe has been largely driven by Judaeo-Christian values, but Henrickson traces this even further back, as far as 2400BCE in the law codes of Urukagina of Lagash and Ur-Nammu. Principles, obligations and practices for caring for the poor contained within both the First and New Testaments of Christian scripture are explained in significant detail (although speculation about the relationship between Jesus and early Christian church, and the Essenes, while interesting, may be more detailed than is really relevant to the purpose of the book). It is interesting to note that, in contrast to recent tendencies among Evangelical Christians, especially in the USA, to decry government welfare and restrict intervention to individual charity, these Scriptures place substantial responsibility on “the king” (Psalm 72) highlighted in the chapter title “A royal responsibility”; even the famous “sheep and goats” passage (Matthew 25:31-46) could be read as focusing on “the nations”, i.e., collective groups rather than individuals.

Subsequent chapters, with titles including “Inventing the poor”, “Reforming the poor”, and “Capitalising the poor”, traverse the history of intertwined state and church responses to poverty from the second to 19th centuries CE, through various changes of theological, philosophical and political

winds over these times. The obligation of social justice within Islam as well as Christian traditions is acknowledged. Under a Cappadocian Catholic theology, the poor were identified with the incarnated Christ, so that caring for the poor was seen as caring for Christ Himself. Wealth rather than poverty was identified as a problem, obliging generosity on those who possessed it. Further “it was not necessary to assess the claims of the poor upon the church to see if they were worthy of assistance. John [Chrysostom] inveighed against the notion of the examination of the poor to see whether they merited assistance: ‘Let us have no more of this ridiculous, diabolical, peremptory prying’” (p. 53). In contrast, from the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, particularly under Calvinist theology, this identification of the poor with Christ gave way to an identification of wealth as a sign of the blessing of God, and an emphasis on individual responsibility for bettering one’s circumstances through work. Notions of deserving and undeserving poor predominated and underpinned Elizabethan English Poor Laws. Nevertheless, civic responsibility to care for the poor continued. In an interesting contrast with the current religious right-wing political co-option of the term “Evangelical”, English Evangelicals of the 18th and 19th centuries were strongly associated with progressive movements for social justice, including the abolition of slavery.

It is in this context that the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and Settlement House Movement arise in the later half of the 19th century, initially in London and spreading to the USA. Modern social work texts seem to avoid mentioning the religious roots of these movements, however Henrickson demonstrates that they were both profoundly Christian. Modern texts also tend to describe these as quite separate movements. The reality was significant inter-connection despite different modus operandi: key figures in both movements, Helen Bosquet and Octavia Hill (COS), Samuel Barnett (Settlement House, UK) and

Jane Addams (Settlement House, USA) had significant collaborative relationships with each other.

Moving into the 20th century, the book documents the advance of secularism and the growth of the welfare state, and the subsequent global destructive impact of neoliberalism. Subsequent to the Western concentration of much of the book, a further chapter explores other traditions of social care from South Asia, China and Japan. There is a particular focus on African traditions of *ubuntu*, which was adopted as the theme for World Social Work Day in 2021. The importance of decolonising social work is asserted, including acknowledging the tension between values of human rights that are often associated with Western individualistic societies, and the perspectives of more collective cultures.

The current state of social work is analysed in detail, including whether it can be identified as a profession (essentially yes, to some extent, in some places). One potentially controversial point is the tension identified between the professional ideal of altruism and social work’s location in statutory agencies including a significant role of social control. However I wonder if the dichotomy presented at this point is over-simplified. The author states that, “most statutory services, such as forensic social work (corrections, probation and youth justice) and even child protection are not in the strictest sense altruistic. They seek to enforce dominant social standards and codes rather than the welfare of a specific client” (p. 188). However, I would suggest that the motivation for most social workers in these services is not to enforce the law for its own sake but to care for and protect the most vulnerable. I recall the advice of a supervisor in the early days of my career in Aotearoa New Zealand’s child protection and youth justice agency, that our entire job was to “protect kids”, both to protect young children from abuse, and to protect young offenders from the irrational wrath of judges.

The book does provide some evidence of the adage that there is nothing new under the sun. Notions of the deserving and undeserving poor; a mixture of motives for caring for the poor consistent with a Marxist critique of the welfare state (expressed in Roman Emperor Constantine's expectation that "extreme poverty would be minimised, the poor would not riot, the wealthy would not have to look upon beggars on the street, and social stability and the reputation of the empire would be maintained" (p. 3)); the care vs control tension of social work ("a key task of the social worker is to navigate the tension between a client's 'rights' and wellbeing and that of the community or state" (p. 4)); and even proposals for a universal basic income are all shown as having a history of hundreds, even thousands of years.

Overall, the book is written in a very engaging style that captures and holds the reader's interest. One feature of the book is some rather interesting and possibly challenging vocabulary, that may be unfamiliar to qualified social workers or even academics, let alone students: "mendicancy", "prelapsarian", "fungible" and "euergetism" (which even attracted a red squiggly line from the Word spell check as I typed). However, rather than confusing or frustrating the reader, the writing style arouses curiosity to look these up. Indeed, on one occasion, this is supported with some humour; regarding the ancient city of Ur, home to the patriarch Abraham, the reader is encouraged "if you cannot locate Ur in

your mind, that's fine – go Google it now. I'll wait" (p. 24).

Henrickson concludes the book with a challenge for social work to critique its Western ideology, learn from diverse voices, and yet cohere around an identity that encapsulates what it can offer to a planet in crisis.

Different worldviews have much to learn from each other and can do so if each approaches the conversation with humility and respect and in good faith. Practitioners of social care of all sorts are informed by altruism, and, at the risk of over-generalising, I think all of us seek some form of just societies that ensure that every member can access a full measure of the social benefits available in that society. In our increasingly globalised age, we need now to consider a 'global society' as much as we have in the past considered collections of local societies. The consequences of the extreme gap between the very wealthy and the very poor, sustainability, the climate crisis, and global pandemics have highlighted the urgency of the global challenges we face in the 21st century. (p. 214)

A clear sense of identity is vital for social work as it seeks to respond to both local and global challenges. This book makes a vital contribution to developing this, and is highly recommended as vital reading for students, practitioners and educators.

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