

Social work histories of complicity and resistance: A tale of two professions

Vasilios Ioakimidis & Aaron Wyllie (Eds.)
 Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2023
 ISBN: 978-1447364283, pp.304, PDF, NZD88.30

Social work is not, de facto, a 'good' profession. That is the authors' central hypothesis. Rather, they, and the chapters' authors, argue that social work's presumed professional benevolence is not inherent in social work, but a fraught tension composed of awe-inspiring acts of resistance and alarming rates of complicity with State-sponsored and societal oppression. For the authors, this is not in question, and yet social work associations and governments are unwilling to admit to the harm they have perpetuated. This is what the authors seek to call out both local and international social work bodies for failing to address.

This tome is simply not an easy read. Whether recounting social workers partaking in illegal adoptions of people deemed enemies of the State in Spain (Chapter 7), acts of courage to the point of being 'disappeared' by State authorities in the Southern Cone (Chapter 8), or of social workers oppressing adopted peoples by unlawfully withholding information (Chapter 17), this volume challenges the very assumptions of social work's professional meaning. As told in each of the chapters, the distinction dividing this dichotomy of complicity or resistance contains no simple answer, but is contextually the result of, first and foremost, the State's influence on social work practice, closely followed by cultural elitism and other societal biases.

The rounded argument Ioakimidis and Wyllie seek to conjure is that, while some localised social work organisations have sought to

reckon with past complicity in injustice, the international social work community's silence on historic oppression of minority and vulnerable populations is untenable. They argue that, in order for healing to flourish where social work complicity has occurred, both local and international social work bodies must reckon with their past injustices against affected communities.

Dividing the book into five sections, the authors: (1) lay out their argument for facing social work's past; (2) consider the legacies of colonialism and racism within social work; (3) evaluate the ideologies which social work adopts out of complicity with the State; (4) examine social work complicity within State institutions and forms of detention; and (5) share the experiences of survivors subjected to current and historical social work injustices.

The book's five sections weave together a compelling, albeit incoherent at times, story of the ways in which the social work profession has been abused by the State or has abused those it claims to help. There is no shortage of powerful anecdotes. The strength of this approach highlights that, primarily, social work's complicity with injustice is not in question, rather the inaction of social work bodies in response to historic injustice is debated out of fear of undermining the professionalism of social work and uncertainty over who should be held responsible for historic injustice.

A key theme which highlights the complexity of identifying 'who' is responsible, is found

in Chapter 11, where Rich Moth, writing about the history of England's mental health institutions, argues, "State social work is better understood as a highly context-dependent form of institutional activity, conditioned by the nature of the welfare regime from which it emerges and within which it is situated" (p. 165). Amplifying this issue, Michael Lavalette, writing about popular social work in Palestine (Chapter 10), comments, "Professional interpretations (and many academic histories) of social work often ignore the contested nature of the social work project" (p. 148). Put simply, if social workers, and associations alike, are to seek to challenge their own past injustices, this must evolve in each local context where people have been discriminated against by the profession.

Bringing the debate to the issue of pedagogy, Caroline Bald and Akudo Amadiogwu brilliantly argue in "Decolonisation and critical social work pedagogies" (Chapter 16) that many roots of the oppression discussed in this book stem from the dominance of Western thought over indigenous and other forms of knowledge within education. The authors take aim at Western ideas embedded in theories, such as attachment theory, which perpetuate certain social norms that are specific to Western societies and tend to exclude non-Western concepts of community and family. Situated near the end of the book, this chapter serves as a valuable penultimate chapter to summarise the core issues identified in the preceding chapters: that education and

societal concepts (State-sponsored or other) influence social work practice to perpetuate social injustice.

Proclaiming the voices of the historically oppressed by hostile governments and, by clear extension, the social work profession, the book covers a broad range of issues and topics. For this reason, anyone seeking to read this material will undoubtedly be moved by the accounts told within, whether it be atrocities under Nazi Germany, illegal adoptions, mistreatment of refugees, ostracization of mental health patients, and anyone who finds themselves outside the expected norms of society.

For myself, having spent time working in child protection, I found myself equally moved and disturbed by the honest accounts by Guy Shennan in "We want social workers to hear our story": Learning from parents whose children were taken away" (Chapter 15). These accounts compelled me to stop, consider, and reflect. Anyone who chooses to read this volume will surely experience their own journey of reflection in one or more of the book's chapters.

The book's challenge can be summarised by Bob Pease's comments in "Facing the legacy of social work: Coming to terms with complicity in systemic inequality and social injustice" (Chapter 14), "As long as we see ourselves only as good people doing good work, we will remain defensive towards knowledge that challenges the premises of our work" (p. 227).

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