Social work and common sense:
A critical examination

Paul Michael Garrett
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This new book on common sense by Paul Michael Garrett is a welcome addition to followers of his substantial body of work. My own interest in common sense was piqued when I was writing an article about the ubiquitous and pervasive popularity of trauma discourse in social work practice and education (Beddoe et al., 2019). I was interested by the way concepts such as trauma and its practical application in so-called *trauma-informed practice*, became so deeply embedded in everyday practice (Beddoe et al., 2019) that they become ubiquitous. In exploring the way certain kinds of knowledge became privileged in social work, I was intrigued by the way *common sense* was posed as opposite to *expert* knowledge in social work and, indeed, in policy. I found that Hall and O'Shea's (2013, p. 9) idea that, in political discourse, common sense was positioned as arising in nature intriguing:

> [Common sense] is a compendium of well-tried knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices, some of which—like "a little of what you fancy does you good"—seem eminently sensible, others wildly inaccurate. Its virtue is that it is obvious. Its watchword is," Of course!". It seems to be outside time. Indeed it may be persuasive precisely because we think of it as a product of Nature rather than of history.

At the time, as a political trope it was emerging as a device simplistically employed in arguments against any intellectual approach to social work education.

As I write this review, Aotearoa New Zealand is governed by a right-wing coalition government that actively promotes uninformed opinion (from the ordinary kiwi battler, the man in the street or, most likely, the conservative, racist crony with links to very dodgy think tanks). The latter category includes the scary advisors who often have no desire for real solutions to social problems, only the enrichment of the landlord class, and the dilution or removal of any progressive policies that might foster equity and social justice. But in their echo chamber they support each other's reactionary views as common sense. *Good science* is cherry picked if it affirms their desire, for example, to promote tobacco usage or raise speed limits in cramped city streets and small towns. Or allow force in boot camps in the coalition's authoritarian response to young people in need and at risk. Genuine, properly designed, peer-reviewed research can just be ignored if it doesn't fit the narrative.

In February 2025, Trump called on common sense to justify every one of his reactionary executive orders even when these defied logic, evidence (Cohen, 2025) and the rule of law (Reich 2025), but rather were his opinions and a hat-tip to his wealthy mates.

So I was very pleased to see this new book published and to have the opportunity to engage again with these ideas. In his 2021 book *Dissenting Social Work: Critical Theory, Resistance and Pandemic*, Garrett explored the concept of dissenting social work which he described as practice in which social

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work "interrogates dominant ways of understanding the social world within the discipline" (p. 4). In the introduction to this new book, Garrett begins by arguing that dissent in social work may be stymied by notions of common sense: "the profession is often marinated in a cocktail of ideas, ideologies and toxic forms of reasoning, which may blunt more socially progressive ways of thinking and doing social work" (p. 3). As always in his work, Garrett explores the use of language in order to unpack the kind of thinking that dominates social work. Through a discussion of various topics this book explores the idea of common sense and its employment by politicians in the conceptualisation of social problems and their possible solutions.

Garrett argues (p. 16) that "common sense is not an ideology"; rather it is "derived from ideology, yet paradoxically often founded on a refutation of ideology". It is so useful to consider this notion while reflecting, for example, on the attacks on critical race theory, so despised and denigrated by those who would want to stifle advances to defeat White supremacy.

While common sense may manifest differently across the globe in hugely different societies, Garrett suggests five common components. The first of these is a shared dominant knowledge base that forms a basis of "modern thinking". Secondly, the social order associated with the neoliberal capitalist regime creates the stage where social work practice occurs. Citing Fisher (2009, p. 9), this stage is one on which "capitalist realism" constrains social work thinking. The third common component is that of professionalisation where social work is reproduced according to dominant ideas about what good social work is and challenging doxa is problematic. Current organisational dynamics require what Garrett calls "anxious and distracted forms of social work" (p. 8). This fourth element can be linked to wider pressures on public services and the targets and timelines beloved by neoliberal governance. Finally, Garrett points to the often-discussed friction between the social justice and human liberation aspirations of the international profession and the everyday practice of social work largely within the confines of the state. Notions of common sense as applied to, and within, the profession can be examined against the backdrop of these common elements.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed exploration of the theorisation of common sense. This is an illuminating survey of scholarly grappling with common sense as an idea shaped by dominant views of what is right and natural. Common sense, for example, has historically allowed for a justification of slavery and the oppression of women, grounded in structures of power we would now label as white supremacy and patriarchy but held as a natural order of social relations.

Drawing on the scholarship of Gramsci, Garrett situates common sense in history. The ideas labelled common sense do not just drop from the sky. They are often enduring ideas and emerge (and re-emerge) even when evidence refutes them: "Common sense provides a blurred, hazy and defective lens through which to view the world … Common sense does not rationally 'add up', but it can generate and still sustain tremendously potent (non)sense" (p. 43).

The chapters of the book explore a range of topics which canvass issues of importance for social workers: common sense and its impact in the emergence of a social problem, namely "unmarried mothers" in Ireland; and attachment theory and the crafting of common sense conceptualisations of the maternal.

While there are many useful and engaging chapters in this book, for this review I particularly want to focus on Chapter 6 as an essential reading for the times we live in. This short (yet packed) chapter is a thought-provoking exploration of anger. Garrett

argues that social work discussions on anger "tilt towards the disciplining of anger" (p. 130). He explores the contemporary disapproval as anger in the workplace is seen as being at odds with the prevailing ideas of teamwork and civility. Anyone who has ever surfaced their activism with passion at work is likely to have encountered the tone policing where the subject of the speech is lost in the discomfort about anger.

Garrett draws on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the enactment of many forms of oppression and exclusion of minoritised and dominated people and groups that aim to silence and control them. This silencing is also a state of ongoing epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) that privileges some knowledge and silences others (see Joy, 2025 for an example of social work scholarship employing this concept). The remainder of the chapter is a detailed discussion of the role of anger as a response to epistemic injustice, the silencing of dominated voices, where he draws heavily on the work of Bailey (2018).

This chapter is an important contribution to the social work literature, although it focuses mainly on the scholarship of sociologists and philosophers. As always, Garrett invites us to read further and deeper, interrogating everyday words for the discourses they speak to. Anger, when considered as a legitimate response to injustice, becomes a powerful tool of resistance, rather than a behaviour to be managed or policed.

Garrett notes the way professional language and behaviours in child protection for example, may represent issues in ways that undermine and exclude the ability of parents to communicate their own knowledge and perspectives.

There is vital thinking for social work to consider also about the silencing of us as social workers. So often I see (and experience) the attempts to silence resistance to political issues. Social workers so often make pious statements about being calm and respectful and doing dialogue without anger. My reaction is to be even angrier! If we are not reading/seeing/hearing things every day that make us angry then we really aren't paying attention. We don't owe abusers and oppressors our calm selves.

As Garrett notes, "dominant affective norms within the profession, undergirded by codes of ethics and systems of registration, can be associated with particular forms of 'tone management' … aiming to quell and dissipate anger" (p. 146). The symbolic violence of everyday practice in which we witness (and contribute to) "petty, daily humiliations and routinised misery" (p. 147) should make us angry. And garner that anger into actions of resistance.

The final chapter sets out some possible pathways for a new common sense for social work.

These are:

- "The common sense of a retrievable 'golden age' (or 'make social work great again')" (p. 242).
- "The common sense of 'it is what it is'" (p. 243); the banal maxim of neoliberalism social work.
- "The common sense of endism and abolitionism" (p. 244) where he argues briefly that we must confront the forces controlling the state rather than simply condemning it.
- Finally, Garrett sums up an approach to "The common sense that another social work world is possible" p. 244) arguing for the ongoing struggle and a call for solidarity.

Conclusions

While this book is a richly intellectual discussion and is likely mostly to be taken up by academics and researchers, Garrett has thoughtfully added a section to each chapter which provides a vignette and some useful

questions for reflection. There is much to explore in this book, and it is an important resource for those teaching critical social work and social policy.

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