

‘Radical Social Work’ by Roy Bailey and Mike Brake: A Classic Text Revisited

Steve Rogowski

Former children and families social worker, England

Correspondence: drbigpike@talktalk.net

‘Radical Social Work’ appeared in 1975, the year I began my social work career in the U.K. by being seconded by Derbyshire County Council to Lancaster University to complete a Diploma in Social Work (Certificate of Qualification in Social Work). I had previously worked in the Civil Service as an employment adviser with (the then) Department of Employment which genuinely, as compared to what happens now, tried to help unemployed people obtain suitable employment. In discussions with ‘claimants’ as they were then called, what struck me were the various other problems that many faced in addition to unemployment, for example in relation to physical and mental health issues. I wanted to do more to help in these other areas, hence eventually embarking on a career in social work when it was still the rising star of the human service delivery professions (Rogowski, 2010).

One of the first books I was introduced to was ‘Radical Social Work’, with one of the lecturers referring to a possible Robin Hood role for social work; essentially by having to tackle the rich to help the poor. The blurb on the cover refers to such matters as unemployment, poverty, urban decay, delinquency and alienation effecting advanced industrial countries and how social workers, ‘the frontline workers of the welfare state’, might paradoxically find that the justification for their profession lies in the maintenance of a social and economic system that is the cause of the ills they are employed to confront - and to which their everyday experience renders them fundamentally opposed. I well recall how

I used to, somewhat idealistically, argue that as a social worker I would be practicing to do myself out of a job by working towards a more just and equal society where social workers would not be needed.

The blurb continues that the book is radical in that the essays explore ways in which social ills may be resolved rather than concealed, and that it challenges received ideas in social work/education, many of which are seen as rooted in the rapacious benevolence of Victorian philanthropy. Other key questions addressed include how far the requirements for political organization and conscientization of the oppressed can override the immediate need to ease the distress of one family or individual?

In addition to the editors, the contributors are impressive, all being stalwarts of social work in the U.K. and elsewhere - Geoffrey Pearson, Peter Leonard, Stuart Rees, Stanley Cohen, Don Milligan, Crescy Cannan and Marjorie Mayo. Specific topics covered include homosexuality, welfare rights and community development, as well as more general issues concerned with social work and the welfare state.

The editors’ introduction sets the scene by adopting a Marxist approach in their analysis of the development of social welfare and social work. They emphasise the need to understand social welfare history and the state itself, the latter intervening in an attempt to solve problems intrinsic to capitalism, with both the problems and the intervention being integral to the capitalist mode of production. As for the historical

development of social work, there are references to such matters as the economic changes associated with the industrial revolution, the growth and fear of the poor leading to the Charity Organization Society and poverty relief administrators (the precursors of professional social workers). It is argued that individual aspects of poverty causation were the focus rather than structural and economic factors; this emphasis being ultimately associated with the development of Freudian-influenced casework. This orientation continued as the welfare state was established after the Second World War, culminating in the establishment of Social Services Departments in 1971. Meanwhile, social work courses also focussed on casework, mostly in an uncritical way with, for example, the 'caring' rather than the 'controlling' aspect emphasised. Instead, the argument here and in ensuing chapters is for a radical social work, one that considers and addresses the structural elements of poverty, deprivation and injustice that function to maintain capitalism. All the ensuing chapters are important, interesting and remain relevant today (see for example Lavalette, 2011). For me three stand out.

First, Peter Leonard's chapter outlines a radical praxis for social work by utilising Friere's concept of conscientization, a form of liberating education which creates critical consciousness. He advocates an integrated model of practice based on a revised systems theory (for example, Pincus and Minahan, 1973) which identifies four basic systems with which social workers interact: change agent, client, target and action. This schema widens the potential for social work activity linked with conscientization, which is designed to develop praxis by critical reflection on reality and subsequent action upon it. Such critical consciousness develops from an acknowledgement of the existing consciousness of the oppressed and from a mutual dialogue between all those concerned with the task of liberation. In terms of radical practice, there are four aims. First, education involves contributing to the development

in people of a critical consciousness of their oppression and of their potential, with others, to combat it. Second, linking people with systems involves facilitating the connection between individuals and those systems which might serve their interests. Third, building counter-systems involves facilitating linkages between people and various informal and formal systems. And fourth, there must be individual and structural responses to issues, this refers to responding to individual problems and difficulties but also including activities designed to further the critical consciousness of the individual concerned; it amounts to social workers working both within and against the current capitalist system or, put another way, being in and against the state (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1980).

Second, Stanley Cohen's chapter highlights the importance of providing political and sociological manifestos for social work action. He discusses the relationship between sociology, particularly the sociology of deviance, and social work including the oft quoted remark from practitioners when confronted by academics about their work: it's alright for you to talk. This refers to arguments about social work essentially being about social control with practitioners merely being agents of the state apparatus. More positively, deviancy theory and orthodox Marxism are offered as ways forward. Regarding deviancy theory, and related interactionism and labelling theory, there is a need not to label and thereby create and amplify deviant careers, with radical non-intervention being the result (see for example Schur, 1973). As for Marxism, rather than social control, practitioners should forge links with deviants and seek to provide general support for working class struggle. Clients/service users become political allies with the social worker being their defender, organiser and information provider. This approach is linked to the notion of the 'unfinished' which refers to practice being based on what does not yet exist i.e. fundamental societal change.

From all this, the key advice from Cohen is for radical practitioners to 'Stay in your agency Take every opportunity to unmask its pretensions and euphemisms In practice and in theory stay 'unfinished'. Don't be afraid of working for short-term humanitarian or libertarian goals, but always keep in mind the long-term political prospects' (p. 95). Like Leonard, being in and against the state is advocated.

The third chapter that particularly interested me was Marjorie Mayo's on community development, an aspect of practice work which, in turn, was a key method of social work in the U.K. - notably under the guise of community social work in the 1980s. She outlines its history in the British Empire, notably in India and Africa, in the U.S.A., particularly the 'War on Poverty' in the 1960s, and the Community Development (CD) Programme in the U.K. Regarding the latter, twelve CD projects were established in areas of multiple deprivation in 1969. They had a dual responsibility to both local people and the local authority, which led to various tensions and difficulties. Not least, their findings argued that multiple deprivation be re-defined and reinterpreted in terms of structural constraints rather than psychological motivations, so it is no surprise that they were wound up during the 1970s. Essentially, Mayo argues that community development is not necessarily radical in that it can be used to co-opt and repress rather than liberate or empower local groups and communities. Nevertheless, it can have radical possibilities as these CD projects indicate. Importantly, although working with local people might not necessarily be 'the spearhead of the movement for fundamental change in the economic, social and political structure of society [there are] fewer doubts about the potential contribution [this] can make to the struggles around immediate needs' (pp. 142-143).

One might ask what influence did 'Radical Social Work' have on my subsequent social work career which involved mainly working with children and families across five

decades, mostly in Oldham, N. W. England? I have repeatedly dipped into the book over the years and having read it again for this article, I was certainly struck by how many of its ideas and arguments have guided my practice (see, for example, Rogowski, 2013, 2016). This has included: establishing and working with claimants' unions and representing people at tribunals; group work with single parents, parents who had children on the child register/subject to child protection plans, young offenders and their parents; and work with local communities on issues they felt needed addressing. Then there has, of course, been the more usual casework approach to practice with numerous individuals and families. Here I want to elaborate a little more on work with young offenders and community social work (see chapters 3 and 4 respectively in Rogowski, 2016 for a fuller discussion).

In relation to young offenders, I worked from the premise that acts which can be labelled criminal are normal during adolescence and not precursors to adult crime - most young people literally grow out of it. Furthermore, intervention designed to prevent such acts is simply not possible and merely leads to deviancy amplification. The way forward, therefore, is to keep young people out of the youth justice system by systems management and monitoring strategies with diversion via cautions taking place wherever possible. Importantly, any intervention was largely limited to 'heavy end' offenders, those who face custody, and included alternatives to incarceration schemes utilising strategies such as group work (see Thorpe et. al., 1980). For example, during the late 1970s and the 1980s I organised and facilitated various groups for such offenders. These involved weekly group meetings based around recreational activities and group discussions. There were also short residential periods which enabled deeper relationships to develop between the young people and the adult facilitators (as well as myself other social workers, teachers, careers officers and local volunteers were involved). Importantly discussions

took place about offending behaviour and how this could be addressed. From a more critical/radical perspective there were also consciousness-raising discussions about possible causes of youth crime and how these could be tackled- including society being organised on more just and equal lines. I particularly recall facilitating discussions about the youth riots in Brixton and other urban areas in the U.K. during 1981 with the focus being on political, economic and social factors, arising from the introduction of the Thatcherite/neoliberal policies, which were at the root of the disorders. On one occasion such discussions occurred when the local police officer attended as a guest speaker. This certainly proved to be an eye-opening exercise, not least for him.

Community social work, drawing on the Barclay Report (1982), involves a change in the style of social work, with a focus on people defining their own needs as opposed to having them defined by experts; recognising them as having strengths and lacking power rather than having individual or family defects. One example that springs to mind relates to a single parent woman with a child subject to child abuse/protection concerns. Importantly, her situation was not dealt with in terms of individual pathology. While taking the wishes and feelings of her children into account, equally their mother's view of the problems and difficulties was also accepted, including her negative relationships and networks, notably with an ex-partner and many in the local community. Consequently, over ensuing months the focus was on, for example, lack of child care facilities, lack of money, housing repairs, loneliness and isolation, boredom and feelings of depression. Contact was made with the (then) Department of Social Security, electricity and gas companies, and Housing Department regarding financial and housing issues. Playgroup opportunities were arranged for her youngest child and the social services hierarchy were made aware of the need for more nursery/ playgroup places. Contact was also made with a local community centre and she eventually

became a volunteer and helped with the playgroup, later becoming involved with young people who were solvent users and participating in her estate forum (regular meetings of residents, local councillors and representatives of various agencies - housing, police, health, education, social services etcetera - which aimed to address the estate's problems). Eventually she started a local Parents' Aid Group - a support group for parents who had been or were subject to child abuse/protection investigations. At every opportunity discussions were framed in terms of the Thatcherite/neoliberal project which was in full flow at the time. In brief, in pursuing community social work our small team worked with deprived children and families from a critical/radical perspective: we aimed to address immediate needs while also trying to raise awareness and consciousness with clients/service users, local residents, other agencies and local politicians about the need for, and possibilities of, a more just and equal world.

Unfortunately, during 1990s social work saw the rise and now domination of managerialism. This restricted the space for critical/radical practice as practitioners were forced into the target-driven completion of bureaucratic processes aimed at rationing resources and assessing/managing risk. As a result currently critical/radical practice may have to manifest itself in 'quiet challenges' and resistance to managerial and business orientated discourses and practices (White 2009). For instance, mystifying or concealing knowledge of clients/service users in order to acquire resources; this amounting to the manipulation of knowledge and information on their behalf. Or again, delaying or exaggerating reports and assessments so managers are manipulated into taking a particular course of action. Ignoring, bending or re-interpreting rules and procedures may also have a role to play. Some might see this as deliberately dishonest and unacceptable, though surely it should be seen more in terms of exercising professional agency within highly managerial environments. Although group and community work

strategies are now rarely used by social workers in the U.K., politicisation and consciousness raising strategies can still be pursued, albeit on an individual basis, by talking with clients/service users and others about the societal, structural issues that lie at the root of their struggles and of social problems in general. In short, 'Radical Social Work' certainly still retains its relevance.

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