

Dissenting social work: Critical theory, resistance and pandemic

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Paul Michael Garrett has been a favourite author of mine since I was struggling with theorising my PhD findings. His series of articles encouraging social workers to engage with critical social theorists (see, for example, Garrett, 2007, 2020) helped me enormously to develop my understanding of social work's relationship with higher education and how that has impacted on professional identity in Aotearoa New Zealand (Beddoe, 2013, 2017). As an educator, Garrett's work is often where I go first when looking for a helpful chapter to support students to make the connections between social work and critical theory.

Garrett is an academic in the School of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Garrett has a significant body of work and this is his latest book—coming after his second edition of *Social Work and Social Theory* (Garrett, 2018a). In this 2021 publication, Garrett tackles some major challenges of our time and argues for social work solidarity and thoughtful activism.

Dissenting social work has a wide scope. Garrett discusses the central ideas of a dissenting social work with reference to major issues of the day: Black Lives Matter, surveillance capitalism, migration, colonisation and racism. These compelling areas of focus are explored in relation to a central argument that social work must have a dissenting voice. In Garrett's words, this book "contests the idea that educators and practitioners ought to serve as mere handmaidens or functional auxiliaries of

capitalism and the institutional orders that it requires" (p. 4).

Garrett sets out his argument in the first chapter, developed through an insightful consideration of what dissent is. First, he clarifies that all dissent (as oppositional practice) should not be "fetishised or unequivocally supported and valorised" (p. 7). In Aotearoa New Zealand social work, we have a recent example where social workers who were very strongly opposed to Covid-19 vaccine mandates levelled the accusation that pro-mandate colleagues were erroneously supporting a breach of their human rights, suggesting that the consequences of vaccine mandates for those who refuse made them dictatorial and tyrannical. This reflects a rejection of a collectivist response to a community crisis. Similarly, Garrett's position would frame free speech when some of its advocates demand the individual right to utter hate speech as a fetishisation of a human right. What matters in dissent is the outcome. Whose voice is heard, whose is silenced? Whose personal choice is valued and whose is to be removed, and to what end? Who is harmed by free speech without limits? Garrett argues that our social work principles, set in the IFSW definition, should guide us.

Garrett also points out that dissent and social critique in general can be appropriated and diluted, or as he elegantly puts it "slyly abducted" (p. 7). His earlier book, *Welfare Words*, is full of excellent examples of this linguistic appropriation (Garrett, 2018b). There are wonderful examples for students of social policy when words such

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as “resilience” and “sustainability” have left their more nuanced origins and come out of the mouths of chief executives and “human assets” managers as they set about restructuring their organisations.

The positionality of the dissenter must also be taken into account. We may, for example, take for granted particular meanings given to rights that may not be perceived as universal from cultural perspectives other than our own. In choosing to push back against unjust practices across social work we have hugely varied access to power, resources, and a platform for our views. It takes time and energy to create a platform. Garrett calls for social work dissent to be organised and collectivist in nature rather than seen as an individual action. And in the kind of micromanaged, surveilled workplaces so many of us work in right now, solidarity is important.

The main body of the book comprises 10 chapters that focus on the ideas of a particular social theorist as a source of material for exploration of what dissent might encompass. Marx, Foucault, Zuboff, Ranciere, Wacquant, Arendt, Levinas, Fanon and Gramsci are included. For brevity, I have selected three chapters to discuss in this review.

In Chapter 2, Garrett returns to Marx for his critique of capitalist society and the critical ethical stance of looking at what may be concealed below the surface of social systems. Marxist analysis, Garrett argues, provides a critical foundation for dissenting social work and its lens can be applied to an analysis of the work of social work. Social work, like other professions, has become increasingly “proletarianised and subjected to labour processes which are more pressurised, routinised, surveilled and increasingly vulnerable to incessant demands for output data” (p. 47). In many other ways, social workers share many of the features of life in neoliberal capitalist countries. Short-term contracts, shrinking budgets, creeping privatisation and the relentless cruelty of austerity measures where, simultaneously,

the mega rich extract huge profits while those at their mercy struggle for living wages and decent housing. Marxist analyses call for social work solidarity with other workers and progressive movements. In this chapter, Garrett returns to well established tenets of radical social work but considers these in the light of current socio-political trends.

The theme of surveillance appears in Chapter 4, which explores the work of Shoshanna Zuboff on surveillance capitalism. Essentially, the focus of this work is on the massive scale extraction of profits available to the big tech giants through tracking human activity (likes, clicks, friends, interactions, movements, consumption and so forth) and the extent to which this invades human privacy. As he does throughout this book, Garrett notes the contradictions that emerge during the current pandemic. Social work has, to large extent, embraced technology during the periods of lockdown because of its enabling features. Relationships and services could be sustained through video conferencing, smartphone apps. Telehealth has received an unprecedented boost. I have recently reviewed a number of articles that report research about adoption and innovation of technology in social work practice over the last 20 months. Technologies enable us, as citizens and workers, to stay connected, employers have embraced “work from home” and cheerfully noted the savings as we home workers pay for our own utilities, wifi and coffee! The dark side of this of course is that we have become dangerously reliant on these large private corporations, who hold a massive amount of personal information about us, and who, furthermore, pay minimal tax. These factors coalesce in a complex web of systems representing an enormous transfer of public resources into the pockets of a handful of mega-rich people along with embedding significant dependence on the organisations we rely on, and interact with, every day.

Most significantly for social work, the misuse of big data in surveillance of clients and

families is a potent threat. For a recent local example of this concern, Ballantyne (2021) has explored the policy proposals associated with the White Paper for Vulnerable Children. He focused his study on plans to create a digital information system called the Vulnerable Kids' Information System in Aotearoa New Zealand. This was a plan to test and trial a predictive risk modelling tool based on an algorithm that would generate a risk score for all new-born children in Aotearoa New Zealand, that would be used to target interventions which, in theory, would prevent harm to *at-risk* children before it occurred. For further exploration of this phenomenon in three countries (including Aotearoa New Zealand) see also Jørgensen et al. (2021). This is a big chapter that traverses many major concerns with technology and embeds a critical perspective focused on interrogating contradictions. "We need to figure out how the technology is being used to either entrench or potentially erode class power" (p. 96). Keen social work readers might want to turn to *Automating Inequality: How High-tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (Eubanks, 2017) to develop their understanding of how technology can be appropriated by the state to surveil people in poverty.

Last, but not least, in this very selective review, the contribution of Frantz Fanon is examined in Chapter 9. Fanon was a Black psychiatrist, writer and activist, born in Martinique but who undertook much of his work in north Africa. Garrett argues that Fanon is important, primarily due to the current global challenges of resurgent fascism and ongoing efforts at decolonisation. Garrett notes that Fanon does not feature in social work literature very frequently but can be helpful to dissenting social workers. Fanon's work on racism and his depiction of the violence done both physically and psychologically to people subjected to it underscores the Black Lives Matter movement and calls on us to challenge the appalling loss of Black lives in deaths caused by the functionaries of powerful institutions of white supremacy.

Garrett asserts the ongoing relevance of Fanon's work to the profession's drive to address our complicity with colonialism and support the decolonisation project. Fanon's professional work engages deeply with critical reflection that feels remarkably contemporary and will resonate with those working with historical trauma. Many social workers in Aotearoa will find this chapter an excellent introduction to the work of Fanon, enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics of racism and capitalist extraction over place and time.

Aotearoa New Zealand readers will find much of value in this challenging text. If I have one point of critique it is that, at times, Garrett tries to do too much and cover off too many complex issues. Taken as a whole, though, it will provide a curious student with a helpful journey through critical theoretical perspectives with insightful links to our current world in flux.

I am pleased to recommend this book as an excellent resource for social work students at all levels, and for practitioners who still enjoy reading social work theory! For postgraduate students and researchers, Garrett always impeccably references both theoretical works and scholarly research and offers a rich resource for those seeking to make connections from sociological theory to social work in our current climate.

Finally, for those readers who want to listen to Garrett in conversation with Ian Hyslop about dissenting social work, check out the *Reimagining Social Work* podcast (Hyslop, 2021).

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