



# SOCIAL WORK AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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The ,Human‘, the ,Social‘ and the Collapse  
of Modernity

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# The context

- Neo-liberalism
- Neo-fascism
- Trump
- Brexit
- Racism and xenophobia
- Climate change
- Other ecological crises
- Global conflict
- Crisis in democracy

# Human rights in the current context

- It is both harder and more important to think about human rights and what they mean.
- Ideas of human rights in the West used to be widely accepted, but now under challenge.
- Many human rights are under threat.
- Immigration, refugees, welfare state provisions, security of work, privacy, freedom from intimidation, rights violation on-line, etc
- So the idea of human rights needs to be defended.

# Critiques of human rights

- Familiar critiques of human rights from 'the left' or progressive politics.
- Feminist critique: conventional human rights as patriarchal, privileging the rights of men in the public space.
- Postcolonial critique: human rights have been defined within a western world view, imposed on other cultures. Universalism as colonialism
- Postmodernist critique: human rights as modernity, seeking to impose a single unified rational order, devaluing context and cultural difference.

# Neo-liberal human rights

- Neo-liberalism mistrusts human rights.
- Accepts the right to freedom of expression, including the right to insult and offend.
- And the right of ownership of property.
- Beyond this, human rights are seen as eroding 'freedom'.
- This does not acknowledge the right to be culturally active, educated, healthy, secure and articulate citizens
- Rather, neo-liberalism promotes the rights of corporations and their protection.

# Rights, freedoms and responsibilities

- Rights are not the same as freedoms
- Freedom implies that we can exercise our 'rights' however we want, regardless of others.
- But *rights* also imply *responsibilities*. Without them rights lose their social context.
- The responsibility to exercise our rights responsibly: e.g. freedom of expression that does not offend or demean others, property ownership that does not exclude others, etc.
- Human rights mean responsible citizens.

# Western Enlightenment Modernity

- We have seen both 'rights' and the 'human' who has the rights from the point of view of Enlightenment Modernity.
- The ideal human is assumed to be individual, young, male, secular, able-bodied, white.
- Anyone else is ascribed 'human rights' to make them more like the ideal: the rights of women, children, people with disabilities, religious minorities, the aged, Indigenous People, refugees, etc.
- This deficit view leads to colonialist and condescending practice, 'social inclusion', which disempowers and devalues difference.

# The world is changing

- Neo-liberal globalisation and the dominant narratives of Western Modernity are losing their legitimacy.
- The future will be unpredictable and chaotic, not ordered and predictable as we Westerners would like.
- Social work will be important because it is SOCIAL work.
- Social work is about relationships, the collective, the social, and stands against the dominant individualism that has characterised neo-liberalism.
- And human rights are important because they are HUMAN rights, affirming the primary values of humanity

# Values of humanity under attack

- From economic rationalists who seek to devalue humanity in the interests of 'the economy'
- From technology which is replacing human activity with computers, robots and artificial intelligence
- From the ecological movement in the Anthropocene, arguing the need for a less anthropocentric world view.
- So we need to re-evaluate what we mean by 'humanity' and 'human values'.

# The law, lawyers and human rights

- The individualist bias in the law. Most laws regulate individual behaviour. We seek a scapegoat, someone to 'take the blame' rather than focus on systemic issues.
- The law is negative. We are 'free' to do what we want unless the law tells us otherwise. So the law tells us what we *mustn't* do rather than what we *should* do. Hence a concentration on preventing human rights violations rather than promoting human rights and the achievement of humanity.
- The law is essentially top-down. It is enacted by politicians and enforced by governments. There is little room for participation or for other voices than those of powerful elites.

# Social work is different.

- Social workers work with relationships, not individuals. They therefore move beyond the individualism of the law in understanding humanity and human rights. This includes collective practice, and systemic analysis.
- Social work is about promoting more fulfilling lives, so it can counter the negativism of the legal approach to human rights. It can include an analysis of what people should do – ethical behaviour – as well as what they mustn't do. Ethics is a real strength of social work.
- Social work is able to work bottom-up, not just top-down, especially in community development aspects of practice. Human rights require relationships. Human rights from below.

# Human rights based social work

- Human rights can help social work move beyond the conservatism of therapeutic practice which aims to help people 'adjust', and the temptations of judgements of 'the deserving'. Rather, we work with people who have rights, and those rights need to be met.
- Human rights based practice also concentrates on what social workers do well, and lawyers don't do so well: relationships, the social, community, morality, ethics and values.

# The human

- The definition of 'human' is contested, e.g. children are not given some 'human' rights. The denial of 'humanity' to various groups.
- Human rights have been based on the ideal 'human' of the European Enlightenment.
- The exploration of the human, and what it means to be human, is essential for human rights and social work.
- So the Humanities should be central for social workers, as well as the social sciences: history, literature, art, philosophy, music, theatre (and not just Western European traditions).

# Asserting the values of humanity

- It is time for social workers to stand up and make their presence felt and their voices heard.
- We must oppose political forces that clearly violate social work values and ethics.
- So we need a strong but nuanced vision of humanity
- We are at a time of change and crisis. Social workers are good at working with change and crisis.

# A paradox.

- There is a strong need to reaffirm the values of humanity.
- But at the same time we live at the time of the Anthropocene, when anthropocentrism has devastated the 'natural' world, caused climate change, and is rapidly making the earth increasingly hostile as a habitat for humans (and other species)
- So we also need to decentre humanity. We have to become more eco-centric in our world view, recognising interdependence with the rest of the natural world.
- To do this we need to listen to Indigenous People who understand this interconnection in ways the West has forgotten.

# Human privilege?

- Social workers understand privilege: white privilege, male privilege, class privilege, age privilege, ability privilege, sexuality privilege, etc.
- We now need to add human privilege as a concern for social workers.
- This means we cannot only talk about *human* rights.
- Ideas of 'community' cannot just be about humans.
- Decentering humanity, 'rights of Mother earth', and so on.
- Neither exploiting nor romanticising 'nature'.
- This is a major challenge which will become more urgent

# Social Work Action: 1. Affirming humanity

- Standing against neo-liberalism
- Standing against the values of the far right
- Collective social work advocacy
- Being overtly political
- Confronting racism, xenophobia, the obscenity of increasing inequality, the assault on democracy, increased surveillance.

## Social Work Action 2: Social Movements

- Social work must stand with, and be part of, social movements working for change
- This has always been important: the peace movement, the labour movement, the feminist movement, the human rights movement, and so on.
- Contemporary social movements are often temporary and fragmented, e.g. Occupy.
- They are also often in the virtual world, social media, etc.
- But they are important movements for progressive change.

## Social Work Action 3: Community Work

- There are unlikely to be many resources for individualised professional services.
- Collective, community-based solutions will be required.
- Human rights require strong communities.
- Social work has a long tradition of community-based work, often devalued. This needs to be reaffirmed.
- The most likely locations for innovative practice and progressive alternatives are marginalised communities. Change is driven from the margins.
- Social workers work with marginal communities, so can be key workers for progressive change.

## Social Work Action 4: Ecocentric Practice.

- Redefining 'social' and 'community' in ways that extend beyond the human.
- Relationships with animals, plants, land, and so on.
- Locating social problems, families, etc within their ecological environment.
- Learning from Indigenous People.



# Crisis, change and uncertainty

- The future is one of crisis, change and uncertainty
- But times of crisis are times of opportunity
- Social workers are expert at dealing with crisis, change and uncertainty. It is what we do best.