

Being a Radical Social Worker in Reactionary Times by Michael Reisch

Keynote Address to the 25th Anniversary Conference of the Social Welfare Action Alliance

Washington, DC – June 10, 2011ⁱ

Since the formation of the Social Welfare Action Alliance twenty-five years ago, in virtually all industrialized nations, economic globalization, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the failure to respond adequately and equitably to increasing demographic and cultural diversity have exacerbated social inequalities and the tensions that accompany them. Within the context of an ascendant neo-liberal paradigm, these forces have also transformed the goals and distribution of power within social welfare institutions and the nature of social work practice itself. In order to remain viable actors in this dramatically new political-economic and ideological context, social workers will have to re-conceptualize their relationship to the state, the market, service users, and the community and revitalize the role for politics in their individual and collective work. I believe radical social workers can play a critical role in these essential processes.

During the past quarter century, the pressures of economic globalization within a world system in which market values are ascendant have undermined many of the fundamental assumptions, values, and goals of social work: for example, about the relationship between government and social welfare. This is best illustrated by the impact of welfare reform, managed care, and recent proposals to drastically reduce social welfare spending.

During the past quarter century, there has been a marked increase in income and asset inequality in the U.S.; the growth of capital's power over labor; widening insecurity of employment; the declining social character of work; the destabilization of communities; and the

decline in public's faith in government as a problem-solver. Ongoing ideological attacks, the contraction of state-funded services, and the spread of regressive modes of taxation have undermined public confidence in the state's potential to create effective services. Social services, formerly regarded as components of citizenship, have been redefined as vehicles to "enable" individuals rather than enhance their well-being. Private, often smaller organizations are now the "support of last resort," providing goods and services the state has eliminated or significantly reduced. The spread of market mechanisms has had deleterious effects on nonprofit agencies' mission, culture, values, patterns of employment, and norms of inter-organizational cooperation. Recent fiscal cuts will exacerbate this situation, particularly at the local level.

Let's look briefly at the situation we are facing:

The nature of poverty in the U.S. is changing. In 2011, the official U.S. poverty rate was 15.1%, over 46 million people, a 15 year high. Over 25% of African Americans and Latinos now live below the poverty line; they are 2.5-3 times more likely to be poor. As the extent of poverty increased, so have its depth and chronic nature, particularly among persons of color and female-headed households. Nearly 1 of 8 African Americans and over 10% of Latinos experience "deep poverty," defined as below 50% of the Federal poverty line. Over 20% of poor individuals are chronically poor (i.e., remain poor for a year or more); African Americans, Latinos, and female-headed households are over five times more likely than Whites to experience chronic poverty. On average, individuals in poverty have a one in three chance of escaping in a given year, although this probability is much lower among African Americans, Latinos, female-headed households, and larger families. Roughly half of those who escape poverty, however, become poor again within five years.

The duration of poverty spells is compounded by the widespread experience of poverty among Americans. More than half of the population experiences an episode of poverty during their lifetime of one year or more, and over 3/4 of the population experiences at least a year of near poverty. Even more striking is that 91% of African Americans will experience poverty at some point in their lives.

Children constitute the demographic cohort most likely to be poor, a phenomenon unprecedented in industrialized nations, which has both social and fiscal consequences. Children who experience extended periods of poverty are less likely to finish high school and go to college. They are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice and to develop chronic illnesses. In addition, each 1% increase in child poverty costs the nation approximately \$28 billion/year. Women, particularly elderly women and single parents, are also more likely to be poor at every educational level. In fact, the U.S. has the highest rate of poverty for female-headed households among 22 industrialized nations, about three times higher than average.

Poverty in the U.S. is no longer confined to depressed inner city neighborhoods or isolated rural areas. It increased recently in all regions, particularly in the South and West, and in suburban areas as well. Over 3.4 million homeowners defaulted on their mortgages in 2009 alone. To make matters worse, by some accounts the poverty rate is underestimated by half because it excludes homeless persons, people who are incarcerated, and individuals who are “doubled up” and living with family members. It also fails to consider the higher cost of living in many metropolitan areas. According to recent data, if the poverty line was raised to \$25,000/year for a family of four, about one-third of the U.S. population (100 million persons)

would be poor. It is estimated that half of all adults in the U.S. today are at economic risk in terms of their levels of literacy, education, and health care.

One reason why poverty has become more widespread, chronic, and intense is that the nature of work is changing. In the U.S, the most common cause of poverty today is job loss or a reduction in wages. While the official unemployment rate is just over 9% estimates of the actual unemployment rate range as high as 23%. Last year, the proportion of workers who worked full-time at least 50 weeks dropped to 80%. These may be signs of a permanent shift in employment patterns. Since 2008, over half of all workers have either experienced a pay cut or a layoff, and the percentage of workers facing long-term unemployment (more than 26 weeks) increased from 34 to 43%. Without unemployment insurance, an additional 3.3 million people would be counted as poor. Without Social Security benefits, 20 million more Americans would be officially poor.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly Food Stamps) now aids over 43 million people, up more than 50% since December 2007. Over 30 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program, an increase of 20%. Medicaid now serves over 50 million people, up 15% in the past three years. These increases have created an enormous fiscal burden on state governments, which are already reeling from the effects of declining revenues and growing demand for social services. In response, some states have lowered the amount of time families could receive TANF benefits, tightened mandatory work requirements, or imposed drug testing requirements as a determinant of eligibility. Others have cut families from their Medicaid roles or denied coverage for certain health procedures. During the past two years, at least 46 states have cut services to vulnerable populations and more cuts are likely in the years ahead..

The prospects for the future, therefore, are not encouraging. A simulation conducted by the Brookings Institution projects that the overall poverty rate will increase to nearly 16% by 2014 (+10 million) and the child poverty rate will increase to nearly 26% (+ 6 million). If this is correct, by 2014 nearly 50 million Americans, 20 million of them children, will be in poverty.

Perhaps a more ominous indicator for the U.S. is the widening gap in income, wealth, education, skills, and health status between classes and races. The gap between the poverty line and median family income has widened considerably over the past four decades. The top 1% of all households earned 22 times as much as the bottom 20% in 1979. Today, they earn 70 times as much. The top 1% of all U.S. households now has as much total disposable income as the bottom 40%. Even before the current crisis, the top 1% of all households had as much income to spend as the bottom 40%, the largest share of after-tax income since 1979. The share of national assets owned by the richest 1% of households has grown from one-fifth to over one-third of all private wealth, the most unequal distribution of the nation's wealth since 1928 – the eve of the Great Depression. Inequality has increased several reasons, including the decline in unions, outsourcing of jobs, stagnation of wages, a decline in the value of public assistance benefits, and changes in the nation's occupational structure and corporate culture.

By 2050, a growing population of elderly people, nearly two-thirds of them White, will need to be supported by fewer workers, over half of whom will be persons of color. Just to maintain Social Security benefits at current levels, we will have to provide educational and social supports for today's children to enable them to earn an average wage that is 1.5 times more than at present. Without dramatic improvements in such supports, particularly for children of color, low-income children, and those from immigrant families, by the middle of the 21st century they

will be economically worse off and unable to sustain our current levels of health and income support for the elderly. Unless current policy trends are reversed, the U.S. is on a self-destructive course that could transform the American dream into a nightmare.

For several reasons, the people with whom we work are not only poorer, they are increasingly powerless. First, the forces which possess a monopoly of strategic resources are guided by fundamentally different premises about the purpose and nature of welfare systems from those which guide social work practice. Second, the principal actors within the welfare system, including many social workers, have scant influence over decisions regarding environmental uncertainties. Finally, these actors often cannot even anticipate what these decisions will be. This produces an interesting paradox: change can only occur through structural challenges to the existing regime, yet those who promote change must operate from a situation of resource, power, and information deficiency.

In this new regime, independence is defined as acquiescence to the values and goals of neo-liberal institutional forces, whose center of power has shifted from the state to the corporate sector. One consequence is the increasing depersonalization of the relationships between individuals and institutions. This reflects both growing power imbalances in U.S. society and the increasing privatization of social life. Another consequence is reflected in social work practice: the focus has shifted from personal maintenance to behavior modification; from long-term stability to short-term outcomes; and from voluntary to compulsory participation in the welfare system's rules.

During the past quarter century, despite these dramatic changes, the gap between the profession's rhetorical emphasis on social justice and social change and the increasingly

conservative features of its practice has widened. These dramatic changes have been rationalized, however, within social work's "master narrative," which still portrays the profession in terms of social justice and empowerment. This master narrative, which incorporates the ideology and discourse of the dominant culture, frames our practice issues and policy agendas, constructs an assumed normative experience, and defines social and political rights and duties. It influences our ideas about reason, science, and values; shapes our self-concepts and our conceptions of those with whom we work; and directly and indirectly leads to a process of inclusion or exclusion of ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes. It defines what constitutes "normal" behavior and produces expectations for individuals, groups, and organizations to conform to that behavior.

For most of the past century, social work's master narrative has reinforced its self-image as a benign instrument of progress and human amelioration, even as it has distorted the profession's historical memory and served as a means of justifying the profession's status aspirations -- most recently through licensing laws and regulations, the use of a medical model to inform practice, and the wholesale embrace of positivism and empiricism in social work research. In this process of inadvertent goal displacement, major organizations like CSWE, NASW, and SSWR have played key roles. They have institutionalized the implied (if unstated) relationship of the profession to the nation's market-oriented political-economy. Instead of challenging the roots of social problems, we are encouraged to channel clients' needs within existing parameters. Social justice rhetoric masks the social control functions this produces.

Let me give you an example from recent professional statements: Official documents promote the expansion of people's capacity "to address their own needs," and the empowerment

and liberation of people “to enhance [their] well-being,” but emphasize that such changes are more likely to occur “if *individuals* could be helped to move up and eventually out of the engulfing vortex of personal maladies and slum conditions *through improvement of their own moral and physical capacities, with the aid of helpers*” who serve as “change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve.” Thus, while the profession’s vocabulary is change-oriented, its practice largely focuses on adaptation.

The theoretical constructs which have been most influential in shaping social work practice also reflect the structure of the master narrative. These include the linearity of bio-psycho-social and spiritual needs which reflect the presence of a universal, static, individually-oriented hierarchy, which people pursue rationally; and the notion of fixed boundaries of various environmental systems. These theories largely assume as “normal” a benign relationship between individuals and their environments in which well-being is the natural state of people, communities, and organizations. Although they portray the individual as embedded within the environment, the theories subtly imply the separation of the individual from the environment and a sequential, rather than concurrent, impact of environmental forces on human needs and our individual efforts to satisfy them. They frequently neglect the influence of history and institutions on people’s lives. Finally, by equating difference with deviance, they apply a thin veneer of cultural sensitivity to universal norms and models of behavior.

Social work’s master narrative has also defined our conceptualization, production, and dissemination of knowledge. The growing emphasis on intervention research, “evidence-based practice,” and sophisticated quantitative methodologies have been rationalized as means to enhance the quality of social work scholarship, improve the effectiveness of social services, and

strengthen the competitive position of the social work profession in the occupational and academic marketplace. On a more subtle level, however, they may also be ways to reassert the master narrative in the face of emerging theoretical, methodological, and political critiques.

These changes have been introduced with little assessment of their effects on the long-standing mission of social work and the character of schools and social service agencies. For example, by promoting research on the effectiveness of established interventions as a means of addressing contemporary social problems, rather than analyzing their structural roots, we are led to accept these problems as inevitable, as conditions to be managed rather than eliminated. This trend has been reinforced by the funding priorities of government agencies and foundations. It ultimately rationalizes existing hierarchies between social service agencies and service users.

Historically, social workers, particularly radical social workers, have attempted to base their knowledge on a combination of experiential and empirically-researched realities, in which clients were actively involved. Traditional professionalism, however, relies on the application of expert knowledge of a particular type to control the worker/client relationship. An implication of current research trends is that knowledge based on experience is devalued and “private” while knowledge based on observation is labeled science and becomes public.

Finally, the prevailing master narrative shapes many assumptions about social work practice, e.g., the voluntary nature of worker-client interactions, the benign relationship between government and the nonprofit sector, and the role of scientific objectivity in shaping the parameters of practice. It shapes the vocabulary of the profession and public perceptions of those who require and receive social services, although it has been influenced by institutional and ideological forces whose goals and values are opposed to those social workers profess.

Understanding the implications of this master narrative is critical if we are to translate the profession's social justice rhetoric into reality because such efforts require constant attention to the processes of creating and sustaining change and to how societal institutions construct and reproduce conceptions of "truth." A critical posture also enables people who are oppressed to exert dignity and agency in the presence of dehumanizing circumstances. Since the institutions created by the dominant culture are designed to preserve established systems of power and privilege, radical social workers must attempt to challenge and destabilize the status quo before any changes we desire can be implemented. One way to do this is to subvert the ways the master narrative rationalizes inequalities of power and resources, often in subtle and unrecognized ways. In the case of social work, it involves overcoming the fear of challenging the very structures which provide the profession with sanction and support.

Because of the unprecedented and interlocking nature of the current economic, fiscal, and social crises, there are no clear road maps to follow. It may be difficult for radical social workers to acknowledge that policies and strategies that worked in the past may no longer be effective because the context has changed so dramatically, or that past approaches may not be feasible in today's acrimonious political climate. While it is widely acknowledged that problems such as economic inequality, immigration, epidemic disease, and environmental degradation must be addressed in a cross-national context, and that issues such as welfare, health care, education, employment and immigration are inseparable, our policy-making apparatus remains locked in anachronistic patterns. This has increased the vulnerability of entitlement programs to political and ideological attacks, just when their fate is particularly critical as the population ages and the economic and demographic effects of globalization mount.

One long-standing obstacle to the radicalization of social work has been its professionalizing impulse. It is important, therefore, for radical social workers to address the enduring question as to whether radical social work and professionalism can co-exist. The answer to this question is complicated by differences in how professionalism is conceived. Is professionalism a means of perpetuating dominant cultural values, hierarchical relationships, patronizing views of those who receive services, and individualistic, top-down views of change? Is it merely an outgrowth of capitalist modes of production and consumption, an attempt by an organized occupation to monopolize the distribution of a service commodity, or a manifestation of the multiple expressions of power in a society? If the answer is yes, radical social work is possible only if we abandon our professional role as it has been traditionally defined.

It is not clear, however, under what institutional auspices radical social workers would practice. At present, there are no viable structures which could support, politically or financially, the translation of radical ideas into sustained forms of practice on any meaningful scale. Because we have long regarded the state as a primary source of support, the withdrawal of its social welfare function leaves us with few options in an era of increasing privatization.

An alternative view of professionalism acknowledges these political-economic, cultural, and institutional limitations, but focuses on such qualities as competence, integrity, fairness, and mutuality. This more sanguine perspective asserts that a radical social work could be compatible with professionalism if it incorporated into its practice vital components of critical structural theory and action. One model which is often suggested involves strengthening the link between social and economic development as has occurred in parts of Latin America and South Africa; another focuses on balancing the relationship between workers and clients through a process of

mutual empowerment. It is not clear whether such changes could be implemented on a large scale particularly in a society that currently exalts diametrically opposed values.

Another response has been the development of anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) in Great Britain – an off-shoot of the radical social work movements of the 1960s. ADP focuses on anti-oppression and empowerment-oriented work strongly influenced by the recent transformation of cultural identities and cultural consciousness, especially among marginalized social groups. It emphasizes consumer participation, self-advocacy, and collective action in the context of basic human rights. ADP is similar to critical or structural social work practice as developed in Canada and Australia, which include such components as “a structural analysis of personal problems; an analysis of the social control functions of social work and welfare; an ongoing social critique, [and the establishment of] goals of personal liberation and social change.”

Proponents of critical social work disagree, however, over such issues as universality vs. cultural specificity (of values and goals); the role of standpoint; and the implications of uncertainty in the construction of knowledge to guide practice. Although there have been some attempts to synthesize the two perspectives under the banner of “social justice” (another concept with often conflicting definitions), each has different implications for practice and research.

Others propose new approaches that emphasize the resurgence of communities of identity or the creation of alternative economic and political institutions at the local level, such as cooperatives and eco-villages, through which communities can become self-sufficient centers of alternative, life-sustaining culture. Whether such approaches can produce sustainable progressive change in the current context is unclear.

Finally, there have been attempts to promote practice frameworks and a social work politics that are truly multicultural; to reintegrate politics into practice on a day-to-day basis; and challenge the explicit and subtle ways in which the profession has become de-politicized. These approaches also emphasize intra-organizational power relations and a broader view of politics itself. They suggest ways for social workers to challenge the normative boundaries that society has devised to control professional interventions and reconfigure them in more emancipatory, people-centered ways. Yet, they also struggle to translate the principle of social justice from a universal generality to specific policies and modes of intervention.

Despite these differences, there is widespread acknowledgement that previous strategies, which viewed communities and even nations in isolation from the international environment, are no longer adequate. Yet, the persistence of views often based on identity politics within contemporary movements and movement-based organizations hinders their ability to develop coherent strategies or broad, effective coalitions. In addition, “no mechanisms currently exist than can aggregate neighborhood mobilization of needs into a viable public discourse...” Thus, the formation of a new form of radical social work is hampered both by the existence of seemingly intractable social divisions and the absence of organizational structures that provide a basis for unity. The challenge for the future is how to combine long-standing identity- based conceptual frameworks into effective policies and political strategies.

What, then, is the best approach to position radical social work politically in the contemporary debate? First, I believe it is important to re-learn certain critical historical lessons – to recapture our own memory and sense of agency, so to speak – and to apply these lessons to

the 21st century context. To paraphrase the U.S. political scientist, G. William Domhoff, this reinvention requires three framing components: analysis, alternatives, and action.

Radical social work has long been characterized by these analytical components:

- A structural analysis of society and the root causes of its problems;
- Recognition of the significance of history, culture, and context;
- Promotion of a synthetic and adaptive rather than rigid ideological perspective;
- An understanding of the interconnectedness of issues, e.g., the link between international issues (particularly war, human rights, and now climate change) to domestic issues; and
- Recognition of the role of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation play in marginalization how how they relate to broader structural analysis (i.e., recognizing that racism, etc. serve a specific purpose in maintaining the political-economic system and the social and cultural values that sustain it).

Despite this analysis, to some extent, radical social workers are reaping the consequences of a problem they helped create. Many of our long-standing criticisms of the nation's social welfare system were appropriated (and twisted) by conservatives to justify the reduction and privatization of social services. Often, our failure to proffer viable alternatives to policies we justifiably criticized ultimately put us in the awkward position of defending policies and programs we had fiercely attacked for nearly half a century. This contributed substantially to the marginalization of social workers from the major policy debates of the 1990s, and the marginalization of radical social work within the profession, conditions that persist today.

Our analysis should include the identification of the political-economic and ideological forces which are driving the purposive transformation which is currently underway. We need to examine the different motives of its principal actors or drivers, and how the reorientation of social welfare and social work is related to their long-term goals. Instead of focusing largely on the injustices produced or sustained by this transformation, we need to posit an alternative vision of society which highlights the key features of a socially just society. Radical social workers need to reframe the debate – from one that focuses on mitigating the consequences of economic and social inequality to one that emphasizes new forms of social solidarity. We have to refuse to accept the inevitability of the neo-liberal project just as we previously refused to accept the inevitability of poverty.

Radical social work has also been characterized by the formulation of creative and innovative alternatives in the form of new questions, new ways of defining concepts, and new solutions to persistent problems. For example,

- We helped formulate a broad definition of health – which includes concerns about the impact of the physical environment and the role in which the environment plays on the overall well-being of individuals and communities. We played a critical role in the development of public health in the U.S.
- We pioneered the use of research as a tool to illuminate social/economic issues and to disseminate information and analysis about neglected and marginalized populations.

In the years ahead, to construct a renewed radical vision we now need to develop answers to the following broad questions:

1. What type of economy, society, and culture do we want to create in the future?
2. Who will need social services in the 21st C. economy? Whose needs should take priority, how will we determine these priorities, and who will determine them? How can we hold the most vulnerable populations harmless in the distribution of benefits and burdens?
3. What types of services will be needed? What types are desirable and feasible? How extensive and long-lasting should this assistance be? How should we balance short-term emergency assistance with longer-term, preventive approaches?
4. Which sectors of society will provide the resources and the administrative structure to deliver these services – government, nonprofit, private – and how?
5. Who will be the helpers? What knowledge and skills will they require to provide this help effectively and efficiently?
6. How should we bear the costs of the transition that is already underway?

To challenge the neo-liberal project effectively, we will also have to construct a new, dynamic concept of citizenship – one which is not limited by traditional political constraints – and the formulation of new meaning to the mainsprings of our vocabulary: justice, equality, freedom, autonomy, and community. In the past, we have integrated these concepts into new insights about poverty, the needs of children, and the plight of women, racial minorities, the LGBTQ community, and individuals with disabilities. Today, similar innovative syntheses are required around such issues as the nature of work in post-industrial society, the global maldistribution of resources, and the impact of environmental change.

It is insufficient, however, to criticize prevailing conditions without offering fresh new ideas and the means to implement them. Our discourse, therefore, needs to articulate new, hybrid organizational forms which use new technologies in ways consistent with our societal vision and which recognize that a new relationship needs to be forged between the market and the state. The emergence of a new synthesis, which contextualizes contemporary social work practice without compromising our fundamental values, may also require us to break down long-standing dichotomies in the social roles embedded in social welfare systems – e.g., between benefactors and beneficiaries, and between institutional forms of helping and mutual aid. Finally, even in a global culture that increasingly emphasizes a form of neo-tribalism, we need to reemphasize the virtues of universal rights and the policies to implement them on a global scale.

Radical social work has traditionally incorporated an understanding of the relationship between peoples' need for economic assistance and the non-economic supports they also require. Today, it has the potential to express an alternative vision of society and its institutions – a vision which takes into account the implications of global interdependence and demographic diversity – and integrates that vision into all policy and programmatic solutions. This vision could view universal guarantees to basic assistance in ways that reflect specific contexts, local sources of knowledge, and traditional cultural practice and may, therefore, be better suited for the complex economic and demographic environment of the future. Finally, the development of an effective, sustainable solution to the current crisis in the social services requires a definition of problems and goals, not merely in terms of fiscal costs and balanced budgets, but through the calculation of the actual and potential social costs of action or inaction.

For example, we need to start building a consensus around a strategy of sustainable human development, which would include:

- Satisfaction of basic human needs for food, shelter, health care, education, and natural resources such as clean water;
- Expansion of economic opportunities for all people in ways that are environmentally and socially viable over the long-term;
- Protection of the environment through future-oriented management of resources;
- Promotion of democratic participation, especially by marginalized populations, in the fundamental economic and political decisions that affect their lives; and
- Encouragement of adherence to internationally recognized human rights standards.

This leads me to the third element of Domhoff's alliterative trilogy – **action**. Radical social work emerged as a form of collective action, which had many of the characteristics of a social movement with emancipatory potential. From its inception, it was linked with other social movements such as labor, feminism, socialism, and civil rights. It provided support for groups which reflected the collective voice of people, empowered people, and gave them opportunity to exercise their agency. Radical social workers also recognized that conflict is an inevitable part of social change efforts – at all levels – that politics and practice were inseparable, and, therefore, that social work practice and social work education are arenas for ongoing struggle. Radical social workers need to reassert this heritage today because it reflects an alternate view of the process of change – and not merely a method of self-protective collective agency.

This last point underscores the importance of our developing autonomous sources of political and financial support, and establishing and maintaining broad-based coalitions with

new, sometimes unusual allies that cross traditional boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and even nation. To do this effectively, however, we have to promote meaningful, not nominal participation by all the stakeholders in such efforts instead of acceding to views of participation which regards politics as a placebo for society's ills, or which implicitly blame people's socio-economic problems on their lack of civic responsibility.

To be effective in this regard, radical social workers must learn to make our arguments more appealing in the political arena. For example, we need to refocus the debate away from a discussion of the aggregate size of welfare state expenditures or the efficiency of institutional mechanisms toward an examination of the normative goals and distributive effects of present and future outlays, how they will be funded, and what effects they have on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. This requires us to reassert our belief in collective responsibility for human welfare and to challenge prevailing assumptions and myths which prioritize individual "freedom" in a competitive market economy over social well-being. Unless we create a new compelling synthesis, the neo-liberal regime is likely to increase the marginalization and exclusion of a majority of the world's population from participation in productive economic activity and its rewards.

What I have attempted to summarize today presents us with numerous daunting challenges. There are neither clear nor perfect solutions to these dilemmas. Yet, it has become increasingly clear that the expansion of social provision *by itself* cannot create a more just society. The structure of government institutions and the relationships between the state and the market, and the state and the nonprofit sector, must be reconstituted in order to resolve the difficult problems that lie ahead. In addition, the recent recession, mass immigration, and the

effects of climate change demonstrate that such problems cannot be solved by one nation acting alone. Conversely, community problems like homelessness, transportation, and inequalities in education, employment, environmental quality, health care, and housing cannot be solved by one city, county, or even one state at a time.

Unfortunately, to a considerable extent, the mainstream social work profession remains a captive of its tired rhetoric and has not grasped or responded effectively to the significant political-economic and ideological changes produced by the neo-liberal project. These changes have challenged many of the fundamental assumptions that underlie social work practice, yet the implications of these challenges remain largely unexplored. The social work profession wants to preserve its moral rectitude and social status without taking risks, and to maintain its intellectual and moral authority without challenging existing political authority. We forget that even the incomplete U.S. welfare state was not a gift from benevolent elites, but the product of sustained collective struggle. We need to remind ourselves that even small victories must be re-fought by each generation as the political-economic and cultural context changes.

This failure is ironic because modern social work emerged from a counter narrative, one which challenged the prevailing conception of social welfare, based on a hierarchical charitable model, and proposed alternative goals based on principles of social justice. It promoted environmental, rather than individually-oriented explanations for human need and a more democratic conceptualization of service. While elements of these counter-narratives continue to be expressed in the profession's rhetoric they have been largely superseded by a master narrative which defines the mission of social work in terms consistent with the U.S. political-economy and the social roles it generates. Even when counter narratives are expressed, the views they reflect

are often silenced or marginalized. To a considerable extent, social work has folded in these critiques into its basic master narrative without fundamentally changing it. In the interest of professional status enhancement, social work has removed itself for the arena of struggle.

As a counter-narrative, radical social work can play a crucial role in this struggle. As a form of resistance to the dominant culture it can help validate an alternative reality. It can pose fundamental questions, such as who benefits from the establishment and preservation of the societal master narrative and in what ways? In sum, radical social work can disrupts our accepted “stories” by postulating a different view of professionalism and redefine the meaning of such basic concepts as social justice, cultural competence, and empowerment.

A key challenge for radical social workers today, therefore, is not merely to create a new narrative but to forge a new social discourse – a new context – within which our stories make sense. To do this requires more than replacing one form of rhetoric with another. By applying a critical perspective to practice we could reorient social work’s goals from self-maintenance to the creation of a more egalitarian society. By challenging prevailing assumptions about poverty, the inevitability of a market economy, and the nature of evidence, we would be more open to the development of alternative frameworks and practice theories. By posing different research questions, we could begin to clarify ambiguities in our fundamental concepts and vocabulary. By suggesting new practice roles, we could help form new alliances with clients and potential allies in the pursuit of social justice.

Social work is unique among organized occupations because its practitioners believe not only in the inevitability of change, but in the desirability of change. Radical social workers have long believed that people, individually and collectively, possess the agency to make their own

history. If there is one overarching lesson from the tumultuous 20th century which can be applied to social work's politics in the future it is that nothing is pre-determined or eternal. We have the power and the responsibility to help shape that future.

ⁱ Due to space limitations, the citations and references upon which this speech was based have been omitted. Some of the ideas expressed in this presentations have appeared in publications which are already available or are in press or preparation. For further information, please write to mreich@ssw.umaryland.edu.