

Progressive Social Work

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Abstract and Keywords

Since the beginning of the profession, progressive social work has been characterized by a lived commitment to practice dedicated to advancing human rights and social and economic justice. Since the mid-1980s, the rise of global capitalism has vitiated support for robust social welfare programs and has had a conservatizing effect on the profession, rendering the progressive agenda both more urgent and more difficult. Since the economic crisis of 2008, with a rise in people suffering, while at the same time those programs that would help ease that suffering have been cut back, further perpetuating the myth that austerity is the cure for the disease that it has caused. Progressive social work has responded to both challenges with innovation and energy, but theoretical and practical conundrums remain. This article is offered as an effort to discuss and define progressive social work and its connection to social work values with the hope of contributing to advancing social work practice that addresses social injustices and human rights violations.

Keywords: critical, radical, structural, progressive, welfare state, globalization, postmodernism

Defining and Describing Progressive Social Work

Progressive social work has existed within social work since the beginning of the profession (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002; Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018; Reisch, 2004; Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Selmi & Hunter, 2001). In fact, we could make the case that the term “progressive social work” is redundant, since the values and history of social work are firmly rooted in practice that calls for social change and social justice. Similarly, we could make the case that radical social work should be the norm, because social work’s focus on person-in-environment calls on social workers to analyze the structural causes of

oppression and to change those causes by going to the very root of the problem, which is the definition of radical.

In the United States, for nearly three decades, the progressive social work community has sustained a scholarly journal, the *Journal of Progressive Human Services: Radical Thought and Practice* (JPHS); has its own organization, the Social Welfare Action Alliance (SWAA); holds conferences and webinars; and has a visible presence at the conferences and meetings of the standing organizations of the profession. SWAA has also partnered with social movements led by those most affected by social and economic injustice, such as the National Welfare Rights Union, The Assembly to End Poverty, the USA-Canada Alliance of Inhabitants, and the New Poor People's Campaign. Through these partnerships, SWAA recognizes that, "as so often in the history of social work, social movements outside the profession fuelled the developments of more critical currents within" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 93; Lavalette, 2011). Likewise, other social workers (see Burghardt, 2014) became involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement and continue involvement in the movements that sprang out of Occupy.

Core concepts associated with the contested label of progressive social work derive from several practice traditions and analytical perspectives, including those called radical, critical, structural, and some iterations of feminist and empowerment social work. While acknowledging the debates and distinctions among these groupings—and the reluctance with which people in this diverse community accept the label progressive (Wagner, 1999)—we will use the term in this article as encompassing all of these conventions.

Progressive social work is distinguished by its emphasis on:

- Ongoing analysis of the ways in which individual and institutional (or personal and political) forces interact;
- Critical examination of the power dynamics infused into all social welfare and social work endeavors;
- Practice that emancipates and liberates;
- Attention to the centrality of basic human needs and human rights grounded in these needs;
- Aversion to the pathologizing and labeling of behaviors that can be explained as functional and adaptive survival mechanisms to the experiences of oppression and unmet human needs;
- A commitment to working in partnership with people who are typically relegated to the role of client;
- A critique the privatization of civil society in which "NGOs have successfully displaced, destroyed or co-opted movements" (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007A, p. 454);
- Critical examination of how social work's value base has been hijacked through the process of neoliberalization of social services; and,
- The level and type and direction of action that flows from these analyses and critiques.

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The last point is most fundamental. For progressives, it is not enough to see—one must do (Bak, 2004; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Fook, 2003; Healy, 2001; Healy & Leonard, 2000; Van Wormer, 2004); one must engage in praxis, which necessarily has an action for social change component (Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018; Freire, 1972; Martín-Baró, 1994). As Lavalette and Ferguson (2007B) point out, when we engage in structural analysis in our social work practice, we have an “ethical imperative to act” (p. 20).

Given an analysis of the roots of private troubles in public environments and relations (Mills, 1959), progressive activism is aimed at fundamental transformation of human relations and structures. Not all work purported to be for *empowerment* or *justice* is necessarily seen as *progressive*; indeed, the depoliticized and deradicalized use of these concepts is criticized by progressives as concealing the need for fundamental change (De Maria, 1997; Dominelli, 2005; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2000). Progressive social workers often do support and pursue so-called reformist agendas. However, these are generally seen as palliative tactical efforts to alleviate private troubles, while the strategic agenda of transformation is pursued simultaneously.

In the field, progressive social workers can be found in every type of agency and organization, including private practice, and in every field of practice, including clinical practice; they use the full range of social work methods and modalities and draw upon a wide range of practice theories. There is among progressives, however, an emphasis on action grounded in an analysis of all social, political, and economic structures that impede the fulfillment of basic human needs, the realization of basic human rights, and the promotion of human capabilities. For most progressive social workers, these include the way we live on the planet and the prevailing mode of production and distribution of essential goods and services (D. P. Boyle, personal communication: Progressive social work, January 5, 2007; see also Voss, 2004). The scope of analysis spans social work relationships and methods as well as the social welfare institution (Baines, 2000; Gil, 1998, 2004; Healy, 2000; Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2005; Thompson, 2005).

Many people enter social work because of a commitment to social change, but they find themselves swallowed by bureaucratic systems that perpetuate injustice (Ferguson, 2016; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Lavalette, 2011). In many parts of the world, “social work has been shaped by the demands of neoliberal policy regimes that threaten to undermine” (Lavalette, 2011, p. 14) a commitment to the values and ethics of social work. Neoliberal regimes have led to slashed budgets, larger caseloads, and an inability to do social work, since case management is what is required (Ferguson, Ioakimidis & Lavalette, 2018). As a result there is “a growing mismatch between what social workers feel they are trained to do and what they are required to do” (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006, p. 309).

In the United States, the Social Work Code of Ethics is based on six primary values, which include social justice, dignity and worth of all people, and service. The conditions, however, of social work practice do not permit social workers to practice from this value standpoint. Social work has been commodified, and the people social workers work with have

likewise been commodified and are not respected as a result (Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018). Without the type of structural change that progressive social work demands, social workers in the field cannot carry their ethical mandate of service, respect for the dignity and worth of each person, and social justice. Commitment to social action by social workers is often not part of paid employment (Ferguson, 2016). Instead, social workers find themselves engaging in short-term charity instead of social justice and auto-critical practice instead of service. Progressive social workers work to change this so that all social work practice is consistent with the articulated values and ethics (Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018).

Continuity and Change

The entry “Progressive Social Work,” in earlier editions of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Bombyk, 1995), sets forth the theoretical base of progressive social work, its agenda, its values, and its practice principles. Unchanged is the agenda described by Bombyk: the creation of political, social, and economic systems that have as their *raison d’être* the meeting of common human needs, and the unfolding of human potential. We would add to this a commitment to advancing human rights, so that human needs are met and human potential is realized. Values that endure include anti-authoritarianism, collaboration, solidarity, equality, democracy, a concern for ethics and spirituality, and the concept of horizontalism—“the use of direct democracy”—to make sure that those most affected by injustice become the protagonists of social change (Sitrin, 2006, pp. vi-vii). Theories and theoretical constructs that continue to be integral to progressive work include those derived from political economic analysis, power analyses, the dynamics of oppression and exploitation, human needs theory, and theories of social movements and social transformation. Practice theories that continue to influence progressives include structural social work theory, liberation psychology, popular education (Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018), and some forms of empowerment and feminist practice.

Bombyk also listed several practice principles derived from the theoretical orientations mentioned above; these include:

- Striving for collaboration and egalitarianism in relationships.
- The use of power analyses and “personal-to-political” assessments.
- Developing comprehensive, holistic intervention strategies.
- The use of consciousness-raising techniques (see also Freire, 1972, and Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018).
- “Understanding the position of the oppressed in the context of the social and economic structure they live in” (Bailey & Brake, 2013 as cited in Ferguson, 2016, p. 90).
- Engaging the realities and expertise of people in client status at all phases of the social work process.

While this core remains, recent changes in the context of social work have stimulated new challenges, innovations, and, quite possibly, opportunities for progressive social work (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2006; Denzin, 2002; Dominelli, 2004; Ferguson, 2006; Fer-

guson, 2008; Lavallette & Ferguson, 2007A; Leonard, 1997; Wilson and Prado Hernández, 2007). These changes, which interact, lie in the realm of both the practical and the intellectual work we do: the development of global capitalism, with its attendant practices of neoliberalism, and the introduction of postmodernism and its attendant debates (Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson, Lavalette, & Whitmore, 2004; Mullaly, 2001, 2002; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000).

During this time of rapid change, the progressive social work community in the United States has been particularly informed, strengthened, and energized by the lively debate, theoretical advances, and practice innovations in other English speaking countries—particularly Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Scotland. Increasingly, progressives are examining the effects on social welfare systems and practices resulting from the advance of global capitalism (Gilbert, 2002; Hanley & Shragge, 2007; Vij, 2007; Zorn, 2007) and the resistance to neoliberalism emerging in Central and South America and elsewhere (Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018; Glatzer & Rueschemeyer, 2005; Mishra, 1999; Wilson & Prado Hernández, 2007). The remainder of this article focuses on the structural and intellectual challenges to social work and to progressives' responses to these challenges.

Globalization

Four interrelated elements of economic globalization have received particular attention in the progressive literature: (a) the effects of neoliberalism on social welfare and social work practice, including the privatization of social work practice; (b) the reduction of rights and entitlements; (c) the impact of technology on the workforce and the nature of work; and (d) militarization, both as fuel for and consequence of globalization.

Progressives believe that neoliberal policies and practices are designed to support privatization of the economy. Effects of these policies have included the corporatization and commodification of services once thought to be the domain and mandate of public social welfare programs (Razin & Sadka, 2005; Stoesz, 1997; Teeple, 2000). Consequences identified by progressive social workers include “rationed” care (Harris, 2003, 2004), commodification of services needed to meet basic human needs (Noonan, 2006), routinization and “de-skilling” of practice (Butler & Drakeford, 2000; Reisch, 2006), and a shrinking (perhaps abandonment) of the welfare state as we know it (Ferguson, Lavalette, & Mooney, 2002; Gough, 2000A, 2004; McDonald, Harris, & Wintersteen, 2003).

Privatization's orientation to profit and performance has required expansion of managed care and emphasis on evidence-based practice in every sphere of social service (Scheyett, 2006). Evidence-based practice often removes the person-in-environment orientation and does not “address issues of process, relationship, and structural oppression often simply does not work” (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006, p. 313). The use of contracted services to control costs has created a *day-labor* force within social work; while providing entrepreneurial opportunities and employment flexibility for many social workers, this pattern has also resulted in routinization of the social work enterprise and, most importantly, may be

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reducing the significance of the worker-client relationship, long thought to be the nexus of practice (Jones, 2004). We must push back against the dominant ideology that everything should be subject to market forces. This affects those with whom we work as they lose their jobs to cheaper labor. It also affects social workers whose caseloads and job tasks increase, while their salary and benefits decrease (Ferguson, 2008).

Rights and entitlements believed to be integral to the social welfare institutions of liberal democratic states have long been an arena for action by progressives, but progressives point out that their advance is inconsistent with the interests of economic globalization (De Feyter, 2002). Indeed, the 1996 “welfare reform” legislation not only ended rights and entitlements for poor people—easy targets who had been vilified publicly and blamed for the country’s economic woes for decades—but undermined the edifice of rights and entitlements for all in the United States (Abramovitz, 2004). Some say it ended the right to rights (Baptist & Bricker-Jenkins, 2001).

Progressives note that the elimination of economic rights has been accompanied by control and containment of civil and political liberties and has been furthered by an intensification of pernicious institutionalized biases and prejudices such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, and the like. Increasingly, social workers are asked to perform surveillance along with service functions (Schram, 2006). The shift in emphasis from caring to control is particularly evident in efforts to prepare for employment those who are required under current public welfare policies to accept employment at any wage (Fording, Soss, & Schram, 2008; Moffatt, 1999). It must also be noted that neoliberal social work “undermines not only radical or structural approaches but also ‘traditional’ relationship-based social work” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 14).

Technology, particularly electronics, has fueled globalization and transformed the world of work, creating economic insecurity and new demands for services just as public support and resources for them have declined. Progressives emphasize the consequences of the shift from an industrial to an electronic age. Jobs once performed by a skilled labor force are now performed by robots and electronic devices. The use of labor-replacing technology has resulted in massive layoffs in industry, banking, and other service sectors. Since many of those jobs have not only gone abroad but are gone forever, we are seeing the emergence of a new class, largely carved out of the middle-income population, whose role may be expendable in the new economy. Some displaced workers are able to meet their needs by taking on multiple jobs and cutting back, while others are pushed into poverty. Social work programs and methods based in the structures and relationships of the industrial age may be outmoded (Bricker-Jenkins & Baptist, 2006).

Another element of the consequences of technology has to do with the push toward so-called evidence-based practice in social work. The drive is toward social work becoming more technical through evidence-based practice, but evidence is circumscribed to certain types of evidence; social work by definition works with the person-in-the-environment, which cannot be controlled for and studied in pre-existing ways; and

it is hoped that evidence-based practice, with its claim of ideological neutrality and scientific objectivity, can play a similar role in assisting social workers towards becoming primarily experts in controlling risky individuals and managing behavioural change, less concerned with issues of inequality and oppression.

(Ferguson, 2008, p. 52)

This has implications for social policy and what gets funded as well as how social workers carry out their jobs.

Militarization has created new demands for services and challenges for progressive practice. Veterans and soldiers' families need more and more services, even as military budgets drain public coffers and as services to veterans continue to be cut. In poor communities, military service promises the education, training, and employment that were once provided through a public education system, which, like social welfare, is being defunded, and by an economy with fewer and fewer jobs (Davis, Cummings, MacMaster, & Thompson, 2007). These conditions have challenged progressives, typically anti-war, to engage with the military in new ways that are consistent with their values and commitments.

It is important to note that most social work organizations in the United States have overwhelmingly been unable to question neoliberalism because of a lack of understanding of political economy. We can see this as evidenced by the lack of pushback against the privatization of services and the deplorable conditions under which social workers often work. As Gil (1998) pointed out, social work has an inherent contradiction of, on the one hand, being committed to social justice, while on the other hand, helping people adjust to an unjust status quo. Social workers' knowledge of economics is woefully lacking, and so when decisions to impose austere measures are made based on an economic argument, social workers are unable to offer alternatives or push back against the changes.

Postmodernism

Emerging philosophical trends of postmodernism and poststructuralism rendered action more difficult just as conditions demanded action (Noble, 2004; Wood, 1997). Social work and social welfare arose in the era of modernity, characterized by *metanarratives* and belief in the potential universality of concepts of justice, needs, and rights (Leonard, 1995; Pease & Fook, 1999). Although there are many iterations and debates among them, postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers have challenged modernity's universalized discourse, advancing the notion that there are many competing truths shaped by such multiple interacting factors as culture and language, experience of oppression and power, social relationships, consciousness, and more (Howe, 1994, 1996; Ife, 1999; Smith & White, 1997), but often not noting how these truths might be interconnected and might be exploited by those with power in society.

Some postmodernists, affirming the relativity of *truth*, reject the *privileging* of any particular truth. The challenge to social work is clear: If justice, needs, rights, and truths are

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diverse and relative, and if the imposition of one group's notions over others' must be eschewed, what is the basis for action in the world, and who can claim the right to act in ways that affect others (Solas, 2002A; Taylor-Gooby, 1994)? The challenge to progressive social workers, whose very essence is action for justice, is particularly crucial and sharp: "How do we uphold a metanarrative of 'social justice' while at the same time deconstructing it?" (Fook, 2003, p. 127).

Standpoint theorists have helped address activists' dilemma. They agree that all truth is relative and incomplete, but they reaffirm a concrete basis for judgment and action. They assert that one's social group membership shapes both one's truth and one's power to impose it on others. Particularly (but relatively) powerful groups include capitalists, men, straight and cis- people, academics, and professionals (Campbell & Ungar, 2003; Witkin, 1999). The material and historical exercise of their power can be analyzed and challenged. This theoretical stance underpins much progressive anti-oppression work.

The philosophical challenges to modernity also benefited progressive work:

- Epistemological interrogation of positivism breathed new life into alternative epistemologies and into collaborative, participatory, narrative, and other qualitative approaches to research (Alvarez & Gutierrez, 2001; Barbera, 2008; Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006; Fook, 1996; Fraser, 2004; Golightley, 2004);
- Emphasis on the forces that shape consciousness and "false consciousness" reenergized the politicized approaches to feminist practice (Dominelli, 2002A; Gorey, Daly, Richter, Gleason, & McCallum, 2003; Israeli & Santor, 2000; Mizrahi, 2007; Orme, 2003) and empowerment practice (Cox & Joseph, 1998; Lee, 2001);
- It stimulated a more complex understanding of the dynamics of oppression and the potential for anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002B; Gil, 1998; Mullaly, 2002; Van Wormer, 2004);
- It unmasked, but generated correctives to, the power agenda and functions of the welfare state (Ferguson, 2004, 2008; Lash, 2017; Stepney, 2006) and of social work education (Corvo, Selmi, & Morey, 2003; Dudziak, 2004; Husebo & Andrews, 2004; Rossiter, 1996, 2001) as an agent of the state;
- It facilitated narrative and the validation of multiple truths in discourse with clients and colleagues (Bullock, 2004; Cohen, 1998; Darling, Hager, Stockdale, & Heckert, 2002; Finn & Jacobson, 2008; Peile, 1998; Spratt & Callan, 2004); and
- It provided a firm philosophical foundation for strengthening diversity and for a potential transformation of the worker-client relationship, from one of "service" to one of "solidarity" (Beresford & Croft, 2004; Bricker-Jenkins, Young, & Honkala, 2007; Finn & Jacobson, 2008; Sitrin, 2006). The new relationships are based more in power and class analyses than in naive notions of "partnership" in practice (Heron, 2005; Morley, 2004, Olson, 2007; Solas, 2000B).

In sum, progressive social workers have been unwilling to abandon an emancipatory agenda which goes beyond postmodernism, but they take seriously the challenges that postmodernism has made to its traditional philosophical underpinnings. Progressives

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have made efforts to bridge, merge, or fuse the competing philosophical traditions (Dominelli, 2005; Fook, 2003; Ife, 1999; Leonard, 1997; Mullaly, 2001, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999).

While differences remain among them, there appears to be consensus on these principles to inform practice: there are multiple truths and ways that power and oppression are created, experienced, and maintained; there is a need for structural changes to eliminate the empirical realities of domination and oppression; analysis cannot substitute for action, which must take place even in uncertainty—for failure to act is to act; action must be collective for it to contribute to creating a new social order (Ferguson, 2016); and, while acknowledging our power and privilege, we must “synthesize a politics of difference with a politics of solidarity in practice” (Mullaly, 2001, p. 311; see also Finn & Jacobson, 2008) that advances human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.

Innovations in Progressive Social Work

Building on the core described by Bombyk (1995), progressives have responded to the structural and intellectual changes of the past decades with innovations as well as critique. Specifically, there have been developments and refinements in practice frameworks and concepts as well as demonstrations of progressive practice in multiple settings.

Several authors propose *anti-oppression* as a framework that can bridge structural and postmodern approaches (Dominelli, 2002B; Mullaly, 2002; Van Wormer, 2004). They preserve the socio-political analysis of personal troubles, affirming the universality of the human need for health and autonomy, and they use new social movement theory to ground action in particular and unique communities. Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) have refined the notion of resistance in practice, illustrating ways it can be used in agencies and in the political arena. Meta-analyses of theory and research in feminist practice (Israeli & Santor, 2000) and empowerment practice (Hur, 2006) have reaffirmed political consciousness and activism as essential elements of effective practice. Reconceptualizing *community* in the context of globalization and postmodernism has stimulated action based in a more nuanced, less romantic notion of both *place* and *non-place* communities (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2007; Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2005). Using the work of Paulo Freire and Ignacio Martín-Baró, social workers have developed a method of clinical practice that addresses personal problems in the context of structural oppression and works to both improve personal situations and change unjust structures in society (Belkin Martínez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014).

A human rights approach to social work, developed early on by progressives (Jones, Bricker-Jenkins, & KWRU, 2002; Witkin, 1999; Wronka, 1992) has now gained currency in mainstream social work (Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2003; Wronka, 2008). A framework that focuses specifically on economic human rights has emerged from collaboration between progressive social workers and people living in poverty (Bricker-Jenkins, Barbera & Myers, 2014; Jones, Bricker-Jenkins & KWRU, 2002). Social workers can be found in grassroots organizations throughout the United States, where they are applying and refining

this economic human rights framework with poor and homeless people. They can also be found in the New Poor People's Campaign (NPPC), taking up the unfinished business of Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign 50 years after his assassination. Social workers have united with parents of children in care to challenge denial, by public child welfare agencies, of both civil and economic human rights (Bricker-Jenkins, Young, & Honkala, 2007; Lash, 2017). With others, they are also taking up the theoretical project of refining social movement theory and, in particular, interrogating the concept of *the poor* as an identity group (Thompson, 2002). SWAA, the national organization of progressive social and human service workers, has made a formal alliance with the New Poor People's Campaign, involved in trainings and organizing. Prior to the NPPC, SWAA was involved with the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), holding joint conferences and actions.

In addition to these emerging concepts and frameworks, a tremendous diversity of approaches to progressive practice is evidenced in the literature. For example, progressives have used a critical lens to develop research and practice in such varied fields as child welfare (Lash, 2017; Parton, 1999; Spratt, 2001, 2004; Spratt & Houston, 1999), youth work (Rogowski, 2004; Skott-Myhre, 2005), caregiving (Berg-Weger, Rubio, & Tebb, 2000; Dow & McDonald, 2003), addictions (Morell, 1996), and mental health (Ferguson, 2003, 2017; Furlong, 2003; Morley, 2003). The literature also demonstrates a wide range of progressives' interests—examples include macro research (Clarke, Islam, & Paech, 2006; Gardner, 2003), participatory research (Barbera, 2008), social work education (Prichard, 2006), international policy studies (Ferguson, Ioakimidis & Lavalette, 2018; Gough, 2000B), the exploration of ethical issues (Deitz & Thompson, 2004; De Maria, 1997), practice with groups (Cohen & Mullender, 1999), community development (George & Marlowe, 2005), and community organizing (Fisher, Brooks, & Russell, 2007).

The activist character of progressive social work and the very nature of praxis are such that much of progressives' most innovative work and important debates often are not reflected in mainstream publications. However, at least two discussion boards were essential resources: The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society (now SWAA) discussion group was based in the United States, and Barefoot Social Worker is based in Great Britain. Both have used technology effectively to advance practice rapidly and to document current work and discussions among progressive practitioners and scholars. Both have also used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to generate discussion around theory and practice for radical/progressive social work.

Taken together, current discussions and literature may evidence a growing class analysis among progressives fueled by several factors (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992; Lavalette & Mooney, 2001). For example, increasingly restrictive policies and programs lead to heightened awareness of the ways that social workers may unwittingly collude in the oppression of their clients (Lash, 2017); a commoditized, de-skilled, privatized social welfare system has led to increasing economic hardships experienced by social workers and mounting impediments to meeting clients' needs (Ferguson, Ioakimidis & Lavalette, 2018); advances in anti-oppression theory and practice have facilitated an analysis of the

ways that systems of oppression are interconnected and are used selectively to undermine solidarity among groups; and collaborations between social workers and groups led by immigrants, the homeless, and others living in poverty have been built on and deepened an understanding of common class interests (Bricker-Jenkins, Barbera & Myers, 2014) and the potential of class-based action.

Challenges and Future Trends

In the coming period, progressives face theoretical and practical challenges and opportunities in a globalized world that continues to see a concentration of resources in the hands of an ever smaller group of people who make decisions and influence elections. As the effects of neoliberal capitalism expand and continue to cause violence and significant damage to people and planet (Leech, 2012), the role of social workers to mitigate this violence will be important. An important question asks us to reflect on whether or not social work will continue to be the *soft cop* of the state or whether social workers, as part of the state system, will organize to demand human rights and economic, social, and environmental justice.

Likewise, another fundamental issue is the future of the welfare state itself given the tide of austerity and rollbacks that happened at the beginning of the 21st century around the world, and those that are promised by the U.S. administration and Congress in 2018. We are facing a historic structural transformation where funds are taken from the poorest and most vulnerable in society to be redistributed in upward fashion to the wealthiest. As such, a crisis will ensue, since funds will be scarce and this will permit even further rollbacks at precisely the moment when need is the greatest. Some analysts urge advocacy to save what can be saved of the existing social welfare state; others believe that the institution of social welfare is an artefact of the past industrial age and seek unity with those displaced in our labor-replacing electronic age through class-based activism (Garrett, 2017; Glatzer & Rueschemeyer, 2005). There appears to be consensus that the robust programs of the past are incompatible with the interests of global capital, but analytical and strategic questions remain.

Related to positions on the future of the welfare state are debates about arenas for action. For example, ongoing discussions within the Social Welfare Action Alliance at conferences and meetings have led to rich discussions about the most appropriate locations and forms of struggle. Some progressive social workers view electoral politics and the standing organizations of the profession as primary sites of struggle; others regard them as instruments of a corporate class whose interests are incompatible with most people. Some, distinguishing between strategies and tactics, attempt to work in both. The PPEHRC allied with a chapter of the National Association of Social Workers in using legislative tactics in their strategic effort to build a national movement to end poverty (Bricker-Jenkins, Barbera, & Myers, 2014). As resources and services are increasingly rationed and controlled, analyses of the welfare state under neoliberalism also influence the degree to which progressives are willing to seek and support concessions; for example,

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some are more willing than others to accept health insurance instead of universal health care, or the elimination of “extreme poverty” rather than the abolition of poverty.

The workplace is a continuing arena for struggle among progressives. Agencies are becoming more restrictive and, while there appears to be an overall increase in social work jobs, they appear to be less well paid and less satisfying (Ferguson, Ioakimidis & Lavalette, 2018; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006), with less favorable working conditions. The turn to evidence-based practice, while stressing accountability in an era of shrinking material resources, inevitably limits innovation and deflects attention from the struggle for concrete services (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Reisch, 2006). Actions outside the “arc of legitimacy” are increasingly discouraged. For example, a clinical social worker was reprimanded by the state licensing authority and threatened with loss of her professional license when she was arrested for civil disobedience in a non-violent protest (Jones, 2004). Despite an increasingly repressive environment, however, immigrant workers, students, teachers, and others have continued to use oppositional tactics in a strategic effort to build community-based alternatives to neoliberal policies (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2007; see also the Black Lives Matter, the Enough Movement of students, and the wave of public teacher strikes throughout the United States in 2018).

Even the project of theorizing and educating for practice may be impeded, as some universities and foundations direct rewards and funding to scholarship considered *rigorous*, when this term refers primarily to the production of quantified data and studies about limited phenomena (Davis, Cummings, MacMaster, & Thompkin, 2007). Similarly, the very meaning of core concepts in progressive social work analysis has been contested. Historically, such concepts as human need, empowerment, feminism, and class have been stripped of radical content as they entered the mainstream (Agger, 1989; Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007A; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2000).

Nevertheless, the conditions under which we live present new opportunities for progressive social workers. While practice auspices may limit some opportunities for action as noted previously, they force needed attention to the micro processes of progressive practice. Further, the need and possibilities for action and organizing outside the agency become clearer. In England, social workers have gone on strike, not for better pay, but for the right to fulfill their professional mandates (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). Although social workers in the United States have had an ambivalent relationship with unions (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 2006), progressives typically are supportive of labor organizing and may well provide seasoned leadership in similar efforts. Organizing and action can also be informed by refined theory; some progressives are re-examining social movement theory and, in particular, interrogating the concept of “the poor” as an identity group (Thompson, 2002). This theoretical work is vital to the need to engage with the “new class of poor,” the economically displaced families who are coping with poverty despite successful education and employment histories (Bricker-Jenkins & Baptist, 2006).

At least three additional challenges and opportunities will likely become pressing for progressive social workers in the near future: forging stronger links to the anti-war/peace

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movement, the #blacklivesmatter movement, and the global movements for resistance to neoliberalism (Bircham & Charlton, 2001; Reza, 2003). In the United States, the anti-war movement has been deeply divided over the rights of people in the Middle East (Davis, 2016, Chapter 1), rendering alliances difficult. Meanwhile, particularly in the southern hemisphere, resistance to globalization's neoliberalism has matured into new forms of the social contract between the state and the people (Sitrin, 2006), producing changes in the definition and role of social workers. In the United States, as part of the World Social Forum process, the first United States Social Forum was held in 2007, and the most recent was held in 2015. Organized under the banner "Another world is possible, another US is necessary," these events brought together 20,000 activists, mostly from grass roots organizations, for four days of dialogue and networking. At the 2015 U.S. Social Forum, social work had an organized presence at the forum through a People's Movement Assembly, which brought together social workers and their partners to discuss the possibility for radical social work given the current climate in the United States. Some individual social workers in attendance noted with optimism that the evolving analyses and actions of progressives strongly suggest a move toward alignment with forces of resistance globally and in U.S. communities.

Social work must take its place in social movements organizing for societal transformation and must learn from these movements to improve practice that not only professes a commitment to social and economic justice, but that takes sustained action to advance social and economic justice. At the same time, social work has to do a better job of understanding the dynamics of the neoliberal political economy, which constricts what social workers can do and stresses the market economy as the solution to social problems. Learning from social movements and critiquing how neoliberalism violates the human rights of both social workers and the people we work with is not enough, however. With this new knowledge, we must engage in praxis; we must learn, reflect, and act to change our reality (Freire, 1972) both in our spaces of employment and in our society. As Lavalette and Ferguson exhort, we must create a

"partisan social work," with social justice as a core value, which attempts to link structural factors and personal experiences, which relates "public issues" and "private troubles," which emphasizes the value of collective approaches, and sees the need to make connections between social work practice and wider social movements.

(Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007B, p. 7)

Only in this way will we contribute to significant social change in solidarity with the most vulnerable and oppressed members of our society. And, as a positive by-product, we will also improve our conditions of employment and life.

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