

Radical Social Work

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Summary

Since the beginning of the profession, radical social work has avowed a commitment to practice dedicated to advancing human rights and social and economic justice. Since the 1980s, the rise of neoliberal global capitalism has vitiated support for robust social welfare programs; its conservatizing effect on the profession has rendered the radical agenda both more urgent and more difficult. Ensuing polarization in the economic, social, and political arenas has been mirrored in the profession as well: differences widen between the micro and macro realms and privatization engulfs the public welfare arena; the epistemological bases of knowledge and prevailing theories form competing camps; the entire project of social work for social welfare is challenged as Eurocentric and implicitly white supremacist. Radical social work has responded to these challenges with innovation and energy, deriving insight from and participating in spontaneous uprisings and resistance, while engaging theoretical and practical conundrums.

Keywords

[critical](#), [structural](#), [progressive](#), [welfare state](#), [globalization](#), [postmodernism](#), [neoliberalism](#), [capitalism](#), [commodification](#), [macro social work](#)

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Defining and Describing Radical Social Work¹

Radical social work has existed within social work since the beginning of the profession (Bailey & Brake, [1975](#); Freedberg, [2016](#); Ferguson & Lavalette, [2018](#); Reisch & Andrews, [2002](#)).

Because social work's focus on person-in-environment calls on social workers to analyze the structural causes of oppression and then change those causes by going to the very root (*radicalis*, L.) of the problem, some argue that radical practice defines social work (Bussey et al., [2020](#)).

Others vigorously contest that claim (Brady et al., [2019](#)).

Core concepts associated with radical social work derive from several practice traditions and analytical perspectives, including those called critical, structural, Marxist or Marxian, revolutionary, 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](#))—this article uses the term “radical” to encompass all of these conventions.

In the field, radical 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. Among radicals, however, there is 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. The scope of analysis spans social work relationships and methods as well as the social welfare institution. Increasingly, radical social workers' analyses and critique include the way we live with the planet as well as the "base," the prevailing mode of production and distribution of essential goods and services. Radical social work has particular relevance to those working in "macro" positions given its explicit incorporation of the full range of natural and human-built environments in its field of vision and action.

Radical social work is distinguished by its emphasis on the following:

- ongoing analysis of the ways in which individual and institutional (or personal and political) forces interact;
- critical examination of the power dynamics in all social welfare and social work endeavors;
- practice that emancipates, liberates, and develops political consciousness;
- attention to the centrality of basic human needs and human rights grounded in these needs;
- aversion to the pathologizing and labeling of behaviors that are functional and adaptive survival mechanisms to oppression, exploitation, and unmet needs;
- a commitment to working in partnership with people who are typically relegated to the role of client;
- a critique of the privatization of civil society and the public domain;
- critical examination of how social work's value base has been appropriated and disempowered through neoliberalization of the social welfare system; and,
- the level, type, and direction of action that flows from these analyses and critiques.

The last point is pivotal. For radicals, it is not enough to see; one must do (Fook, [2016](#); Kamali & Jönsson, [2019](#)). Action is integral to the practice of *praxis* (Freire, [1972](#)); indeed, we have an "ethical imperative to act" (Lavalette & Ferguson, [2007b](#), p. 20). Given an analysis of the roots of private troubles in public environments and relations (Davis, [2016](#); Mills, [1959](#)), radical activism is aimed at fundamental transformation of human relations and structures.

This position is not inconsistent with the formal declarations and definitions of the standing social work professional organizations. In the United States, for example, the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* is based on six primary values, which include social justice, dignity and worth of all people, and service. Radicals contend that the actual conditions of social work make it difficult for social workers to practice from this value standpoint. Many enter social work out of a commitment to social change but find themselves swallowed by bureaucratic systems that perpetuate injustice (Fenton, [2020](#)). Commitment to social action is usually not part of paid employment. Commodification and privatization of social services corrode the tenet of the inherent worth and dignity of the individual (Wroe, [2019](#)). Investigations, relief work, and even autocratic practice trump service (Rogowski, [2021](#)).

Moreover, while all social workers are enjoined to work for justice and empowerment, not all work purported to be for *empowerment* or *justice* is necessarily *radical*; indeed, radicals criticize the depoliticized and deradicalized use of these concepts as concealing the need for fundamental change. Reform efforts promoted by professional organizations and agencies may alleviate distress but not change fundamental relations of exploitation and alienation, or even identify and name them. Radical social workers often do support and pursue reformist agendas; however, such palliative efforts are pursued tactically, while the strategic agenda of transformation—the long-term goal requiring political consciousness and strong movements—is pursued simultaneously (Bricker-Jenkins, [2004](#); Bricker-Jenkins et al., [2014](#)). These contradictions between aspirations and actualities have always existed. The modern social welfare system was not created in 19th-century Europe to challenge or change the system but to preserve it by thwarting the more radical projects of its militant labor force. It is precisely this disjuncture between the stated purpose and values of the social work profession and actual practice that drives the radical project.

Radical social work theory and practice have developed within, on the edge of, and outside the organized profession. For over three decades, the radical community in the United States has sustained a scholarly journal, the *Journal of Progressive Human Services: Radical Thought and Practice*. Since its 2013 debut in England, *Critical and Radical Social Work: An International Journal* has become a respected source of scholarship. The radical community regularly holds conferences and webinars and has had a visible presence at other professional conferences and meetings. There are national and local radical social work organizations and collectives such as the Social Welfare Action Alliance, Social Service Workers United, and the Boston Liberation Health Group in the United States and the Social Work Action Network in the United Kingdom. Radicals often participate in activist groups that focus on specific sectors or issues: The Social Service Workers Uprising Now is a collaborative of groups that focuses primarily on workplace conditions; the Social Work Coalition for Anti-Racist Educators challenges systemic racism in social work education; Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement organizes to educate about and end abuse in prisons; and the *Federación de Estudiantes de Trabajo Social* (Social Work Student Federation) in Puerto Rico organizes for access to education for all.

While creating a unique identity within social work, radicals generally identify with and promote working-class interests. In particular, the impetus for critical analysis and transformative action has often been stimulated by resistance and demands by those most directly impacted by social, political, environmental, and economic injustice (Johnson & Flynn, [2020](#); Patrick, [2020](#); Stevens et al., [2020](#)). Accordingly, radical social workers have learned from and partnered with “bottom up” social movements and organizations such as the National Welfare Rights Union, the National Union of the Homeless, the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, and Black Lives Matter chapters. Other alliances arise around issues or events to unmask the need for comprehensive change. Examples include mutual aid organizing in natural disasters and pandemics (Bonilla & LeBrón, [2019](#)); indigenous organizing for environmental justice (Estes, [2019](#)); public school educators organizing for better learning conditions for their students in Chicago, Philadelphia, West Virginia, Oakland, and Los Angeles (Jaffe, [2019](#)); and the organizing of undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers who work to ensure respect for human rights for all (Chacón & Davis, [2018](#)). Policy recommendations and platforms grounded in the experiences and demands of those leading these struggles are correctives; that is, solutions to the denial of basic rights and survival needs of those directly impacted by inherent structural deficiencies. Examples include the 2016 and 2020 platforms of the [Movement for Black Lives](#),

which build on the 1966 Black Panthers' 10 Point Program, and the Poor People's Campaign [demands](#) and [policy platform](#).

Finally, radical social work has always been international, concentrated primarily but not exclusively in capitalist countries. Radicals are responding everywhere to the effects of the advance of global capitalism, neoliberalism, and the digital revolution (Schram & Pavlovskaya, [2018](#)). The radical 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 and the resistance to neoliberalism emerging in Central and South America and elsewhere (Rojas & Acosta, [2020](#); Vickers, [2020](#)). A united global radical social work agenda may yet develop (Dubrovnik Conference Group, [2019](#)).

Continuity and Change

In earlier editions of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Bombyk, [1995](#)), the article "Progressive Social Work" set forth radical social work's agenda, values, core constructs, and practice principles. The agenda is unchanged: The creation of political, social, and economic systems that secure the meeting of common human needs and the unfolding of human potential. In recent decades, radicals have leveraged the transformative potential of a human rights framework. Whether human rights have a universal, objective, and verifiable quality is contested, but the strategic value of pursuing them is not (Solas, [2000a](#)). Similarly, radicals are drawn to the mass movements that aim and organize to dismantle all systems of supremacy, end poverty, and halt ecological devastation.

Enduring values include antiauthoritarianism, collaboration, solidarity, equality, democracy, a concern for ethics and spirituality, and the use of direct democracy to ensure that those most affected by injustice become the protagonists of social change. The contemporary Poor People's Campaign roots its organizing program and policy agenda in the lived experience and testimony of those directly affected by the "interlocking injustices" of racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation; and in so doing, the campaign carries these values into the realm of theory and practice of social transformation.

Core constructs integral to radical work remain 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 radicals include structural social work theory, liberation psychology, popular education, and some forms of empowerment and feminist practice.

Bombyk ([1995](#)) also listed several practice principles derived from these theoretical orientations; they 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; and

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 opportunities for radical social work. These changes, which interact,

impact both the practical and the intellectual work of social workers: they include the evolution of technology-based, neoliberal capitalism and the introduction of postmodernism and its attendant debates. The remainder of this article focuses on these structural and intellectual challenges to social work and radicals' responses to them.

Technological Transformation and Neoliberalism

Two forces that arose in the late 20th century converged to create a perfect storm in the realm of social work and social welfare: the transformation from an industrial to an electronic base of production and the global imposition of neoliberal economics. The structural impacts of these, which were pervasively shaped by white supremacy, were fully revealed and exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Four interrelated elements of the technological transformation and neoliberalism have received particular attention in the radical literature: (a) the impact of technology on the workforce and the nature of work; (b) the effects of neoliberal policies such as privatization, austerity, and commodification; (c) the reduction of rights and entitlements; and (d) militarization and surveillance, both as fuel for and consequence of extreme and racialized economic inequality.

Technology

The microchip is the steam engine of the current global economy. Microchip-based technology has fueled globalization and transformed the world of work, creating economic insecurity necessitating more services while public support and resources for them have declined (Robinson, [2018](#)). Resulting from the global transition to electronically based production, many jobs once performed by a skilled industrial labor force are now performed by robots and electronic devices (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, [2014](#); Peters, [2017](#)). The use of labor-replacing technology has resulted in massive layoffs in manufacturing, banking, and other service sectors. Many of those jobs have not gone abroad but are gone forever, resulting in the emergence of a “new class” or precariat (Standing, [2011](#), [2018](#)) carved out of the middle-income population. Workers with obsolete skills are expendable; some are able to meet their needs by retraining or reskilling, taking on multiple jobs, increasing debt, and cutting back. Others are pushed into poverty (Walsh, [2019](#)). Social welfare policies and programs that were designed for an industrial labor force experiencing “cyclical” unemployment cannot meet the needs of a permanently displaced section of the population scrambling for low-wage fast food or “gig” jobs. While some herald the possibility of new jobs in the new economy, these will be high-skilled positions for a few, low-skilled and poorly paid jobs for more, and no jobs for many. As the surplus labor of the industrial age becomes the superfluous labor of the electronic age, radically new social welfare policies and programs are necessary.

Similarly, social work programs and methods based in the structures and relationships of the industrial age are outmoded. Radicals are attempting to define and describe specific ways to adapt to the new economy (Pease et al., [2016](#)). Unfortunately, as radical social workers point out, some adaptations have been regressive. For example, recent developments in the use of algorithms to predict behavior of individuals and groups can also be used to control behaviors

(Robinson, [2020](#); Zuboff, [2019](#)). The specter of replacing clinicians and program designers with algorithmically driven robots is not entirely far-fetched (Morley et al., [2019](#)).

Neoliberalism: Privatization, Austerity, and Commodification

The elevation of social control over social care has accelerated since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s. The neoliberal requirements of free markets, privatization, and austerity have led to large-scale abandonment of public programs and a shrinking (perhaps abandonment) of the welfare state (Lavalette, [2017](#); Reisch, [2019](#)). Neoliberal policies and practices that are designed to support privatization of the economy have led to corporatization and commodification of services once thought to be the domain and mandate of the public sector (Cummins, [2018](#); Ferguson et al., [2018](#); Jones, [2018](#)). In turn, the private sector has embraced entrepreneurial ventures, contracted services, and market-driven, “efficient” policies and programs (Gray et al., [2015](#)). These austerity measures have led to slashed budgets, larger caseloads, and bowdlerization of social work services to case management (Ferguson et al., [2018](#)). Using 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, it has also resulted in routinization of the social work enterprise and, perhaps most importantly, it minimizes the significance of the worker–client relationship, the nexus of practice (Winter, [2019](#)). As austerity shrinks the public sector, faith-based communities and the private nonprofit sector have been expected to address unmet needs, but they do so on a selective, potentially biased, and conservatizing basis. Moreover, foundations and other elements of civil society, while purportedly and altruistically acting in the public interest, have also co-opted and contained protest and movements of resistance to neoliberalism and its effects (Lavalette & Ferguson, [2007a](#)). These critical analyses have accelerated radicals’ political demands and work for a robust public sector.

Neoliberal exigencies have also fueled an uncritical drive toward evidence-based practice (EBP). While acknowledging EBP’s appropriate uses, radicals critique widespread overdependence on and misuse of them when they diminish the person-in-environment orientation, the relational aspects of social work, and deflect attention to structural oppression (Simmons, [2012](#)). Moreover, what is accepted as “evidence” is often limited and rooted in worldviews that are typically white and male; this perpetuates a colonial mindset while claiming to be objective and neutral. Reliance on such evidence can produce practice that advances social control over liberation (Fine, [2011](#)). Further, since research and program funding often require an EBP design, those whose work constructs practice to challenge inequity and work for justice are disadvantaged (Ahlin Marceta, [2020](#); Carey, [2021](#)). Clearly, EBP cannot control for conditions that do not exist but for which we strive.

In sum, radicals contend with the dominant neoliberal axiom that subjects everything to market forces. Neoliberalism affects all those who lose their jobs to robots and cheaper labor, bend under the weight of debt, and face hunger and homelessness in growing numbers. Social workers’ caseloads and job tasks increase while salaries and benefits decrease. Many join the ranks of contingent labor, and their mandate to meet common human needs seems impossible to achieve (Santos, [2020](#)). Neoliberalism has amplified the dissonance among social work values, social work education, and social work practice (Butler-Warke et al., [2020](#)), necessitating a robust radical project. Some, however, contend that the conditions of neoliberalism constrain and may preclude the development of radical practice and even prevalent reformist efforts (Fraser &

Sunkara, [2019](#)). Kamali and Jönsson ([2019](#)) argued for a genuinely revolutionary social work, indicting a self-defeating tendency to resolve the cognitive dissonance between expectation and perceived opportunity by “normalizing” what appears to be inevitable. It is radical—or revolutionary—social work’s role to document and demonstrate that the current conditions and consequences of neoliberalism are not normal or inevitable. In fact, and ironically, the electronically based production of goods and services has made meeting the basic needs of people and the planet quite possible. This fact forces radical social work into the realm of political education and action, often in unity with spontaneous uprisings and movements that occur in the United States and around the globe (Lavalette, [2019](#)).

Rights and Entitlements

Rights and entitlements integral to the social welfare institutions of liberal democracies have long been an arena for action by radicals, but their advance is inconsistent with the interests of neoliberalism and globalization (Whyte, [2019](#)). In the United States, the 1996 “welfare reform” legislation not only ended rights and entitlements for poor people but undermined the very edifice of rights and entitlements (Schram, [2008](#)). Some say it ended the right to rights (Baptist & Bricker-Jenkins, [2001](#)). The elimination of economic rights has been accompanied by control and containment of civil and political liberties. This is particularly evident in widespread “workfare” policies requiring recipients of public benefits to accept employment at any wage and in any conditions—policies that social workers implement (Fording et al., [2008](#)). Radicals document the specific ways these policies are fueled by such pernicious institutionalized biases and prejudices as white supremacy, sexism, and xenophobia (Beck, [2019](#)). Analysts have attempted to counter the cutbacks in rights and entitlements by invoking such [United Nations’ Human Rights](#) instruments as the Covenant on Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and others. Radical social workers and others have united with those whose rights have been denied to use these instruments in organizing a movement to claim them (Bricker-Jenkins et al., [2007](#); Bullock, [2018](#)).

Militarization and Surveillance

Militarization has created new demands for services and challenges for radical practice. Veterans and soldiers’ families need more services as military budgets drain public coffers but funding for veterans’ services decrease. In poor communities, military service promises the education, training, and employment that were once provided through a public education system that, like social welfare, is being defunded and by an economy with vanishing jobs. These conditions have challenged radicals to engage with the military in ways that are consistent with their values and commitments.

Militarization refers not only to foreign intervention but also to the nationwide shift in the role of the police. Those who were once known as “peace officers” now wear military-grade gear and drive armored vehicles to disband peaceful protests. After decades—even centuries—of racist policing of communities and state-sanctioned, sometimes deadly violence perpetrated toward people of color, 2020 saw people organize and unite across the lines of difference to challenge these practices. In many communities, demands to demilitarize and defund the police include calls to shift funding to social services; the assumption is that social workers are better able than

police to address mental health crises, homelessness, gang rivalries, domestic violence, and nonviolent or “victimless” crimes.

However, social workers are asked to perform surveillance along with service functions. This is evident not only in social work in prisons but also in “benign” arenas as child welfare (Rogowski, [2013](#), [2021](#)). These proposals are also weighed by radical social workers against the backdrop of the rise of mass incarceration of people of color; the yawning gulf between the wealthy and wage workers, whose real wages have not increased since the 1970s; the criminalization of protest; and a state whose instruments of surveillance and control—social media and algorithmic manipulation of choices—lie in the hands of private corporations, well beyond the control of the public (Srniczek, [2017](#)). Consequently, there is organized resistance among many radicals to collaboration with police or performance of police functions (Sato, [2020](#)) and a push to unite with efforts to abolish police (Vitale, [2017](#)).

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 long ago, social work has an inherent contradiction of being committed to social justice while helping people adjust to an unjust status quo. The 21st-century status quo offers the promise of abundance and the possibility of a just distribution of the necessities of life even while it imposes economic dispossession of masses of people, surveillance and control of dissent, and the elevation of private property rights over human rights. Radicals in social work have taken up the task of creating a social work that resolves Gil’s “inherent contradiction” through intellectual and physical participation in movements to end systems of supremacy and the exploitation of people and the planet.

Postmodernism

Emerging philosophical trends of postmodernism and poststructuralism rendered action more difficult just as conditions demanded action. Social work and social welfare arose in the era of modernity, characterized by *metanarratives* and belief in the universality of concepts of justice, needs, and rights. Although there are many iterations and debates among them, postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers have challenged modernity’s universalized discourse, contending that there are many competing truths shaped by multiple interacting factors such as culture and language, experience of oppression and power, social relationships, and consciousness (Martinez-Brawley, [2020](#)).

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 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, [2002](#))? The challenge to radical social workers, whose very essence is action for justice, is particularly crucial: Is it possible to use a metanarrative of “social justice” as an objective category while we deconstruct it (Fook, [2016](#))?

Standpoint theorists (Cattien, [2017](#)) and, more recently, “critical realists” (McNeill & Nicholas, [2019](#)) have helped address activists’ dilemma even as they confront their own. 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 truth and the power to impose it on others. Particularly (but relatively) powerful groups include capitalists, men,

heterosexuals, academics, and professionals (Mullaly & West, [2018](#)). The material and historical exercise of their power can be analyzed and challenged.

Several authors have proposed anti-oppression as a framework that can bridge structural and postmodern approaches (Dominelli, [2002a](#); Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, [2014](#); Mullaly & West, [2018](#)). They preserve the sociopolitical analysis of personal troubles, affirming the universality of the human need for health and autonomy, while using new social movement and critical theory to ground action in particular and unique communities.

The philosophical challenge to modernity has benefited radical work in several ways:

Interrogation of positivism breathed new life into alternative epistemologies and research methods, particularly collaborative, participatory, narrative, and other qualitative approaches (Baldwin, [2013](#); Barbera, [2008](#); Johnson & Flynn, [2020](#)).

Emphasis on the forces that shape consciousness and “false consciousness” reenergized politicized approaches to feminist practice (Dominelli, [2002b](#)) and empowerment practice (Turner & Maschi, [2015](#)).

It stimulated a more complex understanding of oppression and the potential for anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, [2002a](#); Mullaly & West, [2018](#)).

It unmasked and generated correctives to the power agenda and functions of the welfare state (Izlar, [2019](#); Lash, [2017](#)) and of social work education as a state agent (Bussey et al., [2020](#); Kamali & Jonsson, [2019](#)).

It facilitated narrative and the validation of multiple truths (Fraser & MacDougall, [2017](#)).

It provided a firm philosophical foundation for strengthening diversity and for transforming the worker–client relationship from “service” to “solidarity” (Bricker-Jenkins et al., [2007](#); Vickers, [2020](#)). These new relationships are based more in power and class analyses than in naive notions of “partnership” (Lavalette & Ferguson, [2018](#); Solas, [2000b](#)).

In sum, radical social work takes seriously the challenges of postmodernism to its traditional philosophical underpinnings but retains its emancipatory agenda. Radicals have made efforts to bridge, merge, or fuse the competing philosophical traditions (Brown, [2012](#); Fook, [2016](#); Morley & Macfarlane, [2012](#)). While differences remain, there appears to be consensus on these points: There are multiple truths and ways that power and oppression are created, experienced, and maintained. Structural changes is needed to eliminate the empirical realities of domination and oppression. Action must take place even in uncertainty, for failure to act is to act. To create a new social order, action must be collective. While acknowledging our relative power and privilege, we share class interests with those in client status.

Radical Social Work Beyond the Welfare State

The most compelling contemporary challenge and opportunity currently facing radical social workers is the construction of a practice beyond the social welfare state. The scaffolding of the social welfare system was constructed in the 19th century in an effort to control a restive working class increasingly drawn to socialism and communism. Throughout the industrial era, social welfare programs constituted a major clause in the social contract between labor and

capital. Social workers, the medics and soft cops of the welfare state, helped keep the peace between oppositional—but interdependent—classes through the 20th century. Can an industrial-era welfare state meet the needs and demands of 21st-century electronic age in which capital no longer relies primarily on labor for production of goods and services? Working in the midst of these global tectonic shifts, radical social workers are attempting to envision and fashion a transformed state and practice that is not built on systems of supremacy, is not Eurocentric and heteronormative, and is not capitalist (Atteberry-Ash et al., [2019](#); Cherry, [2018](#); McCoy, [2020](#)). Any such system necessarily will transform every level from interpersonal to global relations, but it will rely in some measure on the concepts and practices built from radicals' critiques. For example, Lavalette and Ferguson ([2007b](#)) refined the notion of resistance in practice, exploring ways it can be used in agencies and in the political arena; Weinberg and Banks ([2019](#)) illustrated its ethical use in agencies compromised by neoliberalism and privatization. Meta-analyses and reviews of theory and research in feminist practice (Conlin, [2017](#)) and empowerment practice (Hur, [2006](#)) have reaffirmed political consciousness and activism as essential elements of effective practice. Using the work of Paulo Freire and Ignacio Martín-Baró, social workers have developed methods of clinical and community practice that address personal problems in the context of structural oppression and work to both improve personal situations and change unjust structures in society (Belkin Martínez & Fleck-Henderson, [2014](#); Bussey et al., [2020](#); Hegar, [2012](#)). Reconceptualizing *community* in the context of globalization and postmodernism has stimulated action based in a more nuanced, less romantic notion of both *place* and *nonplace* communities (DeFilippis et al., [2007](#)). Community organizers and policy advisers use analytical tools and data produced by economists that drill down to the neighborhood level to identify the disproportionate and racialized impact of the global pandemic and government policies that have exacerbated them (Chetty et al., [2020](#)).

A human rights approach to social work, developed early on by radicals (Jones et al., [2002](#); Wronka, [1998](#)), has now gained currency in mainstream social work (Barbera, [2017](#); Ife, [2012](#); Wronka, [2016](#)), even as analysts continue to refine and critique its core concepts and application in policy, practice, research, and education (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., [2018](#); Gatenio Gabel, [2016](#); McCann & Ó hAdhmaill, [2020](#); Maschi, [2016](#); McPherson, [2020](#)). Mapp et al. ([2019](#)) contended that social work is, per se, a human rights profession. While some radicals point out that rights should be pursued as means, not ends in themselves, they do not question the strategic utility of a rights-based practice (Solas, [2000a](#)). In that vein, a framework that focuses specifically on economic human rights emerged from collaboration between social workers and people living in poverty (Bricker-Jenkins & Baptist, [2006](#); Jones et al., [2002](#)). Today, social workers are found in grassroots organizations throughout the United States, where they apply and refine this economic human rights framework with poor and unhoused or homeless people. In 2020, a major initiative of the Poor People's Campaign relied on a social work study of voting patterns of low-income people to target action in states where even small increases in participation could transform electoral politics and, ultimately, federal policies (Hartley, [2020](#)). Social workers have also united with parents of children in care to challenge denial by public child welfare agencies of both civil and economic human rights (Bricker-Jenkins et al., [2007](#); Lash, [2017](#)). Radical social workers in England have documented a worrisome rise in investigations and developed recommendations for overhauling child welfare programs that are grounded in the experience of those impacted by them (Stevens et al., [2020](#)). In the United States, some cite the disproportionate impact of intervention in families of color to demand the dismantlement of the child welfare system; although the condition of living in poverty may be

the operative variable in these cases, the claim is that reform efforts have failed and abolition of the system is necessary (Dettlaff et al., [2020](#)).

Radicals are also advancing the liberatory practice project as the practice of theory (Dunk-West & Verity, [2013](#)). They are redefining social justice (Allen, [2019](#); Levin, [2020](#); Rigaud, [2020](#)), interrogating social movement theory (Solás, [2008](#)), and continuing to challenge the concept of *the poor* as an identity group rather than as members of the same class of dispossessed to which social workers belong (Shildrick, [2018](#)).

The activist character of radical social work and the very nature of praxis are such that much of radicals' most innovative work and important debates often are not reflected in mainstream publications. However, multiple groups on Facebook and other social media platforms are discussing issues of importance to radical social workers and radical practice. These include the Radical Social Work Group, Social Service Workers Uprising Now, #SocialWorkforBlackLives, and [Social Work Coalition for Anti-Racist Educators](#). Radical social workers frequently publish on the British blog and podcast *Transforming Society*.

Taken together, such current discussions and recent literature evidence a growing class analysis among radicals that is fueled by several factors (Ablett & Morley, [2019](#); 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 commodified, de-skilled, privatized social welfare system has led to increasing economic hardships experienced by social workers and mounting impediments to meeting clients' needs (Ferguson et al., [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, homeless or unhoused people, and others living in poverty have been built on and deepened an understanding of common class interests and the potential of class-based action for social transformation (Baptist, [2015](#); Baptist et al., [2012](#); Garrett, [2018](#)).

How might radical social work be defined in a world without a social welfare state, or, rather, as part of the force that builds that world? Activism without analysis, strategy, and vision is insufficient. What is needed is a new intellectual and material apparatus for preserving the health of people and the planet (Booth, [2019](#); Dubrovnik Conference Group, [2019](#)). Lavalette and Ferguson ([2007b](#)) set forth some design specifications for social work beyond the welfare state in their call for

“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. (p. 7)

To this we add only what is now indisputably technically possible; that is, the stated but unmet purpose of social work in the welfare state of the 19th and 20th centuries: the meeting of common human needs (Towle, [1953/1945](#)).

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Notes

¹ Deceased.