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Social Work and the Just Society
Diversity, Difference and the Sequestration of Poverty

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Abstract

• Summary: The article begins by exploring the engagement of social work in Britain with ideas bound up with the creation of what might be termed the just society. This is followed by a critical discussion of diversity, difference and division. In conclusion, how social work in Britain might become more poverty-focused is briefly explored.

• Findings: In the context of globalization and ‘savage capitalism’, social work should seek to connect its analysis of oppression to mass poverty. However, current approaches, focused on notions of diversity and difference, are failing to produce a rounded analysis because the impact of poverty and material hardship is not acknowledged.

• Applications: Various themes can be related to the sequestration of poverty from social work’s dominant discourses. Five ways in which social work theory and practice could become more poverty-focused are tentatively identified.

Keywords difference diversity division poverty poverty-focused practice

How social workers respond to issues connected to social justice is an issue of international significance for the profession (see, for example, Hawkins et al., 2001). This discussion will focus on Britain where, it is argued, there has been a failure to incorporate an understanding of the impact of poverty into a discourse which is apt to pivot on notions of diversity and difference.

The first part of the article surveys the engagement of social work in Britain with ideas bound up with the creation of what might be loosely termed the just society. This is followed by a critical discussion of Williams’s (1996) articulation of diversity, difference and division. Here it is argued that issues bound up with the fluidity of national boundaries and globalization need to be taken into account.
account and a more comprehensive analysis developed. The second part of the article will examine the sequestration of poverty from social work’s dominant discourses. Four factors are important: the extent of poverty; social work’s historical relationship with ideological categories associated with people who are poor; the imagery and iconography associated with poverty; and New Labour’s preference for the idea of social exclusion.

The conclusion explores how social work in Britain might become more poverty-focused. The argument is not that social work should prioritize anti-poverty work over all other professional concerns. The aim is not to promote a reductive theory and practice which will entirely focus on the economic and material needs of the users of services. Here, the aim is to illuminate the silence of social work on poverty and to argue that ideas about diversity and difference are inescapably enmeshed in issues associated with poverty and, more broadly, in the politics of redistribution (Fraser, 1997).

Social Work and the Just Society

Hawkins et al. (2001: 6) in an Australian survey concluded that social workers use ‘few social justice terms’ and that ‘few social workers use social justice terminology’. However in Britain since the late 1960s the discourse of social work can clearly be associated with a professional project to create the just society. Here social work continues, for example, to evolve ideas and strategies associated with ‘anti-discriminatory practice’ (Thompson, 1997), ‘anti-racist practice’ (Dominelli, 1988; Singh, 1997; Williams, 1999) and ‘anti-oppressive practice’ (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 1998; McDonald and Coleman, 1999). These paradigms are historically rooted in the professional value base (Forsythe, 1995) and in endeavours to engage, in the contemporary lexicon, with notions of diversity and difference. Before going on to articulate what such notions and constructs signify, it should be stressed that social work in Britain, both institutionally and theoretically, did not evolve its critical strategies in a social and economic vacuum. They were also the by-product of the struggles throughout civil society from the late 1960s of a variety of social movements (Harman, 1988). These contestations, taking place in the industrial West and elsewhere, included: a reinvigorated struggle, partly informed by Marxism and more libertarian currents, for workers’ rights and industrial democracy (Meiksins Wood, 1995); the battle for women’s equality (Segal, 1987; Brah, 1992: 34–40) and for gay liberation (Segal, 1990: Chap. 6); the fight for racial equality in the metropolitan centres and for national self-determination for subordinate nations confronted by imperialism and neo-colonialism (Dooley, 1998). This period also witnessed the birth of an inchoate ‘politics of disability’ (Oliver, 1984) and a mental health system survivors’ movement (Rogers and Pilgrim, 1989).

The belief that social work can truly engage with issues of power and oppression and be part of a wider emancipatory project is, of course, vulnerable to critique, most pointedly, perhaps, in terms of the lived experience of the users
of social services, yet also in terms of critical social theory. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, a range of radical texts identified social work as part of the capitalist state’s ideological apparatus (Simpkin, 1983; Jones, 1983; see also Althusser, 1971). These contributions remain insightful, but the more vulgar variants of Marxism were too economically reductive and insufficiently attentive to structural discrimination and oppression also rooted in racism (Dominelli, 1988) and patriarchy (Reay, 1997; Kemp and Squires, 1997; Young, 1990).

A further critique of the idea that social work is a potentially liberatory activity has, more recently, been provided by those influenced by post-structuralism, particularly Foucault (1977). In brief, this approach perceives social work as one facet of ‘disciplinary power’ which Foucault associates with the evolution of the ‘psy professions’ (psychology, psychiatry, criminology) and the spread of new discourses and technologies of treatment and surveillance (Donzelot, 1979; Cohen, 1979, 1985; Rose, 1985, 1989). The central problem, however, with this perspective lies in its entire approach to power: it is perceived as multi-dimensional and dispersed throughout the entire social body. Thus, as Eagleton (1991: 7–10) observes, Foucault’s emphasis on the very diffuseness of power (what Eagleton refers to as ‘pan-powerism’) risks divesting it of any real meaning. Despite such criticism, Foucault’s difficult but important contribution clearly provides a corrective to more simplistic analyses of power relations available in social work literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Foucauldian approach and the locating of social work in the matrix of the disciplinary society were, of course, highly influential in the social work academy in the 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Rojek, 1986; Webb and McBee, 1989; Parton, 1991; Rodger, 1991). During the 1990s, however, the related social theory of postmodernism, in part, superseded this theoretical perspective (McBeath and Webb, 1991; Gorman, 1993; Howe, 1994; Pardeck et al., 1994; Parton, 1994; Pozatek, 1994; Parton and Marshall, 1998; Carter, 1998). Social work’s postmodernist turn has, however, had little impact on field social work as perceived by its practitioners. Perhaps more fundamentally, this occasionally modish indulgence has been responded to by a number of cogent critiques from within social work (Peile and McCourt, 1997; Smith and White, 1997; Ferguson and Lavalette, 1999; Williams, 1999). In more general terms, Vieux (1994) has castigated postmodernists for their failure to adequately address structural racism.

**Diversity, Difference and Division**

Fiona Williams (1996: 70), fusing feminist and postmodernist ideas, has conceptualized how diversity, difference and division can be articulated. For her, diversity refers to ‘difference claimed upon a shared collective experience which is specific and not necessarily associated with a subordinated or unequal subject position’: for example, ‘a shared language, nationality, regional origin, age,
generation, sexual identity, marital status, physical condition and so on’. Difference refers to ‘a situation where a shared collective experience/identity’ centred on, for example, ‘gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, disability’ forms the ‘basis for resistance against the positioning of that identity as subordinate’. Division refers to the ‘translation of the expression of a shared experience into a form of domination’. This is where a dominant subject position, for example, ‘being white, British, heterosexual, a man’ forms an ‘identity which protects a privileged position’. At ‘its most extreme’, she continues, ‘the British National Party represents such a type of difference’. None of these categories is fixed or closed, and movement can take place from one to another.

The central conceptual flaw in Williams’s otherwise valuable analysis is, however, the failure to interrogate the role of the state or to look at structurally generated inequalities (Ferguson and Lavalette, 1999). Nonetheless, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, social work’s willingness to wrestle with diversity, difference and division – even if, at times, in a merely rhetorical way – led to the charge of political correctness (Hopton, 1997; Campbell, 1998). The now defunct Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), for example, came under a concerted attack (see, for example, Gledhill, 1989: 36–9) because of its willingness to defend liberal and humanitarian professional values and because of its awareness of anti-racist discourses (Phillips, 1993). Prior to its abolition, CCETSW’s perceived ideological waywardness resulted in the appointment of a new chairperson and the dismantling of the organization’s innovative black perspectives committee (Penketh, 1998; Patel, 1999). These developments reflected the determination of the New Right to close down those spaces which provided for progressive debate and for a social work practice which tried to take account of inequalities. In addition, these attacks evidenced a more generalized backlash against some of the gains made by, for example, feminism since the late 1960s (Faludi, 1992; Phillips, 1997).

Social work’s ruminations on diversity and difference and the attempts to change institutional practices received, however, some validation with the publication of the Macpherson Inquiry into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson, 1999; Lea, 2000). More specifically the inquiry’s identification of institutional racism in the police and other state agencies was, in fact, an echo of CCETSW’s infamous statement about endemic racism contained in Paper 30. Less well-known have been those parts of the Belfast Agreement which commit the signatory parties to affirm ‘the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity’. Moreover, the British government stated, as part of the agreement, its intention to: ‘[C]reate a statutory obligation on public authorities in Northern Ireland to carry out all their functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in relation to religion and political orientation; gender, race, disability; age; marital status; dependants and sexual orientation’ (Northern Ireland Office, 1998: 16). This was, in short, an enlightened approach to civil and human rights, but one which in the early 1990s
would have risked being caricatured as more reflective of ‘political correctness’, or even ‘loony leftism’.

Social work’s own specific professional project(s) to create a more just society can, however, be criticized when one notes some of the efforts which have been made to theorize and respond to discrimination and oppression. Here is not the place to analyse all of these in detail, yet prominent conceptual wrong turns, elisions and strategic shortcomings might include: the racism awareness training approach of the early 1980s (see Gurnah, 1984; Singh, 1997); the frequently sentimental attachment to empowerment (see, for example, the critical contributions from Ward and Mullender, 1991; Bairstow, 1994/95; Humphries, 1996); continuing assumptions about white homogeneity (Roediger, 1994) and the failure to understand anti-Irish racism and to integrate an Irish dimension into anti-discriminatory theory and practice (Garrett, 2002a; Hickman and Walter, 1995, 1997); the failure to build a base for critical perspectives which encompassed the users of social services (Dominelli, 1999); the lack of attention afforded social class (Jones, 1997). However, central to this discussion will be the suggestion that social work has failed to adequately respond to mass poverty (Becker, 1997). This oversight, which will be examined in greater detail below, is particularly damaging, moreover, because mass poverty is so enmeshed with all the other facets of structural oppression (see, for example, Sivanandan, 2001).

**Shifting Boundaries and Globalization**

A further dimension for the discussion of poverty and social work is territoriality, since in the early 21st century geographical boundaries appear to be shifting and fluid (see Bauman, 1999: Chap. 2). This is apparent at various levels: local government in Britain has recently undergone reorganization, and a number of new unitary authorities have been created, with the consequence that many social services departments (SSDs) have been reconfigured. Concerns have also been expressed about the apparent break-up of the United Kingdom on account of the institution of devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland has also been provided with its own Assembly (in this context, see Garrett, 1999b).

Importantly, events such as these not only have material consequences; they also affect key themes such as diversity and difference which, as we have observed, are associated with anti-oppressive social work theory. The alleged fragmentation of Britain, for example, is now giving rise to more general, public anxiety in some quarters, about the nature of Englishness (Barker, 1997; Grant, 1997; Woollacott, 1997; Alibhai-Brown, 2000; Parekh, 2000). These developments are, of course, intriguing because what it means to be English is not usually interrogated (Hall, 1991; Colley, 1992; Nairn, 2001). In England, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant manhood, for example, is not normally apt to interrogate its own location: it is the constant and static core against which
a series of ‘others’ (black, Irish, Jewish people, for example) are perceived, weighted and fixed. Indeed, this new uncertainty found cultural expression, during the period of the first Blair administration, in the ‘Cool Britannia’ motif and in the rediscovery of the flag of St George on football terraces and elsewhere. Such preoccupations, symbols and icons are, however, also available to the avowedly racist far right (Mills, 1997).

Incremental integration into the European Union continues to affect social work in Britain (Cannan et al., 1992). This will also result in, for example, the evolution of new bureaucratic protocols for processing and responding to migrants and refugees. More fundamentally, events in the former Yugoslavia suggested that the implosion of Stalinism in Eastern Europe will continue to result in turbulence and civil strife on the continent of Europe. This situation is compounded by the further marketization of the former communist states and the rise in xenophobia and racism: developments which a ‘Fortress Europe’ (or, more accurately, ‘Fortress Western Europe’) approach manifestly fails to address (Lister, 1997: 46). Recent concerns, indeed moral panics, in Britain and elsewhere about asylum-seekers serve to emphasize this point. New Labour has, of course, recently decided to abolish food vouchers for asylum seekers. However, this issue provides an example of how oppression rooted in racism and racialization is also enmeshed with poverty and immiseration.

It is necessary to relate these developments to more encompassing, global and economic shifts. These dynamics are, moreover, connected to changes in labour processes and the culture of work (Taylor, 1999: 66–7), and more specifically, in the transformation that has taken place from a Fordist to a post-Fordist organization of production (Clarke, 1990; Sivanandan, 1990; Amin, 1994; Taylor, 1999: 11). Bound up with this change have been the growth in the service sector, female and part-time working and casualization. For some these developments are viewed in the context of globalization (Hall, 1991; Fox Piven, 1995; Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996; Sivanandan, 1998; Kundnani, 1998; Bauman, 1999; Mann, 2001). As Levitas (2001: 462) observes, capitalism ‘is a system in which the social product is systematically appropriated by a tiny proportion of the world’s population’, and in the contemporary ‘global economy, an increasing proportion seems to be moving beyond the control of nation states into the hands of transnational corporations’. Associated with this development is the evolution of what the Pope has called ‘savage capitalism’ (in Gawronski, 1993).

On this terrain social work’s failure to adequately respond to mass poverty undermines other aspects of the professional and humanistic project to promote a just society.

The Failure to Integrate Poverty into a Discourse Centred on Diversity and Difference

Despite the historical and contemporary relationship between social work and poverty, few writers concerned with social work have interrogated this dynamic
and there has been a failure to integrate an understanding of poverty into the more recent preoccupation with diversity and difference. However, in truth, notions such as these become meaningless if they are not grounded in some understanding of mass poverty. For social workers seeking to operate in an anti-discriminatory way, therefore, it is vital that they are aware of how poverty relates to other dimensions of structural inequality rooted in, for example, gender, ‘race’ and ethnicity. Glendinning and Millar (1987) have discussed the impact of poverty on women (see also Oppenheim, 1996: Chap. 5) with Pantazis (1999) identifying what she refers to as the increasing ‘criminalisation of female poverty’. Oppenheim (1996: Chap. 6), meanwhile, has highlighted how ‘race’ and poverty are interrelated. Furthermore, poverty has an impact on disability and how the later years are experienced (see Walker and Walker, 1999: 48–9). More generally, as Schorr (1992: 8) observed at the beginning of the 1990s, the ‘most striking characteristics that clients of social services have in common are poverty and deprivation. Often this is not mentioned . . . Still everyone in the business knows it.’ Thus, despite the persistent and pointed interventions of Saul Becker, Bob Holman and Chris Jones, social work in Britain continues to fail to take account of the impact of poverty on the users of services. As a result, the suggestion here is that poverty has been sequestrated from the profession’s dominant discourses. As a consequence, aspects of social work theory and methodology are undermined, appearing incomplete or unfinished. The influential ‘Looking After Children’ system (Parker et al., 1991; Ward, 1995; Garrett, 1999c), for example, is enmeshed in an implicit, but persistent, denial that poverty continues to adversely affect the lives and outcomes of many children and families in Britain (Garrett, 1999a: 56–7). This sequestration has led Becker (1997: 107–9) to assert that the 1990s were ‘characterised by a reluctance, indeed a withdrawal, by social workers and their departments from doing anything substantial about the impact of poverty and inadequate social security payments on the users of social services’. Thus, poverty has ‘to a large extent, slipped off the social work and social services agenda for both research and practice’, with even those SSDs ‘with local anti-poverty strategies still following policies and practices which, in effect, continue to “manage poor people” ’ (Balloch and Jones, 1990; Becker and Silburn, 1990: 35). Social work’s failure to address poverty is also, perhaps, reflective of more entrenched academic and cultural processes which provide part of the encompassing intellectual milieu for social work theory. Giddens (1991: 147), the leading sociologist and theorist of high modernity and of the post-traditional society, has observed: ‘Where a person lives, after young adulthood at least, is a matter of choice organized primarily in terms of a person’s life planning.’ Clearly, it is wrong to identify those suffering on account of poverty as perpetual victims, unable to find, in Raymond Williams’s words, ‘resources of hope’ (in Jones, 1998b: 14). However, comments such as those of Giddens show a failure to understand the impact of the material hardship and the economic constraints which limit many people’s capacity for choice and autonomy.
In social work there are four key themes, which we will examine below, which appear to relate to the sequestration of poverty and illuminate the profession’s reluctance to highlight the issue.

Examining the Sequestration of Poverty

The Extent of Poverty

We first need to have regard to the sheer, numbing extent of poverty and material hardship. Savage capitalism is promoting disparities in wealth and increasing poverty and immiseration throughout the world. In the new world order the combined wealth of the world’s three richest families is, according to a United Nations report, published in July 1999, greater than the annual income of 600 million people in the least developed countries (Denny and Brittain, 1999). Wealth disparities are also found in individual European nation states. In Russia, Latvia and Ukraine, life expectancy has fallen by at least six years since 1989. Real wages in Russia have now retreated to 1965 levels: the income of over one-third of Russian households is below subsistence minimum. Meanwhile, 35 percent of Polish children and 76 percent of Romanian children are being raised in poverty (Ascherson, 2001). Perhaps such findings also provide a bitter rebuke to those who, in the 1990s, tore up their ‘grand narratives’ and who are now still lost in the postmodern hall of mirrors (Carter, 1998).

In Britain the effect of poverty continues to underpin a range of social work concerns. For example, in the late 1980s Bebbington and Miles (1989) found that 20 percent of children becoming ‘looked after’ were from families in receipt of income support. Freeman and Lockhart’s later research suggests that, in some areas, 75 percent of children entering the ‘looked after’ systems are from families relying on benefit (Becker, 1997: 111). In the late 1990s, ‘nine out of ten users of social services’ were claiming benefits with the majority on means-tested benefits ‘reserved for the poorest’ (Becker, 1997: 88). Many of those both in receipt of and not in receipt of benefits were trapped in debt (Ford, 1991).

Specific benefit policy changes have also had an impact on the users of social services. Particularly prominent here was the scrapping of single payments (Cohen and Tarpey, 1988) and the introduction of the pernicious Social Fund under the Social Security Act 1986 (Stewart and Stewart, 1986; Craig, 1989; Bradshaw and Holmes, 1989; see also ‘Social Fund Maintains Cycle of Debt’, Community Care, 22–28 February 2001). This loans-based scheme which pits the poor against the poor is, of course, now being maintained by New Labour (Pearce, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). On account of central government constraints, SSD’s financial assistance to service users was also cut, in real terms, in the 1980s and 1990s (see also ‘Hardest hit by social services cuts: the isolated, and vulnerable elderly’, The Guardian, 19 January 2002). This was facilitated by the introduction of various classifications of need which have been used to ration access to services and resources (Hillyard and Percy-Smith, 1988: Chap. 6).
Throughout the 1990s cuts in benefits continued to have an impact on those living in poverty. Other policy departures related to housing, the NHS and education have also disadvantaged this same group. Walker and Walker (1998: 46) observe that a significant proportion of the British population are living on incomes substantially below the average for the rest of the population and are, as such, at risk of malnutrition, hypothermia, homelessness, restricted educational opportunities, poorer health, earlier death and being the victims of crime. For example, a child born into a poor family is four times as likely as a child from a better-off family to die before the age of 20.

These types of hardship (see also Jack, 2000) have daily, practical implications, with many parents preferring to miss meals in order to have enough money left available to be able to feed their children (Lang, 1997). Indeed, by the mid-1990s, Britain had one of the worst records on child poverty in the industrialized world, with nearly 20 percent of children living in families below the poverty line. This compared unfavourably with countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland, which had rates of 5 percent (Green, 2000; see also ‘“Mass affluent” get richer as the poor get poorer’, The Guardian, 2 April 2001).

In February 2001, according to the quarterly bulletin published by the Department for Work and Pensions, 2.63 million children (19 percent of children in Britain) were living in families claiming benefits. In the London area, this was as high as 29 percent. Of all children living in families on benefits, 61 percent had been on benefits for at least two years (Department of Work and Pensions, at www.dwp.gov.uk).

Possibly the sheer, overwhelming scale of poverty in Britain has contributed to a defensive retreat from an engagement with issues associated with poverty and the material hardship of users of social services. Parton and O’Byrne (2000), for example, in seeking to delineate a new practice have opted to focus on language and the micro-dimension of the social worker’s interaction with users of services. In this new paradigm, social workers are viewed as ‘creative word-smiths’ and ‘constructive social work involves improvisation, not unlike jazz’ (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000: 78). Clearly, social workers need to assess and seek to develop their skills, but the suggestion here is that social work theory and practice also need to be more encompassing and should try to embrace some understanding of structural inequalities rooted in economic exploitation and poverty.

Poverty and the Vocabulary of Domination

Social work has been historically complicit, from the late nineteenth century, in a host of projects seeking to regulate and remoralize the poor and to restructure charitable and state intervention. This is reflected in the history of both the Charity Organisation Society (COS) (Townshend, 1911; Woodrofe, 1962; Rooff, 1972; Parry et al., 1979; Jones, 1983, 1998a) and poor law (Fraser, 1976;
Historically, the discourse of professional social work has been prone to interpret poverty and material want as evidence of a person’s moral, or psychological, shortcomings and to reaffirm that the problem of poverty should be rooted in the behaviour of those who are poor. A number of formulations or ideological categories have therefore been constructed to identify and classify this undeserving segment of the population (Stedman Jones, 1984; MacNicol, 1987). Hence terms such as ‘industrial residuum’ (Davis, 1992), ‘social problem groups’, ‘problem families’ (Hall, 1960: Chap. 10), ‘underclass’ (Murray, 1990; Dean, 1992; Robinson and Gregson, 1992; Rodger, 1992; Mann, 1994), even the ‘new rabble’ (Murray, 1994) have all been deployed. Each shifting conceptualization refers essentially to the same alleged behaviour traits (fecklessness, lack of foresight, etc.) of the group identified (Dendy, 1895a: 83).

Social work, moreover, has played a key role in promulgating some of these conceptualizations which are part of the ‘vocabulary of domination’ (Jones, 1998b: 7) and are embedded in power relations.

The COS, for example, played an important role in the ‘industrial residuum’ construct (Bosanquet, 1895a, 1895b; Dendy, 1895a, 1895b). Similarly, in the 1940s and 1950s the idea of ‘problem families’ was integral to social work’s discourse (Philp and Timms, 1957). However, as Welshman’s (1999) research has revealed, the profession also remained somewhat sceptical about the construct. As a consequence it is perhaps even more surprising that problem families should make an uncritical reappearance in social work publications in the late 1990s and early 21st century (Eisenstadt, 1998; Steele, 1998; ‘The Division Bell’, Community Care, February 2001). Such ideological categories, targeted at the poor, have also been traditionally immersed in a discourse of difference and have included specific constructs pivoting on, for example, the good/bad mother and appropriate/inappropriate gender roles (see also Garrett, 2001). In this way dominant gender roles and economic relations have been continually reinforced.

The Dominant Imagery and Iconography

Perhaps we should also try to appreciate the impact which pervasive stereotypes of the ‘underclass’ and ‘sink estate’ imagery may have had on social work’s willingness to become more poverty-focused. In 1998 New Labour launched its New Deal for Communities programme to regenerate run-down neighbourhoods in Britain. However, references to poverty remain underpinned by a political consensus on the ‘underclass’ concept and are still influenced by the imagery of the ‘sink estate’. These symbolic locations have variously been described as part of ‘No Go Britain’ (Victor et al., 1994; Loos, 1994) and ‘estates from hell’ (Campbell, 1995; Melkie, 1997). Furthermore, there is now an array of measures in place to contain the people who live in these neighbourhoods. Such measures include enclosing or fencing in the inhabitants, covert video surveillance and the use of anti-social behaviour orders under the Crime and Disorder Act (Thomas, 1998; Malik, 1995; Chapman, 1999). Alongside this
pathologizing of those living in poverty, reflecting similar trends in the economically polarized cities of the USA, the rich have begun to flee to their own gated communities (D avis, 1990; Thomas, 1998; Hari, 2001; Bullock et al., 2001).

Related to these developments have been subtexts centred on the allegedly predatory nature of white, working-class masculinity (Campbell, 1993; Coward, 1994; Connell, 1995: Chap. 4; H aylett, 2001) and fear of alleged black criminality (G ilroy, 1987). Emblematically in the early 1990s, reflecting the former concern, a public awareness exercise about the threat of car crime portrayed young men as hyenas. Meanwhile, a rat boy was reported to be skulking in the detritus and ventilation shafts of tower blocks on Newcastle’s Byker estate. Associated with these preoccupations has been the notion that social workers often face violent situations. In the summer of 1999, for example, the social care magazine Community Care began a national campaign for safety at work (Valios, 1999). While not denying that social workers can face violence, most distressingly evidenced by, for example, the tragic murder of Jenny M orrison in November 1998, it might be argued that that such concerns are in part also related to the prominence of the ‘dangerousness’ concept (D ale et al., 1986; Payne, 1999; Winches- ter, 2001). Moreover, as Parton and Small (1989: 135) suggested a number of years ago, the users of social services are not becoming more dangerous, neither are social workers less able to cope with violence. It is simply that the number of ‘violent situations they face are increasing’ and ‘this results directly from changes in the nature of the social work task and the restructuring of the welfare state’.

New Labour and Social Exclusion

Finally, we need to refer to New Labour and the impact which its perspective may have had on social work’s willingness to address poverty. Unlike previous Conservative administrations, New Labour has, of course, been prepared to refer to poverty. A s Walker (1999: 139) has argued, before ‘1 May 1997, poverty had been a proscribed word in official circles for a political generation’. Furthermore, there has been a commitment to eradicate child poverty within 20 years (B arnes, 2001b; H arvey, 2001; L ister, 2001; Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001). Nonetheless, the government has not even tried to build a consensus in favour of redistribution. Moreover, generally the government’s preferred orientation has been to shift the focus of debate from poverty to social exclusion.

Both in social work and elsewhere, the term ‘social exclusion’ has been apt to dominate discussions concerning the conceptualization of and response to poverty (Prescott, 2002). Current reference to the concept of social exclusion in Europe can be traced to ‘the somewhat surprising synthesis of social Catholicism and republicanism in contemporary France’ (B yrne, 1999: 8) and to its deployment by the Commission of the European Union from the late 1980s. However, even by the mid-1990s it had become central to New Labour’s social justice discourse (Commission on Social Justice, 1994). Washington and P aylor (1998: 335) have argued that ‘the developing usage of the concept of social
exclusion offers social work an opportunity to establish a professional focus which can be used in practice throughout the member states of the European Union’. The argument here, however, is that the concept needs to be approached more warily. The definition of the term can, for example, be exceedingly broad and highly generalized. Washington and Paylor (1998: 332) contend, for example, that:

Central to most definitions is the notion of separateness from the life experiences common to the majority within society . . . Social exclusion is multi-dimensional disadvantage which dislocates people from the major social and economic opportunities in society: from citizenship, housing, adequate living standards or employment . . . The process of marginalisation and exclusion affects us all, whether it is because we ourselves experience isolation or powerlessness or because we contribute, however unintentionally, to the excluding of others. The processes which locate people in these positions may well be different and their exact situation on the margins may be varied, but the characteristic definition of the terrain is that it is occupied by people who are apart from the mainstream of social living. (emphases added)

Social exclusion might also be criticized for seeking to mask poverty and the related questions of income and wealth distribution. Levitas (1996) has criticized this ‘new hegemonic discourse’ since ‘social divisions which are endemic to capitalism’ are presented as ‘resulting from an abnormal breakdown in social cohesion’. The concept also erases issues connected to low pay because work is unquestionably perceived as the mechanism of social inclusion (Levitas, 2001; Lister, 2001). Levitas (1996: 18) contends, for example, that to ‘see integration as solely effected by paid work is to ignore that fact that society is – and certainly should be – more than a market’. Lister (1999) has levelled a similar critique at social exclusion and its fetishism of work which is, in reality, often low paid and associated with few employment rights (see also Haylett, 2001). These criticisms should, moreover, have a particular resonance for social workers who daily engage with people excluded from the labour market because of ill health, disability, caring responsibilities or discriminatory employment practices.

Described by the press as ‘ghetto busters to tackle poverty’ (Wintour, 1997), New Labour’s Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was established in December 1997. Initially, priority tasks for the SEU centred on truancy and school exclusion, so-called rough sleepers (i.e. the homeless) and run-down estates. More recently it has also turned its attention to teenage pregnancies (Department of Health, 2000). Since its formation various keynote speeches have highlighted a new element to social exclusion. That is to say, there exists the notion that social exclusion, entirely detached from economic processes, can be transmitted from generation to generation. At the launch of the SEU, the prime minister, Tony Blair, asserted: ‘Social exclusion is about income, but it is about more. It is about prospects, networks and life chances. It is a modern problem likely to be passed down from generation to generation’ (in Alcock, 1998: 20, emphasis added). Alistair Darling, the social security secretary, echoed these sentiments when he
claimed: ‘Many of these people live on the worst estates. They will die younger, statistically there is a good chance their exclusion will pass on to their children’ (Darling, 1999, emphasis added). This reflects some of the ideas associated with the discredited cycle of deprivation theory in the 1970s (see the critique in Jordan, 1974) and makes it plain that New Labour’s social exclusion discourse is part of a more historically rooted approach which persistently locates the cause of poverty in the behaviour of those who are poor.

An assistant director of social services has been a member of the SEU (Peatfield, 1997), but little effort has been made to integrate social work into the unit’s approach (see Hunter, 1998; Jordan, 2000; Downey, 2001a, 2001b). Some evidence also suggests that frontline social workers remain sceptical about the aims of the SEU, perceiving it as a ‘middle class institution, run by middle class people to impose middle class solutions on people who do not want them’ (Chadda, 1998). More fundamentally, social workers should perhaps be wary of conceptualizations and schemes which present market solutions to problems generated by the market.

What spaces and opportunities exist, therefore, for a more socially progressive social work, for a social work practice that is more poverty-focused and that seeks to relate poverty to ideas connected to diversity and difference? How can this be incorporated into the project to create the just society? Below, the aim is not to provide anything so crudely modernist as a blueprint or action plan, yet the sequestration of poverty might be addressed in five interrelated and practical ways.

Towards a More Poverty-focused Practice

First, there is perhaps a need within social work to undertake critically-focused research examining the impact of poverty. Writing after the First World War some 25 years before becoming prime minister, Clem Attlee (1920: 126), in his book *The Social Worker*, asserted that every social worker ‘is almost certain to be an agitator’, but he also stressed the importance of social investigation in social work. Indeed, this message remains just as pertinent in the early years of a new century. Social work, generally, needs to develop a more practice-orientated research culture (Everitt, 1998) and specific pieces of research on poverty could be carried out in conjunction with the users of services and local academics. This type of research need not be grandiose in design or execution, but could produce accessible snapshots and locally-based audits which are both professionally and politically useful. Furthermore, it is an approach which could gel with the current official interest in evidence-based practice (Atherton, 1999).

Second, as hinted above, there is a need to involve those living with the impact of poverty (Willow, 2001). As Beresford and Croft (in Becker, 1997: 164) assert, ‘the argument that people with experience of poverty should be more fully involved in the anti-poverty action is now well rehearsed. A strong case is made for it on philosophical, practical and political grounds . . . It makes
It is likely to lead to more successful and appropriate campaign methods and results.  

While entirely accepting this analysis, the complexities involved here should not be underestimated. As Lister (Becker, 1997: 157–8) counsels, ‘many people in poverty . . . don’t want the label attached to them because there is still a stigma attached to it . . . We need a strategy which gives due place to their perceptions of the situation and what they themselves are doing to change it.’  

Perhaps it is also important to note that given the low wages available to many (largely female) social care staff in the private and statutory home care sector, many providers as well as users of services are now living in poverty.  

Third, creative (and exhausting) work could be undertaken to try to construct networks which are committed to address poverty. Campaigning against poverty in social services needs to be a collective, coalition-based endeavour. The social work and poverty agenda might also be activated within the self-organized or support groups, which a number of larger SSDs have for women, disabled, black, Irish, gay and lesbian workers. Each group brings its own perspective to the issue and helps to emphasize the connections between mass poverty and notions of diversity and difference. The impact of poverty might also be a focus inside various professional specialisms: for example, social workers dealing with children and families or employed in mental health services. Social workers could also try to be aware of and act on the findings and statements of national organizations such as the Child Poverty Action Group and the Joseph Rowntree Trust.  

Fourth, there may be a need to consider the possibility of whistleblowing. This topic received a good deal of attention in social work and in other ‘caring professions’ in the late 1990s (Chadda, 1998). The aim of this activity is to expose nefarious or incompetent professional practice and whistleblowing has now been sanctioned under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1999. The increasing public awareness of this practice might, therefore, be utilized in such a way as to whistleblow on instances of hardship and oppression which are structurally generated. As a journalist, Nick Davies (1995), has observed, ‘Social workers more than any other professional group deal with the facts of poverty. For as long as they are compelled to conceal these facts, the rest of us remain ignorant, and the truth about poverty surfaces only in occasional fragments.’  

Finally, the importance of welfare rights could be emphasized more in social work in that income problems could be seen as core social work problems (Bateman, 1999; Dean, 2001; Patterson, 2001). Social workers need, therefore, to be adequately trained and committed to providing welfare rights and/or referring to specialist agencies. This argument is emphasized by, for example, the new attentiveness to income maximization in the core assessment record which is a key part of the recently devised Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, Home Office, 2000).
Conclusion

In a more embracing academic discourse there are those who have always remained wary of ideas centred on notions of diversity, difference and, more broadly, identity politics (Jacoby, 1994; Hobsbawm, 1996; Fish, 1997; Beckett and Macy, 2001; Haylett, 2001). The perspective developed in this article, however, seeks to retain the progressive aspects of an attentiveness to these questions. Elsewhere, for example, I have emphasized that it is important for social work to recognize the specificity of Irish people in Britain (Garrett, 1998, 2000, 2002a). However, it is vital to accept that what Nancy Fraser terms ‘struggles of recognition’ also need to be ‘integrated with struggles for redistribution, rather than displacing and undermining them’ (Fraser, 2000: 109; Fraser, 1997). In this sense it might be argued that at present in the mainstream academic and practitioner discourses in social work ‘questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalise, eclipse and displace them’ (Fraser, 2000: 108; Harris, 2001).

As argued above, the Blair administrations’ focal conceptualizations, specifically the centrality of social exclusion, remain problematic (see also Garrett, 2002b). Moreover, social work has perhaps been rendered marginal or, bypassed by a number of initiatives such as Sure Start and other programmes, devised to regenerate local communities (Jordan, 2000). However, the fresh prominence given to poverty-related issues is, for example, apparent in the discourse centred on the Framework for the Assessment for Children and Need and their Families (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, Home Office, 2000) and does, at least, provide the space for a debate on anti-poverty orientations to practice.

Over a quarter of a century ago, Zofia Butrym argued that a ‘concern with the quality of human living . . . is what social work is basically about’ (Butrym, 1976: 40). Indeed, a reinvigorated theoretical and practical concern about mass poverty, and about the situation of those whom Bauman (1999: 90) has termed ‘flawed consumers’, is central to social work’s ethical base. As the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) ethical code proclaims, ‘social workers have a commitment to principles of social justice’ (IFSW, 1994). Moreover the IFSW, acknowledging the relationship between the value base of social work and human rights theory, has asserted that poverty is a ‘violation of human rights’ and that social workers ‘stand with the disadvantaged in campaigning for social justice’ (IFSW, 1996).

Clearly, none of the suggestions listed above provide solutions to the major disruptions, dislocations and hardships prompted by the dominance of the market and some of the pernicious features of globalization. The ideas can, perhaps, be viewed as small-scale, realistic ways forward that might translate into meaningful localized activities, which might also help to reconnect social work with more enlightened forms of practice and a more emancipatory politics.
More fundamentally, these ideas seek to reaffirm a social work commitment to civil and human rights and to promoting a more just society.

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