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Jim Barry, Elisabeth Berg, John Chandler and Elizabeth Harlow

Contact:

Jim Barry
University of East London, UK
j.j.barry@uel.ac.uk

John Chandler
University of East London, UK
j.p.chandler@uel.ac.uk

Elisabeth Berg
Luleå University of Technology, Sweden
elisabeth.berg@ltu.se

Elizabeth Harlow
University of Salford, UK
E.Harlow@salford.ac.uk

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Neo-liberalism and the (re-)construction of social work in Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Jim Barry, Elisabeth Berg, John Chandler and Elizabeth Harlow¹

Abstract

This paper considers some of the ways in which neo-liberalism is impacting upon the provision of welfare in Sweden and the UK, and more specifically the way(s) in which social work is currently being constructed and re-constructed as a consequence. This has the potential to implicate the organisation, management and practice of social work which are considered. The focus is on two major themes: firstly, the changing approaches to welfare and social work post-war, and the implications of the rise of neo-liberalism; and, secondly, the ramifications for social work as a (semi-)profession.

Key words

Social work, neo-liberalism, Sweden, United Kingdom

Introduction

This paper considers the influence of neo-liberalism on social work in the UK and Sweden at a time when social work is an organised occupation in all continents of the world (Barnes and Hugman 2002). Despite sharing a common basis, however, the specific organisation and practice of social work is likely to vary between countries since local discourses concerning citizenship and the provision of welfare might well be contributing to the shaping of national configurations. If the typology offered by Esping-Anderson (1990) is relied upon, social work within the social democratic context of Sweden may well contrast with social work in the United Kingdom, which has evolved within the context of a liberal welfare regime. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the idea that nation states can retain their individual difference has been contested: globalisation is said to erode national borders and impact upon economic policies, social life, the construction of social problems and the welfare policies and practices that are pursued (Wilding 1997). One global trend is for neo-liberalism to modify or possibly even replace social democratic and liberal welfare regimes.

According to Powell (2001), the implications of the neo-liberal discourse for the welfare state are ‘catastrophic’ in that the fundamental commitment to distributive justice and social citizenship has gone. Policy theorists such as Clarke and Newman (1997) argue that neo-liberalism constructs welfare professionals such as social workers as expensive resources, pursuing their own interests and patronising the clients with whom they work. Whilst welfare services and some associated professionals may be required, this discursive framework dictates that these should be limited in number and remit and provided by the private and voluntary sector rather than the state. Importantly, market conditions should apply: the market in welfare would reduce cost and introduce ‘choice’ for welfare ‘consumers’ (Harris

¹ The authors are in alphabetical order

2003). In consequence, the social work relationship is transformed, as clients become 'service users', 'stakeholders' or customers in a service transaction.

In analysing these issues the paper draws on secondary sources, including our own previously published work. In the section that follows we consider changing post-war contexts and the implications for the public realms of Sweden and the United Kingdom. We then go on to examine the organisational context for social work before offering some concluding thoughts.

Changing contexts and public realms

A great deal seems to have changed in the public realms of Sweden and the UK, from the seemingly settled worlds of collective institutional welfare provision that characterised much of European social policy discourse in the aftermath of the second world war. Today, it seems, social policy is far more likely to be moulded by individualised concerns with uncertainty and risk (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), alongside pressures to marketise and engage in the associated politics of choice that has historically predated any impulse to democracy (MacPherson 1966: 6). The idea of change is moreover reflected in the interest shown in academic circles in the growth of new forms of politics (Todd and Taylor 2004) and public management (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000), as well as new subjects conceptualised as active citizen-consumers and responsabilised accordingly (Newman 2001: 149). The settled worlds of welfare for Sweden and the UK were identified by Esping-Anderson (1990) as social democratic and liberal welfare regimes respectively, and whilst to a degree these may have been imagined worlds, their intellectual utility has held some not inconsiderable sway in the academic community. Yet, more recently, a new influence has been discerned as extending its reach far and wide, even if its present and likely future impact is unclear: neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism probably dates, according to Harvey (2005:1), from 1978-80 with a series of events in different parts of the world, including the election of politically right-wing Reagan and Thatcher governments in the US and UK respectively, suggesting a turning point in world affairs. Harvey's comments on what is meant by neo-liberalism are worth quoting at some length,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices ... There has everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s ... Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.

(op cit: 2 - 3)

Whilst acknowledging that not all states have actually succumbed, Harvey nonetheless points to a pervasive influence that affects thinking and practice, or discourse, to the degree that it has become normalised, with 'individual freedoms ... guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade' (op cit: 7). His linking of politics and economics is no accident, for neo-liberalism drew and gained inspiration not just from a classical liberalism that had flourished

in the nineteenth century writings of Bentham and Mill, but also the embedded liberalism of a Keynesianism that had gained ground a century later only to falter, following the relatively short-lived post war boom, towards the end of the 1960s (op cit: 11-12). The influence of academics such as Hayek (1944 and 1966) and Friedman (1962) - both 1970s Nobel Prize winners within just two years of each other - and their intellectual fellow travellers of the Mont Pelerin Society, should not be underestimated in all this. Hayek's reaction for example, against what he saw as the serfdom imposed by the march of collectivised politics was fuelled by his search for more simple ways to orchestrate human affairs in order to secure stability and freedom of choice. His answer was catallaxy (op cit 1966: 60), a process whereby economic relationships came to foster bonds of solidarity that acted to stave off the evils of right-left varieties of political totalitarianism (Friedrich 19969) and turn strangers - and potential enemies - into 'friends'. It was this special blend of economics and politics that gave neo-liberalism its dynamic character when compared to traditional one-nation, right-wing conservatism that found itself effectively sidelined under the US and UK regimes of Reagan and Thatcher; it also served to straightjacket erstwhile socialist parties which subsequently found themselves veering uncertainly towards a new, neo-liberal, *post-political* middle ground that mirrored the Butskellite consensus of the post-war years.

So influential did these ideas appear to have become that Fukuyama (1989) proclaimed no less than an end to history where conflicts of social class, religious fundamentalism and nationalism, were consigned to the dustbin of history, relics of a not-so-golden age that had passed. The subsequent recurrence of concerns about poverty, religion, territorial disputation and fragmentation nonetheless failed to shift the triumphal discourse of neo-liberalism in any significant way, its apparent dominance going largely unquestioned, with deregulation, competition and individual accountability held to be paramount and thereby influential in shaping social policy and its institutional forms.

This is not to suggest that neo-liberalism has been warmly embraced everywhere, nor that it has been without its critics. Sweden, for example, held out against neo-liberal pressures (Harvey 2005: 71) for some time, despite a fairly brief period in office from 1991 for the 'first Conservative Prime Minister since 1930' (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: 263), followed by a return to social democracy. Yet even here, policies of the recently elected right-wing coalition in Sweden suggest a piecemeal shift in a neo-liberal direction, the existence of support for the promotion of policies in favour of the development of small business even predating their election to office (Cervantes 2005). Sweden is not alone, there is an almost imperceptible shift in many countries, as states, reflecting the neo-liberal turn, favour social policy that oversees a withdrawal from 'welfare provision and ...[a diminishment of] ... health care, public education, and social services ...' (Harvey 2005: 76) in a potential if not real 'race to the bottom' (Hirst 1998:21). It is developments such as these that lead Alcock and Craig (2001: 3) to talk of a 'welfare mix', as social policy shifts its attention to the interest groups and associations of civil society, as well as private business and forms of privatisation.

This sense of forward movement for advocates of neo-liberalism has not been lost on academic critics, some of whom recount its seemingly relentless progress. Leys (2001: 1), for example, contends that 'politics everywhere are now *market-driven*' (italics in original). His focus is on aspects of the public realm in Britain though he does argue that the lessons, for other countries including Sweden, should not be ignored (op cit: 217). But what surprises him, perhaps above all else, is why there has been such little resistance, the answer appearing to be linked to the ways in which the changes have affected people differently and at different times, in effect a kind of divide and rule approach to social policy (op cit: 219-220).

Clarke (2004), by contrast, is wary of claims of neo-liberal triumphalism, seeing variation as well as conformity in its Anglophone manifestations, and as a strategy for an unfinished project that invites examination of ‘contradiction and contestations’, of ‘forms of refusal, resistance and accommodation’ (Clarke 2004: 30). In the ‘dispersed state’ (Clarke and Newman 1997), much is open to negotiation between, for example, politicians, professionals, users and new public managers, as well as agencies and agents, suggesting, at least potentially, considerable variation in implementation, with public attitudes showing,

... a surprising degree of continuity throughout this [recent] period of neo-liberal dominance, tending to see ‘more resources’ rather than ‘better management’ as the key to improving public services (particularly in health and education); and viewing responsibility for service provision (and service failures) as located with government, rather than ‘local management’

(Clarke 2004: 38)

For Clarke neo-liberalism is ‘enacted in different hybridised formations – in different national politics, in different regional contexts’ (op cit: 44) – and the task is not to assume its dominance but to explore attempts to both embed *and* disrupt it, to look, in short, for ‘resistances, refusals and blockages’. But the question remains: where to look for conflict and messy compromises?

One possibility is to look at other political parties and movements, such as the neo-conservative backlash played out by neo-conservatives, or ‘neocons’, who fear that the recent focus on the individual can lead to social disorder which would need to be met with a new moral authoritarianism (Harvey 2005: 82). Another is to consider those involved in the delivery mechanisms of neo-liberalism. Yet still we may go beyond the visible manifestations of neo-liberalism and consider the contexts within which they operate in civil society, the very contexts that set the scenes and shape the discourses by which those involved, including our selves, live. This will likely be framed by assumptions and theoretical conceptions of phenomena such as civil society.

In this respect, Mouffe’s position on civil society would appear to offer an approach that shifts issues of conflict and messy compromises centre stage. Mouffe’s (1999: 745) interest derives from concerns over the rise of the ‘extreme right’ and ‘growing disaffection with democratic institutions’ in a number of western countries. Whilst reasons for this may not be entirely clear, she notes current approaches as dominated by individualism, universalism and rationalism. Her intellectual target in this is Habermas (1995) and his notion of ‘deliberative democracy’ that draws inspiration from Rawls’ political liberalism and elevates ideal-speech and the ordered achievement of consensus through procedural regulation. For Mouffe this is misconceived since the removal of impediments to ideal speech and communication are not only unrealisable in practice, but constitute the very substance of civic life itself. In place of abstractions such as ideal-speech and originary positions, Mouffe suggests agonistic pluralism as a way of recovering struggle and differences of self and vested ‘interest’ (du Gay 2007) that need to be worked through in real time. This helps us to see the nation-constructing role of those who create welfare or, to paraphrase Clarke (2005:427), accord those involved agency in breathing life and meaning into the kinds of welfare provision that help to define a nation, rather than the reverse. In locating public sector organisations and agencies, professionals, managers, administrators and users in such a context within civil society, of which they are all a part, we further seek to re-centre politics in the strangely depoliticised

worlds of neo-liberalism in order to highlight its political character as an incomplete project, and bring centre stage the messy compromises and settlements that characterise the daily lives of those involved as they enact its processes and shape its meanings.

Changing Spaces, Changing Times: The Organisational and Political Context for Social work in Sweden and the United Kingdom

In analysing the re-construction of social work within Sweden and the UK there is a need to appreciate the dynamics of construction. As Halford and Leonard (2006: 658) have put it: “the concepts of space (the where) and time (the when) are important in unpacking the part that context plays in subjective manoeuvres around managed change (the how).” As an occupation, even as a profession (although the nature and extent of their professionalism is, of course, contested), consideration of the spaces in which social work operates, both nationally and organisationally, is crucial for the analysis of the way in which neo-liberalism is impacting. Space and time provide particular configurations which have the potential to render as different neo-liberalism’s form and hold. It is for these reasons that social work in two national contexts, Sweden and the United Kingdom, is being considered. These two contexts have not been selected because they are ‘typical’, but because, according to Esping-Anderson (1990), the origins of welfare provision in each is different.

There are differences and similarities between United Kingdom and Sweden regarding social work as an occupation. Social Work in Sweden has since the 70’s become an academic discipline something which has led to a focus on professionalize the occupation trained social worker (Wingfors, 2004). The trained social workers has not succeeded to set boundaries towards a specific social work area which has led to that many employers, for instance the local authorities, employ staff that have other educations as trained social worker. SSR, an union that organise trained social workers, informed 040120 that it is just 35 percent of all local authorities in Sweden where trained social workers have the proper education as social worker. In Sweden there has been a reform about Social work education (SFS 20061053) where three specialities and dedicated educational provision in the social work field from 2007 will be trained in the same education but there still will be possibly to specialize in three different fields, social care, social pedagogic and individuals and families. . Before this reform the education for trained Social worker were three different educations, social care, social pedagogic and social worker. Social care workers have their expertise with elderly and people with physical and psychological disability, Social pedagogic is focusing on young people in school. Trained social workers are employed by Social welfare departments in the local authorities working with individuals and families. The Health County Councils are employing almoner, Social health officer, who have an education as trained social worker. Social Work has always, and still, been dominated by women and they have struggled to get there own subject for examination which they succeeded but they have not yet a licence.

In consequence, social work within the historically social democratic context of Sweden may possibly contrast with social work in the United Kingdom, which has evolved within the context of a liberal welfare regime. Furthermore, both can be seen - even if to varying degrees - as places where neo-liberalism does not go un-contested, but rather confronts what many commentators (e.g. Huber 1996, Le Grand 2003) see as a major alternative: social democracy.

However, the very emphasis on constructed or situated identity creates the challenge of defining social work. Certainly, definitions of social work abound, although Youngusband's (1964: 23) comment made over 40 years ago that "Defining 'social work' and 'social worker' is a common though not very profitable undertaking" appears as apt now as it was then. Social work reflects the political climate prevailing in society at any moment in time and what is seen to be politically correct. Reflecting its location, social work can be understood to be normative (Blom, Morén and Nygren, 2006).

Although vague, the International Federation of Social Work's (2000) definition might be helpful:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

This seems to leave the forms of work open to 'social workers' very wide. This diversity is one source of tension: spatially social workers are often found in different places, doing rather different things, even within the borders of a single country. However, by invoking 'theories of human behaviour and social systems', the definition suggests a 'higher calling' which is akin to professionalism. Social work, in this definition, does not constitute just any form of care – social workers do not wash or feed the people with whom they work: this hands-on help is offered by care workers. In short, reflecting its social and organisational location (Berg et al, 2008) social work is a (semi-) professional activity that aims to help and empower individuals and groups to change or improve their lives. In practice, social workers assess 'social' need, or intervene in some way - with intervention legitimised as satisfying basic needs or providing protection. Specifically, social workers tend to work either with families and children, older people, and those with mental health problems or learning difficulties.

Sweden is of course associated with a 'Scandinavian' model of high taxation and high welfare standards (Esping-Andersen 1990). This can be seen as part of a post second world war settlement, in which social democratic ideas have held sway, influenced in part by Fabian ideas from the UK. Apart from a brief period of Conservative-led coalition government in the early 1990s, as noted earlier, the Social Democratic party was the dominant force in government until 2006 when a new right-wing coalition came to power. Not surprisingly, therefore, social policy in Sweden can be seen as having experienced a degree of stability, based on a high degree of popular support for high social welfare standards.

In the post-war era social work in Sweden has largely taken place within local authorities and Health County Councils that have responsibility for health and education as well as social care and this has provided a largely stable and, until recently, expanding organisational space for the development of social work – a space in which women tend to be numerically dominant (Berg, 2003). However, the social democratic settlement was always based on the assumption that full employment was a priority and that welfare provision would complement the private market sector of the economy rather than undermine it (Wilson 1979: 17). It is also important to recognise that the state did not have a monopoly of welfare provision – in fact private provision of health and social care has continued through the post-war period (Meeuwisse, Sunesson and Swärd, 2006), with opportunities for private companies to provide social work increasing from the early 1990s (Berg 2003).

As economic problems mounted in the 1980s in Sweden, as elsewhere, there was an increasing questioning of existing arrangements. Although coming to Sweden rather later than some other countries, the mid 1990s is seen by many analysts as a time when New Public Management took hold (Pollitt and Bouchaert 2004), with greater emphasis on performance management, efficiency, accountability and decentralisation (Holmberg and Henning 2003, Larrson 2002, Christensen and Læg Reid 2007: 74-76, 83-84).

The changes for clients with a higher degree of differentiation in Sweden started early in the 1990s (Åström in SOU 2000:38). It is too early to be sure how far the election of a new right wing government alliance in 2006 will bring about change, but it is pursuing a clear neo-liberal agenda with early actions, such as that of the closure of the respected National Institute for Working Life, changing the conditions for unemployment and people on sick-leave from paid employment, indicative of a desire to make a substantial transformation in state welfare institutions.

Turning to the United Kingdom, Harvey's (2005) suggestion that neo-liberalism dates from around 1978-80 coincides almost precisely with the election of the Thatcher-led Conservative government, replacing a crisis ridden Labour one. In terms of social policy the Thatcher governments which ran from 1978 to 1990 can certainly be seen as enacting a neo-liberal agenda, favouring the development of markets or quasi-markets (Johnson 1987, Le Grand and Bartlett 1993), even if there was simultaneously the continuance of a strong centralised state, and state funding of services was not noticeably contracted in real terms (Glennerster and Hills 1998). However, while the rhetoric may have been of a 'rolling back' of the state the reality seemed to be somewhat more complex – in some respects a clipping of its wings through privatisation and resource constraint, in others a strengthening of state control through mechanisms of accountability and performance measurement, some of which (as in the case of education) were meant simultaneously to inform consumer choice of services. This was a period characterised by one commentator as one of the 'free market and the strong state' (Gamble 1994). It was also the period when the NPM was seen as taking hold in the UK with an emphasis on disaggregation, greater 'hands-on management', 'discipline and parsimony' in use of resources, increasing measurement of performance and the use of 'pre-set output measures' (Hood, 1991; 1995:95-97). All of these can be seen as embedding business values, competition and 'entrepreneurialism' within state organisations (Hood et al 1999, Du Gay 1996).

Social work in Sweden and the United Kingdom since the 1980s

It has been argued above that global economic challenge in the late 1970s and 1980s contributed to political and policy change in both Sweden and the UK. Despite the potential for national governments to make different responses to global influences, both Sweden and the UK embraced neo-liberal thinking and linked politics with economics. In both countries the cost of welfare came into question and private sector managerialism became seen as a means of making the most of public investment: that is, managerialism became the mechanism by which public services, including social work, could become more economic, efficient and effective. There has been an increase in the delegation of accountability, surveillance, work intensification and financial restrictions (Holmberg and Henning, 2003), and this has occurred under both Conservative and 'New Labour' governments (Langan 2000, Clarke et al 2007). In the UK at least, this has led to the re-configuration of social work practice with social work becoming managerial and technicist (Harlow 2003). Indeed, in

adult services the role of social worker has been re-named to that of care manager where the incumbent (not necessarily a qualified social worker) manages the purchase and provision of care services. With reduced emphasis on direct practice, as well as the reduced autonomy (Harris 2003), this re-construction of social work has encouraged practitioners to become dissatisfied and resign from their posts (Harlow 2004). This has contributed to an on-going problem in the staffing of social work services.

Neo-liberalism is also associated with the development of new social movements and the idea of citizens as consumers. By the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s new social movements were coalescing around constructions of identity. Groups such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation and the Disabled People's International who, informed by the social model of disability, campaigned for 'normalisation' and the full social inclusion of those experiencing impairment. Uniform services were criticised and solutions began to be framed in terms of consumer-based citizenship and choice. In the UK the diversification of service providers by market mechanism has been legally required and social work 'clients' have become 'service users' (for a fulsome discussion of changed nomenclature see McLaughlin 2008), who in principle at least, exercise their right to choose:

The marketisation of relationships in health and welfare promotes efficiency among providers by subjecting them to bracing competition, and increased choice for users who are expected to exercise responsible and rational discretion on their own behalf. The assumption is that needs are transparent and obvious to the consumer, requiring no interpretation by professionals, and that welfare is merely a commodity (Froggett 2002: 70).

In the past, the relationship between individual social workers and their clients was the essence of social work. The nature of the relationship has changed and service users now have new opportunities to work alongside social workers and impact on social welfare services. This includes management and wider social services activities. This is not unproblematic: the users' movement established in England (Wallcraft, Read and Sweeney, 2003) has met resistance from organizations and practitioners alike. But radical ideas become institutionalized and implemented in organisations in ways whereby they come to lose some of their sting. Despite this social work as an occupation is being obliged to change in order to work more closely with users/clients and include them in decisions, something that challenges its professional status.

According to Fournier (2000) the reduction in the power and status of professions is linked to the neo-liberal drive to cut costs. Fournier argues that in order to liberalize labour markets, professional monopolies (based on specialist knowledge) are being eroded. In addition to an emphasis on inter-disciplinarity, expert knowledge is diffused to customers (Kanter 1990) and the boundary between professions and between professionals and lay people is becoming blurred. These trends are evident in both Sweden and the UK with the knowledge base of social work practice becoming an important focus of attention and the subject of complex political positioning.

In both Sweden and the UK there has been a drive to for social work practice to be explicit and overtly based on evidence. Put another way, evidence based practice, riding on the wave of a neo-positivist movement, has become a requirement. The idea of evidence-based practice (EBP) is attributed to Sackett et al. (1997) who, in the field of medicine, argued for ' [...] the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making

decisions about the care of individual patients' (Sackett et al. 1997: 2 quoted in Butler and Pugh 2004: 60).

However, in both countries the increased call for evidence based practice (EBP) has given rise to questions concerning the construction of social work and its epistemological underpinnings. Firstly, challenging the fundamental notion of social work as a (semi-) profession has been the suggestion that social work does not require a specialist knowledge base: the kind of problems with which social workers deal are 'general' rather than specialist and therefore solutions are already available to lay people (Rosen 2003). This is linked to the second point, that whilst social workers have professional knowledge, they focus on individuals without any ambition to generalize precepts for professional practice, with - the third point - any general standards and methods that they have had in the past now tending to disappear. According to some, the foundations of social work knowledge lie within art rather than science (see England 1986). For such critics the application of positivist principles to the generation of social work knowledge is alien to a practice that is socially constructed. Furthermore, the construction of social work is political, an important consideration with which the proponents of EBP fail to engage:

Not only are we being led to a narrowly constructed notion of welfare, but also to a similarly constrained notion of what constitutes knowledge. A kind of cross-contamination has occurred whereby the scientism of the one reinforces the depoliticisation of the other (Butler and Pugh 2004: 63).

For these commentators the radical potential of social work is being eroded. Again, though, the future is far from certain and there have been some voices arguing in rather more optimistic vein for the possibility of a 'new professionalism' that combines technical competence with a practice that is 'more politically and socially engaged' and which has some 'radical spirit' (Lymbery 2001: 381, see also Payne 2006, Adams et al 2002). Such commentators advocate a need to recognise and engage with those very social movements that contest the conventional ways in which social needs are defined and dealt with.

Whether or not pessimism or optimism is warranted, however, advocates of EBP argue that it will improve the quality of services as well as make the decisions and methods of social work transparent to all, including service users. In consequence, the Swedish government is stressing the importance of social workers using and supporting this new approach and that the principles are promoted within the education of practitioners (SOU 2008:18, Börjeson 2008). In keeping with the approach in Sweden, in 2001 the UK government established the Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) as the 'key source of evidence-based policy' (Fisher 2002: 8). There has also been a rise of research dissemination projects such as Research in Practice (www.rip.org.uk), its younger sister Research in Practice for Adults (www.ripfa.org.uk), and Making Research Count.

From the above it appears as though 'radicals' speaking on behalf of the service user might support or reject evidence based practice. However, for critics the battle has been lost since both the Swedish and UK government have given their commitment. As indicated above, the emphasis on evidence based practice as well as stronger service user influence may lead to the re-construction of social work. Although the current managerialist version may be unpopular in the UK, and the status of social work might be under threat, a new professionalism might eventually emerge in which practitioners are more closely allied with service users. Hugman (2001) argues that social work now finds itself in a context that facilitates structural

discrimination linked to ethical discrimination and high unemployment for immigrants. This policy change may question the place of social work in government in a way that would reposition it as a user friendly social service where paternalism, racism, age discrimination and oppression of clients reduces and social workers come to see themselves as allied to fellow citizens.

This trend may become more evident in Sweden than in the UK given its history in relation to welfare provision (see above). However, overall developments in Sweden suggest shifts in favour of a more neo-liberal policy as in England. The future is uncertain as pressures on equity, inclusiveness and expectation of fairness in the behaviour of governments – crucial for Sweden's social democratic solidarism more generally (Hirst 1998:21) - come under strain.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper we have sought to outline changing contexts and developments in welfare provision following the Second World War in Sweden and the United Kingdom as they have affected social services and social work. In Sweden a social democratic approach to policy and practice was dominant through much of the post-war period but we have seen significant social welfare changes appearing from the early 1990s. The United Kingdom has, in contrast, experienced a more consistently liberal orientation, something reflected in Esping-Anderson's (1990) characterisation of welfare regimes in Sweden and the UK as social democratic and liberal respectively, and it might have been thought that, as a result of their different welfare traditions and trajectories post-war, their welfare architecture would remain somewhat polarised.

More recently, however, we have witnessed the intrusion of a neo-liberal agenda, dating probably from the late 1970s and associated with a series of events in different parts of the world that have suggested to some a turning point in world affairs (Harvey (2005:1). Certainly, political predilections of the right-wing Reagan and Thatcher governments, in the US and UK respectively, did advocate a rethinking of political and economic direction, prompting a turn to neo-liberalism (Ibid) and, at least potentially, an unseemly race to the bottom in pursuit of a competitive edge that threatens welfare provision. Certainly Sweden held out against neo-liberal pressures (Harvey 2005: 71) for some time, with social democracy continuing to dominate the political scene through the 1980s. Yet whilst social policy in Sweden has continued to focus on ensuring health and social security for all its citizens (Salonen, 2001), a new influence associated with neo-liberalism dating from the mid 1990's has been discerned (Pollit and Bouchaert, 2004). These new liberal ideas in Sweden have strengthened citizens' individual rights but have also emphasised individual responsibility, duty and the obligation of individuals to be accountable not just for themselves but also their families. The result, since early 90s, and perhaps especially following the election of a right-wing coalition government in 2006, has been that unemployed and people on sick leave have lost some of their advantages, suggesting perhaps that forces have been at work not just in the UK but also in Sweden which have been at least sympathetic to neo-liberal thinking. The implications for social work can be seen in a number of ways, but not least in the increasing emphasis on evidence based practice and the call for stronger service user influence. These are significant developments in both Sweden and the UK and appear to be leading to the reconceptualisation and reconfiguration of social work. These changes can be seen as a challenge, in short, to the fundamental legitimacy of social workers' right to even a semi-professional status, since their independence of judgement and ability to use their experience and training to define and address social need is so constrained. It appears, moreover, that governments in both places assume that the kind of problems with which

social workers deal routinely are 'general' rather than specialist in nature, and that all that is required is the provision of ready-made solutions for whatever problems are presented and that these can be administered routinely by lay people (Rosen 2003), marginalising, thereby, social work education in the process.

Suggestions that the very basis of social work knowledge may lie within the arts rather than sciences (see England 1986) constitute one possible reaction to this. For such critics the application of positivist principles to the generation of social work knowledge is indeed alien to a practice that is by its very nature socially constructed. Yet social work has, nevertheless, become both managerial (Berg et al 2008) and technicist (Harlow 2003), suggesting that the future for social work is bleak, since the debate around social work in Sweden and the UK has operated at a level that valorises positivist, managerial and technicist ways that mask their underlying political character. It may be that this process of normalisation is the most significant of the consequence of the discourse of neo-liberalism for social work, if not the entire approach to welfare in the unedifying, undignified 'race to the bottom'. It is in this context that Hugman's (2001) arguments about social work now finding itself facilitating structural and ethical discrimination and high unemployment for immigrants would seem persuasive. This would not be the first time that social workers would find themselves cast as agents of the state. Nevertheless, the future is by no means settled. One response to current circumstances would be to argue for a new professionalism based precisely on 'evidence' of what works that is put to the service of citizen-consumers. But there are other, more radical, alternatives in which social workers engage not just with isolated citizen-consumers but with social movements for change. This would be an alternative to their acting repressively, and would be to ally themselves with fellow citizens and challenge paternalism, racism, discrimination and oppression. Social work, as Lymbery put it back in 2001 might be seen as at a crossroads between a marginalized and demoralized condition and a 'new future and sense of mission' (Lymbery 2001: 381). Seven years on and there is, however, perhaps little sign that social workers have avoided being caught in the strangely depoliticised worlds of neo-liberalism, with politicians and publics appearing mesmerised by seemingly neutral, managerialised and technicist solutions that just happen conveniently to reduce costs and the economic 'burden' of welfare. But lying behind the post-political soporifics and neatly packaged solutions of neo-liberalism is a politically inspired orientation that elevates consensus and procedural regulation above a contention it seeks to defuse. In such circumstances there is an urgent need to bring politics back to the debate and highlight the winners and losers in the power plays of neo-liberalism. In short to focus on the resistances, refusals and blockages which need to be re-centred in the post-political world of neo-liberalism. It is tempting to say that social work is no longer so much at the crossroads that Lymbery (2001) described, as well down the 'neo-liberal' road to its oblivion. There are always, however, other possibilities and one of these is a reconfiguration of practice that sees social workers as not simply engaging with social movements for change, but as part of such movements. This involves a refusal to see the citizen as an individual welfare consumer in favour of recognition of collective identities that are engaged in a web of political action. It is to unsettle the complacent certainties of possessive individualism with the complexities and indeterminacies of agonistic pluralism. To what extent social work embraces one or the other future is an apt subject for future research, but if the similarities between Sweden and the United Kingdom at present seem greater than the differences there is no guarantee of this continuing. In different contexts, different forms of struggle and resistance might emerge and we need to look out for these.

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