

Social Work, Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism

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Social Work, Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism – An Analysis of Policy Document ‘Regulating Social Workers’

The social work profession has a complicated public image. On the one hand, it is viewed as a human rights and social justice profession (the preferred view of the profession itself as exemplified by its international definition statements). On the other hand, it is viewed as a profession in crisis traversing through one crisis to another, often detested in the public mind and viewed as a well-meaning but largely ineffective and sometimes harmful occupation. This discussion attempts to unravel this complexity by examining the reality of the social work profession in the neoliberal era. This will include how the structural aspects of the profession; government policies of austerity and a market and corporate neoliberal state have effectively trapped social work in an ideology that increasingly furthers the authoritarian nature of the profession. This shall be considered by looking at the broader policy, political and economic contexts. It will focus in detail on one specific Conservative Government policy document, namely ‘Regulating Social Workers’ (DoE and DoH 2016).

There is an increased understanding that the political left, including the British Labour Party fell into a trap in the early 1970s to believe that the traditional post-war consensus of steadily increasing prosperity for the working class was at an end due to a crisis in Capitalism’s ability to produce sufficient wealth. The British Labour Party abandoned Keynesian economic policy on which the post war prosperity of both Britain and the US had been based. The abandonment of the post-war consensus was a renaissance in class war and the realisation of Capitalists that a new approach was necessary if they were to regain their economic advantage and levels of inequality which had been threatened by collectivist and socialist policies (Mitchell and Fazi 2017). This crisis which was essentially a trap for the left is succinctly explained by Dumenil and Levy (2011) as a counter revolution or coup by neoliberals. This was essentially against full employment and state intervention policies that had accrued benefits to the working class at a cost to the capitalist class:

‘The profitability of capital plunged during the 1960s and 1970s; corporations distributed dividends sparingly, and real interest rates were low, or even negative, during the 1970s. The stock market (also corrected for inflation) had collapsed during the mid-1970s, and was stagnating. It is easy to understand that, under such conditions, the income and wealth of ruling classes was strongly affected. Seen from this angle, this could be read as a dramatic decline in inequality. Neoliberalism can be interpreted as an attempt by the wealthiest fraction of the population to stem this competitive decline.’ (Dumenil and Leve 2015:12).

Collectivist welfare polices’ were regarded to have gone too far and by the 1970s even threatening the means of production itself with radical left-wing policies emerging such as workers on company boards and a National Investment Bank. The roll back of the state including the welfare state was an important strategy of neoliberalism to increase corporate profits in part through creating social insecurity, low paid jobs, undermining the wage negotiating powers of the trades unions; and abandoning full employment.

Neoliberalism is closely associated with New Management approaches which are generally referred to as Managerialism (Harlow 2003 and Harlow et al 2013). These involve the cultures of auditing, regulating, commissioning and unit pricing. The management culture accompanying neoliberalism enables the neoliberal state to keep control of spending and development including in the welfare and health fields. In recent times this has been accompanied by a culture of austerity, another vehicle of neoliberalism to restore inequality and capital advantage even deliberately at the expense of welfare which the neoliberals regard as having gone too far. It is in this context that this article

will focus on one current policy development in particular in social work, and critique it from the perspective of what the author regards as the dominance of neoliberalism in social work. A view shared by others who describe a neoliberal hegemony within the profession (Carey 2008 and 2011). The policy development critiqued is the creation of a new regulatory body for the social work profession in England as outlined in the policy document 'Regulating Social Workers' (DoH and DoE, 2016).

The imperative of 'Regulating Social Workers' is the premise that standards need to be raised and bad practice more effectively dealt with including the dismissal of social workers where they fail to reach the new standards that the new regulator will develop in consultation with the profession. According to the document, standards need to improve right across the field, from initial training courses to on-going professional development; in social work practice with children, young people, families and adults. The document when discussing standards uses commonly used neoliberal terms such as 'quality' (quality assurance) and takes a castigating tone contending that the standard of social work is currently not good enough. However, it does not explore why it is not good enough beyond focussing on the skills and knowledge deficits of individual social workers, some of them presumably have not engaged in much ongoing professional development and training. The wider fiscal climate and austerity effects on local authorities is not examined. Indeed the 'need to drive up standards' (p4) will be addressed through micromanagement and regulation including more robust suitability for practice procedures. In the future it will be an offence for anyone to fail to produce evidence required by the regulator or fail to attend a fitness to practice hearing, thus criminalising social workers. It is clear that the government believes that the current regulator in England, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) is completely unfit for purpose to regulate social work since it has minimum standards of public safety rather than standards for career progression and expertise. The new regulator would have a standards' orientated approach to its work. These changes represent through the methods of managerialism the furtherance of an authoritarian attitude towards the social work profession by Government and in turn this will seep through to the profession itself as evidence shows that recently qualified social workers are far more prepared to accept neoliberal ideology.

Standards are to be raised with no mention of any extra spending and with no indication whatsoever that the excessive social work caseload will be addressed. In fact it is expected that savings will be made in the long term as social work vacancies are filled and the cost of regulation is reviewed and probably raised in 2020. There will be a new set of standards for qualifying education and training and providers of social work education, in the most part universities, are likely to be charged a fee for accreditation raising questions as to whether more universities will cut their losses and end social work education in their institutions.

The policy document praises the Sir Martin Narey review of social work education which said that too much social work theory was taught and not enough practical skills and posited that some social work courses were poor in quality (Narey 2014). Such courses might not be able to meet the new accreditation standards and would be wound up. Sir Martin Narey used to be a respected leader in the field having led Barnardo's but as his report testifies he has deserted to the neoliberal camp after becoming special adviser to Michael Gove when he was Education Secretary. New standards for continuous professional development and accreditation in specialist pathways will broadly be welcome but there is no commitment of new funds to pay for these areas. In fact, cost seems to have been a major consideration in creating a new regulatory body with the government choosing the cheapest type of regulator, an executive agency rather than an independent regulator. This is justified on the basis of cost and time as the problems in social work necessitate 'urgent reform' (12)

and thus there's not enough time to set up a new independent regulator requiring new staff and offices:

'...Government believes that the most appropriate course of action at this time is for regulation to move closer to Government to quickly and effectively drive forward the changes we urgently need' (p14).

The new regulator would be based in the Department of Education and jointly managed with the Department of Health and Social Care raising questions of how effective a management system can be created across two large Whitehall Departments who have huge financial demands placed upon them. Moreover, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 gives considerable power to the Secretaries of State to regulate social work but does not give enough specification as to how these powers will be scrutinised by Parliament. This raises the criticism that a politically led regulator is being created. This is consistent with the criticisms of neoliberalism that it is essentially an anti-democratic ideology and policy-package (Mirowski 2014).

On examining the role and responsibilities of the new executive agency regulator it looks similar to an enhanced version of the old General Care Council which the Government abolished in 2011... Indeed, the only obvious difference other than the new regulator looks more powerful and politically led with new standards to implement robustly, is the role it has been given regarding post-qualifying education and training and the annotation of the Register to record specialist accreditation. The negative side of this is that it might be used to discipline social workers who do not engage in post qualifying training to extend their expertise and competence. It is unclear whether social workers who refuse to engage in ongoing professional training will be removed from the Register or not. This is another critique of the policy document from the perspective of the authoritarian disposition towards the profession by the Government since it is making it easier to dismiss social workers who allegedly are not performing well.

The executive agency regulator is problematic since it is far too close to government with only reassurances that areas such as fitness-to-practice will be kept at arms-length from Ministers. Can this always be the case when there is high public and media concern about a particular case? In these circumstances can Ministers be trusted to resist intervening as did the former Education Secretary, Ed Balls, in the Baby Peter case? The government will consult after three years as to whether the executive agency should be made independent of government, but there are no guarantees that it would, and the executive agency might continue indefinitely. How would other professions, the medical profession for example, respond to having an executive agency of government as their regulator? I think the answer is clear – there would be a militant reaction.

Of particular concern is whether the policy document 'Regulating Social Workers' is predominantly about social work with children and families since it equates social work with statutory social work and protection work in particular. The document uses protectionist language leaving the impression that the main target and area for improvement is in the field of child protection and it is here that the real drive for raising standards will take place reflecting political and media imperatives about this highly visible field:

'It supports Government's ambitions to ensure that all children and young people are protected from harm, and vulnerable children are supported to succeed with the same opportunities as other people'. (p7)

However, it sees social workers rather than structural and organisational factors as the problem, as revealed in the title of the document 'Regulating Social Workers' rather than 'Regulating Social

Work'. Moreover, there's no recognition of the rise in child poverty under both the Coalition Government and the Conservative Government since the start of austerity policies especially since the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The current rate of child poverty in the UK is about 4 million and rising rapidly. The document does not acknowledge how austerity policies have contributed significantly to unequal opportunities for poor children.

The focus on improving safeguarding is made even clearer with the policy document declaring in the light of high profile cases that 'professional and leadership capability has been a common factor' (p8) in all of them. According to the document Ofsted inspections found concerns with leadership and professional practice with 70% of those children services inspected rated as inadequate and requiring improvement. Such failings are also confirmed by serious case reviews which identify failures in professional practice and 'variability' (P8) in leadership, management and supervision. But not a word about how all these areas have been undermined by neoliberal reforms in social work, such as the technical supervision which focusses on targets rather than lives. Furthermore, the high turnover of social work staff and high use of agency staff is mentioned but no recognition of the link between these and neoliberal reforms of social work (Carey 2011).

Social work education becomes a target because 'independent reviews' determine that courses at qualifying and post-qualifying level need to improve. The response to the crisis in public confidence in social workers is a 'significant reform agenda' (p9) advanced in this document. Among the tools of this agenda are the appointment of two Chief Social Workers bringing 'social work expertise to the heart of Government' (p9). Consistent with managerial reform the Chief Social Workers have identified the essential skills and knowledge required by social workers. But there's no mention of enhancing the professional autonomy of social workers to do their work effectively. The approach is that if previous statements of knowledge and skills have not worked then create even more of them! Indeed, the philosophy of the reform is that more regulation is always the answer. This blindness is nothing new in neoliberal theory, just think about the way neoliberalism has been emboldened after the credit-crunch crisis (Mirowski 2014). Moreover, the policy document makes a lot of enhancing fitness to practice, to address any 'malpractice' (p13) which will undoubtedly make social workers concerned about it becoming easier for managers to dismiss them.

The regulator's role in raising standards depends to a large degree on effective use of its powers to raise standards from initial qualifying education to the spectrum of post-qualifying education. This will involve a new accreditation system for qualifying social work courses which will be used for all courses by 2020. This raises questions as to whether the new standards in post qualifying courses is intended to make the process of fitness to practice easier to use in terms of dismissing social workers who are deemed to be deficient or guilty of 'malpractice'. The new standards by which practitioners will be assessed will include standards of 'proficiency, conduct and performance' (p24). Clearly these terms are open to wide interpretation including alleged incompetence or failure to progress appropriately on post-qualifying courses. This concern is reflected in the document:

'Undertaking continuous professional development will be expected in order to remain a registered social worker'. (my emphasis) (p25).

Continuous professional development is an important instrument for raising standards in the document. There is an acknowledgement that the current requirements are not 'challenging enough' (p25). Social workers will be expected to comply with the new standards for continuous professional development and 'appropriate sanctions' will be in place for 'non-compliance' (p25). Furthermore, all children and family social workers will be 'assessed and accredited' against the new standards by 2020. Moreover, they might be charged for the privilege. Not surprisingly this will

cause concerns in a field that already has plenty of stresses. How this is supposed to make things better remains to be proven.

So, what can be said about the new standards against which social workers will be judged? For a start, one of the organisations responsible for developing the standards, consistent with neoliberal ideology, is a private charity organisation called 'Skills for Care' (2018) with 18 years of workforce development experience including for the Department of Health and Social Care. According to its online information page it helps develop adult and children and families' social workers. It also helps develop social work managers to advance social work practitioners at a strategic level. Skills for Care's work is closely related to the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW 2018) which is a set of standards created by the Social Work Reform Board which was itself created by the Social Work Task Force, which included among its members Deidre Sanders, agony aunt with the Sun newspaper, not known for its hostility to neoliberalism. Among the standards at all levels of the profession is 'to be able to meet the requirements of the professional regulator'. As might be expected these requirements are not elaborated but it is clear that failing to meet such requirements would be a serious breach. Moreover, the standards in the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers in Adult Services reflects some of the neoliberal and privatisation agenda and language (Lymbery 2012) in social work:

They (social workers) should contribute to developing awareness of personalisation and outcome-based approaches to improving people's lives.

This discussion has examined the introduction of 'Regulating Social Workers' policy document within the context of the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism within our society and specifically within the social work profession. It has argued that the new regulator can be seen as a product of neoliberalism and managerialism in social work and poses a serious threat to professional autonomy by an increasingly political regulator situated within government rather than independent of it. It is clear that the document blames individual social workers for the crisis in the profession and requires even more standards to overcome them. This is a threat to social workers since the new regulations will make it easier for social workers to be dismissed. Significantly the policy document does not address excessive caseloads. Neither does it demonstrate any awareness of the effects of Government austerity policies on local authorities and poor families.

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