Marxist Social Work: An international and historical perspective

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Introduction

The relationship of Marxism to social work is highly contested and contradictory. Tavares (2013) suggests that social work and Marxism might be considered intrinsically connected and/or diametrically opposed, because both share a concern with the 'social question' but social work has often been involved in managing the contradictions of capitalism and thereby sustaining it. This is further complicated by disputes over what 'Marxism' means[1]. The English-language literature on Marxist social work is mostly limited to the 'Radical Social Work' (RSW) tradition, and the experience of socialist countries is neglected. For example Strug (2006) observes the almost total absence in the international social work literature of "information about Cuban social work, the changes it has undergone, or its relevance for the international social work community" (p. 750). Filling the gaps in the literature is a huge task, beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead this chapter outlines some key features of Marxism as it relates to social work, and offers examples of Marxist social work within the varying contexts of capitalist states, popular movements, and socialist states. The chapter is informed by a review of historical and contemporary literature, building on Vickers (2015).

Foundations of Marxist social work

> "Marxism is many things...in a state of flux and development, and is subject to highly divergent interpretations...Marxism is not simply a theory: it is a political practice which confronts capitalism with an alternative model of a social order" (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978, pp. xiii-xiv)

This definition, from a classic British RSW text, emphasizes Marxism's unfinished character, containing theory and practice in dialectical unity, or 'praxis'. This section outlines the Marxist method, often referred to as 'dialectical materialism', before applying it to social workers' relationship to the class struggle and to the state.

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[1]   This chapter is not simply about Marxism, but is written from a Marxist, specifically Leninist, perspective, which acknowledges that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge. I have attempted however to give a fair account of other trends, and to be open about my own perspective to support a critical engagement with my account.

Dialectical Materialism

> "Everything is ... mediated, bound into One, connected by transitions [in a] law-governed connection of the *whole (process)* of the world" (Lenin, 1895-1916/1972, p. 103, emphasis in the original).

The Marxist analytic method involves an iterative movement from holistic and concrete living phenomena to a "number of determinant, abstract, general relations" and from there back to a more complex understanding of the living whole. Throughout this process, sight must be maintained of the primacy of the whole, avoiding confusing the analytic process with the actual formation of concrete phenomena through the action of pre-existing and independent abstractions (Marx, 1857/1973, pp. 100-102). For the most part this method is implicit in Marx's own writing (presented most explicitly in Marx, 1857/1973; 1859/1971; 1845/1991).

Marxism directs attention to the way consciousness is shaped by experience, and how experience is shaped in turn by social structures, in particular the processes of production and reproduction. The central premises of Marxism, derived from empirical and historical study, are that people must produce in order to satisfy their needs, that the satisfaction of these needs leads to further needs, that people act to reproduce not only themselves but also their species, and that all of this activity is organised socially, depending on the means of production available (Marx & Engels, 1845/1991, pp. 48-52). In one example of the application of this to social work, Corrigan and Leonard (1978) explore the way migrant families within Britain can be better understood by viewing them in the context of the relations of production in their country of origin, and how these interact with conditions arising from relations of production within Britain (pp. 129-132). Today we must add to this differential treatment by the state based on a combination of immigration status, country of origin and class (Vickers 2012). Such understandings enhance agency by developing an understanding of the way subjective actions are shaped and limited by objective conditions.

Dialectical materialism is distinguished from crude materialism by its acknowledgement that ideas influence the future development of material conditions. It is not purely the material level that determines the development of history, but also "the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (Marx, 1859/1971, p. 21), and which interact dialectically with the material base. Human agency plays a vital role but does not operate in a vacuum.

Social workers in the class struggle

Marxism uncovers the political character of social work, which has often been obscured by claims to impartiality and universal human rights. As Galper (1980) says in another classic RSW text:

> "conventional practice is fully political, whether or not its politics are acknowledged. The ends it serves, however, are conservative ones. Radicals do not seek to introduce politics into an apolitical situation. Rather we mean to challenge the politics of compliance and to introduce the politics of resistance and change" (pp. 10-11).

Mota (2013) makes similar points regarding contemporary social work in Brazil, and warns against the tendency for practice to "regress in search of the applied, the effective, presenting itself as a means to prepare for 'complex work'", thereby losing its capacity to engage critically with "social macro-processes", and limiting practice to maintaining the status quo (p. 31).

For Marxists, the necessarily political nature of social work is rooted in the class struggle. Marxism is not the only school of thought that focuses on class, but Ferguson (2011) distinguishes Marxist approaches by their attention to inequalities in ownership of the means of production, as opposed to simply in distribution, and exploitation, as opposed to simply domination (pp. 128-129). This can inform practice, by pointing to the kind of structural changes that might be needed to more effectively address social problems and by identifying connections between different sections of society who have a shared interest in struggling for change. By defining class as fundamentally rooted in peoples' relationship to the means of production, oppression based on factors such as gender, 'race', and disability can be integrated as part of a holistic analysis.

Marxist analyses of the state

The state is of crucial significance, both for the class struggle and for social work, and for Marxist social workers it is therefore decisive (Bailey & Brake, 1975, p. 2). Marxists analyses of the state vary, including its capacity for reform, and if it must be abolished then what should replace it. Lenin (1917/1972) defines the state as an institution emerging in the midst of class struggle as a means of holding in check irreconcilable antagonisms in order to stabilize the system. In this view the state emerges as a set of institutions representing the economically dominant class, who, through the exercise of a state apparatus specifically tailored to its needs, maintains itself as the politically dominant class within a given geographical territory (pp. 8-14). Another important Marxist theorist of the state is Gramsci (1929-1935/1982), who analyses the dialectical relationship between consent and coercion in the modern capitalist state. Disagreements with the Leninist conception of the state

typically concern arguments that the capitalist state either enjoys 'relative autonomy' from capitalist pressures, and is neutral with regard to class, to be fought over by competing interest groups, or that it is not coherent, with different interests served by different sections of the state. The latter argument sometimes differentiates between a 'good' side of the capitalist state, including social services, health, education and nationalised industries, and a 'bad' side, including defence, law and order, and aid to private industry (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group [LEWRG], 1980, pp. 52-53). Differences follow from this regarding whether a transition to socialism is possible while the capitalist state remains intact, or whether a revolution is necessary.

Among revolutionary Marxists, there is a divergence between those who define themselves as 'libertarian' or 'autonomous' Marxists, who reject the need for any kind of state, and those who argue a state of a special kind is needed, a socialist state, in order to facilitate a transition to a classless society. There is a further division within the latter as to what constitutes a socialist state, with different Marxists defining the same states as 'socialist', 'state capitalist', 'degenerate' or 'deformed workers'' states (Galper, 1980, pp. 29-39). Where Marxists tend to agree, is in viewing the class character of a specific state as of great importance in creating the conditions under which social work operates.

Marxist approaches to social work under capitalism

Marxist social work under capitalism is not always recognised as such because the threat Marxism poses to the capitalist state means social workers may jeopardise their employment by openly declaring their Marxism. Other Marxist-informed practice is simply never written about, and this is particularly likely when practice occurs within non-professional settings. Although social work academics often have greater freedom than practitioners, there has still been a tendency to avoid explicitly discussing Marxist influences.

The most public face of Marxist social work under capitalism has been as an influential strand within 'Radical Social Work' (RSW), which has existed in most advanced capitalist countries since at least the 1970s (Ablett & Morley 2016). In the United States (US), Reisch and Andrews (2001) trace its history further back, through the 1930s Rank and File Movement led by Marxists such as Bertha Reynolds, who "warned that unless New Deal policies moved beyond 'offering palliatives to assuage the miseries of poverty and racism', social workers would do little more than 'carry out the designs of the ruling class and victimize clients'" (p. 79). RSW became prominent again in the early twenty-

first century through the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) and publications such as Lavalette (2011) and the journal *Critical and Radical Social Work*, founded in 2013. RSW has come to involve practitioners and educators in a wide range of countries (Lavalette & Ferguson 2011). In Britain a separation of social work and community work since the 1960s gave rise to a distinct strand of radical community work (e.g. Craig, Derricourt, & Loney, 1982), covering forms of practice which would be considered social work in many countries. The following discussion will focus on Britain and the US, both because they have a more extensive RSW literature and because of their significant impact on RSW internationally. I focus here on the more explicitly Marxist elements within the radical tradition, while acknowledging Marxism's wider influence, for example within some feminist, green and anti-racist approaches, and that not all Marxist social work writers explicitly discuss Marxist theory.

The contradictory character of capitalist state welfare has been a central concern and point of debate within RSW. State welfare benefits capitalists by helping to ensure a healthy and compliant workforce and plays a role in managing the behaviour of the working class, which might be considered oppressive. Yet at the same it offers services and resources that benefit working class people. Focusing on the US, Stevenson (1978) points out that while elements of control and service are inherent in all 'human services', including social work, the balance is different for different groups, with the example that:

> "the service aspect is dominant in New York City schools when teachers teach white middle-class students. The control aspect is dominant when they teach black and Latino working-class students". (p. 459)

In a concise article that moves beyond many of the classic social work texts in its treatment of the political economy of welfare, Stevenson (1978) argues that human services are characterised by:

- the simultaneous production and consumption of the 'product';
- direct contact between producers and consumers;
- an incentive for producers to deliver their services in a way that maintains dependency in order to maintain demand.

While this suggests social workers have a direct stake in maintaining the oppression of their clients, it also points to the necessity of direct human contact, which creates potential for shared understandings and solidarity. Such an analysis explains the tendencies within capitalist state welfare for social workers to be pulled in contradictory directions, to either side with service users to overturn the basis of their oppression, or cooperate with the state in managing service users'

responses to their oppression such that the status quo is maintained. Singh and Cowden (2015) argue that such contradictions are intensifying as capitalism in a period of crisis expands its search for new sources of profit, including "the exploitation of psychological need" (p. 376), and the increasing use of market mechanisms to allocate services. Marxist social workers have responded to these contradictions in diverse ways (see Vickers 2015).

Some Marxists argue there is not necessarily a contradiction between meeting immediate needs and organising for structural change, but rather that social workers should link the personal and immediate with the collective and the long-term as part of a multi-dimensional practice:

> "If counselling is required, it must be provided. But if...counselling...fails...to link...temporary and partial solutions with the larger social transformation that is required for realistic solutions, then it is extremely limited, at best, and deceptive and repressive, at worst. Radical practice...is another way to look at what it means to take our commitment to meeting [immediate] needs seriously." (Galper, 1980, pp. 12-13).

Following this approach, standard processes of referral might be reinterpreted to include workers "investigating appropriate political resources in the community and determining their relevance to the particular issues faced by those with whom we work" (Galper, 1980, p. 137). Social work can also play an important role in supporting people to sustain their involvement in collective struggle. For example, Bailey and Brake (1975) argue for the need to help people overcome the "psychological damage" which may result from resisting capitalist hegemony and struggling for an alternative viewpoint (pp. 9-10). Baldock (1982, p. 30) draws on work with single parents to argue that RSW can foster mutual caring networks and make demands for state resources, to enable political participation among sections of the working class who are often excluded. The importance of this can be seen in contemporary struggles such as the Focus E15 housing campaign, started by a group of young single mothers and sustained for many years (Watt, 2016).

The relationship between workplace and community struggle has been contested among Marxist social workers. Fleetwood and Lambert (1982, pp. 48-58) discuss the disconnect between socialist community workers' experience of housing struggles and the orthodoxy of socialist practice in Britain in the 1970s, which "scorned non-workplace struggles" and "exhorted activists to link up with trade unions and trades councils in the muscle of the labour movement", even in a period where "the very existence at the moment of a labour movement can be seriously doubted" (p. 49). Against this the authors propose a form of socialist practice that:

> "starts and grows with the experience of people in struggle...developing techniques, organisational forms and relationships which recognise the personal barriers (constructed by capitalist society) to a class consciousness...it will entail people to do extraordinary things, to dress up, sing songs, perform antics in council chambers, to travel unprecedented distances." (p. 57).

These points remain relevant today. In a recent example of the contradictory role of trade unions, in June 2013 Britain's biggest public sector union, Unison, issued a circular to its local government branches regarding a cut to welfare payments for social housing tenants, popularly dubbed the 'bedroom tax'. The circular expressed the union's opposition to the cut, but nevertheless instructed its members to cooperate with its implementation lest they jeopardise their employment. Tenants themselves showed much more determined opposition, mounting campaigns across Britain and winning some concessions (Owen, 2013).

The Community Development Projects (CDPs), set up by the UK Home Office in 1969, offer an example of paid professionals using state resources to organise with working-class people on a range of initiatives and produce damning reports on the capitalist state. For some workers this was directly connected to revolutionary aims. A group of CDP workers came together to form the Political Economy Collective, drawing directly on Marxism (Craig, et al., 1982, p. 3). Armstrong, Banks and Craig's (2016) survey of PEC bulletins shows that the group's work was driven by the practical need to understand the structural causes of problems facing working class people, together with CDP workers' exposure to Marxism through meeting other CDP workers. Blagg and Dericourt (1982) argue for the revolutionary potential of such approaches by drawing on the Marxist Althusser's analysis of how the class struggle emerges through and draws together a multiplicity of contradictions, facing for example unemployed young people, black people, and women outside waged work, and Gramsci's analysis of the state penetrating into every aspect of social life and thereby creating multiple fronts for the class struggle. More recent applications of this approach can be seen in community campaigns on issues such as immigration controls (Vickers, 2014).

Popular social work

Lavalette and Iaoakimidis (2011) use the term 'popular social work', to encompass welfare activities organised within social movements, including situations where the state breaks down or during periods of revolutionary war. There is a rich tradition of communist provision of welfare services as part of anti-capitalist struggles, dating back to Karl Marx, who founded the Committee for the

Support of Imprisoned and Emigrated Revolutionaries in 1848. Significant international efforts since then include the International Organisation for the Support of Fighters for the Revolution (MOPR), known in many countries as 'International Red Aid', which was founded in 1922, and more recently Cuba's international solidarity in education, sport and health care (Kirk and Erisman, 2009). MOPR's national sections supported communists and their families who had been imprisoned, injured or killed in the course of political activity through "legal counselling, social welfare for prisoners [including cash, clothing and food for their families], children's homes, support for campaigns directed at the liberation of communist political prisoners and support for political refugees" (Schilde, 2003, p. 144). By 1933 there were national sections in 71 countries. The largest membership was in the Soviet Union, exceeding 10 million by 1940, whose financial contributions supported tens of thousands of people in capitalist countries as diverse as Germany, India, Poland, Java, and Bulgaria.

Other examples of popular social work informed by Marxism include:
-   from the 1930s the "patriotic and revolutionary Vietnamese tried to build networks of youth, students, workers (horse-cart drivers, carpenters, shoe-makers, porters) in the form of 'red relief services' to serve the poor and provide mutual assistance", often forced to operate clandestinely (Oanh, 2002, p. 85);
-   from 1940-1944 in Greece, the communist-led EAM movement developed popular forms of welfare provision based on grassroots democracy and solidarity as part of their resistance to Nazi occupation, encompassing "the fight for survival, popular administration and 'holisitic development'" (Ioakimidis, 2011, pp. 115).
-   in Nicaragua, following the establishment of a revolutionary progressive state by the Sandinista movement, social workers who were part of the 'reconceptualisation movement' facilitated the active participation of the people in the development of society, centred around Freirian methods of popular education (Wilson & Hernández, 2011; also Tavares, 2013).
-   since the 1980s in Brazil, there has been a strongly interventionist current of social work, forming a pole of attraction for professionals in other fields seeking a more critical perspective, and involving social workers as "producers of a critical mass in the realm of social, popular and union movements" (Mota, 2013, p. 29)

Marxist approaches to social work under socialism

Socialism is a highly contested term, as is its application to specific countries. In this chapter socialism is defined as a form of society in which: social ownership of the means of production predominates; society is consciously organised toward the goal of meeting the needs of humanity and creating conditions for each individual to flourish; and a state exists which is tailored to these ends (Galper, 1980, pp. 29-39). The actual structures and practice of socialist countries has been incredibly varied, including over the last century countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America. A full consideration of Marxist approaches to social work under socialism is beyond the scope of this chapter. It would require analysis of the character of welfare provision in each country and during specific periods, the definition of professional social worker roles, where they existed, and other social professions, the welfare functions performed by non-professional mass and party organisations, the relationships and boundaries between these different actors, and the relationship between welfare, cultural, and political arenas, which in many socialist countries have often been closely intertwined.

The fundamentally different character of socialist states, compared to capitalist states, implies a need for a different kind of social work (Galper, 1980, p. 12). This is connected to:

- The absence in socialist societies of many of the social problems that social work seeks to address under capitalism, or at least an increased potential to overcome these problems' root causes rather than simply to manage their consequences (Strug, 2006);
- The role of diverse state, political and 'mass' organisations under socialism that aim to tackle the same issues social work seeks to address, and therefore impact on the scope and character of social work (Oanh, 2002);
- The potential for a contradiction between the professional ideal of individual autonomy and the socialist ideal of collective political leadership (Ngai, 1996).

In many cases social work as a distinct profession has not existed under socialism, but has become established or re-established after a return to capitalism. In some countries a return to capitalism has proceeded through reform with a self-defined communist party remaining in power, further confusing the task of comparison. For the purposes of this chapter I present brief case studies of the changing role of social work in a handful of socialist countries, to illustrate the diversity of approaches and make the case for further research.

China's War of Liberation culminated in 1949 with the establishment of socialism, although as a result of market reforms introduced in the 1980s it is questionable whether China still meets the definition of socialism outlined above. Social work was abolished as a discipline in the 1950s along with other social sciences that were judged as unsuited to socialism, and reintroduced in the 1980s (Ngai, 1996, pp. 289-291). However, the absence of social work as a profession during the socialist period did not mean an absence of social work. Ngai (1996, p. 293) describes the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the All-China Federation of Trades Unions, the Chinese Communist Youth League, the All-China Federation of Youth and the All-China Federation of Women as all playing 'social work service' roles that developed under socialism and continue today. There is also a strong affinity between social work and some of the innovative approaches to physical and mental health care that developed during the socialist period (see Vickers, 2015). Workers' Cultural Palaces were established in the 1950s, and provided a plethora of activities to the working class, serving as "theatre, concert and cinema", offering literacy classes, training youth workers, and providing other courses as varied as "literature, mechanics, painting, calligraphy, photography, music, dance, sports and gardening" (Xing, 2011, p. 822). Since 1985, when the major market reforms began, state funding for the cultural palaces has been significantly reduced and they have been pushed to commercialise their activities.

In Vietnam, Oanh (2002) describes the different forms social work has taken throughout national reunification, the development of socialism, and then the return to capitalism – all of which Oanh witnessed personally as a practising social worker. When Vietnam was divided in 1945 the north had already begun some short-term courses provided by the French Red Cross but these were suspended. The south, still under French control until 1954, began professional social work training under a government directorate for social welfare and the Caritas School of Social Work set up by the French Red Cross. Between 1954 and 1975 there was a huge expansion of social welfare in the south, including hundreds of foreign NGOs and professional social work training courses, in what Oanh (2002) describes as "the other war", performing a number of functions for the US war effort. During the war, some social workers became radicalised through work amongst poorer sections of the population, and either joined the revolutionary forces or cooperated with the revolution following the defeat of the US, "in the search for an alternative model of development that would reflect the values of social equality and justice" (p. 87). Some social workers who had been trained prior to or during the war went to work afterwards as teachers, in the ministry of social welfare, in research institutes, or as part of mass organisations, which encompassed the entire population and

were responsible for their members' welfare. The revolution integrated pre-colonial collectivist approaches to welfare, based on the local 'Phöôøng', "a cooperative organisation where people helped each other to build houses, take care of the weak and the sick and bury the dead"; these continued into the twenty-first century as a basic unit for administration and voluntary labour (p. 85). Under the period of 'modernization' and the reintroduction of the market, social work began to re-emerge as a distinct area of professional practice, in response to the re-emergence of social problems associated with capitalism. Social work was formally recognised by the government as a profession in 2010 (Oanh, 2002; Durst, Lanh, & Pitzel, 2010). As part of this re-establishment of professional social work, many training programmes were set up, involving 33 training providers by 2010, ranging from semi-private universities to the training schools of the Women's Union and the Youth Union. At university level the social work curriculum includes politics, Marxism and Ho Chi Minh studies, and the inclusion of these subjects is made mandatory by the Ministry of Education and Training. Yet despite the continued presence of Marxism within social work curricula, Durst et al. (2010) suggest social work practice in Vietnam frequently neglects structural factors and prioritises professional expertise over collective empowerment, which could suggest a disconnect between theory and practice, or alternatively different interpretations of empowerment.

In Cuba, social work since the 1959 revolution can be broadly grouped into three phases, each adding to those that went before without replacing them: the first phase involved activities by mass organisations that were not always explicitly defined as social work but would meet most definitions; the second added explicit social work roles as part of community health infrastructure; and the third focused on support for democratic participation. As an example of the first phase, the Cuban Federation of Women:

> "provided an orientation for thousands of its activists in how to work with community members, especially women and children. The FMC called these activists "empirical social workers". They facilitated the entry of women into the labor market, promoted their economic, political and social involvement with the Revolution, and organized community members for participation in major educational and public health initiatives" (Strug, 2006, pp. 751-752).

Technical social work training institutes were created in 1973, with social workers playing an auxiliary role to health care practitioners. A shift in focus took place in the 1990s, in response to the extreme hardships of the 'special period'. The collapse of the Soviet Union and consequent loss of favourable trade terms combined with a tightening economic blockade imposed by the US and the

expansion of tourism to drive the growth of social problems including drugs and prostitution. Part of the revolutionary leadership's response was the 'Neighbourhood Movement', including construction, environmental and other community development projects, with enabling legislation creating People's Councils as a bridge between municipalities and local communities, "comprised of community delegates, mass organizations and administrative entities" (Strug, 2006, pp. 753-755). Social workers became increasingly involved in the People's Councils, building community members' capacity to participate in the new structures, advocating for specialist services for at-risk members of society and helping with community organising. Strug (2006) cites an interview with a Cuban social work educator who described how this drove reforms of social work education, including the creation of a six-year social work degree programme for advanced social work within the Department of Sociology at the University of Havanna in 1998. This was followed by the creation of a series of paraprofessional social work schools to train out-of-school and unemployed youth. Social workers in Cuba also play a role in more targeted interventions, where young people have been involved in petty crimes or anti-social behaviour. Informed by a Marxist perspective, the existence of such behaviour is understood socially and used to drive social change while also responding to the individual. This is coordinated by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior, with participation from provincial government and representatives from mass organisations including the Federation of Secondary School Students and the José Martí Pioneers Organization (Mendoza Diaz, 2002). In this way young people have a direct voice and vote in decisions relating to the treatment of young people.

The examples outlined above show the potential for fundamentally different roles for social workers as organisers that support members of society in meeting one another's needs as part of a socialist process that also involves the state. This contrasts with the need under capitalism for social workers to support people in resisting attacks from the ruling class and often the capitalist state, or to mitigate their most damaging effects.

Conclusion

This survey of Marxist approaches to social work shows that social work can make an important contribution toward movements struggling for structural changes that will benefit humanity, but also that social work is inherently limited in achieving its goals by itself and may even perpetuate the problems it seeks to address. Marxism emphasises that realising subjective agency is dependent on analysing the constraints imposed by objective conditions, and this calls for a consciously political

practice that reflects on the relationship between the state and class forces, and the role of social work within this. Under capitalism, social work can include activities to offer political education, build alliances between oppressed groups, and help people survive the alienation and exploitation caused by capitalism long enough to transform it. Under socialism, a radical shift in approach is needed if social work is to retain its relevance, as RSW's goals of organising society to meet human needs are no longer marginal or oppositional but are also pursued by a socialist state and political and mass organisations tailored to that purpose, and professional autonomy threatens to compete with the political leadership of the revolution. Approaches to social work and welfare in countries where Marxist-led revolutions have tried to build socialism offer a rich source of experience, but are under-documented in English. Recent steps toward broadening what constitutes social work, through the concept of 'popular social work', represent a step forward but there is much still to be done in documenting and sharing a wider range of experience accumulated by Marxist social workers internationally.

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