

The Routledge Handbook of Critical Social Work,

Stephen A. Webb (Ed.), Londres y New York, Routledge, 2019, 609 pp, ISBN: 978138578432. CLP\$ 44.0000 / US\$ 53,00

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Edited by Stephen A. Webb, professor of Social Work at Glasgow Caledonian University, this handbook provides an overview of Critical social work in primarily Anglo speaking countries. Comprised of 48 chapters written by social work academics from the UK, Australia, United States, New Zealand, Canada and a few other European countries, the handbook is divided into six sections. The first section, titled “Historical, social and political influences” seeks to provide the conceptual foundation of Critical social work, providing historical and contextual insight into the differences between Critical social work and what the handbook defines as “mainstream social work perspectives”. The second section of the handbook is entitled, “Mapping the theoretical and conceptual terrain” and presents readers with an introduction to a wide range of theoretical perspectives that inform Critical social work including chapters on Critical Theory (Frankfurt school), Constructivism, Anarchism, Feminism, Biopolitics, amongst others. The third section, “Methods of engagement and modes of analysis” seeks to cover Critical social work methods including chapters on critical race theory and social work, postcolonial feminist social work, narrative analysis and social work, amongst others. A fourth section, “Critical contexts for practice and policy” focuses on Critical social work in particular contexts and populations followed by a fifth section, “Professional education and socialization” dedicated to discussing the challenges secondary education faces due to neoliberalism and presenting innovative approaches to incorporating Critical Social work into social work curriculums. Lastly, the final section, “Future challenges, directions and transformations” completes the handbook with chapters dedicated to exploring new directions for the profession and discipline in the 21st century.

The handbook begins with a brief foreword by Jan Fook, social work academic who has published various texts on critical social work throughout her career. The foreword is written from a personal perspective, detailing her ties to critical social work and its development since she was a student during the 1970s in Australia. Surprisingly she states that critical social work, “...might have been said to have been initiated in

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Australia” (p. xxv), a statement I am sure many are willing to counter, including authors from this very handbook as well as many from outside the Anglo-Saxon academic circle (see for example the Latin American reconceptualization movement of the 1960s). Nevertheless, Fook’s foreword provides an interesting review of the birth of critical and radical social work in the UK as well as Australia discussing the author’s own hesitations with the perspective during her formative years. Fook details how in her work she was able to combine critical, postmodern, and post structural theories in order to address what she felt were shortcomings of the 1970s critical social work. She thus defines critical social work in the 21st century as theoretically, methodologically and contextually pluralistic, identifying this heterogeneity as potentially divisive. It is for this reason she praises the publication of the Handbook as key to providing a space for featuring the diversity of Critical social work thinking under one unified volume, specifically considering the challenges Critical social work faces in today’s uncertain times.

Jan Fook’s forward to the Handbook is followed by Stephan Webb’s introduction, a chapter fittingly titled, “Critical social work and the politics of transformation”. While Webb’s introduction provides an overview of the book and its parts, it also provides a much needed redefinition of the meaning of Critical social work. Here Webb juxtaposes what he defines as mainstream social work and Critical social work, defining the latter as a political project, one that seeks social justice, emancipation and the end of oppression versus the former as a depoliticized practice focused on the failings of individuals and communities. Webb’s redefinition threads even finer by identifying the differences of what he defines as critical social work (with a small c) and Critical social work (with a capital C). According to the author, the dissimilarities lie in that critical social work (with a small c) is broader in definition and encompasses a “...much more generic approach that attenuates the necessary attributes and characteristics for effective interventions.” (p.xxxiii). The focus of critical social work (small c) is thus on developing best practices and calls for social workers to be reflective and critical in their practice with a focus on individual and community level interventions, leading to what Webb argues is an obscuration of larger more structural analysis of reality and transformation. Critical social work (capital C) on the other hand, is narrower in scope and is characterized by the identification of structural oppressions and inequalities and seeks widespread structural transformations rather than micro level change. Within this line of argument, Webb defines Critical social work as a political endeavor that need to take a stand against neoliberal capitalism and the wide-spread and profound damages it has caused on a global scale. He incites social work and social workers to resist, to organize, and to recognize, “...just how multinational corporations and local state bureaucrats are terrified of social protests and radical mobilization.” (p. xii). For Webb



this fear is of tactical importance for social work in order to become a force of refusal, of opposition, of insurrection and of “...fraternal solidarity.” (p.xiii). He calls upon social workers to become militant political agents who confront and fight against “...the repressive violence of the State and apparatus of capitalist greed and wealth accumulation.” (p.xiii). It is precisely this political position and the critique of structural oppressive forces that unite the chapters that make up this hefty volume.

While all the chapters of the volume present very interesting and thought-provoking perspectives, on a personal level I particularly enjoyed and thus recommend Paul Michael Garrett’s chapter, “Welfare words, neoliberalism and critical social work”; Stephen A. Webb’s chapter, “Resistance, biopolitics and radical passivity”; Natalia Farmer’s chapter, “Controversy analysis: Contributions to the radical agenda.” and; Lucas D. Introna’s chapter, “Performativity and sociomaterial becoming: What technologies do.”. Nevertheless, before ending this book review I would like to take a moment to delve into more depth into a chapter I consider of particular significance to the handbook, specifically due to the lack of chapters and authors from the global south. This chapter is the Handbooks last, fittingly titled, “Imperialism, colonialism and a Marxist epistemology of ‘critical peace’” written by Vasilios Ioakimidis and Nicos Trimikliniotis. This chapter is an excellent note on which to end the Handbook due to its call for, “a radical shake-up” (p. 560) of social work’s imperialist knowledge base. In this last chapter, Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis argue that while colonial and postcolonial theories have been key to challenging “traditional” social work knowledge, the postmodern or poststructuralist origins of these theories places a limit on the manner in which social work is conceptualized, specifically by obviating the broader socio-economic structural links of social work as an imperialist project contained within modern capitalism. Taking the readers on a historical journey, the authors reveal how social work in certain times and places has played a key role in suppressing and controlling certain “dangerous” populations in order for oppressive regimes to thrive. The authors give examples of the origins of social work in Cyprus in which the profession was imported from the UK by the colonial authorities in order to undermine anti-colonial movements, working towards identifying and containing “anti-social” opposing forces during the 1940s, a strategy also utilized in India and the West Indies. The authors argue that these imperialistic strategies have continued throughout the 20th and 21st century under the guise of humanitarian aid, calling out the, “lucrative ‘peace industry’ which often employs social workers and NGOs” (p. 565) that aided in the transition to neoliberal regimes in war torn and poor ravaged countries. In their chapter the authors provide a true global perspective on social work and it’s at times horrific history, a perspective key to recognizing the challenges Global Critical social work faces in today’s complex times. Their proposal for a Marxist epistemology of critical



peace is, "...a profoundly deeper and broader concept which demands a break-up with imperialist and neocolonial practices and meaningfully addresses the questions of inequality and poverty." (p.570) calling upon social work to take up this endeavor on local and global levels.

To conclude, there is no doubt that this handbook is an extremely valuable contribution to the literature on Critical social work, providing readers with a vast array of perspectives, discussions, and innovative methods. This handbook is a very important reference not only for students and social work academics but also for frontline professionals who seek to widen and update their social work knowledge base. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the handbook's scope is limited in scale and would benefit greatly by the incorporation of authors and perspectives outside of anglo-saxon and European countries. There is a great depth of knowledge and wisdom on Critical social work from the global South that is absent from this volume thus contributing to the imperialist tendencies of social work discussed in Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis's last chapter. Hopefully this absence will be taken into consideration in the publication of the Handbook's second edition or perhaps better yet, in the publication of a second volume of the Handbook that provides a much needed platform from which to include Critical social work perspectives and discussions from other latitudes that have been obviated for far too long.

