PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

CRITICAL PROPOSALS IN SOCIAL WORK

FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES

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ARTICLE

Common sense as a conceptual tool to reflect on social work's past, present and future: A short essay marking 100 years of social work education in Chile

El sentido común como una herramienta conceptual para reflexionar sobre el pasado, presente y futuro del trabajo social: un breve ensayo que celebra los 100 años de la educación de esta disciplina en Chile

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Received: 22/10/2024
Accepted: 22/01/2025

How to cite

Garrett, P (2025). Common sense as a conceptual tool to reflect on social work's past, present and future: A short essay marking 100 years of social work education in Chile. *Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social Critical Proposals in Social Work,* 5 (9), 17-39. DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2025 76565 .

Abstract

Antonio Gramsci's conceptualisation of common sense helps us to think more critically about dominant ideas within, and beyond, social work. Especially important are his articulations of common sense (senso comune) and good sense (buon senso). Gramsci's understanding is also rooted in a more encompassing theoretical apparatus in which hegemony and the role of intellectuals are central. Having pointed to the progressive possibilities associated with the shaping of a more Gramscian social work, four alterative social work futures are identified.

Keywords
Common Sense, Gramsci, Capitalism, Hegemony, Intellectuals

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Resumen

La conceptualización del sentido común, de Antonio Gramsci, nos ayuda a pensar de manera más crítica sobre las ideas dentro y fuera del trabajo social. Particularmente importantes son sus articulaciones de sentido común *(senso comune)* y buen sentido *(buon senso)*. Así también, su concepto de entendimiento se fundamenta en un aparato teórico más amplio, en el que la hegemonía y el rol de los intelectuales son esenciales. Señaladas las posibilidades progresivas asociadas con la conformación de un trabajo social más Gramsciano, se identificaron cuatro alternativas de futuro para el trabajo social.

Palabras Clave:
Sentido común; Gramsci; Capitalismo; Hegemonía; Intelectuales

Introduction

We are surrounded by assertions that politics, policies and social practices reflect, or are unambiguously embedded in, 'common sense'. For example in a fawning profile of Evelyn Matthei, current mayor of Providencia and potential candidate for Chilean president in 2025, it was claimed that 'Chileans are fed up with extremism and yearn for moderation and common sense' (*The Economist*, 2024). The 'left', maintained Matthei, 'wanted to weaken the police, almost to get rid of them'. The same article went on to refer to the current president, Gabriel Boric, as a 'leftist firebrand' who during his term of office foolishly backed a rejected and 'utopian and barely intelligible draft constitution, which would have defined Chile as a "plurinational, inter-cultural, regional and ecological" state, banned for-profit universities and granted rights to nature'. Perhaps, these are, in fact, aspirations which may have actually reflected the aspirations of the Chilean people. However, here it is clear that the reasonable political project is being simply ridiculed by *The Economist* as a departure from common sense: indeed the periodical is simply making a performative move to try to marginalise, even to erase, alternative political possibilities.

This short article will briefly comment on the theme of common sense (*senso comune*) in the context of social work. Following Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), however, the foundational understanding is that *common* sense is not necessarily *good* sense (*buon senso*), it is simply sense that appears to be common across an entire social formation or, following Bourdieu (2003 [1977]), within a particular 'field'.

Attentive to Gramsci's ideas on common sense we can recognise that it can be immensely powerful and an organiser and influencer of popular perceptions, but is

also very often wrong, and not infrequently swept aside by history. According to Kate Crehan (2018: 278), common sense is the 'polar opposite of critical thinking, which demands that we accept no "truth" unquestioningly, but always carefully scrutinise the evidence on which it is based'. For example, it was common sense that women should not be permitted to vote and, for many, it was 'obvious that slavery was eternal and desirable' (Miéville, 2022: 104). Turning to social work in Ireland, for decades it was disciplinary common sense that 'unmarried mothers' had to spend time in quasi incarceration in Mother and Baby Homes and that their offspring should be swiftly adopted by more 'respectable', heteronormative couples. Moreover, in a powerful statement, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) identifies how the common sense of the profession 'reinforced the colonial project' and refers to how this was apparent in its collusion with policies and practices directed at indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) (CASW, 2019: 3–4). Similarly, mainstream white South African social work accepted supremacist separationist ideologies well before 1948 and readily adopted the common sense practices of racial segregation culminating in the creation of Apartheid (Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis, 2020: 6).

However, it has also been charged that the idea of 'common sense' has become something of a 'cultural studies joke', a term 'hauled out to cover much too much while explaining all too little' (Bhattacharyya, 2015: 25). Gargi Bhattacharyya's provocation may be right in so far as analyses rooted in the theorisation of common sense have to be careful not to become vapid, even patronising, toward those who, in difficult times, find a measure of psychological comfort in dominant and popular 'explanations' and proposed 'solutions' to a host of individual and social problems. However, it remains important to engage with common sense because, far from static, it can congeal and distil diverse forms of dominant thinking and contribute to the consolidation of hegemony within a social formation and the diverse 'fields' or disciplines situated within it (Bourdieu, 2003 [1977]). Often grounded in deeply racialised and patriarchal forms of reasoning – and lack of reasoning – common sense can also create and sustain intersectional hierarchies.

This is not, of course, to imply that ideas alone can shore up hegemony; nor can ideas alone create counter hegemonies and prompt meaningful social and economic transformation within and beyond social work. Nevertheless, echoing Marx, it is still the case that ideas – modes of thought and how we conceive and 'think about stuff' – are of the utmost importance for leftist educators, students and practitioners. This claim can also be connected to Marx's assertion that the 'dissolution of a given form of consciousness' can aid in the transition from one 'epoch' to another (Marx, 1981

[1857–58]: 540–41). In short, 'mental conceptions' matter (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 493).

Elsewhere, I argued that dissent within social work education and practice may be thwarted because of two key factors (Garrett, 2021a). First, social work students, practitioners and educators may, perhaps, be reluctant to promote progressive ideas and practices because of concern about the adverse impact on their jobs and careers. In short, the tilt toward compliance with often highly retrogressive policies is materially rooted. That is to say, what Marx terms, the 'mute compulsion of economic relations' leads to the tapering and shaping of what is likely to be viewed as 'inappropriate' behaviour (Mau, 2023). Second, and the main focus in what follows, is that dissent may be stymied because social work is frequently enmeshed in a particular type of common sense. That is to say, the profession is often marinated in a cocktail of ideas, ideologies and doxic forms of reasoning which may blunt more socially progressive ways of *thinking* and *doing* social work.

The article is divided into three sections. The focus is initially on Gramsci's understanding of common sense and how it relates to his more encompassing conceptual apparatus, particularly hegemony and the role of intellectuals. Second, there is a short discussion on shaping a Gramscian social work. Finally, I identify four main perspectives on how social work's potential futures can, perhaps, be articulated[2]

Gramsci, common sense (senso comune) and 'good sense' (buon senso)

According to Gramsci's reading, common sense is a 'chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything one likes' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 422). Gaining currency through language, many elements of common sense contribute to 'people's subordination by making situations of inequality and oppression appear to them as natural and unchangeable' (Forgacs, 1988: 421).
To justify the way society is hierarchised and regulated, ruling elites oftentimes purposefully 'manufacture ignorance' (Slater, 2012). Controlled by Big Tech, social media now also fulfils a significant role as a potent transmission belt helping to constitute public opinion.

Common sense is not embedded in critical reflection, but merely distils and amplifies already socially prevalent narratives and, seemingly, self-evident 'truths' which shed light on the 'way things are'. For example, 'neoliberal rationality is assumed and

[2] See Garrett, 2024

reproduced as common sense appearing in a subtle manner in people's daily experiences, either blaming service users or imposing market discipline' (Muñoz Arce and Pantazis, 2019: 140). Such understandings paint the stage-set where social work is performed. For example, there may be a tendency to accept that the rationing of services and unfilled posts is inevitable rather than contingent on and a consequence of a specific economic system favouring the few and not the many.

Typically, common sense 'expresses itself in the vernacular, the familiar language of the street, the home, the pub, the workplace and the terraces. The popularity and influence of the tabloid press – one of its main repositories – depends on how well it imitates, or better, ventriloquises the language and gnomic speech patterns of the "ordinary folk"' (Hall and O'Shea, 2015: 52–53). Today, the mainstream press – be it tabloid or broadsheet – is often viewed as being of reduced significance. Dismissed as part of an old fashioned, pre-digital world, corporately owned media is frequently perceived as having been supplemented by social media and new ways of shaping perceptions. This is a view that seriously underestimates the continuing impact which the supposedly anachronistic 'legacy media' has in moulding public perceptions (Langer and Gruber, 2021). Nevertheless, online sources are clearly a significant element of our lives and they furnish part of the cultural and political atmosphere in which our 'habitus' is formed and in which we chart our life courses.

Not measurable in terms of any international empirical studies, common sense in social work might be regarded as an assortment of, often conflicting, schemes of perception. According to my interpretation, common sense in social work is not an ideology: derived from ideology, yet paradoxically often founded on a refutation of ideology, it is comprised of a more amorphous mix of elements. Social work common sense is a fluid and unstable 'sense', that might be perceived as a form of everyday 'professional' thinking which provides a way to comprehend the social work role, its 'limits' and boundaries, and the wider world in which the role is located. Social work common sense is derived from the often unquestioned 'knowledge base' constituting the curricula of taught programmes, the frameworks furnished by accrediting and registration bodies and the reading lists assembled, catalogued and marketed by corporate publishers. This is a 'sense' also emanating from and helping to constitute so-called 'practice wisdom'. It is also shaped by the 'official' discourse of the employing organisations and the 'unofficial' exchanges and language used in the more 'informal' conversations of practitioners with each other.

None of this suggests that 'there are no truths in common sense' in that it is 'an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 423). Common sense contains 'elements of truth as well as elements of misrepresentation – and it is upon these contradictions that leverage' must be obtained in a struggle to win and maintain political hegemony (Forgacs, 1988: 421). That is why common sense matters. Writing as a young political activist prior to the end of the carnage of the First World War, Gramsci observed that every 'revolution has been preceded by a long process of intense critical activity, of new cultural insight and the spread of ideas through groups of men *[sic]* initially resistant to them, wrapped up in the process of solving their own, immediate economic and political problems, and lacking any bonds of solidarity with others in the same position' (Gramsci in Bellamy, 1994: 10).

Gramsci acknowledges therefore that common sense is not simply and solely the product of the ruling class. Importantly, he also comprehends that, potentially, even the most oppressed and denigrated of people have the ability to think critically about the reality that confronts them. Although far from utopic, Gramsci's engagement with common sense is imbued with radical hope. Following Marx, he believes that 'worldviews do not exist in an independent sphere of ideas, developing according to their own dynamics, but are rather necessarily anchored in the practical activities of the people who have them in mind' (Snir, 2016: 271).

From his prison cell, Gramsci observed that 'repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 340). Indeed, contemporary social media provides a powerful vehicle for 'repetition' with advertisers, government and policy-makers attuned to the potential of memes culture to distil messaging and embed a common perception in relation to an array of topics (Garrett, 2018). The immediacy and sheer welter and velocity of online communications may also render common sense more fickle and subject to swifter change and re-shaping. Running throughout Gramsci's prison *Notebooks* is the recurring, even urgent, preoccupation: what is the relationship between common sense and social transformation? Also significant when writing the *Notebooks* was his investigation of the role of common sense within the conjuncture leading to the rise of Mussolini and fascism. Only by seeking to understand this, could one go about trying to shape a new common sense and a new society in which fascism would be wholly eradicated. Given the resurgence of the far right, a hundred years later, such preoccupations are once again timely.

Gramsci frequently refers to common sense as the 'philosophy of non-philosophers', 'the philosophy of the man *[sic]* in the street', or 'spontaneous philosophy'' (Green and Ives, 2009: 13–14). Attuned to his interpretation, we can recognise that within common sense there may also be a kernel of subversive good sense (*buon senso*) which is more than a simple reflection of the dominant ideas of the ruling class. Consequently, Gramsci's perspective offers 'us a way of thinking about the texture of everyday life that encompasses its givenness— how it both constitutes our subjectivity and confronts us as an external and solid reality—but that also acknowledges its contradictions, fluidity, and flexibility' (Crehan, 2016: 58). That is to say, common sense is one of the terrains of struggle that revolutionaries – and socially progressive educators and practitioners – must enter.

Within his wider analysis of common sense, Gramsci is also interested in what he terms 'folklore' and this aspect of his thinking may have been brought into productive conversation with the growing recognition, within and beyond social work, about the importance of indigenous knowledge. When Gramsci was imprisoned in 1926, Italy had been unified for a mere thirty-five years and the new nation was riven by class differences and also enormous differences related to language and culture. As a Sardinian, Gramsci was also a member of a minority group from an island whose inhabitants were frequently racialised and patronised by 'northerners'. More pervasively, Italians were often preoccupied with what was dubbed the 'southern question'. Conservatives, and even some elements within the socialist movement, considered the south as 'inherently backward due to the inferiority of southerners' and frequently expressed such views in explicitly 'biological and racist terms' (Ives, 2004: 35). This functioned – and to some extent still functions – as a pernicious 'screen discourse' obscuring the country's uneven development and the way that this favours capital to maintain an ample supply of cheap labour in the south.

Gramsci respected the kind of peasant culture that he had grown up in, but he still depicted it as 'narrow and parochial, and needing to be transcended': he never sentimentalised it (Crehan, 2002: 98). He was also alert to the sheer, stubborn rootedness of peasant culture and 'folklore' and recognised that it had to be meaningfully engaged with by those aspiring to promote social and economic change: there was, as the common maxim would stress, a need to 'start where people are at'. Top-down, standardised 'solutions' intent on creating one, monolithic culture generally do not work, and should be rejected. A good example of this orientation to common sense within the social work literature is provided by, for example, Khan and Shahid's (2022) fascinating exploration of maternal care practices among slum dwellers in India.

Gramsci's approach was also reflected in his opposition to Esperanto which enjoyed a certain popularity when he was alive. The whole idea of an invented new language was a 'metaphor of mechanical and artificial worldviews or modes of thought that are imposed on people with little reference to their own life experiences and their own creative input' (Green and Ives, 2009: 5). Here again, we can relate this to social work which has, perhaps, sometimes swung from seeking to impose top-down, one-size-fits-all mono-cultural norms to encasing users of servicers within static and stereotypical cultural identity categories; the latter typified, of course, by frequently arid and damaging ideas circulating around so-called 'cultural competence' (Marovatsanga and Garrett, 2022).

A few additional comments can be made in relation to the Sardinian theorist's perspective on common sense. First, and inevitably, Gramsci was not always able to disentangle himself from the common sense prevalent during the conjuncture in which he was living. Some of his perceptions on schooling and learning are likely to appear somewhat conservative to readers in the twenty-first century. Similarly, today's readers might be struck by his rather 'staid views on sexual morality, women and the family' (Forgacs, 1988: 276). His antipathy toward jazz music is also, it might be argued, rooted in the Eurocentric and racialised common sense of the period in which he was writing (Rosengarten, 1994a; 1994b).

Second, who is the arbiter of 'good sense'? Does Gramsci's perspective have a certain affinity with Bourdieu who was ridiculed by Rancière (2003: Ch. 9) as the 'sociologist king' arrogantly committed to providing insights to cut through the *doxa* of the, seemingly, stupefied masses? Is he a 'Marxist king' ready to judge and correct the perceptions of the 'people'? Such a question is warranted, but there is slim evidence that this is an apt characterisation. As we have seen, Gramsci is attuned to popular ways of perceiving the world and his thinking is grounded in the Marxist intellectual and political conviction that the working class are the agents of their own liberation and emancipation. What constitutes 'good sense' is to be democratically arrived at within the Communist Party – what he terms, riffing on Machiavelli, the 'modern Prince' (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 123–216) – but also via wider public deliberations. Readers of Gramsci are not left with the impression that once 'good sense' is arrived at on a particular issue then it is forever cast in stone. Far from dogmatic, his whole philosophy is rooted in the idea that everything is constantly in flux and incessantly changing. 'Good sense' is not static, it is always potentially incomplete, impaired and subject to constant reform and renewal. Otherwise, the risk is political and social inertia and the cold brutalism of Stalinism.

Hegemony

Those attentive to the construction of hegemonic projects, dwell on how a dominant class has to organise, persuade and maintain the consent of the subjugated by ensuring that its own ideas constitute common sense within a particular society or social formation (Crehan, 2011). Derived from hegemon, literally meaning leader, hegemony signifies a combination of authority, leadership and domination. It is socially neutral and not 'necessarily tied to progressive or retrogressive' social movements (Singh and Leonardo, 2023: 2). As a word and concept, now largely associated with Gramsci, hegemony refers to 'something more substantial and more flexible than any abstract imposed ideology' (Williams 1973: 10). Hegemony has constantly to be 'worked on', maintained, renewed and revised (Hall, 2011: 727–728). Part of the political skill integral to such an endeavour is the ability to co-opt and nullify 'alternative meanings and values' (Williams, 1973: 10). Consequently, hegemonic projects attaining success do not simply seek to win over people to a particular world-view. Rather, they aspire to neutralise and render passive competing perspectives 'while recruiting small but strategically significant populations and class fractions into active support' (Gilbert, 2015: 31). Such an approach is essential because excluded 'social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions' (Hall, 2011: 727–728).

The key issue for those seeking to maintain hegemonic power is how to get the mix right. Thus, coercive power is perpetually held in reserve for those times and places when the means of generating sufficient consent fails (Smith, 2011). Ordinarily, the mass of people would not directly be targeted or experience such a deployment of coercive power, but some population segments – perhaps impoverished minority ethnic communities in particular urban enclaves – regularly encounter the state's coercive edge in the form of regular and routine interventions by uniformed and militarised police. We might also translate this understanding across to social work and micro-encounters: in, say, the arena of child protection, parents who are unemployed and/or from certain minority ethnic groups are more likely to face coercive forms of intervention than more consent-generating, 'partnership' orientated approaches (Marovatsanga and Garrett, 2022).

A difficulty we face is the tremendously absorbent character of the extant hegemonic apparatuses. The Chilean feminist collective LasTesis (2023: 20–21) stress:

> *Capitalism possesses the brutal capacity to take ownership of everything. Even critiques of capitalism end up processed, re-appropriated, defanged as tools of struggle, and turned into consumer goods, commodities of the market. One of capitalism's survival mechanisms to sustain its hegemony, is to absorb strategies of resistance. It absorbs them, wrings them out.*

This capacity of capitalism to absorb ideas and perceptions of life that challenge it, can be a stumbling block in the creation of a *new* common sense imbued with *good* sense. Certainly, we are at a conjuncture when challenging capitalist common sense is more urgent than ever. Perhaps we are situated at what Gramsci terms, an 'interregnum' when the 'old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith (2005: 276). This is a period of indeterminate length, characterised by a series of interlocking structural predicaments that adversely shape, to varying degrees, people's daily lives. According to Gramsci, one of the prime indicators of an 'interregnum' is a 'crisis of authority' caused by the inability of the ruling class to govern in the ways to which it has become accustomed (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 275). Things begin to unravel and those governed are no longer persuaded by the consensus-generating narratives and messaging that previously sustained the hegemonic order.

How this situation unfolds will be very different depending on the national contexts, but Gramsci goes on to suggest that an 'interregnum' is a time of great uncertainty in which forms of rule and governance risk becoming increasingly authoritarian and coercive (see Hall *et al*., 1978). It is a period in which, desperate for 'solutions' to resolve the crisis, elites flail, lash out and are often prone to identify scapegoats and pariahs who can be blamed for the crisis and for people's hardships and dashed expectations. Gramsci also notes that in times such as these we are also likely to witness the appearance of a 'great variety of morbid symptoms' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 276); 'symptoms' that are disease-ridden and unhealthy and which may be reflected in the narratives and metaphors featuring in political discourses or cultural phenomena; for example, the genocidal discourse of Zionism and the talk of Palestinians as 'human animals' (Hawari, 2023). We might also refer to contemporary neo-fascist diatribes and the appearance of oddities and startling spectacles such as Trump. In Latin America, the electoral success of Javier Milei reflects similar disturbing political developments (Calvi, 2024).

All of this may seem to take us some distance from social work and its narrower range of concerns, but the argument here is that these 'big picture' factors are, in complex and often obscure ways, reflected in the micro-dynamics of our own 'field'.

Intellectuals

The role of intellectuals is vital within all hegemonic apparatuses. In this context, Gramsci highlights those he termed 'organic intellectuals' who are integral to the project of a particular class. Oftentimes, such figures are presented in the literature as being progressive, but Gramsci was always clear that 'organic intellectuals' can fulfil a role which is not always socially beneficial for the majority of people. As Spivak quips: 'Gramsci does not think that the organic intellectual is necessarily a good guy. What he thinks is that every mode of production throws up an organic intellectual who supports that mode of production' (in Green, 2013: 97). They may, for example, be intellectuals 'organically' and purposefully associated with the interests of capital; alternatively they may be linked to and/or part of the working class and other exploited and oppressed groups. In order for such groups to challenge and usurp the existing order they must, in fact, cease relying on intellectuals from outside and create their own 'organic intellectuals'.

Historically, previous social formations 'produced different types of organic intellectuals, such as the ecclesiastics in feudalism' (Green 2013: 96). Gramsci argued that, for a long time, they were probably the 'most typical' and held a 'monopoly of a number of important services: religious ideology, that is the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity, good works, etc. The category of ecclesiastics can be considered the category of intellectuals organically bound to the landed aristocracy' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 7).

Gramsci suggested that over time a 'stratum of administrators, etc., scholars and scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers, etc' also formed (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 7). These 'various categories of *traditional intellectuals*… put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 7, emphasis added). The prime characteristic of this group is that they perceive themselves as not only autonomous, but beyond the cut and thrust of political engagement. One of the 'most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is, therefore, its struggle to assimilate and to conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 10).

Intellectuals have a crucial role in maintaining common sense or, alternatively, in helping to shape new forms of revised common sense. Hence, they are able to contribute to

the consolidation or erosion of particular hegemonic orders. As Gramsci avowed, one of his new types of organic intellectual possessed the capacity to help build proletarian hegemony on account of their 'active participation in practical life, as constructor, 'organizer, "permanent persuader"' (Gramsci in Forgacs, 1988: 321).

Gramsci also made an important move deconstructing dominant ideas and perceptions of *who* can be an intellectual. That is to say, and in line with the rest of his politics, he tried to democratise the idea of what constitutes an 'intellectual'. Consequently, he maintained that although 'one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist…There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 9). He then went on to redefine 'intellectual' as 'anyone whose function in society is primarily that of organising, administering, directing, educating or leading others' (Gramsci in Forgacs, 1988: 300).

Shaping a Gramscian social work

Gramsci's political philosophy is not comfortably aligned with 'Bolshevik vanguardism' nor with the belief that a 'historical vision' formulated by professional revolutionaries can be simply passed on to the working class (Rupert, 2005: 488). This is an important point since Gramsci's entire contribution strongly implies a particular type of political action and pedagogy[3]. Indeed, his life and work have a number of thematic affinities with Freire. In a thoroughly Gramscian way, the Brazilian educator observes that one 'cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding' (Freire, 2017 [1970]: 69). Appreciating such a premise demands that educators try to understand people's 'thematic universe' (Freire, 2017 [1970]: 69). This idea seems to be wholly aligned with Gramsci's articulation of common sense and 'good sense'. Moreover, it resonates with progressive social work education and practice (Singh and Cowden 2009; Shahid and Jha, 2014). If, in fact, social workers are not attuned to and respectful of the 'thematic universe' of the people who they provide services for, then one wonders if the profession is worth preserving (Maylea, 2021).

How, therefore, might a Gramscian approach influence and inform engagement with contemporary social issues impacting practitioners in Ireland? To take one example impinging on community social work, some local communities object to the arrival of

[3] See also Morley et al., 2020.

asylum seekers (Sherlock and Blaney, 2023). If such objections are simply sparked by ideological racists and fascists, then such individuals and groups must be resolutely confronted and not placated. Nevertheless, the common sense of such communities *may* also contain elements which are far less socially toxic and, to some degree, rationally explicable. For instance, the concern may be about the impact that large numbers of newcomers concentrated in an impoverished neighbourhood may have on hard-pressed health and public services already whittled to the bone after years of neoliberal austerity. There may also be anger at the State's routinised lack of consultation with, implicitly de-valued, local communities. Questions might be being raised, and puzzlement expressed, about why more affluent parts of the country do not appear to have any asylum seekers located in their leafy neighbourhoods. Here, *maybe* part of the opposition to asylum seekers' presence could be related to a kernel of 'good sense' mired in the muddled and heterogeneous bundle of common sense.

As we have seen, according to Gramsci's Marxist thinking – and what is often termed in the Notebooks, the 'philosophy of praxis' – progressive activists must creatively struggle against and transcend common sense. Common sense must be 'actively grappled with, sifted through, understood and sorted out by the very users of language and holders' of common sense (Green and Ives, 2009: 20). Dialogue must occur because individuals and their mind-sets are the 'terrain of struggle for the competing social relations, or hegemonies' (Davidson, 2011: 142). Consequently, there is a need to engage with, and even challenge, people's views and, of course, our own 'mental conceptions' of the social world (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 493). In this instance, therefore, whilst giving total support to the asylum seekers, efforts might be made by community social workers to dialogue with those opposing their settlement.

Suggesting this may be a way forward does not amount to surrendering ground to racists and neo-fascists. Rather, Gramsci's approach can prompt us to try to reframe what is constructed as the main 'problem'. Hence, interventions would not simply be focused on changing the local residents' opinions, but might look to widen the scope of debate: for example, by raising the issue of better funding services and enhancing the material resources of the community. Housing and health services may be of particular concern. Perhaps efforts could also be made to organise joint community action with local residents – or a fraction of them – with their being encouraged to join with the asylum seekers to place new demands on the State.

Mainstream media discourses are apt to depict communities as being wholly united in their opposition to asylum seekers, but it is likely, of course, that there will already be a diversity of opinion in relation to their arrival. In terms of Bourdieu's reasoning, part of the task is to dismantle the 'screen discourse' evoking the presence of asylum seekers as the sole issue. This also relates, as we have seen, to Gramsci's ideas on hegemony and intellectuals. Political action should 'use good sense against common sense to transform common sense from within' (Snir, 2016: 276). In many instances, this may appear to be politically naïve, but choosing not to enter this often complex 'terrain' means it will be more easily conquered by racists and neo-fascist ideologues whose aspiration is to extinguish 'good sense' so as to nurture the most socially toxic facets of common sense to propel their more expansive and far-reaching political projects.

How, therefore, might social work's futures be perceived. In the final section of the article, mindful that my articulation of these perspectives is determined by my positionality, I will briefly refer to four differing perspectives that are currently present and each may point to alternative futures for the profession. These may, or may not have meaning in a Chilean context.

Social work future(s)

The common sense of a retrievable 'golden age' (or 'Make Social Work Great Again')

Gramsci observed that common sense tends to be 'crudely neophobe and conservative' (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 423). This facet is to the fore in a perspective on social work harking back to the profession's alleged 'golden age'. In general terms, its implicitly political, social and cultural point of reference is the Fordist regime of capital accumulation and the institutionalised social order that it produced after the Second World War. During this period, in places such as Britain, the common sense of the profession was undisturbed by considerations about class exploitation, racism and gender oppression. Referred to as 'traditional institutionalised social work order' (Brockmann and Garrett, 2022, pp. 5–6), it can be associated with an 'uncomplicated' worldview still existing in the fading glow of Empire and colonial common sense. Today, aspects of this perspective are, perhaps, present in periodic calls to enable social workers to return to more artisanal ways that provide opportunities to build 'relationships' with 'clients' again. Perhaps, in its modern guise, it reduces the scope of social work to a breviary circulating around, for example, 'attachment', 'trauma-informed practice' and 'adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)'. While such concerns are not, of course, to

be wholly decried, the risk is that the wider social and economic world that generates pain and hardships becomes obscured by an overly narrow focus on psychology. In other words, the *social* in social work becomes shrunken. The dangers of this occurring are compounded because of the positivistic and comforting certainties that the novel field of neuroscience, bestowing on this perspective a certain 'modern' gloss, seems to provide.

The common sense of 'it is what it is'

This is the maxim and enveloping common sense of the 'neoliberal institutional social work order' (Brockmann and Garrett, 2022: 5–6). Perhaps occasionally not entirely comfortable with the 'way things are around here', the dominant tendency is to simply accept the current hegemony and thus to help constitute it. Flooded with a vibe of mandatory workplace 'positivity', this perspective can also be readily associated with managerial authoritarianism. Those adopting this form of common sense within social work education are often keen to create minor recalibrations which, whilst reflecting and bolstering neoliberal imperatives in the field, purport to have a totally different intent. This particular variant of professional common sense encompasses talk of 'diversity', stresses the need for 'cultural competence' and may, in the future, go as far as incorporating a degree of 'decolonisation' within its education and practice discourses. It might, in this sense, be characterised as, what Lange and Pickett-Depaolis (2022) dub, a 'conformist rebellion': where supine compliance with the dominant order is coated with a dull sheen of reformism. Anything, in fact, is possible so long as it does not disturb the relentless drive of capital accumulation and the workplace and wider social order conducive to such a process (Fraser, 2022).

Relatedly, in this context, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui furnishes an insightful perspective as to how discourses on 'multiculturalism' and the 'indigenous' are frequently used in Latin America to shore up neoliberal ideology. Although she does not use the term, her critique might also be framed within Brenner and Fraser's (2017) 'progressive neoliberalism': a conceptualisation that points to the inclination of leading fractions within the global hegemonic bloc, presently constituting the ruling class, to strategically celebrate 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' whilst simultaneously eroding public provision and dismantling social protections. This is partly the context in which elites 'adopted' multiculturalism in Bolivia and wider afield in Latin America as a project aiming to 'humanise' neoliberal structural adjustment programmes (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2020 [2010]: 51).

The common sense of endism and abolitionism

This is a marginal strand of emergent common sense focused on the harms that social work caused – and continues to cause – to a range of communities. Such legitimate denunciations prompted calls to 'end' social work (Maylea, 2021; see also Garrett, 2021b). Similarly, but largely associated with the treatment of African-American families by social work services, a related strand of thinking demands not only the 'abolition' of the prisons and police, but also social work (Toraif and Mueller, 2023). One of the prime, and cogently reasoned concerns here is that social work, as an institution, is wholly enmeshed in policing, with the child 'care' system functioning as a pipeline frequently leading straight into the prison system, especially for those in minority ethnic communities (Adjei and Minka, 2018). A good deal of the sense-making on this theme is persuasive and compelling (Dettlaff *et al*., 2020). However, the 'abolitionist' perspective is arguably U.S.-centric and wholly entangled with the particularities of U.S. racism and, what Wacquant (2009) terms, 'neoliberal penality'. Maybe the idea that the police and prisons should be abolished is more complex than the 'abolitionists' argue? Do we, for example, hanker to create a new post-capitalist state apparatus where neo-fascists can roam free to intimidate and propagandise as they please? Perhaps what is required are new forms of policing and imprisonment (and social work) which are re-purposed, with new priorities and democratic/accountable structures. The state, as a whole, is not necessarily a mechanism to be simply condemned. Rather, we may be better served by questioning the social forces controlling it.

The common sense that another (social work) world is possible

Gianinna Muñoz Arce reminds us that in the mid-1960s a debate about the aims and intent of social work was initiated in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America. Dubbed the 'reconceptualisation movement', it criticised how social work practitioners and educators operated as supporters of the established order and it went on to stress and campaign for 'new social work' wholly committed to the 'oppressed and dominated Latin American people' (Aylwin in Muñoz Arce, 2018: 781). Perhaps today there is also a global requirement for us to try to seek out alternative forms of social work education and practice. Important here may be the creation and nurturing of dissenting 'structures within structures' inside of social work service organisations and within institutions providing social work education (see also Garrett, 2021a). This tactic, part of a longer-term and strategic struggle, may entail rekindling older forms of organising that emphasise the importance of caucusing: that is to say, *concentrating*, both in terms

of engendering new forms of radical thought, but also in terms of coming together and forming blocs and assemblies – in-person or online – to collectively resist the stultifying neoliberal organisations along with their narrow and toxic imperatives. This might form part of a wider network of similar caucuses spanning a range of jobs across entirely different 'fields' within the wider social formation. Indeed, this wider dimension is vital, not only to counteract the fetishisation of sectional interests, but because social workers alone can, of course, actually change very little.

Conclusion

Importantly, in commenting on social work and common sense, I recognise that others have contributed fascinating articles in a Chilean context: for example, Luis Vivero Arriagada (2017). Moreover, my article is constrained because of my unfamiliarity with the specificity of Chile. In this context, the specific composition of social work common sense will vary on account of a myriad of factors related to history, culture, politics and the genealogy of the profession in a specific country. Clearly, given the cloying nature of common sense, there is a risk of becoming myopically preoccupied with the sense-making and what, more generally, is taking place in the countries in which we live and the institutions in which we work. This can lead to wild and misguided generalisations. Despite possible shared characteristics, social work common sense will not, of course, be the same in Chile and Ireland.

Clearly, social work practitioners and educators occupy a multiplicity of other roles and subject positions: familial roles, roles as manifestly political actors (in political parties and social movements etc). Hence, the struggle to promote a new common sense – perhaps, more accurately, Gramsci's *good* sense – stretches beyond the sphere of the 'professional'. Within the field of social work, key questions that we need to keep asking ourselves may include: What would a more emancipatory social work pedagogy 'look like'? How might it serve social emancipation more broadly? What would it mean if the word 'liberation', featured in the IFSW (2014) definition of social work, was taken seriously? None of these questions have easy answers but they prompt us to think more deeply about how to occupy and repurpose the existing social work terrain with the hope of building worlds anew. A good place to start is by questioning social work and its regnant common sense.

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