# Book Review
# Social Work and Common Sense: A Critical Examination.

## Paul Michael Garrett, Routledge London and New York, 2024, pp.296, ISBN: 978-1-032-45647-8, USD $39.16.

**Taly Reininger**[1]

Paul Michael Garrett is widely regarded as one of the most prominent critical social work theorists in the English-speaking social work world. A professor at the University of Galway and a member of the Royal Irish Academy, Garrett has written many books that challenge the ideological basis of social work practice, with a particular focus on the relations of state, neoliberalism, and professional discourse. In addition to his other books, "Social Work and Social Theory: Making Connections" (2013), "Welfare Words: Critical Social Work and Social Policy" (2017), and "Dissenting Social Work: Critical Theory, Resistance and Pandemic" (2021), Garrett has been making a deliberate and sustained effort to (re)introduce critical theory into social work education and debates, and to assert the political nature of the discipline.



His recent book, "Social Work and Common Sense" (2024), is a further development of this line of work, providing a sustained critique of the ideas and beliefs that are often taken for granted in social work, both in regards to its education as well as practice. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'common sense', Garrett applies this lens to a variety of concepts and theoretical positions that have dominated social work over the years, including attachment theory, creativity, human rights, and what he terms colonial common sense.

The book is extremely timely due to its publication at a time during which, on an international scale, authoritarianism is on a preoccupying rise, far-right discourses are being normalised, and neoliberal austerity measures are being rapidly enforced – all of which have significant implications for social work as both a profession and as a discipline. Garrett's contribution is particularly relevant because it looks not only at the external political realities but also at how these contribute to the crystallisation of internalised 'truths' and beliefs that define social work. In his introduction, Garrett argues for the need to interrogate the whys, specifically, "Why did a *particular* view establish itself as the dominant one at a *particular* moment in time within *particular* places in the world and within *particular* fields of expertise." (p.12). As he convincingly argues,

[1]Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Chile.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6398-5204

situating the debates within particular political, economic, social, and historical moments is necessary in order to question dominant "common sense" problem definitions that shape social work practices, making it impossible to visualise alternative responses.

In this regard, the book positions itself in the broader critical social work tradition by questioning structural inequality, power dynamics, and the ways in which knowledge is produced and legitimised, particularly through the use of "common sense." Garrett expands the discussion about how dominant narratives establish what counts as legitimate knowledge and acceptable social work practices. The book thus resonates powerfully during a time when many critical positions are under attack from multiple fronts.

The book is structured into ten chapters, each dedicated to a specific topic or area of discourse. In the first two chapters, Garrett introduces and theorises common sense, referencing the works of Hannah Arendt and Pierre Bourdieu while arguing that Antonio Gramsci's conceptualisation offers the most politically and analytically helpful framework for understanding how dominant ideas become naturalised and shape social work practice. Chapters three to seven provide interesting analyses on the use of common sense on a diverse range of topics relevant to social work, including unmarried mothers, attachment theory, creativity, anti-anger ideology, and human rights.



In chapter eight, "Colonial common sense and 'decolonizing' social work" and chapter nine, "Latin American challenges to the common sense of the Global North" Garrett deviates from previous chapters by "moving beyond critical European social theory" (p. 170), however stating his limitations due to the language barrier (Garrett only reads and writes in English) and his fear of "careless appropriation" (p.171) that might reproduce colonial practices. Garrett situates himself as a scholar living in the Republic of Ireland, a country that has a complicated history of colonialism, and this positionality appears to function, at least partially, as a way of legitimising his engagement with colonial and decolonial debates. At the same time, he recognises the inherent tensions between binary categorisations of colonised and colonisers, adding a further layer of complexity to his position. The objective of this chapter is to examine how "colonial common sense" and Eurocentrism continue to shape what is considered legitimate social work knowledge, thus advocating for the need to challenge dominant epistemologies while creating spaces for situated, decolonial ways of knowing in academia. This critique becomes the groundwork for chapter nine, in which Garrett introduces decolonial theorists from Latin America, arguing that the ideas he presents can challenge colonial common sense and expand the horizons of critical social work.

In chapter nine, Garrett presents the works of a wide range of Latin American theorists, including Paulo Freire, Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel, Maria Lugones, Enrique

Dussel, Santiago Castro-Gomez, Ofelia Schutte, Walter Mignolo, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. The concepts he introduces are not only numerous but also complex, such as "coloniality of power", "epistemological reconstitution", and "epistemic disobedience". Garrett not only presents these concepts in great detail but also delves into the internal critiques and theoretical tensions among authors. For example, Garrett provides an extensive analysis of Quijano's concept of 'coloniality of power' followed by an even more extended discussion of Grosfoguel's and Lugones's critiques, particularly their argument that Quijano fails to account for gender and intersectionality. A similar, although more concise, treatment is given to Enrique Dussel's theoretical contributions and their critique from Santiago Gomez-Castro and Ofelia Schutte. Finally, Walter Mignolo's contributions regarding decolonial delinking and epistemic disobedience are countered with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's critique of Mignolo's and others' positionality being based in universities in North America.

While admiring and respecting Garrett's commitment to theoretical depth and detail, his focus on internal disagreements at times obscures the broader insights these ideas offer for the discussion on social work 'common sense'. The chapter introduces too many complex debates, especially considering that its intended audience includes students and readers encountering Latin American thought for the first time. This depth and detail may overwhelm and limit the potential to expand the horizons of critical social work in the English-speaking world.



Understanding the complexity of translating and fitting such a large amount of knowledge into one chapter, the book's most important contribution lies in its ability to unmask the basic presuppositions of social work through a thoroughly critical perspective. Garrett does a great job of using Gramsci to reveal the ideological aspects of professional knowledge, and several of the chapters have a good historical context. The inclusion of pedagogical tools, such as the "reflective Talk" boxes, also makes this a valuable and engaging resource for teaching.

In conclusion, Paul Michael Garrett's "Social Work and Common Sense: A Critical Examination" (2024) is a continuation of his critical academic project, offering important theoretical insights and critiques of social work and social work education. In his latest contribution, he draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of "common sense," exposing how seemingly neutral concepts ranging from attachment theory to human rights, are embedded within historically contingent, politically charged frameworks. The book's publication is especially timely in a global context marked by rising authoritarianism, the normalisation of far-right discourse, and the deepening of neoliberal austerity, all of which have serious consequences for Social Work.

Garrett's intervention stands out not only for its critique of these external forces but also for its analysis of how they shape the internalised "truths" that underpin professional knowledge. As he compellingly argues, examining why certain views have gained dominance in particular times, and places is essential to challenging the problem definitions that limit our capacity to imagine alternative futures for Social Work. By including a chapter questioning colonial common sense and a second introducing important Latin American theorists, he invites readers to turn towards other latitudes and authors in order to imagine such alternatives. This book is both a theoretical contribution and a political provocation for social work in the English-speaking world – one that demands the discipline confront its complicity in reproducing common sense and invites a more profound commitment to epistemic and practical transformation.

Taly Reininger
Profesora Asociada
Departamento de Trabajo Social
Universidad de Chile
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6398-5204



April 2025. Vol. 5, Num. 9, 212-215 ISSN 2735-6620, DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2024.76249