

Re-Imagining Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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CELEBRATING DIVERSITY! UMM? AND WHY THE QUESTION – KEI HEA TE PUTEA? IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.

Posted on **April 6, 2018** by **RSW Collective**



A guest post by **David Kenkel**

Fraser and Honneth (2003) suggest that one useful way to slice up politics is to distinguish between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution. You could also talk about identity politics (Gergen, 1995) versus the politics of class. Whatever it is named, this type of political critique looks at the difference between the social struggles of diverse groups for recognition and fair treatment versus the basic question of how a society allocates resources. Arguably, during the rise of neoliberalism the politics of recognition has played a more centre-stage role. Distribution is portrayed as a question better answered by the marketplace than political will or the desires of an electorate.

Looking back on the last 35 years, my own take is that the neo-liberals stole the economy while me and other fellow activists were distracted fighting for the rights of groups we cared about. The upshot being that some groups are now somewhat less oppressed, but many New Zealanders are poor, broke, in awful debt and the very rich are laughing all the way to the bank. I don't regret my 'rights' battles, but I do now sometimes wonder if I'd have done better if I'd stuck closer to the barricades of class politics.

My irritation at being asked to celebrate diversity began when I saw a succession of our most right-wing politicians happily joining in with gay pride parades. I began to ask myself – 'so when I'm being encouraged to celebrate diversity and the rights of oppressed groups; what am I being encouraged to 'not' pay attention to'?

I think the answer may be the very successful 35 year-long implementation of an upward wealth funnelling mechanism that is now so systemically entrenched that it is no longer able to be dismantled by ordinary democratic processes (Harvey,2013).

The truth is; as much as we might celebrate cultural, linguistic, sexual and ethnic diversity the brutal dollars and cents reality is that most of how our economy works and the fallout of the increasing rich/poor divide is not decided democratically; but instead, by interwoven restraints, demands and coercions operating at the local and international level.

This is not a system decided or designed by individual voters, or individual politicians. Rather, this is an interlocking system created to push money up the economic food chain as efficiently as possible while persuading as many people as possible that an overtly unfair system is in fact the best of all possible worlds. You will never hear a politician say that democracy now has little power to change social conditions through true redistribution of the worlds wealth. That doesn't make it any less the truth.

Neo-liberal economic systems also operate in lockstep with social systems designed to make less visible the reality that initial socio-economic position, rather than personal choice, determines most people's life outcomes. These persuasive social systems additionally operate to repetitively assert a story that individual success and failure is

solely a matter of personal responsibility. The degradation of our welfare systems into terrorising machines has played one large part in this broad-scale public shift toward blaming individuals for their circumstances rather than examining larger systems for culpability.

What the neoliberal grip on the public imagination and the levers of the economy is unsurprisingly desperate to avoid is any large-scale shift back to the politics of redistribution. Hence the tendency in Western democracies to put the economy outside of the arena of democracy. A politics of redistribution recognises that an unfair economic system produces unfair social results. A politics of redistribution also recognises that a sensible society attends to these economically derived problems not just by throwing social workers at them, but also by equalising the outcomes of the economic system.

Unfortunately, neoliberalism is likely to plague the planet for some decades to come. Despite a disastrous record of accomplishment for ordinary people and the environment (Smith, 2013) neoliberal policies are too entrenched into too many global systems to be quickly removed, and the beneficiaries of neoliberal economic structures hold many of the levers of global power and will do for some time to come (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014). To stress the point again: How economies operate and how resources are allocated is now mostly decided outside the tent of democracy. A true political re-think of resource distribution is either decades or a global revolution away.

So, how does this parlous situation influence social work in New Zealand? Above all it leaves us with a long-term responsibility to not collude with arguments that tell us celebrating diversity is enough. My own perspective is that we have come out of a nine-year tunnel of cruelty for individuals involved with social welfare systems. Let's not pretend otherwise, it has been a punishing and vicious nine years for the poor and the marginalised. We now have a government aiming to dial back the viciousness. I am very pleased about this. As a social worker I prefer minimal government cruelty as opposed to maximum. That said, it does not matter how much this government is in love with notions of kindness and support rather than cruelty and punishment; their economic wriggle room is minimal and the same systems that crush many to the bottom while enabling ridiculous wealth for the very few will continue unabated.

The social work response: Social work as a profession can have several responses to this situation of a government aiming for minimal cruelty within an implacable global system that allows very little room to make real changes in how distribution occurs.

Firstly: of course, we can support moves away from cruelty towards kindness. That is only sensible.

Secondly: we can continue to support points of view and government policy that recognises that people's dismal life circumstances are not usually of their own making.

Thirdly: and I believe this to be a critical point: We can be suspicious of the distraction of being asked to celebrate diversity and always instead ask the question – ‘what about the money?’. As the newly elected politicians tire and begin to recognise the limits of their ability to influence real changes around the distribution of wealth, the celebration of diversity, and small wins for the disadvantaged amongst the contested needs of diverse groups can be a safe place of retreat. We should not support these hiding places – but instead need to keep asking: ‘Where is the money?’

We need to continue to hold our politicians to account as we wait for the inevitable global sea-change that brings the decline of neoliberalism’s authority over our economies and societies. It is critical that we forcefully take our politicians back, and back again, to the table of redistribution and vital that the social work profession is not diverted by celebrations of diversity from recognising the immiserating effects of inequities of distribution in our societies.

Image credit: Ugg Boy

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jayne says:

April 9, 2018 at 11:46 pm

Thankyou so much for this and your comments! especially- “There is a great deal of thinking suggesting that if we continue to leave these things to the market, (as is the case right now under neoliberalism) we are aiming for a very bad very big ecological and social crash in the not too far away future.” I had to take time to think about how to articulate a helpful response.

“Neo liberal” politics is a zero sum ideological movement of “self interest”, and behaves more like a religious movement than a political one. Followers can be accommodated by

multiple governance systems. Neo liberals generally support views about Taxation as “theft” and welfare recipients as ‘thieves’. Neo liberal policies and systems thrive equally as well inside a Fascist dictatorship, or in a 3rd world state. There are equally as many millionaires and billionaires in Dictatorships, and in states with minimal to no social security systems as there are in Democratic countries.

In NZ, the media is at risk of being co-opted by whatever entities control its output, professional lobbyists create socially corrosive narratives and myths to achieve a grip on public opinion and control how the majority will vote, and which opinions upon which subject people will feel ‘safe’ discussing. This becomes more likely as the effectiveness of the social security system is eroded by commercial hegemony. It is not good enough to say that “this is ‘nothing’, it is worse overseas”. This attitude ensures that these conditions will be imported into NZ, and, without government intervention, entrench poverty and inequality deeper into the NZ living environment. Neo liberal ideological capture involves discouraging “government intervention”. The negative effects of a government captured by Neo Liberal ideology are mainly felt by ordinary people.

I came across some writing about this which I will share a link to-

<https://medium.com/s/jeremiad/the-unfortunate-efficacy-of-evil-bd1063814dc0>

“Housing addresses a fundamental human need, and is critical for people to be able to live healthy, prosperous lives”- quote from –

[https://beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2017-](https://beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2017-12/Housing%20and%20Urban%20Development.pdf)

[12/Housing%20and%20Urban%20Development.pdf](https://beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2017-12/Housing%20and%20Urban%20Development.pdf) Access to housing is the ‘king pin’ service which provides people with a ‘place to be’ and a place to be recognized and heard and belong in the community, and provides individuals and households with a physical platform to enable access to other essential economic resources.

In NZ access to housing remains commercially contestable. Welfare, and visible homelessness has played a major role in polarizing public opinion without necessarily supporting much progress towards identifying fair and equitable solutions for regulatory reforms.

Because access to essential services is considered a ‘business matter’. Arguments about access to essential goods and services (housing, healthcare, food security, education etc) as a ‘human right’ are ignored by NZ domestic law.

<http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/E-C.12-NZL-CO-4-AUV.pdf>

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David Kenkel says:

April 10, 2018 at 4:34 pm

Thank you, Jayne, what an interesting post! I really like the links, they are incredibly useful.

As someone who spends a lot of time watching how neoliberal thinking and practice expresses play out in our social and economic worlds I have noticed some changes that make me guardedly hopeful.

To explain: an analogy that I often use when thinking about neoliberalism's purpose and intent – (insomuch as such a diffuse set of thinking can be said to have an intent); is the tobacco industry.

In the 1950s it was quite common for cigarettes to be advertised by doctors; saying things like: 'toasted Virginia tobacco is proven to be soothing for the throat'. By the time the 1970s and 80s came along the evidence was overwhelming that tobacco caused a whole range of serious health problems.

At that point you no longer saw doctors on TV saying tobacco is good for you, however, you did see massive amounts of money pumped into counter research suggesting that the evidence about tobacco causing cancer and other diseases was flawed.

Post 2000 the focus of the tobacco industry has shifted away from questions of health toward questions of personal choice. It is obvious that at this point in time the tobacco industry is fighting a rear-guard action against the coming day when tobacco is made illegal. They want to keep the profits flowing as long as possible and are quite happy to use all sorts of legal tricks to delay the day when tobacco is declared a poison that shouldn't be available for sale.

In some ways neoliberalism is following a similar trajectory. In the early days of neoliberalism there were many good people who believed that the suite of changes neoliberal thinking proposed would be truly good for society. In the 1970s and 80s the story was everywhere that the common good would be best served by a shift toward a free choice – market-based society. The vision was dazzling, as was the rhetoric. Choice, freedom, growth, possibilities, the end to a stagnant red-tape bound society. It sounded great and people at many levels of the economic ladder were enthusiastic proponents.

As neoliberal approaches began to get a solid grip on New Zealand's economy and society through the late 80s and into the 90s it became apparent to more and more people that the promise of the beautiful society was not panning out. Nevertheless, neoliberal ideology was still espoused with enthusiasm, along with the promise that the supposedly huge efficiency gains from a shift from government delivery to privatised competitive delivery of services would create a new era of flourishing. (Anyone remember competitive tendering?)

N.B. It needs to be remembered that along with the public rhetoric through the late 80s and 90s there was also vast amount of background political tinkering that locked neo-liberal economic policies into permanent place.

Moving into Post-2000 a consensus of resistance began to grow that increasingly pointed out that a majority of the world's population was not gaining from a global era of market liberalisation. It also became increasingly apparent that unrestrained markets equate to unrestrained damage to the environment.

The global financial crisis of 2008 was when the mask cracked. It became very clear that the global promise of neoliberalism to increase the common good was a lie; and worse a lie designed to quietly and efficiently reallocate the world's resources from the masses to the few. What also became apparent in 2008 was the entrenched power of the economic systems designed by those that gain from the liberal policies.

Despite a sense of repugnance from the general population the world's banks were bailed out at public cost, and the neoliberal approach did not just remain the status quo but actually accelerated in funneling wealth upwards. In the 10 years since 2018, I have noticed that the voices selling the wonder and beauty of neoliberalism are significantly quieter, and, are likely to meet with some scorn if they wax too lyrical. However, what has not changed is the extent to which neoliberal systems remain entrenched. Put simply, the strategy has changed from selling the vision of neoliberalism to simply enforcing the continuation of its policies and strategies as a wealth harvesting device.

Like the tobacco industry' neoliberalism remains a very efficient moneymaking device for a few, but, it is no longer loved; very few other than those who are the obvious benefactors are arguing for it, and clarity and force are growing in the movements declaring neoliberalism (like tobacco) as a toxic poison. My own sense, is that those who benefit from neoliberalism are holding grimly onto the levers of power for as long as they possibly can while very aware that a sea-change is inevitable.

It is impossible to predict the sources of future change, but, I suspect that social work as a profession can play a real role in continuing to point out that pushing personal choice alongside economic and social structures that strip people of actual choice is a vile and cruel travesty. We don't need to be economists to criticise neoliberal policies; what we need are hearts and voices big enough to tell the stories of those we work with to a public that has been lied to long enough.

The following is a crudely titled article about neoliberalism that made me laugh, that I enjoyed reading, and that has a whole lot of sensible suggestions:

file:///C:/Users/david/Downloads/1342-Article%20Text-4333-2-10-20160730.pdf

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David Kenkel says:

April 7, 2018 at 12:36 pm

Good point, I agree it would be very useful to look at the media's role. An interesting author called Michael Apple made the comment that the great success of neoliberalism is not just in the economic field but as much in how it has shifted how a large proportion of the population makes sense of the world. And, I tend think that one of those shifts is a careful screening out of certain kinds of possibility from the popular imagination. In particular what seems screened out are economic alternatives to the status quo, particularly in terms of how the world's limited resources are managed and shared. What tends to happen when those sort of possibilities are screened out is that the economic status quo becomes perceived as rather like gravity; an unchangeable constant that it's hardly even worth commenting on because nothing can be done about it. Media have been firstly I think compliant in the continual repetition of the TINA (there is no alternative) story and more recently actively complicit in promoting that there is really only one way to think about the world. Of course there are many journalists who keep up a very honourable tradition of critique, but, they tend to be the ones who do not get much mainstream airplay.

I do wonder if social work as a profession needs to expand its horizons in terms of how it thinks about the media. Many social workers are very aware of the sometimes harmful ways in which media portrays our profession and the people we work with. Perhaps what we now need to become more aware of, (and suspicious of); is the way the world itself is portrayed, particularly in terms of possible ways for society to organise how (or whether) human beings and the ecologies we depend on are sustained, nurtured, and cared for. There is a great deal of thinking suggesting that if we continue to leave these things to the market, (as is the case right now under neoliberalism) we are aiming for a very bad very big ecological and social crash in the not too far away future. So yes I very much agree with you, we need to look hard and critically at the role of media in how the world is made sense of. And, perhaps as profession we need to start more publicly asking what kind of sense is being made, who does it serve, and what kind of possibilities are not being told.

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Tom Gledhill says:

April 6, 2018 at 5:21 pm

Thank you an excellent article. Perhaps an analysis of how the media machine has been used to fool global societies us into falling for this state of affairs might be in order as well.

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