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Trapped within Welfare

Surviving Social Work

Mike Simpkin

SECOND EDITION

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First edition 1979

Second edition 1983

Published by

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

London and Basingstoke

*Companies and representatives
throughout the world*

ISBN 978-0-333-33956-5

ISBN 978-1-349-06449-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-06449-6

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Preface to the Second Edition

At the beginning of 1982 a BBC documentary series about the police achieved widespread publicity and notoriety, not least for the callous handling of a rape complaint. An opinion poll at the end of the series suggested that confidence in the police had, if anything, increased; top of viewers' priorities for institutions suitable for similar 'fly on the wall' treatment were Social Services Departments. In fact there had been a shorter and equally controversial series about social workers some months earlier. I have some doubts over the propriety of presenting intimate and emotional scenes from people's real lives as peak-time television viewing, though it may be possible to maintain adequate safeguards. But this poll confirmed how much more prominent a place social services now have in the public consciousness than in the mid-1970s when the first edition of this book was written. Much of the comment and of the depiction of social workers may still be ill-informed, but the interest is now there.

Why should there have been such a change? No doubt voyeurism plays a part, as, for the more fortunate, does relief at having avoided the fate of being a social work client. One young mother whom I visited after a psychiatric referral was at first offended because she had gained the impression from the television that social workers only visit 'grotty' homes. But this remark suggests another reason: expansion of services in the 1970s, combined with the effect of the recession presided over by the gurus of monetarism and the Tory Right, have brought many more people into the net of the social services than ever before. Forced increases in council rents and rates, in fuel prices and in regressive taxation have to be met out of diminishing incomes or by a social security system where many benefits have been made less flexible in addition to the loss of some of their real value. Social workers, housing authorities and the tottering National Health Service have all had to take account of massively increased personal debt as well as the social and emotional scars of large-scale unemployment.

Tory efforts to exploit anti-statist feeling as an ally in their assault upon public expenditure have, fortunately, been less successful than might have been expected. Generalised criticism of bureaucracy has not prevented people from rallying to the defence of services they regard as useful, though there has been no effective mass movement and the odds are often stacked against isolated defensive actions. Recognition of deficiencies, for instance in the NHS, has usually resulted in demands for improvements, rather than abolition; attempts to force social and health services to take a more residual role have met stiff resistance, though the Tories have done their best to encourage a burgeoning private sector, often parasitic on the state, which does present a serious threat to the principle of universal services. Perhaps surprisingly, in view of the fact that the structure of social work has altered little over the last few years, the major cutbacks have been in education and housing. Indeed, Labour has used the defence of social services as one of its major policies, though activists have quite rightly insisted that there should be increasing debate over issues of legitimacy and accountability. Areas of direct social work power are also coming under closer scrutiny: for instance, the much too ready use of section 3 of the 1980 Children's Act (formerly section 2 of the 1948 Act).

This politicisation of welfare issues is to be welcomed. Social workers have accepted the need to provide answers to questions of practice, if they are to win the battle for resources. As a result, the professional literature has become less cosy and more attuned to real political issues. Of course, much of the pressure has also come from within the social services: social workers' readiness in many instances to take an active part in defending services or facilities, and the experience of industrial organisation gained both in the strikes of 1978–9 and in subsequent actions, have enabled us to have a much stronger voice, even if this has alarmed the welfare establishment and created some new enemies. Dissident critiques of values and practice have emerged from both Left and Right, and although the latter have, because of the political atmosphere, had more influence than the quality of their criticism has deserved, the build up of both literature and experience on the radical and socialist side is beginning to lay some solid foundations for strategy, even if there is not as yet a fully agreed stance.

Developments on the Left which have affected radical social work have been on two fronts. Perhaps the most important has been the way in which a rising tide of disillusion with Left organisations coalesced with the increasing strength of socialist feminism in the support given to *Beyond the Fragments*, a collection of essays which repudiated much

behaviour taken for granted on the Left, and helped to promote a much greater legitimisation for the acceptance and exploration of personal issues as being necessarily political.¹ Although many orthodox socialists, mostly male, saw this as a retreat in the face of the Tory onslaught, using as evidence the failure of *Beyond the Fragments* to come up with any acceptable and effective organisational alternatives, there is no doubt that, at local levels at least, seeds have been sown for ideas and alliances that may have more widespread effect as the Tories falter.

Similar chords were struck by the collective which produced *In and Against the State*,² which stressed not only the contradictions facing state workers in all sectors, but also the importance of consumers' poor experience of state services; the administrative distance between resources and the people who needed them was suggested to be a significant hindrance in winning mass support against cutbacks. But once again, the proposals and the response were too diffuse to achieve successful united organisation.

On the academic side, the Marxist view of the state and welfare in capitalist society has received much more detailed consideration, mainly from the viewpoint of the Broad Left, which concedes most of the criticisms of welfare made by socialists who demand more revolutionary change, but none the less argues that socialists within the state have a quite legitimate role as guardians and propagators of working-class interests. Social workers have, not unnaturally, found this position more comforting than the rather bleaker revolutionary scenario which emphasises the controlling functions of the state and which can therefore seem both pessimistic and unduly limiting. But while it may be true that revolutionary socialists risk either being trapped in their own rhetoric or belatedly drifting towards reformism, the more conventional Left, with its belief in the possibility of transforming the state, stokes up enthusiasm for policies and projects only to be brought up short, amid accusations of betrayal, when the interests of capital demand retrenchment of state activities around a much more restricted and authoritarian role. The Broad Left argues that the state can be seen as 'an arena of class struggle' or as reflecting the balance of class forces.³ This is the position of 'semi-autonomy' for the state which I criticise in Chapter 2. My own reaction is still one of suspicion. The fact that welfare is subject to the interplay of contradictory forces is one reason why over-simplistic analysis of the state as a crude instrument of social control is not really credible. But hard though it is to find single words that accurately reflect the complexity of the state as an institution, neutral terms like 'arena' foster dangerous illusions about the possibility

of transforming state power and neglect its inextricable connection with the dominance of capital. Of course, the effectiveness of the state in ensuring conditions in which capital can accumulate depends on the balance of social forces at any given time. But it is equally important to recognise that even during periods when capital is on the retreat and needing to offer concessions, the state will, until some total change, always retain a structure through which the goal of accumulation can be achieved. However many benefits or services have been conceded, control of these benefits has never been surrendered, even when Labour has dominated the legislature. As Taylor-Gooby and Dale put it, the state cannot solve the relations of production because it is itself the product of those relations.⁴ Thus when the authors of *Towards Socialist Welfare Work*⁵ suggest that, in the absence of a vibrant and effective working-class movement, a strategic stand for democratisation is the most powerful option for socialists, they do so in the context of the belief that, in Leonard's words, 'the state can be transformed to benefit the working class'. Thereby they run the risk of substituting a democratisation which can never be fully effective for the building of that working-class movement without which there can be no effective socialist transformation. Analogies to this process may be found in the co-operative movement or by looking at the media; democratising the structure of one or more newspapers may make the paper more palatable for socialists and more rewarding for its workers. But the need to retain the goodwill of advertisers and the force of consensus values will still hold sway unless the structures of newspaper readership and of journalism are wholly changed.

There are no easy answers or options in this debate, which is discussed further in Chapter 8, but on its outcome hinges the general level of expectation for socialist change through welfare. The important thing to remember is that this will not be achieved in academic argument, but, as many of the Broad Left themselves recognise, only through active working-class struggle. I also consider it important that socialists do not confine themselves to broad issues of social policy and administration, but look in much more detail at the specific options in practical social work so that even at this individual level we can seek means of avoiding the reinforcement of dominant but oppressive cultural patterns and try to set up the possibility for progressive personal change.

The first edition of this book was commissioned as part of the Crisis Points series, and therefore written to a specific length with a brief to be provocative. At the time it was completed, there was still no extended account of radical social work, and my efforts to fill that gap meant

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that many topics got much less attention than they deserved. I was also unable to take advantage of some of the recent work which is now regarded as standard. However, most comment has suggested that the strengths of the book are in its flavour and use of experience, and therefore I have left the bulk of it unaltered except for a few minor corrections or updatings. I have rewritten the end of Chapter 2 and slightly altered some remarks on deskilling on page 95. I have, however, taken the opportunity of an expanded edition to recast the end of Chapter 7, including a personal account of the 1978–9 strikes, and considerably to enlarge the last chapter in order to offer some more positive direction. My debt to recent writers will be obvious. I should like to thank all those who responded positively to the original appearance of the book. For help with preparation of this edition, I should like once again to thank Carole Dale, and also Steven Kennedy of Macmillan for his enthusiasm and advice.

August 1982

MIKE SIMPKIN

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the ideas expressed in this book, so I make no claims to originality. Particular thanks must go to the early members of the Editorial Collective of *Case Con*, who enabled me to see the value of a more radical perspective after my liberalism had been shredded by my post-Seebohm experience. I am also grateful to my present colleagues, especially Wally Reed, for their moral support, if not their total agreement, and to Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard for allowing me to see advance proofs of their new book *Social Work Practice under Capitalism*. Ian Taylor suggested the book and his comments have saved me from at least some political and stylistic solecisms; Tim Fox at Macmillan was of great help at the copy-editing stage. My greatest debt is to Carole Dale, whose imagination and perseverance have not only ensured completion of the book, but also provided much of its inspiration. Needless to say, any mistakes are my responsibility.

1978

M. S.