Feminist Social Work

Critical Texts in Social Work and the
Welfare State

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Feminist Social Work

Lena Dominelli and Eileen McLeod

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To Maria Guiseppina, Connie, Maria and Rita (L.D.)

To Janyce, Nora, Rosemary and Viven (E.M.)

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Foreword

When the series *Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State* was launched in 1978 it was situated within a particular discourse – that of Marxism. It was argued then that the foundations of a Left politics and practice in welfare must be based upon a Marxist political economy, a Marxist theory of the welfare state and a Marxist theory of interpersonal relations. The aim of the series was seen not as indulging in sectarian dogmatism but contributing to ‘the development of the debate on the Left about the nature of the welfare state and the possibilities of socialist practice within it’.¹

The ten years which have passed since these intellectual objectives were announced have been intensely traumatic years for both socialist practice and Marxist theory. Three factors in this trauma can easily be identified.

First, we have experienced the profound shift in class forces which marks triumph of the new Right in Western countries. This shift to the Right has had and continues to have a transforming effect upon welfare institutions and practices, and upon the debate within the Left generally. Ten years ago socialist discourse on welfare was situated within a critique of social democracy, its bureaucracies, its elitism, and its alienation from the working class. It took some time for the Left to realise that social democracy as we knew it was dead and buried, and that the radical neo-conservatism of this new era required far-reaching changes in socialist thinking and action.

Second, the politics of existing ‘socialist’ countries has ranged from disappointing failure to outright oppressive horror. There comes a point when it is increasingly difficult to continue a commitment to the grand project of socialism in the absence of any positive

examples. Within eastern and central European countries, for example, where the language of Marxism has been pressed into the service of state dogma, progressive, socialist critiques of welfare have at this point to look elsewhere than to Marxist analysis for their frameworks, because Marxist discourse seems hopelessly debased through its service to oppression.

Third, and most important in relation to the publication of this particular volume in the series, are the deeply significant critiques of Marxism which have been articulated within wider progressive political forces and their organic intellectuals. Of these various critiques, it must be acknowledged that the most profound and far-reaching have emerged from the women's movement and from feminist scholarship directed at the analysis of gender relations in every field of human activity. Although debates within feminism between the various tendencies that are represented within the broad movement have been politically divisive, all feminists agree on the centrality of gender relations to any analysis of the social order, its institutions and ideologies. Furthermore, feminist analysis claims to provide a more complete understanding of the politics of welfare than a Marxist interpretation is capable of, and most importantly, a more complete guide to practice within the welfare field.

Lena Dominelli and Eileen Mcleod's *Feminist Social Work* stands firmly and impressively in this growing tradition of critiques of Marxist theory and practice as part of its development of a feminist politics within every level of welfare. Although it is thoroughly critical of previous writing in the area of radical, socialist, social work practice, including all the relevant volumes in this series, it is most importantly practical, empirical and prescriptive in its approach. It demonstrates convincingly the outstanding virtue of the best feminist writing, a determination to give priority to political practice rather than abstract theorising

The authors of *Feminist Social Work* approach practice through an examination first of the definition of social problems and how a feminist perspective illuminates our understanding of the significance of gender in their construction. They then give an account of a range of feminist work in campaigns and in therapy before exploring the possibility of a feminist practice in the most recalcitrant of settings – that of statutory social work. They then turn to the working relationships which might be established among social

workers on the basis of feminist principles. Finally, Lena Dominelli and Eileen McLeod write optimistically about the wider political presence of feminism as the context for the effective development of feminist social work.

Given its highly critical stance in relation to 'socialist' practice, where is this book located within the series? It has become increasingly evident in recent years that any simple pairing of feminism with socialism is exceptionally problematic and at this juncture impossible.² When feminism enters into a dialogue with Marxism, it is bound to be sharply critical, unmasking and challenging in the most profound way possible, namely not only about *what* we see in the world (and what we fail to see) but also *how* we attempt to understand it. Feminists are right to argue that classical Marxism, at least, is inadequate as a basis for understanding the social world and our internalisations of it. Marxism, if it is to remain a dynamic and reflective theory and method has to be *feminised*, and undergo the thorough changes that this process implies. Certainly, no socialism is now conceivable which fails to address the issue of gender as central to any development of egalitarian and non-exploitative social relations. On its side, feminism also benefits from its discourse with Marxism; it must confront the core theory and practice of the socialist tradition if it is to pursue its own politics. This book makes its own valuable contribution to this discourse.

In a review of Linda Gordon's study of family violence in Boston 1880-1960,³ Kenneth Keniston raises the most important issue which confronts the dialogue between feminists and Marxists:

For Marx, the social relations of production were the Rosetta stone that unlocked the languages of ideology, consciousness, the state, economics, religion and historical change. Contemporary feminist scholarship suggests that even if gender is not the Rosetta stone, it is more than just another variable. Gender is the first, most unchanging and deepest of all the meanings attached to human beings. The achievement of scholars like Linda Gordon is to give gender a role in explanation equal to the role it plays in life.⁴

Whilst some feminists seem to see gender precisely as the Rosetta stone, those who interact closely with socialist thinking, as do

Dominelli and McLeod, refrain from this final step, one which would subordinate all other social divisions, including class and race to the dominant imperative of gender. This book engages with this question of the relation of gender to other divisions and finds, unsurprisingly, the feminist analysis of this relation to be the most satisfactory. Their answers are likely to be subject to some debate among social workers; what will be welcomed by all readers are the careful spelling out of the implications of the feminist perspective for day-to-day practice in social work at every level of intervention.

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Notes

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2. Wilson, E. with Weir, A. (1978) *Hidden Agenda* (London: Tavistock Publications).
3. Gordon, L. (1988) *Heroes of their Own Lives* (New York: Viking).
4. Keniston, K. (1988) 'Wife Beating and the Rule of Thumb', *New York Times Review of Books*, 8 May.

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EILEEN MCLEOD