

Book Review: Amid Social Contradictions – Towards a History of Social Work in Europe, Gisela Hauss and Dagmar Schulte (Eds), Barbara Budrich Publishers (2009)

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This collection of essays on various aspects of Social Work and Social Policy in Europe covers a wide terrain - geographically, temporally and theoretically. Amongst the contributions are discussions on the provision of ‘tuberculosis welfare’ in Switzerland, maternal policies in the Soviet Union, social work traditions in Poland and child welfare social work practices in Finland following the Second World War. In analysing some of the themes of the book, the editors characterise the history (or more accurately the histories) of social work in Europe as one of manifold ‘contradictions’.

Within these contradictions and multiple histories a number of themes are explored –centrally these concern the purpose and function of social work in the spaces within which it operates and the manner in which social work responds to or perpetuates the very problems that it sets itself to ameliorate. Distinctions are made between the government of social work, at state level, via institutions of civil society and even at the transnational level (as the chapter by Kurt Schilde on the International Red Aid organisation demonstrates).

What is actually characterised as ‘social work’ is a subject that reading this text leaves open to debate. The chapter on Soviet social policy by Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov, while illuminating does not in fact refer to social work, but a ‘range of professionals and quasi-care professionals’ who were involved in the implementation of Soviet social policy between 1917-1930.

Schilde’s chapter on the ‘Red Aid’ international organisation, a network of welfare organizations formed by Communist parties in a number of countries in the 1920s to support victims of political persecution, contends that although these organisations did not describe themselves as social workers, they were *de facto* social work providers. Attending for example to the welfare of prisoners and their families and a operating a child welfare function through their management of a number of children’s homes, which housed the children of political prisoners. The specific label of ‘social work’ was rejected as being too bourgeois, but Schilde’s discussion highlights that widening the analytical gaze to include organizations such as ‘Red Aid’ challenges the orthodoxy of social work originating solely through the efforts of middle-class and/or religious organizations.

The appropriation or the merging of social work with particular political ideologies is a dominant theme throughout the collection, seen for example in discussions of the history of social work and social policy in Germany, Hungary, Switzerland, Finland and Austria. Gerhard Melinz’s chapter on social work and child welfare in Austria in the first half of the

twentieth century is particularly striking as it includes a discussion on the role that social workers played in the implementation of Nazi policies based on eugenics and race hate.

The co-opting of social work with policies of classification, segregation, exclusion and worse is also highlighted in essays on Hungary during the Second World War and in Elke Kruse's contribution on the history of social work training in Germany. Kruse also characterizes key phases in the development of social work training in twentieth century Germany. Her analysis maps onto other historical accounts in where the role of early pioneers has been set out (see for example Kendall, 2000). She further notes the expansion of the profession in the post-war period and the role that social work played in this radically changed context.

In her contribution, Dorottya Szirka argues that the concepts of 'maternalism' and 'familism' provide more useful analytical constructs for intersectional analysis of the role, purpose and function of social work and social policy moving beyond more conventional analyses that focus on comparisons and differences between 'eastern' and 'western' Europe. The theme of 'maternalism' is indeed one that recurs throughout this collection. This focus on gender is presumably as a result of the origins of this collection – the introduction to this book informs that the publication follows a collaboration between two European Networks – the *Network of Historical Studies on Gender and Social Work in Europe* and the *Athena, Advanced Thematic Network in European Women's Studies*.

Haus and Ziegler's chapter on welfare discourse on motherhood in Switzerland between 1920 and 1950 critically analyses the role that social work played in the assessment, categorization and disciplining of families through the regulation of mothers. Here the intersection of discourses of motherhood with nationalism and eugenics is highlighted. While Mirja Satka's contribution on child welfare social work practice in Finland in the latter half of the twentieth century notes the convergence of particular discourses of childhood, nationhood and motherhood.

This 'maternalism' is also seen in the gendered make-up of the social work profession. In most of the contributions to this collection the predominance of women in this sphere is noted. Caroline Skehill for example documents the situation in the Republic of Ireland where up until the beginning of the 1970s social work was an exclusively female profession. Interestingly, the various analyses of the gendered nature of the social work role point to regulation of both the worker as well as the clients of their services. Writing on the emergence of child welfare social work in Austria at the beginning of the twentieth century, Melinz quotes contemporary advice to the social worker:

...absolute devotion to duty, the negation of oneself and willingness to sacrifice must be the rule for every welfare person; she must constantly work on herself if she wants to be a model for others. (206)

In a similar vein, Szirka notes that while the emergence of a social work profession in Hungary provided an employment and career route for women, it necessitated women remain unmarried and 'devoted' to their work.

One of the unintended consequences of this 'maternalist' discourse is highlighted in Mirja Satka's essay, which charts Finnish social policies and child welfare work following the Second World War. Here the emergence and influences of discourses of 'maternal deprivation' combined with the Finnish state's concern with the 'strength of its national population' and a

psychological perspective of childhood combined to provide social work with a particular dominant orientation. Here Satka notes that in a profession dominated by young females, social workers experienced tensions between their role as professionals and the contemporary expectations that they produce healthy, psychologically well-adjusted children.

In their exploration of child welfare social work practice in Switzerland between 1920 and 1950, Gisela Hauss and Beatrice Ziegler draw on Foucault's concept of *disciplinarisation* to explore the techniques used by social workers and others to regulate motherhood. Here importantly, the notion of resistance to power a key is referenced, in other words analysis of the functions, power and role of social work cannot be conceived of as a one-way street:

Resistance to the disciplinarisation exercised by state guardians demonstrates their powerful effect, compelling individuals to fight back and defend themselves. (187)

This theme of resistance while somewhat subdued, finds voice in other contributions, most notably in Caroline Skehill's essay on the role of women in the history of social work in the Republic of Ireland. Here Skehill adopts a 'history of the present' approach (Foucault, 1977), to critically explore the role and functions of social work and the manner in which the profession gained discursive space in that country in the twentieth century. Skehill argues that social work can best be understood:

...as a contradictory activity involving the simultaneous reinforcement and challenging of social norms. (30)

In fact it is arguably this particular theoretical perspective that speaks most to the multiple histories, the ebbs and flows and the contradictory discourses in a 'European' history of social work that this collection as a whole serves to illuminate.

References

Foucault, M. 1977 Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison. Harmondsworth: Penguin

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