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The New Structural Social Work

Bob Mullaly / Third Edition



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The New Structural Social Work

Courage my friends . . . 'tis not too late to make a better world.

—Tommy Douglas



Acknowledgements

To write a book such as this, which calls for a social order and a social work approach different from those now dominant, requires a tremendous amount of angry energy. It is not enough to understand how our present set of social arrangements benefits a privileged minority (mainly white, bourgeois, entrepreneurial males) at the expense of the majority (mainly poor people, women, people of colour, immigrants, disabled persons, and the working class). One must be angry enough to want to do something about it. Paraphrasing Marx, it is not enough to understand the world, the task is to change it. So, I wish to thank all those individuals and groups and organizations who have fuelled and sustained my sense of indignation and rage over attitudes and acts that unfairly and unnecessarily have denied so many people their essential human dignity and have blocked the realization of their human potential. Included among them are: conservative politicians of all stripes for pandering to the corporate agenda in exchange for monetary and political support, leaving millions of people to fend for themselves; business organizations such as the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and the Business Council on National Issues, who in their greed for higher and higher profits have created a social Darwinian culture in society that has swelled the ranks of the underclass; right-wing think-tanks that do not think at all but continue to recycle a 200-year-old socially pernicious economic doctrine of laissez-faire that has never worked; the mainstream media that trivialize alternative social arrangements and economic policies and brainwash people into accepting a social system that victimizes and oppresses them; and all those social work academics and instructors who smugly and arrogantly dismiss progressive social work and continue to teach and write about recycled, conventional theories of social work that implicitly accept an inhumane social order and attempt to fit people into it; they should know better.

Of course, anger by itself is not enough to sustain one's writing. Support, encouragement, and help are also required. So I wish to thank the hundreds of people in Canada, Britain, the United States, and Australia—other progressive social work writers, instructors, students, and activists—who took the time to give me constructive feedback on the first two editions of *Structural Social Work*. I have been extremely fortunate in my career as I have met many, many progressive social work and social welfare writers who have shared with me their own ideas about progressive forms of social work. In particular, I want to thank a number of Australian colleagues and friends—Jan Fook, Bill Healy, and Mark Furlong from LaTrobe University; Jim Ife from Curtin University; Bob Pease,

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Preface

This book represents the third stage of the development of my thinking and writing with respect to 'structural social work'. The first edition, *Structural Social Work: Ideology, Theory, and Practice*, which was published in 1993, followed a period of relative quiet from the progressive or radical social work camp. The second edition, which was published in 1997, was one of many progressive social work books that appeared around this time. This new edition, which is called *The New Structural Social Work*, begs the question: what is new about structural social work? To answer this, a brief overview of the development of progressive social work in Anglo-democracies is presented here.

Although progressive forms of social work date back to the Settlement House movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the modern formulation of progressive social work began with the 1975 publications of Roy Bailey and Mike Brake's *Radical Social Work* in Britain, Jeffry Galper's *The Politics of Social Services* in the United States, and Harold Throssell's *Social Work: Radical Essays in Australia*. Despite being written independent from one another and in three different English-speaking continents, they contained a number of common themes (that had emerged in the radical sixties). Each criticized capitalism as a social and economic system that was antithetical to human need; each criticized mainstream social work for being an unwitting agent for capitalism; and each called for emancipatory/radical forms of social work practice that would contribute to the transformation of capitalism to some form of socialism.

A flood of progressive social work writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s focused mainly on class struggle (e.g., Bolger et al., 1981; Brake and Bailey, 1980; Carniol, 1979; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1980; Jones, 1983; Longres, 1986; Moreau, 1979; Pritchard and Taylor, 1978; Wagner and Cohen, 1978). From these writings the progressive social work agenda was clear. The critical analysis of capitalism would be further developed to show not only its oppressive effects, but also its contradictions, which would provide the levers and latitude for the practice of radical social work. The critique of mainstream social work practices would also be further developed to show how they actually covered up many of the oppressive features of capitalism by helping people to cope with it, adjust to it, or fit back into it. These critical analyses of capitalism and mainstream social work would, in turn, be used to develop radical/progressive theories and practices of social work at both the personal and political levels. This would include raising the consciousness of social services users of how capitalism exploited them and encouraging

them to organize and mobilize against it; joining with the trade union movement, which was seen as the major vehicle for overthrowing capitalism; building up the welfare state that had need rather than profit as its criterion for production and distribution; and electing social democratic political parties that were viewed as more committed to social justice than were bourgeois parties. Also, radical social work in the 1970s was responding to the criticism of feminist social workers that it was gender-blind and in the early 1980s to the criticism, mainly from black social workers, that it was colour-blind. In varying degrees, most social work educational programs incorporated some of these progressive ideas and analyses into parts of their curriculum, but for the most part, they occupied marginal or token positions alongside mainstream social work ideas and practices.

By the mid-1980s it was clear that the progressive project of radical social work was being undermined by the worldwide economic crisis and right-wing social policies brought about by the oil crisis in 1973 along with the inflation-fuelled Vietnam War. Led by 'big business' and bourgeois governments, economic restructuring occurred to address a worldwide recession and inflation (i.e., stagflation). Capitalism was transformed from its rigid and centralized post-war form to a flexible (for the capitalists at least) and global form (Harvey, 1989), thus making much of the earlier critical analyses of capitalism outdated and irrelevant. We witnessed, as Leonard (1997) pointed out, the ascendancy of neo-conservatism on a global scale and the virtual collapse of Left politics, a reduced welfare state, increasing disparities between rich and poor, national trade unions in disarray, and massive economic uncertainty. Given the irrelevance of much of its analysis of capitalism, the diminished political power of the trade union movement, continuous cutbacks in the welfare state, and the election of neo-conservative governments, the development of radical social work came to a halt and the whole radical social work movement seemed to have gone underground.

Though never dead, there was a period of inactivity and virtual invisibility (roughly during the 1980s) for radical social work before an important book was published in Britain in 1989. *Radical Social Work Today* contained articles from various radical writers and practitioners that reassessed the need for radical social work in its new socio-economic-political context. These authors identified what they believed to be the essential elements of a radical social work strategy in the 1990s. In my view, this book breathed new life into progressive social work. The title of its opening chapter, 'Whatever happened to radical social work?', addressed the questions that so many progressive social workers had. What *did* happen to radical social work? To what extent is it still relevant? Which aspects should be modified and/or rejected, given the events of the previous decade and the new realities facing social work? The editors of the book (Mary Langan and Phil Lee), who were also the authors of the first chapter, called attention to several factors that, in their view, would have to be considered and addressed before radical social work could move on. One of these factors, of course, was the changed practice context in which social work operated: dramatic increases in workloads of social workers; criticism and condemnation of social workers from conservative politicians and a mainstream media; the drive to push social workers into a more coercive and interventionist role in policing 'deviant'

families; and a growing criticism from members of oppressed groups, such as women, people of colour, persons with disabilities, and older people, that their interests had not been adequately articulated by the radical social work movement. A major criticism of the 1970s radical social work was that it was strong on critique but short on practice. Although such objection seemed to underestimate how necessary this critical stance was, as well as the constructive role it played, by 1989 it was obvious that radical social work had to translate its critical analysis into practice if it were to move on. A few other books around this time furthered the critical analysis of social work and the social welfare state—Fiona Williams's 1989 book from Britain, *Social Policy: A Critical Introduction: Issues of Race, Gender, and Class*; Ben Carniol's second edition of *Case Critical* (1990) from Canada; and George Martin's *Social Policy in the Welfare State* (1990) from the US—but these did not really address the practice of radical social work.

It was shortly after the publication of *Radical Social Work Today* that I wrote the first edition of *Structural Social Work* (1993). In the first edition I attempted to address many of the criticisms made of radical social work in Langan and Lee's book, but in particular I focused on the inconsistent treatment that radical social work had received in the literature to that time and the criticism that it had not moved much beyond a critique of conventional social work. I sought to clarify the clutter of the existing radical social literature by providing a framework that integrated its ideological context, its theoretical base, and its political practice. As well, I tried to advance the existing theoretical and practice bases of radical social work beyond that which existed in the literature at that time by linking social work practice with individuals, families, and groups to contribute simultaneously to fundamental changes of structures in society. I chose critical social theory as my theoretical base and, as my framework, a particular school of radical social work pioneered in Canada by Maurice Moreau, which he termed 'structural social work'. I chose critical social theory because it, unlike mainstream social theory, goes beyond merely attempting to explain and understand social phenomena to a political purpose of changing social conditions and challenging oppression. I chose 'structural social work' for several reasons. First, the term 'structural' is descriptive of the nature of social problems in that they are an inherent part of our neo-conservative/liberal, capitalist society and do not reside in the individual. Second, the term is prescriptive, as it indicates that the focus for change is mainly on the structures of society and not on the personal characteristics of the individual. Third, structural social work has more potential for integrating various theoretical concepts and political practices because it does not establish hierarchies of oppression but is concerned with all oppressed groups. Fourth, it is a dialectical approach to social work practice and, therefore, does not get trapped within false dichotomies or binary opposites. Finally, most of the development of structural social work had occurred in Canada and it was increasingly becoming a major social work perspective.

Coincidentally, another radical social book was published in Australia in the same year as the first edition of *Structural Social Work*. Jan Fook's *Radical Casework* focused primarily on the practice (at the micro level) of radical social work and de-emphasized theory, whereas my *Structural Social Work* was stronger on theory than it was on practice.

Many radical social work instructors in Australia and Canada used the two books together as each supplemented the other. As well, these two books are credited by many as representing an important milestone in the development of radical forms of social work theory and practice, as evidenced by the plethora of progressive social work books published a few years after 1993. However, *Radical Casework* is still one of the best books written on the practice of radical social work.

The first edition of *Structural Social Work* proved immensely popular because, in my view, it filled a large gap in the literature. Many, many social work practitioners and academics were committed to fundamental social change and to social work practices that did not blame people experiencing social problems for their situations, and they were looking for workable progressive forms of social work. However, this first edition contained a number of limitations and, over time, required further development. For example, it did not contain a full analysis of the transformation of capitalism from its previous post-war, almost nation-by-nation basis to its global form. Thus, the book represented a reaction to the negative consequences of globalization without a full understanding of what was happening or how to challenge it. Although the first edition acknowledged other forms of oppression and furthered the analysis of social problems beyond those associated with class, it still did not emphasize enough other forms and sources of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism, and ageism, which not only existed in society but were also present in the post-war welfare state and in social work practice. As well, the first edition of *Structural Social Work* was conceptualized within a modernist framework, as postmodernism was just beginning to appear in the social work literature. Thus, it did not contain any of the insights of postmodernism and, in fact, was based on the emancipatory narrative of Western modernity, with certain claims to unqualified universalisms and essentialisms and with a linear view of history and progress.

In 1996, I began writing the second edition of *Structural Social Work*, which was published in late 1997. In that edition, among other changes, I attempted to address the limitations of the first edition and in doing so to further the development of structural social work theory and practice. I provided an overview of the transformation process from post-war capitalism to its global form (thanks to David Harvey, 1989) and outlined its negative consequences on vulnerable populations, the welfare state, and social work. Given this analysis, at least social work now knew what it was up against and who the beneficiaries and victims of globalization were. Without such understanding it is difficult to challenge or influence any such movement. I also included a chapter on oppression, which I presented as the primary focus of structural social work. In other words, it is not capitalism or class relations that constitute the major source of social problems and exclusion. Rather, it is the exploitation and oppression based on dominant-subordinate relations that result in social problems. Classism is one form and source of oppression, but not the only one. (It is interesting that today the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work includes in its Standards of Accreditation that social work programs must demonstrate they have included oppression and anti-oppressive social work in their curricula.) I also included the postmodern critique of modernist thinking, which included

earlier forms of radical (and mainstream) social work. I argued that it was not a case of modernist versus postmodernist thought; that both were necessary as each provided a corrective to and informed the other.

Several other books on progressive social work were published around the same time as the second edition of *Structural Social Work*. They included Jim Ife's *Rethinking Social Work: Towards Critical Practice* (1997) and *Human Rights and Social Work: Towards Rights-Based Practice* (2001); Peter Leonard's *Postmodern Welfare* (1997); Ben Carniol's third (1995) and fourth (2000) editions of *Case Critical*; David Gil's *Confronting Injustice and Oppression: Concepts and Strategies for Social Workers* (1998); Bob Pease and Jan Fook's *Transforming Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives* (1999); and Lena Dominelli's second edition of *Anti-Racist Social Work* (1997). By now there was a substantial body of literature on various schools of progressive social work.

In spite of attending to the limitations of the earlier edition of *Structural Social Work*, there were still gaps and weaknesses in the 1997 version. Although the analysis of the transformation of capitalism was included, there was no real plan or strategy of what to do about it beyond caring for its victims. In spite of arguing that postmodernism had to be a part of any progressive school of social work, the dominant paradigms that have played such an important part of my approach to structural social work were still steeped in modernist concepts and contained elements of universalism, essentialism, and linear progress with respect to the pursuit of social justice and equality. There was also criticism made that the chapters on practice were not sufficiently nuanced to address the complexities of real-world experience and that I did not address the micro-politics of practice sufficiently. In addition, little attention was given to issues of identity and subjectivity and to the structural social worker as a person, or to the social location of the worker and how this might impact on his or her practice.

In this new edition, I seek to address the criticisms made of the 1997 version of *Structural Social Work*. I have called this third edition *The New Structural Social Work* because it is sufficiently different from previous editions and because the context of social work is also different today from what it was 10 years ago. With respect to the latter point, many observers and commentators, such as Canada's John Ralston Saul, argue that globalization has run its course and is now on the decline. It has not delivered the goods that it promised and very few people expect that it will any longer; many countries have opted out of the globalization process and are reasserting their national autonomy over economic and social affairs; some of the leaders of the globalization movement have not only lost credibility because of their exorbitant salaries and benefits, but many of them are now before the courts answering to charges of corruption, fraud, and other white-collar crimes. In addition to the decline of globalization as an economic theology or religion, other hopeful signs today were not present 10 years ago. For example, in Canada at least, instead of being in a deficit situation as it was a decade ago, the federal government has had surpluses in each of the last eight years in the billions of dollars. Government deficit can no longer be used as the excuse for cutting social services. As well, the anti-globalization movement, once considered by the corporate and government elites to be

a rag-tag group of extreme anarchists and radicals, showed that people can organize, can challenge the way that large corporations and governments do business, and can make changes in the face of formidable odds. What was made by an elite few can be unmade and remade.

In addition to a different economic and political context today, there is also a new intellectual context. When I wrote the 1997 version of *Structural Social Work*, there was a seemingly unalterable tension between modernist and postmodern ideas as they applied to ideas and ideals such as social justice, emancipation, and solidarity, all of which were crucial to the modernist notion of a progressive social work. Today, we have several versions of postmodernism, ranging from a nihilistic and individualistic form on one end of the continuum to a critical postmodernism on the other end, where writers and theorists are attempting to bridge the positive and liberating aspects of the critical social theory tradition with those of postmodernism. This developing epistemology calls for: work on the interstices of materialist philosophies and postmodernism; a retention of the ideals of social justice, emancipation, and equality in ways that respect difference, diversity, and inclusion; and an avoidance of totalizing belief systems and essentialisms, on the one hand, and politically disabling fragmentation and witless relativism, on the other hand. I believe that most of us who are writing in the area of progressive social work have moved beyond a modernist versus postmodernist dichotomy. This perspective is the one that guides the new structural social work. This is not to say that antagonisms do not exist between the two, but surely by now there is a healthy tension rather than a binary opposition or dualism.

When I wrote the first edition of *Structural Social Work*, only a few social work programs in Canada (and elsewhere) might have had a single course on radical social work. Today, entire social work programs advertise themselves as structural or anti-oppressive or some other variation of progressive social work. Times have changed and so has structural social work. I hope that *The New Structural Social Work* reflects and contributes to these changes.

Part I of the present work, 'In Search of a Paradigm', shows how and why current social work theory and practice are parts of the larger crisis of global capitalism and oppression, and what social work must do to contribute to the solution of social problems. Chapter 1 examines the transformation to global capitalism and the devastating effects that this shift and neo-conservative policies, more generally, have imposed on the labour market, the autonomy of communities, the social welfare state, the social work profession, and historically marginalized groups. To date, social work has been ineffective in dealing with the deleterious consequences of the 'fiscal crisis of the state' and, therefore, is itself in a state of crisis. This situation has resulted in considerable soul-searching within social work with respect to many of its comfortable assumptions about the nature of society, the nature of social problems, and the nature of social work practice. And although many social workers have fallen back on victim-blaming explanations for social problems, considerable criticisms have been made of our present set of social arrangements and our conventional social work practices, and there is a significant call

for alternative models and practices. The concept of paradigm is presented in Chapter 1 as a means to explore alternative models of society more in keeping with human well-being, alternative explanations of social problems more in keeping with people's lived realities, and alternative theories of social work practice more in keeping with social emancipation than social control. Potentially, the hopeful signs today, which were not present a decade ago, could alleviate some of the devastation incurred since the mid-1970s by global capitalism and ease some of the pressure that social workers have experienced over the past three decades because of the fiscal crisis of the state.

Chapter 2 differentiates two major social work perspectives—the conventional view and the progressive view. The former accepts our current social system; the latter seeks to transform it. Structural social work is based on the progressive view: an alternative vision of society must exist in advance of practice as a necessary prerequisite to social transformation. An outline of such a vision based on a progressive view of social work values and principles is developed and articulated and a critique of the new Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW) 2005 *Code of Ethics* is provided. Chapters 3 to 6 examine the ideologies of four dominant societal paradigms—neo-conservatism, liberalism, social democracy, and Marxism—and consider how each paradigm views human nature, the nature of society, the role of the state, and the concepts of social justice and social change. Also presented is an explanation that each paradigm offers for the existence of social problems, the ideal social welfare system consistent with each paradigm's ideology and interpretation of social problems, and the nature and form of social work practice dictated by each paradigm. Chapter 7 presents three critiques of the four paradigms: the feminist critique (i.e., the paradigms are gender-blind), the anti-racist critique (i.e., the paradigms are colour-blind), and the postmodern critique (i.e., the paradigms are steeped in modernist thought where there is no respect for diversity and difference and oppressed groups are subjugated under working-class oppression). An argument is made that the progressive paradigms (social democracy and Marxism) must be reconstructed to accommodate these critiques. The Third Way, which some writers have heralded as a reconstituted social democracy and others as a modern version of conservatism, is assessed in Chapter 8 with respect to its potential to overcome the limitations and critiques of the four dominant paradigms.

Part II, 'Structural Social Work Theory and Oppression', presents the theoretical basis of structural social work, with oppression as its focus. Chapter 9 compares and contrasts the four paradigms with each other and with the elements of the progressive social work vision outlined in Chapter 2. Progressive social work is much more congruent with the socialist paradigms (social democracy and Marxism) than it is with the capitalist paradigms (neo-conservatism and liberalism). However, it must be a *revitalized socialism* and not the 'old' socialism of the twentieth century, which reflected a project of emancipation rooted in domination. This revitalized socialism must engage with postmodernism and with feminist, anti-racist, and other struggles against domination. As well, it needs to demand the acknowledgement and celebration of diversity in cultures, sexualities, races, ages, abilities, and other human characteristics that were excluded, suppressed,

or discriminated against within an unreconstructed modernist version of socialism. The remainder of Chapter 9 discusses the fundamental components of structural social work theory—its socialist ideology, its radical social work heritage, its critical social theory base (including modernism and postmodernism), its conflict or change perspective, its dialectical analysis, its inclusion of all forms of oppression, and a conceptual framework that incorporates these components into transformative and emancipatory forms of social work practice. Chapter 10 argues that oppression is an issue of social justice and is the fundamental source of social problems. Rejected are the neo-conservative individual deficiency explanation and the liberal social disorganization explanation of social problems. Also examined here are the nature of oppression; its causes, sources, and forms; its production and reproduction; the three levels at which it occurs (personal, cultural, and institutional); its dynamics; its effects on oppressed groups, including its internalization; coping mechanisms used by oppressed persons; and the social functions it carries out in the interests of the dominant groups in society. A new section is added to this chapter where it is argued that the structural inequalities experienced by oppressed persons are socially sanctioned forms of physical and psychological violence, which over time leads to slow, agonizing, premature, and unpunished death.

Part III, 'Structural Social Work: Practice Elements', outlines several on-the-ground approaches of structural social work that are derived from its theoretical base. Chapter 11 focuses on structural social work practice within (and against) the system and Chapter 12 deals with structural social work practice outside (and against) the system. Chapter 11 discusses several structural social work practice elements to be used with service users that differentiate structural practice from conventional practice. This chapter looks also at how a structural social worker can survive in a workplace that she or he is attempting to politicize and democratize. Issues and strategies of protecting oneself from reprisal while trying to radicalize the workplace are discussed. Chapter 12 considers several arenas for struggle outside the workplace where structural social workers can contribute to social transformation, and presents a number of personal attributes that are essential in carrying out structural social work practice. It is argued in the final section of the chapter that structural social work is much more than a technique or a practice modality. It is a way of life.



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