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Similarities, Differences and Dialectics of Radical Social Work

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ABSTRACT. The current state of radical social work theory is not confined to an obscure or narrow corner of social work thought. This paper presents several areas of philosophical, theoretical, and practical agreement and disagreement among radical social work writers. It argues that the differences persist due to the inadvertent acceptance, on the part of many writers, of the legitimacy of certain false dichotomies. A dialectical approach to radical social work is needed to resolve these dichotomies. Such a dialectical approach would lead to greater integration of theory and better informed radical practice.

Since "Social Work in Search of a Radical Profession" (Rein, 1970) first appeared in the April, 1970 issue of *Social Work* followed by *Radical Social Work* (Bailey & Brake, 1975), a substantial literature, known as 'radical social work,' has developed. This theoretical perspective challenges the hegemony of traditional "person-reform" theories as well as contemporary "social reform" theories of social work.

Although radical social work has elicited considerable recent in-

terest, treatment of the subject has not been consistent. A review of social work literature reveals that radical social work has been variously referred to as: critical social work (Carniol, 1979), Marxist social work (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Longres, 1986; Wineman, 1984), political social work (Withorn, 1984), progressive social work (Jones, 1983; Smid & van Krieken, 1984), radical social work (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Galper, 1975; Langan & Lee, 1989; Leonard, 1975; Pritchard & Taylor, 1978; Rein, 1970; Simpkin, 1979, Statham, 1978), socialist social work (Galper, 1980), socialist welfare work (Bolger, Corrigan, Docking, & Frost, 1981), and structural social work (Middleman & Goldberg, 1974; Moreau, 1979; Moreau & Leonard, 1989; Rojek, 1986; Wood & Middleman, 1989).

While radical social workers share many philosophical, theoretical, and practical assumptions, the above list of nominal differences suggests less homogeneity among radical social workers than indicated by both enthusiasts and critics. To create greater theoretical integration the clutter of radical social work thought must be clarified. To this end this article: (1) explicates the major areas of agreement and shared assumptions of radical social work; (2) identifies some of the major differences of thought within the arena; and (3) presents a dialectical approach to radical social work which, it is argued, will provide a means to integrate radical social work theory.

PHILOSOPHICAL, THEORETICAL, AND PRACTICAL SIMILARITIES IN RADICAL SOCIAL WORK

Not suprisingly, most agreement exists among radical social workers at higher levels of abstraction. For example, there is virtual universal agreement that capitalism engenders inequality and must be replaced with some form of socialism. Much less agreement exists, however, at the operational level as to how society should be transformed or re-organized. The following common themes found in the radical social work literature demonstrate general agreement, with expected differences in emphasis.

1. Rejection of Capitalism in Favour of Socialism

Radical social work writers tend to favour some form of social-ism[1] and to reject capitalism, whose competitive and individualistic ethos is viewed as a major source of alienation and exploitation. In this view, the interests of the ruling class and the capitalist system of production institutionalize inequality especially since the vested interests of the former depend upon the perpetuation of the latter. Likewise, the free market as the dominant instrument of production and distribution denies the essentials of a civilized life to many people. These dynamics contrast sharply with the vision of socialist society which stresses equality, cooperation, solidarity, and human welfare which distributes resources on the basis of need, and in which life chances are structurally egalitarian.

2. Rejection of Liberal Reformism

Radical social work writers also reject liberal reformism. They believe that social problems arise from the exploitative, alienating, and oppressive practices that dominate capitalist society rather than individual deficiencies, family dysfunction, or subcultural differ-ences. The resulting inequalities, structured along lines of class, gender, race, age and so on, must be systemically not symptomati-cally addressed. Social work should not ignore problems found among individuals, families, and subcultures. But, these issues are best addressed by recognizing the underlying causes of the distress. In other words, private troubles are rooted in public issues — that is, in capitalist society's institutions and its supportive ideology. Be-cause social problems are "normal" consequences of the way soci-ety is organized, they cannot be resolved by technical or administra-tive reforms. A massive reorganization or transformation of capitalism is needed.

3. The Capitalist Welfare State Props-Up Capitalism

Most radical social work theorists define the capitalist welfare state as part of the wider state apparatus and supportive of the exist-

ing social order. The key interrelated political and economic functions of the welfare state include:

a. The control and policing of the "dangerous classes" by providing social welfare benefits which help to reduce the threat of social disruption (Abramovitz, 1988; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1975, 1976, 1980; Gough, 1979; Jones, 1983; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Simpkin, 1979).

b. The maintenance of the non-working population which helps to legitimize the state in the eyes of the subordinate classes and to ensure private enterprise a readily available work force (Abramovitz, 1988; Djao, 1983; Galper, 1975, 1978, 1980; Moscovitch, 1980; Gough, 1979; O'Connor, 1973; Piven & Cloward, 1971).

c. The socialization of the costs of production through health, education, and welfare programs, which is a form of subsidization for private enterprise (Buchbinder, 1981; Djao, 1983; Galper, 1975, 1976, 1980; Gough, 1979; O'Connor, 1973; Panitch, 1977).

d. The reinforcement of capitalist values through the manner in which social welfare services are provided. The state cannot serve just ruling class interests without losing its legitimacy. Its policies must obscure the prevailing social relations (which reinforce ruling class domination) while appearing to be in the best interests of the subordinate class. The structure of the welfare state promotes this kind of 'false consciousness' by simultaneously serving some of the needs of the subordinate class, while reinforcing individualism, competition, and inequality through selective and inadequate programs (Corrigan & Leonard, 1981; Galper, 1975, 1976, 1980; Gough, 1979; Moscovitch & Drover, 1981).

e. Many radical social work analysts view the social agency as an organization that implements the capitalist functions embedded in the welfare state (Carniol, 1987; Galper, 1975, 1980; Pearson, 1975; Scurfield, 1980; Simpkin, 1979). Indeed, the radical literature regularly discusses the tensions social workers experience as they try to reconcile the conflict that often exists between the requirements imposed by their employing agency with the welfare of their clients. Rather than just having "positive" service goals (Piven & Cloward, 1975), social agencies are also instruments of

social control, regulating the behaviour of service users as well as workers (Galper, 1975; Simpkin, 1979).

4. Social Welfare As a Societal Norm
Is Antithetical to Capitalism

Radical social workers consistently critique the welfare state in a capitalist society. But only a few present a socialist model of social welfare. Those writers who do, generally agree on the following points: distribution of resources based on need; universal (available to all), comprehensive (cover all contingencies), and adequate services; state financing of services, eliminating both the insurance principle and means testing; and increased participation by lay persons in social welfare decision making along with decreased power of professionals and managers (George & Wilding, 1985; Gil, 1976; Hurl & Mays, n.d.; Mishra, 1981). Guided by the basic principle of prevention, a socialist model would entail a complete restructuring of the socio-economic order that neglects human need. Virtually all radical writers agree that such a welfare system could not exist in a capitalist society because the values and requirements of capitalism and socialism contradict each other.

5. Conventional Social Work Perpetuates
Social Problems

Radical writers fault conventional social work practice for contributing to the perpetuation of many of the social problems it seeks to eliminate (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Carniol, 1987; Galper, 1975, 1978; Jordan & Parton, 1983; Simpkin, 1979). They see it as carrying out the control functions of the state by individualizing social problems and by endorsing the therapeutic age and personal adjustment while leaving the status quo unchallenged and secure. Radical social workers support helping individuals and families, but believe that by locating the source of change within the casualties of an oppressive economic and social order is to ''accept the larger social order as fundamentally sound or ignore its destructive characteristics'' (Galper, 1978, p. 38).

6. Individual vs. Society Is a False Dichotomy

Radical social work writers view the 'individual vs. society' split in social work as a false dichotomy (i.e., social work is divided into intervening on a personal level or on a societal level). Dating back to the eminent sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) who wrote: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (p.3), radical social workers have always linked private troubles to public issues or as Lichtenberg (1976) states, there is a "self-social unity." Radical social work also uses the feminist premise "the personal is political" to discuss how the political and economic context of our society shapes, at least in part, one's personality and personal situation (Galper, 1980; Leonard, 1984; Moreau, 1979; Withorn, 1984). Seeking broader political and social solutions for problems instead of relying solely on psycho-social interventions, radical social work does not preclude intervention at the individual, family, or subcultural levels. Instead of dealing with each level by itself, it stresses the connection between private troubles and the structural source of the troubles whenever possible.

7. Feminism and Radical Social Work

Feminist analyses have contributed significantly to the development of social work knowledge and practice and assume increasing importance as a major social work perspective (Collins, 1986; Eichler, 1988; Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986). Initially, radical social work neglected patriarchy (and racism) as sources of oppression in society. More recently feminist insights into how patriarchy structures society, families, the market, the welfare state and virtually all societal institutions have been incorporated into some radical social work analyses (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Langan & Lee, 1989; Leonard, 1990; Rojek et al., 1988; and Williams, 1989). These theoretical advances combined with the predominance of women among users and providers of social work services makes the feminist perspective an epistemological imperative for radical social work.

The feminist analysis not only decodes sexism and patriarchy,

but more than any other theory, stresses the links between the "personal and the political."

> The feminist method of understanding and explaining experience rests on the concept of "the personal is political." . . . it is a method of gleaning political insights from and analysis of personal experience — in particular, female experience. (Collins, 1986, p. 215)

Like radical social work, feminist social work writers such as Van Den Bergh and Cooper (1986) and Withorn (1984) emphasize that feminism is about "transformational politics," and contains the commitment to changing existing social, economic, and political conditions. Some feminist theories do not limit themselves to a constituency of women, but seek to end the domination and oppression of all people.

> It [feminism] is a vision born of women, but it addresses the future of the planet with implications accruing for males as well as females, for all ethnic groups, for the impoverished, for the disadvantaged, the handicapped, the aged and so on. (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986, p. x)

Although feminists share the basic analysis that patriarchal society is oppressive, different feminist perspectives exist. In their often-cited *Feminist Frameworks* (1978; 1984) Jagger and Struhl present four feminist approaches: liberal, radical, socialist, and Marxist feminism. Liberal feminism accepts the basic organization of liberal-capitalist society and seeks to reform it by removing gender-based discrimination from social institutions. As such it is largely incompatible with radical social work. Although, the other three feminist frameworks share more of the premises of radical social work, they provide differing analyses of the fundamental causes of women's oppression in society.

Radical feminists believe patriarchy is the fundamental cause of oppression. Socialist feminists believe capitalism and patriarchy are co-determinate. Marxist feminists believe that capitalism is the fundamental cause of oppression, but that patriarchy is rooted in it. Both socialist and Marxist feminists see the solution to ending sex-

ism as a transformation of capitalism to socialism, although social-ist feminists stress changing the gender division of labour in society as well. True egalitarianism as a social norm requires the elimina-tion of patriarchal arrangements, which many socialist feminists re-gard as intertwined with capitalism and racism. Radical feminism puts gender before class, is strongly pro-woman, and often favors separatism as a strategy, if not a goal. Socialist, Marxist, and radi-cal feminists have much to offer radical social work in its under-standing of the nature and dynamics of patriarchy.

8. Racism and Radical Social Work

Just as radical social work theorists initially ignored patriarchy as a source of oppression, so too they paid only minimal attention to racism and anti-racist practice (Langan & Lee, 1989). Since then the incorporation of racism into radical social work theory and prac-tice has expanded the understanding of racism as a major source of oppression. "Rooted in histories of slavery, genocide, and colonial or imperial domination, racism has represented the most extreme form of organized domination and dehumanization yet devised by western culture" (Wineman, 1984, p. 124).

Radical black social workers such as Hutchison-Reis (1989) ar-gue that: "For the black cause in particular, progress can be achieved by confronting the welfare system with its own ineffec-tiveness, illogicality and underlying racism." He adds that the in-terface between society and social work provides "opportunities . . . to further the progressive cause, and that those opportunities can be exploited by highlighting the theoretical and practice contra-dictions in social work" (p. 165). Devore and Schlesinger (1987), Freeman (1990), and Small (1989) among others, argue that most conventional social work approaches inadequately recognize social and cultural factors related to non-white populations. Just as black women criticized the early feminist movement for its lack of atten-tion to the special and more complex situation of women of colour, so too have black social workers criticized the early radical social work movement for largely overlooking anti-racist social work practice (Freeman, 1990; Hutchison-Reis, 1989; Shah, 1989; Small, 1989).

Racism institutionalizes the myth of white superiority by creating social structures and processes that support this pattern of domination. The political, social, and economic marginalization experienced by people of colour reinforces racist beliefs within white society and helps to maintain the oppression of non-whites. Racism, apart from the personal and social injury it perpetuates, reinforces capitalist social relations in a number of ways. It legitimizes inequality on the basis of personal-cultural characteristics while obscuring its structural roots. It adds to the complexity of people's oppression which hampers their already limited ability to effectively rebel against the political-economic status quo. Racism also rewards white people, particularly those who suffer economic oppression, by offering them a more esteemed social status. Such rewards also contribute to political and economic stability by dividing people of the same class, gender, age, and sexual orientation on the basis of race, and diverting attention away from their shared conflicts with the capitalist political economy.

In contrast to conventional practice, anti-racist radical social work practice would raise the consciousness of practitioners and service users about the oppressive impact of racism and its interplay with patriarchy and capitalism. Such practice would seek to diminish the destructive "personal" effects of racism while undercutting its "political" causes.

9. Mistrust of Professionalism

The final area of broad agreement among radical social work writers is a mistrust of 'professionalism' (Galper, 1975, 1980; Hardy, 1981; Laursen, 1975; Wagner & Cohen, 1978; Wilding, 1982; Withorn, 1984). In a scathing attack on professionalism Laursen (1975) contends that

> . . . professionalism is primarily characterized by self-interest expressed in a quest for power, economic, social, personal and political; that professionalism by its very nature makes little difference to the underlying causes of clients problems (it does not, nor does it intend to change social structure in any radical way such that the most fundamental causes of problems are dealt with) . . .. (p. 47)

Social work radicals criticize professionalism on several grounds:

a. By emphasizing the technical aspects of helping such as emotional neutrality with consumers, impartiality and apolitical service to others, professionalism masks the political aspects of social work practice, i.e., the fact that it perpetuates the myth that capitalist social relations are natural, normal functions of an industrialized society (Galper, 1975; Withorn, 1984). Professionalism also promotes technical solutions to problems rather than larger social and political change.

b. By dividing social workers from other workers and from persons using social work services (Galper, 1975), and by requesting to be certified, professional social workers implicitly align themselves with the state. In exchange for state recognition, social workers operate oppressive programs which separate them from the ordinary 'non-expert' working-class persons who do not enjoy the special status and other privileges perceived to accrue to professionals. In effect, professionalism risks blinding social workers to issues of class, especially as Withorn (1984) points out, to their own class position and class function in relation to the consumers of service.

c. By practicing inequality (social and occupational hierarchies) and individualism (social problems are individualized) professional social work can promote capitalist, racist, and patriarchal values. By accepting an ethic of 'service to others' it conveys the message that intervention focuses on people and not on social structures and that the best source of helping lies within the expert social worker and not within the service user.

d. Finally, the history of professionalism suggests that despite its 'service to others' mandate, it becomes self-serving and seeks the personal, social, economic, and political power noted in Laursen's passage above. In effect, professionalism is for professionals, not for service users.

These major areas of agreement among radical social work writers is neither exhaustive nor static. Many radical social work analysts also support the unionization of social workers and other workers (Bolger et al., 1981; Carniol, 1987; Galper, 1975, 1980; Jones, 1983; Jordon & Parton, 1983) and a decentralized, participatory decision-making in social work practice (Gil, 1979; Prichard &

Taylor, 1978; and Wineman, 1984). As radical social work theory continues to develop, other areas of agreement will arise. For examples, imperialism, heterosexism, and ageism increasingly are viewed as structurally oppressive forces. These areas of agreement, along with increasing levels of specificity, including actual forms and methods of social work practice, will be incorporated into its growing theoretical framework.

PHILOSOPHICAL, THEORETICAL, AND PRACTICAL DIFFERENCES IN RADICAL SOCIAL WORK

Radical social work writers tend to agree that capitalism, patriarchy, and racism pose major obstacles to human well-being. As an alternative they support some type of socialist society that is neither male dominated nor racist. Despite this consensus, disagreement exists over the means of social transformation. Radicals in social work tend to agree that they do not want capitalism, patriarchy and racism and that they do want socialism. But they disagree on how best to move from the former to the latter. "Now that we have interpreted the world, how do we change it?" is a crucial question for radical praxis.

Analyses of social transformation have been categorized differently by writers. Langan and Lee (1989), discuss Three different non-exclusive, approaches: (1) the revolutionary approach which emphasizes the oppressive nature of the state and the social control function of social work; (2) the reformist approach which views the welfare state as a path to socialism and social work as an agent of this gradual transformation; and (3) the prefigurative approach which, based on the feminist slogan 'the personal is political,' favours changing oppressive features of everyday life (sexism, racism, etc.), changes that would prefigure the future as detailed in *In and Against the State* (London Edinburgh Return Group, 1979). Langan and Lee also identify, but do not explain a fourth approach—the "realist perspective" which appears to combine reformist and prefigurative thinking. The existence of four different categories points to the diversity of radical social work theory and

suggests that it is not a uniform, undifferentiated category of thought and practice.

Rojeck, Peacock and Collins (1988) contend that there is not one but three traditions in Marxist social work. The 'progressive position' holds that to transform wider society, social workers must act to raise working-class consciousness of their oppression and must join with the working class to change the welfare state. The 'reproductive position' identifies social workers as an indispensable part of the capitalist state machine with no radical change potential. The 'contradictory position' views social work as both an instrument of class control and an agent for creating the conditions for the elimination of class domination. These writers reject all three perspectives on the grounds that they are based on class analysis only, and thus "neglect forms of belonging associated with race, disability, age, and above all gender and sexuality" (Rojeck, Peacock & Collins, p. 70). Instead they advocate an eclecticism which "consists of selecting limbs from Marxism and grafting them on to trunks of feminism, discourse theory, and critical psychology" (p. 76). This eclectic approach suffers, however, from a lack of any grounding in the socialist paradigm of radical social work. Without a location in a specific paradigm one loses cohesiveness among the various "trunks and limbs," and risks falling victim to the dominant paradigm of liberal capitalism.

Radical social work discussions tend to fall into one of three traditional schools of socialist thought: (1) social democracy, (2) revolutionary Marxism, and (3) evolutionary Marxism (also called democratic socialism) (Bolger et al., 1981; George & Wilding, 1985; Pritchard & Taylor, 1978). Most radical social work writers do not identify themselves in these terms. But their prescriptions for socialist transformation, including the place of social work in the process, effectively place them in one of these three schools of thought.

The three socialist perspectives differ regarding: (1) the place of radical social workers in the present social welfare system — should they work within the system or stay outside; (2) the fundamental or primary source of oppression and alienation in a capitalist society; and (3) the priority given to the personal versus the political in a strategy of social transformation. Although the fundamental philo-

sophical and theoretical roots of these questions cannot be discussed here, a brief overview of how each school informs radical social work follows.

Social Democracy and Radical Social Work

The social democratic tradition includes the British Fabians such as D. Donnison (1965); Richard Titmus (1963, 1968); and Peter Townsend (1979), and a smaller number from Sweden: Ulf Himmelstrand (1981); Furniss and Tilton (1979); Gosta Esping-Andersen (1985); and Walter Korpi (1978, 1983). Despite differences between the British Fabians and the Swedish socialists, both agree on the proper location of social work practice and the primary source of oppression.

1. Where should radical social workers work — inside or outside of the social welfare system? Social democrats appreciate the welfare state within a capitalist society for providing a minimum standard of living for people who would be worse off without it. But, they argue that it should promote greater justice, more equality, and increased lay control of services (George & Wilding, 1985). Social democrats also regard the capitalist welfare state as a stepping stone towards a socialist society. Because social welfare programs violate the doctrine of free market distribution, social democrats believe that the general public will over time, come to see them as preferable to the free market economy, thus aiding in the transformation from capitalism to socialism.

The role of social work within the social democratic transformation is twofold: (1) to provide practical humanitarian care to the victims of the inequalities which characterize a capitalist, patriarchal, and racist society; and (2) to foster the democratic restructuring of society along socialist lines through existing political and social institutions which, according to social democrats, ". . . *are* relatively accessible, *are* democratic, and *are* therefore capable of radical reform" (Pritchard & Taylor, 1978, pp. 92-93).

2. What is the primary or fundamental source of oppression in a capitalist society? Social democrats subscribe to a social conflict rather than class conflict perspective (George & Wilding, 1985). The social conflict school maintains that conflict derives from a

variety of sources including race, religion, profession, age, gender and economic status. The resulting diverse conflicts produce winners and losers with power and privilege going to the former, and oppression and alienation to the latter. Racism, sexism, poverty, pollution, and other social problems result from conflicts over the acquisition or control of societal wealth, privilege and political power. Social democratic social workers must confront such conflicts when developing strategies for social transformation.

3. Critique of Social Democratic Social Work: The major criticisms of the social democratic school comes from the revolutionary Marxist school, which objects to "working from within." In this view, working within the welfare state and other capitalist institutions legitimizes rather than transforms the prevailing social order. One cannot work within the very system one is trying to abolish. Revolutionary Marxists also criticize social democracy for giving primacy to social conflict over class conflict. Marxism accepts other types of conflict. But it argues that social conflicts are not related to capitalist relations or production and thus divert praxis from the fundamental source of oppression and alienation which is a class-divided (capitalist) society.

Revolutionary Marxism
and Radical Social Work

Many revolutionary Marxist writers, usually not social workers, dismiss social welfare as part of the state apparatus and as helping to carry out the functional necessities of capitalism (i.e., controlling the working class and subsidizing capitalist-owned enterprises). Others in this group, however, conclude that although social work does contain a social control function, it may also contribute to socialist transformation under specific conditions discussed below (Buchbinder, 1981; Lesemann, 1984; Wineman, 1984).

1. Where should radical social workers work—inside or outside the social welfare system? According to revolutionary Marxists, radical social work practice is impossible within the welfare state since it promotes the survival not the transformation of capitalism. Health care, education, income maintenance, and social services assure capitalism an available supply of labour, and pass the cost of

maintaining the labour force over to the public purse. Welfare state programs also make capitalism more efficient and tolerable to the working class and poor which can reduce the likelihood of class conflict.

Revolutionary Marxist social workers support welfare rights groups, co-operatives, self-help groups, trade unions and other counter forces that challenge the power of the state and the capitalist leaders (Wineman, 1984). They also support working-class persons to contest capitalism through strikes, sit ins, demonstrations, campaigns and other struggles designed to oppose government policies and capitalist domination (George & Wilding, 1985).

Revolutionary Marxists maintain that social work can participate in social transformation. But to do so it must shed the illusion of bringing about change from within the system and join with clients and the working class to fight the class nature of capitalist society. This fight would include opposing the welfare state – the very institution of which social work is a part – "a dangerous but not altogether ignoble role" (Pritchard & Taylor, 1978, p. 109).

2. What is the primary or fundamental source of oppression in a capitalist society? In the tradition of Marx and Engels, revolutionary Marxists recognize conflicts other than class conflict. But they believe that in a capitalist society the conflict between workers and capitalists is "the primary type of conflict in capitalist society" (George & Wilding, 1985, p. 101). Capitalism may exacerbate race, gender, religious, and other conflicts but these can be resolved within its confines. In contrast, the resolution of class conflict requires the abolition of capitalism itself.

Revolutionary Marxists differ about the relative importance of other conflicts and their relationship to those of class. The emphasis on class conflict has been tempered somewhat by Marxist feminism which stresses class analysis, but also sees patriarchy as rooted in capitalism. Marxist feminists argue that the existence of patriarchy depends on the existence of capitalism and that the end of subordination of women and men requires a socialist society in which the means of production belong to society as a whole (Jaggar & Struhl, 1984, p. 85).

3. Critique of Revolutionary Marxist Social Work: Evolutionary Marxists and social democrats critique revolutionary Marxism for

its almost exclusive preoccupation with class conflict. Feminists add that revolutionary Marxism lacks an analysis of patriarchy and it fosters the domination of women in the workplace, in the family, and in society in general. Additionally, the revolutionary Marxist analysis misses the contradictory nature of the welfare state. It downplays that while "Social welfare may help shore up capitalism, materially and ideologically, it also represents a gain for the working class in its struggle against exploitation" (Mishra, 1984, p. 81). The deterministic nature which revolutionary Marxists ascribe to the welfare state leads to what Leonard (1979) has termed a "crippling fatalism." Unless one is self supporting or employed by a radical union, there are not many opportunities for revolutionary Marxists to practice social work in a capitalist society.

Evolutionary Marxism and Radical Social Work

Most radical social work writings fall within the evolutionary Marxist category, although few writers will openly refer to themselves as Marxists. In our opinion, evolutionary Marxism represents a compromise between the optimistic naivete of social democracy and the deterministic paralysis of revolutionary Marxism.

1. Where should radical social workers work—inside or outside of the social welfare system? Evolutionary Marxists do not reject the welfare state as a vehicle for socialist change.

> There is indeed, a significant number of evolutionary Marxist socialists arguing . . . for the creation of a socialist system . . . through the relatively untainted and indigenous institutions of the working class; most notably the trade unions and the welfare state. (Prichard & Taylor, 1978, pp. 89-90)

Evolutionary Marxists join with social democrats in believing that the welfare state can be used as a stepping stone towards socialism. At the same time, they agree with revolutionary Marxists that many of the welfare state activities act to preserve capitalism. Most within this group view the welfare state as contradictory: it is simultaneously a prop for capitalism, a product of class conflict, and a

force for socialist change (George & Wilding, 1985; Gough, 1979; O'Connor, 1973; Pritchard & Taylor, 1978).

2. What is the primary or fundamental source of oppression in a capitalist society? Evolutionary Marxists regard class conflict as the fundamental source of oppression in a capitalist society. They also include race, gender, age, and other conflicts in their analyses of advanced capitalism (Carniol, 1979; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1975, 1980; Gil, 1976, 1979; Moreau, 1979; Withorn, 1984). These secondary conflicts which derive from conflictual class relations are nonetheless sources of oppression and alienation and must be fought. In doing so the classist correlates are also weakened. Some writers in this group question whether the 'mode of production' determines the ways in which people organize to produce and distribute their means of subsistence. They argue for a broader conception that includes how people organize to produce and distribute the means of satisfying their needs for sexuality, nurturance, physical and social reproduction and other needs (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984).

3. Critique of Evolutionary Marxist Social Work: Social democrats criticize evolutionary Marxism for its position that classism is the most important conflict in society. Revolutionary Marxists object to evolutionary Marxist's diffusion of class conflict and for its belief that the welfare state represents a stepping stone towards socialism.

The Personal Is Political But Which Comes First? Radical Humanism vs. Radical Structuralism

Although radical social workers link private troubles and public issues, considerable disagreement exists as to whether the "personal" or the "political" comes first. For example both radical humanism and radical structuralism define capitalism as the major source of social problems, but the former argues that changing people (by consciousness raising) is a prerequisite to changing society, while the latter holds that the redistribution of wealth and power are necessary to change people's consciousness (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). These two different approaches to change reflect different

ontological (the nature of being) and epistemological (the nature of knowledge) assumptions (Howe, 1987).

Radical humanism reflects the ontological assumption that the human being is fundamentally set apart from all else in existence because of its conscious and creative capacities. From this follows the epistemological assumption that the human mind does not receive objectivity from an external world. Rather it confers objectivity by imposing its own order on the world as it is perceived. What is 'known' or perceived about external reality is subjectively conferred by the knower.

Radical structuralism reflects the ontological assumption that the human person is merely one entity among many. While human conscious and creative capacities differentiate humanity, they do not set it apart from all else. From this follows the epistemological assumption that external reality is objective and as such tends to impose itself on our consciousness.

The radical humanist approach can be thought of as subjectivism, while the radical structural approach can be thought of as objectivism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Carniol, 1984; Howe, 1987). Each answers the question: "are we creators of or created by our social reality?". Understanding both sides of this question provides a clearer basis for radical social work theory. The subjectivist orientation suggests that knowledge and social reality are created in people's minds through personal experience (Howe, 1987). Meaning is imposed by people on things and other people. No social facts exist because we create our own social reality. Conversely, the objectivist orientation holds that knowledge and social reality are external to the individual, that the real world is made up of concrete structures, and that this external social reality has a deterministic impact on a person's development and circumstances (Burrell & Morgan, 1974; Howe, 1987).

Clearly, the subjectivist and objectivist orientations favour different social work practices. While radical humanists (subjectivists) and radical structuralists (objectivists) both reject capitalism, patriarchy, and racism and envision a socialist society, they espouse different means to this end. The radical humanists, who believe that personal consciousness-raising precedes political change, direct their efforts towards raising people's awareness about how society's

inequalities shape, oppress, limit, and dominate their experiences (Howe, 1987). Since people are alienated from social structures, from each other, and from their true selves (Carniol, 1984), they must learn how others define them to suit their own interests. By understanding how ideological hegemony operates to make us accept our subjugation we can free ourselves to regain control over our present experiences and our destiny (Carniol, 1984; Howe, 1987). The works of Paulo Freire (1971) are highly relevant to the subjectivist approach of radical humanists.

Radical structuralists believe that reality resides in the social world rather than the person. Therefore they direct their efforts towards changing material conditions and structural patterns. Radical structuralism seeks to abolish capitalism and other oppressive structures and to replace them with a socialist society wherein the oppressive structures associated with capitalist societies would not be present. Such a socialist society would become the new social reality. The achievement of transformation depends on the formation of coalitions of clients, trade unions, and others who have developed an awareness of their oppression and on using the ever-present societal conflicts to advance the interests of these coalitions (Carniol, 1984; Howe, 1987). This approach involves consciousness raising focused on the unfair societal structures rather than constrained individual reality.

Both radical humanism and radical structuralism contain limitations. Radical humanism naively and optimistically assumes that raising people's consciousness will effectively address social problems and expose an exploitative social system. It ignores the fact that power and privilege, whether rooted in class, gender, or race, is not likely to be relinquished without a struggle and that part of this struggle would involve supporting the ideological hegemony required to continue to control people's consciousness. Radical structuralism is overly simplistic and deterministic in its understanding of the complexity of human need and the depth of oppression. It is difficult to understand how describing external power empowers people to change it.

In our view these two different approaches to radical practice represent a false dichotomy. Conceptually both link private troubles and public issues, but both dichotomize praxis along personal-polit-

ical lines. Each view seems to deny the wisdom of Marx regarding the complex interplay or dialectic which occurs between subjective and objective reality. We believe that an 'either-or' position is unnecessarily dogmatic and is counter productive to the development of radical social work theory. The following seeks to reconcile the two.

A DIALECTICAL APPROACH
TO RADICAL SOCIAL WORK THEORY

A dialectical approach to radical social work may provide the basis for an integration of the various theories described above. A dialectical emphasis is consistent with the work of such contemporary Marxist scholars as Claus Offe, Alan Wolfe and James O'Connor. Citing these authors Gold, Lo, and Wright (1975) state:

> Many of the recent developments in Marxist theories of the capitalist state can be interpreted as attempts to restore the dialectic to the analysis of the state, thereby applying the methodology that Marx himself used so successfully. (p. 45)

We contend that the three areas of disagreement discussed above reflect a lack of understanding of the contradictions inherent in capitalism and the welfare state. The social democratic, revolutionary Marxist, and evolutionary Marxist approaches need not be incompatible, although they have been treated as irreconcilable by most radical social work writers. The following dialectical response to the three areas of disagreement discussed in the previous section, seeks to reconcile and synthesize these 'different' schools of thought.

1. Where should radical social workers work—inside or outside of the social welfare system? Dialectical analysis accounts for the place of conscious human action in the creation and re-creation of human circumstances. It also recognizes that material conditions impact upon people and shape their consciousness. The state is not only shaped by the logic of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism but also by conscious struggles of people along lines of class, gender, and race. This includes the process of democratic elections. To

adopt a simplistic materialist notion that all social conditions are determined by the economic system or by the conscious efforts of the ruling class encourages a philosophy of cynicism and nihilism. Such thinking objectifies and dehumanizes persons in all oppressed groups and suggests that their struggles are essentially meaningless. Likewise, the notion that persons are free to act as they choose is falsely optimistic as it ignores the power of the ruling class to use the state and other institutions to protect the status quo and the basic nature of capitalism.

The above simply indicates that modern states contain both emancipatory and repressive forces (Frankel, 1979). A theory of radical social work must recognize both and develop strategies of social transformation that maximize the emancipatory potential while minimizing the effects of the repressive forces. This requires that radical social workers work both inside and outside the welfare state.

2. *What is the primary or fundamental source of oppression in a capitalist society?* Dialectical theorists such as Frankel (1979) argue that the contradictions within the state must be understood in contemporary terms which are unlike those of 1871 or 1917. This means considering race, gender, sexual preference, environmental, and other conflicts which "rest very precariously with the traditional 'workerist' struggles that revolve around the factory" (Frankel, 1979, p. 237).

Consequently, Frankel (1979) believes that,

> Only the full recognition of the decisive and contradictory role of the state apparatuses can help create political organizations adequate to holistic struggle needed to defeat capitalism. Because the state is involved in everything from wage fixing, to sexual, racial, urban, and ecological policies, any political organization which claims to be revolutionary must abandon the notion that certain struggles are primary and others secondary. (p. 237)

Radical social work has changed since its early period when its advocates suggested such acts as 'client refusal' (Taylor, 1972).

Initially, radical social work focussed only on the oppression of white, male members of the working class. But, as Langan and Lee (1989) note, this narrow focus has received growing criticism from representatives of the oppressed within social work and from the wider radical movement.

Feminism has challenged and continues to challenge both traditional and radical social work to include the role and function of patriarchy in its analyses. Black activists have criticized the early radical social work movement for 'race blindness' (Langan & Lee, 1989). Due to such pressure racism and anti-racist social work practice now have prominant places in radical social work literature. For example, in 1981 the American radical social work journal, *Catalyst* published a special issue entitled "The State of the Black Community in Capitalist America." And, the British radical social work writers Langan and Lee (1989) devote three out of fifteen chapters to anti-racist practice. Wineman (1984) refers to the oppressive effects of cultural imperialism experienced by people-of-colour within racist western society. The struggles of North American Native people focus attention on racism and colonialism rather than classism (Kellough, 1980; McKenzie & Hudson, 1989). Imperialism is receiving increasing attention as a source of oppression of third world countries by developed countries (Albert, 1990; Campfens, 1988). Heterosexism as another source of oppression is also receiving attention (Buchbinder, Burstyn, Forbes, & Steedman, 1987; *Catalyst*, 1981, III, 4; Mercier & Berger, 1989; Schoenberg & Goldberg, 1984; and *The Social Worker/Le Travailleur*, 1988, 56, 2).

The inclusion of non-classist sources of oppression has increased the relevance of radical social work for more groups. But it tends also to divide the radical ranks. In earlier years divisions tended to be largely within Marxism. Now they arise among groups concerned with other sources of oppression, as well as within each group. Radical social work must deal with the inevitable competition that arises from these various analyses.

According to Wineman (1984), a perspective that identifies only a single basic source of oppression . . .

. . . fails to create a basis for unity which respects the dignity and felt experience of all the oppressed individuals and groups who are supposed to become unified, and it fails to generate a practical strategy and process which can . . . challenge all forms of oppression even if it is true that historically one or another of the various "fundamental" factors was actually the "root cause" of all other forms of oppression, the plain fact is that effects are capable of outliving their original causes . . . Thus, even if it were true that capitalism was the original cause of sexism (which in itself is highly dubious . . .), it is a matter of record that sexism has persisted following the overthrow of capitalist systems. It seems equally plain that the overthrow of male domination would not inevitably eradicate racism . . . and so on. (Wineman, 1984, p. 163)

3. Radical Humanism vs. Radical Structuralism. In our view objective reality and subjective reality are irrevocably locked into a dialectical relationship. People are conscious creators utilizing thought, information, and emotion to choose and act; while at the same time we are created by our surroundings. Endorsing a dialectical analysis, Quinney (1979) contends that:

History is made both subjectively and objectively; as a result of class struggle *and* as the development of the economic modes of production . . . Thus, all social life, . . . , must be understood in terms of the objective economic conditions of production and the struggle between classes that is related to these conditions. (pp. 445-446)

(The authors are not implying, as some may interpret from the above quote, that 'subjective' relates only to class struggle.)

A dialectical approach to radical social work avoids both the simplistic linear cause-effect thought of historical materialism which underpins radical structuralism and the naive romanticism associated with the notion of a free human will which underpins radical humanism. Any meaningful theory of radical social work will have to reconcile and incorporate these two radical perspectives. This requires abandoning any tendency to vacillate between vulgar mate-

rialism and idealism. Dialectical analysis helps not only to understand the complex interplay between people and the world around them, but also to examine social work's role within society. We are not only objects of the prevailing social order, we must also be subjects who are able to move beyond it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Contrary to the view that radical social work occupies a narrow and somewhat obscure corner of social work thought, the preceding pages reveal the richness and diversity of its ideas, assumptions, and theories. The radical social work literature contends that the fundamental obstacles to human well-being include capitalism, patriarchy, and racism and that the general solution is an egalitarian society based on non-sexist, non-racist, non-homophobic, and socialist principles. Disagreement exists mainly on how the solution should be achieved. The dialectical approach which reveals these differences as false dichotomies can help to resolve them. It is being employed (although not acknowledged as such) by many radical writers today.

The 1980's were dominated by neo-conservative social welfare thinking and politics. Yet radical social work theory did not stand still. We have tried to show that it has moved from its original preoccupation of viewing classism as the fundamental source of oppression in society to its present position of attempting to incorporate a range of oppressions. Just as feminism forced change in comfortable Marxist assumptions, so too experience with other sources of oppression will challenge radical social work. The struggles which inevitably accompany such challenges will stimulate productive debate among all (radical) social workers who are committed to the ultimate goal of social transformation.

To reconcile the opposing views within radical social work, we have argued for the dialectical approach. This is not a new position, of course, since the dialectical approach has a long history and has received support from many radical social work writers and others. We are calling for more radical writers in social work to use this approach especially as the discourse moves beyond a simple theory

of class oppression. If we cannot integrate the various perspectives then we cannot build the alliances which are so necessary for radical practice today. "Never has it been more important for social workers to act in ways that minimize the worst effects of current state policies and maximize the potential for resistance . . . [of all oppressed groups]" (Langan & Lee, 1989, p. 17).

Much of the controversy surrounding radical social work today represents a reflex reaction to its association with socialism and Marxism. This reaction, neither scholarly nor critical, is counterproductive to the development of social work theory. Certainly, it should not result in re-cycling mainstream, functionalist theories of social work practice that protect the status quo such as general systems theory and the ecological perspective. When separated from radical thought such theories only perpetuate the very problems social work seeks to resolve because they contribute to the ideological hegemony of patriarchy, liberal capitalism, racism, and other oppressive thought structures. Surely, human beings deserve better.

NOTE

1. The authors recognize that there are different schools of socialist thought ranging from social reformism to all-out revolution. There are, however, certain basic values, principles, and beliefs which are common to all schools of socialist thought. Socialism is thought of as an alternative to a society based largely on private ownership and private profit. Both socialist reformers and revolutionaries envision a world with no great inequalities of income and wealth, where economic and political power is more evenly distributed, where public ownership serves public interests, where people have greater control over their lives and the conditions of their work, and where proper planning for the good of all members of society replaces the vagaries of the market place (Nove, 1989).

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