Social work, modernity and post modernity

Graham B. McBeath and Stephen A. Webb

Abstract

In this article we argue that current reform proposals coming from Robert Pinker and others are challenging the universalist premises of generic social work. Pinker et al. argue that social work should, for the sake of efficiency and performance, be a connected set of specialist activities. This 'determinate dispersal' which we recognise as falling within the remit of postmodern strategies, we contrast with the far more libertarian ideas of the noted post-modern theorist J.F. Lyotard. Thus we site the political and cultural meanings of Pinker's ideas between generic social work which upholds ideas of universal ethical values and universal provision, and those of Lyotard whose anti-foundationalism proposes a radically heterogeneous society with no central value-structure.

We express our concern that the 'new specialist' remit may allow too much power to the social worker. Thus we have considerable sympathy for Lyotard's call for a radical anonistics - a field wherein the inequalities of power between say, a worker and her client, to some extent can be redressed.

The continuing attachment to generic approaches in social work has provided a bulwark against plans which suggest a radical restructuring of the remit and provision of social work and social work education in Britain. In the vanguard of such reformist programmes stands the controversial figure of Robert Pinker, Professor of Social Work at the London School of Economics. His view of social work, which was brought to wider notice by his minority submission appended to the 1982 Barclay Report, has been trenchantly put forward in various articles the themes of which we examine below.

As a foil to the views of Pinker and as a means to give these a cultural, ideological and political setting, this article contrasts his...
version of social work as a partially dispersed 'entity' to Jean-Francois Lyotard's articulation of the meaning of dispersal and fragmentation in forms of knowledge and social practices. The leitmotifs of dispersal/postmodern and unity/modernity, more fully explained in our concluding section, will be used in the main part of the article to signal the differences between the Pinker/Lyotard trend that accepts fragmentation processes in social life and therefore in social work, and the defenders of genericism who endorse social work as possessing a unified identity underpinned by an integrated knowledge base.

In our view Pinker suggests that a specialist and technical agenda is central for social work. We therefore begin with some observations of generic work and the range of specialist practices and their attendant training courses which preceded genericism. We then consider the outcomes of the Seebohm and Barclay Reports as a context for our subsequent analysis of Pinker's proposals.

After noting research showing Pinker's rationalising aims we outline Lyotard's view of dispersed data-bases and forms of knowledge and draw out what we see as their implications for the re-structurining and meaning of social work. This paves the way for our analysis of Pinker's work in the light of Lyotard. We note that while they share a strategy of dispersal they do differ since Lyotard offers a libertarian/radical view of fragmentation and Pinker presents a conservative, constitutional model of how separable parts of social work can be related to each other.

In our concluding section we set the generic/new specialist debate within a postmodern political and cultural context extending beyond our discussion of Pinker and Lyotard, but finally propose that Lyotard's vision of the 'informational' society may provide the means to redress the balance between client and social worker.

The past catches up with the future

The Thatcher Government aimed to streamline and make more efficient the provision of social services. This entailed a move away from the all-embracing remit of social work and 'universal' welfare provision as symbolised by the post-war generic model for social work education and a return to the broad aim of pre-generic specialist training.

Before the 1960s social work did not conceive of itself, either in education or practice, as a unity. It was not seen as having an
integrated knowledge base with a common core of values, methods and aims in the provision of personal social services. The types of training and methods of practice had emerged incrementally in response to social problems and needs. Specialist professionals resisted change and integration fearing that this would downgrade their particular field of practice and expertise and result in their being colonised by the generalist (see Jordan, 1984: 78). The various certificated courses available from Applied Social Studies departments in Colleges and Universities, most notably the London School of Economics, and from organisations such as the Institute of Almoners separated types of social work practice, insisting on separate training for psychiatric social work, child care, mental welfare and probation. The detail of pre-generic social work education has been well-documented in Younghusband’s classic study *Social Work in Britain 1950–1978* as well as in Olive Stevenson’s article ‘The development of social work education’ (1976). Elizabeth Macadam, trained in the United States, was the first to propose a generic base to social services training in her 1945 book *The Social Servant in the Making*. The people she identified as suitable for a common training programme, however, included public health inspectors, factory inspectors and national insurance officers. The group was too disparate and her proposals too radical given the structure of social services at the time. In 1953 a substantial grant from the Carnegie Foundation led to proposals for a generic social work course, although it was not until the Report of the Seebohm Committee (1968) that the organisation of personal social services was brought under one overall structure within Social Services Departments. There was thus a considerable delay between the unification of social work as a study discipline and social work as an administratively unified welfare practice. Unsurprisingly during the seventies education and practice converged, though not without political tensions being generated by younger marxist-oriented community and radical social workers. Politically on the outside of the social work establishment, they were on the inside track as far as the ideals of generic social work were concerned. They upheld the view that the social worker should be able to provide a spread of interventions within a particular community or patch. Indeed, their ambitions for both social and political transformation of the apathy of working-class communities into an activism involving all client-groups extended the meaning of ‘universalist’ welfarism. The emergence of the generic approach to social work education was important in giving
a greater professionalism to social workers and identity to the field of social work.

Inevitably, social workers would gain power and status once they became a unified group and they would have to assume in the new departments responsibility for professional standards, ethical behaviour, client commitment and advocacy on behalf of those they served. (Bean and MacPherson, 1983: 88)

Genericism combined with the reorganisation of social services departments post-Seebohm was the culmination of the Welfare State ideal and aimed not only to provide personal social services in the community but also to prevent clients feeling alienated from officials' elaborate bureaucratic processes. The role of the social worker was to be a multi-purpose skilled enabler and facilitator. Before, a client had to pass through a series of 'specialist' workers each of whose function was designated by the professional certificate they held. However, the triumph of genericism was shortlived. In 1982, the Barclay Report once more raised, in a changed context, the old quarrel between specialist and generic social work. The majority report in the event seems to have had less impact than the two minority reports submitted by Pinker and Hadley. Hadley and Pinker addressed themselves to the merits of extending community work, the former for and the latter against such a proposal.

Pinker in a series of articles has since outlined his ideas on the reform of social work and continued to attack the incoherence and anachronistic nature of current community work. His 'realistic' assumptions about the practical demands on social workers, their need for a precisely articulated set of roles and functions, the primacy of the formal statutory social services, and the overwhelming importance of casework and a consumer-responsive service delivery to clients, are compatible with the managerialist and residualist philosophies of the Thatcher Government. By residualist we mean the provision of welfare as targeted resource allocation, in contrast to universal provision. Pinker, however, distances himself from the accusation that he wants to revert to a pre-generic/pre-Seebohm structure:

This is not to recommend reversion to a pre-Seebohm model in which social work is divided into isolated and narrow specialisms
which, in turn, are separated from the other main social services. That is emphatically not the answer. (1982: 72)

Nevertheless, his recommendations do call for specialisation at two levels:

My own proposals are based largely on Professor Olive Stevenson's 'Specialisation in Social Service Teams' which accommodates the claims of both generic and specialist teams

Within the generic teams there is a division of labour based on particular categories of need and skill. (ibid.: 72)

In other words, even the work of the generic team is based on the specialisms of the team members in relation to client needs. We agree that he is not returning to the pre-Seebohm situation but he does seek a more residualist practice based on the coordination of specialisms at the level of practice. This would require a nurtured training stage to a greater extent than has been the case under generic social work education and practice.

Social work education and practice has attempted to present generic social work in an unfragmented way as a unified field of knowledge, theory and practice. However, this unity or totality – which we have called modernity – whose basic principle is based on the ethics of helping individuals while retaining their philosophical status as individuals (the Kantian paradigm) can be analysed, revealing an underlying fragmentation of the human subject, and of social work as a discipline (Webb and McBeath, 1989, 1990).

The image of social work has retained its unity – its modernist face – by not addressing a basic problem: the discourses of social work present contradictory views of both subject and the construction of social problems. This nurtures potential practical difficulties which cannot be ironed out unless there are either substantial structural reforms as Pinker suggests, or by what we call the Esperanto Principle.

Social work mixes various models of intervention and technical practice and uses them to assess and prescribe. Warm moral feelings suggest that one should help people and this provides a justification for not drawing attention to the cold logical contradictions between the models. This problem is analogous to the person who knows bits of various languages, but knows no single language properly. Trying to communicate with a Frenchman, such a person constructs sentences out of French, German, Spanish, English and
Italian. Not surprisingly, to the native speaker who knows at least one language thoroughly, the message is incoherent. The utterer of randomly chosen words ignores the fundamental point that macaronic language is unintelligible in any single language and pretends it can make sense. To demonstrate this s/he fashions an Esperanto. Social work does something similar. Like Esperanto itself, social work esperanto is a construction of many languages fashioned into one which its practitioners assume will become universal and harmonise the interests of all. Like true Esperanto it is only learnt by a few and remains esoteric, but like all esoteric knowledge it has a power of mystique, of professionalism, of specialism. It guarantees the authority of the few who speak it. Social work esperanto promotes a hermetic professionalism masquerading as an ethically justified set of practices. Spoken by a few, but said to be there for the good of all.

Driving home its imagined ethical necessity and validity, social work seeps into all manner of educational institutions, takes over local authority buildings, and gains substantial funding. Should it find new languages by which to give greater expression to itself, it applies for and hopes to get further funding. We might call these loquacious grants. Social work is built on its proliferation of discourses and techniques, not on the specifiable needs of people. In effect, Pinker says that it has grown ‘too big for its boots’ and suggests that an implosion will occur leading to a radical reassessment of what social work should be about. To avoid total disaster, he puts forward a conservative post-modern schema. In abandoning generic social work, he abandons modernism for postmodernism; he substitutes planned unity by a structured and rational fragmentation. Lyotard, in another context, describes this well when he notes:

The decision-makers, however, attempt to manage these clouds of sociality [the fragmented languages] according to input/output matrices following a logic which implies that their elements are incommensurable [Pinker’s constitutional structure]. They alienate our lives for the agenda of power. The legitimisation of that power is based on its optimising the systems performance. This criterion entails a certain level of error. (Lyotard, 1984: 24)

He ends this paragraph with the imperative: ‘be operational or disappear’. It does not take too much imagination to see in this
Thatcher's market-performativity criterion as against a larger ethics.

It is relevant to comment on the predominance of the rational-market model in terms of outcome measures of efficiency and performance criteria in social work, since it is our claim that within social work there is an increasing differentiation of a once unitary social work culture into distinct spheres of specialist practice each governed by the same formal rationality. This trend is tantamount to a redefinition of the nature of social work. Pinker's perspective is complemented by a number of diverse studies aimed at rationalising social work. These include the recommendations of the Griffiths report *Community Care: An Agenda for Action* which was managerially led; the Audit Commission studies on effectiveness and efficient managerial strategies in social services (1985, 1986), the project reports by the Social Services Inspectorate and research carried out at the Brunel Institute of Organisation and Social Studies (BIOSS, 1974; Hey, 1978), the Personal Social Services Research Unit at Kent (Bebbington and Davies, 1980; Knapp, 1984; Challis and Davies, 1986; Challis and Ferlie, 1988; Knapp, 1988), the Welfare State Programme initiated at the International Centre for Economics and Related Disciplines at the London School of Economics (Barr, 1987; Le Grand, 1988; Hall, 1988). All these indicate that radical changes in the definition of welfare provision and the role of social work departments are on the way. These changes are likely to result in new operational policies about priority services, decentralisation of managerial functions, social care planning, integrated planning, accountability measures, targeting resources, cost-effectiveness, performance levels, efficiency measures of workload and so on. These changes, however, will require concomitant changes in managerial style, and clarification of organisational structure and function within local authorities. Hunter and Judge (1988) point out that major organisational restructuring within social services is not the answer. Instead 'adopting a modern managerial ethos is likely to be of more benefit than organisational change' (p. 8). Similarly, Griffiths calls for 'the design of successful management accounting systems and the effective use of data', alongside a 'more productive use of the management abilities' (paragraph 8.1) and the need to give 'greater emphasis to management skills' (paragraph 8.6).

The concepts of effectivity and efficiency are common parlance in the managerial model of social work. Barr (1987) argues that
public sector authorities as agencies of the welfare state have a ‘major efficiency role to play’ in addition to equality and social justice effects. Similarly, the underlying principles of the Audit Commission for Local Authorities in England and Wales, presented in the foreword of the report Managing Social Services for the Elderly more Effectively (1985), are concerned with ‘the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of local authority services’. To this end the Commission conducted 1,600 value for money projects in 1984. A major concern of the Commission is ineffective management. The report summarises the inadequate management of community services. Its main concerns are that ‘The overall objectives of providing individual services are often unclear; management’s policies and guidelines on how they should be used are often not well articulated; and procedures and systems for controlling their use are largely absent’ (p. 2), and that ‘there are opportunities to secure better value from existing services by taking steps to improve their operational effectiveness’ (p. 45). An SSI report states that ‘With devolution the “centre” of the SSD will need to develop ways to monitor efficiency and effectiveness’ (p. 51), while the Griffiths Report argues for a budgetary approach to social services which will ‘spur managers to search for the most effective and efficient ways of meeting needs’ (paragraph 5.6).

To understand the changes in the definition of the nature of social work we need to situate them within both the wider context of the ideology of technocratic planning and the need to make the existence of social service provision politically legitimate. The increasing emphasis on input-output mechanisms and performance criteria of efficiency and effectiveness suggests that the underlying trend in social welfarism is towards a depoliticisation of demand, reducing clients to objects of administration and formal rationality (McBeath and Webb, 1991, 1992). As the critical theorist Claus Offe explains:

The welfare state is developing step-by-step, reluctantly and involuntarily. It is not kept in motion by the ‘pull’ of a conscious political will, but rather by the ‘push’ of emergent risks, dangers, bottlenecks, and newly created insecurities or potential conflicts which demand immediate measures that avoid the socially destabilizing problem of the moment. The logic of the welfare state is not the realization of some intrinsically valuable human goal but rather the prevention of a potentially disastrous
social problem. Therefore, welfare states everywhere demonstrate that the tendency of being transformed is less a matter of politics than a matter of technocratic calculus. (1972: 485)

**Questioning the unity of social work**

Lyotard's postmodernism has replaced modernity's logic of unity with a logic of multiplicity, fragmentation and of the discreteness of the singular event. Bennington characterising Lyotard notes that:

no totalising unity is available: the signs which were to legitimate the idea of an emancipated proletariat are fewer and farther between than ever, and any ideal of universal emancipation through education is nowadays apparently strictly subordinated to the production of experts and to the improvement of performativity it is no longer possible to identify a universal subject-victim with which to identify there is indeed a responsibility to denounce injustice and attempt to help victims: but this can only legitimate local and essentially defensive interventions and cannot ground a narrative of emancipation or fulfilment for a universal subject. (1988: 8–9)

Lyotard, if he wrote about the discipline of social work, might well denounce the possibility of theorising social work precisely because, at the end of the twentieth century, there is no theorisable universal subject. He would also point out the impossibility of what Adorno among others has called totality thinking as a grand, rationally ascertainable structure. In other words, to borrow another phrase from Lyotard, the grand metanarrative form of social theoretical knowledge that intellectuals have constructed, for example, marxism, liberalism, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, has been dissolved into a series of discrete practices and local immediately usable knowledges that are relevant to the 'performativity-criteria decided by governments, quango commissions and experts. In Anglo-American terms this may reduce to arguing that the 'needs' of clients (Lyotard's 'victims') are no longer determined by grand social theories such as marxism, but are constituted through public policy and input-
output systems of accountability and budget controls. Subjects (including those known as 'social workers') are thus points marking efficient policy input or output in the postmodern cybernetic age. But in his account, Lyotard wants to allow his subjects access to the cybernetic network through utilisation of information systems whereby they can make informed decisions and activate localised resistances against monopolistic agencies such as those of social work.

Lyotard is in reality slightly more optimistic than our comments would appear to make him. Calling the obsession with totality, 'modernity', to quote Bennington again, Lyotard sees 'in its decline the beginning of possibilities of flexibility, tolerance and multiplicity. A new responsibility among the dispersion of heterogeneous responsibilities becomes that of respecting that heterogeneity as such' (1988: 8). Quite so, but in our view tolerance has little part to play in a social work which attempts to be ethically reductive and homogeneous, but in fact is discursively and contradictorily heterogeneous. Social work reiterates ideas about persons (subjects) deserving respect, having reason, being ends in themselves, engaged in self-realisation and self-determination, but at the same time is constituted by a 'bricolage' of competing discourses such as ego-psychology, behaviourism, interactionism, liberal-humanism, welfare statism, systems theory, groupwork, intermediate treatment which effect a determinate dispersal of the individual subject. The desire of social workers to believe that their activity is broadly unified under an ethical teleology of personhood and helpful interventions on behalf of self-realising persons conceals social work's theoretical heterogeneity. For this reason there is not the active respect for multiplicity, flexibility and difference and their possibilities for which Lyotard hopes.

For Lyotard postmodernism's vision of dispersion is pregnant with the potential for creativity, where an agonistics – an ongoing debate of views would take place. In our view the multiplicity of discourses making up social work theory and practice merely supplement technique. Commensurability replaces the incommensurability of subjects implied in social work's various discourses. Each new discourse provides another layer of diagnostic statements and prescriptions by which to understand, assess and categorise clients. The form of application and the mix of the various discourses diffract and re-constitute the client-subject through diverse languages. The dispersion of the human subject in social work is a reflection of the subject-form of social work as a body of
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knowledges. The authority of social work to perform this dispersal paradoxically stems from a belief that as a vocational discipline it is somehow unitary and integrated. This is the totalising logic at work and reflects and reiterates the thrust of generic social work. In the wake of conservative criticisms, new sets of expediency criteria for efficient resource allocation, and crises such as Cleveland where one knowledge base (i.e. medical discourse) dominated all the rest, social work has appeared to be hopelessly uncoordinated intellectually and practically. This is dispersion by accident rather than by design. What if, however, dispersion did not occur by accident but became the central guiding principle of a reformist account and if the coagulation occurred not piecemeal but through elements being deliberately united under the name ‘social work’? Each element would then follow its own laws or criteria of construction and social work would be a heteronomous series of parts, e.g. offender work, child care, care of the elderly. Under such a scheme, social work as a discipline built on rational ethical foundations would become a set of irreducible sub-disciplines emerging as a response to the self-evident needs of the community, and only pulled together as a hierarchy at all levels of the State ensemble by the private, voluntary and public social services. This is reminiscent of Michael Walzer’s proposals in Spheres of Justice (1983), suggesting that each public good should have its own criteria of distribution – welfare on the basis of need, public office on the basis of equality of opportunity and so on. In such a welfare system, social research could be employed to indicate levels of intensity of need and thus to determine provision of various welfare goods.

Pinker and Lyotard on social work as dispersion

In an authoritative article entitled ‘Social welfare and the education of social workers’ (Bean and MacPherson, 1983), Pinker has argued that social work as a discipline should be dispersed and fragmented. For him this is essentially a good thing from which social work can derive the professional identity it has lacked since the 1950s. He argues that if social work is to find an identity for itself, it must narrow its remit to particular areas of personal social service delivery rather than continue with the over-large set of responsibilities that came with the re-organisation and expansion of social services departments in the sixties. He takes a
similar unfavourable view of the decentering of social work’s purposes introduced by radical social work, the renewed emphasis on community work and the development of the patch system of prevention. Much of the thrust of Pinker’s position is conservative in purpose. He praises the rationalisation of spending implied by the New Right’s version of patch-systems and criticises the implied profligacy and romanticism of the left’s politically motivated version of the same approaches. He wants a reformed personal-service oriented social work as a series of programmes and techniques rooted in a specific ordering of empirically determined needs and correlative interventionary practices which draw on disciplines such as sociology and social administration for developing useful knowledge bases and techniques. In this way, theory would be confined to the role of the servant of social work and not its master. What he does not acknowledge is that the concept of needs is a theoretically indeterminate construct. However, we feel closer to him over his recognition of the attenuation of social work theory into a technique or a ‘tool kit’ for practice. He too recognises that, if one draws out the consequences of each theory, they are contradictory and thus help to indict social work’s lack of integration and profusion of theoretical inconsistencies. But in seemingly true postmodern fashion and by tying down the use of theory to the needs of practice, he celebrates the partialness of social work’s use of theory and claims that this is precisely what gives social work its vocational character. It also, he fails to note, provides an anti-intellectual foundation.

Like Lyotard on society in general, Pinker evaluates social work in particular, from the standpoint of expertise, technical performative and system responsiveness. Unlike Lyotard he does not see multiplicity as a virtue in itself. He wants the discrete parts of social work practice (which utilise bits of various theories) to remain separate and at the same time to constitute the identity of social work. These parts would be statutorily held in place as determining the field of social work. This ‘constitutional’ formula looks like totality thinking, a vulgarisation of Lyotard’s modernity, that involves a restricted multiplicity. It does not necessarily follow from this that Pinker’s proposals are modern with postmodern aspects, but rather that his ideas are conservative authoritarian postmodern as against Lyotard’s libertarian postmodern proposals. Pinker, we suspect, would resist Lyotard’s suggestion that an open-minded agonistics would preserve order in the field of social work.
An interesting omission in the Pinkerian perspective is social class as an indicator or blueprint for both politics and practice in social work. During the ‘heady’ days of radical social work, Case Con and community work devoted much time and effort to analysing the relevance and applicability of social class for social work, and constructed a political manifesto for practitioners. Today the absence of class analysis in social work literature is startling. Perhaps as an indication of the influence of the Pinkerian type thinking and the impact of ten years of Thatcherite government policies, social work rarely dwells upon class antagonisms and working-class clients as exploited subjects dominated by the long arm of the state and its concomitant ideological apparatus. A recent collection of essays, for example, entitled Radical Social Work Today (1989) devotes far more time to issues of race and gender than it does to class analysis. Indeed, the few references to social class in the index to this collection are marginal and juxtaposed against issues of deviancy and differing value systems. What we are faced with in social work is an exemplary instance of Simmel’s (1971 (1903)) déclassé in which individuals are enmeshed in a diversity of contexts in which social problems of madness, depression, senility and violence are generalised on the same plane and devoid of any reference to class struggle or ethical discourse (Harvey, 1990, p. 316). This trend in social work, we claim, is symptomatic of the rejection/demise of totality thinking, progressive and linear history and the characterisation of a universal subject (the working class) found in classical marxist political theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 3). It is also indicative of a shift towards a more discrete and fragmented set of finely graded issues and specialised practices combined with a bolder emphasis on pluralistic policies and politics.

As we have suggested above, there is a sense in which Pinker and Lyotard stand to one another much as the right’s constitutional democracy does to the left’s participatory-democracy: both outline democratic practice. Pinker wants social work to consist of statutorily sanctioned and highly specialised practices which divide, rule, and rationalise the previously ever-expanding remit of social services. Lyotard would perhaps see social work as an interactive and creative exercise between social worker and client. Lyotard’s cybernetic society entails clients’ use of data bases to enable an understanding of what is happening to them so they can take a full part in the language-game that is played out between them and the social worker. This does not happen in current social
work which hides behind the skirts of the state, and, more importantly, establishes distance between itself and the client through making case recordings difficult to obtain, and through professional languages and procedures whose meanings are largely obscure to the client. Such open information networks would be a profound challenge to the power and authority of social work which is maintained through professional autonomy; an autonomy which Pinker’s proposals would extend.

Pinker’s delimitation of social work would strengthen the hand of statutory social services, as he wants, and also strengthen the hand of professionals by giving them an authoritative, specified and technical field of expertise. This would in turn tend to have the effect of enhancing their idea of a rationalised profession and their own competence to judge others. The combination of generic social work and social services expansion caused a negative multiplicity because social work became unsure of its duties and limits. But that is no reason to argue for a retrenched position which we argue will further alienate clients from professionals by giving the latter a well-defined arena of operation and an added sense of right judgment. It will tend to set in stone social work’s constitutional aspect at the cost of its dialogical, participatory and welfarist aspect. The return to specialisation will deepen the authority and validity claims of the social worker and intensify the internalisation of their sense of professional competence to the detriment of client’s ability to represent their interests.

The last idea – that clients should be able to represent themselves fully and say what they want from their standpoint – may create lacunae in the new constitutional identity for social work based on Pinker’s ideas. Interviewing, for instance, could be disrupted by contingent statements of the client and these would be a challenge to the social worker where control of the situation would be threatened. In the absence of free agonistic play and the presence of a structured plurality of elements, Pinker’s reforms are designed to prevent a slippage of control lest this take social work back to an ungovernable state and leave it without firm rules of identity and constitution. If clients play too great a role in shaping outcomes and social work practices, Pinker’s view that social work must construct and preserve its own rules of formation would be challenged. Structure ensures an ethical metanarrative which underpins the client’s right to speak is on its way out and that efficiency of performance is in.
Social work: modern and postmodern visions

Postmodern social work is, we noted earlier, a return to consumer-responsiveness and decentralised, indeed decentralised, social care packages. As such it provides services for individuals rather than for society or in the name of society. Postmodern social work is what Walter Benjamin would have called ‘anti-auratic’ as opposed to modernist social work’s aural subsumption of social work under the ethical state, and under the metanarrative of society. Instead of justifying its activities in terms of the promotion of the good of human kind through virtuous state agents, these high cultural claims, these auras and airs are reduced to now oft-repeated terms, performativity and efficiency. Thus rather than linking the high aims of the state to theoretically pre-determined concepts of the needs of the people – always a mark of the superior modernist state’s ability to determine best interests – postmodern social work attempts to satisfy specific needs as and when they occur so long as they fall within the remit of the new slimmer version of social work (cf. Kellner, 1989: 176-96; Offe, 1985). This is a social work neither bound to the vast discourse of the modernist welfare state nor bound to the traditional socialist and conservative conceptions of the organic state, but a social work that tries to serve the public immediately. It imagines itself as cutting down the distance between the aural state and the public demand inputs and appears to merge state and the people into a kind of populism. No longer are the rational planning Fabian and ‘middle way’ conservative values in vogue, in which the mandarins would pull levers and the welfare state would work in the name of the promotion of social and ethical progress. Few now believe in this. What most are agreeable to is the immediate satisfaction of needs and desires at a unilateral level. What they want is the usable state, a resource of information and practical help. Postmodern social work and postmodernism in general seem to offer them this in reducing the cultural to the popular. It is an irony that the grand social ethical gestures of the totalised state of consensus politics since the war should end with a search for rationalised efficiency and immediate gratification. Postmodernism is anti-auratic. Postmodern social work rejects ethical ambitions and rationalises its functions to be able to provide consumer responsive services, criteria of efficiency and tighter bugetary controls.

Insofar as the welfare state’s role is to promote the ends of all
men and women equally, it is attempting to promote fundamental objective truths about needs and ethics. Postmodern social work does not bother with this. Its interest is in the performance of the social system and whether social work enhances it. Where it does not enhance it, there it can be rationalised or cut unless in so doing there will be a massive fuss or scandal, for this does not enhance performativity.

What we have attempted in this paper is to introduce the basic idea of postmodernism as against modernism in social work as it enters the 1990s by examining Pinker's projection of a postmodern social work and contrasted it with the bench-mark statement of postmodernity made by Lyotard. This was followed by an examination of the question of how modernist social work — generic social work — tries to preserve its unity as an alternative to Pinker's multi-sectoral managerial model. To this end we used the analogy with Esperanto to show how social work ploughs on without working through the implications and inconsistencies of proliferating assessment and prescriptive languages. Finally, we came to the question of the demise of social work's ethical metanarrative and truth-conditions, showing that postmodern social work is an abandonment of objective foundations in favour of making the system of provision work better. We suggested that postmodernism was populist as opposed to auratic, the latter marking out the modernist state.

One final point we should like to emphasise is that Pinker's postmodernism can be characterised as potentially alienating since it would enhance the technical power of the social worker as professional. On the other hand we have suggested that postmodern social work connects state to people. This tension is a problem for Pinker, in that, on the other hand, he wants a highly responsive and performative social work, but on the other hand, he also wants to maintain a matrix of control. This position is similar to Free-market economics and strong state duopoly. His work nevertheless, although he does not endorse the radical agonistics and cybernetic information society of Lyotard, proposes a postmodern vision for social work and one that is a challenge to the modern society of rational unities and ethical norms. It may still be possible to break up the new social work into a radical multiplicity with each part democratically shaped by interactions of social worker and client. It may also be the case that in a post-marxist/postmodern climate the time is ripe for individuals to be agents of their future history
and to resist the bureaucratic welfare state by entering into an agonistics whether social work likes it or not.

University of Dundee

Received 29 May 1990
Finally accepted 4 April 1991

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank David Anderson and Kathy Booth for suggestions made during the preparation of the original manuscript and two anonymous reviewers and an editor of the journal for improvements in the argument and presentation of the final version.

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