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Three Discourses on Practice: A Postmodern Re-appraisal

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The current debate about the knowledge claims of modernity has profound implications for theories and practices of social welfare, though postmodern critiques of its foundational beliefs should be approached cautiously. This paper suggests that a postmodern critique of three historically significant discourses - American casework, British social administration and Marxist social work - illustrates what might be learned from a deconstruction of their modernist assumptions as a stage in a reconstruction of social welfare ideas appropriate to postmodern conditions.

The debate about modernity and postmodernism has plunged a whole range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities into turmoil in the past ten years. In part, it is a debate about the knowledge claims of that Western historical trajectory signified by the term "Enlightenment" which, in the name of universal reason, order and science brought modernity, primarily in a capitalist form, first to Europe, then to north America, and now to the whole world. Against the assertion that this process of "modernization" is essentially emancipatory in its effects, or at least its potential, postmodernists argue that modernity represented a eurocentric and destructive triumphalism based upon a philosophical foundation which resulted in dogmatism and the attempted homogenization of a world of diverse cultures, beliefs and histories.

Only recently does this debate appear to be having some impact on social work practice and education. Moore and Wallace (1993), for example, present postmodernism as an unambiguously progressive force which will contribute to an "emancipatory social work". The notion that postmodernism is clearly on the

side of radical and critical approaches to social work is, however, open to considerable debate. Outside of social work, feminists, for example, are divided on the question of whether modernity is finished and must give way to postmodern deconstruction of its universalistic assumptions (Nicholson 1992), or whether modernity retains its validity as an emancipatory process for humanity, as Lovibond (1989) argues. Marxists are also in dispute amongst themselves over the role of postmodernism as a critique of "grand narratives", with some protagonists, such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) engaging in a wholesale deconstruction of Marxist beliefs in the primacy of class struggle and of economic determinants, whilst others see such attempts at re-stating Marxism as a betrayal of socialist aspirations (Geras 1987).

Given the ambiguity and complexity of the debate about postmodernism, and the often arcane language in which it is conducted, it would seem wise to approach postmodernism cautiously. In this paper I explore some specific examples of historically important discourses in the field of social work and social welfare to see what postmodernism might offer in terms of critique. My own view is that postmodernism is not a contemporary critical *alternative* to modernism, but a form of reflective consciousness which may contribute to a reconstitution of the project of modernity in a direction which is more diverse, cross-cultural and non-universalistic in its claims.

I have chosen to begin a discussion on three discourses: *American casework*, *British social administration*, and *Marxist social work*. I shall focus on negative critiques of these discourses in an effort to highlight the challenge of postmodern ideas, but I would argue that the next stage in critique should be to examine the *contradictions* within each discourse. On the one hand, I maintain that they exhibit the typical illusions and tendencies to domination of modernist discourse whilst on the other, I suggest in the conclusion that they have contributions to make to the possibilities of emancipatory practices in social welfare.

Practice Discourses as Political Ideologies

Within the project of Western modernity social welfare was seen as carrying a significant function in responding to the social

consequences of the structural dynamic of capitalist modernization. We must begin by recognizing that the three discourses represent different interpretations of this function based upon three different political ideologies: liberal, social democratic, and revolutionary socialist.

The significant and influential texts in the formative literature of American casework before the mid 1970s, for example Charlotte Towle's *Common Human Needs* (1945/1973), Helen Perlman's *Social Casework* (1957), and Florence Hollis' *Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy* (1969) were deeply influenced by discourses outside social work, including psychoanalysis and structural-functional sociology, and later systems theory, especially through the work of Allen Pincus and Anne Minahan (1973). At the ideological level these texts represented a particular set of liberal ideas and rhetoric: the importance of individual self-determination, the existence of common human needs which social workers could understand and respond to, the central value of the family as an institution, professionalism as a benign force in society, and a relatively unreflecting acceptance, with some reservations and reformist notions, of the capitalist social order in which it was rooted.

British social administration, in contrast, had its roots within the Fabian tradition of social reform. It was an academic field of study closely integrated into the social democratic politics of Britain from the early 1950s, powerfully advocating an expanding Welfare State which would improve the life chances of the whole population, but especially the working class, whilst still maintaining a reduced but substantial market economy: the market and welfare were to co-exist. For the most influential texts within this tradition we need only refer, initially, to the work of Richard Titmuss, especially his *Essays on the Welfare State* (1962) and *Commitment to Welfare* (1968). These texts were profoundly influential, not only in providing a basis for the analysis of social policies, but also as representing welfare as a moral imperative—the ethical case for social democratic institutions within a reformed capitalist economy, sometimes called a mixed economy, or even *post-capitalism*.

Radical perspectives on social welfare emerged as a predominantly marxist or marxist-influenced discourse which contested

the ideological terrain occupied by American casework models and also the reformism and theoretical weakness in terms of class analysis, of mainstream social administration. It was a discourse based primarily on Marxist and socialist feminist scholarship and politics in a number of countries, and interestingly began to have its most significant impact from the mid -1970s onwards when the idea of welfare was already in retreat as the political influence of neo-conservatism grew, and capitalist economies took a new turn towards globalism. For early texts in this political movement of radical social welfare we might refer to Frances Piven and Richard Cloward's *Regulating the Poor* (1972), Jeffrey Galper's *The Politics of Social Services* (1975), Roy Bailey's and Mike Brake's *Radical Social Work* (1975) and also Elizabeth Wilson's *Women and the Welfare State* (1977), which reflected the tension between Marxism and feminism in this field. As a perspective, radical social work and social policy quickly split into a number of different ideological positions represented by the varieties of Marxism and feminism which fuelled it. In this paper, I intend to focus on the specifically *Marxist* tendency in this movement: the crucial influence of feminism is another, though interconnected story. During the 1970s and early 1980s this Marxist tendency emphasized the *critique* of dominant forms of social welfare theory and practice, but it gradually attempted to construct alternative forms of practice based upon the central ideas of class struggle, patriarchy and the inherently exploitive nature of the capitalist state and economy.

The task of preliminary deconstruction will be to highlight not only the ideological divergencies between these discourses which we can see at once, but also their common features. From the point of view of postmodernism, it may be argued that despite their differences they also present a *continuity* found in their adherence to "science", in their determination to control or guide others "in their own interests", in their giving priority to certain kinds of expert knowledge over other forms of social knowledge, in their subordination of those without expert knowledge to the power of professional, bureaucratic or political authority. In his work on the discourses of madness, sexuality and punishment, Foucault (1967; 1979; 1977) was able to demonstrate how deeply embedded are the assumptions and forms of power expressed in the language of these discourses (Sheridan 1980; Gordon 1985).

Modernity, Progress and Order

We can begin a critical reading of postmodernism as it illuminates our three discourses by confronting the uncompromising challenge to the modern idea of progress which we find in the work of Jean- François Lyotard. It is a challenge to that humanist optimism which lies at the core of the whole enterprise of social welfare—the belief that planned, scientifically-based social intervention is a benign project. Lyotard's (1989 : 89) assault on Enlightenment beliefs is a powerful one:

One can note a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the last two centuries in the idea of progress. This idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole. . . . After two centuries, we are more sensitive to signs that signify the contrary. Neither economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind. I use the name of Auschwitz to point out the irrelevance of empirical matter, the stuff of recent past history, in terms of the modern claim to help mankind to emancipate itself.

To the name Auschwitz could be added other names signifying the recent history of crimes against humanity—Dresden, Hiroshima, the Gulag, Cambodia. The postmodernist argument is that these and countless other crimes were justified by reference to powerful ideologies which originated in the pursuit of progress and order: fascism, liberal democracy, Marxism. Lyotard (1989:9) argues that "the grand narratives of legitimation are no longer credible" and have lost their power to provide a foundation for social criticism. On the other side of the argument, we can see that rejection of the humanist idea of the inevitability of progress and of the grand narratives which underpin it, can clearly serve entirely reactionary purposes and a nihilistic withdrawal from the political arena, a neo- conservative version of postmodernism, in fact.

However, the contention that grand theories tend to objectify human subjects who then become the bearers of biological destiny, of human essence, or of a revolutionary task is well made. The appeal to science as a justification for professional, bureaucratic

or revolutionary practice, tends to solidify power in the hands of intellectuals and state functionaries and denies it to the mass of the oppressed and the dispossessed whose welfare has been claimed to be one of the central rationales of scientific advance in the West. Also, the postmodernist claim that progress cannot be *guaranteed* may be taken as a means of counteracting euro-centric conceptions of the world in which the West triumphantly brings the fruits of "Civilization" to the Other. To believe in the inevitability of progress involves the conception of an impersonal force called History as Popper (1957) famously pointed out, a force which unfolds itself through the specific histories of particular struggles and peoples (Attridge, Bennington, Young 1987). Such a mechanical notion of the process of history objectifies historical subjects and legitimates the leadership claims of a ruling class, a political élite or a revolutionary vanguard by reference to their historical role. But does accepting the postmodernist critique of grand narratives requires us to abandon all attempts to conceptualize in a broad way such issues as the various oppressions experienced in terms of gender, class and ethnicity, or more concretely, the problem of world-wide poverty, or the relation between the human species and the natural world?

The lesson of postmodern critique is surely that we should subject all grand theories to an interrogation as to their implications in terms of objectification, knowledge production and the processes of domination. We must admit, however, that the basis of such interrogation is inevitably another grand theory embedded in the postmodern perspective on the historic failure of the humanist idea of progress. Foucault's dislike of overarching theories and his wish to destroy the human sciences in the name of our liberation as humans is itself based upon a grand narrative of the nature of knowledge and its links with coercive power. We cannot do without grand theory, it seems; perhaps we can learn to approach it cautiously and reflexively, taking full account of its dangers and illusions.

Progress, Science and Welfare Practice

How do our three discourses fare when evaluated in terms of their adherence to humanist ideas on the role of specific kinds of knowledge in ameliorating or confronting individual and social

problems? It is clear at once that these discourses are deeply embedded in legitimization narratives which appeal to the authority of science as well as to a moral imperative to change people and/or situations in ways which are expected to enhance their welfare.

Central to the discourse of American casework was a belief that liberal democratic progress could be achieved through "knowledge of the science of human relations" (Bowers 1949), and that "the characteristic method of social work incorporates within its processes both scientific knowledge and social values in order to achieve its ends" (Hamilton 1951:3). Although we see in American casework literature an adherence to scientific theories drawing, for example, on key metaphors from medicine such as the notions of diagnosis and treatment, we also find a belief that progress through a science aimed at ameliorating human suffering draws upon the professional practice of social workers—their experience of the "real world." These two sources of knowledge—scientific theory and professional practice—are seen as the basis of a moral commitment to individual adaptation and social change. Social workers are empowered to act on behalf of the progressive impulses of society as a whole:

The professions charged by society to educate, help and heal people have become increasingly concerned with contributing to the development of the individual. As we have inched toward the interdependence implicit in a democracy, society's aim progressively has been to afford the individual opportunity for the development of his capacities (Towle 1945/1973:15).

We can put aside, for this discussion, the problems which the language of this passage presents: the reification of the term "society", the rhetoric of "democracy", the implicit normalization in the idea of individual capacities and development. Towle's passage can be taken as representative of a profound belief in the progress achieved in U.S. democracy, and a moral legitimization for professional intervention in people's lives in order to enable them to enhance their capacities and development as individuals.

Whilst within the American casework tradition, moral commitment to the idea of progress was tied to a belief in the values of liberal democracy, in British social administration this commitment took on the tougher form of a moral critique of contemporary capitalist society. In the tradition of social democratic

humanism, it was intent on using the empirical social sciences, especially statistics, to condemn the continued existence of poverty and gross inequality and to see progress towards equality as possible within a reformed society. In undertaking a statistical re-evaluation of income distribution for example, Titmuss (1962) is concerned to "study the rich and the sources of power in society," because "ancient inequalities have assumed new and more subtle forms; conventional categories are no longer adequate for the task of measuring them" (Titmuss, op.cit : 199). In a similar moral approach, Townsend (1979) uses a mass of empirical material to indict current economic and social policy for the continuation and growth of poverty in Britain.

This moral critique was accompanied by optimism in the future. Donnison (1970) for example, argues that liberty, equality and fraternity are social goals to which Britain can aspire in a context of continuing economic prosperity:

Eventually it should be possible to maintain the process by which policies for the equalization of income, wealth and living standards extend freedom and promote innovation and development which ensure the continuing economic growth that makes further progress towards equality possible (Donnison op.cit. : 23).

Titmuss's work was based upon a conviction of social democracy's moral superiority in terms of the social relations it fosters. In his study of blood donor systems in the United States and Britain, which he called *The Gift Relationship* (1970), Titmuss argued that the voluntary British system is morally and socially superior as well as more cost-effective compared with the American system of paying for blood because the former is a social rather than an economic exchange. Titmuss develops this distinction between social policy and the market as a crucial defining characteristic of social administration:

Social administration is thus concerned, for instance, with different types of moral transactions, embodying notions of gift-exchange, of reciprocal obligations, which have developed in modern societies in institutional forms to bring about and maintain social and community relations . . . The grant, or the gift or unilateral transfer-whether it takes the form of cash, time, energy, satisfaction, blood or even life itself-is the distinguishing mark of the social (in policy and

administration) just as exchange or bilateral transfer is the mark of the economic. (Titmuss 1968: 21–22).

The analysis of certain kinds of moral transactions is, for Titmuss and his co-workers, a scientific pursuit involving knowledge-building “which is one of the attributes of science,” (Titmuss op. cit.: 24) a pursuit which his Marxist critics saw as lacking an overarching structural theory of class exploitation which alone could satisfactorily explain the empirical data on poverty and inequality which social administration research revealed.

In its reaction against both the liberal American casework tradition and the social democratic thrust of British social administration, Marxist perspectives on welfare argued for their own versions of progress and science, for historical materialism. The ultimate authority on what was science and what was progress was to be found in Marx’s work. In much of the radical social work literature, Marxist analyses of contradictions within the state apparatus were undertaken in order to identify arenas of class struggle, so that the Welfare State became the location in which a critical social work practice was possible (Leonard, 1993). Radical study of social policy was, by the early 1980s, dominated by a Marxist “political economy” approach which emphasised the role of the state in the reproduction of class and gender relations.

The science of historical materialism provided then, the overarching paradigm for Marxist writers on social work. At the beginning of their introduction to *Radical Social Work*, the editors, Bailey and Brake (1975) present their perspective on the welfare state grounded in a particular grand narrative:

Any understanding of the position of social welfare in our society requires an understanding of its history, and an understanding of the state. ‘The state is founded upon the contradiction between public and private life, between general and particular interests . . .’ (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*) . . . Marx and Engels argue in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) that ‘the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’. The state executive not only controls the political and economic situation, but also the distribution of welfare schemes.

Bailey & Brake op. cit. : 2, 3.

The certainty about *any* understanding having to be founded upon Marxist analysis can be seen in the editor's introduction to the first of a series of texts on radical social work and social policy:

. . . this series is based on the proposition that its foundation must be predominantly Marxist. It cannot, therefore, depend primarily on the bourgeois disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics or social administration: it must seek to develop a Marxist political economy, a Marxist theory of the welfare state and, most difficult of all, a Marxist theory of interpersonal relations.

Leonard (1978) : xiii

Thus the science of historical materialism is seen as providing the guide, outside of which exist only "bourgeois disciplines" which by definition cannot furnish an understanding of social welfare. Although western Marxism was always more permeable, more diverse and more critical than its orthodox Soviet variants, it tended, until the entry of feminism as a powerful theoretical and political critique, to remain hermetically sealed within its own discourse. Like their political opponents the Marxist writers on social welfare remained children of the European Enlightenment belief in progress. Although stronger in critique than in prescriptions for action, they continued to hold the view that social and moral progress meant moving towards some form of state socialism, often avoiding the contemplation of the contradictions of the "actual, existing" socialist states of Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Belief in the inevitable progress of modernization legitimated social welfare interventions, but often closed the eyes of writers to the negative aspects of these interventions. Scientific work, Kuhn (1970) points out, normally takes place within a dominant paradigm which controls and socializes those who work within it. Until it is effectively challenged by a "scientific revolution," the dominant paradigm acts as a filter through which all results are assessed, and negative results which do not confirm the paradigm are explained away as aberrations, as poorly conducted practice or research, or as indicating the need for merely a small adjustment of the paradigm. It appears that in social welfare discourses a similar process was at work.

Under the sway of non-radical and scientific forms of psychoanalytic theory, coupled with the authority of medical models of

disease, most American casework writers of the 1950s and 1960s consistently failed to live up to their own rhetoric of maximizing client self-determination. Their paradigm could not account for the class, gender and cultural control omnipresent in the interaction between client and social worker, and thus interpreted client resistance as the result of a range of defence mechanisms, ego weaknesses and poor socialization. The professional assessment of client "needs" took absolute priority over clients' expression of their "wants" and so the "casework relationship" could not be opened up to the client's definition of the situation.

Although based upon a moral critique of the state and the economy, the social administration paradigm was largely blind to the negative consequences of organizational forms and practices which increased bureaucratic and professional power. Despite the rhetoric of "community participation," belief in the effectiveness of professional and scientific rationality meant that such participation was token at most: democracy was seen primarily in terms of political representation through the ballot box, rather than community and service-user *control* at the point of policy-making, planning, and the delivery of services.

The Marxist paradigm on the other hand took for granted that we already know how power is exercised (through exploitive class relations) and why such power is successful (through economic production and ideological reproduction). The microscopic processes of power, its diffusion throughout the social system and its connection to knowledge production could not effectively be taken into account because a paradigm of the centrality of production and of class subordinates diverse and contradictory experience of oppression (gender, race, culture, age etc.) to a single explanation. Furthermore, certainty about the single locus of power blinded some Marxist writers to the fact that organizational structures and practices do not necessarily cease to be oppressive simply because they are legitimated by the reference to Marxist theorization.

The effects of the power of eurocentric grand narratives within the discourses on social welfare was, overall, to produce an objectifying tendency which has become the focus of critique by a potent conjunction of feminism, critical psychoanalysis and now postmodernism.

Discourse and Truth

The basic assumption behind the discourses we are discussing is that they were approximations to the truth about the real world which scientific knowledge has progressively revealed to us. Given that these various discourses were in conflict with each other, it was assumed further that their verification could ultimately be settled independently of the discourses themselves by reference to "real" processes in the world. These processes could be discovered by accumulation of empirical data, by the careful classification of individual and family problems, or in the longer run, by the outcome of present social processes—how History (with a capital H) turns out. The issue of the truth of statements was either removed from politics and seen as an "empirical question" as the positivists argue, or seen as reflecting the social and political world as in the case when Marxists claim that the economy ultimately determines intellectual production. In both cases the aim is to guarantee the claims to objective truth which professional or scientific discourses make.

Against all of these assumptions that what we say or write is ultimately determined by "real" objective processes, postmodernism argues that discourse itself determines knowledge production and not the other way around. Postmodernism maintains that there can be no appeal for verification as to truth to anything outside discourse because outside one particular discourse can only be specified some other discourse that always already constructs it in a specific form.

It is the perceived totalitarianism of grand narratives, the terrible certainty that underlies dogmatic belief in the unrelenting pursuit of "progress", of the domination of nature and of the social world, that postmodernism confronts. Guarantees of certainty, "the grand narratives of legitimation" are swept aside by postmodernism in favour of a predominately relativist position whereby the criterion of truth or the adequacy of an explanation is internal to specific discourses: the real only exists because there is a discourse which describes it. The needs of social services clients exist, postmodernists might argue, only in so far as social policies and professional social work has constructed them as objects that it can assess and respond to. Need does not arise from the social

services client spontaneously; "needs" are constructed through discourses and the client is required to fit into them.

By maintaining that what we count as knowledge is determined by specific discourses, the postmodern critique, especially in the hands of Foucault, points to the oppressive role of professional and scientific discourse in its power to define the social world and develop technologies of administration and control in the management of troublesome populations: the mad, the poor, the criminal. These scientific and professional disciplines *claim* objectivity, and see themselves as part of the moral and social progress of the modern world, but in reality they are profoundly implicated in the discipline and punishment of populations which they (the professionals) legitimate by reference to the specific discourse within which they are situated. Thus caseworkers often re-defined their clients' culturally specific needs and "learned to use authority" in the clients' supposed interests; thus social administrators studied poverty and often increased the knowledge of governments in the management of the poor; thus Marxist social workers represented state power and sometimes justified it by reference to the political rhetoric of revolutionary consciousness-raising.

Although extremely powerful as critique, postmodern analysis cannot, I believe, be accepted without substantial challenge and modification. If we are sympathetic to the assault by postmodernists on the idea of grand, unifying theories which claim universal objectivity, are we therefore compelled to fall entirely into the relativist camp which takes no account of what goes on outside of discourses? I think not, for an adequate theory of discourses must account for resistance to dominant discourses and the politics involved in the production of knowledge. Foucault's (1967) history of madness, for example, though a powerful critique of medical ideology, cannot further our understanding of the social construction of mental health and mental illness in the present historical juncture, because it lacks an adequate account of social forces and relations outside of discourse.

It is clear that we can use discourse analysis to reveal to us, for example, how certain social welfare paradigms, theories and practices were implicated in "the logic of domination", but why were they resisted and challenged by new paradigms? Were

these challenges simply the result of what was happening *within* discourses, or were other social events, such as changes in the balance of class, gender or cultural forces, of major relevance? To answer these questions we must address the issue of the relation between knowledge and power.

Knowledge/Power

If we examine the discourses of casework, social administration, and Marxist social work, we shall find that their claims to truth or adequacy as knowledge took place in the context of struggles around legitimacy, authority and power; around the relationship between knowledge and ideology. The politics of these struggles were not simply *outside* the discourses themselves, but also inside the knowledge-producing activities with which the discourses on social welfare interact. The fact that these knowledge-producing activities are outside the narrow boundaries of scientific and professional disciplines can be seen in the way that our knowledge about individual and social problems goes outside social work, or sociology, or medicine, to knowledge inscribed in everyday practices in a variety of institutions—the family, community organizations, income maintenance agencies, schools, etc.

It would be absurd to claim in a relativist manner that it is because the concept of child protection exists that children are abused. What actually *constitutes* child abuse however, is essentially a political debate related to questions of cultural diversity and state control. Child abuse is certainly “real,” but it is inextricably caught up in the articulation between different discourses and practices, whereby each set of activities (such as the practices of child protection workers, community critiques of these practices, the articulated claims of ethnic diversity in child rearing) conditions the other. Discourses develop in interaction with a range of practices which are both discursive and material, practices which are historical products.

By concentrating on the relationship between knowledge production and power, we are able, I believe, to reject *both* the absolutist model of scientific truth *and* the relativist model of discourse determination. Instead we can focus on the debates and arguments which surround and penetrate scientific and professional

discourses, examining alternatives and exploring the specific historical and cultural assumptions which contextualize these debates. An approach which emphasizes the significance of power and resistance in the arguments which take place around major discourses should provide us with a dynamic picture of the development of social welfare ideas. If we accept the postmodern account of the oppressive tendencies of the discourses which have shaped social welfare as material practices which define and act upon troublesome subject populations, then we must discuss how these subjects of social intervention are culturally constructed.

The Production of Subjectivity

Postmodernists argue that the most far-reaching illusion of modernity is that concerning the subject, the belief that there is an essential self, the author of my intentions, which lies buried beneath social and intra psychic repression. Postmodernism, allied here to contemporary feminist, psychoanalytic and Marxist theory (Leonard 1984), is concerned to question this belief and to ask what are its origins and social consequences. Although the various critiques of the illusion of a unitary, autonomous self are at variance with each other, they agree that the individual's sense of herself as a unitary subject is achieved by her identification with a dominant discursive formation reflecting class, gender, ethnic and other relations. Traces of what determined her (discursive and material practices) are "re-inscribed" in her discourse—she believes in her autonomy (Pêcheux 1982). This process, it is argued, is essentially how compliance is engineered: subordinate populations, including social welfare clients, are complicit in their own oppression through their incorporation of dominant discourses of normality, of health and illness, of what is possible and impossible, and all of the attendant practices which sediment these definitions into "common sense".

Holding to the myth of the essential autonomous self was originally at the root of the American casework use of post-Freudian ego psychology with its assessments of strengths and weaknesses, and its concern with adjustment to "reality". The principle of client self-determination was based on the notion of the possibility of autonomous choice, and prevented the theorists

of American casework from seeing how the discourse of which they were part permitted choices only within the parameters set by the discourse, a discourse which defined the "client" and re-inscribed this definition in her consciousness: she becomes a client one can work with because she has accepted her client role.

Similarly, under the influence of British social administration, social services and health care planning were based upon the careful categorization of client and patient "needs", supposedly reflecting the generally common needs of integrated coherent subjects rather than the diverse, conflicting and culturally varied needs of different individuals and populations. It was believed that the users of services were relatively free to make choices and to participate at least in the evaluation of services—a belief that largely excluded from the discourse an understanding of the way in which these very users were, in practice, required to subordinate themselves to professional perceptions of their needs and so present an apparent integrated self to whom services could be delivered.

Marxist social work intended to make the principle of client self-determination *real* by helping the individual to understand how her view of herself was socially constructed within the context of class and gender relations. In practice, the Marxist perspective failed to take this understanding to the point of acknowledging and acting upon the fact that discourse determinism implies multiple identities rather than an integrated subject. Thus clients or service users were often seen as relatively homogeneous in terms of their crucial social characteristics, namely members of the working class or women, in either case subjects whose consciousness could be raised and whose common needs might be responded to through community-controlled state services.

The argument concerning the production of subjectivity might lead us to accept that subjectivity should be theorized as multiple, a historical product based upon particular forms of rationality which are produced through particular technologies and practices. The traditional Enlightenment subject is therefore displaced into positions within specific discourses, and it is a range of normative practices and assumptions which produce in us a model of a unitary, rational and coherent subject to which we are motivated to aspire. Motivation and intention re-enters

into this account of subjectivity—the individual is not totally powerless and determined, but neither is she free to choose unconditionally or without struggle and resistance. It is a position which will not satisfy many postmodernist critics, but it implies an optimistic view about the possibilities of change, and perhaps a more plausible account of subjectivity.

From Deconstruction to Reconstruction

In discussing three discourses on practice I have sought to show that postmodern critique can be useful in exploring their modernist domain assumptions, although at many points I have registered objections to the more extreme and illogical postmodern positions. In any case, quite apart from the notion of postmodernism as a distinct set of political and cultural perspectives, we should also acknowledge the existence of *postmodernity* as a contemporary form of human consciousness. It is a consciousness rooted in our awareness (and anxiety) that we live in an uncertain, insecure world without transcendental guarantees about truth, progress or science, because modernity in either capitalist, or, briefly, socialist forms, has not delivered what it promised in terms of freedom, security, and prosperity. In this world we can no longer, as social workers or social scientists claim to make authoritative judgements about individual or social problems based upon scientific objectivity any more than we can seek certainty in tradition. Instead, we are in a world which is more relativist, more modest in its knowledge claims and hopefully more sensitive to cultural difference as the eurocentric base of modernity becomes ever clearer to us.

With this postmodern consciousness, we turn back to look at the recent history of modernity, at its contradiction between emancipation and domination, and at present, necessarily perhaps, place more emphasis on its failures than its achievements. It may be, however, that close examination of the social welfare discourses of modernity will also enable us to ask what they might offer, after shedding some of their more strident claims to universality, certainty and objectivity, to the re-constitution of critical social welfare practices.

Currently, social welfare is dominated by the concerted push by governments and multinational corporations to give political

priority to the establishment of a global market. This class project is based upon a "modernization" process which is largely indifferent to cultural diversity except where it serves the purposes of capital accumulation and social regulation, an example, *par excellence*, of modernity as domination. In this context, the American casework tradition of respect for the expressive, relational needs of clients turns out to be positively progressive, for it contains the promise that individuals' narratives about their intersubjective experiences of a destabilized and often hostile world can be given sustained attention. The tradition of British social administration as an interdisciplinary field of study and action contains, in its twin emphases on empirical investigation and ethical critique, one basis for intellectual, political and moral resistance to those current forms of modernity which ruthlessly exploit subordinate populations of the world's poor by prioritizing the drive for markets over all ethical objections.

Finally, Marxist analysis, as it abandons dogmatic and scientific claims to holding the exclusive key to understanding and articulating emancipatory struggles, has the potential of becoming a crucial means, alongside other critical perspectives, by which new forms of practice emerge to face new historical conditions. Marxist perspectives on social welfare retain their persuasive power because of their analyses of class relations, of state power, of the various forms which capitalist exploitation takes, and of the potential which exists in solidarity and collectivity. Following the deconstruction and critique of the social welfare practices of modernity, we are in a position, perhaps, to forge new practices relevant to the postmodern conditions of uncertainty, cultural relativity and global interdependence.

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