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CONFLICT THEORIES AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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How one defines the world has consequences for one's actions in the world. Sociology has attempted to utilize the scientific method to help human beings understand their social world. However, in the process of its development, sociology has reflected the ideological bias of its practitioners. (Mills, 1943). Irving Zeitlin (1968, pp. vii) claims "Much of classical sociology arose within the context of a debate - first with eighteenth-century thought of the Enlightenment, and later with its true heir of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx."

The central theme of this paper is that social work education makes extensive use of conflict theory in selecting the social science concepts we teach. The concepts are selected to fit the practice technology, which developed prior to the formalization of social work education. The conflict theories most prevalent in social work education are direct descendants of the "conflict ideology developed in the name of business groups in modern society...which lies close to the mainstream of sociological development - Social Darwinism" (Martindale, 1960). Social Darwinism is a polemic with the conflict ideology developed in the name of the proletariat-Marxism."

We further maintain that the derivatives of Social Darwinism are an integral part of the prevailing ideas of society and reflect the continuing debate with Marxism.

We will explore briefly the contrasting positions of Marxism and the mainstream sociology in the areas of stratification theories, alienation, and power and politics. Throughout we contend that we select from the body of social science theory and ideology those concepts which provide an intellectual rationale for our existing practice skills and technology.

A critical aspect in understanding the contrasting views of the world between Marxism and the mainstream of sociological theories is how the human being is defined in each of these frameworks.

Mainstream sociology is the heir of the Newtonian world view: "the image of the great machine itself, and the expulsion of man from the center of the stage - from an active part in the drama - to a seat in the audience and the passive role of spectator. The full meaning of

this tableau was that man disappeared from the world as subject in order to reappear as object." He became as Floyd Matson (1966) notes "The Broken Image." Inherent in this view was "the belief that the behavior of the individual human being is the product of circumstances beyond his control and is therefore at bottom involuntary, irresponsible and mechanical." (Matson, 1966 pp. 21) The English sociologist, Herbert Spencer, represents the Social Darwinist school based on faith in evolution and in the survival of the fittest.

"The ultimate development of the ideal man is logically certain as any conclusion in which we place the most implicit faith: for instance that all men will die. Progress, therefore, is not an accident but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower." (Matson, 1966 pp. 23) The faith in the evolutionary process as providing progress in society is part of the mythology of American Thought.

Simultaneously with his belief in the inevitability of progress of civilization, Spencer saw the "natural process of conflict and survival operate as a kind of biologically purifying process resulting in the survival of the fittest." (Martindale, 1960)

Building upon the inevitability of progress coupled with a deep faith in the rightness of things as they were, William Graham Sumner, the American sociologist, regarded as absurd attempts to make the world over. "There can be no rights against Nature except to get out of her whatever we can, which is only the fact of the struggle for existence stated over again." Natural rights and moral values were only the "rules of the game of Social competition which are current now and here." (Matson, 1966, pp. 24) Both Spencer and Sumner defined the human being as self-seeking, competitive and concerned with his/her own survival. Self-interest was the motivating force for the individual.

Two quotations from Sumner will illustrate how these ideas are currently in vogue in sociological theories.

"Capital is only formed by self-denial, and if the possession of it did not secure advantages and superiorities of a high order men would never submit to what is necessary to get it." (Hofstadter, 1959)

"The millionaires are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick out those who can meet the requirement of certain work to be done...It is because they are thus selected that wealth - both their own and that entrusted to them - aggregate under their hands...They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. There is the interest competition for their place and occupation. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it, so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms." (Hofstadter, 1959)

The modern heir of the first quotation is to be found in the Davis-Moore theory of Social Stratification.

"One may ask what kind of rewards a society has at its disposal in distributing its personnel and securing essential services...It must concern itself with motivation at two different levels: to instill in the proper individuals the desire to fill certain positions and, once in these positions, the desire to perform the duties attached to them...Inevitably, a society must have, first, some kind of rewards that it can use as inducements and second some way of distributing these rewards differentially according to positions." (Davis and Moore, 1945).

The heir to the second quotation is to be found in the concept of meritocracy. (Mankoff, 1974)

Kristol currently argues that there is a relationship between ability, on the one hand, and economic inequality on the other. "Human talents and abilities, as measured, do distribute themselves along a bell-shaped curve. Moreover, it is a demonstrable fact that in all modern bourgeois societies, the distribution of income is also along a bell-shaped curve, indicating that in such an "open" society the inequalities that do emerge are not inconsistent with the bourgeois notion of equality." (1972)

It is possible to continue at great length to demonstrate that much of mainstream sociology is related to the conservative individualistic conflict-competitive theories of Spencer-Sumner Social Darwinism.

Contrast Marx position to that of the Social Darwinistic conflict theories.

Marx defined the human being as self-creative and as creator of the social world through his labors. He noted that the individual could not in his/her struggle with nature, conquer it alone. Individuals must labor together in order to satisfy their needs. Work is therefore a social activity based on cooperation. (Marx and Engels, 1947)

The Marxist conception of the class structure is based on the relationships of the people to the means of production. It is a structural concept which focuses attention on how society is organized rather than on individual achievements. In addition the Marxist concept of social class is social in that Marx viewed work and work relationships as social relations. Marx developed both a dichotomous and trichotomous scheme. The dichotomous scheme has variously been described as "the oppressing classes and the oppressed classes," "the small excessively rich class and a large propertyless class of wage workers," "the propertied and the propertyless classes." In the trichotomous scheme he referred to the capitalist class which owns large scale means of production so as sufficient to make possible the employment of hired labor; the proletariat...which owns no means of production whatsoever and the polit boureisie who dispose of the means of produc-

tion on a modest scale. At another time he saw the middle class as consisting of those who "possess their own means of production and themselves make use of them." (Ossowski, 1970)

The current debate with Marx on social class, i.e. stratification theory in America, has been summarized as follows: "The ideology of students of American stratification has remained optimistic, individualistic and evolutionary. Belief that the stratification system selects for mobility those who are biologically and socially most fit has generally prevailed since the inception of the discipline. Sociologists have also believed that rates of occupational mobility have tended to verify the dominant ideology because the relatively high rates have reduced extremes of economic, social and political inequality and have created a middle-class society." (Pease, Form, Ryteria, 1970)

The individualistic ideology that emphasizes the selection of the most fit for mobility is a direct lineal descendant of Social Darwinism. The emphasis on biopsychic approaches to understanding the roots of economic inequalities, which suggests that economic inequality is largely dependent upon the psychological disposition or genetic endowment of the lower classes is a direct polemic with Marx. (Banfield, 1970; Jansen, 1969; Herrnstein, 1971)

Another area where considerable debate continues concerns the concept of alienation. We consider alienation a part of the conflict theory because Marx originally developed the concept to deal with the personal and social consequences of the capitalist mode of production. There are several important characteristics which differentiate the Marxist and mainstream sociological meaning of alienation. The Marxist theory of alienation is structurally related. The main dimensions of Marx theory of alienation involve the fact that the worker lacks control over the disposal of his products, that he is treated as a commodity to be bought and sold on the market, work becomes a means to an end rather than an end itself, —the end being the opportunity to develop freely his mental and physical energies, social relationships tend to be reduced to the operations of the market, they are built on the basis of money and finally men are estranged from the ties to society. (Giddens, 1971)

Marx view of human nature focused upon the self-creating aspects of labor. It is by means of work that humanity comes to create its essential, self-defining characteristics. The products of labor, as well as labor activities, are extensions of his own nature. Alienation is the condition in which man's productive activities and the products of these activities exercise control over him, rather than providing him a means for the development of human potential through the simultaneous processes of self-creation and world creation. This condition, Marx contends, is endemic to the capitalist mode of production. (Plasek, 1974)

Marx concept of alienation is also a criticism of the reification of the self-interest ethic and the essentially psychological and atomistic interpretation of man and society. (Horton, 1964)

American mainstream sociology, which is positivistic and empirical oriented is "microsociology dealing with definite, well-delineated problems but not with society at large." (Israel, 1971) Israel notes that in the psychologically oriented definitions of alienation, the social structure of society is often accepted in its current shape. The focus is on individual social adjustments and that alienation is frequently implicitly perceived as a lack of social adjustment. Whereas Marx focused on the social structure as the source of alienation, mainstream sociology focuses on individual adjustment or lack of adjustment as the source of alienation.

The major theoretical work in alienation in American sociology is that of Melvin Seeman (1959). Although claiming to adhere to the Marxian view, Seeman transfers his analysis to a social-psychological level rather than the sociological social process, social structural level of Marx's analysis. This shift moves the analysis to individual expectations, perceptions and values concerning certain elements of the individual's life situation. Thus, the approach becomes a subjective experiential one. The five dimensions of Seeman's concept of alienation and their definition will suffice to illustrate this point.

- 1) Powerlessness - the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes or reinforcements he seeks.
- 2) Meaninglessness - the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe - when the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met.
- 3) Normlessness - high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals.
- 4) Isolation - assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society.
- 5) Self-estrangement - a loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work - the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards. (Seeman, 1959)

In the area of alienation we see again the critical difference between a social structured view and an individualistic view. The individualistic view, it is our contention, is a derivative of the conservative individual competition-conflict ideology of Social Darwinism.

Social work education in selecting Seeman's definition of alienation shifts its focus from the structurally induced sources of alienation to the individual's psychological reaction to the social structure. Within this orientation, we are able to differentiate those who have adjusted to society and those who are maladjusted. We feel better prepared to deal with individual's psychological reactions than with the

social structure. Thus our helping technology dictates the theoretical orientation we use in the area of alienation.

The last area we will briefly discuss relates to power and conflict. Marx theory places emphasis on the economic structure of society as the basis for political power. He postulates the existence of ruling elite based on the ownership of the means of production. The issue of the existence of a ruling elite has become one of the main points of debate between Marxist and liberal-conservative sociologists. One need only recall the Floyd Hunter (1953)-Robert Dahl (1961) exchanges or the work of C. Wright Mills (1956), William G. Domhoff (1967, 1974), David Turman (1951), Charles Lindblom (1968), Arnold Rose (1967) to recall that both on the local level and a national level there is a continuous debate as to whether there exists a ruling elite or a pluralist system. The Marxist view is that a ruling elite does in fact exist and that it is capable of utilizing the machinery of the state to maintain and expand their own benefits. The pluralist view is that interest groups compete with each other in the decision-making process, that no one group is strong enough to gain complete power or control; that the result is an incremental allocative strategy in which some needs are met, but not all.

Although conflict is inherent in the pluralist theory, the conflict is routinized and more peaceful because the groups abide by a unifying theme or "value system." The theory posits the existence of changing coalitions which may come together on a particular issue and disband on other issues. There are no permanent coalitions capable of exerting undue control over the decision-making process.

The consequences of the pluralist theory are:

- 1) It denies the existence of a ruling class capable of exerting undue power.
- 2) The concept of multi-interest groups denies the existences of a class structure in the Marxist sense.
- 3) The element of coercion is minimized to the degree that no one group has control of the decision-making process.
- 4) Interest groups which may coalesce around one issue may oppose each other on other issues.

Marxist conflict theory requires social workers to recognize the existence of an exploited propertyless class whose members are experiencing social and economic inequities not because of some weakness in their character, personality, culture, genetic endowment, or moral standards, but because of the nature of the institutionalized social structure.

Pluralistic conflict theory permits the social worker not to identify with any particular class since none exist, only multiple interest groups. The theory allows for "issues" to become paramount and thus permits social workers to appear neutral insofar as social class is

concerned, but to champion worthy causes.

One of the major consequences of the conflict theories based on the individualistic Social Darwinist ideologies of Spencer and Sumner is the development of a group of theories which attempt to explain the difficulties people have as being rooted in some aspect of personal deficiency, i.e. psychological, genetic, cultural or biological. The implications of these theories are that the institutional arrangements of society are sound. The technology required of the "individual deficiency model" is individual remedial work.

A few illustrations that emanate from these ideologies may suffice to demonstrate this assertion.

1) The Culture of Poverty Theory:

This theory does not take into account the relative stability of the inequitable distribution of economic resources over the years, but stresses the fact that people are poor because their "culture" maintains them in poverty. (Kolko, Gabriel, 1962; Miller, 1971) Studies of the characteristics of lower class people have highlighted such aspects as inability to forego immediate gratification, inability to plan ahead, poor motivation, etc. (Lewis, 1966) One can hear discussions of whether these characteristics are adaptations to their social situations or the causes of their social situation. Conspicuous by its absence is any real reference to the economic structure and the inequitable distribution of resources.

2) War on Poverty Programs:

Based in part on the "culture of poverty" construct, programs such as Headstart were designed to break this cycle. People were poor because they had no marketable skill. We established job training programs for people, frequently for non-existing jobs or obsolete jobs. People were poor because they lacked sufficient education. We developed a series of compensatory educational programs. We tried to induce people to remain in school. We developed programs to encourage people to seek higher education. While all these efforts were underway, the United States Census Bureau released figures demonstrating that the median income for white families was between \$2,015 to \$3,179 higher than other families with identical educational achievement (New York Times, January 10, 1972).

Warren (1971) points out that our belief - value system - "which emphasizes the essential soundness of the institutional order, democratic pluralism, science, organizational reform and the principle of inducements" was so prevalent that even where assessments of the cause of the problem of people was within the institutional arrangement, our technology resulted in the development of programs designed to deliver services to the people not changing institutional arrangements. This was the conclusion of a research project involving eight Model Cities Programs.

A leading scholar in social casework notes "Concepts from the social sciences, although they permit us to describe and define the situation more richly, offer only limited prescriptions for intervention...a socially based counterpoint to the present helping technology has not yet developed (Germain, 1970). It is not very accurate to say that we have not yet developed a socially based helping technology. It is our contention that our current helping technology is in great measure based on the conservative-individualistic, competitive-conflict ideology. Whether this is due to the possibility that we are captives of our own helping technology, or that we have accepted the conception of the world which belongs to the dominant group (Marx and Engels, 1947) or that we lack viable alternative helping technologies and theoretical supports is a question that requires further exploration.

What would the helping technology be based on the Marxist conflict theories awaits further development. However, before we can develop this technology, we need considerably more understanding of Marxist sociology. There are hopeful signs that social work education is beginning to address itself to this question. Last year in Atlanta there was a panel discussion on teaching a "Marxist approach to social work." At the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, there are two seminars, one on "The Radical Perspective in Social Work," the other a seminar on Marx sociology. We are aware of at least two other schools that have introduced courses dealing with Marx and modern day Marxist. In order for us to make more headway, we need to be aware, that knowingly or otherwise we are currently committed to the modern day derivatives of Social Darwinism - a conservative individualistic conflict ideology.

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