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The Transition: An Historical-Materialist Perspective
on Social Welfare and Social Work Practice

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If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along in the wake of change. They see that the times are changing, but they are submerged in that change and so cannot discern its dramatic significance.

Paulo Freire
"Society in Transition"
Education for Critical Consciousness

From an historical-materialist perspective American society is in a transition to a new structural form--a new order. The future of social welfare and social work practice is intimately bound to the nature and outcome of this transition. Moreover, the transition has economic and ideological characteristics that hold important implications for changes in the ways social workers view their clients and conduct their practice. Employing an historical-materialist analysis, this article will discuss the nature of the societal transition and its implications for social welfare and social work practice.

The analysis will be prefaced with a synopsis of basic concepts and assumptions of the historical-materialist perspective as developed by Marx and Engles. The perspective is seen as a useful framework for assessing contemporary social work theory. The utility of the perspective for the present discussion is seen as independent of the merits and demerits of the various causes and groups labeled as or claiming to be based upon an historical-materialist or Marxist perspective.

The Basics of the Historical-Materialist Perspective

The historical-materialist perspective focuses on the economic infrastructure of society, namely, the means of production and the resultant economic relations among people. Marx held that the economic forces and tensions at work within society condition the social life of man. In his preface to The Critique of Political Economy he described the foundation of the historical-materialist perspective when he asserted,

"The mode of production of the material means of existence conditions the whole process of social, political, and intellectual life."¹

Marx meticulously described the socio-economic dynamics of the conditioning process in his 1867 work, Capital², from which the ensuing synopsis is derived.

Concerned with the conditions of the poor and the causes of their exploitation, Marx undertook a study of industrial society that led to several basic insights. Commodities fulfill man's wants and needs and are the products of his labor. Commodities link man to the material world. Because they fill wants and needs, the creation of commodities is simultaneously the creation of the use value of commodities. The value derived from the exchange of commodities is their exchange value. There is no exchange value for materials, such as air, when there is no labor involved in making them available for use. Use value and exchange value comprise economic value. Value is also created by labor when the machines that produce commodities are assembled and when raw materials are extracted. Thus, in the production of commodities for sale or exchange, economic value is created. Human labor, then, is the source of economic value.

On the economic stage, individuals come together to exchange commodities and to sell their labor. Historically, those who have only their labor to sell come with a disadvantage vis-a-vis those who control sufficient wealth to pay a wage for the labor of others.

Competitive advantage in the market derives in part from paying a wage for labor that represents less value than is realized in the sale or exchange of the commodity produced by that labor. Hence, those who labor create more value than they realize in their wage. The difference between the value of the wages paid for the labor necessary to create a commodity and what is realized in its sale is surplus value. This surplus value accumulates as

capital for those who own or control the means of production. The means of production includes the machines, materials, and labor necessary in the creation of a commodity.

A socioeconomic class structure emerges that reflects the relations in the economic system between those who labor and those that control the means of production. In Marx's day, the capitalists who controlled the means of production exploited the laborers by various means. Exploitation included extending the working day and limiting wages so as to extract as much surplus value as possible commensurate with the survival and the biological reproduction of the laboring class. An industrial reserve army moved in and out of the labor force as conditions necessitated. The capitalist class dominated. Class exploitation, class identity, and class antagonisms together with the economic crises arising from contradictions of the capitalist system were seen as leading inevitably to a class warfare and revolution in which the workers seized control of the means of production.

The Transition in Contemporary Society

From a historical-materialist perspective, contemporary American society is seen as an evolution in the dynamics Marx described. Certain quantitative dimensions to contemporary American society stand behind the day to day realities of social welfare with which social workers deal that are vivified by the historical-materialist perspective.

For instance the dimensions of the capitalist class and its control can be illustrated in quantitative terms. In 1969, 7.4% of a large random sample of the adult population in the labor force were employers of the labor of others. Of these, 78% were small businessmen who employed nine or fewer workers.³ If capitalists are defined as owners or controllers of the means of production, few Americans are capitalists. Moreover, a few Americans--not all of them employers--control much of the nation's wealth. In 1969, .008% of the population owned as many assets as the bottom half of all American families, and the top 5% of wealth holders have 86% of all publicly held corporate stock.⁴ David Livingston in examining studies of the economic, socio-cultural, and political structures in corporate capitalist states, concludes,

There is a very small objective class of controllers, invariably less than 2% of the population, consisting of the owners and managers of capital in corporate productive and mass culture enterprises, and the state,

elite. These people dominate leadership positions in virtually all large-scale organizations, live socially in effective isolation from the majority of the community, and have extensive inter-regionalities. Actually a much smaller capitalist sector of a few thousand family fortunes typically exercises market control within the relations of production domestically as well as internationally, while cabinet members and senior civil servants dominate state decision making.⁵

While the dominant class is small and controls most of the wealth, the working class nevertheless fairs materially better today than in Marx's time. In quantitative terms, the standard of living for the employed majority, unanticipated by Marx, was won in part by the trade unions. The union's power shortened the working day and brought wages to levels above that minimum necessary for biological reproduction of the labor force. This qualitative aspect of capitalist society was seriously shaken in the great depression and is repeatedly threatened in the economic downswings that arise from the contradictions in the economic system exposed from behind the facade of consumer wealth. How might these contradictions be described?

In the drive for competitive advantage in the market place, labor is displaced by machine and new methods of organization that are more efficient. But, as labor is displaced so is the source of surplus value and ultimately the market itself. Nevertheless, innovations in the use of energy and mechanization have kept the economy generally expanding in what Marx called the revolution of the means of production. In addition, wars that open new markets, and exploitation of labor in the poorer populations⁶ of the third world help to sustain the economy through its boom and bust cycles.

Ironically, the technological advances, that comprise the revolution of the means of production, help to produce the growing crisis confronting the economy. Often such advances result in the necessity to advance more and more capital and the simultaneous deskilling and displacement of more and more workers. As less capital is accumulated from surplus value and production outruns the market, less capital is available for investment in new technology, new machines. The system sustaining revolution of the means of production becomes more difficult. The final crisis which Marx foresaw is not simply to be a class revolution. It is the outcome of the displacement of labor which produces the capital by technological advance in productivity and intense

use of energy and the corresponding decline in consumption. The unemployed buy less.

The crisis may well be worsened by the natural limitations on materials, energy, and ecology just now becoming apparent. For example, capital is being extracted from the economy for oil at a serious rate that further endangers the system.

For several reasons the spasmodic, violent, class revolution that would move the society to solutions to the dilemma of capitalism was a prediction of the historical-materialist perspective that seems remote and, in the context of professional values, repugnant. Violent revolutions seem to retain elements of their violent character in the new order. In addition, working class solidarity among Americans seems split by employment status, racism, and sexism. And most importantly, a violent alternative espoused by some so called radicals of the late sixties could spawn an authoritarian state-capitalism masquerading as socialism. In such a system bureaucrats control the means of production and emerge as a dominant class of totalitarian exploiters more cavalier with human rights than their capitalist counterparts. The economist Paul Mattic describes the state-capitalist alternative,

The "socialization" of the means of production is here still only nationalization of capital as capital, i.e., though private ownership no longer exists, the means of production have still the character of capital by being controlled by government instead of being at the disposal of the whole society. Although private capital accumulation is now excluded, the exploitation of men continues by way of an unequal system of distribution with respect to both the conditions of production and the conditions of consumption. This perpetuates competition as a struggle for lucrative positions and better-paid jobs, and carries the antagonisms of capitalism into the state capitalist system.⁸

The predicted violent revolution of the working class, therefore, has drawbacks in both its violent nature and in its possible outcomes.

The crisis confronting the economic system and the social order need not be met with violent, magical revolution. A long transition to a more humane system is seen as likely even by Georg Lukács, the Marxist philosopher who resolved late in life, about 1970, that the transition from capitalism to true socialism is just now beginning though it may take years before an era of socialism can begin.⁹ Though such a transition may not be abrupt its impact

on society and social work practice would be profound.

Hegemony and the Transition

A final notion arising from the historical-materialist perspective critical to an analysis of social welfare and social work practice is hegemony. This principle will emerge later as a source of important criticism of social welfare and social work practice. A prolonged crisis in an economic system threatens the social order and the position of the dominant class. A dominant class retains its economic position by controlling economic relations. It further secures its position through an ideological hegemony. Marx observed, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class."¹⁰ Marx's observation was later amplified and developed in the insights of Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci. In discussing the bourgeois hegemony in American society, contemporary sociologist David Sallach characterized Gramsci's insights,

The basic thesis is that, in class differentiated societies, a major source of undisturbed elite dominance is control over the ideological institutions of that society. By using their power to define what is good, true, just, reasonable, practical, and inevitable, the ideological institutions are able to purge interpretations based upon deviant, dissident or revolutionary traditions.¹¹

Later, Sallach, in "Class Domination and Ideological Hegemony," persuasively documents the case for the existence of a ruling class and the dimension of its ideological hegemony in contemporary American society. He illustrates how the educational system and the mass media are used as instruments in perpetuating values that support the interests of the elite that control the nation's wealth.¹² Livingston examined the scope of hegemony in non-work hours and documented the hegemonic nature of leisure time, voluntary organizations, and family life. He extended the definition of hegemony in a manner descriptive of its impact in contemporary capitalist society as "...a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class."¹³

The interest and hegemony of the dominant class is further perpetuated in the fragmentation and contradictions in the value structures of working classes. Such fragmentation and contradiction was called false consciousness by Marx. This was because true

class consciousness would serve the economic interests of the class. Michael Mann in, "The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy", concludes an analysis of value commitment in Britain and the United States with the observation that there exists in both societies evidence for both a false consciousness among subordinate classes and a "pragmatic acceptance" of limited roles in the control of production.¹⁴ G. David Garson, in his study, "Automobile Workers and the Radical Dream," found that such fragmentation and lack of consistent value commitment intercede where class identity and class action could serve the economic interests of the workers.¹⁵ In essence, the evidence indicates that an ideological hegemony supporting the current social order, (1) exists, (2) is perpetuated through various social institutions, and (3) prevents working classes from acting in their own best interests.

In summary, the historical-materialist perspective envisions the economic infrastructure of society as driving toward crisis precipitated by a shortage of capital under consumption, and aggravated by dwindling energy supplies. It suggests the social order will undergo a profound transition. Namely, that control of the means of production may ultimately shift from the hands of a few into some form of worker control of the means of production. With this economic transition, the concomitant hegemony of the dominant capitalist class over social reality will loosen. Such a crisis and transition is fraught with danger to democratic ideals and institutions. It could be a time of growth or a time of regression.

Viewed from one perspective, the decline of a particular hegemony may appear as a period of disorder and decadence--for instance a decline in the work ethic may horrify some. From another perspective, the decline might be seen as a correlate of the emergence of competing value systems and the emergence of a new social order. Increasing scarcity of capital¹⁶ and growth of the public sector in the post-industrial, service economy suggest that we are now well into the period of transition.¹⁷ Drawing upon the perspective developed here, a variety of implications for the profession and practice emerge.

Implications for Social Welfare and Social Work Practice

In the preface to the introductory practice text Tripodi, et. al. characterize the social work practice role:

Social workers have become more heavily involved in many areas of governmental and voluntary efforts to improve life

conditions, control people's behavior, and make possible various kinds of change, in welfare, in work with law violators, with the physically and mentally sick, in schools, sometimes in industry--in other words, in many different situations and with many types of problems, fulfilling various functions.¹⁸

This characterization of the practice role is not atypical. It describes a profession with a diversified practice. But the role of the profession has a single core, a central ingredient. Regardless of the level of intervention and the social welfare institution, social workers practice at the nexus of the individual or group and the social system. In capitalist American society, therefore, social workers practice at the point of individual deviance from the social reality hegemony. This is a position of considerable importance.

In his article, "Toward a Marxian Theory of Deviance," Steven Spitzer posited that deviance is a phenomenon related to the social structure and to ideological change. Spitzer then observed,

If we assume that class societies are based on fundamental conflicts between groups, and that harmony is achieved through the dominance of a special class, it makes sense to argue that deviants are culled from groups who create specific problems for those who rule. Although these groups may victimize or burden those outside of the dominant class, their problematic quality ultimately resides in their challenge to the basis and form of class rule.¹⁹

Because of the profession's position relative to the social order, its value orientations have been long recognized as critical to practice. Martin Rein surveyed and summarized research that touched on the issue of the profession's practice role. He said of the studies,

These findings are suggestive only, and it is hazardous to make firm generalizations based on them. They do appear however to indicate that the dominant value commitment and behavior of professional social workers supports in theory and practice a posture of getting others to meet standards of accepted behavior. They reveal the extent to which social workers personally comply with bureaucratic norms even when these conflict

with client's needs.²⁰

If the value allegiance as demonstrated in professional practice is tacit or open support of the current economic order, and the concomitant hegemony over social reality, its role as control agent is certain. Moreover, this role, because it supports a passing class structure, will be in jeopardy.

Not only will the role be jeopardized because of radical infrastructural change in the society but also because of its prescribed orientation toward people. Stuart Kirk in his article, "Clients as Outsiders: Theoretical Approaches to Deviance" summarized several models of deviance in society and called to question the welfare model to which social work subscribes in practice. Kirk concludes,

It is in the role of norm-enforcers that the dilemma for social workers becomes full blown and the possibility of a partial resolution emerges. It is precisely at this juncture that the viability and rationality of some norms can be critically examined and alternative modes of reaction proposed.²¹

That clients, whether defined as criminal, ill, poor, or inept, are deviants and that social workers are but one variety of norm enforcers in an ever-changing parade of images of deviance and control is a disconcerting possibility. Such images for the profession are alarming if deviance is viewed in light of social hegemonies supportive of exploitive and dehumanizing economic order. Spitzer suggests that populations that are a problem to the economic order supply society's deviants. Spitzer illustrates the ways problem populations--that parallel descriptions of social work clientele--threaten the social and economic order.

Problem populations tend to share a number of social characteristics, but most important among these is the fact that their behavior, personal qualities and/or position threaten the social relations of production in capitalist societies. In other words, populations become generally eligible for management as deviant when they disturb, hinder or call into question any of the following:

- 1) capitalist modes of appropriating the product of human labor (e.g. when the poor "steal" from the rich)

- 2) the social conditions under which capitalist production takes place (e.g. those who refuse or are unable to perform wage labor)
- 3) patterns of distribution and consumption in capitalist society (e.g. those who use drugs for escape or transcendence rather than sociability and adjustment)
- 4) the process of socialization for productive and non-productive roles (e.g. youth who refuse to be schooled or those who deny the validity of "family life")
- 5) the ideology which supports the functioning of capitalist society (e.g. proponents of alternative forms of social organization).²²

If these be our clients and if we in the social welfare system fill a role supportive of a declining capitalist order and its social hegemony, where lies the future of social work practice? Would social workers fill the same role in totalitarian states?

Considering that the socio-economic order is undergoing a profound transition and that competing values and behaviors will persistently emerge, two implications for the profession and its practice arise.

First, as Kirk suggests, critical examination of the rationality--and the humanity--of some social norms can be undertaken. Second, given a view of society that holds the economic relations among men--and especially the relations of capital to labor--as important in the dynamics of social life, deviant behavior and the profession's practice with deviants must be reexamined as they relate to a given economic order.

Solidarity with Working People

The population that supplies the raw material for deviants is a segregate of the populace of working men and women. Strengthening the lot of working men and women vis-a-vis those that control the means of production entails more than residual and rehabilitative social policy and practice. Out of the turmoil of the late sixties, Charles F. Grosser in "Changing Theory and Changing Practice", reminded the profession of its commitment to the institutional--structural view of practice, "Since individual pathology is seen as a function of social disorganization, the invidious characterization of the client as helpless and the distinctions between client and non-client are substantailly mitigated."²³ Furthermore, the interests of social workers, as

public employers, and the interests of their clients in seeking more money and increased services are substantially the same. With the mitigation of distinctions between client and non-client comes the inexorable mitigation of distinctions between the populations of working people and the social work profession. O'Connor observes that the government socializes environmental and social costs while at times fragmenting working class solidarity in the interests of private capital.²⁴ Moreover public employees contribute to the overall productivity of the society. Therefore, public employees stand in substantially the same relationship to capital and the current hegemony as do workers in the private sector. Unionism for public workers may not bring the same results as they do for workers in the private sector, but they may have another positive result. Antagonisms between private and public employees may emerge as private capital dwindles and salaries for those who work in the public domain, particularly in social welfare agencies, are seen as parasitic to the capitalist system. The solidarity of private and public workers, therefore, may be threatened. Hence, joining public employee unions affiliated with private labor--not to bankrupt the state but to bargain for qualitative changes and our clients interests--may be a wise choice for the profession.

If the social order is seen as compelled toward change by the economic forces at work, the role of the practitioner helping individuals with behavioral or psychological problems is by no means invalidated. The shallow condemnation of some casework practice as if from a higher perspective cognizant of social structural problems is naive. The alleviation of subjective distress and limitations in individual choice, autonomy, and actualization generated in casework practice have an unimpeachable value in either a capitalist or true socialist state. The caution for intervention with the behaviors and psychies of individuals lies in avoiding a narrow, linear, unicausal, view of the client's position in his social environment and the social order. A persistent effort to help clients see the structural sources of "their problems" and to cultivate a critical awareness when possible should be a part of direct practice. Goldberg's "Structural Approach to Practice,"²⁵ and Pincus and Minahan's systems approach to practice²⁶ are two models that provide broad views of the client's social position and flexible frameworks for practice in a period of transition. Goal formulation and intervention techniques must emerge concomitant with a sense of the person's position relative to the values and economics of the changing social order. Hence, either tacitly blaming the client as the carrier or sole cause of his problems or altercasting him as the dependent victim of circumstance become the two traps

of a myopic, therapeutic practice perspective. Finally, accepting adjustment to inhumane or inequitable situations as the long term goal in the helping relationship constricts practice to a level of social control in behalf of a declining social order. Considerable empirical and theoretical work must yet be done to secure our understanding of the links between the economic structure and its dynamics and the individual problems faced by clients and their dynamics. The historical-materialist perspective relieves the weight of much mystification but reveals large gaps in our knowledge.

Practice with Social Welfare Systems

The historical-materialist perspective also provides an important insight for effective intervention with and change of social welfare systems and their policies and services.

Social work has traditionally speculated about or advocated two foci of intervention efforts designed to enhance social welfare services provided in society. These are (1) values and, (2) material conditions of existence. The first of these, values, is manifest in the following statement by Ronald Frederico in the conclusion to his book, The Social Welfare Institution:

Achieving changes in social values sometimes seems a hopeless task. Although there is no question that the social welfare structure is solidly institutionalized in the United States, this book points out that adequate services are still needed in many areas. Certain basic social values must be changed if these needed services are ever to be feasible. The perspective of history is encouraging. When one thinks of the centuries it took to achieve the breakthrough of the Social Security Act, the lesson is clear--social change is slow and tedious. This country has made progress in social welfare. We do care for others in ways and at levels unthinkable not too many years ago. Yet we as a society still value individualism, discrimination, and laissez-faire capitalism, and these values often conflict with social welfare goals. Any projection that attempts to predict the resolution of this conflict would require a prediction about the future of the society. This is an impossible and perhaps sterile task. What the issue of value change in the future does suggest in a practical way is that all of us citizens will affect the values of the future. Values are made and can

be changed. If we as human beings, citizens, and social welfare practitioners believe in certain values, we must fight for their adoption. It is a worthwhile project for the future of each of us.²⁷

Fighting for change in values may well have limited results if values, as rules for behavior, are but the reflection of the economic system. Attempts at value change would be equally important if they were the building blocks of a hegemony that helps secure a social order and the position of its dominant class in an economic system. Many social workers would look deeper to the material or economic conditions to find a foothold for change.

The second focus, that of material conditions, is manifest in the words of John Romanyshyn in his text, Social Welfare: Charity to Justice. He critically analyzes the welfare model and condemns the defining of deviant behavior in terms of "... personal pathology rather than unresolved political issues." Later he examines economic dependency to declare,

Today, however, it is the political issue of income redistribution and a citizen's right to a decent share in the commonwealth that challenges the definition of economic dependency as a problem of individual maladjustment. We now see that society is so structured as to create and perpetuate a dependent class of welfare recipients. Only a significant redistribution of income in support of the ideal of one's right to life will be an adequate response to that condition we now define as economic dependency. In this light dependency is a political issue, not a social problem.²⁸

The redistribution of income is viewed as a means to the improved material conditions of existence for the industrial reserve army and the economically superfluous people of our society. From this perspective, plans for a negative income tax and guaranteed adequate income have arisen with the sanction of the profession.

Hence, the critical focus of intervention and change of welfare systems is held to be the value structure on the one hand and on the other as the material conditions of people's lives. The historical-materialist perspective would suggest a third beginning point.

The dynamics of the relations between capital and labor described earlier suggest that it is from here that the egalitarian and humane society is constructed. Marx and Engels

were critical of a socialism which would but alter only the material conditions of existence labeling it bourgeois socialism that lessens the cost and administrative work of bourgeois government but does nothing to alter the basic economic relations.²⁹ From an historical-materialist perspective not a redistribution of income but a redistribution of the control of wealth and hence a rearrangement of economic relations would be necessary.

Such a change is qualitative in that permanent redistribution must retain control of the means of production in the hands of the workers who produce the wealth. This focus for change on its face seems polyannaish but no less so than the two traditional foci. As economic crisis persists, as the public sector--including welfare costs--grows, as the need for a mirror image industry to recycle waste and repair the environment becomes more evident, and as the damage from unemployment and lack of meaningful work continues, the transition that will bring about a change in economic relations continues. As a part of this change, the strategies and specific practice roles directed at managing change in economic relations at both individual and organizational levels of practice enumerated by Galper in his Politics of Social Services,³⁰ will be of use in dealing with social welfare systems.

Conclusion

If, as the historical-materialist perspective would predict, the socio-economic system is in a period of change to a new order, the practice role of the social work profession should not be defined in theory or practice as narrowly: change agent vs. control agent. Rather, filling those roles, making those choices, and providing that leadership and critical insight that will enable the transition to take place with the least suffering and with the best possible post transition conditions is the posture for social work. Such a posture will galvanize the practitioner to be discerning of deviance labels and deviant roles and to differentiate practice approaches in light of the changing social and ideological hegemony.

Just as individuals enter periods of crisis with potential for growth or deterioration, so too does the society. Though prolonged, the predicted transition would have a crisis character. We must critically assess the stresses, dynamics, and substance of the crises that form and force the transition. The society may leap ahead to a new order, more humane, more viable, more democratic, more harmonious with its natural environment. Or

it may fall back to an authoritarian, dehumanizing form. Many groups and professions concerned with the social welfare will be instrumental in guiding the transition. Marx observed that man makes history in the production of the means to satisfy his material needs. The historical-materialist perspective therefore provides fundamental, though imperfect, understandings of the socio-economic dynamics of the transition. Social work, with a critical, sophisticated, and discriminating vision of these socio-economic dynamics and its own practice role relative to those dynamics, will have a constructive part in guiding the societal transition. The historical-materialist perspective and its implications for social welfare and social work practice may be one part of such a vision.

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