

Prying open the space for social work in the new millennium: Four theoretical perspectives on transformative practice

Stan Houston¹, Caroline Skehill¹, John Pinkerton², Jim Campbell¹

Abstract: *Social work in the United Kingdom faces all manner of woes. Critical public inquiries, disgruntled users of the service, the bureaucratisation of practice, problems with recruitment, and the overhaul of training, all continue to reinforce a culture of pessimism. It has been suggested that social work in the United Kingdom stands at the crossroads where a decision must be made either to accept these depressing conditions as they are, or to challenge them by asserting a new future for a reinvigorated profession. The latter option is supported by the authors of this article because we share the view that as social workers we have available to us discursive freedom with which to analyse the profession's contemporary ailments and to find a way through them based on a discourse of social justice. The idea and practice of discursive freedom can be captured in the heuristic notion of 'space' which the authors use here as a shared focus for analysing contemporary social work from four different critical perspectives. In this way a dialogue is promoted between theory and practice and within critical theory. In its method and its results this inquiry is still very much work-in-progress. This provisional quality sits comfortably with the notion of 'space' and gives rein to its recursive qualities. These qualities, it is argued, must lie at the heart of transformative social work.*

Key words: *transformative social work practice, discursive space, theoretical perspectives*

1. Senior Lecturers in the School of Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast

2. Professor, School of Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast

Address for correspondence: School of Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast, 7 Lennoxvale, Belfast, BT9 5BY. s.houston@qub.ac.uk.

Introduction

'At the beginning of a new millennium, social work stands at the crossroads' where a decision must be made to 'accept its marginalised and demoralised conditions or to seek a new future and sense of mission', argues Lymberry (2001, p.381). Collectively, the authors of this paper share this sense of being 'at the crossroads' in social work. Faced with constant attacks on its value base, the onslaught of managerialism, the technocratisation of many aspects of practice and worsening conditions of employment, it is little wonder that a culture of pessimism plagues the profession (Jones, M., 2001a). Yet within that pessimism lies not just a reflection of the world as it is, but the aspiration for something better – the cross roads. At that intersection of pathways lies an opportunity that can be articulated in the notion of '*space*'. Space in this sense represents the freedom of an analytical enclosure permitting diverse forms of discursive inquiry which, in turn, give rise to the conceptual unbinding of social and institutional domains of social life and the critical questioning of hegemonic discourses and ideologies. Space is thus a heuristic device for the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959), for zoning in on the institutional interfaces between agency and structure, subjectivity and materiality, and the micro and macro domains of social life. Understood in this way, space provides not only a focus for discursive descriptive exploration but also for praxis. It offers opportunities to conceive and enact new forms of intervention that flow from discursive inquiry in order to challenge the prevailing technocratic stranglehold of social work. No matter how constraining wider structures are, there is nevertheless an opportunity to exercise the 'dialectic of control' (Giddens, 1984): that is, the capacity to exert influence over seemingly entrenched positions of institutional power.

Over the past century, social work has always been characterised by competing theories, be it between philanthropy and social reform at the end of the 19th century; psychodynamic and behavioural perspectives in the 1950s and 1960s; or traditional and radical perspectives in the 1970s. However, in more recent times, the relevance and usefulness of competing grand theories has been challenged at a number of levels, not least within the context of post-modern theorising. In a post-modern context, it is alleged that we have constructively shifted away from grand theorising and sought to engage reflexively with the fragmented, diverse, uncertain and often contradictory conditions within which social work exists. Less constructively, however, a shift away from 'competing theories' has resulted, at least in some spheres, in the practical erosion of space within social work discourse for theoretical debates at any level. In light of the changes within social work education, the apparent malaise within the profession within a number of contexts and the growing decentralisation and bureaucratisation of social work practice, the need for rethinking our theoretical positioning seems timely.

It was this struggle to come to terms with the changing context and role of social work theory that led the authors of this paper to establish a 'theorising social work'

research group within our School. Given that members of the group brought with them a range of perspectives, based on Habermas, Foucault, Klein and Marx, our primary challenge was to consider how these perspectives could help to locate social work, in what can be seen as either a post-modern world or one where high modernity has reached its apogee, spatially, temporally, discursively and practically - in a way that maximised the possibilities inherent within space. We recognised the need to shift beyond 'competing theories' yet were concerned not to fall into a bland consensus position of pluralism or eclecticism. While struggling to identify how social science discourses can influence the nature, form and practice of social work in a reflexive, practice-oriented and constructive manner, we all share a conviction that it can. We see critical theory as the key to unlocking the potential within social work to contribute to the promotion of social justice. We also share a belief that, despite the contested, grey, diffuse and diminished space for social work within its conditions of possibility, opportunities do exist for professional social workers to engage, in their thinking and in their practice, creatively, critically and constructively within the space available to them. It was this shared belief that offered us a theme, or heuristic device, around which we could engage together theoretically in a reflexive manner.

To develop and test our ideas, two staff and post-graduate research seminars were held. We wanted to gauge the relevance of our ideas relating to space and social work. Such reflexive engagement helped us to focus on key questions: What is the space that social work can or does occupy? Has this space been eroded? Does social work have a right to claim expert or separate space within the present context of third-way modernising? Can our four perspectives on, and attempts to understand the space in and for social work, help develop critical debate about these questions? Through critical dialogue and engagement with each others' perspective, an exchange took place that has helped us pry open the space of social work and identify its potentials and possibilities. To some extent they have continuities between them while at the same time represent discontinuities and different views. The continuities, which are shared across the four perspectives presented here, include: a concern about the nature and organisation of social work; about the impact of this on practice and users; a commitment to use all resources possible to inform and influence a social justice agenda; and to an assumption that it is necessary to embed social work in critical social theory in a reflexive and informed manner. The discontinuities reflect the theoretical divergences between the four perspectives. Through our exchanges, we have come to realise the value of linked but different perspectives which seek not to overpower or reach consensus, but rather to create a synergy which produces a number of possibilities for making sense of social work and its future.

Section one draws on the work of Habermas and considers social work in the context of the space between the 'system' and the 'lifeworld'. Section two considers how perspectives on social work have been influenced by the work of Foucault. It attempts to examine the contradictions and tensions inherent within the so-called

space of the 'social', with particular reference to child protection and welfare social work. Section three, drawing on a Kleinian perspective, critically examines the nature of space according to object-relations theory, and look particularly at the context of mental health. Section four sets out how Marxist ideas and theory can be used to explain space in and for social work in terms of the relationship between civil society, the state and the individual. Through these four sections, two key questions will be addressed. Firstly, how is social work viewed through an understanding of space as provided by each perspective? Secondly, how can we use these perspectives to promote theory-practice links in a reflexive manner?

In sum, the four sections provide insights into the different 'levels' of space for social work from the broad societal context through to practice realities. We are by no means suggesting that together the perspectives provide the answer to the question of what space exists in and for social work in a contemporary context. However, we hope that as a set they contribute to finding secure common ground on which those interested in theory testing, theory building and theory-practice links, can engage in exchanges that draw on unapologetically diverse perspectives. These exchanges will both benefit from and contribute to the use of space as a heuristic device. All in all, our intention is not to register theoretical certitude, but rather issue an invitation to the social work community to take up the challenge of defining and clarifying new ways of working with the space of contemporary social work.

A Habermasian approach to space

Jürgen Habermas is arguably the leading social theorist in the world today. His polymathic approach – drawing on philosophy, epistemology, linguistics and social and political theory – has no parallel elsewhere. Yet, within his vast corpus there is a unifying thread centring on the emancipatory power of unconstrained discourse. Where actors seek to establish genuine understanding and consensus, argues Habermas, in conditions where power is held in check, and strategic interlocutions are excised, then moral communication unfolds. This critical insight acts as a centripetal tendency in his work generating ideas on: the form and content of emancipatory knowledge (1968); the role and function of the public sphere (1989); the nature of the legitimisation crises that plague capitalist societies; and the role of deliberative democracy in re-fashioning the modern, pluralistic State (1996). However, this underpinning theme may be contrasted with a centrifugal impetus in Habermas' thinking leading to two contrasting positions in his work: an intermediate position emphasising the polarised relationship between the State and civil society, referred to here as the '*colonisation*' thesis; and a later position in which he calls for mediation between the two spheres, the '*mediation thesis*' (Delanty, 1999; Jones, 2001b). In both positions, the issue of space – that is, *the space between the spheres* – becomes

the axial principle around which Habermas' project turns. This section of the paper will briefly describe both of these positions before turning to the implications for social work.

The 'colonisation' thesis

Before dealing with the concept of 'colonisation', it is necessary to define two, primary, *analytical* constructs in Habermas' work. The first, following Schutz, is referred to as the 'lifeworld' (1987). Put simply, the 'lifeworld' is the everyday, taken-for-granted world of human interaction. As the natural habitat of social life, it concerns the interpretive schemas employed by social actors in their daily quests to make sense of the social world. Such intuitive know-how operates, in the main, without problem. Social actors go about their business pursuing 'their own individual goals under the condition that they can harmonise their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions' (Habermas, 1984, p.286).

By way of contrast (in the sense of being analytically distinct from the 'lifeworld'), the 'system' is the formal domain of the State and economy under capitalism. For Habermas, it is riven with 'technocratic consciousness' resulting firstly in the widespread and commodifying use of money and power to achieve pre-determined, strategic ends; and secondly, in the adherence to bureaucratic and legalistic practices.

With these constructs in place, Habermas' argument proceeds (in extreme skeletal form) as follows. In the early development of the State the lifeworld and system were separate ontological domains, distinct in their own right and yet interdependent in the sense of sourcing the other's increasing rationalisation. The space between them, consequently, was inviolable. However, in advanced capitalism, the 'system' has colonised the 'lifeworld' much as an amoeba might engulf a particle. In this period, the hitherto, untainted communicative exchanges within the lifeworld gave way to state-driven, technocratic remedies. The space was compromised, alienation set in and citizens retreated into an insipid civic privatism sustained by rampant consumerism.

The 'mediation' thesis

The 'mediation' thesis, developed later, re-constructs the relationship between 'lifeworld' and 'system' in a conciliatory direction. Habermas advances this mature position through the lens of the role of law in modern democracies. For law to maintain its legitimacy it must have public assent – a characteristic sadly lacking in parliamentary democracy. Habermas argues that this assent can be achieved through deliberative democracy where citizens are active in debating issues that are central

to their lives, primarily those centring on rights and obligations. Thus, the State's laws must find their legitimacy in public discourse. Furthermore, liberal democratic polities must not become independent domains operating solely according to their own criteria that are unresponsive to the needs of the lifeworld. Hence, lifeworld and system mediate to produce law that is authoritative and yet responsive to the ever changing landscape of modern pluralistic societies: 'law can be preserved as legitimate only if enfranchised citizens switch from the role of private legal subjects and take the perspective of participants who are engaged in the process of reaching understanding about the rules for their life common'. (Habermas, 1996, p.461).

Implications for social work

There have been few attempts to extrapolate the colonisation thesis to social work in the United Kingdom. Blaug (1995), being one of the few to make such an attempt, argues that Habermas' critical theory 'calls for a more meaningful inclusion of users in the design and operation of services' (p.434). For him, 'the progressive colonisation of communicative practices ... and the denial of resources ... is a toxic brew' (p.435). Yet, from Habermas's writings on welfare (during this intermediate position), it is doubtful whether social work could free itself from its position within the 'system' where it performed a pacifying, compensatory function to quell discontent within the lifeworld (1987, p.350-351). Put more simply, social work was cast as an ideological vehicle of the State and consequently, one might read into this view the profession's limited power of manoeuvre. The extent to which it could therefore shift into the space between lifeworld and system to effect emancipatory forms of practice appears questionable if the colonisation thesis holds good.

In the later 'mediation' thesis, Habermas still writes in critical terms about paternalistic welfare regimes, but at the same time re-casts the system in more benevolent terms. Practices – say of a welfare kind – that are deliberative (involve unconstrained dialogue), democratic (allow full participation) and consensual (aim for the common good) operate as a bridge between lifeworld and system. In effect they convey the needs of the ordinary citizen and, moreover, the system is obligated to take these needs into account when new policies or procedures are being developed. Social work, therefore, can move out of its entrenched position in the system and enter the space between it and the lifeworld – if the mediation thesis holds good. In doing so, its mission is to develop forms of practice that are deliberative, democratic and consensual. Fortunately, there are already some veritable examples of these types of practice already in operation including Family Group Conferences, the attention to user perspectives and the focus on rights based social work. In these different models and forms of practice the voice of the system and lifeworld are reconciled and social work becomes (successfully) Janus-faced, meeting its systemic obligations while attending to users' pleas to listen, show respect and communicate (Howe, 1993).

In more general terms, Habermasian space insists that social work must fulfil the system's regulatory framework in a more equivocal, questioning way that dispenses with the 'bad faith' of apolitical rectitude. When state driven measures privilege administrative criteria over need, social work must challenge their validity through the moral yardstick of communicative action. On the other hand, social work must look out to the lifeworld with a broad commitment to deliberative democracy. We can learn much from other European States whose commitment to principles of subsidiarity, solidarity and social capital facilitate the development of 'bottom up' policies and practices. Moreover:

... these principles are concretised in the form of intermediate institutions. For example, the Flemish welfare regime makes use of mediation committees as an alternative to formalised judicial intervention. These committees protect civil life from unwanted intrusions by the state or judiciary while at the same time discharge clear responsibilities in matters of social concern. In effect, a space is created for voluntary intervention with families as an alternative to legal compulsion (Houston, 2002, p. 309).

Foucault's contribution to space for social work

The work of Foucault spans over four decades and therefore any attempt to interpret his contribution for social work must be cautious. Two particular strands of his work are highlighted in this brief commentary in an attempt to consider their implications for understanding existing and potential space for social work. The first strand of his work relates to his analysis of the nature of discipline, punishment and surveillance within the context of the emergence of modern penal and welfare systems, in particular, his seminal contribution *Discipline and Punish (1977)*. In addition to examining the way in which new mechanisms of surveillance in penal and psychiatric institutions emerged, Foucault also considers the nature of social professions such as judges, teachers, philanthropists and social workers. While Foucault did not write a great deal about social work, his theorisation of: the nature of power and discourse; governmentality; disciplinary strategies, regulation and surveillance; has influenced the authors of social work literature such as Philp (1979), Donzelot (1980), Dingwall et al (1983; 1988), Parton (1991; 1996; 1998, 1999) and Skehill (2003, 2004), all of whom are concerned with the particular nature and position of social work within the 'social'.

The authors referred to share the view that social work operates within a certain 'social' space (albeit grey and diffuse) between the objective mechanisms of regulation, surveillance and government – such as legislation, policy, procedures and governing structures – and the subjective world of the individual who experience this regulation.

It is generally argued that it is within this space of the social that social work is deemed to operate as a disciplinary and mediating strategy. Philp (1979) provides one of the most succinct considerations of the nature of social work within this space. He argues that social work occupies a particular and unique position within the social wherein it effectively acts as a buffer between the individual and the mechanisms of governance to which s/he is subjected. Within a modern liberal context, the aim of governance is that individuals are self-regulatory, independent and free from external regulation. Take child welfare as an example: those parents who ascribe to accepted norms and morals of child-rearing in a modern world experience little regulation or intervention from governing forces – *because they self-regulate according to accepted norms and morals of family life* - whereas those parents who fail to ascribe to such norms and morals come under surveillance. In consequence, they are subjected to disciplinary interventions of moralisation and normalisation within the context of a tutelary or legislative framework. For social work, the aim is to intervene with the latter category of family in order to promote self-regulation or in Philp's terms, the 'creation of subjects'. Analyses of the nature of child protection and welfare interventions in France (Donzelot, 1980), Britain (Parton, 1991) and Republic of Ireland (Skehill, 2003, 2004) attempt to illuminate the manner in which social work occupies its space within the 'social' in terms of balancing between regulation of objective behaviour – essentially child abuse and neglect as it is normatively defined at any one point in time – and the promotion of subjectivities aimed at encouraging 'deviant' parents and families to become self-regulatory and thus free from coercive or disciplinary interventions.

The second strand of Foucault's work which offers a framework for theorising social work in a critical and transformative manner is his use of a 'history of the present' approach which encourages analyses of strategies such as social work by studying both its archaeological and genealogical construction as a strategy. For Foucault, archaeology and genealogy are intrinsically linked. Archaeology considers the rules of formation in the creation of knowledge and discourses while genealogy considers how some discourses come to be accepted, to constitute 'reality', while others are rejected. In other words, archaeology refers to the way in which social work as a discourse is constructed from within, while genealogy refers to the surrounding conditions of possibility which both enable and constrain its operation within the social. At any one moment in time, these conditions vary depending on political, social, intellectual and institutional influences that surround the strategy (see Garland, 1992). By analysing the archaeological construction of social work within the context of ever-changing genealogical conditions, Foucault's work can contribute towards an appreciation of social work as a means of gaining creative 'social' space. This will be the focus of the following section.

Implications for social work

Followers of Foucault might ask whether social work in the 21st century still has the authority to act as a technique within the 'social' and mediate between regulation and the promotion of subjectivity? Given the increased regulatory nature of governance, is there still room for social work to promote self-regulation and independence from statutory surveillance? It is argued here that social work continues to occupy this position, but the space in the social has been gravely undermined and curtailed by the neo-liberal context. Within an increasingly managerial, bureaucratic and proceduralised system of objective governance, the autonomy of social workers has been diminished and the space available for their activities has been reduced. In other words, consideration of the genealogical conditions surrounding social work at present can sometimes result in a bleak view on the potential for social work to exercise power over its own archaeological construction, nature and form. Indeed, questions have been raised about the very future of social work within this context (Clarke, 1996) and concern has been expressed that, by its nature, neo-liberalism limits the space for social work. On the ground, social workers are feeling the weight of the regulatory mechanisms and often see little possibility for operating as autonomous professionals. The effect of this is that the 'expertise' of social work, its 'regime of truth' (Philp, 1979) is thrown into doubt.

However, considering the nature and position of social work from a 'history of the present' perspective, it would appear that social work as a strategy continues to hold certain power over its own destiny. Although constrained within its conditions of possibility, possibilities for 'putting the social back into social work' (Howe, 1996) are identifiable: potential to change our surrounding genealogical conditions may be limited, but the opportunity for social work to pay attention to its own archaeological construction and pry open greater space for mediation continues. Use of Foucault's work to develop a critical understanding of power, in and for social work, offers an effective starting point. From this point we can begin to critically reflect on how social work discourses are constructed within our current context. Critical perspectives on power and 'history of the present' methodologies, allow us to consider ways in which a more proactive stance can be taken within the social work discourse. Consideration can be given, not just to the forces that constrain social work, but also the potential of social work for empowering, promoting independence, freeing from regulation, and developing emancipatory practice.

A Kleinian approach to space

There are a number of arguments for using the analytical category of 'space' in this paper. Sometimes the historical development of social work is described in a rather uni-dimensional way, often associated with developments in the British welfare state, and changes in professional knowledge (Clarke, 1996), or in the context of dualities – agency and structure; personal and political. The concept of space helps us to describe and analyse the fluidity and uncertainty which increasingly characterises social work in a post-structural world (Healey, 1999). Shifting assumptions about risk and the legitimacy of professional knowledge create anxieties and challenges for practitioners and employers who often strive for evenness of function and certainty of judgement. On the other hand, the acknowledgment of tension and contradiction in role can be used in progressive ways, both to gain knowledge about the self and to build practice which can enhance the lives of service users. In this section the work of Klein and post-Kleinian theorists will be used to explore how one aspect of the psychoanalytical tradition can be used to explore these tensions. It is argued that this theory base can help us reveal the complex relationships between the internal world of the self and the practitioner, and the external social world which is often oppressive.

Connecting internal and external worlds

Much contemporary critical theory is preoccupied with the following problematic: how can we differentiate and prioritise the factors which connect the individualised world of personal thought and action with the wider world of social and political relationships? Klein's (1963) original contribution focused on the way primitive instincts in early infancy affect the potential for growth in personal relationships in later life. The theory posits that the willingness to live propels the infant to human relatedness, particularly with the mother. But there also exists the more sinister forces of the death instinct which can only be modified by the containing function of the mother or other good object. It is this crucial juncture that creates the platform for relationship building in later life. If these primitive instincts are not adequately contained, then 'splitting' can occur. In this situation, human relationships are idealised and viewed as all good, or devalued and viewed as all bad. In both scenarios the child, and later, adult, approaches relationships unrealistically, and generally fails to appreciate the complexity of social life. Klein describes this state of mind as the paranoid schizoid position, characterised by the projection of our own 'bad parts' or thoughts into others which in turn leads to a generally distrustful view of human relationships. On the other hand, good containment in early, and even later life, can help create a positive worldview, one in which trust and safety is experienced in human relationships. This is reflected

in an acknowledgment of the ambiguities of social relationships and a concern for the needs of others. What is also developed is an awareness of the need for reparation when things go wrong within our selves and our contact with others. Klein describes this as the depressed position.

One of the interesting developments in Kleinian theory over the past few decades has been the search to make sense of how intra psychic phenomena can be used to understand broader social and political forces, in this respect it fits with other, past attempts to link psychodynamic ideas with critical theory (Hinshelwood, 1996). Rustin (1991), for example, has argued that the work of Klein can be translated into wider social contexts, and used to build more egalitarian structures and reparative social relationships. He discusses how developments in British post-war family, juvenile delinquency and educational services were profoundly influenced by the work of object relations theorists and a collective optimism about the capacity for society to care. Perhaps this is a rose-tinted appraisal of that historical moment, but a contrast can be drawn with a less reparative and more destructive relationships which can be found in many current health and social welfare agencies. For example, Valentine (1994) uses the idea of the social worker as a 'bad object' to illustrate the development of the moral panic which surrounds the contemporary issue of child abuse in Britain. Valentine concludes that the proposed increase in bureaucratic regulations, and defensive social work caused by introjected anxieties, only serve to strengthen the pathological cycle of blame directed at the 'bad object'. The model has also been used to deconstruct the language and behaviour at the level of international war and violence. Segal's (1995) critique of Cold War politics described how attributes of good and evil are necessarily separated out in government and military discourses. Group or national harsh objects are projected into the other as part of a destructive, dehumanising process which in turn allows for reactionary politics to flourish. This point has been made elsewhere in the context of violence in Northern Ireland (Kapur and Campbell, 2004).

Kleinian ideas and social work

It has been argued that Kleinian theory can provide insights, not just into individual personal suffering and pain, but also the hostile and irrational manner in which social and political structures often function. How then might these ideas help create space for progressive social work practice? To begin with, at the personal level, object relations theory encourages the critical examination of the construction of our own internal relationships – the sort of battle which goes on in our mind about security of belief and judgement (the way this tension is played out is largely determined, not just through past objects, but through how we reconstruct new relationships as we have grown up). This sense of self-reflection is an essential attribute of sound social work practice, for example, where we should try to understand how our actions

can lead to the punishment of, or overdependence on clients, because of our own internal uncertainties. This fundamental awareness of the frailties of the self is crucial in work with all client groups. In the field of adult mental health, for example, Bion (1959) describes how 'faulty' human relationships, caused, for example by projective identification (the insertion of my unhealthy ideas into the 'other') or conversely, introjective identification (where we receive the pathologies of others into ourselves) creates conflicts in group processes at staff and group psychotherapeutic levels. Kleinian ideas can also provide insights into the mechanisms of social structure, where institutions are often characterised by a culture of paranoia, harshness and a willingness to blame 'the other'.

In conclusion, it is important to return to our theme of space and opportunities for change. Kleinian theory provides an opportunity for practitioners to contemplate the space in which the profession occupies because it encourages us to think more seriously, not just about the lives of our clients, but our own intrapsychic worries, as well as our potential to harm and be harmed. But it offers something more than this to social workers, their agencies and wider society. If critical theory is about change and the desire to create 'the good society', then this more expanded version of Klein's thesis is relevant. It is relevant because injustice as well as the projection and introjection of guilt and blame constantly occur, and reparative acts are difficult to contemplate. Social work is implicated in these dynamics in its everyday relationships with clients, in social work agencies and in the social structures which close down opportunities for growth and development.

A Marxist approach to space

For Marxists, a 'social work space' must be located within the social structures and processes that flow from the global dominance of capitalism in its imperialist phase. This means that social work must be understood as systemic, dynamic and historical. This perspective is also based on the premise that contemporary Britain is a leading capitalist social formation and as such the productive and reproductive capacity by which it survives depends on the exploitation by capital of labour, both nationally and internationally. Also, that exploitation and the management of the associated social contradictions are facilitated by the relationship between the state and civil society through both the repressive and ideological state apparatus. The latter includes welfare provision as one aspect of the distribution of resources from individuals and groups directly involved in the system of production, either on the side of capital or of labour, to those individuals or groups who, for reasons such as age or illness, are not directly involved in production. The provision of state services is a significant part of the state's care and control of one sector of civil society, the working class, to the advantage of another, the capitalist class.

Such a Marxist approach, accepts from traditional systems theory, its emphasis on the interdependence of variables in social systems and in the analysis of social institutions. However, traditional systems theories have a tendency not to present any one variable as of greater importance than any other, outside the contingent conjuncture of any particular historical moment. Alternatively, they suggest that the value elements are marginally the most significant; thus highlighting the normative base of social formations and thereby the central place of value-consensus in their successful maintenance and modification. By contrast, a Marxist approach deals with the problem of how to identify the focal system by granting a privileged position to the economic base of any social formation. By then insisting on the dialectical relationship between the super-structural political and cultural reproductive systems and the infrastructure of the system of economic production, all the various components of a social formation retain their relative autonomy and their particular, albeit constrained, contribution to the shape and direction of the social formation as a whole. As the ultimately determinant economic sub-system is regarded by Marxists to be the site of continuous contest over the expropriation of the surplus value of labour, any assumption that orderly consensus does, or even should, characterise a social formation and its various sub-systems has to be abandoned. Instead, it is assumed that the differences of power and interest and the ensuing conflict found in the economic sphere will have effect within the various other sub-systems within the state and within civil society: 'systems are often in a state of continuous strain caused by the striving for 'functional autonomy' of elements within the system and the controlling, coercive and legitimating efforts of the more powerful 'managerial elements' (Leonard, 1975).

Social work is located in the contested space between the state and civil society. It is the encounter between two individuals - one in need, 'a casualty/survivor'; the other a service provider, there 'to identify, respond to and control'. Understanding the characteristics of this interaction requires both recognition of its objective structural determinants and what the encounter means to those involved. The subjective immediacy of the pain and relief, hope and despair that the encounter may bring to either or both actors must not be dismissed. The pain and suffering of the individual casualty/survivor may be an experience inseparable from human existence - for example loss, bereavement, aging and death. Whilst emphasising that such experiences will bear the effect of their societal context they are not reducible to that context. However, it is the persistent awareness of the social contextualising of human experience within a capitalist social formation that makes the Marxist position distinctive.

Characterising social work by the relationship between worker and service user draws attention to the way that social workers, in being required to play a controlling and authoritarian role as state functionaries, have also to be directly exposed and responsive to both individual suffering and class oppression. As a result, they

experience a deep seated ambivalence based on the objective contradiction of their systemic positioning which provides the cause of the constantly shifting, contracting and expanding social work space. For both social workers and service users to increase their control over this situation, a theory and practice (praxis) is required that will focus on linking the individual, the collective and the wider social forces in relationships of survival and resistance.

Three important Marxist positions can be identified in this regard. First, the progressive position views social work as a catalyst for social change. This is because social workers typically work with clients who are poor and working class, that is, members of the most exploited class under capitalism. Social workers are therefore well placed to harness and raise working class consciousness and transform the nature of class society.

Second, in the reproductive position, social work is identified as an indispensable part of the capitalist state machine. It functions to produce, maintain and reproduce working class subordination. Social workers are the 'soft cops' of the capitalist state. Attempts at empowerment are either viewed as nugatory or piecemeal.

Last, the contradictory position suggests that social work is held both to reproduce and to undermine the conditions of class society. It acts as an instrument of class control, and also creates the conditions for the liquidation of the class domination. As this is the favoured position more will be said. In their brief account of Contradictory Position Marxism, Rojek, Peacock and Collins (1989, p. 63-68) stress that whilst it shares with the other two positions the focus on the relationship between social welfare provision and capitalism, it brings a distinctive perspective to this question through emphasis on contradiction.

In *Towards Socialist Welfare*, Bolger, Corrigan, Docking and Frost set out their understanding of contradiction as follows:

.... in common parlance for a person to admit that their argument is built around a contradiction is to admit that they have a major problem in their argument, that they are not really consistent. For us and for most Marxists, the concept of contradiction within social structures is essential. A contradiction within a structure must not be confused with a difference between one structure and another. A contradiction means that there are elements of that structure that can only be fully realised, can only be fully put into effect by destroying other elements of that structure. This means that the structure is in constant tension, since simultaneously one part of the structure can only be successfully realised at the expense of another (Bolger *et al.*, 1981, p.3).

Implications for practice

In this last position, then, space encapsulates the analysis of contradiction and its unfolding praxis. In concrete terms, this entails an ongoing struggle between, on the one hand, fulfilling the State's ideological remit (to care, cure or control) and, on the other, the need to empower those affected by the inequalities inherent within capitalist society. Pincus and Minahan's (1973) basic model of social work systems might provide a practical template for managing this contradictory endeavour. By separating out the client system from the change, target and action systems, social workers might begin to use contradictory space creatively. In particular, target systems do not necessarily need to focus on the client; they can involve repressive institutions. In fact, this re-casting of systems theory away from its traditional, functionalist and conservative leanings privileges the target system in terms of the economic base. Moreover, action systems can harness important alliances including user advocacy groups; and social workers, as the agents of change, can employ methods that empower such as self-directed groupwork (Mullender & Ward, 1991). They can also give attention to important skills such as advocacy, brokerage, mediation, alliance-building, networking, resourcing and modelling.

Conclusion: Towards a dialogue of discomfort

The perspectives outlined above transverse a landscape of modern, late-modern and postmodern contours in social work theorising. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that these sections of the paper stand as four rigidly compartmentalised sets of ideas reinforcing a sectarian stance never to be aligned. In undertaking this exercise each of the authors has been forced to interrogate their ideas from one of the other three perspectives, to enter into a *dialogue of discomfort* that challenges and questions whether theoretical premises can be re-worked in the light of competing ideas on social life.

One important consequence of this undertaking has been the need to confront the cardinal sin of reductionism (Sibeon, 2004); that is to reduce the complexity of social life to one overarching, theoretical prime mover. For example, we have been reminded that crude Marxist approaches might be guilty of privileging materiality while ignoring the salience of language and unconscious processes. The opening up opportunities to reflect on social space may be reduced in consequence. Moreover, the deficiencies of a Kleinian perspective in accounting for transformative agency have been exposed in our deliberations concerning Habermas' persuasive ideas on the ontogenesis of the human subject. For each of the authors these challenges create a dynamic that seeks to enlarge thinking by embracing pioneering attempts

to build bridges across set paradigms. Once such attempt, as we have argued earlier, is Rustin's (1991) development of a traditional Kleinian position. Rustin probes the interplay between the micro and macro domains of social life. In our emerging dialogue, we have also considered how Habermas' idealism might be tempered by Layder's (1997) realist adaptation of his theory and Lacan's (1966) excavation into structural linguistics. Such refinements in thinking lead to a more nuanced, fluid and sophisticated view of space.

For the authors, this dialogue has also effected a convergence of thinking around a number of meta-theoretical ideas bounded by the notion of space. Formative here are ideas relating to agency and structure, or lifeworld and system, state and civil society and so on. Each of the authors have contextualised these domains from different theoretical standpoints, but central to them all is the premise of social workers as transformative agents who can seize on the notion of space to discursively analyse practice. More significantly, taking account of its *recursive* potential (Giddens, 1984), space should be given primacy in critical social work thinking. In other words, space, as an analytical enclosure, is both the *medium* and *outcome* of critical discursive inquiry; that is, by using space as a means for analysing practice and intervening more effectively we in turn both re-produce and, in certain conditions, extend its boundaries.

This enabling characteristic of recursive space should not detract from its constraining nature. Nor does it imply that space is easily approached. Rather, our dialogue has revealed that space can be understood as a contested enclosure, one that is socially constructed, messy, indeterminate, erratic, contradictory and shaped by spatial and temporal contexts. Moreover, we argue that it is deeply embroiled with power. These enabling, constraining and fluid aspects of space should make the experience of social work unpredictable, but never banal. Working at the boundary of constraint and opportunity, as the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1967) claims, is where knowledge acquisition reaches its zenith and where human agents find the 'courage to be'.

The process of entering into a dialogue of discomfort around the differing perspectives also adumbrates the importance of alliance building in social work. Market driven cultures in academia and a dispirited profession have created the conditions for atomisation and organisational climates driven by individualism. We have found that the heuristic of space challenges these tendencies by energising debate and paving the way for a vanguard that focuses on the central importance of anti-oppressive social work, regardless of its theoretical moorings.

The concept of space has been discussed in terms four theoretical perspectives and the resulting rudimentary conclusions related to social work. No doubt these preliminary conclusions can be refined over time. Nonetheless, we recommend that the concept is evoked and institutionalised in academic, educative and practice settings now, when social work faces a crossroads, and in the hope that, with the passage of time, the boundaries of space may be re-drawn.

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