

Social Work and Social Care seminar:

Social Work, Neoliberalism and Neo-eugenics

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Introduction

Although it is customary to express one's delight at being afforded the honour to address an esteemed audience at a highly respected institution, such as we are doing today, given the focus of my talk, I feel perhaps delight is not an emotion to be expressed this evening. When we think about the fire at Grenfell Tower that took place just 5 miles from here in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, we are rightly filled with horror and anger. How can so many people needlessly perish in the richest borough in the world? But, when the noise of protest subsides, as it no doubt will, who will be highlighting a silent genocide that is reflected in disparities in life expectancy as high as 20 years between the poorest parts of the UK and the wealthiest, such as Kensington and Chelsea. And these patterns with even starker disparities are reflected across the developed and developing world and are increasing. And so, perhaps feelings of urgency and anger at what is happening around us, are more apposite than rather than pleasure. Whilst we are rightly reminded of the threat of terrorist violence, we cannot forget the violence of the present economic system. As Chris Williamson Labour MP and shadow minister for fire and emergency services noted, 'The survivors of Grenfell are not the only ones to suffer the violence of neoliberalism. Those who have experienced the sharp end of the free market know the truth of this event only too well: that neoliberalism is a threat to human life' (4th Aug 2017, Independent).

In this public lecture, I will be offering a bleak assessment of the state of social work and social welfare and indeed the wider socio-economic milieu that we are living through. Across the world, east, west, north south, developed and developing world, we see the emergence of real spectre of fascism. In the US, for example, who could have thought that an openly racist president could have been elected! But most worryingly Trump is not alone and we can see very same hate rhetoric resonating across the continents of the world. This big concern is that until recent times the language and rhetoric of hate, of blaming the other, the refugee, the poor landless peasant, the ex-mill/ship worker, the young working-class mother, welfare recipients, homeless people, first peoples, the Dalits and so on etc was propagated by extreme right-wing groups. However, today, we see the emergence of new right Nationalisms, that are increasingly shaping the public policy agenda. The election of Modi in India,

Trump, and a whole range of right wing politicians through Europe, and our own Brexit reflect the growing appeal to populist nationalism seeds of hatred.

Though we should certainly be wary of the overt manifestations of prejudice against vulnerable groups, I want to argue that beneath the surface, often cloaked within more subtle discourse, in response to the ongoing crisis of neoliberalism, ruling elites are reconstructing a dangerous new regressive common sense about the nature of welfare state and of welfare recipients. This is built around a three-pronged strategy; first, ongoing and sustained attacks on progressive sociological critiques of power and oppression; second, a diminishing of focus on poverty and the damaging effects of structural inequalities (Hill and Hart, 2016; Garrett, 2016); and third an uncritical embrace of 'an increasingly political biology' in the guise of 'epigenetics', which seeks to link environmental factors to gene expression. (White and Wastell, 2016:1). In contrast to the previous crude eugenics of the early 20th century, that social destiny can be simply determined according to genetic make-up, this contemporary manifestation, hides behind 'a vastly more complex biological cloak.' (Dorling, 2011: 113). And so, as well as outlining the history and significance of the struggles against oppression in social work, the lecture will uncover some of the worrying trends towards an altogether more sinister model of practice that is deeply implicated by what Katz (2013) terms 'neo-eugenics'.

Crisis of neo-liberalism

It is impossible to understand the problems facing contemporary social care/social work without examining the nature and antecedents of the crisis of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a term that in its literate form [new liberalism] sounds quite benign. However, the reality is very different; in essence neoliberalism represents a policy perspective based on a simple belief that free market approaches are the best way to; create wealth, unleash innovation and generate efficiency, and these mechanisms can be applied to almost every sector of the economy, both private and public. The inevitable consequence of such policies is large scale privatisation and a much-reduced state, whose prime role is to act as a broker and regulator for the provision of services. A more expanded dynamic economy, it is argued will result in wealth naturally trickling down to create a win win situation!

The crisis of neoliberalism really takes hold in a spectacular manner when the corporate banks, from Wall Street to Canary Wharf came tumbling in 2008/9. This led to some commentators to suggest that the neoliberal project had reached its endgame. As the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz noted at the time:

Today, there is a mismatch between social and private returns. Unless they are closely aligned, the market system cannot work well. Neo-liberal market fundamentalism was always a political doctrine serving certain interests. It was never supported by economic theory. Nor, it should now be clear, is it supported by historical experience. Learning this lesson may be the silver lining in the cloud now hanging over the global economy. (2008: 2)

However, far from heralding a new settlement, with the instigation a dual track policy of bail-outs of the banks and austerity, as Belzer and Wayne (2017) note, since 2008 we have seen 'greatest theft from the public in our entire history'. And far from witnessing its demise, we have seen is an intensification of neoliberalism with the consequences most acutely felt by those least able to resist its impacts, resulting, amongst other in a rapid rise in poverty and inequality. A report by Oxfam, for example, estimates that between 2010 – 2020, 25% of British children will be living in poverty and an additional '1.5 million working-age adults are expected to fall into poverty, bringing the total to 17.5 per cent of this group.' (Oxfam, 2013:2). Other effects of austerity are a significant rise in suicide rates, particularly amongst older males and disabled people (Antonakakis & Collins, 2015; New Scientist, 17.11.2015).

A blog by the *Social workers and service users against austerity campaign*, outlines a growing evidence base of the direct impacts of austerity on children's social care practices. For children and families, this has led increasing levels of mental and physical ill health, powerlessness, loss of self-esteem and alienation, whereas practitioners with increasing caseloads and diminishing resources and frequent staff turnover are pushed towards narrow, time-limited and risk averse models of intervention where relationship based practice becomes a luxury. (Gupta & ATD Fourth World, 2017)

One of the promises of neoliberal economic theory is that if you encourage wealth creation and enterprise, like wealth begins to trickle down to benefit all. This simply has not happened! Inequality has returned levels on a scale that can be hard to imagine; according to a recent report by Oxfam 'almost half of the world's wealth is now owned by just one percent of the population, and seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years' (Oxfam 2014). This unravelling of the welfare state poses a fundamental problem for the state – what do we do with people who have welfare needs? In the present moment of austerity as noted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, we are witnessing 'a quiet resurgence of the seductive language of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor', where references to fecklessness and irresponsibility have become such effective drivers of the coalition's welfare reform legislation. (Guardian, 27.1.2012)

One of the most revealing statistics is the effects of cuts in disability living allowance by force people back to work. The government's own data as reported in the Guardian (27th Aug 2015) revealed, during the period December 2011 and February 2014 2,380 people died after their claim for employment and support allowance (ESA) ended because a work capability assessment (WCA) found they were found fit for work.' Similarly, in relation to asylum seekers, there is growing evidence that can Government policies, either by withdrawing entitlements to public funds or deliberately delaying asylum claims is pushing many into destitution.

Just last month in the Guardian it was reported that because of welfare cuts, crippling rent rises and looming inflation more than 2 million poor families will be more than £50 a week worse off by the end of the decade. Most strikingly almost two-thirds of

them are working households, which betrays the claims from ministers that they wish to create a welfare system that encourages work.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/sep/09/two-million-uk-families-face-50-pound-week-cut-income>

Such increasing levels of poverty, if not blaming the poor, are often rationalised in terms of a poorly performing economy. However, it was not a shortage of money that has led to such devastating levels of inequality, but, through the state bailout of the failing banks, a direct transfer of money from the most to the least needy [Lavalette, 2018]. The policy of austerity, that was instituted to pay for the bailout, as well as leading to levels of poverty comparable to the 1930's is accompanied with unprecedented cuts in social protections and new insidious attacks on those most reliant on public services and state protection (Stewart, 2016).

And so, whilst in some senses we are seeing history repeat itself, we are also witnessing a new world in which existing challenges faced by welfare professionals related to questions of human rights, social justice and ethical practice, are manifest in new and increasingly complex and dangerous ways. Whilst perhaps there never was a perfect time to do social work, the adage 'are social worker's agents of social change or social control' comes sharply into focus when we consider the contemporary challenges facing the profession. This comes from the fact that being positioned at the interface between bureaucracies, both state and increasingly private, and the most vulnerable people in society, they/we have the potential to do immense good, but also immense harm! Though social workers are bound by a set of independent professional ethics, one cannot deny the reality that social workers' autonomy is mediated by the objectives of the (neoliberal) state. However, as Comley, (1989: 63) notes, 'social workers can make effective use of this position' only if they are able to think critically about 'welfare and the assumptions that mediate its forms' and only by doing so can they 'counteract their own involvement in the reproduction of oppressive social relations.'

Across the 'developed' world, though there are notable differences, social work services were essentially born out the establishment and expansion of social protections. The three pillars the 'post-war consensus' spanning a period between 1945 and 1980 emphasised the importance of collectivism, a mixed economy and a welfare state (Toye, 2013). However, from the early 1980's we have seen a gradual erosion of all three aspects to a point where, particularly within the current climate of austerity, talk of a 'post welfare' state can no longer dismissed as idle speculation. Whereas previously, social protection measures were seen to have a beneficial economic rationale, within a Keynesian framework, we now see the view that welfare cuts should not be viewed as an inconvenient necessity, but are rather a pre-requisite for economic growth and development. Coining the notion of 'expansionary austerity' influential economists like Reinhard and Rogoff (2011) have argued that in consumer based economies, austerity is a good thing because it can lead to lower interest rates and therefore a boost in investment. The articulation of ideas like this reveals how generalised the earlier work of Milton Friedman and the Chicago school of economics has become. Stuart Hall, originator of the term 'Thatcherism', has argued in a one of

his final pieces of writing, the period we are now living through in our time represents nothing less than the creation of a new form of capitalist hegemony:

...in ambition, depth, degree of break with the past, variety of sites being colonised, impact on common sense, shift in the social architecture, neoliberalism does constitute a hegemonic project. Today, popular thinking and the systems of calculation in daily life offer very little friction to the passage of its ideas. Delivery may be more difficult: new and old contradictions still haunt the edifice, in the very process of its reconstruction. Still, in terms of laying foundations and staging the future on favourable ground, the neoliberal project is several stages further on (Hall, 2011).

Capitalism, accumulation and dehumanisation

One of the many consequences of capitalist expansion is dehumanisation and destruction of peoples – this is an unescapable fact and remains one of the central contradictions of the present age. Throughout the past 200 years or so of capitalist development one of the challenges facing ruling elites was, how to legitimise the impoverishment of populations and their own elite status? Whether this was at home in relation to the exploitation of the working classes, the Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of black Africans, the systematic brutalisation of 'indigenous and first nation people, or the process of colonisation and the expansion of empire, the elites had to devise some rationale for their wealth, power and status. Quite simply they had to develop systems of thought that could not only justify inequality as a natural consequence inherent differences but also that indeed such inequalities were beneficial. (Dorling, 2011:103). As C. Wright Mills in his book *The Power Elite* notes:

"people with advantages are loath to believe that they just happen to be people with advantages. They come readily to define themselves as inherently worthy of what they possess; they come to believe themselves "naturally" elite; and, in fact, to imagine their possessions and their privileges as natural extensions of their own elite selves (p14)." (C.Wright Mills, (1956/2000) *The Power Elite*, Oxford)

The Marxist scholar David Harvey has suggested, human disparities far from being the result of the uneven distribution of 'natural abilities', are directly a result of 'dispossession' s accomplished through violence, war, enslavement, and colonialism; this process begins by dispossessing and expelling people of the land, thus creating 'a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatised mainstream of capital accumulation' (2005, p149). In today's world of complex finance and private property, essentially, we are seeing the massive acceleration of this theft!

Of course, rarely do the ruling elites admit that their system is unjust or that they may be acting in ways that is wrong. This justification of the virtues of accumulation by the few can be illustrated in the work of the 19th Century capitalist economist Adam Smith (1776) who, in his classic work *'An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth'*,

invokes the concept of 'the invisible hand' to describe the unintended social benefits of individual self-interested actions. These same ideas were deployed by the neoliberal economist Friedrich Hayek (1944/2014), who, in his seminal text, *The Road to Serfdom*, argues that markets should be unchained and left to the free-flowing 'natural order of the invisible hand'.

It was this kind of rationalization of theft that Marx was alluding to in the German Ideology when he noted that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas."

In other words, without being able to deploy some form of rationalisation and arguably co-option of the oppressed in this process, the project of dispossession would simply have not succeeded. In other words, accumulation through dispossession needed to be defended, if not as a moral enterprise, then one that was constituted in the 'natural order of things'.

One of the most appealing and insidious theories to be developed to provide 'natural' justification the dispositions of populations was that of Social Darwinism. This theory, based on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution offered a simplistic yet seductive explanation for social inequalities, namely that they were essentially the result of biological natural selection resulting in the ascendancy and survival of the fittest. This theory had the capacity to transcend many prevailing and developing ideas, from the philosophical underpinnings of scientific racism, through to ideas about human intelligence and inherited genetic traits in the 19th and 20th Century (Dickens, 2000).

If scientific racism was later exposed to be based on dangerous myths and fallacies about innate human biological difference (Montagu, 2001), this did and has not stopped those in power developing new and increasingly sophisticated ways to demonization of the poor, minorities, women and indeed all groups that deviate from the prevailing mythical norms of society (Lorde, 1984).

Beverly Skeggs, whose work focusses particularly on poor working-class women argues that in the present moment, we are witnessing a rearticulating of the 'theory of monstrosity' that was developed first in sixteenth century England to legitimate violence used against labour and the poor:

No longer branded with burning metal, the unemployed and working-class mothers in the UK in the 2000s are now inscribed by the symbolic violence of government policy promoted and popularized by a media that subjects them to contemporary slow death (slow, because the welfare state offers some

protection, as do charities). The working-class mothers and unemployed are blamed for the global structural problems made by capital, capitalists and the state. (Skeggs, (2014)

Though we may have abandoned the crude scientific language of 20th Century Social Darwinism (imbecile, cretin, moron, retards, feeble minded, negro, mongoloid etc.) human oppression and social divisions continue to play a key role in determining life chances. Much of this progress was achieved through social movements that emerged in the post war period (welfare activism, feminism, anti-racism, gay rights, disability activism, student activism etc) confronting dehumanising ideologies and practices, by exposing 'common sense' ideologies about human difference and ability, they challenge systems of thought and classification of populations associated with biological determinism and in doing so made a powerful case for equality and social justice.

Social production of moral indifference.

When the eighteenth century Irish political philosopher Edmund Burke proclaimed that *"In order for evil to flourish, all that is required is for good men to do nothing"* he was drawing attention to the dangerous consequences of moral indifference. Indeed, if one looks at the Nazi holocaust in the 1930's and 40's, as revealed by the moral philosopher Hanna Arendt in her famous study of the Trial of Adolf Eichman, how banal evil can be. Put simply, evil deeds are, for the most part, not perpetrated by people who we might immediately deem as 'evil'. Most often, as we have seen with sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, Jimmy Savile and Harvey Weinstein, such deeds are perpetrated by apparently ordinary or even 'good' people.

Following Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman has argued, that given our inbuilt basic 'animal pity', which makes it hard for most of us to hurt others, there have to be other mechanisms which allows us to overcome these natural abhorrence towards violence. In his seminal work, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman discusses the process of 'moral distancing' that allows people to commit the kind of crimes committed by the Nazi's. Most people, including health and social care professionals, who acted in the Holocaust were 'normal' people, doing what was 'normal' in very abnormal conditions. He then identifies three conditions that erode moral inhibitions:

- Authority - authorization of violence where power is invested in people 'higher-up'
- Routinization – habit has the effect to desensitise
- Dehumanization - make people seem less than human.

And so, under a bureaucratic system, the inner organizational rules provide the moral context. What is 'right' is following orders, and good bureaucrats do not worry about the substantive content of the order - that is what the superior is supposed to do. What is interesting about social work under neoliberalism is the very subtle way in which professional autonomy is being eroded. The intensification of the global neoliberal project has resulted in the withdrawal of the state from delivery of services

and to severe cuts to social spending. The resulting wide-ranging attacks on the welfare state and those dependent on it, clearly raises many ethical, moral and practical dilemmas for social workers.

Running along this, though paradoxically, we today have quite developed anti-discriminatory legislation, we have also seen sustained attacks on both the underpinning ideas associated with anti-oppressive social work from the onset of neoliberalism in the late 1980's (Singh and Cowden, 2009). One of the clearest illustration of this, certainly in the UK, can be seen in the government and tabloid attacks on social work education and various attempts to shift the curriculum away from a critical emphasis on power and oppression to one focussing on psychological models of human development and evidence based interventions and skills.

Though we tend to view anti-oppressive social work as a relatively modern phenomenon that emerged in the 1990's, in reality the history of social work can be characterised as an ongoing struggle between progressive (anti-oppressive) and regressive forms of intervention. That is why I often say from the perspective highly vulnerable service users/client's social workers [and care and health professionals more generally] are potentially the most dangerous professions – we literally have the power to determine people's lives and it is our total commitment to professional ethics that acts as an important counterweight to ensuring positive outcomes. In this sense, perhaps we must admit that the default position of social work (and other professions) is a will to power. This idea was first expounded by the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche who made a direct correlation with connects the the pleasure in the feeling of power with a desire for cruelty. Aleksandra Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winning novelist and dissident notes:

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” (Aleksandra Solzhenitsyn (1985) *The Gulag Archipelago* Abridged: An Experiment in Literary Investigation 1918-56)

Some of the recent expose of child and adult abuse in care homes, hospitals, schools etc perhaps provide examples of this. The point is that unless there is a positive commitment to require/encourage professionals confront power, and to develop critical (anti-oppressive) practice then the default position will prevail. The question that looms large is when any one society is either unwilling or unable to provide welfare, protection or care to the most vulnerable sections, then how should social workers respond? Clearly, we would all think they would mobilise whatever, individual and collective resources they had to challenge prevailing oppressive and dehumanising practices. However, a historical analysis reveals a worrying picture.

Eugenics and Social Work

In her analysis of what she terms as the 'fantasy science' of Eugenics, from its earlier incarnation in the late 19th Century through to the present day, Elizabeth McCreadie

argues that like a submarine, 'eugenics thinking surfaces at various times and in various locations to assert and influence attitudes and social policy'. Though most popular conceptions of eugenic science associate it with the murderous atrocities of the Nazi regime in 1940's and their policy to create a 'super-race' by eradicating undesirables, ideas about 'racial hygiene' and the development of state policies to promote certain human characteristics deemed desirable through social policy interventions were being developed across Europe and North America.

Indeed, social work itself has been deeply implicated in such policies, be it in the ways in which social workers were co-opted into the Nazi policy of the 'Volk community', which was defined as one of 'blood and soil'. A policy where those of other 'races', those with disabilities, those who sought to question were deemed unfit to be members. And there is much evidence that social workers (or social pedagogues, as they were called) were deployed to assist both in the training of Hitler's youth and also identification of 'unfit' mothers to be subject to sterilisation and worse. (Sunker and Otto, 1997).

In Australia, where I was recently, eugenics perhaps found its most infamous expression in the treatment of its native population indigenous or aboriginal population, where between 1910 and the 1970s, under various policies, known as the 'stolen generation' Aboriginal children were systematically removed from their families in order to be integrated and "civilized" into western society, and thus to annihilate the Aboriginal culture that was considered inferior and a burden on the settlers (Gigliotti, 2003; Krieken, 1999; Short, 2008). These practices, as Johnson and Moorhead (2011:3] point out 'came under the banner of "protection and segregation" and as such were considered 'logical steps for improving society'. Similarly, in New Zealand eugenics groups in the early 1900s advocated sterilising those who were 'unfit' to breed. They urged upper-class and middle-class women to stop using contraception and to breed more, to stop the country being dominated by 'defectives'.

If we look at the origins of the modern welfare state back in the early part of the 20th Century, we know that William Beveridge, and other 'progressives' at the time were sympathetic to ideas associated with Eugenics and scientific ways of improving the human race (The Scientist, 1999).

"those men who through general defects are unable to fill such a whole place in industry are to be recognized as unemployable. They must become the acknowledged dependents of the State... but with complete and permanent loss of all citizen rights - including not only the franchise but civil freedom and fatherhood" (Beveridge, in, Sewell, 2009)

In relation to policy programmes based on eugenics, broadly speaking one can see two distinct approaches, which are referred to in the literature as 'positive and negative eugenics'. Positive approaches, some of which are still practiced within medical contexts are associated with promoting good health and reproduction to produce

'good births' and to offer pre-natal screening and encouragement to ultimately eliminate certain inherited conditions and diseases. (Goering, 2014). Negative eugenics has an altogether different and sinister image and is associated with enforcement of forced sterilizations of men and women deemed unfit to reproduce - described variously as 'defectives', 'imbeciles', 'retarded', 'feeble-minded', 'idiots' etc) through to mass genocide, as in the case of the Nazi's racial hygiene programme. It wasn't only biological 'defects' that eugenics was seeking to eradicate but cultural, behavioural and social traits such as such as poverty, vagrancy or prostitution, as it was felt that this could be passed from parent to child, inherited as traits rather than shared as common social situations (ibid, 2007.)

And so, though the kinds of 'negative eugenics' ideas described here have rightly been discredited, disowned and in many places made illegal, we feel that the ideas of 'social and cultural pathology', which was subject to powerful critiques by anti-oppressive social work movements the 1980's and 90's (Singh, 2002) are being rehabilitated and reproduced in very sub-subtle ways under neoliberalism. Pierre Bourdieu has insightfully pointed to the way today's poor are now characterised, arguing that this is based on:

... a racism of intelligence: today's poor are not poor, as they were thought to be in the nineteenth century, because they are improvident, spendthrift, intemperate...- but because they are dumb, intellectually incapable, idiotic (2001:34-35).

The rule of the 'brightest and best', I would argue, rather than representing the dominance of privilege represents a rational form of natural selection, objectively justified through neoliberal economic theory. A 2013 speech by the then London Mayor, no UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson exemplified exactly this point. Johnson stated that "Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16% of our species have an IQ below 85". The implication is clear here; those at the bottom of society are 'the stupid' and it is these people who are incapable of coping with the competitive globalised world we are now living in. He went on to argue that:

"No one can ignore the harshness of that competition, or the inequality that it inevitably accentuates, and I am afraid that violent economic centrifuge is operating on human beings who are already very far from equal in raw ability, if not spiritual worth (Guardian 27/10/13)".

Epigenetics and Social Work

The science of epigenetics is relatively recent and, as Waggoner and Uller, (2015) note, there is no consensus on the precise. Nonetheless, as the word suggests, it has something to do with genes and their relation to the outside (epi) or the environment. What distinguishes it from genetics more generally is the focus on how environmental factors, ranging for toxins in the atmosphere through to 'stress, socio-economic

status, bullying, racism and the lifestyles of our parents and grandparents, can all turn on or off certain genes in our DNA' (Maurizio Meloni, March 15, 2016). Moreover, by suggesting that our behaviour and ability are the product of an interaction between our genetic inheritance and the environment, epigenetics seemingly offers a resolution to the nurture v nature conundrum (Katz, 2013).

The seduction of this new biological modelling is that, it apparently releases us from being simply determined our genes, which was the central assertion of old styled eugenics. That there can be 'non-genetic' influences on development and heredity, given the right environment, opens up the possibility of not only enabling one to become more functional, because our genes become carriers, positive genetic development they can be transmitted through generations. Though, most of the studies on epigenetic effects have focussed on plants and animals and there are real uncertainties about the precise effects on humans. (Waggoner and Uller, 2015), However, despite these uncertainties, the wider implications are often taken for granted and Epigenetics is generally considered to be a basis for a better, more progressive, liberal and inclusive social policy. (Maurizio Meloni (March 15, 2016)

One might be fooled into thinking that epigenetics is potentially an anti-dote to biological determinism. For example, if it can be proven that racism has a causal relationship with, for example, higher incidences of schizophrenia or lower educational attainment amongst black people, then doesn't this vindicate anti-racist arguments? However appealing this may be, there a real danger of slipping back into biological determinism and eugenic reasoning – it really depends on how these ideas become implemented in practice. If one accepts that social inequalities can have a detrimental impact on our genes, unless there is a considerable effort to address structural inequalities that produce these effects, then epigenetics may provide a rationalisation for "acquired pathology" of specific populations.

As Meloni (2016) notes, 'No doubt, by focusing on the environment as a cause for many unwanted conditions, epigenetics has the potential to advance social justice. But we need to remember that it is no guarantee of a more inclusive society. Social values often decide how we implement science, rather than the other way round.' Sue White and David Wastell (2016) in an article specifically exploring the the possible ramifications of epigenetics, argue that the implication of what they term as a biology of social disadvantage for social work is far-reaching and that 'Epigenetics is part of a political biology with the potential to affect the moral direction of social work.'

In a recent review of David Wastell and Sue White's book *'Blinded by Science: The Social Implications of Epigenetics and Neuroscience'*, Rick Hood identifies a key distinction between old eugenic and epi eugenics. 'Their target is not the brutal sterilisation and extermination programmes ... that were unleashed in the 20th Century. Instead, they are concerned with a contemporary and rather murky confluence of science and politics: neuroscience and child welfare, epigenetics and poverty. (Hood, 2017: 1825)

One of the appeals of epigenetics and related 'biosocial models', such as some of the new developments in neuroplasticity, and the mapping of effects of maltreatment on brain development is that apparently one can develop quite precise measurements of effects and interventions. It is heralding a novel approach to evidence based interventions where, for the first time, we are told that we can begin to offer concrete, quantitative statistically significant data and perhaps even randomised control trials to determine 'what works'. The concern here isn't that some useful data might be generated, but what are the implications of focussing on what will inevitably be 'downstream solutions' at the expense of the mountains of data showing the powerful correlation between structural inequalities and health and social outcomes (Dorling, 2010; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Current research on the relationship between inequalities and child protection identifies some powerful evidence that increasingly poor families are being targeted by child protection services. Based on an analysis of over 35,000 children in the UK care system who were designated as 'looked-after' or on a 'child protection plan' a study by my colleague at Coventry Professor Paul Bywaters (Bywaters et al, (2017], cited in McNicoll, 2017) found that for every '10% increase in deprivation rates saw a 30% rise in a child's chances of entering care' and lack of funding to provide appropriate services was the 'most likely' factor. Perhaps the most worrying finding in the study was, perhaps in the face of limited resources, the tendency by social workers adopt a blinkered approach. As the study notes, 'Most social workers saw their core business as risk assessment, and regarded actions to address poverty (benefits advice, provision of food, rights advocacy) as services others should provide' (McNicoll, 2017).

When Albert Einstein proclaimed that *"No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong."* He was warning against a slavish application of scientific knowledge. There is a long legacy of the damaging effects of social policies that have been developed through a lens of science and biology. There is no doubt that scientific discovery has made a phenomenal contribution but there is also a litany of scientific claims about brain functioning and human differences that has proved to be motivated by a desire to maintain and justify social inequalities rather than eradicate them,

For instance, to suggest that poverty and deprivation can lead to human dysfunctionality is not the same as saying that human dysfunctionality is the cause of poverty and deprivation. To do so would be to accept a slippery slope argument that can only lead to one conclusion, namely that some people and groups are naturally superior/inferior to others. However, historically, this reasoning error has not stopped policy makers, framing a wide range of social problems, from poverty, lower educational attainment, gender based violence, mental ill health, criminality through the lens of 'nature' and biology. Running parallel to this framing of problems is a long history of oppressions based on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, religion and age, being justified in terms of pseudo-scientific truths. Until the 1970's and the period of decolonisation and emergence of anti-racist movements, most text books were replete with associations between biological attributes and 'racial' types. A classic example is a popular textbook in 1926 that stated, 'the Negro lacks in his germ plasm

excellence of some qualities which the white race possesses, and which are essential for success in competition with the civilisations of the white races at the present day'. (Popenoe and Johnson 1926;285).

Conclusion - building an alternative project.

At a time where social welfare is under sever attack, this talk has sought to highlight three linked challenges confronting social workers. These are practical in relation to securing the resources to support vulnerable citizens, and political in the ongoing assertion of neoliberal political ideology, and ideological in the ways in which dominant ideas about human difference and dysfunctionality are being reproduced. The wider political context is clear; we are seeing a deepening of global economic crisis and austerity programmes on the one hand, and a collapse of a progressive left alternative and the excision of even basic forms of sociological analysis from policy making on the other. This has created a dangerous situation, most particularly for the most marginalised sections of modern developed societies.

One of the consequences of neoliberalism and managerialism has been to displace collective and critical forms of practice with individualised procedural models, what is disparagingly termed the 'tick-box' approach. By creating moral distance between professionals and service users and through closing down possibilities for creative and politically engaged practice, social work has increasingly become hostage to behavioural and in more recent times biological models, which on their own, cannot be a solution to complex psychosocial problems. Therefore, it is important that we seek to (re)build practice that confronts austerity policies, which simply end up co-opting professionals in attacks on the most vulnerable. In terms of child care practice, this will require a radical departure the current emphasis on 'downstream' risk assessment and child protection to upstream community based preventative approaches. If we are to be true to our title as Social Workers, then unless we nurture and apply a more expansive sociological imagination to our practice, then we cease to function as social workers. And tragically, just as we are seeing the medical professions embrace such a perspective, in for example the idea of 'social prescribing' we appear to be moving in the opposite direction!

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