

Dissenting Social Work: Critical Theory, Resistance and Pandemic.

Paul Michael Garrett, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2021, 276 pp.

ISBN 978-0-367-90370-1. CLP\$36.000 / USD\$ 40,00

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While doing my PhD more than 10 years ago, I came across an inspiring book: *Social Work and Social Theory: Making Connections* (Policy Press, 2013). From that moment on I began to follow Paul Michael Garrett's scholarly contributions and I discovered his work on critical theory and social work to be exceptionally sharp, rigorous and conceptually dense that I could not help but share his contributions with my colleagues. Always on top of key debates and participating in controversial discussions (see for example 'A World to Win': *In Defence of (Dissenting) Social Work-A Response to Chris Maylea*, published in 2021 in *The British Journal of Social Work*), Garrett is an exceptional author, a source of pride for our profession and discipline. It is a pity - and I lament - the language barrier that separates us. I am sure that if his work were known in Latin America it would be tremendously valued by our schools of Social Work, which have a vast tradition of critical social theory forged through their almost one hundred years of history. I hope this review motivates people to jump over the language barrier that separates us and try to approach his work.

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Dissenting Social Work: Critical Theory, Resistance and Pandemic, is a work that could not be more timely. Published in 2021, one year into the Covid-19 pandemic, Paul Michael Garrett provided us with discussions to think about the ways in which Social Work can raise resistance to the ravages of neoliberal capitalism, in the midst of uncertainty and fear and in the midst of a dystopian scenario. In those moments of despair, we witnessed a brutal precarisation of the employment conditions of thousands of social workers through the installation of ‘tele-intervention’, physical exposure and risk of contagion, the emergence of new forms of surveillance to control professional interventions, as well as a preoccupying increase of professionals facing mental health difficulties (Reininger et al., 2022). It was during this time that Garrett’s book gave us the possibility to visualize a collective body existed internationally, and was addressing the consequences of the pandemic by contesting, challenging, and resisting. As I read his book I thought of comparisons and contrasts with the heterogeneous realities social workers face in different geopolitical regions, but I also found commonalities, such as the exacerbation of managerialist approaches, job insecurity, de-professionalisation, de-politicisation in the face of neo-conservatism, and the rise of neo-fascist currents - phenomenon that existed prior to the pandemic but whose intensity only grew during its onslaught. While this has been something ‘so common’ for social workers around the world, it has also brought about the possibility for social workers to respond in suspicious, collective and creative ways. In other words, through actions of resistance. Con este libro, el autor propone un concepto a la comunidad del Trabajo Social: *Dissenting Social Work (DSW)*. No he sido capaz de traducirlo al español sin miedo a equivocarme. Podríamos decir “Trabajo Social Discordante” o “Trabajo Social Disconforme”, pero la traducción que me ha hecho más sentido es “Trabajo Social Disidente”. Lo abreviaré, de aquí en adelante, como TSD.

With this book, Garrett proposes the idea of Dissenting Social Work (DSW) to the social work community. The central premise of the book is to show that, in the context of the pandemic, we live in a singular political conjuncture: a key moment in which neoliberalism has revealed a progressive side (celebrating diversity and meritocracy, for example) while at the same time dismantling social protection and allowing the rich to increase their wealth exponentially. This conjuncture is also characterised by three phenomena associated with neoliberal capitalism: climate change, migratory flows, and the emergence of the neo-fascist populist right. It is a conjuncture in the sense that, although it accounts for an extremely complex moment, it opens a window to the possibility of rethinking Social Work through the contributions of important representatives of critical theory: Marx, Foucault, Zuboff, Ranciere, Wacquant, Arendt,



Levinas, Fanon, Gramsci, among others. This is, in my opinion, one of the most powerful contributions of Garrett's book, as it carefully analyses the conceptual frameworks of each author, and based on these analyses, offers powerful conceptual 'resources' to underpin DSW. There is a second premise, perhaps in the background, but no less relevant, that without theory there is no critique in Social Work, and without it, there is no possible path other than that of repetition.

Accordingly, Garrett argues that DSW draws on critical social theory – in which different authors provide clues, provocations, and alternatives. He proposes that dissent has to be a collective effort rather than an individual activity, sustained by articulations with social movements, trade unions, user organisations, activist networks, among others. DSW offers an anti-capitalist perspective, enriched by feminist perspectives, the fight against 'white supremacy' and racism, and alert to the dangers of neo-fascism. It recognises that social work has often been complicit in oppressive processes, and proposes, with cognitive humility (rarely seen in European authors), that DSW should aim to “*decolonise social work knowledge and learn from perspectives derived from Africa, Asia and Latin America*” (p.4).

I want to dwell on this last point because I think there is much to unpack. 'Decolonising' Social Work is an aspiration, which, in my view, is an essential aspect of critical proposals in Social Work. The act of claiming 'decolonisation' is a political gesture that demonstrates a commitment to cognitive justice. Rarely discussed, cognitive justice is a foundational dimension of social justice -the horizon of Social Work according to its international definition (IASSW-IFSW, 2014). Nevertheless, despite this admirable proposal, the decolonisation of Social Work involves a debate within the discipline that in my opinion has not yet emerged and one that is not only political, but also ontological and epistemic. There are still many aspects to continue discussing; for example: at what points can Marx's work enter into dialogue with Liberation Theology, one of the primary sources of Latin American decolonial thought, which interprets the world through theological perspectives? Can a critical theoretical view, which emphasises the structural mechanisms that produce oppression and inequality, co-exist with indigenous views that, for example, border on shamanism or essentialist conceptions of spirituality? At what points can Marx's work enter into dialogue with decolonial feminisms which question the universalist and androcentric categories of some Marxist scholars? How then, from a 'decolonised' critical theory, can we understand the epistemological relation between subject and object? These are open discussions - fruitful controversies - for those of us who are passionate about disciplinary debates in Social Work.

Garrett's conceptual proposal moves in the same direction. It seeks to open debates, to discuss what is taken for granted, and to examine old and new issues in social work from a different conceptual angle. DSW is not intended to be a manifesto, but, according to the author, an artefact for critical reflection (p. 5), which allows us to develop the habit of questioning ourselves as a discipline, to interrogate the dominant approaches from which we understand the world, and to examine their operationalization both in professional intervention and education, challenging the idea that social workers are "*mere handmaidens or functional auxiliaries of capitalism and the institutional orders that it requires*" (p. 4). In this sense, the book makes an important contribution by proposing the concept of DSW, which "*might potentially provide a new knowledge project and a different type of analytical lens to view themes, issues and practices from fresh angles*" (p. 227), and which could contribute to the construction of unthought-of strategies, enabling the generation of new theoretical knowledge and other ways of approaching 'social problems' where class, gender, and 'race' are understood as intersected phenomena (p. 227). Consistent with its 'praxical' aspirations, at the end of each chapter the book provides exercises that can be used to promote this critical reflection in the classroom with students, in professional association meetings, in academic reunions, etc. These to me are invaluable resources for putting these conceptual proposals into play through collective construction.

I highly recommend this book, as it provides relevant contributions to think and imagine a critical Social Work in our current turbulent time, and to strengthen the conceptual tools used to interpret the world to come. It will undoubtedly open up new questions and possibilities to think critically as a discipline and to exchange views with colleagues from other latitudes. This, I believe, is key to the Social Work we want to create, because as Garrett points out, "*...if there are no sustained attempts to generate more expansive and dissenting forms of thinking, then social work is, perhaps, at risk of being 'hollowed' or completely 'emptied out'*" (p. 229).

You can see details of the book and its table of contents here:

<https://www.routledge.com/Dissenting-Social-Work-Critical-Theory-Resistance-and-Pandemic/Garrett/p/book/9780367903701>



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