

## **Introduction - analytics of power and politics for social work: introduction to the handbook**

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# **Introduction: Analytics of Power and Politics for Social Work: Introduction to the Handbook**

Stephen A. Webb

## **Abstract**

The Routledge Handbook for International Critical Social Work (ICSW) provides a systematic guide to the leading traditions, innovations and international trajectories in critical social work. With the publication of this new Routledge ICSW Handbook comes an opportunity to further demonstrate the richness, diversity and innovation of critical scholarship and research in social work across the globe. Critical social work is increasingly involved in a global conversation, hence the rationale for including “international” in the handbook title.

The Routledge Handbook for International Critical Social Work (ICSW) provides a systematic guide to the leading traditions, innovations and international trajectories in critical social work. With the publication of this new Routledge ICSW Handbook comes an opportunity to further demonstrate the richness, diversity and innovation of critical scholarship and research in social work across the globe. Critical social work is increasingly involved in a global conversation, hence the rationale for including “international” in the handbook title. This is because as a subfield of social work, it is rapidly becoming an interdisciplinary field in its own right and promoting novel forms of political activism. The handbook is designed for four groups: undergraduate students in social work and social policy programmes; graduate students embarking on the same and often specialist intellectual journeys; scholars who want to get a deeper understanding of this complex and rapidly evolving field of study; and practitioners, activists and policy makers who wrestle with the implications and impact of critical social work for their professional, working and political lives. The focus throughout is on critical social work as both an activist movement and instructive theorising for practice on the one hand, and a distinctive body of theoretical and methodological knowledge applicable to social work on the other. This is vividly demonstrated in the handbook chapter on family policing of black children and the Abolitionist child welfare movement in the US. The handbook is intended to serve as an international survey of not just the field of critical social work in terms of its theories and

methodologies, but also of those claims about the field made by critical social work scholars themselves. Part of the intention for producing this handbook is the growing recognition that there have been significant international changes taking place in social work in recent years, as well as the way social work has responded to new political, environmental and technological challenges. As discussed below, COVID-19 is just one of these dramatic challenges that will force social work to rethink its position on the “more than human” and the importance of multi-species research. Theoretical innovation has always been central to the field of critical social work but in recent years, there has been considerable growth of social work as a complex international field of theories and methodological approaches.

At the same time, several very distinctive trends have occurred in social, political and philosophical thoughts over the past decade, and these have yet to be properly captured in the social work literature. These trends indicate significant possibilities for theorising social work from innovative social and political standpoints; there are also fresh and exciting new methodological trajectories, different ways of doing empirical work and new approaches to situate front-line practice. These are captured in the handbook from the perspective of critical social work. To name just a few examples of innovative change that have occurred in social and political sciences which relate directly to social work, the following give a feel for the changing landscape:

Biopolitics and novel configurations of power

Continuing influence of Black Lives Matter movement

Beyond speciesism, critical animal studies and non-human analysis

Environmental humanities, ecological feminism and climate justice

Rewriting boundaries of (trans)gender, sexuality, queer studies and posthuman feminism

Radically rethinking the concept of community and community engagement

Science and technology studies which focus on the making of publics and participation

Theorising of alternative radical grass roots social movements

Innovative ideas about nationhood, immigration and bordering practices

Threats of national populism, racism, white supremacy, subaltern and postcolonial rule

Evaluation of sovereignty, security, bordering practices and the politics of exception

New methods such as post-qualitative analysis and situational analytics for ethnographic studies (Marres, 2020)

Each of these is covered in some manner in the handbook. While there is only a sparse, uneven and often under-theorised development of these sorts of issues in social work, the handbook lays some significant groundwork for addressing related but ground-breaking new ideas and reworking older ones. The Routledge Handbook is divided into *seven sections*, each focusing on a broad thematic area of investigation relating to critical social work. It provides the first complete survey of the vibrant field of critical social work in a rich international context.

*Section One: "Thinking the Political"* explores the historical, social and political ideas that have impacted on critical social work. The chapters address the problems associated with constitutive politics and what it means to say that social work thinks politically, and what is distinctive about that kind of political thinking. Contributions in this section offer field-defining ways of conceiving critical social work as it bridges various theoretical and activist dimensions. They demonstrate the crucial role that critique can play in social work as a movement of contestation of the "regimes of truth" that govern practitioners and service users alike.

*Section Two: "Politics and the Ruins of Neoliberalism"* examines the deleterious effects and impact of neoliberalism on social work. It does so by unpicking the various meanings of neoliberalism and presents new case study materials on its impact.

*Section Three: "Negotiating the State: Resistance, Protest and Dissent"* through an explicit focus on state power and its apparatus takes up various critical contexts of political activism, struggle and movements that shape and enable social work practitioners in the face of oppressive power regimes. It examines the status of critical social work and the way it helps mobilise new methods and analyses to engage with service users and express dissenting approaches.

*Section Four: "Race, Bordering Practices and Migrants"* focuses on anti-racism, critical race theory and case study material on working with migrants and Roma people. The section offers fresh insights on issues relating to whiteness and white supremacy populism for social work. The section opens with a time-enduring analysis of Black Lives Matter. It is the first contribution to emphasise explicitly the relation between social work and working with Roma communities. The section examines the overwhelming issues faced by minority groups and the way social work can best address the injustices and disadvantage faced by minority ethnic people.

*Section Five: “Post Colonialism, Subaltern and the Global South”* offers a fresh and important examination of the concepts of the subaltern and post-colonialism for social work. It brings into focus different analyses of the troubled concept of identity politics as it relates to decolonising practices. The section draws together international expertise to unravel the ways that different contexts impact on service users and practitioners in different ways. For the first time in an international social work handbook, it critically excavates the sites of tribal politics, and has a chapter on Native American Indians. Most importantly, the section includes important international contributions from the global South, and especially Latin America. With the inclusion of these chapters in the handbook, critical social work can seek a richer and more significant interaction among researchers in Latin America, and between the North and global South for social work.

*Section Six: “Critical Feminism, Sexuality and Gender Politics”* turns its focus to the emerging and exciting new areas of critical thought as they relate to the “post materialist turn” as it is taken up through the lens of feminist social work. Some pathbreaking work is recently emerging in these fields which are likely to have a profound effect on the dominant “humanist” social work perspectives in the not-too-distant future. This new theorising is underpinned by novel methodological approaches to lived experience, narrative histories, digital technologies and community.

The final *Section Seven: “Posthumanism, Pandemics and Environment”* writers bring critical social work into close contact with the posthumanities. The authors take seriously the role of “more-than-human” actors to explore the complex entanglements of human, animal and ecological health across various geo-political contexts. The chapters examine the importance of ecology, climate justice, speciesism, environmental humanities and the green movement on social work. Such analyses are especially important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its likely overarching impact on social work and social work education. By bringing together these three themes, the section develops new theoretical ideas, policy innovations, methodological advances and pressing issues for front-line practice. These important fields have largely been under-theorised in social work and offer important opportunities to expand the remit of critical social work. Drawing on the work of writers like Bruno Latour, Vinciane Despret, Karen Barad and Isabelle Stengers, it also offers an opportunity to leverage a fresh perspective on terrestrial politics for social work. The introductory discussion which follows is organised around the seven main sections of the Routledge Handbook; it develops some of the key critical themes and debates of engagement, but also casts the

analysis further afield to make important connections to new ideas, activism and challenges faced by critical social work, and more widely in modern societies.

Moving on to briefly consider the intellectual standing of critical social work and some of its key influencers. Unlike psychoanalysis, critical social work has no intellectual giants like Freud or Jung to historically benchmark against in its journey of embedding or re-embedding various theories and key concepts. However, some might persuasively argue, we have the likes of Marx and the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt School tucked in the cupboard to signpost a clear trajectory. But there is no direct, foundational lineage, in the way that psychoanalysis can reasonably claim. The lack of any distinguishing intellectual giants might well turn out to be a good thing, because we are freed from the spectres, phantoms and irrecoverable intrusions that tend to haunt disciplines embedded in the so-called “Godfather”-like legacies. The consequences of the legacy situation can be ambivalent for disciplines. On the one hand, intellectual giants, in fields like psychoanalysis, help legitimate a discipline, sometimes in a hostile academic environment. On the other hand, they can create a discipline so diversified in substantive specialties, and so concerned with narrow research and specialised methods that they create serious problems of intellectual integrity and rigour. We do find critical social work scholars primarily cite Marxism either to support their research topics, methods or methodologies, and arguments, or to credit Marx for concepts or ideas. Fewer instances of citations that engage critically with Marxism or build directly on Marx’s ideas are observable in the social work literature. As with the referencing of all intellectual giants – whether this be Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu – in social work they tend towards *uncritical* and *narrow* use of a particular vein of scholarship. What we get is an eclectic recycling of single source material, for example, with a plethora of citations around the writings of Foucault over the past two decades, restricted to citing either *Discipline and Punish* or *History of Sexuality* (see Foucault, 1984a; 1984b; 2003). The resultant effect is that it fails to penetrate the Foucauldian tradition in question. Very rarely do we find key methodological, and more difficult texts, such as *Archaeology of Knowledge*, or *Order of Things* referenced in the social work literature.<sup>1</sup> This has significant consequences for the quality of scholarship in social work. For example, in British social work theory, despite long flirtations with fashionable theorists, such as Foucault, a backsliding occurs, and we end up with a more English than French version of Foucault, which often rests on discredited interpretations, that are dogmatic and theoretically shallow. It is fair to say that the quality of academic erudition in critical social work is partly a consequence of interdisciplinary connections forged with other scholars through citations. The value and power of interdisciplinarity

for critical social work cannot be overstated. Interdisciplinary collaboration is a prerequisite for social work to contribute to major problems – wicked problems – and thus to generate quality knowledge impact. It also marks out new areas of critical consideration, identifies fresh debates and lays out the space for deeper engagement with and accountability to other disciplines. Research shows that interdisciplinarity is statistically significantly and positively associated with research impact (Okamura, 2019). Historically, social work knowledge has long been influenced by, and, in turn, influences, other disciplines. Indeed, from the mid-1950s onwards, psychoanalysis was a major influence on social work research, and it regularly leant on the intellectual giant of Freud, and particularly, the English paediatrician Donald Winnicott (see Heiman, 1953; Joseph, 1951). Cheung (1990) reviewed interdisciplinary contributions in professional journals from 1981 to 1985. The top five disciplines cited in social work journals at the time were social work, family studies, psychiatry, sociology and education. These findings are obviously dated. I would contend that a very different, and much richer, grouping of disciplines would be identified in the present situation. These might include political anthropology, cultural geography, environmental humanities, posthuman feminism, post-qualitative research, critical psychoanalysis, theoretical sociology, Latin American Marxism and critical race theory. This list is not exhaustive by any means, but it does show that critical social work has developed as a versatile and heterogenous research field in the social sciences and that one of its strengths is its ability to travel between spheres of intellectual inspiration and engage confidently in debate and dialogue in other professional and academic fields.

To quickly gravitate towards a discussion of a thorny issue that continues to beset the Left in social work, latterly, there have been suggestions that critical and radical social works are best distinguished by the legacy of ideas on which they rely (Woodward, 2013). This has led, for example, to the notion that radical social work is best understood through its legacy relation with Marxism, while critical social work is much more derived from a Foucauldian legacy of ideas (Carey & Foster, 2011). It seems to me that this is a vastly over-simplified version of what defines and constitutes critical social work. I will return in the next section of the introduction. We should consider critical social work, like all other important theoretical paradigms, to be “fractal”: many parts are singular, infinitely nuanced, and by this fact solicit a finer granulation. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there are five unifying ways of viewing and practising critical social work as a strategic endeavour. These five ways mark out its distinctiveness and contribution to the field, and include (1) theorising “the optimum social world”; critical social work is always about ethics; it implies a form of life in terms of social justice, equality and freedom; (2) seeking out

the entangled relations of power and resistance which impact on social work and conversely is impacted by social work on service users and carers and other professionals and policy makers; (3) determining which fundamental political concepts apply to social work. “Governing” and governmentality are central to this with their accompanying analysis of the different modes by which social work makes service users and carers into “subjects”, e.g., subjects of law or subjects of intervention; (4) investigating social work’s ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, an enquiry that also draws on critical, discursive and materiality analyses; (5) enabling dialogue and debate with mainstream social work and related interdisciplinary fields in social sciences and more widely. This requires thinking about critical social workers as strategists and not simply as researchers, activists or practitioners.

## **Thinking the Political**

This first section of the Routledge Handbook combines various aspects of theoretical debate through a set of seven chapters which explore critical social work in relation to “thinking the political”. The chapters ask what it means to say that social work thinks politically, and what is distinctive about that kind of thinking. They are best described as a cluster of thought-practices, combining insights from political theory and political philosophy – traditional and recent – to the study of social work. In doing so, they reposition the political, through philosophical, anthropological, ethical and historical insights, to the heart of social work research. This underlines the many strengths of critical social work as an interdisciplinary field, which has moved on considerably from the “radical” social work times of the 1970s. The chapters challenge many conventional understandings of social work in the current literature and locate the political as a complex and ubiquitous phenomenon within the critical social work agenda.

Social justice is often hailed as the centrepiece of progressive social work values. The claim that social work is universally dedicated to a social justice platform, and even defined as a social justice profession, runs deep and wide in the literature. It also vaunted in many professional and international ethical manifestos, and included in the International Federation of Social Workers, “Global Definition of the Social Work Profession” as a principle which is central to social work (approved in July 2014). However, despite its being held up as a badge of honour for the profession, the concept of social justice is rarely subject to close critical scrutiny in the social work literature. As



Joseph (2020) observes, “Notwithstanding its popularity, social justice has received little attention in terms of theoretical merits and shortcomings” (1). Furthermore, what is often overlooked is that the plethora of discourse about social justice is derived from a very narrow conceptual base within political philosophy that is best described as liberal egalitarianism derived from a Rawlsian theory of justice (Forrester, 2019). Fifty years after its publication, the classic liberal perspective developed by Rawls in *Theory of Justice* (1971) permeates assumptions about justice in social work and is barely recognised for the significant influence it has had on the way professional values have been shaped.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Banerjee (2011) maintains that much of Rawls central ideas, despite their influence, are not accurately represented in social work. To quickly summarise, Rawls defined social justice as protection of equal access, liberties, rights and opportunities, as well as necessary principles of taking care of the least advantaged members of society. He argued that these values are principles everyone can support in a decent society, because people are rational and tend towards moral agreement. This liberal brand of “contractual” political theory tries to combine individual freedom and equality into a systematic conception of social justice which applies to the modern institutions constituting the basic structure of society (McKean, 2021). Rawls’ preferred economic regime is one of property-owning democracy. Rawls’ work has been subject to considerable critique and debate on the Left, particularly aimed at the premium he places on abstract hypotheticals, which is based on an asociological and ahistorical approach. Crucially, criticism consistently shows that he ignores questions of power and of ideology and lacks an adequate conceptualisation of liberty. Rawls fails to recognise that the self is “embedded”, in, and partly constituted by, communal commitments and values which are outcomes of power relations, alliances and negotiation (Nielsen, 1980; Webb, 2003).

Throughout his writings, Rawls consistently refused to explicate and elaborate upon the ontological assumptions which sit behind his thought. Indeed, Rawls often argued that ontological claims are best avoided in political thought. Contrary to this standpoint, McKendrick and Webb (2014) maintain that while taking a political stance in social work necessarily involves a close historical examination of the role of socio-economic structure as well as the constitutive context of relations of domination, it also crucially involves formulating an ontology of the political subject. Conceiving ontology as concerned with analysing entities of being in the world that arise from social interaction, they argue that the proper conceptual space for understanding the taking of a political stance for social work is that of political ontology. Prominent Marxist theorist, Lukács in his two-volume collection, argues that the persistent problem of any critical theory of society is to understand, from a critical standpoint, the ontological nature

of social being. In the words of Lukács, “it must be clear to any unbiased reader of Marx that all his concrete statements, understood correctly, are in the last instance, intended as direct statements about an existent” i.e., they are specifically ontological (1978: 1). Returning to the limitations of the Rawlsian perspective for social justice, Irena Rosenthal (2019) carefully unpicks the key problems by comparing his work to Foucault. She does this by pointing to the inadequacies of Rawlsian ontology around the politicisation of knowledge, and counterclaims this by arguing that Foucault’s “understanding of ontology suggests a relation between ontology and the politicisation of political philosophy that is missing in Rawls’ account” (247). Against Rawls’ liberal view of social justice that portrays an even-handed universalising ontology distributed among people, Foucault requires a critical take which emphasises the exclusionary effects of hegemonic notions of identities and justice. Rosenthal draws attention to the strong point he makes about requiring us to make a “critical ontology of ourselves” as political subjects often reduced to the normalising power of biopolitics (1984:42). This would help us better understand how power works to position people in different spaces/levels of vulnerability, such as migrants, children or people living in urban ghettos. In other words, for Rosenthal, it’s Foucault’s theorising of power that puts him ahead of the game in developing a comprehensive political ontology of modern institutions, social relations and subjectivity. She says that

Foucault suggests that human identities, morality and knowledge emerge as an effect of a dramatic quest for domination. What we are today originates in random social-historical struggles where some possibilities for thinking and acting became dominant and others were obliterated or marginalised. Foucault understands these power relations as a relatively constant condition of human existence: the play of dominations is ‘endlessly repeated’ (1984: 85) and cannot be surmounted by intentions or treaties.

(246)

Power relations can be seen as agonistic struggles because subjects are thrown into adversities, entangled in tensions and contests which attempt to transform the power relations that are exercised through and upon them (Foucault, 2012). These struggles are not driven by a capacity of the individual subject to transcend power relations, but, rather, immanent to, or derived from within, power itself. That is, the exercise of power opens up “a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions” (Foucault, 2000: 340) that foregrounds the subject’s

possibility for contestation and his participation in the critical, local transformations of power relations central to the ontology of different life forms (Rosenthal, 2019). What is often overlooked in these sorts of defence of Foucault, and important to a critical social work understanding, is that Foucault's later work demonstrated a distinctive anti-Marxist turn. This is partly the reason why some have accused Foucault of holding neoliberal sentiments. His anti-Marxist turn, however, can be explained by a better understanding of the enduring influence of Nietzsche's "negative ontology of knowledge" on Foucault and the way this view that all language and speech is a form of violence became the central preoccupation of his historiography. From this, one might happily claim that "underneath all Tweeting is a relationship of violence". More seriously, it's clear that Foucault was absolutely wedded to the Nietzschean view that knowledge and its production are driven by humankind's will to appropriate. Power is, first and foremost, appropriative. This formed the basis of Foucault's theory of power from the early days of his writing in 1966, but he failed to fully engage with Nietzsche's other major line of critique directed precisely at the devastating effects of bourgeois possessive individualism (Balibar, 2014). Nietzsche is just as radical as Marx in conceiving the individual as a specific and ambiguous historical achievement. We might be wondering what is going on here with Foucault, because he either side-stepped or ignored the Marxist strain implicit in Nietzsche's critique of hegemonic relations in modern societies (Rehmann, 2013).<sup>3</sup> This begs an important question for critical social work, especially given its foregrounding of the analysis of power as a central preoccupation. Leaving aside other very important thinkers and perspectives for a moment, do we think the political through Marxism or Foucauldianism? Is it a question of either Marx or Foucault as the primary basis for critical engagement and the mobilisation of a politics of social work? If one is correct, does the other have to be dismissed, or is it more precise to say that one viewpoint must be reabsorbed and redefined in terms of the alternative view?

There is significant mileage in further developing a more nuanced Marxist analysis for critical social work. But this would be an open Marxism, iterable as necessitated by our historical moment, situated practices and changes in political landscape. It would be a Marxism that does not participate in disguising division by projecting into the future a final reconstitution of a classless society as a finalistic solution. It would bring a Marxism of critical innovation to the table, as opposed to the Trotskyite orthodoxy which haunts some wings of radical social work, as its defining hallmark. In social work, it's important to get past this hauntology which is preoccupied with a vague notion of "potential".<sup>4</sup> This is a very human attribute to make; and it's hard to imagine someone talking about the potentiality of an animal, unless of course, it's a competitive sports animal, like a racehorse. Moving on now. The

chapters published in this handbook from the various Latin American authors are a testament to this sort of innovative Marxism we should pursue. I want to briefly suggest two lines of enquiry for critical social work in this respect. First, I have in mind the sorts of creative theorising of the likes of Toni Negri, and the jointly written major work on *Empire* (with Michael Hardt in 2004), but more particularly, the later study *Commonwealth* (2009) where they deploy the critique of the Marxist concept of property. It is in this study that the concept of “the republic of property” is introduced. Like Etienne Balibar (2006), they show how much of our modern-day self-understanding is linked directly to embodied property relations and the malign influence of John Locke in his theorising of personal identity which has come to dominate our understanding of self-perception. Negri and Hardt go on to say

What is central for our purposes is that the concept of property and the defence of property remain the foundation of every modern political constitution and law. This is the sense in which the republic, from the great bourgeois revolutions to today, is a republic of property.

(2009: 15)

This opens a very real and rich vein of analysis in developing a critique of the proprietorial self for social work (Gershon, 2011). That is, an understanding of reflective agency, in everyday speech and intimate relations, as self-ownership, and as reproducing an economy of the republic of property in claims about selfhood (for a feminist analysis, see Richardson, 2010). Here, proprietorial things (e.g., “my rights” and “my feelings”) are seen to be situated in the person and associated with an image of a self that is “bounded” against the outside (Webb, 2009). Social work holds firmly to the moral imperative that persons can, and should, self-consciously monitor, evaluate and assess their *own* propertied being in the world. So far, the detrimental effects of the “proprietorial self” have remained unchallenged in the social work literature. These insights about property also afford a radical alternative reading of the beloved concept of community for social work. Social work still clings heavily to the outdated sociological idea of *Gemeinschaft* (or community) as a progressive force. Likewise, media-savvy epidemiologists in response to COVID-19 reproduce this Durkheimian myth with a watered-down communitarian ideal of “being connected with loved ones”. Drawing on Roberto Esposito’s work, Bird and Short (2013) argue that Esposito challenges the property prejudice found in mainstream models of community.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in identity politics, collective identity is converted into a form of communal property. Borders, sovereign territories and exclusive rights

are fiercely defended in the name of communal property. Identity politics are formed around notions of territorial ownership, differential space and property, a most common example from right-wing populists being “this is our country, and you are not welcome”.

Second, a further rich line of inspiration for critical social work is to be found in Gramscian post-Marxist theories of hegemony and critique of ideology. These remain powerful tools of analysis for critical social work. In this respect, the post-Marxist theory of hegemony as elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) is the most valuable resource available to critical social work. The basic questions of ideology criticism remain the same for social work: What is “false” in ideology? How does ideology function? Does it deliberately set out to “mask” or “distort” certain truths? Is it possible to resist ideology? And what is the potentiality of the critique of ideology for social work. If one understands social work as a specific way of constructing identities, normalising relations and transforming meaning for “what is” for service users, then ideology criticism is helpful in explaining how this is reproduced, legitimised and kept in play by social work and the consequences for those on the receiving end. This, of course, harks back to the much cited, but not always successful work of Chris Rojek’s (1988) *Social work and Received Ideas* which emphasised how the effect of ideology was uneven and an arena for dissent. However, for these post-Marxist concepts of ideology and hegemony to have valence and sustain the sharp thrust necessary to engage with contemporary issues of institutional power, social work must reject the interchangeability between the concepts of “discourse” and “ideology” and the once fashionable postmodern narratives of “everything is discourse” and “the death of ideology”. Critical social work was overburdened with often vacuous preoccupations with discourse analysis and postmodernism (Larrain, 1994; Sohlberg, 2009; Webb, 2009).<sup>6</sup> Postmodern discourse analysis is finished; we need to move beyond flawed notions relating to the discursive constitution of the subject in social work analyses. Social work should abandon its affiliations with postmodern identity politics as they significantly detract from studying relations of power and undermine the coupling of the biopolitics of ideology and hegemony as a foundation for a critical social work.

In analysing Emmanuel Macron’s attempts to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in France, Latour (2020) suggests that the pandemic is just a dress rehearsal for the inevitable collapse of society, hastened by the inevitable impact of the effects of climate change. For Latour, France and other countries in the global North have not forged the new kind of state that climate collapse will require. Instead, he says, “we are collectively playing a caricatured form of the figure of *biopolitics* that seems to have come straight out of a Michel Foucault lecture”. He means Foucault’s

final lecture on the theme *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), describing a new kind of biopower. While once “Sovereignty took life and let live”, Latour writes, we discover towards the end of the 18th century “the emergence of a power that in contrast, consists in making live and letting die”. Historically, we are faced with a biopolitics of life (sustaining and “improving” life) and death (selectively letting die). Over the past two decades, the Foucauldian problematic of biopolitics has become an increasingly influential research orientation in the social sciences, applied in a variety of disciplines to analyse the transformations in the rationalities of power over life in diverse spatio-temporal contexts. Totalitarianism is an example of the most extreme form of biopolitics, whereby bare life as the object of sovereign power is no longer concealed under the veneer of the positive forms of good life but is starkly revealed as such (Hardt, & Negri, 2011). Agamben marks out the historical significance of this biopolitical logic of power “Only because politics in our age has been entirely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constituted as totalitarian politics to a degree hitherto unknown” (1998: 120). I concur with Agamben that modern politics has been completely transformed into biopolitical regimes of power. At the time of writing, virus-inspired reflections on biopower, biosecurity and biopolitics are everywhere. It is in this context of crisis and emergency, and within this set of foundational ideas from Foucault – and onwards through the writings of Agamben, Esposito, Negri and Prozorov – that I wish to suggest that biopolitics now has a guaranteed status as the primary framework of analysis for critical social work. Furthermore, we should concentrate our efforts in theorising power from the vantage point of biopolitical theory (Prozorov, 2013; 2016). Social work has lagged behind its counterparts in other fields of social and political science in embracing biopolitics. Of course, this is not to exclude other perspectives and paradigms, and there are inevitably shortcomings with biopolitical theory. Indeed, I want to further suggest that biopolitical analysis lends itself comfortably, for example, to Marxist analyses of ideology, power and hegemony, as well as feminism, environmentalism and critical race theory. Rather than separate biopolitics from ideology, a more fruitful approach is to ask how ideology itself becomes biopolitical, and how ideas are converted into governmental practices. For instance – and the examples are plentiful – as Means (2021) maintains:

By locating freedom as a component of State reason within liberal governmentality, Foucault complicates Marxist theories of power and the State. Moreover, the insight that freedom is immanent to power also forces deeper engagement with the dynamics of alienation within the Marxist tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Jemma Repo's *The Biopolitics of Gender* (2015) is a stellar contribution to the richness biopolitical theory can contribute to feminist and queer studies. If there is to be a "new turn" in critical social work, it should be one that moves decisively towards a deeper appreciation of the strengths and virtues of undertaking biopolitical analysis. A biopolitical lens is indispensable for social work to examine the COVID-19 pandemic and, its gender and racial effects. More generally, for such a paradigmatic shift, we should concentrate on how particular biopolitical theoretical, or methodological questions develop, challenge or complicate existing frameworks or analyses for social work.

Finally, to bring this introductory section to a conclusion, let's take a brief look at the suggestiveness of Foucault's twin concepts of biopolitics and governmentality for social work through some situated practices. This will help us better understand how critical social work positions itself in relation to mainstream social work. One definition of social work which captures its dynamic, networked and interventionist role in modern societies is to conceive of it as a form of street level governing. From this vantage point, social work is positioned as a mode of governance and as part of a state-society continuum. If you talk to people who have never previously been in contact with a social worker, they are often regarded as the first point of encounter with the state. They are viewed as an embodied entry point to "the administration" and the potential resources that come with it. It is often through the intermediary of the social worker that people experience the state for the first time. Various policy guidelines reflect this with practitioners being required to "act with integrity and uphold public trust" and be "accountable for the quality of their work" to the public. Describing them as intermediaries between the State and society does not imply a watertight separation between two different positions. On the contrary, it means emphasising the simultaneous embedding of social workers in different local orders and their role as information gatherers, mediators or brokers. An obvious point that is often overlooked is that social workers are deal makers; they negotiate and trade off with service users. Practice is persuasion, with local knowledge being a node of agnostic power relations. Moreover, it is often through the intervention of social workers that service users become beneficiaries of welfare or financial support resources. Contrary to a kind of Weberian rational-legal administration founded on impersonality, interpersonal knowledge of families or communities is at the very foundation of the figure of street level social worker, and this leads to a specific form of governing. On the one hand, they are the incarnation of the State, charged with applying norms that are intended to be universal in a standardised and impersonal way; they mobilise objects (wheelchairs, stair lifts and kitchen alarms for older people) and language which objectifies the situation

behind institutional procedures. On the other hand, these situated practices – experiences, personal dispositions, affects – are often in the local neighbourhood. They incorporate an affective dimension based on a range of feelings, between hostility and warmth. To the extent that proximity (geographical, social and relational) with neighbourhoods is an integral part of the role of the social worker, it is more relevant to consider social work as an institutionalised intermediary. Both the service user and the social worker may mobilise either of these two frames – either the administrative norms and neutral language of the bureaucracy or the familiar personal language of ordinary existence, neighbourly or interpersonal relations – through multiple links of proximity and dependence. As Michael Lipsky's (1983) classic study *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* showed, this represents *both* a way of ordering – allowing in particular the integration of local heteronomous communities – *and* compromising, in that it provides ways of discretion, or informal tactics, by avoiding or bypassing the State order. Social workers are often in a unique position to develop generalised trust with service users. However, this form of street level governing can also reveal a darker side to social work, as a vehicle of local social control. Examples of this tendency are plentiful in the literature. Farmer (2020), for example, shows how social workers working with destitute migrants have an enforcement role, with key tasks designated to detect, detain and eventually deport migrants with precarious legal status. Decisions on who is banished involve a strong notion of who belongs and deserves to stay, making street level governance part of a system of biopower in which displacement and illegality are produced (see Chapter 25 in this handbook). An ethnographic study of the role of social workers in youth services in the Public Employment Services (PES) in Helsinki showed that a supposed primary policy focus on “active citizenship” was shaped by antidemocratic tactics. Haikkola (2019) argues that street level governing entails not only liberal ideas of self-governing individuals but also subtle authoritarian measures. She claims that what is governed in the meetings with social workers is not the young people's selves but controlling their time and inspecting their behaviour. “In the process, the notion of active citizenship is emptied and transformed to mean participation in supervised activities offered by the PES. Such practice reworks the temporal structures and creates insecure and eventful experience of time for PES clients” (334). In contrast to governing through participation, the localised interpretation of activation policies represents the authoritarian and paternalistic side of neoliberal street level governance. What we can surmise from this is something very interesting. Contrary to Lipsky's claim, with these procedures for normalising segments of the population, we can see that social work is not



so much about managing order at the street level, but quite the opposite, its task is about managing disorder, whether this be debt, drug misuse or family violence.

## **Politics and the Ruins of Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism emerged roughly in the early 1970s as a form of “economic rationalism” which warned about the powers of the state in relation to the “freedoms of the market”. It involved the disposal of publicly owned national industries to the private sector, the rolling back of the welfare state, the introduction of market-style competition into social services, the enforcement of family obligations and the wholesale privatisation of care for older people. Influenced by Chicago School economists, such as Gary Becker, welfare is increasingly regarded as a form of capital or interest-bearing asset, with recipients seen as “human capital”. In the US, the impact of the maturing neoliberal welfare agenda had dramatic effects. As Melinda Cooper (2020) convincingly argues, the various family policies introduced by Reagan and Clinton must be understood as an attempt to revive and reinvent the poor law tradition as a wholesale alternative to the mid-20th-century welfare state. This culminated in Clinton’s monumental welfare reform in 1996 which “effectively federalized the poor law tradition, turning America’s welfare bureaucracy into an immense national apparatus for policing and enforcing child support obligations amongst the welfare poor” (112). Social work in the US has been decisively shaped by the neoliberal turn in family and welfare policies, particularly, in the way it has shifted from a social justice ethics towards an individualising emphasis on adaptation, resiliency and compliance (Reisch, 2013).

Over the past 50 years, it is evident that neoliberalism breaks decisively from classical liberalism in the sense that it is an imperialist project which no longer limits itself to the capitalist economic sphere but aims to marketise and rationalise politics, while embedding itself in routine organisational and everyday life. Nothing is left untouched by the disturbing and authoritarian depths of neoliberalism. Examples are easily discerned. For instance, with the neoliberal project, a specific kind of entrepreneurial self is written into all spheres of everyday life. “You have to invest in your ‘self’ if you want to succeed” is the slogan. This might be described as neoliberalism from below, which was initiated through the writings of Kirzner, Schmolders and von Mises. These writers regarded entrepreneurship as a general feature of human behaviour due to the need to make choices under conditions of unavoidable uncertainty. Individual human action is prioritised, and entrepreneurial skills are regarded as plentiful.

Closer to home, social services are “personalised” and “self-directed”. In this context, service users must demonstrate that they are “active” recipients of social work services; typically, for the social worker undertaking their annual performance review of key target and risk indicators to produce efficiency gains. In this regard, it would be important to empirically investigate how social work contributes to assembling aspects of “entrepreneurial governance” in its micro interventions with service users and carers. As with all public sector services, this relentless logic of improvement suffocates front-line practice, with stretch performance indicators, dictated by an organisational economics of growth (Dardot & Laval, 2013).

The title of this second section of the handbook is indebted to Wendy Brown’s (2019) *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics*, which she wrote partly as a response to the rise of Trump and the shock waves that the US 2015 presidential election sent around the world. In contrast to her previous book *Undoing the Demos* (2015), Brown engages more deeply with neoliberalism’s moral dimension to show how it has forged a political alliance with national populism, reactionary neoconservatism and traditional forms of familial and religious morality. She does this to demonstrate neoliberalism’s antidemocratic consequences and its ambition to undermine political equality. At the time of writing, the likely overturning of *Roe v Wade* by the US Supreme Court is part of a wider political campaign to roll back democracy. It will give the minority neoconservatives and the religious Christian right what Trump promised them: an America in which women and girls are forced into pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. This is despite a 2018 poll, which indicated that only 28% of Americans want the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The impact on the US social workers who work with women in these circumstances will be significant. Linked to this, Brown provides a case study of the legal decision to allow Christian-run pregnancy centres to practise without having to disclaim that they are not medical centres or being required to signpost external abortion services. Markets transposed to the sphere of faith, which for Brown is best captured in Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’s call for a “free market of ideas” for religious conviction (2019: 153). Perhaps, the unique contribution of Brown’s *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* is its rich analysis of the way neoliberalism transcends economic theory to damage the traditional moral fibre of modern society and political democracy. Trump’s indifference to truth might be one of the most telling examples of this at work.

In building on these ongoing concerns about the impact of neoliberalism, a group of social work academics and practitioners at an international seminar in Trondheim in 2016 set out to strategically grapple more deeply with this

phenomenon. The result was a themed issue of the *European Journal of Social Work* published in 2019. Convened by Edgar Marthinsen, the organisers encouraged international contributions to the journal that would:

- Examine how neoliberal imperatives are continuing to impact on, and shape, social work as a disciplinary “field”.
- Draw on new empirical work to highlight how neoliberal imperatives are impacting on situated social work practices “on the ground”.
- Stimulate international debate on the toxic impact of neoliberalism and social work.
- Prompt practitioners and educators to consider ways in which neoliberalism can be resisted (Marthinsen et al., 2019: 183).

These excellent contributions are a continuation of lively debate in social work about the impact and legacy of neoliberalism, which were originally set in motion, perhaps, by an article written in 2004 by Iain Ferguson published in the online journal *Social Work and Society*. It’s accurate to say that social work has been energetically confronting the spectre of neoliberalism for nearly 20 years. The seven chapters in this section of the handbook hopefully make an additional contribution to this two-decade period of engagement with neoliberalism by making a conscious effort to relate it directly to the complexities of the political sphere as it impacts on social work.

A word of caution, however, is necessary at this point. During the COVID-19 lockdown and after attending dozens of online “theory” conferences, it became very apparent just how much the slippery term “neoliberalism” is ubiquitously deployed, as a denunciatory category for just about anything we disagree with. It has come to replace capitalism as the arch enemy and main demon of attack, especially among social work academics. While in fact, as Zizek explains, perhaps the neoliberalism concept is a displacement by which we avoid “the real enemy”, which, for him, is “the core of capitalist social relations themselves” (2009: 177). The social work literature is particularly prone to this displacement tendency, to the point that the excessive and unquestioned circulation of the term neoliberalism is in danger of losing its critical function. It is not without a sense of irony that I noticed the trendsetting journal *Theory, Culture & Society* announced a special edition on “post-neoliberalism” (in December 2021), perhaps, as a way of further eliding this displacement. As Welsh has noted, neoliberalism “has shifted in contemporary history from a concept useful for the formation of critical discourse in sociological analyses to one that hinders critical thinking” (2020: 60). He goes on to propose that if we are to properly restore its critical

function, we need to account for five levels of analyses as part of a more rigorous approach to contemporary political affairs. Garrett (2010) observed that, within social work education, there is often a failure to critically examine neoliberalism and processes of neoliberalisation. Following on from Welsh, in social work, we would be well advised to pay attention to the characteristics of neoliberalism as (i) a model given to the imperative of capital accumulation as the core logic of capitalist social reproduction; (ii) a dynamic structure of “geo-political ordering” related to macro-regulatory financialisation processes, such as the IMF and World Bank; (iii) a “political rationality” or mode of governmentality, aimed at procuring social control and the normalisation of targeted populations; (iv) a “political project”, to a greater or lesser degree of conspiracy, class concertation and purposive programme; (v) a “political ideology” marked by “tensions between public pronouncements and elite truths” (Dean, 2014: 161). This makes neoliberalism more than just a political project. Instead, it makes it a powerful form of “public pedagogy” and “social glue” of symbolic meaning which leads to the production of a particular form of political subjectivity. (Welsh, 2020: 63–65. Also see Lorenzini (2018) for a similar conceptual mapping of neoliberalism.) Each of the seven chapters in this section of the handbook, in various ways, investigates neoliberalism as a structure of domination, showing how social work and neoliberalism are increasingly intertwined as part of an increasingly relevant interaction, and how they articulate together in particular situated practices and policies.

## **Negotiating the State: Resistance, Protest and Dissent**

Nietzsche once described the State as the “coldest of all cold monsters” (2006: 54). The third section of the handbook investigates the role of social work in relation to the cold monster of the state and the various strategies of resistance to state power. Authors argue that the State should be a primary consideration, if only for the reason that many social workers are employed by and work for the State. Typically, the relation between social workers and the State has been described as fraught and tense. This is largely due to claims about the State as a vehicle of social control. Drawing on this perspective, social workers are viewed as agents of control who are integral parts of the State apparatus and carry out the task of maintaining the social order through their work with families and the legal system. The social control perspective was invigorated by Foucault’s deeper analysis about the role of the State and ancillary institutions as sites for normalisation achieved through the strategic codification of power relations. His work on governmentality demonstrates a distinctive type of liberal statecraft that feeds into micro- and meso-level

forms of disciplinary power which flow through social work. Foucault's work articulates a decisive role for professions like social work in exercising novel forms of regulatory power, that are quite distinct from the juridical power of law and the courts. Indeed, he makes a concerted effort to trace what he calls the new technologies of power that are beyond the State as sites of normalisation. Normalisation techniques are distinctive and break decisively from juridical power. At a 2012 conference in Brazil, Foucault argued:

From the 19th century onward, in societies which appear as societies of rights, with parliaments, legislatures, codes, courts, an entirely different mechanism of power was beginning to seep in, which did not follow juridical forms, and which did not have the law as its fundamental principle, but instead had the principle of the norm, and which no longer had courts, law, and juridical apparatus as its instruments but instead, medicine, social controls, psychiatry, psychology. We are therefore in a disciplinary world; we are in a world of regulation.

(The Mesh of Power, September 12th)

In what Foucault calls "the society of normalisation" (ibid), it is the exercise of this form of power which marks social work out as distinct from legal and juridical systems of power, associated with Marxist analyses. However, another key figure with regard to theorising about the State as an apparatus of power was Poulantzas, who claimed to have completed the unfinished Marxist theory of the State in proposing that the State, like capital, is a social relation. For, "like 'capital', it is a relationship of forces, or more precisely, the material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions, such as this is expressed within the State in a necessarily specific form" (1978: 128–129). In many neoliberal political contexts, such as Hungary, we are witnessing a kind of "come-back State" as part of a strategic shift, whereby a much more centralised, muscular state very aggressively manages capitalist investment and clientelist networks tied to the Party (Geva, 2021). Bourdieu (2014) extends this analysis of the State by describing how it derives legitimacy by possessing not just a monopoly over physical violence but also over symbolic violence. The state is incorporated within us, by shaping both our mental structures and practices. Those empowered to act in the name of the state, such as social workers, routinely perform and reinforce the authority of the state as do citizens by following state orders – "do not park your car on double yellow lines".

Bob Jessop (2007) builds on state theory to develop a strategic-relational analysis of the State which examines “how any given state apparatus may privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, and some actions over others” (15). Here, the emphasis is on conjunctions of power in movement. In social work, an example would be the privileging of children’s rights over parents’ rights. These have shifted and flowed over time, with one set of rights being emphasised over the other by the State, and then later shifting back again. Armed with analyses such as these, commentators on both the Left and Right have variously described social workers as “agents of the State”, the “State’s soft police force” and occupying an oppressive role in welfare society precisely because of this strategic relation. Yet, as Guy Feldman (2021) notes, “the state has been central to social work throughout the profession’s history. Despite its theoretical and political significance, the mainstream of the social work field has long disregarded the state as an object of inquiry” (1). I agree with Feldman that this lack of attention is puzzling, particularly given the reinvigorated interest in the role of the State within the social sciences over the past 20 years. For example, we have witnessed a revival of interest in the historical constitution of the modern state and inter-state systems. Most importantly, there has been a growing interest about the relationship between the State and globalisation, and, of related state forms and functions, especially given the crisis of the national state form over the past four decades. Despite the proliferation of interest in the subject across the social sciences, it remains difficult to explain exactly what is meant by the concept of the State. While there is no shortage of definitions, equally, there is no shortage of debate and controversy about the State. One unifying aspect across the debates that is helpful for our understanding of social work is suggested by Mitchell (1991), who says that “a definition of the state always depends on distinguishing it from society, however difficult the line between the two is to draw in practice” (77). This is referred to in the literature as the state-society continuum, and it’s accurate to say that social work is pinned right at the centre of this axis. We can extrapolate from Mitchell’s suggestion to develop a four-fold schema as an aid to critical analyses of the State: (1) state-society relations, or the boundary between state and non-state actors and processes, (2) state capacity, or the ability to successfully implement policy directives, (3) consent or resistance to the constitutive force of state power, and (4) how states normalise populations or obtain compliance from citizens through programmes of governmentality. From this vantage point, we can follow Davies’ (2014) suggestion to work towards a more nuanced analysis of neoliberalism that is far more than merely a mudslinging pejorative slogan used against capitalism generally. For Davies, neoliberalism is not simply about laissez-faire economics, but, instead, requires a closer sociological interrogation, leaning especially on Foucault’s

theory of biopolitics. In all this, the Left need to draw strategic lines of political engagement to address what Marx (1852) called “the tasks of the time”. It seems to me that displacing the sovereignty of the nation state would amount to half the battle; how we get to the negation of capital is the other half.

## **Race, Bordering Practices and Migrants**

Race and racism have long been central categories for consideration in critical perspectives in social work.

Racialised biopolitics are increasingly the subject of critical analysis in social work. Anti-racist approaches within educational social work gained currency through social movements against racism in the 1970s and early 1980s across Europe and the US. In the UK, anti-racist training came to a head with the publication of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work’s (CCETSW’s) Paper 30 published in 1989.<sup>8</sup> However, Platt and Chandler (1988) trace the origins in the US back much further to the 1920s and the pioneering work of E. Franklin Frazier, an eminent black sociologist, and director of the Atlanta School of Social Work. With other black social workers, Frazier made important contributions to social work and to the struggle against racism. In 1967, an Institute of Research Toward Improving Race Relations Report was produced based on a meeting sponsored by the US Council on Social Work Research and the National Association of Social Work. It was supposedly a timely publication, because as the preface of the proceedings said, “when a new phase of Negro-white relations had already begun to emerge”. One can only assume they were referring to the 1967 Milwaukee race riots which in August led to a ten-day shutdown of the city with race riots in the US spreading to Washington, DC. A monograph *Race, Research and Reason: Social Work Perspectives* (1969) was edited by Roger Miller as an outcome of the conference. The Report did not receive universal approval, with one reviewer suggesting that it typically represented a colour-blind approach to race and was indicative of a liberalism which masked social welfare agencies “repressive tolerance of racism” (Street, 1970: 123). However, it was one of the first studies in the social work literature singularly dedicated to issues of race. A very interesting black civil rights activist emerges at this point in time. In the same journal issue of the review, an article by an urban planner and member of the Black Power Movement, Clarence Funnye’s (1970) *The Militant Black Social Worker and the Urban Hustle*, offers some hard-hitting analysis, urging black social workers “to develop militant and special professional responses to the problems of black people and to resist the diversionary urban repair and antipoverty programs and the social work theories and

practices that are institutionalizing a new urban hustle” (5). Funnye offered compelling and lively examples of the hustle, ranging from fake \$10 million foundation grants “urged to relate itself to the Harlem community” (6), clientelism research-funded projects, financial support for “ghetto separatists”, race-sensitising urban programmes, with all white supervisor teams, teaching mainly white students about black lives housing interventions in Manhattan. In a previous life, Funnye had stood on a Harlem Street corner with television sets tuned to various channels, offering a dollar to whoever saw a black person on the screens. It cost him \$15. Over a six-day period, there were 15 sightings. At another point, Clarence goes after a couple of our early cherished radical social work heroes, Cloward and Priven, professors of social work at Columbia University. He talks about his arguments with them on race and cuttingly describes them as “doomfully withdrawn, having pseudo intellectual theories, neo-apartheid and as white Black Power separatists”<sup>9</sup> (Funnye & Shiffman, 1967).

Not only is Funnye arguing that the separatists should be criticised for being exclusionary, he is also hinting that white Black Power professors do not authentically grasp the true situation of the ghetto. Does this have something to do with their whiteness? If so, there is a lot to be unpacked here, which raises issues that certainly impact on critical social work and the prospects of solidarity across interracial lines. The political reflections it prompts are both startling and challenging. If white ignorance is highly resilient even to sustained and intimate contact with non-white people, it would be doubtful that interracial solidarity will play a role in dismantling white ignorance. As Charles Mills (1994) argues, the interracial solidarity argument is best tested against considerations regarding white socialisation under conditions of white supremacy.

Whites are born as fairly plastic entities who will be both shaped by, and in turn shape, a particular sociocultural environment. But it will be pointed out that their socialization in a white-supremacist society makes them ineluctably beneficiaries and perpetrators of the system of oppression responsible for keeping blacks down, so that they are all, or mostly (claims of differing strength can be made), the enemy, whether through active policy or passive complicity. Even if they seem to show good faith, the entering of a social ‘whiteness’ into their personal identity means that they will never, or only very rarely be able to overcome their conditioning: sooner or later, their ‘true colors’ [sic] are going to come out. They will naturally



be less sensitive to its [society's] racist character, and more reluctant to confront the radical changes that have to be made to bring about a truly just society.

(138–139)

By white supremacy, Mills means a social structure in which white people as a class systematically dominate non-white people. In her development of Mills' argument, Fraser (2018) notes that it tacitly draws on the ideas, most thoroughly developed by standpoint theorists, that one's social position affects how the world perceives you and will thus, in turn, influence one's political commitments and projects.

Fast forward 20 years from Funnye's black militant social worker article. The ascendancy of the political right and populism across the globe during the 1990s prompted scholars to identify a "new racism", or what Fanon referred to as "cultural racism", within the political culture and in lived experience. A growing literature now exists on the politics of whiteness that is attempting to develop such a focus of enquiry. In social work, the publication of *The Challenge of Right-wing Nationalist Populism for Social Work* (2020), by editors Noble and Ottman, is a concentrated attempt to confront the rise of right-wing populist politics and develop a progressive social work response. They argue that the rise of national populism signals an important time for social work to forge and reforge revitalised left-wing networks and create links with civil society and challenge right-wing populist policies wherever they manifest themselves (also see Ife, 2018). Social workers must challenge the rise of demonising migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Similarly, the rise of Islamophobia is deeply concerning. The drift towards xenophobia and the targeted victimisation and violence against Roma minority groups is also something very close to home for social work.

A vibrant and compelling example of contemporary black activism and anti-racist practice in social work is the *upEND* movement in the US which campaigns to eliminate the policing of black families, through the child protection and foster care systems. Networked with protest movements across the US, activist groups such as RISE and the Movement for Family Power, led by parents impacted by the family policing system, and scholars such as Dorothy Roberts, Anna Arons and Alan Dettlaff (see Chapter 18 in this handbook) are a real threat to normative social work in the US. Newspaper stories and rallies across the US report disgraceful cases of racism by social workers against black families. To give a feel for this, Ericka Brewington, a Harlem mother who attended a rally in New York's East Harlem district, said that she needed support from black activists in 2017, when her youngest child

was screened for drugs soon after birth – without her consent – and the test came back positive. Instead, the city child welfare agency removed all of her children, even the ones who had been spending the summer with their father in Georgia. They were placed in foster care (reported by Megan Conn, for *Imprint: Youth and Family News*, New York, 1/19/2021). Roberts' important book *Torn Apart* (2022) with the subtitle "How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families – and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World" shows how the child welfare system in the US is little more than a "family policing system". It collaborates with social workers, health visitors, law enforcement and prisons to oppress black communities. Roberts argues that child protection investigations ensnare a majority of black children, putting their families under intense state surveillance and regulation. Black children are disproportionately (referred to as racial disproportionality) likely to be torn from their families and placed in foster care, driving many to juvenile detention and imprisonment. Out of this sort of radical activist work, the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work launched the *upEND* movement during the summer of 2020. As a collaborative and relatively new movement, it aims to abolish the child welfare system and reimagine how society can support child, family and community safety and well-being. It aims at both dismantling the current child welfare system while simultaneously creating a new way of supporting children and families. Under the slogan "Some cops are called caseworkers", the movement calls for a radical shift in how we view the safety and protection of children, particularly black children and ethnic minority families, by imagining a society in which forcible state surveillance and separation are no longer acceptable, due to the harm and trauma they cause. Abolition as a goal requires the active dismantling of racist policies and, in their place, the creation and implementation of anti-racist policies and practices that promote healing and reduce harm. In abolishing the current child welfare system, *upEND* would replace it with community-based supports for the care of children that are designed by and for families and communities, thereby making the need for the current child welfare system obsolete. The family policing of black children and families by social workers depends on creating situated racist borders within families, and across and between families and communities.

It is increasingly apparent that borders and bordering have come to dominate our lived experiences, especially during times of COVID-19, whether these are personal borders associated with social distancing, or territorial borders related to travel and travel quarantining. We live in a world of borders. Territorial, political, juridical, theological and economic borders. The ISIL attempt to establish a Muslim caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2019 is an example of how all five of these dimensions come together in one historical event. In Nail's (2016) *Theory of the*

*Border*, he presents the original thesis that societies and states are the products of the process of bordering, and not the other way around. He throws up important insights for critical social work by offering a radical alternative to theorising about borders defined by social processes and material technologies of division arguing that:

The border cannot be properly understood in terms of inclusion or exclusion, but only by circulation. In part this follows from the movement of the border. Since the border is always between and in motion, it is a continually changing process. Borders are never done “including,” someone or something. This is the case not only because empirically borders are at the outskirts of society *and* within it, but because borders regularly change their selection process of inclusion such that anyone might be expelled at any one moment.

(2016: 7)

We witnessed a stark example of the malleability of borders as circulation and changing boundaries with the controversy over the world-famous tennis star Novak Djokovic, and his attempts to negotiate the notoriously difficult Australian border controls, to play in the grand slam in Melbourne during the COVID-19 pandemic. In tit-for-tat legal challenges, first, he was in, and then he was out, and then back in again. Eventually, he was deported from Australia after legal court hearings in the dead of night. Novax, as he became known on Twitter, because of his refusal to be vaccinated, illustrates how the power of the border to revoke visas is profoundly determined by a host of social forces. It seems that in Australia, immigration laws and consideration of their legal standing will bend according to the status of the migrant seeking entry. Migrants arriving in Europe from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq are unlikely to be afforded such status. Nail maintains that “The border is the social technique of reproducing the limit points after which that which returns may return again, and under certain conditions. The border does not logically ‘decide’; it practically redistributes” (2016: 8).

Bordering practices permeate front-line social work. The history of the border has largely been told as a history of states. But borders are also personal, and social distancing is an example of bordering. There are psychological and affective borders which social work is attentive to on a daily basis. “Personal space” is an affective border. “Personal space management” has become particularly important and emphasised as part of the COVID-19 pandemic. One news reporter tells of scuffles and fights breaking out in shopping centres across the UK. Personal

space thinking has had a significant impact on attachment theory and assessments of “good enough parenting”. A 2002 study by Bar-Haim et al. argued that

Children who had an insecure attachment relationship with both mother and the professional caregiver in infancy displayed smaller personal space boundaries and tolerated larger intrusions into their personal space as compared with children who had secure attachments in infancy.

(68)

In the social work literature, personal space is often wrongly understood in *naturalistic* and *normative* terms. That is, personal space imitates nature or the usual natural surroundings of a species. Indeed, social work has uncritically adopted and hardened psychologistic accounts of personal space as bordered, in the training of social work students across a range of learning programmes especially those concentrating on skills training. With service users, children, for example, are expected to learn boundaries as a basic skill through negotiating personal space. This has also led to institutionalised forms of direct work, especially with children and families, which significantly influence risk assessments and professional judgement on care proceedings (there is a huge “recognising the signs” literature). Gendered and racial aspects are likely to be overlooked. Social work accounts of personal space can have significant racial undertones, for example, when Eurocentric concerns are raised following home visits to Muslim and Southeast Asian families who supposedly live in squalor due to the large number of people occupying single bedrooms and houses.

In the UK, the charity organisation *Social Workers Without Borders* has done much to promote solidarity with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. Involved in both direct work and campaigning, they offer voluntary support to asylum seekers, refugees and those impacted by borders, independent of Government and Local Authorities, using social work skills and expertise. The organisation maintains that social workers must engage with racialised communities’ resistance through their legacy of exclusion and displacement. Recent debates around the UK’s asylum system have focused on the Nationality and Borders Bill going through Parliament at the time of writing. Some of the proposals contained in the Bill, particularly plans to “offshore” asylum seekers and English Channel

“pushback” policies, have been widely criticised. Many of the measures contained in the Bill are likely to affect children and young people, targeting them directly, such as the age-assessment and statelessness clauses.

## **Post-Colonialism, Subaltern and Global South**

Colonialism consists of dispossession, settlement, forced labour (e.g., in plantation economies and slavery) and sometimes racial genocide. One of the most vivid and disturbing historical analyses of the oppressive workings of colonialism linked to welfare services is given by Warwick Anderson (2006). He examines the role of science and medicine in the American colonisation of the Philippines from 1898 through to the 1930s. While rigorously seeking to maintain their own health and stamina in a foreign environment and exerting control over millions of Filipinos spread out over seven thousand islands, Anderson meticulously traces how a significant transformation in the thinking of colonial doctors and scientists took place in the early 20th century. The focus was on what was most threatening to the health of white colonists. The Catholic Church and nurses, who filled social work positions, by way of the influence of American Red Cross aid workers, and then through a small number of Philippine social workers, trained in the US contributed to expanding the gaze of the American Empire building (Price & Artaraz, 2013).

During the late nineteenth century, they understood the tropical environment as the greatest danger, and they sought to help their fellow colonizers to acclimate. Later, as their attention shifted to the role of microbial pathogens, colonial scientists came to view the Filipino people as a contaminated race, and they launched public health initiatives to reform Filipinos' personal hygiene practices and social conduct.

(Web page citation <https://www.dukeupress.edu/colonial-pathologies>)

In 1915, the US established a Public Welfare Board to coordinate the efforts of science, medicine and social services. After the Philippine-American War in 1902, a Beriberi (Thiamine deficiency) epidemic infected mothers and contaminated breastfed milk. This led to high mortality rate among new-born infants. Child and maternal hygiene became a priority and located at *Gota de Leche* (Drop of Milk) in Manila, social workers distributed

pasteurised milk from a dairy farm it operated using Australian cows (Murillo, 1944). In a gaudy picture of Empire building, Anderson's analysis delves into the minutia of white colonial obsession with native excrement, a leper colony intended to transform those considered most unclean and least socialised, and the hookworm, breast-feeding and malaria programmes implemented by the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1920s and 1930s. Anderson shows how the racist colonial public health programmes in the Philippines subsequently influenced modern military medicine and industrial hygiene and the US public health services (hand washing regimes, called "scrubbing", that we are so familiar with during COVID-19, have an American colonialist history). In developing the theory of biopower, Foucault predicted these sorts of historical revelations. In *Society Must be Defended*, he says

a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products  
[...] the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic  
dimensions of social normalisation.

(2003: 62)

The above historical examples rest on the biopolitical "logic of elimination" (Morgensen, 2011). Settler colonialism is exemplary of the processes of biopower theorised by Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. However, white supremacist settler colonialism produces specific modes of biopolitics that sustain not only in settler states but also in regimes of global governance that inherit, extend and naturalise their power. Wolfe (2001) argues that "settler colonisers come to stay: Invasion is a structure, not an event" (338). Examples of the British colonialism of Australia show how settler colonialism performs genocide alongside a variety of practices that converge on a purposed elimination of Indigenous peoples. During the British colonial period (1788–1901), Australia's Aboriginal population declined from 750,000 to fewer than 50,000 (Windschuttle, 2000). However, Dalrymple and Fraser provide an important corrective here when they write in *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company*. *It is not only government states such as the British who are colonising, but vicious capitalist private companies, as in the case of India.*

We still talk about the British conquering India, but that phrase disguises a more sinister reality. It was not the British government that seized India at the end of the 18th century, but

a dangerously unregulated private company headquartered in one small office, five windows wide, in London, and managed in India by an unstable sociopath – Clive of India.

(2019: 21)

Both European and Indian episodes of economic division and resulting violence are about coercion by capitalist interests and ultimately the search for global profit. Scott (1990) deepened subaltern studies in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* and introduced the concept of infrapolitics defined as the cultural and structural substratum of more invisible forms of political action that have rarely attracted scholarly attention.

Desertion from the army, as distinguished from open mutiny, is perhaps a historically significant form of infrapolitics. As Scott (2012) notes, the defeat of the Confederacy in the US Civil War was determined far more by the mass desertion of non-slave holding hill-whites than by any other factor (113). Subaltern people often don't vent their frustrations or claims in conventional political ways, but rather in discreet, illicit, stealthy ways – their goal being not to gain official legitimacy, for which they are often disqualified, but to make claims for dignity and recognition.

On this more positive note of resistance, it was in India that subaltern studies emerged. Subaltern studies began its career in England at the end of the 1970s, when conversations on subaltern themes among a small group of English and Indian historians led to a proposal to launch a new journal in India. Ranajit Guha and eight collaborators formed together to produce the journal *Subaltern Studies*. Subaltern studies inspired a growing number of “bottom up” studies of people, such as peasants, domestic labourers and farmers, whose history had been previously ignored. Subaltern studies are engaged in debates about insurgency and nationality and the gulf between popular unrest and state power. Critical readings of colonial texts, oral histories and ethnographic techniques were employed to reveal India's cultural roots in subaltern subjectivity and coloniality (Ludden, 2002). Resistance, dissent and disruption in the analyses of social work feature significantly in this handbook and have often been inspired by subaltern studies. By 1993, the new critical histories had developed sufficient international prestige that a Latin America Subaltern Studies Group was inspired. Indeed, let us finish this section by turning to this other important region of the global South, in what is a progressive turn for critical social work. Many leading Latin American thinkers continue to remain under the radar for white-centric European and US researchers. For example, the influence of the Brazilian critical geographer, Milton Santos in Latin American scholarship, is enormous, but he is largely unknown in the

Global North. As Lacerda (2021) notes, Santos is revered in Latin America and one of very few scholars from outside Europe or the US, and the only Portuguese speaker ever, to have been awarded the annual Vautrin Lud Prize (an international award for geography modelled after the Nobel Prize). Similarly, many Latin American scholars writing critical histories and theories of social work remain unnoticed.

The Latin American Association of Education and Research in social work (ALEITS, in Spanish) was founded in August 2006, in Santiago, Chile. Yet, rarely has the reception of social work ideas from the global North been reflected on in relation to their influence in Latin America (Resnick, 1980). Such a reflection must acknowledge that these ideas usually meet other demands, creating other actions, deployments and outcomes in very different political contexts. Historiographical reflection on this relationship is important for critical social work especially in light of issues of colonialism and imperialism. The influence of social work that emerged in Europe, especially from the latter half of the 20th century, arrived in Latin America and generated new reflections and productions based on local geo-political realities. For example, the “reconceptualisation movement” of social work in Latin America was violently halted by right-wing political change, and university social work departments were regarded as the cradle of Marxism. Comparatively, throughout the 20th century, we can see the many “family resemblances” in the development of social work in these countries, while at the same time recognising the very significant differences, singularities and nuances of each one. In an effort to establish itself in the southern continent of America and seek its institutionalisation in these lands, it was necessary for social work to find tools that could help the fermenting of theoretical and historical ideas in a vastly different political and policy context (Condé, 2021). With the publication of these important chapters in the handbook, critical social work can seek a richer and more significant interaction among researchers in Latin America, and between the global North and South for social work. They will also help advance a stronger solidarity-based framework for critical social work.

## **Critical Feminism, Sexuality and Gender Politics**

It is over 30 years ago since Donna Haraway published her highly influential essay on situated knowledge in the journal *Feminist Studies*.<sup>10</sup> She made her objectives around the necessity of foregrounding situated practices and their coupling to embodied knowledge for feminist analysis quite clear:



I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for a view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity ... Feminism is about a critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in unhomogeneous gendered space.

(1988: 589)

Feminist epistemology conceives of knowers as situated in particular embodied relations to what is known and to other knowers. What is known, and how it is known, reflects the situation and perspective of the knower (Anderson, 2020). Our positionality inherently determines what it is possible to know about an issue of concern. Since the publication of feminist theorists such as Haraway, social work feminists have creatively developed the concept of embodied knowledge and situated practices to the benefit of both service users and critical social work (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014; Chiu & Charnley, 2021; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012; Tangenberg & Kemp, 2002 ). The term situated knowledge continues to have far-reaching theoretical consequences for feminist social work that render it a useful and suggestive notion for *thinking-with* in many recent debates. Critical feminism is closely associated with the intellectual and political agenda of critical social work, with obvious coalitional parallels around issues of power, ethics and justice. Clark (2007) argues that

The phrase *critical feminist theory* evokes multiple theories and meanings. In some usages, the term *critical* modifies *feminist theory*, suggesting that all feminist theory criticizes the misogynistic view of women that characterizes society. Feminist theory, viewed in this light, is a critical theory representing the radical notion that women are people. Other uses of the term *critical feminist theory* suggest that feminist theory has not gone far enough to counter women's societal subordination. In this view, critical feminist theory encompasses many "modified" feminist theories, indicating a multiplicity of theories critical of feminism itself. These theories push feminist theory to recognize a deeper radicalism.

(349)

Two years after the publication of Haraway's essay, Teresa de Lauretis organised a conference under the newly coined term "queer theory". De Lauretis was an accidental trail blazer in promoting queer theory for its capacity to trouble what she diagnosed as the built-in complacencies of lesbian and gay studies. Apparently, she came across the term "queer" as it was used in an affirmative way by gay activists and street kids in New York in the late 1980s. According to Halperin (2003), "Her usage was scandalously offensive" (340). However, for de Lauretis, queer theory was a placeholder, and offered a way of thinking about lesbian and gay sexualities beyond the narrow rubrics of either deviance or sexual preference, and instead "as forms of resistance" to cultural homogenisation, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture" (1991: iii). As Halperin further explains, in a very short period it was apparent that

Queer theory appeared on the shelves of bookstores and in advertisements for academic jobs, where it provided a merciful exemption from the irreducibly sexual descriptors 'lesbian' and 'gay.' It also harmonized very nicely with the contemporary critique of feminist and gay/lesbian identity politics.

(340)

Queer theory effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences. However, an important insight for critical social work to garner from these outlined timelines is that emergent methodological and theory making changes were indicative of newly controversial separation that queer theory helped open between gender and sexuality. Vociferous turf wars broke out between different fields and hybrid fields around issues relating largely to questions of sexual identity, gendered identity and identity politics. Jagose (2009) puts this rift into a historical context:

Just as women's studies – the example given is specifically women's history – seeks less to inaugurate *women* as a new object of study than to transform existing knowledge formations by establishing 'the centrality of *gender* as a fundamental category of historical analysis and understanding' (1993: xv), so too lesbian/gay studies seeks to establish *sexuality* as an analytic

rubric of broad relevance and importance for a diverse range of disciplinary fields and interests.

(167)

Judith Butler weighed in on the debates surrounding these formulations and identitarian separations and politics. She writes:

Within queer studies generally a methodological distinction has been offered which would distinguish theories of sexuality from theories of gender and, further, allocate the theoretical investigation of sexuality to queer studies, and the analysis of gender to feminism.

(1994: 1)

Butler concludes her article with the following cautionary note, “Perhaps the time has arrived to encourage the kinds of conversations that resist the urge to stake territorial claims through the reduction or caricature of the positions from which they are differentiated” (1994: 21).

Cardon (2010) proposes, in order to avoid any misunderstanding and escape once for all from any attempts at caricaturing, to use the universal notion of transgender, which would cover the notions of queer, sexuality and gender, and give a place to all diversities beyond any binarism and bounded identity politics (also see Green, 2002). Janet Halley (2006), however, stirred the pot and suggests that queer studies should take a break from feminism. She argues that left-wing theorising about sexuality would benefit from taking such a break because of the prevailing assumption that progressive thinking about sexuality must necessarily be feminist. In further justifying this call to withdraw, Halley says that “no one theory, no one political engagement, is nearly as valuable as the invitation to critique that is issued by the simultaneous incommensurate presence of many theories” (2006: 9). In spite of my earlier call for biopolitics to have guaranteed status as the primary framework of analysis, it seems to me that critical social work would do well to heed Halley’s plea for open-ended engagement and multi-faceted theorising. In general, the social work literature has yet to engage with the debates and rifts that have occurred in feminism, gender and sexuality studies. Apart from an edited collection by Argüello (2019) and the pathbreaking article by Hicks and Jeyasingham (2016) which offers a genealogy of social work approaches to sexuality through a critical examination

of the relevance of queer and post-queer theory, the uptake of interest in social work has been limited (see Chapter 39 in this handbook).

In examining the various controversies that surround many of these issues, it is unfathomable why there is not a deeper and wider appreciation of gender and sexuality studies in social work research, especially when we consider the very significant implications these can have for front-line practice. The very possibility that narrow understandings of contemporary family formations and intimate relationships will be reproduced in front-line interventions should be a huge concern. Both empirical and conceptual analyses amply demonstrate that sexual orientation is fluid. As Fraser argues “compulsory heterosexuality is a social system which regulates sexual desire and romantic attachment” (2018: 321). It’s imperative that social workers in all roles have a deeper knowledge and awareness of diverse sexualities and gender/LGBTQI people and must feel confident in giving appropriate support, advice and safeguarding that takes into account any controversial issues of sexuality and gender. As Willis et al. (2016) argued:

The social work profession can struggle to engage with sexuality, as it can with other sources of social difference and identity, such as ethnicity, class and gender. This struggle is likely to create inequality in the construction and delivery of services to service users, and to create fissures in students’ learning.

(2163)

There is limited coverage of LGBTQI content in European and US social work journals and the mainstream literature could be improved if queer theory had a more substantial influence. The chapter contributions in Section Six of the handbook go some way towards correcting this shortfall in the mainstream literature by offering original contributions from an international perspective. They can enrich the debates and will inevitably help fashion a more concerted effort to engage with cross-disciplinary research around issues of gender and sexuality.

## **Posthumanism, Pandemics and Environment**

If things don't change quickly, there will come a time when the Earth sheds humans and non-humans like dead skin. Spaceship Mother Earth is drifting towards disaster like a modern Titanic with no teleports available even for the super-rich. There are dozens of examples around the world of the devastation already happening ranging from severe extinction to extraction issues. Here is a vivid example. For centuries, nomadic pastoralism in northern Kenya has been shaped by unpredictable weather patterns and regular drought. It has slowly had to adapt to its environment, and pastoralism – herding livestock – has become the only viable way of life in the region. Climate change has, however, had a massive impact on the way of life of these Kenyan livestock farmers. The rain seasons have changed dramatically over the past few decades. As climate becomes more and more unpredictable, their way of life is severely threatened. Increasingly, they face daily problems with accessing water and their crop production has dropped massively. The cruel reality of the climate crisis is that those whose emissions are the lowest often suffer the most. As the impoverished farmers prayed for the rain to come, the *Washington Post* ran an article which graphically showed the death and devastation caused for wildlife in the region (November 10th, 2021). Camel skeletons bake in the sun, giraffes are dying of hunger in conservation areas, and cattle and goat carcasses are strewn along the dusty village roads. Overall, 80% of the livestock has been lost to the drought. If they cannot sustain food production and feed their livestock, their civilisation becomes extinct. Drought is a hidden global crisis which risks becoming the next pandemic. This stark example from northern Kenya points to an ethical imperative that our ecological responsibilities lie not only to our species, kin and nationality, but also across the species barrier. There are multiple ways any given creature – or critters, as Donna Haraway (2008) calls them – depends on other beings, there is no agency, that is not interagency. The ethics of care literature is an obvious way to help make sense of these interspecies ecological and moral connections. Pioneered by Carol Gilligan care ethics focus less on moral rules and much more on the role of affect and inter-subjectivity. This allows ecological activists to extend moral considerations to non-human species (Donovan & Adams, 1996). A dual strategy is necessary whereby care with interspecies entanglements is based on raising awareness of injustice while simultaneously enacting alternatives, such as open rescue of animals from theme parks and sabotaging fox hunts. The Kenya example helps convey the inter-relatedness of the three leading themes in this section of the handbook: posthumanism, pandemics and environment. It shows how in the face of disaster and disease, the human is entangled with its environment and with animal species on which it is entirely dependent for its existence. Posthumanism is a theoretical river that cannot be damned. In arguing against human exceptionalism, the posthumanities take seriously the role of “more-than-human”

actors to explore the complex entanglements of human, animal and ecological health across various geo-political contexts (Haraway, 1988). If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's a heightened awareness of the interdependence of human and non-human relations, not to mention how ecological crisis and pandemics are caught up in the interplay of power, politics, science and pharma capitalism. In *After Lockdown* (2021), Bruno Latour suggests a shift in the register of human agency, a metamorphosis, revolving around a kind of twitchy hyper-awareness of the consequences of our socially distanced action. Standing too close to someone in supermarket aisles can easily increase this sense of twitchiness. Indeed, one might go so far as describe the social effects of COVID-19 as multi-species politics characterised by a brutal awareness of our claustrophobic entanglement with each other and the environments in which we live. Examining the interface of human and non-human relations also helps us understand the abject animalisation of people of colour and ethnic minority people such as Roma (Kourova & Webb, 2020). "African", while human, is nevertheless defined by their animality. According to Jackson (2020) rather than being animal-like, black people are perceived as animals occupying the human form. "Blackness is not so much derived from a discourse on non-human animals — rather the discourse on 'the animal' is formed through enslavement and the colonial encounter encompassing both human and nonhuman forms of life" (2020: 5).

Since its inception, social work has been stuck in the narrow groove of human exceptionalism – the privileging and prioritisation of the human species above all else – perhaps not surprisingly, given that in some countries it is called "human services". But the days of human exceptionalism are over. If social work is to learn anything from the burgeoning environmental humanities and social science literature, it is that the arrogance and chauvinism of speciesism is an illusion that has wrought devastation on the planet and genocide on animal and plant species. The present climate crisis is a direct consequence of human exceptionalism and its manifestation of greed. Creative organisations like Superflux are calling time on human exceptionalism. "It's not working for the planet. It's not working for humanity. We believe that humankind needs to think beyond itself", they say on their website.

Inevitably, social work will reach this conclusion very slowly. There are, however, some shining lights on the horizon. The Bozalek and Pease edited book *Post-anthropocentric Social Work: Critical Posthuman and New Materialist Perspectives* published in 2021 was pathbreaking in the field. It's the first sustained scholarly assessment of the dangers of exceptionalism bound to the liberal humanist project of social work and an attempt to disrupt its anthropocentrism. What is most compelling about this collection is not the arguments it mounts against social work, but the philosophical perspectives it enables, particularly around questions of human agency. The very

notion of agency in social work is conveyed as intentional, rational and autonomous in acts of change, and is deeply embedded in humanist and Christian conceptions of human exceptionalism. The reflective practitioner model so strongly vaunted in social work education is an obvious example, whereby the concept of perspective itself rests on an anthropocentric notion of subjectivity. As Lorraine Daston explains at some length:

The language of perspective carries with it weighty assumptions about what it means to understand other minds. Within the model of a world divided up into the objective and the subjective, and armed with the method of sympathetic projection, understanding another mind could only mean seeing with another's eyes "put yourself in his place," as Lloyd Morgan titled one of his chapters. Here I can only hint at the several intellectual and cultural shifts that created the perspectival mode: the habit of interior observation cultivated by certain forms of piety; the increasingly refined language of individual subjectivity developed in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romance novel; the equation drawn between sensory experience and self by sensationalist psychology; political and economic individualism; the cult of sympathy, which expanded to embrace first children, then animals, and finally denizens of other times and places. Perspective is not simply another form of subjectivity; it is the apotheosis of subjectivity as the essence of mind.

(2005: 53)

How do we get out of our own perspectivist cage? (see Despret, 2016). The mainstay of the reflective practitioner model in social work is soaked in this aberrant thinking. It's hard to ever imagine social workers "thinking with animals" (Daston & Mitman, 2005).<sup>11</sup> Unless of course, by some miracle, an Elon Musk-type Brain-Computer Interface hard-wired us up to our domestic cats and dogs. Some people literally think with animals. In the movie *Wolf* (2021) dealing with "species dysphoria" (otherkin) among young people, the setting is a secure clinical psychiatric facility nicknamed the "Zoo" by inpatients. There is an assortment of teenage patients – the sweet boy who thinks he's a dog, the mean guy who identifies as a bear, the seductive Lilly-Rose Depp who is a wildcat, the quiet girl who has long thought of herself as a spider – along with doctors, social workers and nurses both helpful

and harmful. Towards the end of the movie, the director, Nathalie Biancheri, cuts between two incongruous scenes. First, we see an exuberant clinical psychologist dancing around triumphantly in a group session with the young residential inmates to the cheery pop sound of Umberto Tozzi's "Gloria",<sup>12</sup> encouragingly shouting; "you're all going to end up wonderful human beings, you're going to feel more human than you've ever felt before". Meanwhile, cut across, we observe that upstairs in a locked room, Jacob, the boy wolf, is naked, muzzled and constrained in heavy leather headgear and chained in a metal cage, being cruelly tortured and pronged with an electric baton by the senior psychiatrist for his refusal to comply with "being human". At the very end, Jacob escapes the facility, by scaling a barbed wire fence, and howls joyfully into the night. The movie illustrates how an understanding of animals and what it means to be human has been profoundly shaped by anthropomorphic thinking and human exceptionalism. For non-domesticated animals, from elephants to ants and everything in between, humans are a destructive, murderous, cruel and bloodthirsty species. Fox hunting for sport is illustrative of cowardly and unnecessary human brutality. Ultimately, this may well be the verdict of the habitation of human life on planet Earth.

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<sup>1</sup> For an exception to this tendency, see Garrity’s (2010) analysis of the relevance of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge for social work.

<sup>2</sup> A related but different liberal egalitarianist framework for theorising social justice is available to social work through the “capabilities approach” articulated most comprehensively, a decade after Rawls’ (1971) seminal work, by welfare economist Amartya Sen and further articulated by political philosopher Martha Nussbaum. However, this perspective builds on Rawls’ distributive justice approach and adds the dimensions of human dignity, self-determination and well-being to its justice framework (see Morris, 2002). The Bielefeld social work group in Germany, largely under the direction of Holger Ziegler, have done much to advance this perspective in social pedagogy and welfare education (Ziegler et al., 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Some writers have defended Foucault against the often-exaggerated claims that he sympathetically leaned towards neoliberalism, particularly in his later writings and interviews, as well as the suggestion that he carried an anti-Marxist strain throughout his work (Fraser, 1985). They often make this defence by showing how, for example, in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault refers explicitly to the role that the production of sexuality plays in class struggle, and that he uses Marxist concepts when discussing strategies for undermining societies of control.<sup>4</sup> See Agamben’s (1999) critique of potentiality as expectant states of affairs: those which can become or will become actualised precisely as they are now “potentially”. Certain Trotskyite Marxists in social work persistently talk about the potentiality of the working-class as something yet to happen, that will miraculously occur as a given, or else it will stay in wait, immanent, but will inevitably come into political Being.

<sup>5</sup> In *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected*, Marilyn Strathern (2005) probes the mutual translatability of persons and things; interpersonal relatedness *through property* is the other side of relatedness understood *as a property*. Ownership turns up unexpectedly; one *has* identity, or family, or dignity (for example) in a surprisingly literal way. For Strathern, it is primarily the force of law that makes persons into things.

<sup>6</sup> Historically, it is likely that Rojek’s timely book “*Social work and Received Ideas*” (1988) was one of the first studies to introduce a discourse analysis to a social work audience. In Chapter 4, he talks about a foray into discourse analysts (obscurely citing Lacan as an example) and how “discourse theory maybe unfamiliar to our readers” with “less than a handful of attempts to apply it to the field of social work” (14). It was a year later in 1989 that I suggested developing Foucault’s analysis of discourse for a critical enquiry into the Kantian ethics of the British Association of Social Work code of ethics (Webb & McBeath, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> In a brilliant and sweeping piece of in-depth historical analysis, Sergei Prozorov (2013: 2016) brings together ideology critique and analyses of technologies of power, to show how socialist regimes, such as Stalinist Russia, with the creation of the “New Soviet Person”, are themselves oppressive forms of biopolitical power. Historically, we can observe how the actualisation of Marxist thought can lead to biopolitical State regimes which terrorise the populace.

<sup>8</sup> At the time I had just started working as a lecturer at the University of Dundee, and as a module leader for a course on social work ethics and values, was required by the Programme Director, to teach about anti-racist social work. I found myself as a white lecturer, teaching to all white students and being encouraged to create “black role play

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scenarios” to give a sense of lived experience to the students. The course was monitored by white local CCETSW consortium assessors. Needless to say, most of the students were highly critical.

<sup>9</sup> Clarence Funnye: Black Power After the Election|The NYPR Archive Collections|WNYC.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent summary of Haraway’s original contribution around four axes of epistemological, ontological, ethical and political, see Rogowska-Stangret’s (2018) online article “Situated Knowledges”.  
<https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/s/situated-knowledges.html>.

<sup>11</sup> For a brilliant analysis of animal agency, and interagency relations between animals and humans, see Despret (2013), where she reframes subjectivity in the terms of “agencement” – an assemblage that produces “agentivity”. With this reframing, agency seems to be much more extensively shared in the living world.

<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this is a pop tune that is often played at Donald Trump rallies. The song is heard on a video of the moments when Trump is getting ready to give a speech before his supporters march to the Capitol on January 6th. Singer Umberto Tozzi has strongly objected to the use of his song by Trump and his enablers.