

Social Pedagogy, Welfare, and Policy:¹ A Third Eye View



Brij Mohan and Shweta Singh

“The *age* in which I live has itself an objective meaning which it creates by being alive and which escapes it because it creates it *for others*.... [T]he attempt to interpret social phenomenon in economic terms will perhaps appear to our descendants as the dominant *intellectual* characteristic of our age: in short, the material truth unveiled by an age which is in the process of finding itself will become intellectual truth for the next generation.”

Jean-Paul Sartre (1992: 75–76)

The age I live in is more than material. It is both *absurd* and inane if the human condition remains the focus of social phenomenon. Social and public policies and programs are decent alternative interventions to authoritarian extremist choices and provisions that we choose to avoid and change. The post-war years were bedeviled by depression, poverty, and despair. A faint glimmer of hope sustained the vision of a civil society that would democratize institutional infrastructure to ward off the resurgence of war, hopelessness, and totalitarianism. The world I live in is a scandalous paradox of modernity: new inequality, the rise of neo-fascist organizations, national tribalism, and the perils of advancements that threaten human extinction.^{2,3}

The invention of “welfare state” was a pragmatic step to meet a plausible violent revolution halfway. Both public and private endeavors designed provisions

¹Social Work in the Changing Welfare State: *A Policy Analysis of Active Labour Market Policies for Disadvantaged Youth in Austria* by Alban Knecht in a Book Series of the Social Pedagogy Section of ÖFEB (Austrian Association of Research and Development in Education). Berlin: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2024); ISBN 978-3-8474-3053-7, pp. 134, paper.

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to ameliorate poverty, enhance economic security, and rebuild social institutions which ensure health, education, and equal opportunities without any discrimination. Different countries offered variant measures to achieve egalitarian objectives within their political and cultural norms. China's communist regime defined its own freedoms; it nearly annihilated pervasive poverty by authoritarian measures. The Soviet Union established the world's first socialist society in the ruins of a decadent, Tsarist bourgeois history. The fall of the Berlin Wall, however, changed the contours and impact of a failed ideology.

Western democracies pursued liberalism in different modes. The Fabian Society in England and the New Deal in the U.S. fashioned the shape of the Welfare State best demonstrated by Nordic countries, France, Germany, Finland, and Austria. As colonialism began to die, emerging independent nations—India for example—launched national development plans in the nascent stage of welfare planning.

The book under review is authored by a research associate in the Department of Educational Science at the University of Klagenfurt. It is a professionally written study of Social Work in the changing welfare state. It offers an analysis of active labor market policies for disadvantaged youth in Austria. Alban Knecht devoted 10 years in bringing out varied themes relative to social pedagogy and social policy, a nexus hardly explored in the United States and other countries following the Western model. In a series, this book constitutes a Section of ÖFEB under the aegis of the Austrian Association of Research and Development in Education.

In his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire wrote: "There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (1986: 75). The ethos of Austrian (policy) paradigm seems to underscore the pedagogical base for transformative action. What does it involve? What are its implications for the future of the Welfare State? Will public policy emerge as a vehicle of social transformation beyond the UK and USA? Is it prescient for a single regional domain to wallow in the rut of status quo in a fast-changing world? What, if any, Social Work have to offer as a profession to sustain a vibrant Welfare State when institutional infrastructures have failed the needy and alienated people across the nations?

The Austrian welfare system analyzed here is a snapshotted highlight of a European experience which is not yet as polarized as the one we have in the US. From Norway to New Zealand, democracies are increasingly becoming partisan issues. The rise of authoritarianism in the guise of new nationalism—like Hindutva in India and mythical Zionism in Israel are veritable forces that will turn the scope and purpose of all welfare programs and policies. "Abolish Zionism," Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian acclaims.

Social Work in the Changing Welfare State is a well-organized book consisting of six main chapters that signify Austrian domain of principles, practices, and challenges: (1) Youth employment promotion in the changing welfare state; (2) The Resource Theory perspective as a theoretical framework; (3) Changing discourse on labor market policies for youth and youth employment promotion; (4) Institutional changes of youth employment support in the government

coalition in Austria (2000–2020); (5) Results and Conclusions: On the governance of the welfare state; and (6) Impact of socio-political change on Social Work and on young people. The appended outlook, tables, references, and indices are noteworthy assets to readers who may like to dig into the labyrinths of welfare quagmire in a polarized world doomed to become a victim of its own success.

Policy and public welfare are uniquely intertwined in their dynamic relationship. The politics of welfare are a post-war phenomenon confounded by party interests, social bases, leadership styles, natural catastrophes, and manufactured horrors. Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and programs and democratic policy first organized a working-class majority which heralded a social revolution in the wake of the darkest years of American history. Mathew Karp (2024: 55) observes:

“It was no coincidence that after 1933, the working-class Democratic coalition—with the support, and goading, of trade unions—constructed the only rudiments of social democratic government that the United States has ever known, from labor laws and financial regulation to old-age insurance, public healthcare, and support for housing and education. Nor was it coincidence that this same working-class coalition, spurred by civil rights protests, finally overthrew Jim Crow itself in the 1960s.”

The “white side of the color-line”, paraphrasing Du Bois, continues to define the contours of global intersubjectivity. There are no FDRs on the horizon: Only Trumps, Netanyahu’s, Modis, Bidens, and Putins tend to regulate the world in the name of democracies as they define. It would be foolhardy to envision an egalitarian society so long as people of the 21st century remain uncommitted to the ideals of a civil society. Today’s world issues emanate from human inhumanity: terror, war, weapons on the one hand and dehumanization, destruction, and acquisitive-territoriality on the other, characterize the fate of *Species*—a death wish that obscures creativity, peace, and progress. Since science, technology, and capitalism initially arose from Europe, the “mass-men”—([1930] 1957: 1090—to paraphrase José Ortega y Gasset—seems to return as a *New Leviathan* (Mohan, 2024). Modern tribalism in this new age extremes is compounded by the power of Artificial Intelligence, authoritarianism, and nationalism.

Search for *Truth* and *Ethics*

In her courageous and thoughtful writing, Shweta Singh wrote about “Practice as Philosophy” (2023). I quote below a few lines that question Social Work’s legitimacy in a changing world:

“If inequality, injustice, and poverty are “structural” problems, then Plato might not help. Since oppression is rooted colonially, it’s more an issue of decolonization than “capacity-based” *strength perspective*. Of course, individuals and groups have their own viewpoints about their personal and

social problems. However, professional objectivity calls for truth and justice, rather than pragmatic and empathetic emptiness" (Singh, 2023)^{4,2}

Singh's challenge to modernity and social practice partakes of historical significance when social, medical, and psychological modalities of *practices* are at a crossroad. I could not have completed this critique without averring and exchanging thoughts about a "third eye" view of welfare and policy.⁵ My vantage point is the rise and fall of the American Social Welfare that I have been studying and teaching for more than half a century in the United States and beyond. I learned the vocabulary of change, directly and indirectly, from Evelyn M. Burns, the "mother of social policy", as her "grand protégé". Of special relevance here is Social Work's continued reluctance to accept Social Policy—its mission and scope—as the guiding framework for professional practice. Alban Knecht's prefatory questions centrifugalize key issues that merit continued critical discussion:

"Which goals are pursued within the framework of social policy, which measures are implemented? How is social work influenced by social policy? How independent is social work in the implementation of its tasks? Is it largely determined by social policy?" (Knecht, 2024: 5)

"When the world is dark, be a visitor to your pain—don't be a resident of it."

Ali Abu Awwad⁶

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²"Professor Spoke out Against the War in Gaza. Israel Detained her." *The New York Times International*, June 13, 2024: A8.