

Taking a political stance in social work

David McKendrick and Stephen A. Webb

Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland

*There's class warfare, all right but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war,
and we're winning (Warren Buffett, 'The Sage of Omaha')*

Abstract

While taking a political stance in social work necessarily involves a close historical examination of the role of social and economic structure as well as the context which constitutes relations of domination it also involves formulating an ontology of the political subject. We maintain that the proper conceptual space for understanding the possibility of taking a political stance is that of political ontology. In articulating this space we attempt to bring together structure and agency to outline a nuanced strategical framework for radical social work. We ask against which standards and concepts a radical social work stance must be judged? We also question the extent to which radical social work can be positioned within the disciplinary and professional field as a counter-strategy to both neoliberal capitalism and mainstream liberal social work? In doing so the paper attempts to plot the implications, the context and account for the existence, of significant meanings and realisations of the term new politics of social work, which is conceived as a "New Social Work Left".

One of the slogans of the 2011 Occupy protests was 'capitalism isn't working'. French economist Thomas Piketty explains why they're right. In his path-breaking *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) a powerful line of critique is captured that can be effectively deployed against the sympathisers and proponents of neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on robust historical economic data sets he claims that in a market-capitalist system, inequality doesn't decrease as the world gets richer, it gets worse. In an economy where the rate of return on capital outstrips the rate of growth, inherited wealth will always grow faster than earned wealth. Moreover, the wealthier you are, the more disproportionate your hold over the political process. As Paul Mason notes "the fact that rich kids can swan aimlessly from gap year to internship to a job at father's bank/ministry/TV network – while the poor kids sweat into their barista uniforms – is not an accident: it is the system working normally" (Guardian, 28th April 2014). Piketty's essential insight is that private capital accumulation inevitably leads to the concentration of wealth into ever-fewer hands and Marxism's fundamental truth that 21st century capitalism is a one-way journey towards vast inequalities is reasserting itself with a vengeance. Piketty thinks that Marx's political economy critique of capitalism basically got it right.

What do these fresh insights tell us about taking a radical political stance in social work? In *The New Politics of Social Work* (2013) we maintained that such a stance involves redefining the project of the Left in social work in terms of a 'radicalisation' of theory and practice. This we suggested requires a militancy which confronts the system of capitalist power that constantly tries to redefine, limit, and reject the core values of social work. This transvaluation of values drive is "most apparent in the habit of regarding the means to any end as the end in itself" (Sombart, 2001: 227). However, as Negri pointedly observes "value is outside of every measure" (1999: 86). Here, no doubt, while the preoccupation with money is partly to blame, an instrumental bureaucratic rationality is also at fault. Against this transvaluation drive it is important to recognise that social work, as Hardt and Negri describe it, is a form of immaterial or affective labour that is not bound to market principles or instrumental rationality. Affective labour is carried out that is intended to produce or

modify emotional experiences in people (Massumi, 1995; Hardt, 1999; Hardt & Negri, 2000).¹

The central objectives of a renewed social work politics begins with grappling with radical ideas about what a 'just society' might look like and how injustice manifests itself in everyday relationships and institutional structures that impact directly on social work (Webb, 2010). Such a political project confronts, unsettles and agitates. For some it may be difficult to be sure whether one is for or against a radical social work stance; things become a little clearer when one understands that the decision is also a choice for or against social justice. Indeed, one very good reason to reject the doctrinaire capitalism promoted by the likes of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and Gary Becker is because of its denial of social justice. A radical stance is also a stance against an advanced economic system, called neoliberalism, which as Piketty demonstrates perpetuates vast inequalities and injustices in the name of market freedom. It is an anti-capitalist stance and against the endless inequalitarian spiral of wealth bifurcation and privilege.

In *The New Politics* it was shown that a convergence of factors have paved the way to reaffirm a fresh radical stance in social work and an emergent "New Social Work Left" (Gray & Webb, 2013). In drawing together new insights from sociology (Nancy Fraser) and political philosophy (Alain Badiou) we claimed that a distinctive and significant shift is occurring in contemporary times which acts as a catalyst for radical social work. Broadly, this shift is based on an appreciation of renewal and crisis. *Renewal* is situated largely at the level of political ideas and values, especially as they relate to the development of a progressive left agenda that emphasises social justice and equality. In making an assessment of the impact of political writing in social work of late, and with the launch of *Critical and Radical Social Work*, it is fair to say that the new theoretical work produced is beginning to establish itself as a solid and coherent contribution to the field which badly needs one. Social work remains under theorised in the radical tradition and has yet to properly incorporate fresh and exciting insights from important political theorists such as Giorgio

¹ Fortunati (2007) closely examines the role of the 'machinization' of affective labour in the valorisation process of the fashion industry and its detachment from more immediate human interactions that this instrumental rationality brings with it.

Agamben, Judith Butler, Roberto Esposito, Jean Luc Nancy and Nina Power. Or else social work is so badly theorised that it becomes *unpolitical*. *Crisis* refers to the vulnerabilities of neoliberalism and state capitalism on a global scale to the extent that many political commentators believe we are now entering a new phase: a protracted, long downturn in the fortunes of global capitalism. These shifts are particularly relevant in considering how we move towards a new politics for social work. There is a critical role for social work in confronting the contradictions of the logic of capital accumulation and greed based on the notion of endless growth. It is against this dominant neoliberal worldview that David Harvey's *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* urges us to 'constructively rebel if we are to change our world in any fundamental way. The problem of endless compound growth through endless capital accumulation will have to be confronted and overcome. This is the political necessity of our times' (2011: 277). Social work, as a form of immaterial labour, owes it as much to itself as to its citizen service users to confront the dominant neoliberal apparatus and capitalist class with every tactic available to it. *The New Politics* demonstrates the distinct sense in which we are entering this new phase of politics. It is important to be clear what is meant by a 'new phase' as it lends itself to a politics of social work. As soon as anyone starts talking about a new phase, people automatically assume that what is being proposed is the substitution of one kind of politics for another. However, we wanted to avoid stoking up vain hopes and passions or having people jumping up and down excitedly imagining that the revolution is just around the corner. There is no suggestion that this new phase in *The New Politics* is replacing all previous progressive, radical, and left politics in social work. If anything, this project is a reactivation of older radical traditions in social work. Indeed, the stance taken fits within a clear trajectory of critical European political thought in preferring to search for new openings for rethinking radical politics by criticizing contemporary political formations rather than provide ready-made prescriptions. Moreover, if there is a real shift in the point of contestation with this new politics of social work, it is precisely because of the signs of innovation, and the constraints that are happening on the wider social, economic, and cultural plane, under which social work is operating (Webb, 2014).

Mobilising Resources and New Social Movements

There is something deeply experiential about taking a political stance. While we face the difficult challenge of inspiring sympathisers and those already wedded to core progressive values, within social work we face the bigger challenge of convincing the uncommitted – and we assume there are many – that there is something worthwhile to be had in taking a political stance and engaging in a radical project. We are persuaded, often by ourselves that radical politics is futile. So we tend toward compromise, resignation, and indifference. Mainstream liberal social work discourse has a tendency to limit and even dislodge our experience of what is important and urgent. It tries to persuade us that social work is political neutral. Thus it can take over our voice and regulate our feelings into ones of apathy or disinterest. As C. Wright Mills noted in discussing professional ideology "The direction is definitely toward particular 'practical problems'" and that "the emphasis upon fragmentary, practical problems tends to atomize social objectives .. their conduct so informed are not integrated into designs comprehensive enough to serve collective action" (1943: 168-9). We've seen this come to fruition in social work with the obsession on "what works" and outcome based regimes. These approaches restrict the scope of decision making to narrow questions about effectivity and effectiveness within mundane maintenance type tasks and also restrict the opportunities for participation in social work assessment. Theories, rather than factual evidence, provide the essential infrastructure to social workers' day-to-day thinking and practice. As Mills explains 'The focus on "the facts" takes no cognizance of the normative structures within which they lie' (p.169). He chooses to illustrate this from social work and Mary Richmond's 1917 book, *Social Diagnosis*.

'Present institutions train several types of persons – such as judges and social workers – to think in terms of "situations". Their activities and mental outlook are set within the existent norms of society; in their professional work they tend to have an occupationally trained incapacity to rise above series of "cases." It is in part through such concepts as "situation" and through such methods as "the case approach" that social pathologists have been intellectually tied to social work with its occupational position and political limitations.' (p.171).

As Shaw notes Mills believed that Richmond's book afforded 'a clue as to why pathologists (and social workers) tend to slip past structure to focus on isolated situations, why there is a

tendency for problems to be considered as problems of individuals, and why sequences of situations were not seen as linked into structures' (2013: 170), in that by emphasizing 'the whole' this assumes there are many parts. Implicit here is the idea that mainstream liberal psychosocial work or what Ferguson (2001) calls "individualization" is part of the problem rather than the solution in that it neglects the fact that personal experience depends on social and political surroundings.

The nature of workplace culture in social work can be discouraging to attempts to theorise one's practice within the office, conference or meeting room, still more so in taking the stance of a radical social work agenda. Indeed, we need to be aware the scope of radical social work does not aggravate the problem of theoretical distance from the daily concerns of front-line social workers. There can be a quite a different personal conflict for front-line practitioners: between on the one hand staying in a job which s/he likes and trying to develop a political practice there; and on the other, submitting to an externally induced guilt by theoretical observers about one's political role and abandoning that practice for what? The radical position of front-line social workers may well be necessarily ambivalent in that they must inhabit their own workplace without belonging to it completely. Moreover, frontline social workers are often politically unorganised and do not usually have the energy, time, resources to take up active political roles. They may casually slip in and out of politically motivated events. This exposes the weakness of social work as a professional pressure group and helps explain the strength of the capitalist state and its managerial agents in determining our ability to respond with political verve and commitment (Marston & McDonald, 2012). The critique undertaken in *New Politics* is part of a general attack on neoliberal capitalism and it is because the system we are challenging is overwhelmingly conformist and mainstream that we need to look hard at social work itself and point out that corporate capitalism *is there, too*.

We accept that stumbling, hesitancy, and blundering are intrinsic parts of everyday life in spite of the bounded rational worldview offered up by managers and policy makers (see Hjer & Forkby, 2011). So it is with political tactics. Living in the shadow of actuality means a certain patience is needed. Take a deep breath, and try to understand the contours of the specific political situation you find yourself in as potential event of refusal. As Bruno

Bosteels makes it plain, 'politics is anchored in its own independent points of reference, which are rare, site-specific and have a history of own rather than being subordinated to the direction of single and unified history outside of politics' (2011: 120).

Social work will develop its full radical potential only when it accepts that it is, as a discipline and profession, an expression of the same cultural transformation the new social movements foreshadow (such as Occupy and Zeitgeist movements). Insights from resource mobilisation theory (RMT) teach us that movements are based on a set of preferences for social change within a networked or "bounded" population (McCarthy & Zald 1977). A key analytical issue for RMT is understanding how social movements turn bystanders into adherents and subsequently adherents into constituents and ultimately mobilize constituents to active participation. As Gamson notes "Mobilization is a process of increasing the readiness to act collectively" (1975: 21) and tends to focus on issues and material practices. Avoiding the temptation to treat "everything as a resource" in social work we should focus on five distinct types of mobilisation resource - material, human, social-organizational, cultural and moral. For example, the extensive use of digital social media (such as Twitter) by social movement actors is an emerging trend that restructures the communication dynamics of social protest, and it is widely credited with contributing to the successful mobilizations of recent movements (e.g., Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street) (Lee et.al. 2013). Following this line of thinking from resource mobilisation research we proposed that it is time to get organised and find one another and that the *political* has to be the dominant factor in our coming together.

Managerialism, Corporatisation and Performance

The New Politics emphasised the crucial role played by management in legitimating, sustaining and championing corporate capitalism in the context of social work. It was shown how Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007) provides a strong explanation for the continuing appeal of capitalism and its justification by managers and politicians. Boltanski and Chiapello thus identify one of the main stalwarts of neoliberal capitalism as its managers. The 'spirit of capitalism' is the ideology that justifies people's commitment to capitalism, and which renders this commitment attractive. Boltanski and Chiapello focused on the way in which the spirit of capitalism changed between the 1960s

and 1990s. To win conviction and induce conformity, the spirit of capitalism must address three dimensions of legitimation distinguished by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999): stimulation, security and justice. '*Stimulating*' is about an involvement with capitalism and how this system helps people to blossom, and how it generate enthusiasms. As Chiapello and Fairclough explain the "promise of stimulation" is dominant in managerial discourse "evoking a world of change, innovation, creativity ('to offer a dream', 'to stretch their horizons', 'to create the future')" (2002: 201). The second emphasis on forms of *security* is offered to justify involvement in terms of a safety net for those who are involved, both for themselves and for their children. The mantra "Capitalism protects" is deployed. The third set of justifications attempts to invoke the notion of *justice (or fairness)*, explaining how capitalism is coherent with a sense of justice, and how it contributes to the common good, through say, social mobility and freedom of choice.

Management is crucial in legitimating and authoritatively delivering the new justifications for profit and greed in this phase of corporate capitalism. For Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), management discourse does the most decisive work in the economy. In effect, if State law and the military are always ready in reserve, it is managers who provide the glue that holds the apparatus of capitalism together, delivering its command and regulatory structure at the level of everyday practice. As such, it is the rationality of management, its agenda and practices that must be a central target for a sustained critical social work critique and radical confrontation. The dominant devices in managerialist speak is the concentration on leanness of the enterprises, team-work and customer satisfaction, and the vision of leaders or coordinators (no longer managers) who inspire and mobilize their operatives (rather than workers). We see all of this reflected in the devices used by social services management across both public and third sector organisations. Dressed down, cool capitalists such as Richard Branson and Steve Jobs are held up as the new visionary leaders. Management discourse also contains both new methods of running social enterprises, performance measures and making profit, and justification for the way these are done – arguments which managers can use to respond to criticisms and to demands for them to justify themselves. From the analysis provided by Boltanski and Chiapello there is little doubt, that social services management supports, maintains, and deepens the neoliberal apparatus. As Carey (2007) demonstrates, without resistance the deskilling and

marginalisation of frontline practice will continue to be inflicted by care managers and policy bureaucrats.

Iain Ferguson (2013) neatly summarises the function and role of managerialism in social work and its intimate relation with capitalist systems of control. Drawing on Harris and Unwin (2009) he outlines the key elements of managerialism as follows. 'Management' occupies a separate and distinct organisational function which measures progress in terms of increased productivity arising from advances in modes of calculation and information technologies. Increased measurement and quantification shifts the focus from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes. Markets or market-type mechanisms of supply and demand and contractual relationships are prefigured as the most effective way to deliver services. Managerialism places a customer orientation – and consumer choice – as central, and blurs the boundaries between the public, private, and voluntary sectors.

Ferguson notes that in relation to worker autonomy and discretion, three aspects of managerialism are particularly relevant as instruments of control. First, performance management is promoted, typically in the form of managerial regimes driven by key targets and performance indicators and underpinned by inspection, regulation, and audit. "In respect of the UK experience, driving the introduction of this regime in the 1980s was a discourse of failure, shared by Conservative and New Labour governments alike. Welfare professionals, including social workers, motivated by a public sector ethos, could not be trusted to provide the kind of services successive governments wished to see. Instead, a greater role for the market in social care and top-down regulation was required for the delivery of efficient social services (Harris, 2003)". Performance management has had a major impact on professional practice and front-line worker morale. Ferguson reports that according to a major government-commissioned review of child protection in England and Wales published in 2010:

A dominant theme in the criticisms of current practice is the skew in priorities that has developed between the demands of the management and inspection processes and professionals' ability to exercise their professional judgement and act in the best interests of the child. This has led to an over-standardised system that cannot

respond adequately to the varied range of children's needs (UK Department of Education, 2010: 5).

Similar views were expressed by groups of experienced social workers in Scotland by Ferguson and Woodward's:

We live in a performance framework where outcomes have to be seen to be measured. I think we all know that outcomes are really very, very difficult to measure but nevertheless they are measured, a lot of them are measured in such meaningless ways ...The managers control day-to-day practice, which is just chasing numbers and ... targets (2009: 69)

Taken together, these factors result in a growing chasm between the priorities of politicians, policy makers and managers on the one hand and those of front-line practitioners on the other: 'There's a huge gap between managers ... who are trying to implement what we've been talking about and their understanding of what actually good social work practice is' (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009: 72).

One author recalls a recent visit to a local authority social services department in Scotland and a vivid manifestation of corporate capitalism as it is increasingly assimilated into the physical workspaces of front-line social workers. He was told how practitioners were allowed to decorate their work space but the colours used must be explicitly the same as the corporate colours of the local authority organisation. Should their colour scheme not match the corporate colours then they would be removed. What was most surprising about this corporate socialisation was the manner in which it was accepted and indeed in some cases seen as a positive. It was imagined that colour-coded corporate uniformity contributed to a neat, tidy, and ordered workplace environment, one that gave off an air of clinical professionalism, and one where the distractions of non-corporate colours were absent. Colour-coding, as illustrated by the example mentioned here, is one example of the discursive, rhetorical and representational strategies of de-individualisation increasingly deployed by corporatisation in public sector social services. Visual trademarking is more evident with branded logos, branded cars, corporate dress code and "personalised" I.D. badges becoming common in social services workplaces. As we noted above these sit alongside ever increasing regulation regimes and perennial inspections. The sense that the

service being inspected has to “perform” to a high standard is often interpreted as “not letting the side down”. This corporate managerialism sits comfortably along neo-liberalism where the market principle is of paramount importance. The increase in registration and inspection activities adds a further layer to this where the internal corporate controls are mirrored by external regulation of conduct, performance and as we've seen the affective dimension of aesthetic housekeeping.

"I would prefer not to" the political as potential

Taking a political stance involves refusal and resistance to the control apparatus of the capitalist state. In this section we wish to show how social workers can resist by not doing. Conceivably this may give rise to a whole set of (non) actions from the withdrawal of labour by going on strike, to not answering or delaying responses to emails from management. They can refuse the language of ‘service-user’ and reinstall fellow citizen (see Heffernan, 2006). Of course such refusal scales up when local groups of social workers concretely refuse to accept merely economic justifications for changing workplace practices associated with ‘flexibility’ or casework management. Badiou (date) is anti-trade union because he reckons trade unions consistently betray workers. Instead, he proposes a politics based on principles articulated by small, tightly knit groups of workers independent of large-scale institutional support. In the text *The Call* (2007), the French group *La Rage* write, ‘all in all, we would rather start from small and dense nuclei than from a vast and loose network. We have known these spineless arrangements long enough’ (cited in Noys, 2008: 12). This suggests a felt need to re-think fundamental concepts of strategy in social work. Here is an example of how these principles might be theoretically worked through.

At a conference in Lisbon in 1986, Giorgio Agamben gave a lecture entitled ‘On Potentiality’ in which he began by asking, ‘what do I mean when I say: ‘I can, I cannot?’ His answer finds its most radical articulation in the essay ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’. Here Agamben is demonstrating that the proper conceptual space for understanding the possibility of taking a political stance is that of political ontology. Uncovering the importance of Melville’s enigmatic Bartleby for political tactics, Agamben (1999) analyses the law copyist who, on the third day of his employment in an office on Wall Street, begins to refuse any and all tasks assigned to him by repeating in a soft, flat, and patient voice, "I would

prefer not to". He prefers not to collate or complete case files and not to copy. Slavoj Žižek paraphrases Bartleby's political stance:

In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that *he doesn't want to do it*; he says that *he prefers (wants) not to do it*. This is how we pass from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation,' which parasitises upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation (2006: 381-382).

Agamben (1999) shows how the potentiality 'of doing' that belongs to the scribe is stubbornly but politely refused. In recent years, Bartleby has been depicted as everything from a beautiful soul, who must 'continuously tread on the verge of suicide' (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 302) to a 'new Christ' and 'the doctor of a sick America' (Deleuze, 1998: 90). In 1998 Agamben himself said 'I would prefer not to' when he withdrew from a lecture series at a New York university by refusing to submit to the US policy of fingerprinting all migrants, and declared his intent to refuse to submit to similar practices elsewhere. Social work practitioners would do well to note that 'Bartleby' is a powerful narrative for the politics of the moment.

The force of Bartleby's refusal lies in the very fact it does not point to an unnameable Utopia but is concrete and specific to its bureaucratic context. Julian Murphet (2007) sums this up: 'There is no "new order" implicit in Bartleby's preference, only a resolute commitment to the *void* of its situation: the empty set of what does not, and cannot be made to, count' (p. xi). A politics conjured from this vantage point is much more than Bartleby's lifelessness as the product and outcome of a sterile bureaucracy, much of which front-line social workers would easily recognise. In fact, Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' is deceptively disarming because it is neither fully negative nor affirmative; it neither refuses nor accepts. It steps forward – 'I would prefer' – and backwards – 'not to' – at the same time. It opens a zone of indistinction between yes and no. If asked 'Bartleby are you a Communist?' he replies, 'I would prefer not to say what I am'. Bartleby is the image of human freedom, because he, through his refusal (or rather inability) to "be placed within the register of the will, becomes impossible to identify as a subject. The will is in other

words pointed out as the principle which makes coding and identification possible; that which is able to restore order to an otherwise uncontrollable chaos" (Agamben, 1999a: 254). In *Bartleby*, therefore, Agamben finds the call for and possibility of a revitalization of this 'chaos of potency' (1999a: 254). This chaos is namely in turn nothing other than the ungrounding foundation of human freedom. Agamben gives the following elucidation in 'On Potentiality':

[F]reedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality. To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is, in the sense we have seen, to be capable of one's own impotentiality, to be in relation to one's own privation. This is why freedom is freedom for both good and evil. (1999a: 194-5)

What is the radical efficacy of this gesture? Clearly, this example is not to suggest that a system can be overcome by isolated, individual actions or subjective refusals. But imagine for a moment what a collective refusal would look like? The context that interests us lies between the potential to comply (or to do) and the potential to refuse (or not to do). Consenting to rules of domination and control are just that – a potential to consent. As potential they have yet to pass into the actuality of observed behavioural compliance and always retain the opposite potential of resistance – 'preferring not to'.

For Agamben (1999) potentiality has a dual function: while the actual can only be, the potential can be *or* not be. We may ask what does the utterance 'I would prefer not to' do to social work's rules, regulations, and procedures. What does it mean to 'prefer not' when the rules of policy or organisation are in question? After all, the push towards activation by laws and management are constantly in need of fulfilment. Imagine the immanent command structure tacitly sitting there waiting and assuming obedience. In refusing to activate the organisation's need to be obeyed, social workers are conducting a political experiment in what can either be or not be. Literally – 'to be or not to be'. *Bartleby's* refusals overturn the hierarchy of the office, revealing it to be based upon thin assumptions of command and consent. A *refusal* can radically open up new ways of seeing. It can be the locus for critical reflection. At what point is it justifiable and necessary for a

social worker to slow things right down and stumble politely into the utterance, 'I would prefer not to'? Agamben (1999) has placed much significance on this 'potentiality not to' but suggests it is often eclipsed by another kind of potentiality, one that is always already waiting to tip over into actuality. Can social workers call this eclipse into question? The scrivener's enigmatic formula – 'I would prefer not to' – marks the persistence of that other kind of potentiality – the potentiality not to – that Agamben (1999) is interested in. Law, rules and structures of command are confounded by the potentiality not to. They absolutely depend on its opposite, the tipping over of potential into actuality, the call to obey.

Concluding comments

Social work inevitably operates within a 'grand tension' of refusing the dominant order while at the same time being contaminated by this very order. Ferguson (2013) reports that in Slovenia, social workers involved in Occupy Ljubljana established a new organisation, *Direct Social Work 15o* [15 October, 2011] which issued the following statement:

Not to be servants of financial capitalism, supervisors of expenditure of the poor! To become an advocate for the people, join the movements today. Social work emerged from working class movements for social justice – and became in time a mediator between the state and the people. Social workers became expropriated, too. With neo-liberalism social work has become a global profession – to mend and reduce the harm done. But social work is also an opportunity for those who are pushed into the shadow of silence to speak, for those who have become dependent on others to take the things in their own hands (SWAN, 2011).

For radicals the tensions to which these politics gives rise are best dealt with by disciplined organisation, mobilising resources, developing local clusters of solidarity and maintaining a critically reflective stance. Such a stance enables the social worker, as an immaterial labourer, to theorise the imbrication between the 'personal' and the 'political' to generate an informed, yet radical perspective. This makes it easier for social workers to live with these tensions and sustain the tactics of refusal in the face of management regimes of control. Radical interventions in social work are tactically best suited to specific issues via

small groups. The importance of timing and scale in structuring political action and its outcome is widely recognized within the radical literature.

In our recent empirical work on community engagement, we were most surprised to discover just how multinational corporations and local state bureaucrats are scared stiff of social protest and radical mobilisation. This is especially true when a social issue gains salience with the media. Many protest groups are not aware of the panic they excite in the minds of the bosses. Big business and their state bureaucrat allies are utterly risk averse when it comes to the prospect of public protest. They neither understand nor can account for what they see as the 'emotive and irrational public'. This small unknown fact may be a striking tactical lesson for the social work Left. Talking about and organising around social inequality is a threat to political power – the capitalist class. Badiou constantly reminds us of the importance of a strategic approach to power and that successful protests and uprisings in different domains have often taken place because of the actions of minorities (see Hewlett, 2010).

Social work can become a politics of refusal. It can discover a new sense of promise and negate and react against the violence of neoliberalism. It can rejoin around Agamben's (1999) grand refusal. Badiou's (2010) *Communist Hypothesis* rests on a simple, yet important conviction: we need to be able to envision something other than capitalism and the conceptual reworking of communism makes this possible. This would decisively link to renewal of interest and reconceptualisation of community social work (Forde & Lynch, 2013). There is little doubt that the potency for social work, and particularly community based perspectives, in these new creative ways of thinking by writers on the left, such as David Harvey (2005, 2010), Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), and Jacques Rancière (1999) will face enormous, perhaps unsurmountable obstacles before they can imprint themselves on frontline practice. However, we still have much to learn from more classical Marxist writers such as Antonio Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre and Walter Benjamin. Indeed, Gramsci's political theory is well suited to the radical social work agenda in that it recognizes the centrality of organizations and strategy and "directs attention to the organizational, economic, and ideological pillars of power, while illuminating the processes of coalition building, conflict, and accommodation that drive social change" (Levy & Egan, 2003: 803).

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