EDITORIAL/REDAKSIONEEL

THE CARAVAN MOVES ON

Reading the latest issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* at my desk in Australia, I note with extreme interest the turn of events in social work in South Africa and I am led to reflect once again on history and to ask myself, is history repeating itself? Although it took different forms across the Western world, similar trends are woven through social work's development across widely divergent contexts, among them its relationship to state interests and social organisation. Just as the apartheid government moulded social work for its purposes, the ANC government is doing the same though the priorities are different. The former created well-organised infrastructure that mainly benefited white society. The latter is trying to do the same for black society. This is well and good and essential to the creation of a just society in South Africa. My interest is more with political allegiances. The conservatives have become radicals and the radicals are now conservative. The most interesting part of this change is that social work persistently remains a conservative profession supportive of state interests and social organisation.

There are very interesting theoretical debates in social work relevant to this turn of events. One is highlighted in Pozzuto's (1999) article published in this issue in which he argues that social work gave up its position of critique when it joined with the state and lost its basis from which to resist the transformation imposed by industrialization. He draws attention to persistent arguments that "social work is a form of social control contributing to the legitimization of the current social order". Similarly, Amy Rossiter refers to "doing social work" as "an identity position that facilitates governmentality" (p.5). She writes about "a lifetime of being positioned as a 'professional helper' by a state that organizes the people's problems as individual pathologies that are best administered by professionals who are trained not to notice the state". She says that, "my very identity is in jeopardy when I am called a professional within a state that uses the terms and definitions of professionals to hide its oppressive functions" (p.1). She proposes a radical or critical practice which has a place for uncertainty, doubt, mystery and unpredictability, and is hopeful of "the possibility of keeping social work on the side of common decency: spiritually, politically and practically" (p.7). Thinking specifically of Lombard's (2000) standpoint on professionalism, my attention was drawn to Rossiter's statement that what she was suggesting as a possible practice of freedom in social work was absolutely opposed to the reigning discourses of professionals and professional education. She says, "I loathe current practices of professionalism" (Rossiter, 2001:5). The dilemma for her, however, is that what she wants her students to learn bears little resemblance to the social work that they will be expected to perform.

As readers of this journal will know, I have always believed, and possibly naively so, that social workers in South Africa could and should form a unified professional body to promote the interests of the social work profession. I have also strongly believed that social work needs to focus far more on community development, on working from the bottom up, especially now with increasing disillusionment with the government's failure to deliver services at the grassroots level. There is a dire need to rebuild civil society and to capitalise on the enormous assets that exist in terms of human and social capital. I still believe that the social work profession could do this if it were able to build the capacity and commitment to focus its potential where social development really happens – at the local grassroots community level. However, in light of current debates on professionalism (e.g. Coughlan 2000; Lombard 2000; Ramasar 2000), I am beginning to think that emphasis on professional organisation might be misplaced. Instead, the focus should be on developing a critical, radical social work practice, which extends beyond the social work profession itself, focuses on social development and addresses social need rather than government interests.

I realise there are some who would argue that social need and government interests are one and the same and, not being up-to-date with current developments on professional unity, I want to pursue my argument that focusing on professionalism is working contrary to social work's capacity to address vital social need. Coughlan (2000) highlights the political minefield surrounding the so-called 'social service professions' in South Africa. Lombard (2000), Middleton (2000) and Ramasar (2000) take great pains to defend current actions both in government and the profession and do not see any conflicts of interest. The preferred belief is that social work has to get its act together and prove how good it is and how much it is needed rather than entertain any ideas that there might be very real and inevitable (this is history repeating itself after all) political forces marginalising social work. Their stance requires that we have the political capacity to argue for the value of social work within our society and this hinges on it developing a greater concern for social justice than has been apparent through the apartheid years. Those that disagree with them, like Weyers (1998), take the view that social work has sold out. Those that fought for and wanted the new system (the old radicals) are now very much a part of it. They are part of the power structures. They're in and the old guard is out. This is politics. Must we be so naïve about it? We have to acknowledge the new *status quo* and separate out professional politics from social need. So let's focus on critical practice. Let's be the watchdogs of social justice. Let's highlight failures in service delivery that lead to ongoing oppression and inequality. Let's be true to the values of our profession. They are constant no matter what government is in power and it is that which gives us what Rossiter (2001) calls our 'common decency'. It is, however, more than that. It is what gives us our sense of purpose and direction. We should not be sidelined by professional politics but rather stay focused on our mission and goal in society. There is no other way to prove our worth. Let's write about what we are doing well and highlight ways in which we are addressing social need and making society a better place. Let the dogs bark, the caravan moves on.

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