

## Editorial No. 36 (2)

### A social work that is historically and geographically literate

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My eleven year old granddaughter recently asked me who my hero was. I don't really have 'heroes', but I told her about Clement Attlee, the Labour Prime Minister of Britain in the years following the second world war. I have the Attlee government to thank for my well-being, my health and my education. My grandparents were poor, working in the Yorkshire textile mills and, without the benefits of the welfare state (a free National Health Service, financial maintenance for study at university, etc.) my life would have been a very different one – as would millions of others' lives. Clement Attlee and his government opened up a whole world of possibilities in a way that the much more famous Winston Churchill would have denied me, and I remain grateful.

Also, I was able to tell my granddaughter a little know fact about Clement Attlee: he was a social worker. Although he didn't have a formal social work qualification (there were few opportunities in those days), he worked as a social worker in London's East End and he edited what I think is the first English language series of social work books, publishing the *The Social Worker* just over a century ago in 1920 (Attlee 1920). It is a wonderful book, elegantly written. In it, Attlee writes that social workers must be pioneers, investigators and, always, *agitators*.

Why am I sharing this story with you? First, because I want to reclaim one of the world's greatest Prime Minister for our profession, social work. I think it is interesting to speculate why we have allowed him to be forgotten, how we have failed to celebrate the fact that he was a social worker. Secondly, by extension to this first point, I want to plead with our profession to be more attentive to our history, both locally and globally. For instance, we started as a much more radical profession than we have become, certainly in the UK. The early *Settlements* combined all four pillars of classic social work: individual work, groupwork, work with families and community work. It is only later that they became separated. We worked with people's poverty as well their person; we helped to developed co-operatives so that people could use collective bargaining power to improve their personal circumstances. Social solidarity was at the heart of this social work. We collected data in order to have an impact on social policy; the first social surveys, conducted in the last half of the nineteenth century, had a profound impact on the wider community and the political establishment, providing independent proof of the extent of poverty and ill-health. Indeed, Attlee makes a strong case in his book series for social workers to be *applied social scientists*. Social workers are in a unique position to expose the oppression and disadvantage that they witness, and to tell about it to the wider community. This is why Attlee believed that social workers must, above all, be agitators.

I wonder how many social workers now see themselves as agitators? How many even know that this is how one of the early social work pioneers saw the profession? In countries of the Global North, many of the advances that were won by social radicals and social reformers coming together, are now being lost. In the UK our National Health Service (NHS), a service free at the point of delivery and paid for from universal taxation, is being starved of funding because governments are unwilling to confront global capital to ensure that it pays its fair share of taxation. Moreover, the NHS is being quietly sold off to American health care companies. The NHS is very popular with the people, so this is happening by stealth; similarly with other parts of our public sphere. I shudder to think how I will explain to my granddaughter that, having been bequeathed a universal system of health and welfare by my forebears, my generation has managed to let it all start to slip away, sold off for the profit of those who are already wealthy beyond imagination.

What does this have to do with social work? Well, that is the really important question. I believe that, first and foremost, we must whole-heartedly embrace the political nature of our work. This embrace is necessary if we are to begin to decide what we might do about it. We must be politically active in our communities, allying with those forces that are explicitly supportive of equality and justice in social, economic and environmental matters. This is what the early pioneers of social work believed and how they acted: indeed, one of the grand-

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mothers of American social work, Jane Addams, earned a newspaper headline, “*Is this the most dangerous woman in America?*” Which social worker, now, might earn this soubriquet?

My own first two decades in direct social work practice saw a flowering of what was known as *community social work*. We worked in small ‘patch teams’ specialising not by age group or defined problem, but by neighbourhood. If you lived in my patch we would work together, whatever your age or circumstances, and wholly in the context of your community. However, in the 1990s, a case management approach was introduced from the US, which increasingly splintered social work into specialist units, often not even called social work (like ‘mental health workers’), and the neo-liberal ascendancy led to the starvation of the public realm, with the idea of service giving way to that of profit. Of course, I understand that professions evolve and societies change, but I find it worrying that alternative ways of organising social work services are now rarely taught and the profession is neglecting to take care of its history, just like we have neglected Attlee as a Social Worker.

In contrast to all this, I spent an uplifting month in Chile last year in which, as a guest of Universidad de los Lagos, I discovered that social work remains highly community-focused. Indeed, I understand this to be a feature of social work in Latin America. The students’ first experience of social work is side by side with communities. The students are placed amongst a community that wishes to receive them in order to work with that community on the issues and challenges that the community itself identifies. The student stays with that community over a number of placements to give the time needed to work on action plans and to fulfil them, all in tandem with the local people. In sharp contrast, few British social work students work with whole communities, and the emphasis is placed on what is known as ‘statutory work’ (working with individuals and families using legislation decreed by Parliament). It is no wonder that a survey in 2020 found that the area in which social workers felt least prepared by their training was engaging with local communities. Groupwork, too, has become relatively unusual in British social work practice, and is more likely to be facilitated by other professionals such as occupational therapists.

The occasion of my work with and in Chile was the launch and establishment of a website to give expression to the abstract notion of ‘*social work*’ via objects and the stories attached to these objects (<http://40objetos.ulagos.cl/galeria/>). This Spanish-language website is a sister to an English-language site that I had established <https://socialworkin40objects.com/> – hence our mutual interest in understanding how these two Collections of objects and stories might compare.

In terms of our mutual work, my Chilean social work colleagues and I were delighted to learn that the idea of expressing *what social work is* through an object, and contextualising it through a story, was something that most people not only understood intuitively, but also very much enjoyed. Together, the two Collections have grown to house more than 200 objects and stories, alongside brief accounts of the journeys that the ‘donors’ of the objects have taken into social work. It is a fascinating Library of Social Work that appeals to a part of our consciousness that dry definitions and dusty texts do not. We discovered that the notion of *object* can be introduced spontaneously, that some people can quickly bring forth an artefact and associate it with their relationship to social work, though others need more time and reflection. Given the differences that I have already recounted between the *social works* of the Global North and of Latin America, we speculated whether these differences would be reflected in the kinds of object and story that appeared in each of the Collections. We devised a continuum ranging from community-oriented to individual-oriented object-stories to test this out. Interestingly, the proportion of object-stories along each stage of the continuum was surprisingly consistent between the two Collections.

It is my hope, then, that late-capitalist societies such as the UK can re-learn what it is to practise social work, and rediscover our roots through contact with social work practices that continue to consolidate the four pillars of community, group, family and individual into a single practice. There are parallel movements in worlds that are very different to social work: for instance, the increasing recognition of the harm of processed food products that are made for maximum profit, contrasting with the tide in favour of locally sourced organic food grown in harmony with the environment. I see the ‘real social work’ movement as a reassertion of social work’s organic roots in the community, pioneering a social work that is committed to real social change, engaged in investigative applied social science, and faithful to notions of social and economic justice. Indeed, a social work that lives up to Attlee’s notion of social workers as agitators.

To get to this point we must be historically and geographical literate: in other words, educate ourselves and others about how our profession has expressed itself through time and place, so that we can make informed judgements about the *best* of social work, and take all the steps necessary to emulate that best social work.

... By the way, I asked my granddaughter who her hero was and she told me it was Anne Frank, the Jewish diarist who was murdered in the concentration camps. We asked her father, my son-in-law, and he said Gandhi. We reflected on the coincidence that all three of our heroes lived at the same time.

## Reference

Attlee, C.R. (1920) *The Social Worker*, London: G. Bell & Sons.