

Book Review

Brij Mohan: *The Future of Social Work: Seven Pillars of Practice*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2018, pp. xix +159, Rs. 995. ISBN 978-93-528-0625-6

“Best way to learn about future is to create it!” -
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(emerita), University of Helsinki.

Brij Mohan’s new book, *The Future of Social Work* discusses seven new algorithms of social practice that challenge the existing model of social work education and offers a new perspective for radical transformation of the entire system.

Being a teacher and social work philosopher bodes well for Mohan, the writer. *The Future of Social Work* is a relatively small book containing short paragraphs - in 10 chapters –that captures social work practice both by “in the box” and “out of the box” stances. It is a diagnostic-analytic approach to social work practice.

The main focus of the book is social welfare. It brings in diverse, yet connected elements of contemporary professional ethics and practice, suggesting a paradigm shift not just for social work but for social sciences and humanities as well. Social science becoming an oxymoron is as clear as daylight. The society as a whole needs a new classificatory system to establish congruent reality (p. 48).

It takes guts to be highly critical of one’s own domain. Brij Mohan doesn’t mince words to say that the current social work theory and practice is such that it even lost a relevant understanding of what the social is. It gets reflected even in academics as organizational goal-displacement thrives at the expense of creativity. As the author himself admits, he uses his adversity to his advantage and writes with vengeance (p. xviii).

Social work is passing through troubled times and its future is uncertain – both due to its inner contradictions and the meltdown of institutional securities – whether family, state, market or religion. Developmentality has become dysfunctional what with unleashing of

the forces of inequality, injustice and oppression in the post globalization (new fundamentalism?) era. Departmentality has become the new profession. SW in its eagerness to achieve social development (which itself is a contradiction in terms) lent itself as a suffix to any and many orientations and specializations, at the expense of its own identity. In several cases, it is failing even as a basic therapeutic culture. Now there is a need for social work itself to reform in order to perform better. Social work for social transformation must begin with self-transformation. Therefore, *The Future of Social Work* offers focus, nay a ray of hope at the focus of defused and conflicted ‘client-centred’ approach (p. 140).

That there is already is a gap or dissonance in contemporary social work is an admitted fact. On the one hand we have internationalization of social work and the altruistic and idealistic reasons why social workers join the profession. On the other hand, there is the contrast of mainstream statutory social work practice. Time has come to reduce or dissolve this gap or dichotomy by reclaiming the professionalism of social work. But how? One of the ways: the adoption of a potentiality or capacity model of professional learning within a ‘profession turn’ which reconceptualises social work in terms of professional autonomy and expertise. The Professional Capabilities Framework can be seen as a key part of this professional transformation. The danger of this strategy, however, is that it may further widen the gap between the aspirations of social work and the realities of practice. Adopting an ironic orientation may not resolve the dilemmas of social work but it proffers a constructive engagement for a profession in crisis and about to be subject to a further period of anxiety and uncertainty (Higgins & Goodyer, 2014). Social practice without understanding of social reality shows social work’s false consciousness. Here both social and work fail – whether by the state or by the NGOs; whether in the country of Wall Street that justifies inequality for global progress or in the country of Silicon Valley where you can defend domestic violence by karma-dharma philosophy. It is in this context that one must appreciate the Archaeology of Social Practice (Ch. 4). Altruism cannot be professionally attained until social work is refounded.

Chapter 5 dwells upon how to transform social work. It is a reflective analysis of SW profession which is rich in exposition to be a standalone chapter. In it the author not just examines the three basic aspects of professional consequence viz. mission, educational infrastructure and service, but does it by juxtaposing current realities like war and peace, human rights and human strife, cultural progress and loss of Eros, end of Cold War, rise of terrorism etc. to sow the ‘demise’ of the ‘social’ if real – the greatest tragedy of the much-hyped 21st Century (pp.4-61). The science of help and hope is now seeking these metavalues for its deliverance.

We get into social work to help people, but end up hurting them, albeit unintentionally (Full Care Order, 2013) Help through social work is clarified by the author in Hermeneutics of Help (Ch. 6). “Turn to interpretation” is an old but successful idea in social sciences. A number of new qualitative research (interpretive) methods such as “experiential focusing”, “experiencing scale”, “social work history”. These can help restore the ‘caring’ element in social work practice (Sherman, 1991). For Mohan, this is not just an academic necessity but also a systemic socio-political consciousness. Otherwise, we end up with failed states. A unified social work education and practice can offset fears of such a meltdown (p. 96).

Mohan idealises social work as “a flame rather than a mirror”. Chapter 7 (Seven Pillars of Social Practice) rightly (re)presents the ethos and substance of unification. The seven pillars – mission, education, service, empathetic humility, laboratory assistance, transparent effectiveness and buoyance – are the roots of social practice and at the same time the algorithms for the future of work in general and social work in particular. Mohan says that social work should authenticate its value in the world of artificial intelligence (Ch. 8). There may now be a climate of angst, anger and anxiety, but true altruism is attainable provided there is a radical transformation of the entire system (Ch. 10). Where are the angels of transformation?

Brij Mohan is at ease with cross references of literary works, current events (e.g. killing of rationalists), movies, homilies, and what not? An anthology of the main constructs and concepts from his works

(Ch. 9) adds to the richness of the book. Two highlights of the book observed are: (i) Mohan’s critique goes beyond social work; and (ii) even as his critical comments pour out, his concern and commitment for the discipline is undeterred. It is not to say that he has answers to all the questions regarding the on-going disruptions in social work. After all social work is not black and white, but black, white, and many shades of grey. Therefore, as Peter Hermann in his Foreword to the book opines, the reader of *The Future of Social Work* may not necessarily agree with all its details but may acknowledge that we face a suicide of social work action if we are not ready to accept the need for a fundamental change in social work practice (p. xiii).

Note

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References

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