**Marx: alienation, commodity fetishism and the world of contemporary social work**

**Michael Lavalette and Iain Ferguson**

**Introduction**

In 1972 Jimmy Reid, the recently elected Rector of Glasgow University, delivered his inaugural address to a packed hall of university students and academics. Reid was one of the leaders of the historic ‘work-in’ against redundancies and closure that took place earlier that year at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) in Clydebank and the title of the address was ‘Alienation’. It began as follows:

Alienation is the precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem in Britain today. People feel alienated by society. In some intellectual circles it is treated almost as a new phenomenon. It has, however, been with us for years. What I believe is true is that today it is more widespread, more pervasive than ever before. Let me right at the outset define what I mean by alienation. It is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. It's the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision-making. The feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies.

Reid went on to exhort the students present (including, as it happens, one of the authors of this paper) to reject individualism and greed, to remember their common humanity and to reject ‘the rat race’. The New York Times printed the address in full and compared it to Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address’ (New York Times, 28th June, 1972). Following Reid’s death in 2010, a copy of the speech was made available by the then Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond to every school in Scotland.

In 2004 we published a paper on alienation and social work that argued the concept provided a better basis for understanding ‘power relations’ than the postmodern and Foucauldian approaches popular at that time (Ferguson and Lavalette 2004). In this paper, we re-visit Marx’s concept of alienation and the related, but less well-known, concept of commodity fetishism. Like Reid, we will argue that these concepts are crucial for understanding the experience, feelings and behaviour of millions of people in the society in which we live. In fact, we shall argue, almost fifty years after Reid’s address and some four decades into capitalism’s neoliberal phase, alienation and commodity fetishism are even more ‘widespread and pervasive’ than they were in the early 1970s. More specifically, we will seek to show the relevance of an understanding of alienation and commodity fetishism for social workers trying to make sense of the problems, both personal and social, experienced by those with whom they come into contact and point to ways in which they might respond.

The first part of the paper will offer an overview of both concepts. The main section of the paper will demonstrate their contemporary relevance through a discussion of three main areas: the workplace; sexuality’ and mental health and mental distress. The concluding part of the paper will point to some ways in which these concepts might be operationalised in social work practice.

**Marx on human nature and alienation**

The starting-point for understanding Marx’s concept of alienation is his view of human nature, of what it is that makes us distinctively human. The suggestion that Marx actually *had* a concept of human nature may come as a surprise. The term has usually been associated with conservative thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes or Edward Burke as part of their justification for the need for strong government to keep the unruly passions of the mob in check. Similarly, in our own times, the term is regularly deployed by right-wing newspapers and politicians to portray human beings as being essentially greedy and self- seeking and to reinforce the idea that certain types of behaviour (often sex-related, or involving male aggression or our assumed ‘natural competitiveness’) are ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ while others are ‘abnormal’ or ‘unnatural’. The mantra ‘you can’t change human nature’ is frequently wheeled out to refute suggestions that human beings might be capable of creating a kinder, fairer world than the one which we currently inhabit or to attack those whose lifestyles and sexual preferences differ from the ‘perceived norm’.

Such a view of human nature was abhorrent to Marx. He was aware of the huge variations in the ways in which people lived and worked together and rejected any notion of human nature that was fixed and unchanging. Instead, he argued, in the context of working through his differences with the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, that:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

(Marx, 1845/1975: p423)

In other words, the dominant social relations of the society in which they live shape people’s values, behaviours and feelings, as well as the ideas in their heads.

It would be wrong to conclude from this, however, that Marx had no concept of human nature. Rather, as Geras (1983) noted, in Capital Marx distinguished between what he called ‘human nature in general’ and ‘human nature as historically modified in each epoch’. Thus, for example, he criticised the ‘naivety’ of his contemporary thinkers, such as Jeremy Bentham, for assuming ‘that the modern petty bourgeois, especially the English petty bourgeois, is the normal man’ (1867/1976: p.759). As Erich Fromm commented, he was never ‘tempted to assume that ‘human nature’ was identical with that particular expression of human nature prevalent in his own society’ (Fromm, 1966: pp.24-25).

What, then, for Marx characterised ‘human nature in general’? According to Geras, one need in particular went to the heart of his view of what it means to be human, namely:

The need of people for a breadth and diversity of pursuit and hence of personal development, as Marx himself expresses these, “all-round activity”, “all-round development of individuals”, “free development of individuals”, “the means of cultivating [one’s ] gifts in all directions”, and so on. (Geras, 1983: pp.72-73).

Thus central to Marx’ concept of ‘human nature in general’ was our open-endedness, our potential for development, for self-determination. As Paul Blackledge has argued, Marx’s view drew on earlier philosophical notions of freedom but historicised these in a double sense:

Following and extending Kant and Hegel, Marx insisted that ‘freedom is so much the essence of man that even its opponents realize it in that they fight its reality’…If this idea shaped his earliest work, it was profoundly deepened in *Capital* and his mature political writings. At its simplest, Marx agreed with liberals that freedom must be historically grounded, first and foremost, in the satisfaction of our basic needs…However, Marx’s model of human freedom is historical in a second sense: not only do increases in the productivity of labor create the potential for people to devote more time to the development of ‘human powers as an end in itself’ but also, as labour productivity increases, so too do human needs expand…And as human needs and powers expand through history so does the potential for the realisation of human freedom.

(2012: p.57)

Thus in common with thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Abraham Maslow, Marx’s starting point was the basic needs of human beings: physical, social and psychological. His view differed from these other thinkers, however, in two key respects. Firstly, as Blackledge argues, he saw human needs not as fixed, whether in the form of biological drives or as steps within a static ‘hierarchy of need’, but rather as fluid, dynamic and changing, with new societies producing new needs. Secondly, he located these needs and their satisfaction (or lack of satisfaction) within the concrete conditions of class society. His theory of human needs and of human nature therefore provided the basis for a critique of class society and especially capitalism. As Terry Eagleton explains:

Animals that are not capable of desire, complex labour and elaborate forms of communication tend to repeat themselves. Their lives are determined by natural cycles. They do not shape a narrative for themselves, which is what Marx knows as freedom. The irony in his view is that, though this self-determination is of the essence of humanity, the great majority of men and women throughout history have not been able to exercise it. They have not been permitted to be fully human. Instead, their lives have been determined for the most part by the dreary cycle of class society

(2011: pp. 137-138).

Class societies constrain human freedom and self-determination and thus restrict our ability to be fully human.

Within the traditional social work literature, self-determination is usually seen in purely normative terms, as a value to which we should aspire and encourage in our work with people using social work services. Marx, by contrast, rejected that distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. Self-determination, above all the ability consciously to control our labour, was a basic need and was what defined us as human. However, the satisfaction of that need was denied by a system that subordinated everything to the accumulation of capital. Under capitalism, for the first time in history, the great mass of the population – the working class – have completely lost control over both the means of production and the products of their labour: capitalism, therefore, alienates us from our the essence of our human nature.

Marx identified three other dimensions of alienation. Firstly, there was the lack of control over the work process. What distinguishes capitalism from earlier forms of production is that everything becomes a commodity, produced not primarily for use but for sale on the market. Moreover, that includes our labour power, our ability to work. When we sell that to an employer (and under capitalism most of us have no choice but to do that), we lose all control over how our time and our abilities are deployed. The result is that whereas in earlier types of society, individual craftsmen (and to a lesser extent, women) had a degree of control over their work and could take a pride in what they produced, under capitalism work simply becomes a chore, a burden. In Marx’s own words:

Labour is external to the worker i.e. does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labour is therefore not voluntary but forced, it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself. Its alien character is clearly demonstrated by the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists it is shunned like the plague.

(Marx, 1844/1975: p. 326).

What the Marxist theorist Harry Braverman (1974) called ‘the degradation of work in the twentieth century’ has intensified in the era of neoliberalism. People are working longer, more intensively, in more regulated and controlled environments and levels of alienation are increasing.

Then there is alienation from other people. Most obviously, this concerns the relationship between worker and employer. In a capitalist society, the worker depends on the employer to provide her with work. At the same time, however, she resents and often hates that employer (or his immediate representative, the front-line manager) for exploiting, oppressing and bullying her, a contradiction that (other than the gendered language) is neatly captured in Alex Glasgow’s song The Socialist ABC:

A is for alienation that made me the man that I am

And B’s for the boss who’s a bastard, a bourgeois who don’t give a damn.

No less important, however, is the antagonism which capitalism creates between workers. One of the most powerful scenes in Ken Loach’s 2016 movie *I, Daniel Blake*, sees Daniel, a middle-aged unemployed joiner who has recently suffered a heart attack, being required to attend a class on how to write a good CV that will impress employers and get him a job. The whole emphasis of the state-employed trainer leading the class is on how to get ahead of other people who are also seeking work, how to write a CV that will give Daniel and his fellow students a competitive advantage. That relentless emphasis on the need to compete with others, coupled with the insecurity of the job market, are two features of life under capitalism which provide the ideological and material basis for the major divisions that characterize the world we live in, including racism, sexism and homophobia. Moreover, as we shall show below, both are features that have intensified massively during the decades of neoliberalism.

The third aspect of alienation identified by Marx was alienation of the worker from the product of her labour. This belongs to, and is disposed of, by the employer. In previous societies, people have used their creative abilities to produce goods that they would consume, exchange or sell. By contrast, under capitalism, the products of workers’ labour confront them as alien objects. One aspect of this is that workers often cannot afford to buy the things – the iPhones, the expensive trainers, the cars -they produce.

More importantly, however, this dimension of alienation provides the bridge to Marx’s mature theory of alienation. As John Rees argues:

In his later works, particularly the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx not only repeats the themes of his theory of alienation, he also goes on to explain the ideological effects of the exchange and circulation of alienated labour on the market. This is the process Marx calls commodity fetishism (Rees, 1998: p.93).

 It is to a discussion of these ideological effects that we now turn.

**Commodity fetishism**

In *A Reader’s Guide to Marx’s Capital*, Joseph Choonara notes that for Marx:

Capitalism is not simply a system that robs workers of their power in the sphere of production, but is a system based on a whole series of fetishised social relations, which take the form of a set of seemingly immutable relations between things ... [This is] a process of reification and of the naturalisation of social relations which comes to dominate humans living under the system (2017: pp. 40,41)

When Marx talks about alienation he is referring primarily to the ‘subjective element’, the ways in which the social processes of alienation described above impact upon and are experienced by workers. As Ollman puts it, “alienation” is the concept Marx uses to describe “the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are a part” (1977: p. 131). But in *Capital* Marx addresses the ‘objective element’ of this process which he terms commodity fetishism.

Under capitalism all objects of human labour are turned into commodities – from the most basic item, like a simple chair, to the most sublime artistic creation. In other words, they are produced not primarily for use but for exchange (usually for money, which Marx called ‘the universal commodity’) on the market. Marx’s argument is that in a society where *everything* is produced for exchange – what he called ‘generalised commodity production’ – the social relations underlying production are hidden or disguised under what appears to be a neutral exchange of commodities. Choonara suggests the following example to illustrate Marx’s argument:

Consider travelling on a bus. In doing so, you probably hand over some money, in physical or electronic form, for the journey. This is a relationship between things: a bus journey for some cash. What is completely obscured here are the underlying social relations – between you and the bus driver but also between you and the humans who built the bus, who obtained the raw materials that went into its production, to the people who produced the food who produced these labourers and so on. There is a whole web of social relations underlying this seemingly simple relationship between things. But all trace of these relations is completely erased from the process of commodity exchange (Choonara, 2017: p.34).

What then is, in fact, a social relation between people (between capitalists and workers) instead assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx, 1867/1976: p.165). In other words what are actually class relations appear as relations between inanimate products of labour: between commodities. This was one of Marx’s key insights: that commodities, alienated from their direct producer, return to haunt every human need. As Rees notes: “The products of labour reappear before their creators as alien objects, whose market movements shape all human life” (1998: p.92). It is this, the ‘objective element’ of commodity fetishism, which emphasises that alienation is a social process.

Three aspects of this process merit comment. Firstly, precisely because such ‘fetishism’ is an objective process, arising directly from the form that production and exchange take under capitalism, it cannot be escaped simply by changing one’s thinking or altering one’s behaviour: it is built into the very fabric of capitalist society.

Secondly, it means that diverse activities, which are portrayed as natural occurrences which are beyond our control, are in effect the reification of social relations. In other words, human properties, relations and actions have been transformed into the properties, relations and actions of human-produced things. The point is of considerable importance to Marx’s theory of ideology. A frequently-asked question is why, given the oppression and exploitation they experience, do people not rebel more frequently? One important reason (though of course not the only reason) is that for many, the world in which we live seems ‘natural’, one to which ‘there is no alternative’. So, for example, in the last decade ‘austerity’ has been promoted as an inevitable consequence of the economic crisis of 2008, yet neither the crash, nor the political response it engendered were remotely ‘natural’. The crash of 2008 highlighted the role of ‘derivative markets and hedge funds’ on financial markets. The suggestion is that these are unknowable, uncontrollable economic ‘things’ that determine our economies and our lives, rather than ways of gambling with stocks, bonds, commodities and currencies, all of which are based upon the operation of exploitative social relations.

But it is not just ‘economic’ phenomena that are fetishized. Climate change or the arms race, or the wars in the Middle East, for example, are often portrayed as uncontrollable, inevitable aspects of modern life, or a reflection of the innate competitive drive (or survivalist impulse) at the heart of human nature. But in fact, they are the outcome of capitalism and its relentless, competitive drive for profit and generalised commodity production.

The third point is that the process of commodification has reached undreamed of heights (or depths) under neoliberalism. As Singh and Cowden note:

The ideological thrust of neoliberalism … represents a deepening of commodification through the combination of changes in organizational structures accompanied by changes in personal subjectivity. Services dealing with basic human needs of vulnerable people are now understood within a logic of ‘market-based’ relations. (2015: p.380)

As part of this, Governments across the world have promoted strategies of privatisation, marketisation and consumerism. ‘Privatisation’ of state owned, or controlled companies and services has opened up vast areas of our economies and social welfare systems to competition between, ‘for-profit’, companies. As a result, and in the name of ‘choice’, as individual consumers, we are confronted by an array of service providers.

For example, in Britain there is a confusing mess of competing public utility companies, providing the same product for what are, essentially, the natural monopolies of gas, electricity or water services. These companies, competing for our custom, aggressively confront us in the market place and use all manner of shoddy techniques to tie us in to long-term, unfathomable deals. The water, gas or electricity that comes into our homes is exactly the same, no matter which company provides the service. The commodification of public utilities has not brought greater control, or accountability or clarity to the process of getting access to basic services, rather it has brought obfuscation (Smithers 2007; Macalister 2016; Ryan 2017).

In the social care field the push to privatise services has led to a situation where vulnerable people have found themselves facing homelessness because their social care home has shut or the ‘care’ providing company gone into liquidation (BBC 2017, Uttley 2017). In the press these closures are portrayed as ‘unfortunate’ outcomes (or occasionally as an ‘opportunity for others [Albert 2017]), but ones over which people have no say. These closures are just the outcome of ‘natural’ economic forces in the ‘care market’. But of course, they are the direct result of the drive for profit, in a field (social care) that has been removed as a ‘collectively consumed’ provision of the welfare state and handed over to the private sector. In the process, the service has been turned into a commodity confronting people as a ‘thing’, an ‘alien object’, over which they have no control and which they access as a ‘consumer’.

‘Consumerism’ has also brought the spread of commodity production far deeper into areas of social life than was the case previously. Almost every area of social life has become commodified. There used to be an old joke that said that capitalists would sell us the air we breathe if they could get away with it. In 2018 *The Guardian* ran a story about two businesses (one in Canada, one in Austria) selling bottles of ‘mountain air’ to wealthy customers in pollution infested China and India – now even clean air has become a commodity to be bought and sold! (Moshakis 2018)

Increasingly, we are encouraged to express ourselves, to assert our individuality, through the purchase and consumption of ever greater quantities of commodities. We are told to aspire to be like any number of stars or people who are famous, simply because of their wealth. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx described the power of money (the most fetishized of commodities) in this way:

Money, inasmuch as it possesses the property of being able to buy everything and appropriate all objects, is the object most worth possessing … The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money’s properties are my – the possessor’s – properties and essential powers. Thus, what I *am* and *am capable of* is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. I, according to my individual characteristics, am *lame*, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. ... Do not I, who thanks to money am capable of *all* that the human heart longs for, possess all human capacities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary? (1844/1975: pp.375; 377)

**Alienation, commodity fetishism and social work**

In our previous paper on alienation we suggested it provided a powerful concept to help social workers understand aspects of domestic violence, male power and racism (Ferguson and Lavalette 2004). Here we will look at three other areas where, as a result of the present conditions of neo-liberalism, alienation and commodity fetishism have intensified.

*Work intensification in the social work/social care labour process*

The ‘world of work’ is constantly changing. Marx and Engels captured this aspect of capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto*, when they described it as “constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (1848/1973: p.70).

When we think about ‘alienated labour’ there is a tendency to think about people employed on production lines or in other areas of manufacturing employment. This form of alienated labour still exists. Globally, there are very large numbers of people employed in manufacturing and some of them in gigantic factory complexes. For example, in China the Foxxcon Technology Group make a range of electronic components from Intel branded motherboards, to IPhones, to key components for all-electric cars. Their largest factory site is located in Longhua Town, Shenzhen, where it is estimated that up to 450,000 workers are employed at one of 15 factories on a 1.4 square mile site. The site has security guards on each entrance. Workers have to swipe in and out of work. The factories are all uniform design and inside workers sit on a production line and work long hours for little financial reward. The conditions of work are deeply alienating. In 2010 the factory came to the world’s attention because workers started to kill themselves:

In 2010, Longhua assembly-line workers began killing themselves. Worker after worker threw themselves off the towering dorm buildings, sometimes in broad daylight, in tragic displays of desperation – and in protest at the work conditions inside. There were 18 reported suicide attempts that year alone and 14 confirmed deaths. Twenty more workers were talked down by Foxconn officials. (Merchant 2017)

But how common are these extreme examples of work place alienation?

Global production shifts have meant that, in much of Europe and North America, the last 40 years has witnessed a decline in manufacturing industry – and less people employed in factories, mines and docks. But manufacturing still remains important.

In the UK, where some of the trends away from manufacturing have gone further, Hardy and Choonara point out that:

Viewed in broad terms, there are today four large groups which make up the bulk of the British working class. The largest single grouping is “public administration, health and education”, including the bulk of public sector workers such as council employees, health workers, civil servants and teachers. By the mid-2000s this was just over a quarter of the workforce. The second is “distribution, hotels and restaurants”, which includes people who work in shops, retail warehouses, catering, hospitality, etc, and which forms about a fifth of the workforce. This is a central component of what we usually think of as the service sector. The third is “banking, finance, insurance, etc”, formed by about one in six workers. “Manufacturing” is the next biggest group. (2013)

And neither is it the case that the majority of us now work in zero-hours, unregulated work in the ‘gig-economy’. As Choonara notes:

About 90 percent of those who are employed remain on traditional permanent contracts in a single job — and this figure has barely changed in the past three decades. …It is far more likely that a worker is stuck in a job that is lousy, with declining or stagnant wages, declining levels of control of the job and increased bullying and pressure to work harder. (2017b)

The second largest sector includes workers involved in ‘distribution’. Here is the experience of a young worker, employed by Amazon, caught in this sector and hardly less alienating that the experiences of his Chinese brothers and sisters.

If I’ve learned anything from doing this job, it’s that money can’t replace time. I work four nights a week in an [Amazon](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/amazon) warehouse near my home in Southend-on-Sea. It’s quite a cold place to work and, apart from two half-hour meal breaks, I’m on my feet for 10 and a half hours. I scan the items the trucks bring in from distributors and place them into the right cart for the robots to take to the correct place in the warehouse. I have to put away each item in 15 seconds or less, and get through 250 in an hour, or I’ll be given a warning by a manager. Stepping away from my station to, say, get a drink of water can have a big impact on my performance. During my half-hour breaks I rush downstairs to have something to eat. It’s stressful – and it definitely affects my health, standing up for hours on end. I worry I may pass out if I don’t rest during my meal breaks. I’ve lost a lot of weight since I started. (Ferguson 2018)

But what about conditions in the largest sector of the UK economy: ‘public administration, education and health’?

Hardy and Choonara draw on evidence from the *Skills and Employment Survey* which indicates that, since the crisis of 2008 workers in the UK have experienced significant levels of work intensification. They suggest that:

in 1997 about 23 per cent of workers reported working at very high speeds three quarters of the time; by 2001 the proportion had risen to 38 per cent; by 2012 it stood at 40 percent. The public sector has experienced the highest reported work intensity. In 1992 about three in ten workers strongly agreed that their jobs required them to work very hard. By 2012 the proportion had risen to over half in the public sector (53 percent) and around two fifths in the private sector. Within the public sector, it was in healthcare that the increase was particularly sharp between 2006 and 2012. (2013)

What is noticeable is the contrast with the earlier period of work in the post-war welfare state. Writing in 1980, Michael Lipsky wrote about public sector workers being ‘street level bureaucrats’. His claim was that public service workers functioned as policy decision makers who held considerable discretion in the day-to-day implementation of public policy. His suggestion was that a layer of welfare professionals had a degree of discretion over how they worked and a level of control over resources that they could use to support the vulnerable people they worked with. Evans and Harris (2004) applied Lipsky’s work to the field of social work and suggested that, even in an intensifying regulatory framework, social workers maintain some discretion in their work tasks. The post-war welfare state provided services that were decommodified to some degree and within these settings a range of welfare professionals (teachers, lecturers, health workers, social workers and social care workers) used their professional knowledge and skills to support the people and groups they worked with.

Now things have changed dramatically.

The lack of control and alienation from the task emphasised by the Amazon worker above is scarcely less extreme in some areas of social work and social care. In the provision of home care for older people, for example, workers are frequently allowed only 15 minutes to spend with each client and are expected to be accountable for every minute of their working day.

For social workers ‘managerialism’ has meant targets, work intensification, control of all aspects of work (either directly or via IT systems) and the conscious managerial attempt to squeeze worker discretion out of the system. It has also meant increasing attempts to distance fiscal decision makers from service users. In recent research for the EU one of us interviewed an adult social worker who told us that, after she had visited a service user and ascertained their needs and level of support she was expected to send her recommendations to a separate ‘care purchasing’ section who would allocate services on cost grounds without any contact with either social worker or service user (Moth and Lavalette 2018)

An intensifying work system, with diminished levels of work task control and under conditions of managerialism has produced all manner strains, and resulted in a workforce with very high levels of sickness and absence due to stress – and alienation.

*Sexuality*

In few areas of life are the destructive effects of alienation and commodity fetishism more keenly felt than in the area of sexuality. Writing more than 150 years ago, Marx, citing the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, argued that the degree of emancipation of women in any society was a measure of how civilised that society was (Marx, 1844a). The rise of the MeToo movement in 2017, preceded by horrific revelations of sexual harassment in almost every institution in society – political parties, churches, the media, NGOs and so on – show how far 21st capitalist society is from meeting that criterion of civilisation.

Although far from new, the objectification of women’s bodies and the extreme commodification of sexuality – what has been referred to as ‘raunch culture’ (Levy,2006; Orr, 2015) - has actually increased during the decades of neoliberalism, albeit often dressed up as ‘empowerment’. As Sheila McGregor has observed:

Since the impact of the Women’s Liberation Movement ebbed away, there has been a resurgence of a new sexism. Sex itself has become yet another commodity to be bought and sold; women reshape their bodies into objects for male pleasure, including putting them under the surgeon’s knife. All this with the added twist that the more sexually alluring a women appears to be, supposedly, the more she is empowered (McGregor, 2013).

So neoliberal capitalism takes our sexuality and sells it back to us as a commodity, in ways that are highly destructive of our health and relationships. The 2017 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity survey, for example, found that more women in the UK aged from 16 to 24 were experiencing mental health problems than ever before. Psychological distress is now so common that one in four in that age group have harmed themselves at some point. One factor contributing to this is the impact of social media and the pressure it places on young women to conform to particular notions of ‘sexiness’. According to journalist Rhiannon Lucy Coslett, girls and young women routinely alter the photos they post to make themselves look smoother and slimmer. Commenting on this, the journalist George Monbiot has observed: ‘Is it any wonder, in these lonely inner worlds, in which touching has been replaced by retouching, that young women are drowning in mental distress?’ (Monbiot, 2016).

Challenging the influence of pornography and the sex industry is sometimes portrayed as being prudish or as attacking the women who work in it. Debates have raged on the Left in recent years, for example, concerning the attitudes that socialists and feminists should take towards sex work. However, while there can be no justification for lining up with the State, the Church or right-wing groups whose main concern is often to repress and limit our sexual expression even further, nor is the argument from some feminist quarters that women ‘choose’ to work in the sex industry a convincing one. Orr cites several studies which highlight the very high proportion of women involved in sex work who are homeless or have been brought up in care and the even higher proportion who have drug problems (Orr, 2015: 177). And echoing Marx’s words above on the corrupting role of money under capitalism, she concludes:

The exchange of money can pollute any ordinary relationship between individuals…Money pollutes and distorts everything it touches, every part of human lives. But the selling of sex, which is mainly the sale of women’s bodies, involves the alienation and distortion of an aspect of our humanity that not only can be the source of great pleasure but can also inform some of our most important relationships (Orr, 2015: pp.177-178).

*Health*

Almost by definition alienation impacts negatively on our health and well-being. As we have seen above, it means the denial of opportunities to express our creativity and the removal of control over how we work.

The impact of such a lack of control on physical and mental health was powerfully demonstrated in a series of large-scale longitudinal studies of British civil servants carried out by the social epidemiologist Michael Marmot and his colleagues in the 1980s. Before that time, it was common for stress to be viewed in the popular press as ‘executive stress’ since it was seen as particularly affecting high-flying managers.  Marmot’s researches, however, known as the Whitehall studies, found an inverse relationship between levels of employment and mortality from coronary heart disease and a range of other causes. In other words, men on the lowest grade, including messengers, doorkeepers, and so on had a three-fold higher mortality rate than men in the highest grade (administrators). Job stress and lack of control over their work were identified by Marmot and his colleagues as the factors making the biggest difference (Marmot et al, 1991).

Given that a lack of control has such a negative impact on mental health, it is perhaps not surprising that many mental health service users have experienced traditional mental health services, based on the knowledge, expertise and power of the nursing or medical professional, as profoundly oppressive and alienating. Describing her experience as an in-patient at Friern Barnet hospital in North London in the 1980s for example, the socialist-feminist historian Barbara Taylor has written:

The idea of doing anything staff *didn’t* like was unthinkable to me—and my fearfulness was by no means untypical or unreasonable. Even at the day hospital, and even in my case, mental patients were almost power­less. We could be drugged, transferred between institutions, detained in hospital—all without our consent or even our prior knowledge. The popular present day slogan—“no decision about us without us”—was a distant dream for servicer users back in the 1980s (Taylor, 2014: p.250).

Similarly, in a discussion of the role of the biomedical model in mental health, one leading service user activist in Scotland commented:

That’s the model that the users’ movement was formed to oppose. That’s what creates mental illness. Losing sight of personal worth, taking away personal autonomy – that makes mental health problems worse. That model belittles and infantilises (cited in Ferguson, 2017: p.127).

**Challenging alienation: concluding thoughts**

What are the implications of the analysis offered in this paper for a critical and radical social work practice? How can an understanding of Marx’s concepts of alienation and commodity fetishism help us craft social work responses which challenge the powerlessness and oppression experienced by so many of those who seek social work help? Writing some fifteen years ago in the paper previously mentioned, we ended our discussion by suggesting five ways in which we believed an understanding of the concept of alienation could contribute to a critical practice. To a greater or lesser extent, they all involved challenging the sense of powerlessness felt by workers and service users alike. Firstly, we suggested, it meant promoting collective discussions involving practitioners, academics and service users to overcome the isolation and atomisation which was the experience of many and explore new ways of working and new forms of practice. Secondly, we should seek to strengthen workplace-based trade union organisation as the best way of protecting the conditions, resources and staffing levels without which basic good practice, let alone radical practice, is not possible. Thirdly, it involved pushing for the re-instatement of collective approaches, including groupwork and community development, within social work education. Fourthly, we should build closer links with, and learn from, social welfare movements such as the disability movement and the mental health users’ movement. Fifthly, it meant relating to wider social movements which were challenging the ideologies and practices of capitalism and imperialism, which at that time mean the anti-capitalist (or global justice) movement and the global movement against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

All of these suggestions remain relevant today. But in the light of developments over the past decade and a half, we would add a further three.

Firstly, the response of governments across the globe to the economic crisis of 2008 has been to impose a politics of austerity, aimed at making the mass of ordinary people (and particularly poor and disabled people) pay for a crisis which they did not create. In the worst affected countries such as Greece, the result has been a huge increase in mental distress and suicide. Opposition to austerity and the destruction of the post-war welfare state must therefore be at the centre of a radical social work politics.

Secondly, the failure of left-wing parties, from the traditional social democratic parties to newer forces such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, to effectively challenge these ruling-class politics of austerity has created a space for racist and openly fascist ideas to grow. Fifteen years ago, for example, the notion that there would be more than forty neo-Nazi members of Parliament in the German Reichstag would have been un- thinkable. The scapegoating by Western governments and the EU of asylum seekers and refugees, often fleeing wars initiated by these same governments , has also fuelled that climate of racism. A second priority therefore must be the development of new forms of anti-racist social work which challenge Islamophobia, anti-semitism, and all other forms of racism including anti-Roma racism.

Finally, we need to re-assert that social work is a *political* project. Here there are some grounds for optimism. Dissatisfaction with neoliberal social work and the widely-held belief that the social work profession needs to be much more central to struggles for social justice has meant that the period since the early 2000s has witnessed a revival of a new radicalism in social work. We have discussed this at greater length elsewhere (Ferguson, Ioakimidis and Lavalette, 2017) but briefly, groups which identify with the radical tradition can now be found in in several countries including the UK, Greece, Ireland, Hungary, Germany, Sweden, Brazil, Hong Kong, Japan and New Zealand (to name but a few). The role of these groups is perhaps best summed up in the website statement of colleagues in the New Approach Group in Hungary:

‘The New Approach to community work and radical social work is based on the idea of combining workshops and action groups, and also on the renewal of social work codes of ethics

This dual function is located in a long-term goal:

* Workshops: we want to provide a space for discussing issues concerning the social sphere and the development of action strategies.
* As an action group we are committed to drawing the attention of the profession and the public to the situation of those excluded. We seek to be a professional community that is not afraid to stand up for those in need’.

(<http://annyit.blog.hu/2011/03/12/uj_szemlelet_a_radikalis_szocialis_munka_megjelenese_magyarorszagon>)

As this statement suggests, creating spaces where workers, service users and academics can discuss the problems that they face (without fear of management reprisals), discuss ideas and develop new forms of social work practice is a key task in the development of a new radical social work. The annual conferences of the Social Work Action Network in the UK are one example of what such ‘spaces’ might look like.

But there is always a danger that conferences (particularly academic conferences) can become simply talking shops, an opportunity for academics to engage in forms of ‘theoretical practice’ which leave the world unchanged. It is crucial therefore that *activism* is at the heart of any new radical social work, whether it takes the form of union activism, campaigning for more and better services, or engagement in wider struggles against austerity, racism and sexism. Such collective activism is essential, not simply because it is the only way to defend services and bring about change but also because it is precisely in the course of collective struggles that people begin to gain a sense of their own power and to challenge the alienation which makes us feel isolated and powerless.

This is most obvious during periods of great social movements, such as in Poland in the early 1980s with the rise of the Solidarity movement or during the Arab Spring in Egypt in 2011. However, the same phenomenon can be seen, albeit on a smaller scale, in many strikes. We will end with the example of the recent University and College Union strike in the UK. Over several weeks in early 2018 tens of thousands of lecturers took strike action in opposition to an attack on their pensions which would have left many, especially younger lecturers, thousands of pounds worse off in retirement. As the weeks passed, however, it became clear that this strike was about much more than pensions: it was about the meaning and value of education. So as well as a joyous mood on the (very well-supported) picket lines and the active involvement of many students, the strike was also remarkable for the organisation of ‘teach-outs’, day-long events where lecturers had the opportunity to speak enthusiastically about their subject to other lecturers and students. Such teach-outs gave a glimpse of what an unalienated higher education system might look like. In the words of Jane, a striker and University and College Union representative, as told to a visiting journalist:

A lot of us have said that the university on strike is more like a university than it is when we aren’t on strike…We actually have time to talk to each other. It’s exciting and there are so many debates happening. There’s still learning and teaching going on with the teach-outs, but it’s unalienated (Robinson, 2018).

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