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Book Reviews


Dominelli’s latest work belongs in the league of prior work by Jim Ife, Jan Fook and Karen Healy, all of whom attempt to help the reader understand the changing context of social work practice in a globalised world by offering a critical perspective on the profession. Drawing heavily from the British experience, Dominelli attempts to enable us to understand the contemporary context of social work practice so that we are fully conversant with the all too familiar changes we encounter on a daily basis. She wants to enable practitioners to meet these challenges and to oppose structural inequalities and oppression. In chapter 2 she examines the context of these challenges and in chapter 3, discusses the values underlying social work before going on in chapter 4 to focus on contradictory relations within families. In chapter 5 she examines older people’s plight and in chapter 6, that of offenders. She then turns her attention to the potential of community work and considers new directions that social work might take to enhance interdependence, reciprocity, citizenship, and social justice. Her concluding chapter examines social work as a force for change at an individual and structural level.

Although there is much of interest in this book, one scarcely can hardly believe after reading this book that there is any hope for social work in the harsh cruel world of ‘workfare’ which Dominelli paints. Domineelli argues that ‘Social work is a troubled and troubling profession’. So begins her *deficits* approach to social work that could be more aptly named *Social Work: Theory and Practice for a Dying Profession*. The notion of anti-oppressive practice theory is turned inwards on the profession itself: social work is now marginalised, excluded and oppressed. It has become the victim of Taylorisation, Fordism, managerialism, and globalisation, and it has been reduced to routinized, technocratic and bureaucratic tasks where evidence and competency-based practice and risk assessments are the order of the day irrespective of whether or not they improve the lot of clients. Dominelli, clearly
disillusioned by British social work, harkens back to ‘happier
days’ when ‘Father Biesteck’ handed down the values tablets. Elsewhere she gives the impression that the grass is greener on
the other side. She cites Southern Africa as an example where
social workers are said to have made a major impact on local
communities and reconstruction development programs. However, the Reconstruction and Development Program in South Africa scarcely lasted beyond two years of the democratic transition and
no-one is free to do anything in Zimbabwe right now, let alone
social workers. Furthermore, just as social work is giving way to
social care in Britain so too has it given way to social development
in South Africa. How can a profession which ‘endorsed the rule
of white middle-class elites’ through ‘gendered, classist, homo-
phobic, disablist and racist orientations’ ever have a future in a
new social order?

Dominelli believes that social work is ailing everywhere. So-
cial workers in Britain are leaving the profession in droves, and
are being imported from other countries. What can we conclude
about international social work if British social work is more
attractive than social work in other parts of the world given
Dominelli’s critique of her home turf? With her sociological back-
ground, Dominelli is armed with the intellectual tools needed to
mount her critique and no-one does this as well as she does. She
is adept at pointing out what’s wrong with the system and from
her analysis there is not much right with it.

I would keep this book away from eager beginners in social
work who come in with the full flush of optimism, excitement,
wanting to help people, and ready to change the world. It is a book
for the more jaded among us and it will certainly have a strong
following for there are many in social work who share Dominelli’s
perspective. My view is far more optimistic for I believe that no
profession is more resourceful and skilled at double-guessing the
system than social work.

I honestly wonder why anyone would want to be a social
worker when it is approached so pessimistically from a critical
perspective. Theory is an intellectual tool. It is not the reality.
Dominelli makes it a big stick with which to beat ourselves. I
can’t stand the pain so on with my rose-tinted spectacles—the
world of social work looks bright. Always remember when the going gets tough, the tough get going!

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Voices From the Edge presents a refreshing and innovatively organized look at the disability literature in the context of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. While the field is replete with excellent collections of personal narratives of the experience of disability, and, though fewer, with legal analyses of court cases, the ADA, and American disability rights history, O'Brien's skillful blending of the two genres offers readers the best of both: powerful personal narratives and a thorough grounding in legal cases, issues, and precedents which touch upon the lives of each of the people who share their experiences. Through this unusual approach, O'Brien makes an excellent contribution to the field of disability studies.

O'Brien sets the stage by providing us with a brief history of disability and disability rights in the United States from colonial times, when people with disabilities were often hidden away by ashamed families in a world that valued self-reliance, to our present-day disagreements over the interpretation and intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act and issues of judicial oversight affected by the new federalism. While self-reliance continues to be a strong national value, mitigating circumstances tempered public attitudes, beginning with the disabled Civil War veterans, on whose behalf the first programs in support of people with disabilities were developed. World War I veterans were similarly supported, and programs were later extended to cover non-veterans with disabilities. While concern with the needs and conditions of people with disabilities in the United States grew, there was a simultaneous effort by the government's immigration authorities to keep disabled people from entering the United States, fearing that they would become a public burden. There was also a medicalization of disability, where physicians' roles