



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 10
Issue 4 November

Article 2

November 1983

Introduction

Michael Reisch

Stanley Wenocur

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Reisch, Michael and Wenocur, Stanley (1983) "Introduction," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*:
Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol10/iss4/2>

This Editor's Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Introduction

The field of political-economy dates back at least as far as Adam Smith over 200 years ago. The early political-economists made the first systematic attempts to examine the interconnections between the emergence of the new industrial system -- which changed the way in which resources were produced and consumed -- and the advent of bourgeois democratic states -- which made critical decisions as to how those resources were to be distributed. Although the study of political-economy throughout the 19th century implied no particular political ideology, by the 20th century it came to be associated with radical critiques of society, especially by Marxists. And it is largely true that, until recently, only left-leaning social scientists and social workers in the U.S. discussed economics and politics as two inextricably related spheres of human activity.

Now, once again, political-economy is fashionable among the Gilders and the Galbraiths, as well as the Gordons. Spurred by an "ideological" presidency, for the first time in recent memory the debate over our social priorities is taking place within a broader examination of the nature of the U. S. political economy, its assumptions and goals, its intended and unintended consequences.

The events of the last three years have shaken many social workers from the reverie of technique and forced them to face the harsh dawn of government cutbacks in programs for human welfare, accompanied by increasingly sharp attacks on the premises and goals of the unfinished U.S. welfare state. Whereas radicals and reformers within social work have long made the connection between political-economic developments and social policies explicit in their practice, for many in the human services political and economic events were simply a distant backdrop whose impact on the structure and delivery of services was indirect, unclear and often abstract. This is no longer so. Social workers in clinical practice now attend workshops on the impact of unemployment; income maintenance services have established closer ties with labor unions to help the "new poor"; administrators are renewing coalitions with other service providers and their allies within economically besieged communities. Finally, social workers are becoming increasingly involved in electoral politics: as candidates, campaign staff and as directors of voter registration projects.

It is impossible, therefore, for a discussion of the current and future state of social work and social

the relationship of both to the broader political economy. This special issue of the Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare is designed to begin that discussion by identifying several key aspects of this relationship and by stimulating further debate on these and other questions.

The opening essay by Dr. Harold Lewis, Dean of Hunter College School of Social Work, provides an analysis of the relationship between the economic issues which will dominate the 1980's and their impact on the definition of social work services. Lewis argues that these services have attributes as commodities just as any product of work in a political-economic system. He explores the meaning of the commodity attribute for services in such areas as quality of service, utilization of service, and evaluation and proposes some directions for policy makers and service providers in the decade ahead.

The essays by Abramowitz and Kingson examine the impact of political-economic factors in the area of social policy formulation. Abramowitz critiques the assumptions and contradictions of "supply-side economics" specifically in terms of their relationship to and impact upon social welfare program outlays. Although most social workers "know" that Reaganomics has hurt those in society least able to bear the pain, her article will provide the conceptual ammunition needed to refute those who claim the current Administration's policies are "working". Yes, Abramowitz argues, they are working precisely as intended -- now, let's examine what those intentions are, especially in regard to their impact on the people with whom we work.

Kingson, who recently served as staff to the Bipartisan Commission on Social Security Reform, contributes an excellent "case study" of the application of different economic assumptions to the creation of social policy in the political arena. His analysis of different approaches (coercive and voluntary) to retirement policy not only illustrates the impact of economic decisions on a specific, vulnerable population, it also serves as a model for future policy analysis efforts.

The essays by Rose, Perlman and Haggstrom explore various aspects of the development and delivery of social work services within the U.S. political economy. Each author assumes one influence of the U.S. political economy on social services is the "commoditization" of the service recipient. Rose examines how this affects policies and programs in mental health aftercare. He critiques existing policies and practices and the underlying philosophy behind the "deinstitutionalization movement." Rose points to the theories of Paulo

Freire as a guide for an alternate form of service provision.

Like ex-mental patients, members of citizen action groups have often been forced to adopt prescribed roles and have often developed a self-identity imposed upon them by more powerful economic and political forces. Perlman presents mini-portraits of such individuals and reveals the diverse motivations behind their participation. In the second half of her essay, Perlman looks for the "meaning" behind this diversity and evaluates the relevance of existing theories to the experiences of the citizen action groups she observed. She concludes by describing those characteristics of action organizations which produce the greatest change in participants' consciousness and, like Rose, looks to the work of Freire (and others) as a possible model for organizers.

Haggstrom's controversial essay also demands that we reexamine certain fundamental assumptions about our practice, assumptions which have been shaped by the structure of the political economy (via funding patterns) and by the ideology generated by the U.S. pattern of political-economic development (via our conceptions of science and the helping process). He asks us to look at the possibility that some of our programs and practices not only do not achieve their stated outcome goals, but that they exacerbate the problems they are intended to solve or produce new, unforeseen problems. His concluding suggestions about education, research and service delivery are sure to stimulate further discussion of the issues he raises.

The final two articles focus on how political-economic factors influence the individual and group behavior of social workers themselves. Longres analyzes those factors which heighten or diminish the degree of alienation experienced by service providers. His essay is significant for several reasons:

- (a) it reinforces our examination of the work aspect of social work, including the negative features of work in a profit-motivated economy;
- (b) it reformulates the problem of so-called "worker burrout" -- with its emphasis on "internal" factors -- to one which addresses how the features of the external environment (agency, community, political-economic system) affect practice in the human services;
- (c) it reawakens our awareness that the concept of alienation originated with an analysis of how the political-economy of capitalist nations shaped social relationships and behavior.

While Longres' article looks at how individual social workers respond to pressures from the political-economic environment, this issue's concluding essay examines how social workers collectively have been influenced by the structural and ideological constraints of our political-economic system in their creation of an organized profession . Instead of answering the oft-stated query "Is social work a profession?" Wenocur and Reisch question the assumptions and motivations behind the professionalizing impulse itself. The essay critiques existing explanations for the phenomenon of professionalization and develops a political-economic model to analyze the emergence of a professional enterprise in social work. It is the authors' intentions to provide a perspective from which the current situation of social work can be assessed and, thereby, to "enhance the capacity of social workers to find socially progressive alternatives, and in concert with other progressive groups, eventually to create a different social reality."

We hope that all the essays which follow will inspire debate and serve as a prologue to such action.

Michael Reisch, Ph.D. and Stanley Wenocur, DSW
School of Social Work and Community Planning
University of Maryland
at Baltimore