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**Review of *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neoliberalism and Promoting Social Justice*. Ian Ferguson. Reviewed by James Midgley.**

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## Book Reviews

Ian Ferguson, *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neoliberalism and Promoting Social Justice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008. \$99.95 hardcover, \$44.95 papercover.

Over the years, social work scholars have often claimed that the profession is in crisis or has in other ways lost its way and is in need of rescue. In the past, many have been critical of social work's commitment to psychotherapy and calls for a return to the profession's true commitment to work with the poor and vulnerable were often heard. Others have argued that social work has become an agent of vested economic and political interests and needs to rediscover its formative commitment to social change. The growth of private practice has often been accompanied by calls for a return to community practice or public-sector service.

In this readable and informative book, focused mainly on social work in Britain, Ian Ferguson urges social workers to resist the pressures of managerialism that emanate from the British government's acceptance of neoliberal ideas. Despite the Labor Party's long history of struggle against injustice, under the leadership of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown it has ceased to be an agent of progressive change and has instead revealed an enthusiastic preference for markets, deregulation, privatization and the outsourcing of the social services. Public agencies employing social workers are now under intense pressure to meet performance standards, reduce caseloads, and cut costs. Similar pressures impinge on the ability of social workers to serve their clients in the nonprofit sector. The growing commercial social services sector, which is fueled by outsourcing, is driven primarily by profits. The emphasis on evidence-based practice, proceduralism and managerialism has also undermined social work historical role as a liberal and humane profession. The author calls on social workers to understand the challenges they face and to reclaim the profession.

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Although the book's central message may not be entirely new, readers will discover that it contains a great deal of useful information about recent trends in social work and social welfare in Britain today. Of particular interest are chapters dealing with New Labor's approach to social welfare and the way the government uses the market to implement its social policies. In addition to tracing the expansion of commercial provision, the author discusses the way the nonprofit sector has been transformed and the growing influence of consumerism which has expanded through, for example, the use of direct payments and individual care budgets. The way these policies are being implemented in Britain provides fascinating insights into the shift that has taken place since the 1980s in British social policy which previously championed "welfare statism" and was regarded by many as a commendable example of collective provision.

The book also outlines a strategy for responding to the challenges facing social work in Britain today. Many of the author's observations will also be of relevance to social work in the United States and other countries. Tracing the history of social work radicalism, Ferguson questions whether current approaches to critical social work, such as postmodernism, actually offer a sound basis for action. His analysis of the postmodernist position is incisive and pointed, although it is not clear that his own Marxist alternative provides a sufficient basis for mobilizing professional support for a renewed vision of professional practice that addresses the problems of heightened inequality, persistent poverty and unmet needs. Nevertheless, this readable and challenging book is a refreshing addition to the literature and deserves to be widely read.

*James Midgley, University of California, Berkeley*

Melvin Delgado and Lee Staples, *Youth-Led Community Organizing: Theory and Action*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. \$19.95 papercover.

The contemporary Community Youth Development Movement, initiated in the early 1990s, is a form of youth activism which is gaining in popularity and has a growing