Review of: "A Deeper Look at the Origin and Evolution of the Social Work Profession"

Alan Bruce

This paper represents an interesting overview of charitable and quasi-philanthropic initiatives over a vast period of time and an extremely wide geographic spread. The central case and insight focus on the role played by India in originating concepts and traditions of charitable care and relief. It then asserts that these Indian-originated models spread to other parts of the world and formed the basis for what is called 'social work'. Here we run into the first of many issues and problems concerned with conceptual clarity and historical accuracy. Social work, as it is commonly understood in the academic literature, refers to a profession that meets needs based on policies, systems, and resources to improve lives and advance social equity. By contrast, this paper traces the history of charity and almsgiving, with specific reference to their roots in religion and trading routes. Evidently, there is a vague connection between these two traditions, but in the same way, we could trace social work's roots to economic theory or sociology. This conceptual confusion leads to a process of not comparing like to like and drawing conclusions which, if not inaccurate, are fanciful. Traditions of care for the indigent and marginalized are complex and often located under the mantle of many subjective understandings of the nature of power, access, and privilege and how to contain the implications of stratification and systemic exclusion. Moral imperatives are often self-serving and rationalize the structural realities which create and maintain underclasses. These are themes which would lend much more coherence to the portrait of the evolution of 'social work' painted here.

Traditions of almsgiving, hospitality, and nourishment may well have originated in India connected with trade routes. And the attested facts of established trade routes between India and China and the Roman Empire may have facilitated the dispersal of some aspects of this system. But the reasoning is largely conjectural, and the point is unclear. What has this to do with social work? The fundamental fact is that all charity and succour for the 'disadvantaged' is based on the existence of inequality and differential access to power. And this exclusion is itself planned and deliberate, an integral part of system maintenance. The graphic manifestation of this in traditional Indian caste systems speaks for itself. Such traditions of charity as existed were designed perchance to salve the consciences of those in power, but not to alter the fundamental paradigm of structural inequality. The evolution of charity and care in Europe is glossed over in a rapid scan of events from the establishment of poor houses in Merovingian France to hospitals in Cairo to medieval almshouses. This, however, never even mentions the powerful and positive role played by monasticism, originating in Christian Egypt in the fourth century. European monasteries and the monastic system were the foundations of care-giving - as well as medicine, medical research, universities, and centres of alternative thinking that challenged established power structures. This is not mentioned. In the same manner, Islamic traditions of charitable care were linked with research and support, as can be seen by the Ottoman origin of care and medical support for those with mental health-related illnesses in Edirne

from the 12th century on.

The paper then jumps to a review of practice in England, with a digression to France and the United States. There is absolutely no evidence for a connection between Magna Carta and medieval almshouses and modern concepts of social work. The English tradition was characterized by a brutal assault on its own marginalized populations, ranging from land clearances under the Tudors to indentured slavery to forced exile or transportation. And this barbarity was compounded by the pervasive reality of colonial expansion and exploitation, within which context social work gradually emerged - and not always as a positive force. It is an example of the paper's conceptual confusion that reference is made to Britain formulating laws on care in the sixteenth century. "Britain' did not exist in the 16th century. It was England. Britain was only formed with the union with Scotland in 1707, and Scotland had vastly different laws and traditions.

Another glaring gap in the narrative presented is the total absence of any mention of Ireland. The English (and subsequently British) invasion and conquest of Ireland occurred over many centuries and was met with widespread and consistent resistance. Ireland had contained its own traditions of care and inclusion in ancient Gaelic society - traditions that colonialism tried viciously to uproot and destroy. After the military defeats of Ireland in the 17th century, systematic policies of land confiscation, dispossession, ethnic cleansing, slavery, and cultural apartheid were introduced. And British social legislation created the first Workhouses under the Poor Law Act of 1838. This intervention provided the means for massive social control and immiseration that led to the added tragedy of the Great Famine of 1847 when over 25% of the Irish population was liquidated by starvation or forced emigration in three years. These realities were the true origins of social work or, more properly, social engineering.

Legacies of charity and help for the poor are not all bad and negative. Many worthy motives have existed in the minds of the givers. But in structural terms, charity is no substitute for rights. Many of the states mentioned in this paper callously used charities to simply avoid any responsibility to their marginalized or underserved populations. It has taken centuries of resistance to alter this even slightly. And it is even worse when we consider the impact of such approaches in the colonized regions under the control of the metropolitan powers.

This paper does not compare like with like. It skims over too vast a timescale and too wide a geographic area. Above all, it does not define the nature of stratification and the abuse of human rights that sit at the heart of unequal societies and social formations. There is no point in sanitizing social work. It either plays a part in the emancipation of people or in their oppression. The evidence points clearly to a conclusion. This paper, unfortunately, does not make it.