Series editors’ introduction

For much of its history, mainstream social work in Britain has been a fairly conservative profession. It has often reflected the dominant political ideologies of the day, while presenting itself as resolutely ‘non-political’. Thus, the first social work organisation, the Charity Organisation Society (COS) (1869), rigorously adhered to the Poor Law notion that the poor could be divided into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, rejected any form of state intervention aimed at improving people’s lives (including free school meals and old-age pensions) and saw the practice of individual casework as the best antidote to the spread of socialist ideas.

By contrast, social work in the 1960s reflected a broad social democratic consensus, evident in the recommendations of the Seebohm Report in England and Wales and the Kilbrandon Report in Scotland on the basis of which the new generic social work departments were established. In most respects, the social work of this period reflected a huge advance on the punitive individualism of the COS (and, it should be said, the punitive individualism of our own time). Even then, however, there was still a tendency to pathologise (albeit it was communities rather than individuals that were seen as failing) and to ignore the extent to which statutory social work intervention continued to be experienced by service users as oppressive and paternalistic. Be that as it may, the progressive possibilities of the new departments were soon cut short by the onset of a global economic crisis in 1973 to which the Labour governments of the time could offer no answer, except cuts and belt-tightening.

What is also true, however, as we have argued elsewhere (Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007), is that there has always been another tradition in social work, an activist.radical approach which has sought to present an alternative vision both to individualism and also to paternalist, top-down collectivism. This approach, which flourished in the UK in the 1970s, located the problems experienced by those who sought social work support in the material conditions of their lives and attempted
to develop practice responses that challenged these conditions and their effects.

One source of theory underpinning that approach was the excellent series Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State, edited by Peter Leonard and published by Macmillan.

Three decades on, this current series aims to similarly deepen and refresh the critical and radical social work tradition by providing a range of critical perspectives on key issues in contemporary social work. Social work has always been a contested profession but the need for a space for debate and discussion around ways forward for those committed to a social work practice informed by notions of social justice has never been greater. The issues are complex. How should social workers view personalisation, for example? In an era of austerity, can social work be about more than simply safeguarding and rationing scarce services? Will the integration of services in areas such as mental health lead to improved services or simply greater domination of medical models? Do social work practices offer an escape from managerialism and bureaucracy or are they simply a Trojan horse for privatisation?

These are some of the questions which contributors to this series – academics, practitioners, service users and movement activists – will address. Not all of those contributing to these texts would align themselves with the critical or radical tradition. What they have in common, however, is a commitment to a view of social work which is much wider than the currently dominant neoliberal models and a belief that notions of human rights and social justice should be at the heart of the social work project.

**Poverty and insecurity: Chris Jones and Tony Novak**

In this book, Chris Jones and Tony Novak set out to pose, sharply, some fundamental questions about social work within the context of increasingly unequal societies. A number of social scientists have been very good at plotting the growth (and impact) of poverty and inequality in Britain under the impact of neoliberal policy reforms. But what political, moral and social imperatives does this impose on
social workers and social work organisations? Social work claims to be an ‘ethical career’, to be a profession that is value driven, committed to social justice and combatting all manifestations of oppression. Yet faced with the onslaught of austerity, growing inequality and the marketisation of public services – all of which are having a detrimental impact on social work service users and social work practitioners – the social work profession, collectively, has been relatively silent. Jones and Novak’s case is that this silence must be broken. Instead, they suggest that if social work is to maintain its claim to be a profession committed to social justice and humanitarianism, then social work organisations and practitioners need to ‘speak truth to power’ and make clear the horrors being inflicted upon the poorest and most marginalised by state economic priorities.

In their contributions, Mimi Abramovitz, Sanford F. Schram, Suzanne Dudziak and Dimitra-Dora Teloni trace a similar picture of growing inequality and impoverishment of social work services in the US, Canada and Greece. They join the debate and argue for a more ‘outspoken’ social work that is aware of the iniquities of the modern world and the need for a rejuvenated social work committed to working towards human liberation from poverty and oppression.