

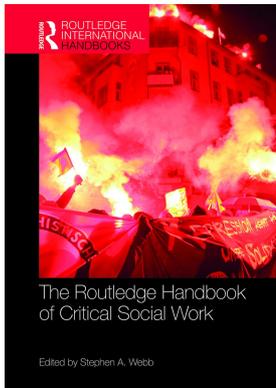
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Welfare words, neoliberalism and critical social work

Paul Michael Garrett

Introduction

During a period of neoliberalism, there is an intense, yet often stealthy, endeavour to adjust or recalibrate the ‘semantic order of things’ (Brown, 2015: 27). As the late Doreen Massey (2015: 24) stated, this development impacts on the everydayness of life and mundane social interactions given that on ‘trains and buses, and sometimes in hospitals and universities too’, we have become customers, not passengers, patients or students. Here, a ‘specific activity and relationship is erased by a general relationship of buying and selling that is given precedence over it’ (Massey, 2015: 24). This observation also helps to illuminate the significance of the use of words within social and health care and the differing practices that particular words seek to trigger, promote and embed. Moreover, what I term welfare words *fit* within the wider economic and cultural patterning riven with gross social inequalities and complex forms of social marginality. Thinking more deeply, critically and *politically* about the incessant deployment of particular words within prevailing discourses and daily social work encounters may also lead to questioning what such words ‘assume about a social totality or infrastructure, or the presumed characteristics of social actors’ (Barrett, 1992: 202). Far from being an exercise in ‘political correctness’, the aspiration to delve deeper into how power relations operate through the language and culture of neoliberal capitalism should form a major component of critical and radical social work (Garrett, 2017a).

Welfare words, critical social work and social policy

Words change meaning over time and are never encountered in isolation. Our engagement with words invariably occurs ‘within the flows of our socio-cultural practices’ with meaning ‘at least in part tied to the social world we inhabit’ (Grimwood, 2016: 15). Yet, as Noel Timms, a psychiatric social worker and author, observed in the late 1960s, it is ‘surprising’ that his profession, ‘largely dependent on language, should have paid so little attention to words and what it means to speak a language’ (Gregory and Holloway, 2005: 38). Indeed, the usage of words shapes the way the profession communicates with itself, how it coalesces, marks out and sustains a distinctive rationality. Through language it is able to construct and maintain the domain, with words serving as the ‘glue’ helping it to stick into place. For example, words (such as ‘assessment’, ‘risk’

and ‘supervision’) are integral to the training of social workers who learn to *think* within the conceptual parameters of the profession and to *talk the talk* (see also Wilson, 2016). This mimetic dimension – learning the *right* language, perceptions and dispositions – contributes to producing a certain social work identity and *style* (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). This is part of the process Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) refers to as attaining the ‘feel for the game’. The game is acquired through experience and the ‘good player, who is so to speak the game incarnate, does at every moment what the game requires’ (Bourdieu, 1994: 63). This ‘feel’ is partly inculcated through prevailing names and descriptions helping to constitute the dominant forms of reasoning which become, in time, ‘turned into second nature’ (Bourdieu, 1994: 65).

This learning process can also be connected to the ways in which people engaging with social workers are classified. Bowker and Star (1999:10) maintain that a ‘classification system’ is a ‘set of boxes (metaphorical or literal) into which things can be put to then do some kind of work – bureaucratic or knowledge production’. Such systems have, of course, been central to social work since its inception (Woodroffe, 1962). In the past, this was reflected in the naming practices and types of descriptive language used in depicting and ‘fixing’ a person in a ‘case’ file (Foucault, 1991). In more recent times, this form of activity is more likely to be undertaken using electronic templates (Garrett, 2005).

For social work to be operational, some forms of categorisation are inevitable if the day-to-day work is to be rendered *doable*. Yet the verbal categories that social workers use can promote ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 2000). ‘Labels’ as Schram (1995: 23) avows, ‘operate as sources of power that serve to frame identities and interests. They predispose actors to treat the subjects in question in certain ways’. For example, the words ‘client’ or ‘service user’ are apt to connote and convey vague, even suppressed, notions of inferior, tainted or spoiled personhood. Moreover, there may be instances when categories and classifications used by practitioners – often situated within a matrix of ideas associated with particular forms of ostensibly ‘scientific’ and neutral ‘expertise’ – can result in oppressive ramifications for those targeted for intervention (Mayes and Horwitz, 2005). An example of how this process can occur is reflected in historical responses to ‘unmarried mothers’ in Ireland and elsewhere (Garrett, 2016a; 2017a). Experts, often straddling the boundaries between the applied social sciences and clerical or pastoral guidance, performed vital ‘definitional labour’ (Goffman, 1971) and charted what was deemed to be the most appropriate forms of intervention. Felix Biestek (1957: 25), an American Jesuit and one of the primary definers of what constituted the philosophical foundation for social work, observed that caseworkers ‘have differed in their evaluation of the capacity of “unmarried mothers”, as a group, to make sound decisions. Some feel that unmarried mothers are so damaged emotionally that they are incapable of arriving at a good decision themselves’.

Gregory and Holloway (2005) chart the history of social work in England and identify how the profession has evolved discursively. For example, in the early 1950s the terminology used to describe the subjects of intervention included the ‘poor’, ‘needy’, ‘imbecile’, ‘problem family’ and ‘crippled family’ (Gregory and Holloway, 2005: 42). As the decade moved on, however, the emphasis on a more clinical orientation and the influence of psychodynamic approaches gave rise to shifting characterizations such as the ‘person’, the ‘client’ (Gregory and Holloway, 2005: 42). Somewhat surprisingly, military metaphors – such as officers and duty – have continued to symbolically represent aspects of social workers’ day-to-day engagement with the users of services (Beckett, 2003; see also Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). Chris Beckett (2003) proposes that the ‘spoken language’ of social work is a combination flowing from the dynamic interplay of three identifiable types: the ‘sacred language’ (reflected in the aspirational language embedded in the profession’s codes of ethics and so on); the ‘official language’ (revealed in the language of the bureaucracy); the ‘colloquial’ language (used by practitioners in the everyday, more informal interactions with one another).

Within mainstream professional exchanges, ‘social worker’ and ‘client’/‘service user’ are usually perceived as fixed and discrete categories despite the fact that during a single lifetime an individual may find themselves passing from one to the other or simultaneously inhabiting both categories. More generally, how the users of services are identified has been a continuing source of debate (Tropp, 1974; Heffernan, 2006; McLaughlin, 2009). However, within social work there is sometimes a certain naiveté about the extent to which changing the names of things (using anti-oppressive language for example) can change the world itself (Beckett, 2003: 627). Nevertheless, critical thinking and engagement remains ‘incomplete without a significant element of language critique’ because ‘discourse, and in particular language’ appears to carry considerable ‘weight in the constitution and reproduction of the emergent form of global capitalism’ (Fairclough and Graham, 2002: 187). Moreover, our ‘unthinking’ engagement in language can often appear to accept uncritically its ideological meanings (Holborow, 2015: 4).

If, therefore, we are to think about the role of language within social work, it is helpful to focus on welfare words. In order to explore this theme in a little more detail, it is useful to also briefly refer to what the late sociologist and literary theorist, Raymond Williams (1921–1988) called ‘keywords’.

Keywords

Raymond Williams’ *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* is one of the main inspirations for this critical focus on the words used in social work and related areas of activity. Initially published in 1976, Williams’ ‘slim, strangely addictive’ volume included 110 ‘micro essays’ on words which he perceived as significant in the mid-1970s and into the following decade (Beckett, 2014: 19). These included, for example, charity, communication, community, consumer, family, modern, society, technology, unemployment, welfare and work. These represented, for him, ‘binding’ words, ‘significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought’ (Williams, 1983: 15). Hence, they functioned, singularly and collectively, as the ‘linguistic-ideological hubs of his time’ (Holborow, 2015: 71; see also Fritsch *et al.*, 2016a). The book was subsequently republished, during the period of the Thatcher governments (1979–90), with an additional 21 words added in 1983 (Williams, 1983). In 2014, a third edition was published coinciding with the *Keywords: Art, Culture and Society in 1980s Britain* exhibition at the Tate Gallery.

The underlying orientation in Williams’ *Keywords* is one maintaining that there is a need to analyse keywords in the social conditions in which they arise, circulate and are then apt to alter or have their meaning culturally and politically re-calibrated. Thus, he tended to place ‘special emphasis on adversarial uses, as in the repeated phrase “there is then both controversy and complexity in the term”’ (Durant, 2006: 12). According to Williams’ perspective, words can be viewed as ‘artillery to be purposefully aimed’ (Durant, 2006: 12). Marie Moran (2015: 4), in her fascinating exploration of one particular keyword – identity – defines a keyword as ‘not merely an important or fashionable word, but a key element of a wider social transformation, capturing, embodying and expressing new, historically and socially specific ways of thinking and acting’. Hence, to understand their meaningfulness and social weight, keywords cannot be ‘separated from the cultural political economy of the capitalist societies in which they came to prominence’ (Moran, 2015: 4). For example, terms such as welfare and welfare state are ‘involved in drawing and redrawing the boundaries of state intervention’ (Béland and Petersen, 2014: 3). Moreover, these, and other words and phrases, change over time ‘as newer terms replace or supplement older ones’ (Béland and Petersen, 2014: 3).

This focus on keywords is ‘traceable back to late nineteenth-century semantics’ (Durant, 2006: 5), but Williams injected a quizzical Leftist approach into his own project. As a Marxist,

he also voiced ‘reservations about semantic and lexicographical work as a force for change’ (Durant, 2006: 16–17). Whilst his work was foundational to the field of ‘cultural studies’, Williams remained a cultural *materialist* in that he believed meaningful social and economic change could never be prompted by words alone. This position anticipates, in some sense, later comments by Bourdieu (2000: 2), who chides those placing ‘excessive confidence in the power of language’. For the French sociologist, this was a ‘typical illusion’ of many contemporary academics who regarded an ‘academic commentary as a political act or the critique of texts as a feat of resistance, and experience revolutions in the order of words as radical revolutions in the order of things’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 2).

Williams acknowledged, however, the power of ideas and culture in consolidating, or rendering more vulnerable to change, a given social order. Expressed somewhat differently, it would be wrong to reduce issues relating to social change to either materialist accounts laying emphasis on structures and the brute forces of history, or to entirely idealist explanations stressing the determining importance of ideas, agency and intentions.

In recent years, some of Williams’ keywords have become less significant, whereas others have been reactivated or had their meanings significantly re-worked (see also Eagleton–Pierce, 2016). Many have been deployed by the political Right to try and win consent for socially retrogressive policies (Garrett, 2009; 2013; 2014; 2016b). Writing prior to the economic crash beginning in 2007, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) refer to a ‘new spirit’ of capitalism more inclined, for example, to encompass words such as well-being and social justice. Post-crash, such a tendency has become even more marked and this is exemplified by the startlingly cynical speech made by Theresa May on becoming UK prime minister in July 2016. Having been part of an administration presiding over relentless austerity measures, she proudly declared her intention to ‘fight against . . . burning injustice’. Even before May’s intervention, other leading Conservatives had strategically committed themselves to tackling social injustice, as evinced by a number of the publications from the UK Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). Partly driven by the desire to claim some of the terrain historically inhabited by the social democratic centre-left, the social justice phrase has been harnessed, in fact, to the project of levering people into work. More expansively, under the ‘interchangeable rubrics of “modernization”, “reform”, “democracy”, “the West”, “the international community”, “human rights”, “secularism”, “globalization”, and various others, we find nothing but an historical attempt at an unprecedented regression’ (Badiou, 2012: 4). In this context, powerful organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) continue to play a pivotal role in amplifying this lexicon. Moreover, often completely ‘disregarding local traditions and cultures’ the language used seeks to create ‘super-uniformity’ amongst nation states (Holborow, 2015: 106).

Importantly, it is neoliberalism, of course, which provides the economic and cultural context for the circulation of these words and the themes associated with them.

A welfare words approach

The word neoliberalism is frequently used in a casual way as ‘shorthand for a prevailing dystopian zeitgeist’ (Venugopal, 2015: 168). However, neoliberalism is an historically specific form of capital accumulation endeavouring to engineer a ‘counter-revolution against welfare capitalism’ (Fairclough and Graham, 2002: 221). Relatedly, we are *witnessing, experiencing* (and often seeking to *resist*) the wholesale ‘extension of a basic feature of capitalist power relations present from the beginning: *class domination*’ (Fleming, 2015: 29, original emphases). Reflecting neoliberalism’s ascendancy as a financial and cultural force, ‘social activity and exchange becomes judged

on their degree of conformity to market culture' with business thinking and language 'migrating to all social activities' (Holborow, 2015: 34–35).

Importantly, neoliberals have been the curators of neo-welfare with the main aspiration being to eradicate any of the more benign attributes associated with post-war welfare states. Within the EU in recent years, it has been Greece which has faced the most 'radical' experimentation in this regard. The Greek working class has been the target for a 'gigantic disciplining operation – a huge experiment in violent downward social mobility and neoliberal adjustment and restructuring' (Stavrakakis, 2013: 315). Emblematic in this respect, is the acronym 'PIIGS' (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain), deployed, on one level, merely as a shorthand for the EU's most indebted national economies toward the end of the 2000s, on the other as an insidiously dehumanising metaphor, justifying the use of large number of disenfranchised citizens, as 'guinea pigs' in the EU neoliberal lab (Stavrakakis, 2013: 315).

Whilst acknowledging that welfare is configured differently in different national settings, I define welfare words as those words and phrases used by 'primary definers' (Hall *et al.*, 1978) to steer debates on welfare in favour of a neoliberal political, economic and cultural agenda. The circulation of such words and phrases potentially helps, therefore, to sustain and propel the social logic of capitalism in its current form (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Although not always neoliberal in origin, these words are frequently pivotal in neoliberal narratives of social marginality. Gendered and racialised as well as classed, welfare words tend to predominantly concern groups lacking in economic capital or holding significant stocks of 'negative symbolic capital' (Bourdieu in Bourdieu *et al.*, 2002: 185).

The use of welfare words might be conceptualised in terms of what Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) refers to as the struggle to maintain hegemony and they are circulated and promoted by figures located within the state and/or particular fields of 'expertise'. The media play a significant role in amplifying, popularising and socially embedding these terms. Nestled within wider 'common sense' understandings, welfare words might also be interpreted as forming parts of a wider, politically distracting 'screen discourse' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 4) deflecting attention from issues related to capitalism, economic exploitation and a differential distribution of power. Such words reflect – or mask – how the dominant order is constructed contributing to its constitution and consolidation. However, they can also, to varying degrees, be perceived as a repository into which 'different sets of actors can pour multifarious meanings, from the hegemonic to the counter-hegemonic' (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016: 144).

In this context, discourse refers to a constellation of interconnected statements, explanations and lines of reasoning functioning to define a given situation at particular historical junctures. Discourses operate within what Bourdieu calls 'fields' – such as social work – determining implicit rules of engagement and restricting what can be legitimately and 'appropriately' represented, said and done. Thus, a pervasive plethora of powerful discourses, whilst failing to extinguish the possibility of oppositional meanings, can contribute to the maintenance of what Gramsci might have called a neoliberal hegemony.

The aim of a welfare words approach is not, therefore, to determine what are 'good' and 'bad' words or what is the decontaminated, 'real' or 'authentic' meaning of the particular words examined. Worth quoting at length, Marnie Holborow (2015: 121) lucidly articulates that the prime critical purpose should be to try and:

unpick the ideological content of any language emanating from the ruling class of a society . . . to identify the link between the language and the specific social world it seeks to represent, including its distortions of reality which have the potential to undermine its hegemony. To grasp how ideology is condensed in certain expressions, it is necessary

to see language not as a discursive practice within its own constraints – an ‘order of discourse’ – but as an utterance which responds to a social order and is fragilely suspended at a social conjuncture.

Some words are polysemous connoting a multiplicity of meanings and are suggestive of a range of different interpretations. Words, as Terry Eagleton maintains, are ‘pulled this way and that by competing social interests, inscribed from within and with a multiplicity of ideological accents’ (in Holborow, 2015: 128). The key point to recognise is that welfare words can be perceived as focal to a struggle for meaning, where dominant forces seek to embed certain hegemonic understandings to serve their class interests.

Examples of welfare words

In my recent book *Welfare Words*, I focus on how, for example, **welfare dependency** is prone to infiltrate many of the exchanges which are central to social work and related fields. The aim is to explore *why* the stigmatising of the welfare/welfare benefits/welfare dependency constellation appears so politically and socially prominent at the present time. Similarly, I examine the word **underclass**: Kirk Mann (1994: 81) believes that there is little doubt that this word is an ‘American invention’ and he mentions a speech by Edward Kennedy (1932–2009) in 1978, in which he referred to this pejorative welfare word. The term was initially promoted by numerous US journalists in the 1980s (Katz, 1993). Particularly influential in disseminating the concept is also a short series of articles by Ken Auletta, appearing in the *New York Times* in 1981 (Welshman, 2013). In the UK, Dean and Taylor-Gooby neatly summarised that the underclass idea did not so much ‘define the marginalised, but . . . marginalise those it defines’ (in Welshman, 2013: 11). Scrutinising the definers, Bagguley and Mann claimed that ‘perhaps the real dangerous class is not the underclass but those who have propagated the underclass concept’ (in Welshman, 2013: 181). Now sustained by a ‘whole journalistic paraphernalia of menacing alterity’ (Badiou, 2002: 27), the underclass has been to the fore in debates on the London ‘riots’ of 2011 and, more widely, on the future of welfare. Furthermore, there is a range of other derogatory labels which have been used, throughout history, to label and regulate the poor and the marginalised with the latest addition being the notion of Troubled Families.

Social ex/inclusion can likewise be examined in a critical way. Twenty years ago, Washington and Paylor (1998: 335) argued that ‘the developing usage of the concept of social exclusion offers social work an opportunity to establish a professional focus which can be used in practice throughout the member states of the European Union’. By the ‘turn of the century, social exclusion had become a Third Way buzzword in the UK’ (Silver, 2010: 189). Subsequently, social ex/inclusion became ‘diffused through international policy networks’ particularly within Europe and, more specifically, the European Union (Béland and Petersen, 2014: 143).

Early intervention is a phrase carrying ‘such an overwhelming, *a priori* correctness’ (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014: 1737) that it appears beyond question. However, key questions relating to the current and seemingly omnipresent fixation with this phrase and practice include: What may be the assumptions underpinning early intervention? What roles are mothers particularly expected to play within a conceptual framework in which early intervention is increasingly to the fore?

Resilience, originating from the Latin *resilio* means ‘to jump back’ (Mohaupt, 2009: 63). Today, resilience is a prominent welfare word within the ‘self-help’, ‘life skills’ and ‘coaching’ book market. More broadly, the attribute of resilience is usually presented as a vital attribute to

add to the kitbag of hardened individual subjects intent on achieving the required psychological fitness for the rigours of neoliberalism's relentless and unending competition. Nevertheless, the promiscuous and mobile discourse pivoting on resilience has largely escaped critical scrutiny within social work and social policy and has far too swiftly become part of its 'common sense'. Hence, it can appear self-evident, established, and settled once and for all that resilience furnishes a convincing conceptual framework for thinking about, for example, social work interventions with a range of client groups. Relatedly, most studies looking through a resilience optic fail to look more closely at a range of other welfare words and phrases present in the same discursive orbit.

The journalist, Madeleine Bunting (2016: 23) avows that **care** is

a small word, so pervasive and overloaded with meanings that its significance has often been easy to overlook. It's the care given by parents that nurtures us into adulthood, and it's the care given by others that supports us in old age and as we die; and in-between, care is the oft overlooked scaffolding of our lives, on which wellbeing and daily life depend.

Care is a welfare word which has a 'warm and loving quality to it, and it is difficult to wholly detach it from this halo effect. Simply to describe work as carework takes it into a special realm of value' (Twigg, 2000: 393). Care is central within a range of discourses impinging on social work and social policy in connection to, for example, the evolution of community care, the long-term care of the increasing proportions of older people, the treatment of children and young people in the public care system and debates about the recognition of unpaid carers. Furthermore, 'self-care', a notion so prominent within social work and similar 'caring' professions, is often mobilised to promote 'neoliberal objectives to dismantle public welfare resources and shift responsibility for care onto individual citizens' (Ward, 2015). All these issues and themes focus 'on what care means, its uses and abuses, what it costs, how it is supported, how it is delivered, and by whom' (Williams, 2005: 471). Underpinning a range of these issues are complex factors, and more abstract considerations related to the use of time and who is empowered to organise its distribution across a multiplicity of care locations. Current strains on care are often reflected in the notion that that is a 'crisis of care', is not 'accidental', but has 'deep systemic roots in the structure of our social order' (Fraser, 2016: 100).

The contemporary policy fixation with **child adoption** entails risks that many parents – anxious about their children being 'put up for adoption' – may be alienated and deterred from approaching local social services for family support. The political centrality of adoption might also lead to a further diminution in such services. More generally, it is apparent that both domestic and inter-country adoption has to be situated in the context of neoliberal economic and cultural practices. Child adoption lies at the intersection of a range of converging issues rooted in social divisions and cleavages associated with social class, 'race' and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender roles, age, (dis)ability and, in the case of ICA (inter-country adoption), neo-colonialism.

Conceptual insights enabling a better comprehension of welfare words, such as these, are provided by a number of European thinkers who are all, to differing degrees, in dialogue with Marx: Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant, the Autonomist Marxist tradition and Jacques Rancière. Each of them, using different analytical optics, furnishes conceptualisations helping us to account for the prominence of particular welfare words. These theorists alert us to the more encompassing economic, political and cultural context which facilitates the *flow* of these words. This is not, however, to argue that they deploy crude single-axis frameworks and are entirely unattuned to overlapping structures of domination. Some welfare words cannot be critically explored without referring to ideas relating to gender and mothering (e.g.

underclass, early intervention, care and adoption) and ‘race’ and racialisation (e.g. underclass and adoption) as well as class. Many welfare words also touch on issues related to age and generation: for example, care is connected to the notion that there is a crisis attributable to an ‘ageing population’; a lacuna is present in discourses on child adoption in that the voices of children themselves rarely feature.

As Durant (2008: 123) concedes, in his discussion on Williams’ choice of keywords, the issue of ‘selection, inclusion and exclusion of candidate “keywords” . . . is as delicate, or awkward, now as it was then’. Having said this, the welfare words and phrases I have mentioned are, to differing degrees, ubiquitous within social work and related fields and their usage provides insights into economic and cultural tensions and wider contextual ‘social changes’ (Voloshinov, 1973: 19). Some of these words and phrases also seem to blend into each other, forming a deeply ideological mosaic of mutually reinforcing ‘common sense’ narratives (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005).

Clearly, a range of entirely different words and phrases could be selected and readers will, no doubt, have their own thoughts and suggestions. For example, increasingly to the fore in what Bourdieu and Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 2) term the neoliberal ‘vulgate’, are words such as therapy, happiness and mindfulness. It is also clear that some words, such as ‘prevention’ are significant. In the area of social work with children and families, this word is increasingly harnessed to radicalisation and is reflected in worries about a conflationary rhetorical logic linking, for example, the Troubled Families Programme with notions of ‘terror’ and ‘radicalisation’ (Stanley and Guru, 2015; McKendrick and Finch, 2016). The words ‘entrepreneur’ or ‘social entrepreneur’ are becoming omnipresent and crossing the traditional divide between political Left and Right. Symptomatic of this trend, John McDonnell (2016), as UK Labour Shadow Chancellor, proclaimed the commitment of a future Labour government to ‘create an entrepreneurial state that works with the wealth creators’. Conversely, as we have seen, traditionally progressive phrases such as ‘social justice’ have been incorporated within the political discourse of the ruling Conservative Party in the UK, being disassembled and reassembled in such a way as to eliminate all semblance of radical Leftist intent.

Rhetorically recalibrated neoliberalism

At this current juncture, it appears that neoliberalism is being rhetorically recalibrated. In the UK, it has been maintained that the Brexit vote and the associated ‘ructions of 2016 may signal a pivot from punitive to compensatory neoliberalism, as spending cuts and monetary policy reach their political and economic limits’ (Watkins, 2016: 27). At the time of writing, shifts may be detectable in the tonality of policy – and the vocabulary used – as this relates to questions pertaining to welfare provision and, more broadly, the role of government. Enunciating the ‘new centre ground’ of British politics at the Conservative Party conference in October 2016, UK prime minister May (2016) contended that this was the time for

a new approach that says while government does not have all the answers, government can and should be a force for good; that the state exists to provide what individual people, communities and markets cannot; and that we should employ the power of government for the good of the people.

If this politics was pursued it would serve to maintain and nurture a ‘country of decency, fairness and quiet resolve . . . a Great Meritocracy’ (May, 2016). This rhetorical positioning is partly a reaction to challenges from the nationalist Right, within her own party and UKIP,

and the insurgent Left within the Labour Party. However, in some respects, this perspective was foreshadowed by some of the narratives circulating around ‘inclusive capitalism’ in 2014 (Carney, 2014). Such moves can be interpreted as part of more encompassing projects seeking to steer the leadership of the ruling bloc, generating consent amongst ‘kindred and allied groups’ (Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell Smith, 2005: 57–8). In the US, not entirely dissimilar shifts are detectable with the emergence of what Fraser ironically terms ‘progressive’ neoliberalism ‘celebrating “diversity”, meritocracy and “emancipation” while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction. The result is not only to abandon defenceless populations to capital’s predations, but also to redefine emancipation in market terms’ (Fraser, 2016: 113). At the level of electoral politics, this form of neoliberalism was embodied, during the 2016 presidential election campaign, by the defeated Hillary Clinton: economically business-as-usual, hawkish overseas, but keen to pursue a liberal social agenda particularly in terms of issues pertaining to gender and sexuality.

Others, however, suggest that neoliberalism is being recalibrated in rather different ways with Davies (2016), for example, arguing that neoliberalism has passed through three stages: a form of ‘combative’ or insurgent neoliberalism (1979–89), followed by the ‘normative’ neoliberalism which began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and culminated in the ‘crash’ of 2008. Since then, neoliberalism can be perceived as entering an unfinished ‘punitive’ phase in which debt and punishment becomes more prominent. Perhaps anticipating something of the ‘spirit’ of the rebarbative and erratic Trump administration, Davies (2016: 130) interprets this development as related to the evolution of a ‘melancholic condition in which governments and societies unleash hatred and violence’. Moreover, integral to ‘punitive’ neoliberalism is the decline in mental health, and a public vocabulary inculcating self-blaming.

Welfare words, social work and critically disruptive thinking

Initially inspired by Raymond Williams, a welfare words approach to analysing social change, in and beyond our professions, acknowledges the importance of ‘keyword-anchored theorising’ (Wilson, 2016: 4). Indeed, there may be something of a resurgence of interest in this form of inquiry within social work, social policy and sociology literature (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Fritsch *et al.*, 2016a; Moran, 2015; Wilson, 2016). Partly in tune with the approach of Williams, Gramsci and Bourdieu, Fraser and Gordon stress the need to promote a ‘critical political semantics’ to discern how neoliberalism seeks to maintain domination across societies and within particular institutions and bureaucratic fields. Such critical vigilance is imperative, since ‘unreflective’ use of words might ‘serve to enshrine certain interpretations of social life as authoritative and . . . obscure others’, generally to the advantage of powerful groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinate ones (Fraser and Gordon, 1997: 123).

Clearly, language does not ‘produce the world as various strands of idealist philosophy have maintained; however, it does organize and delimit its objects’ (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016b: 12). Safri and Ruccio (2013: 8) argue that such an exploration can provide a ‘specific “interventionist” scholarship’ exposing the political, ethical, and class stakes inherent to particular words. The approach discussed in this chapter seeks to *pull* and *stretch* a series of welfare words, to view them from different angles and to defamiliarise and disrupt their taken-for-granted meanings within mainstream social work. Words such as those mentioned earlier, and many more, constitute the ‘linguistic habitus’ (Hayward, 2007) of social workers, aiding them to attain what we have seen Bourdieu (1994: 9) refer to as the ‘feel for the game’.

However, words are notably unstable and can always have their meanings overturned. As the Soviet linguist Valentin Voloshinov (1895–1936) (1973: 23) argued in the 1920s, the ruling

class strive to impart a dominant, hegemonic ‘supraclass, eternal character’ to particular words. Relatedly, Sanford Schram (1995: 21) argues that attempts to ‘rename’ can serve to progressively ‘destabilize prevailing institutional practices’ which may be harmful or damaging. Renaming can help ‘denaturalize and delegitimize ascendant categories and constraints they place on political possibility’ (Schram, 1995: 22), yet we also need to remain alert to how labels and keywords, even those aiming at a progressive re-framing, are constantly shifting and in flux because all ‘terms are partial and incomplete characterizations, every new term can be invalidated as not capturing all that needs to be said about any topic’ (Schram, 1995: 24). Similar points have more recently been made by Fritsch *et al.* (2016b, p. 3) who argue that ‘purely nominal shifts are never enough’ to resolve political problems (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016b: 3). Nevertheless, projects of re-signification and attempting to ‘change the valuations assigned to particular terms’ do have progressive utility (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016b: 14).

Conclusion

Ubiquitous welfare words and phrases can be regarded as ‘tips of the iceberg’, hinting at the concealed contours of a much larger phenomenon (Stubbs in Holborow, 2015: 116). Looking beneath the surface might continue to help us ‘cultivate new habits of disruptive thinking’, new modes of resistance and new political possibilities (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016b: 17). This chapter has, therefore, referred to a cluster of words which are omnipresent during this period when the trajectory of the neoliberal project is more edgily uncertain. These words, along with others not explored, condense various ideological and hegemonic themes at this historical juncture, amplifying the ‘state of play’ in fields such as social work. Attentiveness to such words is of the utmost importance because they can reflect how the dominant order is assembled; yet as they contribute to its constitution and consolidation, they can also become the focus of challenges to the status quo.

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