



Social Work in an Ethnically Diverse Europe: The Shifting Challenges of Difference

Charles Husband, University of Bradford

Abstract

This article addresses the inherently politicised context of social work practice located within the contested logics and values of national social policy and professional values and identities. Noting the key role of social work in delivering the state's promise of social citizenship, it is argued that the increasing neo-nationalist sentiments and politics in European states generate significant pressures upon the universalist, inclusive, values of social work in a multiethnic Europe. The academic and policy debate around social cohesion is explored to illustrate how an assimilationist drift in multicultural state policies undermines the capacity of social work services to deliver appropriate, ethnically sensitive, services. It is further argued that the pervasive spread of populist counter-narratives to multiculturalism erode support for anti-racist and transcultural social work practice. In this context it is argued that social work must acknowledge its compromised situation and explicitly develop a political agenda committed to guaranteeing substantive equality in service delivery.

Social work has over the last thirty years developed an understanding of the quite particular challenges it faces through the processes of migration and racialization (Murji and Solomos 2005) across European societies. The demographics of European states have been transformed through migration, settlement around specific locales of employment, and the consequent construction of new ethnic communities. With this increasing ethnic concentration, fuelled by ethnic solidarity and social exclusion, (Geddes 2003; Castles 2000), the visibility of *ethnic* difference has encountered increasing levels of *racial* hostility. In this context, social work developed distinct conceptual and policy responses: namely, transcultural and anti-racist social work. In this field through his writing, practical instruction and personal leadership, Lorenz has played an outstanding and innovative role (Lorenz 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2006a, 2006b).

The passage of time has not made anti-discriminatory social work practice a stable body of precepts and practice that could become an established set of competencies that could be rehearsed and passed on with certainty from cohort to cohort of entering professionals. Continuing political and academic debates around the nature of racism have made the 'target' of anti-racist practice a shifting, and at times, ambivalent object. Critiques of the 'race relations industry' have made those committed to anti-racist practice vulnerable to charges of 'replicating the radicalization of society and of essentializing ethnic identities (Rattansi 2005). This is a situation that can be personally hurtful and bewildering; and that can be exacerbated by the individualised ownership of commitment to the anti-racist struggle in the context of municipal politics that are ambivalent or hostile to anti-racist analyses.

Additionally, specific minority ethnic communities, the assumed beneficiaries of anti-racist practice, have objected that they have been marginalized and neglected by a language of 'race' that has obscured *their* perceived reality; where, for example, it is their religious identity that most powerfully triggers majority hostility and exclusion (Modood 2005). And, framing all of these phenomena we have seen across Europe an erosion of a commitment to a more inclusive and generic commitment to 'multiculturalism'. Where multiculturalism is deemed to 'have failed' then the pursuit of anti-racist practice becomes readily seen as the perverse concerns of the 'loony left' (Curran et al 2005).

In developing an analysis of the current challenges experienced in conceptualizing and delivering social work services in an ethnically diverse Europe the recent extensive review of European social work presented by Lorenz (2006b) provides an invaluable analytical framework. His analysis is wide ranging and far reaching and the argument here will represent a dialogue with the analysis of the interaction of social work with ethnic diversity presented in that text.

In his 2006 text *Perspectives on European Social Work*, Lorenz draws together his cumulative analysis of social work in the European context into a challenging, integrated analysis. In placing the nation state, and its numerous particular forms of political settlement, at the heart of his analysis he points to the crucially unresolved tensions between the organisational infrastructure of the state, *the system*, legitimated through quite specific constructions of the 'imagined community' of the nation (Anderson 1983) and its accretion of invented traditions (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) on the one hand; and the sometimes inchoate dynamics of *the life world* as expressed in, and through, civil society on the other.

This approach powerfully demands that in every instance any analysis of nation state policy, and any theorisation of collective identities, must necessarily be placed within its own specific historical developmental trajectory. Lorenz (2006b) cites Hobsbawn (1990) in distinguishing between a "'revolutionary-democratic' version of the nation which emphasises the form of contract between free and independent citizens as the basis of their rights, associated with the French Revolution, and a 'nationalist' version which builds cohesion and integration on a 'common cultural heritage' as in the Italian or German tradition" (Lorenz 2006b, p. 27). These foundational mechanisms for defining collective identity and, critically, membership of the nation were, across Europe, not ripped fully formed out of a shared collective experience but were in every instance developed and negotiated in relation to other pre-existing phenomena such as religious affiliation, language preference and class structure. The process of nation building in Europe as outlined by Gellner (1983) and Hobsbawn (1990) has been a creative intersection of contested powers and pragmatic accommodations. Often the characteristics of salient, and enemy, states were as significant in forming national identities and the political formations of the state, as were the internal dynamics of the emergent nations (for example, Colley 1992; Wallerstein 1991). From these quite particular historical dynamics come the deep cultural eddies of the 'modern social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004) that provide a Promethean reservoir of imagery, belief clusters and seemingly independent values that can be evoked in strategically ad hoc ways; both by politicians in legitimating state policy, and by the populace in defence of their individual rights and preferences.

In situating social work within the political context of the nation state, Lorenz (2006b) is conscientious in tracing the distinctive characteristics of the construction of national identities as emergent homogenizing ideologies central to the legitimation of the state's exercise of power over individuals. At the same time he points to the dynamics of globalisation and the

fragmenting of identities consequent upon the social disaggregation of late capitalism which is generating a vigorous contemporary individualism (Giddens 1998; Baumann 1995, 2003). In this context he presents a heuristic model of three relatively autonomous and intersecting constitutive forces shaping contemporary social work practice:

- the social policy agenda
- civil society
- academic discourses

It is through the intersection of these three fields that he interrogates the contemporary practice of social work.

Lorenz points to the intersection between civil society and the social policy agenda as a focus for the tension between the mandate from service users to appropriately address their needs, and legitimately enter into their lifeworld; and the mandate for the state to secure in practice social citizenship, whilst simultaneously reflecting the political values and priorities of the Government. In the last decade across Europe social work's problematic engagement in meeting the needs of refugees and asylum seekers critically exposes the fraught intersection of the core values of social work with the political priorities of the state. The ratcheting up of the 'politics of dissuasion' (Weh 1987) by receiving states over the last decade has been a pragmatic and calculated political response to popular xenophobia and racisms. It has been a concrete expression and reproduction of the social marginalization of refugees and asylum seekers. This has, for example, in the British case included the calculated pauperising of refugees and refused asylum seekers. This is only one very recent instance of the state involving social work organisationally, and social workers personally, in distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving recipients of social welfare. In Lorenz words

“Political citizenship, in other words, necessitated social citizenship sooner or later, but the realisation of social citizenship was not a matter of policies alone. Each system depended for its legitimacy on the ‘fine-tuning’ of those policy arrangements, which means on the individualisation of the conditions through which social citizenship can be established and justified. From the very beginning social workers or their pre-professional ancestors came to be placed on the frontline of these micro-processes that decided on inclusion or exclusion from social citizenship...” (Lorenz 2006b: p.44).

Lorenz is careful to trace the major dynamics that have generated the flow of people within and into Europe as part of a global contemporary process. Along with other contemporary commentators, he is concerned to locate this experience of migration and settlement over the last six decades within both the social and economic transformations of globalization, and of the particularity of national political and policy responses. The impact of the processes subsumed under the concepts of globalization and late capitalism have made the borders of the nation state both more porous, not only to the flow of people, but also to information, finance and political influence; and has contributed to the fragmentation and destabilisation of social solidarity. Thus, as Lorenz points out:

“The encounter with migrants and refugees is not the cause of this fragmentation of social solidarity within European societies, but it activates those existing uncertainties in localised, everyday, inescapable contexts and interactions.” (Lorenz 2006b: p. 71)

Post-war Europe has experienced a wide range of national responses to the arrival and settlement of migrants, and in every case the national response to the management of ethnic diversity has reflected established ideological constructions of 'the nation' and of citizenship; and the pragmatics of national political institutional practice (Heckmann and Bosswick 1995; Koopmans and Statham 2000; Castles 2000). Additionally, Lorenz in his comparison of the British and German context of developing models for social work practice, within specific 'nation building' ideologies of collective identity, illustrates how specifically this continuing project of nation building framed, and continues to frame, social work as a profession. Much of the process of managing ethnic diversity has involved a continuing dialogue between state policy and sectional class and ethnic interests in civil society. Neo-nationalisms and the extensive repertoire of racist and Islamophobic discourses have very actively provided partisan particularistic politics which have challenged, from a xenophobic perspective, the universalist precepts of substantive citizenship (Bottomore 1992) and the universalist humanism of the social work professions. Thus, social works' developing responses to engaging with the needs of ethnically distinct communities, and individuals, has taken place within an increasingly contested and politicised national context.

Lorenz points to the problematic dynamic between social works' long established practice of seeking "... *to rise above the level of the culturally particular and reach a level of universalism as the hallmark of its professional autonomy*" (ibid: p. 84) and the increasingly particularistic claims of social work users. In Taylor's (1992) terms, Europe has seen a progressive transition within civil society from a consensual commitment to a *politics of equal recognition* (ibid 1992: p. 36) toward a more contested co-existence with an emergent *politics of difference*. In Taylor's (1992) words:

"The development of the modern notion of identity, has given rise to a politics of difference. There is of course a universalist basis to this as well, making for the overlap and confusion between the two. Everyone should be recognised for his or her unique identity. But recognition here means something else. Within the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognise is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctiveness from everyone else. The idea is that is it precisely this distinctiveness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity." (Taylor 1992: p. 38)

We have here, in the struggle between the universalising logic of the politics of recognition and the differentiating logic of the politics of difference, the site of a major ideological struggle in contemporary Europe within civil society, and between ethnically defined constituencies within civil society and the state. The politics of difference calls the bluff of the state in its attempt to present social welfare as an expression of substantive citizenship defined by a universalist politics of recognition. Specifically, in this context minority ethnic citizens and denizens have come to share Young's (1989) analysis that within liberal universalism it is the interests and the priorities of the majority that define what are the normative needs and cultural practices that should be addressed through *equal* provision. The extensive continuing social marginalization of minority ethnic communities within European countries, whether in the banlieu of France, the ex-Gastarbeiter Turkish populations of Germany, or the Muslim communities of Britain: provides an existential and concrete basis for the embracing of the politics of difference within minority ethnic communities. Within academic discourse the extensive penetration of the 'post-modern turn' across the social sciences and humanities has fuelled an elite and popular discourse of difference that has succoured the recognition of

hybrid and diasporic identities (Rattansi and Westwood 1994; Hall and duGay 1996). Nor are these discourses free-floating or lacking social mobilisation. Across Europe the continuing reference to 'migrant' communities disguises the reality that frequently it is third generation national citizens and denizens who are increasingly shaping the identity politics of minority ethnic communities. In their personal identity and their social practice they *are* hybrid having national, religious, gendered, generational, ethnic and neighbourhood affiliations (Back 1996; Alexander 2000; Keith 2005; Alam 2007).

Majority ethnic and state discomfort and ambivalence toward minority identity politics reflects a Promethean fear of difference within the fragile post modern state. Thus, even in the pursuit of a positive virtue of social cohesion European states have an evolving definition that equates social solidarity with relevance to the labour market: a definition that then stigmatises the 'threatening' internal cohesion of minority communities.

Established Anti-Discriminatory Practice and a Deteriorating Policy Environment:

Very unevenly across European states the theory and practice of transcultural and anti-racist social work, which Lorenz (2006b) has done so much to advance, is now embedded to greater or lesser extent in national curricula; or at least in vital pockets of localized innovation. However, in a more generic sense, as Lorenz (op. cit.) points out, the advance of neo-liberal and New Labour - 'third way' - policy has increasingly generated new challenges for social work professions. In parallel with these developments I would wish to raise the significantly deleterious effects of neo-nationalisms, and the spread of assimilationist social policy as specifically impacting upon social work in multi-ethnic Europe. I will specifically identify the policies of social cohesion and the ubiquitous spread of counter-narratives to multiculturalism as illustrative of this deteriorating framing policy environment.

The Perversion of Social Cohesion:

If European states have increasingly developed neo-nationalist and xenophobic ideologies which have prejudicially framed the perception of internal diversity as expressed by the presence of significant minority ethnic populations, and have made brittle and neurotic the 'othering' of those who would seek to enter as immigrants or refugees, then regrettably it is not possible to find a positive opposition to this trend in the current policy fixation with social cohesion (Spencer 2006). Social cohesion as a concept has an intuitive positive ambience. It invokes the imagined values and sentiments that provide the vital humanistic dynamic that makes a meaningful civil society viable. Social cohesion is redolent of the nostalgic reverence for early twentieth century village and urban working class communities that were celebrated in the 1960's in Britain by sociologists because of their concrete expression of close bonding and robust cultural certitude (Blythe 1972; Dennis and Henriques 1956). It remains exactly the perceived threat to this coherent community spirit, under the influence of rapid industrial and demographic change, that has been reviewed and re-orchestrated in the contemporary diatribes against the pernicious social and personal fragmentation that it is argued is being occasioned by the forces of globalisation.

There is, therefore, something of an irony in the fact that current salient definitions of social cohesion regard instances of such close cultural integrity and social bonding as problematic. This is particularly so when the 'community in question' is a minority ethnic inner city population. Over the last decade, within Europe, cities have emerged as the dynamic core of much European Union and national social policy planning. In the context of international markets and the erosion of national protections from competition cities have become identified as the critical hub around which economic and social policy can be formed. In the

context of new communication technologies, neo-liberal deregulation and the international flow of labour and finance, cities are seen as providing the fecund spatial concentration and the clustering of essential competitive assets. In this policy environment defined by Buck et al (2006: 6) as ‘The New Conventional Wisdom’, cities have a unique role in fusing economic success with wider societal management through three interlinking dynamics: economic competitiveness, social cohesion and responsive governance. In their words:

“Social cohesion, like competitiveness, becomes a significant public issue in the NCW because the arrangements of the old status quo, with their clear divisions between public/private, and economic/social roles, can no longer be counted on to ensure the conditions for competitive success ... Co-ordination functions which had been increasingly undertaken by (and often within) major firms would now more often take place outside them, largely through ‘the market’, *though this would have to be underpinned by social capital in the form of networks, trust relations and shared conventions.*” [emphasis added] (Buck et al 2005, p. 54)

Within this ‘New Conventional Wisdom’ social cohesion is no longer a product of, and an essential basis for, a vital civil society: it has become prostituted as a hand-maiden of economic competitiveness. The radical individualism and fragmentation of social solidarity, which elsewhere is critiqued as a lamentable consequence of globalisation (Elliott and Lemert 2006), emerges within this framework as a fortuitous precursor of the labour mobility that is central to economic competitiveness in the new economic order.

For social work services engaged in social pedagogy and community work the presence of this framing ideology generates potential policy ambivalence and practical contradictions. When working with minority ethnic communities this inherent tension may be particularly exacerbated when ‘*their* cultural affiliations’ and ‘*their* cultural aspirations’ become the focus of policy. At this point, the internal logics of the ‘New Conventional Wisdom’ become easily, and dangerously, merged with the neo-nationalist, assimilationist politics of current multicultural policies.

The current policy discourses employing the concept of *social capital* provides a particularly flexible instrument for efficiently, and persuasively, fusing these two agendas. In the British context a recent review for the Government – Social Exclusion Unit (Jones 2005) provided a revealing discussion of the tendentious nature of ‘bridging social capital’ and ‘bonding social capital’. She defined these as:

- **Bridging social capital** enables links to new social networks. This can take the form of links to employers and labour markets. Young people with geographically scattered families have a resource they may be able to draw on to escape disadvantage and move to more prosperous areas to study or work.
- **Bonding social capital** may be a characteristic of poor communities, or disadvantaged groups, based on tight bonds and solidarity, but creating boundaries through which it becomes difficult to pass – it can thus act as a barrier to other forms of capital.

In commenting on these human competences Jones (ibid. p. 20) observed that the cultural norms of a community relating to bonding social capital – “can be supportive of beliefs and practices which policy makers would like to change”. Quite so. In the 1960’s and 70’s in Britain Afro-Caribbean communities were vilified by social commentators because their

culture was perceived as being too loose and lacking in strong social coherence. In the current epoch British Muslim communities are being scapegoated by Government and policy pundits because their cultural is too tight and inclusive. They, apparently, have the wrong sort of social capital (Alam and Husband 2006).

Never was Lorenz' (2006b) assertion of the critical intersection of the spheres of social policy, academic discourses and civil society more clearly and handsomely expressed than in this current contested politics of social cohesion. For European states the discourse of social cohesion (Spencer 2006) and its specific sub-texts, provides an unobtrusive tool of radical social management. Its primary fusion of social solidarity with economic competitiveness is given significant credibility by the reality of individualism underpinning personal strategies for success within the 'opportunity societies' of states in retreat from social citizenship. Academic discourse has enjoyed a transatlantic vogue agenda with social capital, and elements of European academic production have found a nurturant environment within the policy milieu of the European Union in civil society where majority ethnic elites have found in the lexicon of the 'New Conventional Wisdom' a 'legitimate' means to express xenophobic sentiments; for some it is closer to discursive de-racialization (Reeves 1983). For some minority ethnic communities this focus on 'their cultural aberration' has produced a reactive defensive reassertion of identity and an organizational mobilisation.

The fusion of social cohesion with the urgent priorities of economic competitiveness has a further complementary logic in legitimating, indeed making necessary, robust and intrusive expressions of 'responsive governance'. Girded with the imprimatur of national economic self-interest the management of culture and the regulation of the exercise of the discursive freedoms guaranteed by a liberal civil society becomes a key element of 'responsible' central government. Fuelled further by the demonology of the 'War of Terror' minority ethnic cultural values, and their play in the public sphere, become a focus of over-determined political anxieties. The assimilationist drift of European multicultural policy has become inextricably interwoven with the social policy agendas expressed through the concern with social cohesion.

Multiculturalism Under Attack:

Countries like Denmark and the Netherlands with a post-war progressive record on migration and multicultural policy have seen a radical reversal of liberal multicultural policies. Britain, which had developed a de facto variant on cultural pluralism, underpinned by a significant framework of legal and institutional support, has moved explicitly toward an assimilationist redefinition of citizenship. Across Europe far-right political movements are enjoying success within the parliamentary process and neo-nationalist sentiments have found a new centrality in the rhetoric of mainstream parties. The moral and political commitment to multiculturalism expressed in Council of Europe documents or UNESCO initiatives have been eroded in many instances to become aspirational rhetoric within national political milieu; where the assertion that 'multiculturalism has failed' is given explicit support by established political parties, and tacit support through the ambivalent resistance of many would be liberal commentators.

In promoting this assimilationist neo-nationalism and the accompanying loss of faith in viable multiculturalism, counter-narratives to multiculturalism have been ubiquitous and effective. These counter-narratives have played across the boundaries between the domain of government social policy and the fragmented public spheres of civil society. Academic discourse has both critically tracked this process and produced elite contributions to it.

While the discourses of social cohesion may be predominantly active within social policy and managerial milieu the counter-narratives to multiculturalism have a capacity to be articulated within the personal and professional discourse of politicians, governmental staff, professional social workers and the general public. Their strength lies in their apparent reasonableness. Drawing upon a more detailed analysis (Husband, forthcoming) the counter-narratives can be seen as being constructed through specific *discursive scripts*, that are given focus and relevance through attachment to specific *issues*, that then find credibility and dynamism through being grounded in a specific *locality*; and all of the above are framed by values and sentiments lodged within the *national social imaginary*.

Prior academic research has done much to reveal the nature of key discursive scripts. Thus, for example, Blommart and Verschueren (1998) have described the power of '*the limits of tolerance*'. This script has at its heart a concerned assertion that: if we are to maintain our collective tradition for tolerance these 'unreasonable' initiatives must be stopped. It simultaneously allows the speaker to rehearse their own virtues whilst limiting the rights of perceived alien others. Similarly, in Wodak and Matouschek's (1993) account of the '*victimization of the majority*' it is the majority ethnic speaker who claims that it is they who are being victimized. It is a powerful assertion that everyone seems to have rights, but the majority ethnic community. It is a claim to a notion of fairness that is inscribed in a nationalist framing of social citizenship; and consequently is consistent with current populist sentiments. The most ubiquitous discursive script is the spontaneous cry of 'political correctness'. The accusation that a policy, practice or utterance is politically correct invokes an assumed demotic outrage at the imposition of practices and values by distant bureaucrats, deluded academics or EU functionaries in opposition to the taken-for-granted certitudes of the speaker's ingroup. These discursive scripts have powerful normative credibility.

The fact that they are not free floating, but typically grounded in specific issues, gives these rhetorical ploys apparent evidential solidity. Recent resistance toward increasing ethnic diversity and specifically, to multicultural policies, has found focus around education, housing provision, developing ethnically sensitive and appropriate health and social welfare services, and around expressions of non-Christian faith: including the building of mosques and the call to prayer. Typically, these foci have been defined by being situated in specific locales where the voice, and experience, of specific majority ethnic communities have energised debates in local and national media. Typically, but not exclusively, established working class communities experiencing the simultaneous impact of inward migration, economic dislocation through radical transformations in the labour market, and government neglect have been central to the construction of a majority ethnic backlash (Hewitt 2005). But, in post-modern Europe the middle class have experienced the uncertainties and anguish of protecting their continued relative affluence in the risk society (Beck 1992) of contemporary Europe. The personal perplexity and resentment at changes experienced, and anticipated, by those living in these locales finds meaningful expression in the discursive scripts of the counter-narratives to multiculturalism. It is a response that is actively promoted by the political propagandizing of their national far-right parties; and is not countered by the pragmatic flirtation with racism and the assimilationist politics of the mainstream.

In the value claims of politicians, and in the partisan discourse of the counter-narratives, the deep cultural eddies of national social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) provide a bed rock of emotively relevant imagery and belief. The foundation myths of national identity, the familiarity with specific forms of democratic practice, the claims to a specific cultural heritage and the ad hoc residue of elite and popular forms of embodied consciousness

(Giddens 1979, 1984) exist within modern social imaginaries. They reside there as a latent resource, rather than as a coherent ideology, which can be seductively tapped in an unreflective partisan way. They provide a diffuse but unifying core fed throughout national counter-narratives to multiculturalism.

The values, intellectual auto-critique and inclusive humanity that fuelled the anti-racist social work and transcultural competencies of 1980's and early 1990's practice are currently subverted by the ubiquity of these counter-narratives. The taken-for-granted reasonableness, and cultural resonance, of the counter narratives effectively construct assertive anti-discriminatory social work practice as 'political': that is, as something imposed by professional ideologues and rogue elements of state social policy, and counter to the evident interests of the majority ethnic population. That the state machinery has itself moved to an assimilationist policy agenda and segments within it are pursuing a perverse conception of social cohesion, serves to further isolate anti-discriminatory practice as the 'politically correct' fetish of a minority of zealots within social work.

The political loss of belief in the pursuit of multicultural social policy briefly sketched above presents a major dilemma for contemporary European social work precisely because Europe is multi-ethnic. Regardless of the reticence of states such as Germany or Estonia to grant citizenship to established resident minorities, regardless of the falsity of persisting in referring to settled minority ethnic citizens and denizens as 'immigrants', and particularly regardless of the racist and xenophobic wishful rhetoric of the far-right and their 'concerned' liberal penumbra, European states *are* multi-ethnic. Nor does this diversity reside in the construction of relatively autonomous homogeneous ethnic blocs. Lorenz (2006b), along with others, acknowledges the relevance to any understanding of defining a social work clientele provided by post-modern analyses of identity. The simplicities of identity politics implicit in concepts such as 'the women's movement' or 'black struggle' are now radically transformed by contemporary hybridity. Not only was feminism radically changed by the challenge of ethnic difference (Hooks 1981, 1991; Mohanty et al 1991), so too initial attempts at responding to ethnic difference have been problematised by charges of ethnic essentialism.

The challenge of relating effectively to transcultural practice has been rendered much more complex by the analytic language of 'hybrid' contemporary identities (Hall and du Gay 1996; Rattansi and Westwood 1994). The language of the multiple and de-centred self asks painful questions of the social work professional who may have been professionalized into a modernist usage of the language of client and individual need which invokes, and infers, some notion of a stable and 'knowable' client individual. The politicised charge of 'ethnic essentialism' now lurks as a nascent threat around any casework discussion.

The logic of post-modern hybridity is not of a cumulative building block route to understanding of multiple identities, but is rather a syncretic, creative fusion of biographical, cultural, existential elements into a personally unique synthesis. Of course, as Gilroy (1993) among others has been concerned to explore, and delineate, there are shared historical trajectories and shared contemporary experiences of mobility and exclusion. There *are* social cultural movements and processes of collective identity formation. These feed into *both* the elaboration of unique personal syncretic complex identities, and the politics of identity through forms of self-conscious collective mobilisation. Something of these dynamics have been expressed through Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of difference and Gilroy's (1993) depiction of the 'changing same'.

Social Work Under Pressure:

Just as the construction of contemporary identities has become increasingly complex and consequently makes novel, and changing, demands on the social worker in 'comprehending' the distinctive subject who is their 'client', so too the context in which the social worker and client undertake their professional encounter is itself in a state of flux. We may briefly note two aspects of this socio-cultural flux.

Just as post modern analyses insist that social work professionals recognise the distinct complexity of contemporary ethnic identities; minority *and* majority, so too both client and social worker are encapsulated in a Western democratic milieu of late capitalism in which it is claimed there are distinct changes in the environmental context in which *any* identity may experience difficulties in constituting a viable and stable identity. This is the social uncertainty described by Beck (1992) as the '*risk society*'; it is the fraying social bonds of civility and mutuality endlessly explored by Baumann (op. cit.) in his interrogation of the dislocation of individuals from community. It is the near nihilist inward oriented narcissism of 'the new individualism' sketched by Elliot and Lemert (2006). If we are to cumulatively take these arguments as relevant to an understanding of the contemporary challenges faced by social workers, not social work systems, but most directly by social workers in constructing their personal and professional lives and in engaging with their clients: then we may reasonably cry with the poet '*the times are out of joint*'. The post-modern hybrid, de-centred identities, sketched above, are both constructed within this socio-cultural environment, and have to operate within it.

This has implications for the individual social worker's negotiation of the personal and professional identities within their 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991; Burkitt et al 2001). The imagined inclusive dynamics of a shared professional identity sit uncomfortably with the individualised anxieties of personal fulfilment and career development of the individual social worker.

Additionally, we can amplify and potentially multiply, the disjunction between the aspirations of the 'social work profession' and the fraught realities of the individual social worker if we briefly address the second cultural-ideological shift of contemporary life. This is the erosion of authenticity and ownership of the labour of workers in contemporary Western professional institutions. This is the world powerfully sketched in its earlier manifestations of Sennett's (1999) *The Corrosion of Character* and more recently elaborated in his (2003) *The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality*. It is the advanced bureaucratization of professional life. The fragmentation of the process of service delivery whether it is in university education, health care or social work. The 'committed professional' increasingly is answerable to arbitrary 'performance indicators', to accountability to line management rather than colleagues, and to make a package of service delivery rather than engage in a sustained and holistic way with an individual client (Lorenz 2006b, pp. 128-129; 137-140; Chapter 9). The aspirations of the imagined inclusiveness of the European welfare state have come into contact somewhat brutally with both the escalating costs of funding promised services; and the managerial backlash of budget management and reigning-in of individual professional commitment. The emotional, intellectual and political virtue of individual professional identities sits uncomfortably with contemporary managerial ideologies and their correlates in the regulatory discipline of professional routines. (See Burkitt et al 2001 for a telling case study in relation to nursing).

In this challenging context clarity of purpose and an unambiguous political framework are essential. Lorenz (2006) is persuasive in arguing for the continued humanistic ethos of the social work professions. At the core of his vision of a viable transcultural practice is a strong assertion of the centrality of an open, inquisitive process of communication. In his words:

“A communicative approach means not taking identities as fixed, essentialist qualities, but as negotiated, emergent sets of social relationships which need to be embedded in political frameworks of rights and obligations.” (Lorenz, 2006b: p. 121)

However, he is also explicitly not suggesting a completely culturally relative, non-judgemental, position of openness to all values and all modes of behaviour (ibid, pp. 130-131). (Throughout his text Lorenz (2006b) remains critical of unrestrained post-modern relativity – in his terms nihilist post-modernism.) Consequently, just what ‘political framework of rights and obligations’ frames practice becomes critical to the conceptualisation and delivery of social work.

The analysis above suggests that contemporary political values and social policy frameworks are hardly conducive to the transcultural communicative style envisaged in his analysis. The tensions between universalism and communalism that he traces as routinely present in social work professions currently is reverting to conceiving universal values as defined in nationalist terms and communalism is increasingly conflated with the exclusive ‘nation’. In this context social work must explicitly recognise its politically compromised position and discover its own political integrity.

In his review of the contemporary challenges facing social work practice (ibid, Chapter 8) Lorenz (2006b) seems fearful that recognition of ethnic difference in the prevailing climate stands in perpetual danger of being reduced to identity essentialisms and cultural sectarianism (ibid, pp. 157-8). This, I would assert, can be confounded by a clear and robust assertion of a multicultural vision based upon a fundamental recognition that hybrid difference does exist, is routinely negotiated in the national life space and is, indeed, the elephant in the room: neo-nationalist neurotic melancholia (Gilroy 2005) denies the evident and real norm of hybrid citizenship.

In this context, asserting a politics of difference based upon Lorenz’ (2006b) communicative discourse around *equality* provides a viable starting point. Equality as a universal liberal value must be negotiated against the particularistic, communitarian, concerns of specific interest groups. This is not a challenge specific to social work (see, for example, Giorgiou 2005). Given the reality of contemporary disembodied hybrid identities, for majority and minority ethnic communities alike; and, given the reality of ethnic mobilisation within civil society in contemporary European states where third generation citizens and denizens have rejected their ‘immigrant’ status, assuming that *equal treatment* can mean *the same treatment* is professionally scandalous. Lorenz’ transcultural communicative model provides a professional disposition to explore the expression of universalist rights and principles through particularistic practice. The systematic critique of institutional discrimination that is at the heart of anti-racist social work practice provides a robust challenge to the naïve idealism of the Habermasian public sphere that frames the origins of the communicative model of practice. The articulation of these two approaches in practice provides the basis for a self-consciously politicised anti-discriminatory social work.

Feminism taught that ‘the personal is political’: its reverse is equally true, and relevant: ‘the political is personal’. Within the current politics of multiculturalism in Europe individual social workers cannot wrap themselves in the mantle of state nurtured professionalism. The pursuit of the particularistic expression of universal rights requires, in Lorenz’ terms, being committed to a communicative process that is reflexive, permeated with ambiguities, and is in a real sense political. Such a practice could be framed by the guiding principle:

“If you want to treat me equally you may have to be prepared to treat me differently.”
(Downing and Husband 2005: p. 214)

This is not mere wishful poetics; it is, for example, already framing the practice of the substantive equality policy of the state of Western Australia. It is a social policy perspective that challenges the complacencies of established professional routines and opens up the space for negotiating the translation of universalist principles into particularistic service delivery. It is a mode of practice consistent with this statement from Lorenz (2006b, p. 177) closing paragraph:

“... social work practice becomes explicitly social policy practice as in every single moment of intervention the right of the participants to belong and the form in which that belonging can be realised are at stake.”

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Notes on Author

Charles Husband, Ph.D., is Professor of Social Analysis at the University of Bradford, UK and Docent at the University of Helsinki/Fi.

He has a long history of relating academic analysis of ethnic diversity and racisms to social policy issues: and has worked in relation to education, social work, health care and the mass media. In 2004/5 he took a lead role with the Office of Multicultural Issues and the Equal Opportunity Commission of the Government of Western Australia in planning and developing the Racism and Substantive Equality Programme; which resulted in the formation of a Substantive Equality Unit within the Equal Opportunity Commission to oversee the development and implementation of this policy. He is currently a Scientific Advisor to the UNESCO initiative - the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism.

Author's Address:

Prof Charles Husband
University of Bradford
Department of Social Sciences & Humanities
Richmond Building
Bradford
UK-West Yorkshire, BD7 1DP
England
Tel: ++44 1274 232323
Email: C.H.Husband@bradford.ac.uk

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