



## **Social Work, Mobility and Membership**

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Social work is more involved in the collective life of its clientele than are other human service activities, because it is directly concerned with the bonds and conflicts between individuals, and the co-operative and competitive aspects of groups and communities. Hence it relies on being sited in organisations relevant to service users' lives, and on being able to influence these collectivities. This article argues that the 'organisational landscape' is being transformed, as commercial enterprises (more mobile and adaptable than either state or non-government organisations) take over important aspects of collective provision. The implications of this transformation for practice are analysed, by reference to examples from the United Kingdom in particular.

The practice of social work might be represented as a form of mediation between the aspirations and needs of individuals, and the normative requirements of collectivities (families, groups, communities and societies). In this sense, it seeks to reconcile the value put on subjectivity, uniqueness and the (sometimes deviant) imagination, and the moral and political demands for restraint, co-operation and mutual support among members of social units. Hence social work occupies an ambiguous role in society, negotiating with individuals in ways that attempt to validate their claims to autonomy, but from a position inside such social institutions as public agencies, civil society organisations, charities, churches or local associations, and one which involves a duty to criticise and challenge those very institutions, from the perspectives of freedom, equality and justice.

In this article, I shall argue that the collective life of societies is currently experiencing a fundamental shift, and that this has important implications for the practice of social work. The process known as 'globalisation' entails a transformation of social institutions, with a growing importance and strength of economic organisations, such as corporations, banks, financial intermediaries, insurance companies and pension funds (Jordan and Düvell 2003, ch.4), which are international in their reach, and a corresponding decline in the power and influence of nation states (except for the global hegemon, the USA, which has largely driven this transformation). Through international agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation, the programme for the new World Order promotes forms of collective life based on competition in global markets, at the expense of forms based on political authority, on informal self-organisation, or on communal sharing. This is changing the ways individuals live, their identities, their affiliations to others, and their strategies for improving their situations.

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The model of collective life adopted in my analysis focuses on organisations and their affiliates. From this perspective, the nation state is simply one kind of organisation, the commercial enterprise another, the voluntary enterprise a third, and the family a fourth (Ahrne 1990, 95-107). The current transformation of the 'social landscape' stems from the increased capacity of commercial enterprise to meet collective needs, and the reduced capacity of nation states to organise and control societies. This has led to reforms of public sector services, to changing roles for non-government agencies, and to new strategies by individuals and families – features that are evident, in slightly different guise, in all countries.

One major shift is that the new social institutions promote mobility between organisations, between communities, and often between countries. Membership of such associations therefore becomes more instrumental; it is for the sake of specific economic advantages, rather than because of shared values or cultural commitments. Social work itself is influenced by this change, and social workers are among a growing body of professionals who migrate between states, in search of more advantageous employment.

Let me provide a concrete example of the phenomena I am sketching. Because it comes from the United Kingdom, the European country where all these trends have been embraced and reinforced rather than resisted, it may seem somewhat extreme, but it is not unrepresentative of this country. The report of the enquiry into the death of a child from the Ivory Coast, Victoria Climbié, has been the most significant event to steer the reform and 'modernisation' of child protection services in particular, and personal social services more generally, in the past 10 years (Laming 2003). Victoria died at the hands of her great-aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao, and her partner (both of whom are now in prison) despite repeated contacts with teachers, churches, health professionals, police and social workers, during her rather brief time in the UK, and the frequent evidence of physical abuse she displayed. The report made a large number of recommendations for improved co-ordination between these agencies, including the radical reorganisation of child protection services.

What the report did not mention was how Victoria entered the country, except that she did so under another identity, as a child called 'Anna'. It is difficult to understand how this was possible, unless her parents purchased false papers for her in this name in the Ivory Coast, before entrusting her to Mrs Kouao (a French citizen), who in turn took her to the UK via France. Such transactions are, of course, common in many West African countries, where parents regard an education in a European country as advantageous for their children, and hence foster them with relatives or strangers to this end.

In British law, the concept of 'parental responsibility' is fundamental to issues of child care and child protection. Social workers are required to carry out their duties, as far as possible, in ways that optimise the role of responsible parents, and that treat them as partners (Parton 1997). But here again the report was silent about who was to be regarded as holding parental responsibility – the actual parents, absent in the Ivory Coast, or the great-aunt and her partner, abusing Victoria in London. Paradoxically, the duty to act as a responsible parent, seen by the Blair government as one of the obligations of citizenship (Blair 1998; Department of Social Security 1998, 80), could not easily be attached to either of these couples, since neither birth parents nor 'guardian' were citizens, and Victoria herself was in the country (as far as can be understood) without proper status. Mobility of this kind sits uneasily with any sense of responsibility arising from membership of a political community, or any duty of citizenship as the basis for social obligation.

Furthermore, it was not only Victoria's family who illustrated the issues around mobility and membership that now affect social work. All the staff of the assessment team in Brent, one of the local authorities that dealt with Victoria's case, were 'agency workers' – professionals recruited on temporary contracts, because permanent posts could not be filled. All the local authorities with whom she had contact were in various degrees of recruitment crisis, a fact which explains the high numbers of staff from overseas countries currently serving in front line positions in child protection and other high-profile teams in the UK. At the time of writing, this phenomenon, prevalent in London for several years, is now spreading to other, relatively stable and monoethnic parts of the country. Plymouth, a city in the extreme south-west of England, is currently recruiting social workers from Zimbabwe.

This article will look at the wider implications of these phenomena. If the whole collective life of societies is being transformed in this way, what kind of social institutions does social work represent? Into which forms of membership group does it attempt to integrate its service users? Which kinds of exclusion is it combating, and what sorts of inclusion does it promote? How is mediation between individual and collective possible, if life consists of movement between one collective and another, for the sake of the economic advantages they bestow? If membership is based in instrumental criteria of this kind, in what sense are its requirements moral or even political, and how exactly are they obligatory?

## **1 Previous Transformations of Social Work**

This is certainly not the first time that social work has been required to transform itself, in line with reorderings of the social and political world. In the past century, there were major changes in its organisation and methods worldwide, both in the first and in the second halves of that period. However, we should distinguish between two kinds of transformation of the profession and its activity.

The first might be described as a technical transformation, involving changes in models and methods of practice. This feature was characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century, when its activities were first informed by psychodynamic (Hollis 1960), behaviourist, social pedagogic (Nohl 1926), groupwork and community work (Attlee 1920; Batten 1957) methodologies. Whole new techniques, which addressed personal problems and psychosocial development, group interactions and the functioning of communities, were introduced, took root, and informed both theory and training in Europe and the USA. In many respects, these still provide the technical and methodological 'toolkit' of practice; during the second half of the century, they were extended to new fields, but little radical innovation in methods, or broadening of the range of technical options available to practitioners, occurred.

However, the second type of transformation, in the relationship between practice and its organisational and political context, was an element in both the first- and second-half changes. Both could be seen as involving the profession's role within the state. In the first phase, social work moved from an aspect of charitable care for selected poor people (Bosanquet 1914; Richmond 1917) to an organised method of service delivery, whether within non-government agencies or publicly provided systems. This transformation was accompanied by bitter ideological battles about the proper function of the profession in relation to state power, most tragically illustrated by the activities of non-government organisations in Germany in the Nazi era (Lorenz 1994, ch.3). In the UK and USA, where the liberal tradition was strongest, social work remained largely outside the ambit of the state, either (as in the voluntary and church organisations) as a mainly conservative force, or (as

among more radical community workers and local associations) as part of the oppositional and critical tendency in society.

With the development of welfare states in postwar Europe, a second phase of transformation signalled a change in the role of social work, as public services of all kinds expanded. In the UK and the Scandinavian countries, the profession became strongly associated with state-provided care (domiciliary or residential) for children and adults, for people with disabilities and older people. Public sector social work came to be the defining identity and dominant activity for the profession. In the rest of continental Western Europe, in the USA and Australia, most social workers were still employed by non-government organisations, but often with most of their funding from central or local government, and supplying services under law and regulations of the state (Lorenz 1994, ch.1). There were also smaller but significant public agencies, notably in child protection, criminal justice and mental health. Social work was also established as an activity of state and civil society agencies all over the developing world, though not in those countries owing allegiance to the state socialist tradition of the USSR, where individuals were required to conform to the rationale of historical materialism in their social lives.

This summary is obviously a fairly crude set of generalisations, and each part of it is open to dispute. In particular, some would argue that professional developments in relation to practice with women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities (Dominelli 1988; 1989; Oliver and Barnes 1998) represented important methodological and theoretical innovations, and hence ushered in transformations as significant as the ones I have sketched. I would maintain that these reflected the application of existing techniques and approaches to groups whose individual autonomy and membership status had been previously neglected, at a time when these features of social citizenship, entitlement and empowerment were beginning to be addressed by all public services and civil society organisations. Social work certainly changed in line with the recognition of its previous neglect of such issues, but neither in technique nor in organisation and function was this shift as transformative as the ones I have identified.

Whether or not the above shift should be represented as a third transformation, it is clear that both it and the second (welfare state) transformation were centrally concerned with issues of power. In the second half of the century, professional social workers were (directly or indirectly) given statutory authority to coerce individuals, or to recommend such orders to courts, to bring about therapeutic outcomes, or to prevent harm to themselves or others. These powers were justified by reference to the public good, and reflected the collective authority of a welfare state, which imposed compulsory forms of co-operation on all citizens. Social work both provided extra services for those with special needs, and control and supervision for those at odds with public authority, or with fellow citizens. Hence the primary membership systems, to which the powers and duties of practitioners were orientated, were central and local governments, which provided the frameworks of law and regulation, the infrastructures of facilities, and the entitlements to benefits and services, in which people lived their lives. Even if social workers were employed by non-government organisations, or by associations critical of state policies, their orientation was primarily to these membership systems.

What I am claiming in this article is that the present transformation reflects a fundamental shift in the collective life of societies, in which individuals come to look to economic organisations of many kinds for the goods of membership, and to geographical mobility as the means of improving the social infrastructures of their lives. This does not mean that political authority becomes irrelevant to them. They may still need public services, and states still hold

formidable coercive powers, many of which are exercised through social workers, or through other officials using similar techniques (Jordan with Jordan 2000, chs. 1 and 3). However, the significance of states and local authorities as membership systems is diminishing as that of market-orientated systems is growing. Hence service users and social workers alike are perceiving membership and its goods as matters of choice, and such choice as diametrically opposite to state power, perceived in largely negative, enforcement-orientated terms.

## **2 The Relevance of the Collective Life of Society**

Why is the collective life of society so relevant for social work practice? The answer to this lies in what distinguishes social work from other human service professions. It is not its technical methods, or its theoretical insights or exclusive knowledge, that defines social work as an activity. Rather, it is its focus on individuals' relationships with others, their ties and interdependencies, and the social nature of human beings (and hence of human flourishing). Social work addresses the collective life of society, because it practises in ways that recognise the inescapably social element in both the welfare and the problems of the people who need its services.

Other human services focus on aspects of human development – improving competence, knowledge and skills through education and training, curing or alleviating disease, or improving psychological functioning – which are more specific, and which add to human capital, or enhance capabilities (Sen 1999). But social work gives priority to the bonds and conflicts between people, and to how moral ties and dilemmas, and the co-operative and competitive aspects of groups and communities, both constrain and enable individuals. It is anchored in collective life, and addresses service users as interdependent and interactive within social units.

Thus the transformation of collective structures and institutions of societies presents challenges for social work which are in some ways more fundamental than those for education, health or psychological services. Social work practitioners must both be credibly grounded in organisations that are significant for service users, and focus on aspects of their lives that promote or hinder their wellbeing. If the structures in which practitioners are embedded (public services, civil society organisations) are becoming less significant features in a global and commercialised order, then social work will tend to be marginalised and peripheral. Alternatively, if it is too closely identified with government agencies, acting on behalf of state institutions which have lost their power to deliver positive welfare outcomes, and focusing instead on surveillance, control and enforcement, it will be compromised by association with an oppressive authority, and lose its impartiality and critical edge.

I have argued that systems of membership in transforming society are becoming more commercially-orientated, more transient and more instrumental, as choice and mobility rather than participation and collective political action become central to individual life-strategies. Of course, many would argue that this ignores the persistent success of the family as a social institution. Since families have always been the main social units upon which social work interventions focused, it might be suggested that my claims of a transformative moment are exaggerated. The weakening of welfare states may put more strain on families, and require more of them as systems of membership (by way of responsibility, restraint and support), but families are strong enough to sustain these burdens, as they have in centuries past.

On the one hand, this ignores evidence that families themselves are being transformed, in line with the changes in collective life. Households are growing smaller, fewer children are being

born (especially in countries with previously high fertility rates, like Italy and Spain), and there are more single-person and single-parent households (Esping-Andersen 1996). These new lifestyles are explicitly being adopted by choice, and for the sake of greater access to employment and to markets by all members (women and children as well as men). Mobility is also increasing, especially in societies which have taken the new social trends furthest. Much of this mobility is within cities and regions, as households group together in homogeneous districts, with populations of similar incomes and tastes, leaving the poorest and least mobile in deprived concentrations, with many social problems (Jordan 1996, chs. 4 and 5).

Other individuals and households are becoming transnational in their mobility; Victoria Climbié and her great-aunt were an example. As economic opportunities in developing countries decline (either in the short or the long term) they move, not so much as migrants, more as nomads (Jordan and Düvell 2003, ch.3). They shift from country to country, in search of the most advantageous collective goods (such as education), employment opportunities or entrepreneurial niches. This phenomenon is particularly obvious among younger people, travelling as individuals or couples, from the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Jordan and Düvell 2002, chs 4 and 5). Research shows that they select the West European states to which to move in ways that match their particular aptitudes – for earning in the shadow economy (UK), for building supportive networks (Germany), or for providing care to rich elderly people (Italy and Greece) (Jordan, Stråth and Triandafyllidou 2003). Much the same processes of selection are evident among high-skilled nomads, recruited from Central Europe under work-permit schemes, and in Indian nurses, moving to improve their earnings (Jordan and Düvell 2003, ch.4).

I am arguing here that collective life is changing because people are developing a more instrumental approach to membership and belonging, in line with the shift towards more market-orientated systems for supplying collective goods. One way of capturing this change is in terms of the distinction, first put forward by Hirschman (1970), between ‘exit, voice and loyalty’. Within the social institutions of welfare states, members (citizens) were supposed to be represented by politicians, business leaders and trade unionists, and to rely on collective actions of various kinds (including participatory protests, marches or petitions), to improve their situation. All these systems were examples of ‘voice’ (the expression of needs and interests, either directly, by voting, or through corporate organisations), but within institutions of collective solidarity (‘loyalty’). These systems balanced the way that labour and product markets worked, through competition and exchange. In the commercial sphere, individuals and households made choices by shifting from one product, brand name, firm, fund, or plan to another – an ‘exit’ option. Hirschman argued that states, organisations and firms should all try to sustain this balance between exit, voice and loyalty opportunities for their members (Hirschman 1970, 69-71).

However, with globalisation, the international reach of large banks and industrial companies, the creation of world markets, and the erosion of welfare states, it is exit options that have proliferated, while the rewards for political participation, collective action and solidarity have diminished. People respond to these changes in the relative potential gains from different kinds of activities by developing new strategies. Mobility (‘voting with the feet’) which seeks the best bundle of amenities for the highest price, in terms of local taxes and accommodation costs, that a household can afford, is often an advantageous option (Tiebout 1956). But engagement in trade union activity, local politics, community activism and service-user groups have become largely defensive strategies, struggling to maintain standards and entitlements, rather than striving to improve them.

This has very important implications for social work practice. On the one hand, it is increasingly less clear into what kinds of collective membership systems practitioners are trying to help individuals integrate. Victoria Climbié is an obvious instance of this. Who was she (her papers called her 'Anna')? Who were her family (her great-aunt, or her parents, still abroad)? Where did she live (the household moved from one local authority to another)? What kinds of belonging were relevant to her wellbeing (Mrs Kouao took her to a church to be exorcised, as possessed by evil spirits)? Which communities and services could best help and protect her (she was known to all public agencies with duties towards children, but Mrs Kouao engaged constructively with none of them)?

On the other hand, disadvantaged people, who lack the resources to 'vote with their feet', by moving in search of better pay and better collective amenities, have developed another kind of exit strategy. They recognise that the gains from keeping the rules (remaining passive, claiming ever-reducing benefits, relying on ever-deteriorating services) are declining, so they engage in various kinds of 'informal activity', either individually or jointly, to try to improve their situation. The equivalents of entrepreneurship in such communities are drug dealing, criminal violence, theft and racketeering. For the less predatory, other options are prostitution and begging. In this way, the collective life of poor districts becomes organised around these activities, in which residents either invest their energies, or struggle to resist damage to their wellbeing (Jordan et al. 1992; Jordan 1996, chs. 4 and 5).

Under these circumstances, social work practice becomes focused on attempts to minimise harm to vulnerable individuals, and to control predatory ones. The collective culture of the community, built around resistance to the oppression of rules imposed by advantaged mainstream group, and opportunistic gain from informal activities, becomes a source of risk, harm and loss for many, and illegal advantage to others. In terms of fashionable ideas of 'social capital' (Putnam 2000), practitioners struggle to build networks of trust and co-operation among the members of such communities, and to divert the energies of predators into more constructive channels. From the standpoint of the mainstream, social work is seen as a controlling force, required to protect the most vulnerable, and punish the most predatory (Jordan with Jordan 2000, ch.7).

### **3 The Organisation of Social Work**

The transformation of collective life has therefore influenced the tasks of social work, and made it much more difficult to practice effectively. The textbooks on values, aims and methods still talk about 'anti-oppressive approaches', about 'integration', 'cohesion' and 'inclusion' (Thompson 1998). But it is not at all clear how social work techniques and strategies can counteract the long-term effects on disadvantaged districts of the changes identified in the previous section, or can best address the tasks of integrating and including those whose nomadism has caused fragmentation, confusion, isolation or conflict (such as Victoria Climbié and Mrs Kouao). Neither the exclusion of whole communities from new forms of cosmopolitan economic membership, occupied by skilled and resourceful households, voting with their feet to enter well-appointed 'communities of choice', nor the failure of others who move in search of these forms of membership, but do not establish adequate supportive bonds, are easily addressed by existing methods.

Furthermore, the organisation of social work is coming both to reflect this transformation, and to reinforce its consequences. Here again, its situation is much the same as that of other human service professions, but the consequences for social work are more profound. The logic which informs the 'modernisation' of these services, especially in the US and UK, but

increasingly also in Continental Europe, is that citizens should be able to make 'informed choices' about their subscriptions to the systems that supply these goods (Cullis and Jones 1994, 297-300). This implies that they should have rights and opportunities to switch between systems, according to the return they receive on their contributions (which will vary according to their needs). This logic is highly compatible with the strategies, based on commercial-style exit options rather than participation and democratic voice, which were discussed in the previous section.

The economic theory which informs this model – public choice theory of 'fiscal federalism' (Oates 1999) – involves the transformation of public and publicly-funded services, on two dimensions. On the one hand, new technologies of various kinds allow goods which were previously difficult to divide up and allocate to individuals (and hence were most efficiently supplied by governments) to be provided instead to members of exclusive 'clubs' (Casella and Frey 1992; Cornes and Sandler 1986, ch.11). The latter is the technical term for those who, by subscribing to membership schemes or networks (as in mobile telephones or satellite links) are able to obtain certain services at a special price, and from which non-subscribers are excluded. Various kinds of electronic and other technology make it far easier nowadays to set up such 'clubs', and hence make commercial or quasi-commercial organisations (public-private initiatives) economically viable, where previously only inclusive state provision was feasible (Jordan and Düvell 2003, ch.2). Hence 'modernisation' (especially in the UK) often entails allowing commercial companies to finance or manage previously public services, or to provide them under contract to the government. 'Clubs' of this kind are often transnational, so (for example) patients from one country are treated in hospitals in another.

The second aspect is that local authorities compete with each other to attract taxpaying residents, by providing a bundle of collective amenities and services that are attractive to households in various income brackets. This implies that mobile and well-informed households move between such jurisdictions, maximising their gains in terms of welfare returns on local taxes and accommodation costs (Tiebout 1956). In the UK, the government has insisted on the publication of increasingly sophisticated league tables of 'value for money' and service outcomes, by education authorities, schools, hospitals and health care trusts (Davies 1992). This encourages 'voting with the feet' by resourceful citizens (and nomads), but it also enables those with adequate incomes and few needs to segregate themselves from those with low incomes and many needs, thus consolidating disadvantages and concentrating deprivation (Cullis and Jones 1994, 300-302). Where – by expensive state intervention – higher standards are achieved in schools or hospitals serving poor areas, this is quickly changed, since better-off people move in, and queuing for places shifts the worse-off to the back of the line.

Taken together, these two aspects represent a formidable challenge to social work practice. The policies emerging in all First World states tend to consolidate the impact of global economic forces, by reforming and restructuring local and national government agencies, and the funding of non-government bodies, in line with fiscal federalist principles, and requiring local jurisdictions to compete with each other for the sake of 'efficiency' and 'choice'. But there is yet another aspect of this agenda, whose impact is only beginning to be felt, and which has even more radical implications.

Under the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), currently in the process of being negotiated and implemented, the public sectors of all states will gradually be opened up for competition between state agencies, hybrid partnerships and



private firms, including firms from outside the country. What has already happened in the European Union for water, gas and electricity supplies, with provision in the UK by French firms (for example), will extend to health, education and personal social services. Large specialist companies will seek to win contracts to take over these functions, either in partnership with existing providers, or in their own right.

The World Trade Organisation, under attack from anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist protests, and stung by criticism from human rights organisations and non-government bodies, has insisted that there will be many safeguards in this process (World Trade Organisation 2001, 2). Governments will be able to control the pace and sequencing of opening their public sectors to this competition and privatisation, and will be permitted to regulate standards. However, the fact remains that the destination envisaged by GATS is a global market in health, education and welfare services, albeit a regulated, and partly publicly funded one. Furthermore, when the process starts, countries will be faced with hard choices over whether to enter the field as 'predators' (backing international companies based in their territory to take over services in other states) or as 'prey' (trying to protect their public services, by delaying such takeovers). The USA and UK have already decided on the former option. In the UK, for instance, it is clear that 'modernisation' programmes, based on ideas of fiscal federalism, favour the entry of private firms into the provision of public services in this sector, for finance, management and delivery. This is seen as opening up a huge potential market worldwide, where experienced and resourceful UK companies will be able to make large profits, and help the balance of trade.

For social work and its service users, this has fairly radical implications. Already the field of social care in the UK, and especially its residential sector, has seen the entry of international companies, providing a range of facilities (including crematoria). Such firms bring a new commercial ethos to the task, often employing young and inexperienced staff, on part-time contracts, but locating their management structures in centralised offices far from these facilities. Furthermore, commercialisation has made the whole supply of services volatile, as it responds to price factors as well as to demand. At the time of writing, there is a serious shortage of beds in residential homes for elderly, disabled and chronically ill people in the UK, at the rates offered by local authorities. Hence both quality and quantity of facilities in social care have become destabilised in the 'mixed economy' of provision.

Finally, and mirroring the globalisation of social care services, the recruitment crisis in UK public services (both in child protection and adult care) has been addressed by recruitment of professional staff from all over the English-speaking world, and beyond. As with teachers nurses and doctors, social workers from other countries are sought to meet specific shortages, especially in large cities, where housing costs are high, and many indigenous professionals cannot afford to accommodate their families. In London especially, many highly sensitive social work services are staffed by such recruits who, whatever their professional skills, are necessarily unfamiliar with UK law, regulations and public service cultures. (Already, before the implementation of GATS, public-service professionals are the largest category of such recruits in the UK.) The local authorities dealing with Victoria Climbié and her guardians were typical of this trend.

Here again, the transformation of the organisation of social work raises questions about the relationship of practice to the collective life of society. In the era of welfare states (especially in the UK and the Scandinavian countries), public service staff gained a certain prestige and respect from the fact that their activities reflected the commitment of the society to its

members, and the personal attention that they could receive for their special needs, from a caring state. In Continental Europe, although most staff did not work for the government, some of the same ethos of representing the collective commitment of the community to the welfare of all rubbed off on them. Commercial care is different; it involves buying into a form of membership which supplies a product to a customer, under conditions where individual welfare depends on relationship with others (for example, in a care home), but where the costs associated with sharing are minimised. It is difficult to see how the ethos of social citizenship and the common good, which has underpinned most social work values and practices in the postwar era, can survive such a transformation.

#### **4 Conclusions**

During the era of welfare states, it came to be taken for granted that social work derived much of its legitimacy, its effectiveness and its relevance from its relationship to the state. This connection was, of course, ambiguous and ambivalent. Having power derived from statutory law gave social workers an authority that might be abused; having public resources to distribute might lead to discrimination and oppression. Some countries, notably in Continental Europe and North America, took these issues very seriously, and relied mainly on practitioners in non-government agencies, but with strong indirect links to the state. Much theoretical effort went into defining the relationship between practice and state power (Bailey and Brake 1975; Corrigan and Leonard 1978), and practitioners struggled with these dilemmas in their everyday work.

The transformations in collective life described in this article pose new problems and challenges for practitioners. If individuals and households rely more on exit and choice in their strategies for wellbeing, if organisations are transformed to accommodate new kinds of mobility, through new systems of cosmopolitan economic membership, practice too must change. Not only will it increasingly be based in commercial or hybrid organisations, and answerable to managers with an eye on the balance sheet; it will also be required to help people whose most meaningful interdependencies, whose identities and sense of belonging, and whose material investments, relate to these new systems. New forms of insecurity, both ontological and economic, are likely to haunt their lives, as they move around in search of survival or advantage. New kinds of relationship, with those who share costs rather than those who share citizenship entitlements, will provide the bonds and obligations of collective lives.

We should not romanticise the postwar welfare state, or exaggerate the benefits it gave to service users or professionals. It did indeed encourage a passive form of membership, based on security rather than participation, and often with sharp differentiations of status and welfare, while also promoting a paternalistic type of provision, with much insensitivity to individual needs and group identities. The present transformation gives an opportunity to shake off that legacy, and to find new ways of practising that are more appropriate for social work's own values and commitments, as well as for new forms of collective life.

One side of this relates to more isolated mobile social units, like the strange (and finally sinister) trio that constituted Victoria Climbié's household. It was not that they had no links with faith groups, voluntary bodies or public agencies, but rather that their strategies for dealing with them, combined with the enormous and destructive tensions in their relationships with each other, made them impervious to the influences of those organisations. In this sense, their membership was shallow and uncommitted, and their inclusion instrumental and fragile. Practitioners cannot now take for granted that service users 'belong' to any social system, in the sense assumed in the previous era. They are called upon to engage with them, in almost

instant, personal way, which forms an attachment that is valued. Bureaucratic procedures and anonymous processes are barriers to such engagement.

On the other hand, the ‘communities of fate’, inhabited by much less mobile households with strong communal bonds, rooted in informal activity, including crime, drug use, prostitution, gangsterism and many other forms of deviance, and often divided along ethnic lines, pose quite different challenges. There it is not the absence of social bonds, but the strength by which they tie individuals to sometimes destructive interdependencies, that has to be addressed. Such communities are powerful systems of membership, often demanding unconditional loyalty to harsh disciplines – as for instance in the rival nationalist and loyalist districts of East Belfast (Leonard 1994). Practitioners can neither ignore the cultural pull of such membership systems, nor neglect the harm that they can do to individuals.

In a way, it is these districts that emphasise the enduring relevance of community and membership for practice, and the inescapable requirement to ground social work in participation, solidarity and mutual aid (‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’ as well as ‘exit’). If much of social life is individualised, privatised and based in economic ‘clubs’, or exclusive local amenities, then the informal collective associations of poor and excluded people will become all the more important for them. Even if social workers come to be employed by new commercial agencies, they will still have to address the phenomena of communities bonded by blood or faith, soil and common suffering.

Finally, the transformation of collective life re-emphasises the dependence of social work practice on a wider context of policy and governance in society. If present tendencies towards the polarisation of incomes and life chances, both globally and within states, continue unchecked, then the issues identified in this article will become almost impossible for practitioners to solve. If collective life is reduced to movement between exclusive economic entities, then those whose identities disintegrate in this anomic system, and those relegated to residual ghettos of degradation, will defy the most skilled interventions. As always, social work needs to be part of a progressive movement for human rights, for inclusive egalitarian democratic systems of membership, which value and embrace all in the common good.

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