



Marginalized Youth, the 'Modern' Professional and the 'Modern' Workplace: A note on the Need for a Critical Approach to 'Modernizing' Strategies

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Abstract

This paper briefly examines plans to 'transform' social work services for socially marginalized children and young people in England. More specifically, it will focus on moves to privatize social work services for children and young people who are in public care, or 'looked after'. In what follows, the focus will be on how the promotion of 'social work practices' (SWPs) – the name of these envisaged new structures – is discursively embedded in the idea the idea that 'liberation' and worker fulfillment can only be delivered within a privatized sphere. In this context, it will be maintained, the work of Boltanski and Chiapello may help to illuminate how the government and other primary definers are seeking to 'win hearts and minds' for further neoliberal 'transformations' within Children's Services in England.

Introduction

Although neoliberalism – the 'N' word – is rarely mentioned, the 'transformation' of services for children in England, and elsewhere, is frequently embedded in dominant ideas about the direction, or shape, of modernity. Such ideas are also related to policy innovations which seek to produce practitioners who are 'modern' and able to respond to the demands of the 'modern world'. Tony Blair (Labour Leader 1994 – 2007 and Prime Minister 1997 – 2007), in one of his later speeches in March 2007, referred to the 'demands of the modern labour market'. Within this market, today's "employer's need employees who are creative, good at communicating, not cogs in the great machine but individual turners of the wheel" (Blair 2007). More generally, the 'modern world' [was for Blair] one of "flux and adjustment, a kind of permanent revolution in the way we work...It won't change. It will intensify" (Blair 2007).

This overarching narrative, as can be seen, is apt to contain references to what are perceived as the attributes and assets, shortcomings and deficits which individual members of the Children's Services workforce are likely to bring with them into the arena of 'reform' or 'modernisation'. For example, those objecting to changes to the nature of jobs and service provision are apt to be characterised as 'traditional' or 'conservative' (Taylor-Gooby 2000). Similarly, those troubled by the implementation of 'modern, active welfare', pursued by an 'empowering state' are likely to be caricatured as opposed to breaking the 'cycle of benefit dependency' (Hutton 2006; see also Purnell 2008). In short, those opposed to neoliberal 'reforms' are apt to be positioned as anachronistic and 'anti-modern': people, in short, seemingly *out of time*.

Related to this point, the discourse of 'modernization' presents difficulties for those seeking to oppose specific policies because:

“modernisation is rhetorical in that it functions to persuade and motivate. It is an ‘up’ word that makes things sound exciting, progressive and positive. But it is also ideological in that this rhetorical usage helps to generate an appearance of structured and unified thinking beyond which is either nonsense or (by implication) out-dated thinking” (Finlayson 2003: 67).

In this context, it is not, of course, only the providers of public services who at risk being labelled as ‘anti-modern’. The “cultural nature of the predicament of the poor is often cast as a failure to “modernise” because of limitations reproduced and reinforced by themselves or because of their disadvantaged position within global economic processes” (Haylett 2001: 45). Focal ideas about what it is to be ‘modern’ and implicit characterisations of ‘modern’ times, are not, however, apt to be interrogated in any detail in, for example, the (largely promotional) policy documents focused on the ‘reform’ or ‘modernization’ of public services (see also Fairclough 2000). Similarly, much of the literature associated with social work and related spheres of activity related to Children’s Services are apt to omit discussion on this still important theme.

In what follows, the aim, therefore, is to examine the English government’s plan to, what has variously been described as, ‘reform,’ ‘modernise’ or ‘remodel’ services for children in public care. More specifically the plan to establish Social Work Practices (SWPs): new organizational forms which herald the privatization of a major area of social work with children and families (Garrett, 2008a). The first part of the discussion, drawing on Le Grand (2007a) will be mostly descriptive. However, it will then be maintained that particular attention should be given to how the drive to install SWPs is being orchestrated. Here the discursive moves and tactics being deployed relate to what has been termed the contemporary ‘spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

Privatising Social Work and creating the ‘modern’, liberated worker: Social Work Practices (SWPs)

Approximately 60,000 children and young people are ‘looked after’ at any one time: approximately two-thirds are the subject of ‘care orders’ and the remainder are accommodated or ‘looked after’ on a voluntary basis (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006: 15). In terms of placement location, 68% are in foster care; 13% in residential care; approximately 9% are placed with their families and “the rest are placed for adoption or in a variety of more specialist placements” (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006: 16). There is “currently a mixed economy of provision” with “around 65% of children’s homes...run by the private sector, 32% by local authorities, and 6% by voluntary sector providers” (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006: 43). Furthermore, children’s stay in the care system tends to vary: for example, very “few children spend their whole childhood in care”; some 40 % “stay for under 6 months and 13% stay for 5 years or more” (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006: 16). Children in care are also ‘ethnically diverse’ with black and ‘mixed race’ children being ‘over-represented’ in the ‘looked after’ population. For example, over “half of children in care in London are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds” (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006: 50). Around “3,000 unaccompanied asylum seeking children are cared for by local authorities at any one time” (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006: 16).

During the final years of the Blair premiership, his government introduced the Children Act 2004 and launched the ‘Every Child Matters’ programme rhetorically concerned with the well-being of *all* children (DfES 2004; see also Garrett 2003). In October 2006, the

government again turned its attention specifically to children 'looked after' – in public care – with the publication of a consultation paper *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children* (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006). A further paper, laying out the government's plans – *Care Matters: Time for Change* – was published, just over ten years after New Labour was elected to government, in June 2007 (DfES 2007; see also DfES 2006).

However, the main document entirely focusing on the SWPs idea remains a working party report chaired by Julian Le Grand which became available in spring 2007 (Le Grand 2007a; see also Le Grand 2007b). Here it was argued that what "many looked after children do not seem to have under current arrangements is *a champion, someone with a parental degree of concern and affection, and with the power to get things done*" (Le Grand 2007a: 16, original emphasis). Turning its attention to the perspective of the social worker, the Le Grand working group claimed:

"In general, social workers who deal with looked after children come to work with a strong moral purpose, idealism, energy, enthusiasm and a commitment to rectifying injustice. However, once into the job, social workers often feel de-motivated, overwhelmed by bureaucracy and paperwork and deprived of autonomy. Research, both national and international, suggests that job dissatisfaction and burn-out, are the most common contributors to social workers in the field of child care leaving their jobs. In turn, these seem to arise from high levels of depersonalisation, role ambiguity, role conflict, stress, work overload, lack of autonomy and influence over funding sources, lack of support and professional supervision, bureaucratic control" (Le Grand 2007a: 17, emphasis added).

Furthermore, and more 'controversially', it:

"has been argued that social workers in Britain have become captured by an auditing regime involving accountability mechanisms that have increased managerial control at the expense of professional development. The accountability of social workers has become a rule-based managerialism, instead of knowledge-based professional accountability in which social workers were accountable to a professional body by delivering services based on evidence about best practice and to service users by providing good user outcomes. In short, it is claimed, in social work managerialism is increasingly dominating professionalism" (Le Grand 2007a: 17).

In brief, it "is not too much of an exaggeration to say that, *as a society*, we are training social work professionals and then offering them jobs, as one social worker put it to us, as social administrators" (Le Grand 2007a: 18-19, emphasis added). Moreover, it was implied, social workers were spending too much time "in front of a computer screen" (Le Grand 2007a: 20). Problems were also apparent from an organisational perspective because, at present, the local authority is the "monopolistic supplier of the social worker service to looked after children... [Yet it] is widely accepted that monopolies find it more difficult to sustain *the competitive edge* which is necessary for continually improving professional practice" (Le Grand 2007a: 20, emphasis added).

The working group report, having framed what it perceived as 'the problem' moved on to focus on what it viewed as some of the chief components structuring the 'debate' on SWP (Le Grand 2007a: Ch. 5). By way of preamble it was maintained that the group had not found 'much disagreement' with – one of the motifs at the core of the discourse on SWPs – the view that

“in many ways, *managerial decision-making has replaced professional decision-making with respect to look after children, that there is a dilution of responsibility away from the front line, and that the autonomy and responsibility of social workers is significantly restricted in various ways. Most would also seem to agree, for one reason or another, social workers are spending too much time on paperwork and on fulfilling other bureaucratic requirements associated with child protection, and too little on building relationships and engaging in direct interaction with children on their caseload*” (Le Grand 2007a: 22, emphases added).

The working group’s ‘preferred model’ would, therefore, “be a group of perhaps six to ten partners of whom a majority (but not necessarily all) would be social workers. The partnership would contract with the local authority to provide field social work for looked after children, and to commission services that its own staff could not provide. It would own its assets and pay the partners and any staff that it might employ. The latter could include receptionists and other administrative staff, and a practice manager (although the last could also be a partner)” (Le Grand 2007a: 22). Local authorities would still have a “major role to play” because they would “still retain the formal responsibility of being the corporate parent; they will undertake care proceedings, they will commission; they will contract; they will monitor the contract” (Le Grand 2007a: 25).

This ‘preferred model’ could, it was argued, solve a range of problems which currently lie at the core of social work with the ‘looked after’ children. In terms, for example, of the criticism that social workers fail (perhaps because of high turnover in staff) to provide such children with a sense of continuity in the care, this might be addressed by the SWP model because there “is evidence that those who have a stake in an organisation are more loyal to it and less likely to leave it than those who are not” (Le Grand 2007a: 22). Similarly, SWPs could respond to child care social workers’ lack of adequate relationships with children in care and ‘deprofessionalisation’ (Le Grand 2007a: 23). This is because the “absence both of the need to report continuously to a managerial hierarchy and other demands of a large organisation, would increase the time available for SWPs partners to build the relationship” with a ‘looked after’ child (Le Grand 2007a: 23). Within SWPs there would be ‘more hands-on time’ (Le Grand 2007a). “In short, they would be ‘*independent* professionals, making *professional* decisions” (Le Grand 2007a: 23, emphases added). The envisaged framework also gelled with the government’s plans to introduce a ‘lead professional’ role into Children’s Services (Garrett 2008b).

The issue of ‘incentives’ was vitally important, in terms of this reconfiguration of services for children ‘looked after’, because “*many* believe that there is a lack of incentives for innovation and responsiveness within present structures” (Le Grand 2007a: 22, emphasis added). Perhaps, attentive to the fact that this unfolding scheme might prompt the charge that local authority services were to become privatised and that children in care were to become commodified, Le Grand and his nine working party colleagues attempted to directly address this question. Thus, it is argued, that the issue of services being outsourced ‘for profit’ prompted reflection on two related issues: first, morality; should ‘social workers (or indeed anyone) be in the business of making profits out of looked after children?’; second, a more ‘practical issue’, would a social work practice “be more concerned with cutting costs to increase its profit margin than improving the welfare of the looked after child?” (Le Grand 2007a: 26).

Related to the morality dimension, it was countered:

“There are already profit-making institutions and individuals working with looked after children, including independent fostering agencies, independent social workers working under contract, and private children’s homes, Voluntary organisations working in the area, although often incorrectly described as not-for-profit, can also make profits (often described as surpluses): the only difference between them and profit making institutions is that these profits or surpluses are not distributed to shareholders or to other owners, but to improve staff pay and conditions or invested in improving facilities. It is also important to note that profit-making institutions exist in cognate areas of public service provision such as health care and education, including the institution most closely related to the professional partnership...the GP practice (Le Grand 2007a: 26, emphasis added).

In respect of ‘incentives’, it was maintained that there are, in fact, reasons to “suppose that a professional partnership practice will actually prioritise the interests of the child” (Le Grand 2007a: 27). Social workers “would still be trained and registered as professionals, with an emphasis on their professional ethos and motivation” (Le Grand 2007a: 27). Moreover, the “small, intimate nature of the social work practice would be one that encourages the formation and maintenance of personal relationships, especially between the social workers and the looked after child – which would make it hard for the social worker to put their concerns above that of the child” (Le Grand 2007a: 27).

Another “reason for believing that social work practices will not engage in ruthless cost cutting or quality reducing is the pressure that would arise from contracting and potential competition or contestability” (Le Grand 2007a: 27). In this context, the “local authority will be monitoring the contract, and will have the potential to transfer the contract to some other practice, or to take the service back in-house” (Le Grand 2007a: 27). More broadly, “a profit sharing social work practice will encourage a new dynamic – one that rewards responsiveness, industry and effectiveness, while penalising indifference and inefficiency” (Le Grand 2007a: 27).

Le Grand and his colleagues next examined the potential ‘models’ for social work practices. Here it was conceded that ‘fully developed’ SWPs could actually takeover ‘complete responsibility’ for social services for children, including child protection and all services for children in need. However, their preferred model was one where SWPs would “take responsibility for children on care orders (section 31 cases) and those who are voluntarily accommodated (section 20 cases)” (Le Grand 2007a: 30). In attempting to map out how this might occur, it was suggested that for

“children on care orders the formal transfer of responsibility to the practice would occur somewhere between where the interim order is made and when the care orders are completed. For voluntarily accommodated children the local authority would make a judgement on where it would be best to transfer responsibility to the social work practice” (Le Grand 2007a: 30, emphases added).

Social work practices could include “forms of social enterprise, such as a professional partnership or voluntary organisation. It could also include private sector firms of various types from share-holder owned corporations to small owner-operated businesses” (Le Grand 2007a: 35). In a more overtly ideological move, it is argued:

“The idea that it is useful to distinguish between organisations on the basis of whether they aim to obtain a surplus of revenue over costs – that is, a profit – is a nonsense. All

organizations that wish to survive as independent entities will aim generate such a surplus, whether they are professional partnerships, private businesses or voluntary sector charities. The difference concerns the way in which they organisations dispose of those profits: private enterprises distribute some or all of their profits to their private owners, or, in the case of a listed company, to their shareholders; whereas voluntary sector or professional partnerships do not distribute the profits to any individuals outside the organisation. So here we shall avoid the terms for-or not-for-profit, instead referring to professional partnerships, private businesses, or voluntary sector organisations” (Le Grand 2007a: 35, emphases added).

Acknowledging that the SWPs plan has led ‘many’ to feel “considerable anxiety over the possibility of distorting and diluting lines of accountability” (Le Grand 2007a: 39), the report attempted to address such concerns. In this context, it was stated that local authorities “*will make arrangements with a social work practice for that practice to discharge their statutory functions in relation to looked after children through a contract*” (Le Grand 2007a: 39). Furthermore, local authorities would “still retain their corporate responsibility even though key decisions will be made by the social work practice” (Le Grand 2007a: 40). The working group also suggested that if there practices appeared to be “making *excessive* profits at the expense of children’s needs’....a cap on the amount of profit or surplus that could be made...[with the] practice having to share any profit/surplus with the local authority” (Le Grand 2007a: 40).

The ‘considerable anxiety’ felt by some readers, it was implied, be alleviated by the ‘lean and sound structure’ of regulation which would oversee SWP (Le Grand 2007a: 44). Here, the main regulatory bodies would be the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) and the General Social Care Council and there would need to be a “new set of Minimum National Standards for social work practices” (Le Grand 2007a: 45). Moreover, it would be important to properly pilot the SWP and the piloting activity should “last for at least two years from when the social work practice has taken over responsibility for its full allocation of children” (Le Grand 2007a: 46). Here, it was suggested that there should be “9 pilots in total (3 professional partnerships, 3 voluntary sector and 3 private sector) across a diverse range of local authorities” (Le Grand 2007a: 46). A national steering/implementation group might also aid this activity and every effort “disruption for children involved in the pilots’ should be ‘minimised” (Le Grand 2007a: 48, emphasis added).

The piloting of SWPs would commence, subject to parliamentary approval, in autumn 2008. How, therefore, can this plan to introduce SWP be assessed and interpreted? How is this project to create “happier children...and more fulfilled social workers” (Le Grand and Pettigrew 2006) being orchestrated and developed? In what follows, it will be argued, however, that the entire discourse focused on SWPs provides evidence of a complex ‘war of position’ being waged against state social work and this is embedded in a more encompassing neoliberal project to discredit public services provided by local authorities subject to democratic control (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005).¹

¹ The ‘war of position’ is derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci. Writing during his period of confinement in prison, he argued that there was a need for Marxists to adopt tactical changes. This, for him, meant that had to be a shift from a ‘war of manoeuvre’ to a ‘war of position’. That is to say, it was no longer appropriate to embark on a frontal assault against capital; instead, there was a need for a more subtle form of confrontation, more conducive to the conditions in the West, and which focused on a longer war of colonisation and territorial conquest. In the context of this discussion, therefore, it is suggested that the ‘war of position’ may also be helpful

The 'War of Position' and the attack on public provision

This 'war of position' does not, of course, seek to *entirely* shift social services provision into the private sector, but there is a constant attempt to *tilt the balance* in the direction of the private sector, increased commodification and marketization (see also Harvey 2005; Munck 2005). How the 'debate' (Le Grand 2007a: Ch. 6) is being discursively framed is, as hinted throughout the earlier part of this discussion, immensely important and revealing. Table 1, for example, although not seeking to present a methodologically rigorous analysis by, for example, introducing a quantitative element, illustrates how keywords derived from the policy documents associated with SWPs are incessantly deployed by primary definers in their attempt achieve hegemony, organizational 're-modelling' (DfES 2007: p. 125) and 'cultural shift' in this particular field within public services (Le Grand 2007a: 72; see also Hall 2003).

'Remodelling' Social Work – Keywords in the SWPs legitimating apparatus
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(old/public service) local authority social work =

(deprived of) autonomy bureaucracy/bureaucratic control/bureaucratic requirements burn-out (high) caseloads crisis situations depersonalisation deprofessionalisation job dissatisfaction managerial control/ rule-based managerialism/ social work managerialism/ managerial decision-making (dire) outcomes paperwork (lack of) professional supervision, support, time (dilution of) responsibility role ambiguity/conflict stress work overload

in terms of understanding how the forces of neoliberalism are forging a Gramscianism of the Right and are intent on the slow colonisation and marketization of key areas of public services (see also Forgacs, 1988).

(new/profit-making) social work practices =

autonomy/autonomous organization
 champion
 committed
 creative
 decision-making
 entrepreneurial
 flexibility
 freedom/freeing
 independence/independent professionals
 innovation
 opportunity
 professional
 (good) outcomes
 (adequate) time
 trust

Table 1: 'Remodelling' Social Work – Keywords in the SWPs legitimating apparatus

A seemingly new move in the evolving strategy to promote greater privatization (in the shape of SWPs) is to *partly* assimilate and *selectively* incorporate leftist critiques of social work's labour processes, emerging over the past ten years, which has focused on job dissatisfaction (for example, Baines 2004a; 2004b; see also Harris 1998; Jones 2001; Ferguson and Lavallette 2004; Harlow 2004; James 2004; Carey 2007). This involves recognising social worker dismay, discontent and disappointment (illuminated in this research literature) about how work is tending to become more dehumanizing and alienating, but then the attempt is made to *decouple* such insights from the critique of neoliberal modernity in which they are mostly embedded. Thus, the project becomes one of 'reframing' or 'channelling' social workers' reported discontents, away from political and economic critique, so as to orchestrate and mobilise a particular tier or group to support *more* neoliberal 'innovations': in this instance in the form of the outsourcing of a substantial element of local authority social work services for children 'looked after' (see also Mathiason 2007). For example, social workers are not criticised and, indeed, arrive in the profession with, as mentioned earlier, a "strong moral purpose, idealism, energy, enthusiasm and a commitment to rectifying injustice" (Le Grand 2007a: 17). They are, however, not furnished with an opportunity to blossom and realize high-minded and noble career ambitions because the current (democratic/public) structures stultify, fetter and constrain, whilst the potential for liberation and emancipation lies in the envisaged (private/profit-seeking) structures.

The notion that social workers come to work with 'a strong moral purpose, idealism, energy, enthusiasm and a commitment to rectifying injustice' is repeated mantra-like in the discourse pivoting on SWPs. It appears initially in Pettigrew (2006), is seemingly cut-and-pasted into a *Guardian* article by Le Grand and Pettigrew (2006). It then occurs here the report of the 'independent' working group (Le Grand 2007a) and then in Le Grand (2007b). Other phrases are also apt to be recursive in the discursive presentation of those advocating SWPs. For example, the reference to children 'looked after' at risk of being 'left behind' is periodically deployed in the literature associated with the *Care Matters* programme. Although not a focal concern of this discussion, this phrase hints at the impact of US policy-making on New

Labour governments. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is controversial federal legislation introduced to improve the 'performance' of primary and secondary schools. The *Every Child Matters* programme, in England, is also suggestive of US approaches and a keen attentiveness to language. More specifically, there appears to be similarity in terms of how contested policy is discursively embedded by means of terse, populist, promotional slogans or 'sound bites' (see also Fairclough 2000).

This strategy on the part of the promoters of 'modernization' chimes with trends in contemporary management literature which in which workforce change is often "presented as an attempt to inflect the world of work in a 'more human' direction" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 98). That is to say, the emphasis appears to be on responding to 'demands for authenticity and freedom' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 97). More theoretically, the approach taken in promoting SWPs gels, in many ways, with Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's (2005) account of the contemporary 'spirit of capitalism'². For Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 10), the 'spirit of capitalism' is the ideology that justifies continuing engagement in capitalism and a belief in its emancipatory power: it is, therefore, a set of "beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it". In this sense, the "spirit of capitalism...presents two faces – one turned towards capital accumulation, the other towards legitimating principles" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 58). The ability to assimilate critique into the legitimating apparatus is a vital aspect of this project. Moreover, the "critiques to which capitalism is vulnerable constitute one of the determining elements in the formation of the spirit of capitalism peculiar to a period" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 96). Thus, the "price paid by critique for being listened to, at least in part, is to see some of the values it had mobilized to oppose the form taken by the accumulation process being placed at the service of accumulation" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 29; see also Harvey 2005). They argue, therefore, that to:

"maintain its powers of attraction, capitalism...has to draw upon resources external to it, beliefs which at a given moment in time, possess considerable powers of persuasion, striking ideologies, even when they are hostile to it, inscribed in the cultural context in which it is developing. The spirit sustaining the accumulation process at a given point in history is thus imbued with the cultural products that are contemporaneous with it and which, for the most part, have been generated to quite different ends than justifying capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 20, emphasis added).

It might, therefore, be argued that the discourse on SWPs furnishes something of a microcosm which reveals how this process is apt to work. Perhaps, also the high moral tone of the working group report provides an illustration of how there is a need to "restore meaning to the accumulation process, and combine it with the requirements of social justice" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 19). Importantly, contemporary management literature (which the SWP literature so resembles) "cannot be exclusively orientated towards the pursuit of profit. It must also justify the way profit is obtained, give cadres arguments with which to resist criticisms

² Their work is based on a detailed study of the evolution of management literature circulating throughout the private sector in France, but their reading and interpretation of this literature has a more general European resonance. Significantly, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 96) conclude, however, that the "mobilizing capacity contained in the new spirit of capitalism as deployed in 1990s management literature seems to us poor". It might also be argued that the arguments deployed in, for example, the literature associated with SWP are also unconvincing.

that are bound to arise...Management literature must therefore demonstrate how the prescribed way of making profit might be desirable, interesting, exciting, innovative or commendable. It cannot stop at economic motives and incentives" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 58).

Table 1, therefore, begins to indicate how this process is being discursively amplified. As observed previously, this stress on the exciting possibilities apparently inherent in the SWPs is coupled with an attempt to erase the significance of the core 'for profit' element: "the idea that it is useful to distinguish between organisations on the basis of whether they aim to obtain a...profit...is a nonsense" so the SWPs working group is keen avoid "the terms for-or not-for-profit, instead referring to professional partnerships, private businesses, or voluntary sector organisations" (Le Grand 2007a). This is not, of course, merely a question of semantics because the working group performing (fairly blatant and rather crude) *ideological* work are intent on erasing mention of 'profit'. This is necessary (but should not be perceived as guaranteed to succeed) because using children in care to generate profits is likely to at rest uneasily alongside the humanistic social work code of ethics (Hare 2004).

Conclusion

Historically, in England and elsewhere, the 'looked after' system is, in part, a "legacy of minimum standards and minimum objectives that was inherited from the Poor Law" (Parker et al. 1991: 74). It remains important, therefore, not to reify existing organisational forms and to fall into the trap of arguing that such structures and practices (even now, of course, retaining traces of the ethos of the poor law and its modalities of operation) should be merely 'retained' and 'defended'. However, it appears that the SWPs plan is rooted in a particular perception of 'modernization': one which pivots on the core insight that services can only be improved is by injecting more marketization, more commodification and more competition. Furthermore, following Bourdieu (2001), this could be regarded as part of a wider conservative 'restoration' in which is incessantly seeking to create more spaces for capital accumulation.

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) (2007) has reported that the SWPs proposal had been 'fiercely debated within our organization'. Indeed, it could be argued that a core element in the plan for SWP is to divide and split the profession in that part of the strategy involves decoupling a key 'cadres', or section, of the profession from the public sector (Confederation of British Industry (CBI) 2006a: 4; see also CBI 2006b; Bentley 2007). As some respondents to the consultation paper observed those 'social workers...more likely to be experienced and confident, leaving the less experienced social workers to work within the local authority' (DfES 2007a: 14). Perhaps crudely, this could also be perceived as a form of (human) asset stripping which *removes* the most experienced professionally accomplished workers and leaves behind a residual pool of newly qualified, comparatively low-paid workers, who whose work will be subject to Taylorist forms of ordering and regulation and work processes partly associated with the assessment materials derived from the work of one of the members of the SWPs working group (Ward 1995).

This brief critical commentary has tried, therefore, to illuminate the key elements contained within the SWPs model and gone on to identify how this particular project is being orchestrated. At present, this model remains vulnerable to critique because, for example, a good deal of the associated official literature tends also to skim over some fairly complex legal questions (see also Garrett, 2008a). Moreover, the glib notion that that SWPs can provide structures to house and nurture '*independent* professionals, making *professional* decisions' is manifestly unconvincing given that these social workers are likely to be

constrained (perhaps albeit on occasions in deceptively subtle ways) by the requirement to generate financial profits (Le Grand, 2007a: 23, emphasises added). Perhaps more fundamentally, this discussion is founded on the understanding that the problems caused, in part, by neoliberalism cannot be solved by revitalized programmes of neoliberalization.

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