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Book Review

Rethinking democracy in social work: From police to politics of emancipation

By Magnus Weber, Marcus Herz and Zulmir Bečević

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The authors of this text, all of whom are social work academics at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, recently published an article and a special issue of the *European Journal of Social Work* (Bečević et al., 2026; Bečević & Herz, 2023) dedicated to revitalising political and transformative approaches within social work theory. Having read and been excited by these outputs, I was looking forward to this textbook-length exposition of their thinking, knowing that it would draw on the work of political theorists like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, whose work is not well known in mainstream social work.

There is a long tradition of critical and radical thinking in social work going back to the 1970s, but this has had a recent renaissance triggered by rising authoritarianism, deepening inequality, welfare austerity, the stigmatisation of refugees and asylum seekers, and the steady growth in far-right nationalism. Many commentators consider these trends to be producing a democratic crisis.

At the heart of the authors' response to the present conjuncture is a call to reinvigorate social work by (re)politicising it with the conception of *radical democracy,* as described in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014) and Mouffe (2013). By radical democracy they mean more than social

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work working in democratic institutions or the party politics of the electoral cycle. In the introductory section of the text, the authors draw on a distinction made by Rancière (2010) between *politics* and *police*, which they summarise as follows:

> The latter being institutional settings that frame political discourse, and the former a rupture that begins in the acknowledgement of injustice. Police is thus not necessarily related to law enforcement: it is …[a] term for the organisation of the visible, the reasonable, the practical, within a given political order or regime. (p.2)

The authors refine this distinction by referring to police as 'democracy as *form*' and politics as 'democracy as *spirit*'. Social work, the authors argue, if it is to achieve its core values of social justice, human rights and the 'empowerment and liberation of people' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), must be political. It must challenge existing institutional settings to deepen democracy and achieve social justice.

This task is, they argue, made more urgent as antidemocratic and authoritarian forces have become unleashed across the countries of the Global North. The authors acknowledge their positionality as social work academics within a Nordic, European social democracy, but many of the issues they identify, and the responses they offer, will resonate with social workers elsewhere.

Having set the scene by defining what they mean by democracy as spirit and harnessing the mandate of social work to the deepening of democracy, the authors proceed in subsequent chapters to give an evaluation of contemporary social and political issues, their impact on social work and possible responses. Across eight chapters they trace the ways in which forty years of neoliberalism, and key events like 9/11 and the War on Terror, have hollowed out liberal democracy, increased citizen surveillance and harnessed social workers to projects like youth deradicalisation programmes.

Key concepts from social and political theory are deployed to illuminate the present situation. For example, Agamben's (2005) thinking around states of *exception* – where democracies suspend normal rights and protections – are considered to be 'mainly directed at parts of the population that are already vulnerable and under pressure: people with migration experiences, refugees, people experiencing homelessness,

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people in poverty, racialised groups, and those already under welfare surveillance' (p.55). A chapter on the impact of conspiracy theories, antidemocratic social movements and toxic masculinity offers excellent advice on how social workers might counter them by deploying deep stories and mobilising 'emotionally compelling narratives anchored in equality, justice and democratic renewal' (p. 98).

This textbook is a highly significant contribution to the literature on critical and radical social work, offering a welcome contemporary analysis on the issues confronting social work today. The authors' arguments for a radical democratic orientation within social work are compelling, although the material and managerial constraints on social workers in highly regulated and statutory or state-funded agencies are less well considered.

As a social work educator, keen on making use of the text in teaching and learning, I would have preferred a deeper and more critical discussion of the many social and political theorists deployed, teasing out their limitations and contradictions with each other (as Garrett (2021) offers in his own critical social work text). However, I appreciate this is not an introductory, undergraduate text on social and political theory, and I don't want to detract from the significant achievements of this text as an analytic intervention in twenty-first century critical social work theory. Put it on your reading list!

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The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book

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