

Book Review

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Social Work in Extremis: Lessons for social work internationally

**Michael Lavalette and Vasilios Ioakimidis (eds) (2011) Bristol: The Policy Press
ISBN 978 1 84742 718 2 hardcover**

This is easily the most enjoyable social work book I have read for a decade. In fact, it was nothing short of riveting as each chapter provides a grounded description of recent, or not too distant, world disasters or contexts of war, through the lenses of nuanced social and political overviews and analyses of social work responses.

The editors are known for their radical social work writing and teaching, publishing in the journal *International Social Work*, participating in the Social Work Action Network in UK and joining in the most recent UK national strikes in protest at austerity measures in response to another looming EU financial collapse.

The book covers four themes: state and institutional responses to crisis or disaster; academic reflections on social work practice; scope for social work, student and volunteer campaigns in post crisis situations; and alternative forms of social work, or 'popular social work'. An Australian reader can find much of interest here, not only by hearing the local voices behind familiar world news but also in the echoes of familiar social welfare issues around worsening social conditions and growing inequalities, with the same public explanations repeated endlessly by both major parties.

The first chapter provides the context for this collection. Professional standards and university education are partnered in service of a much more regulated, narrow and prescribed form of professional social work in the UK than is the case in Australia. Lavalette notes in the Introduction that the tradition of socially and politically engaged social work has been almost written out of present texts (eg Sylvia Pankhurst, Mary Hughes) (p 3). This book documents the efficacy and indeed, the necessity, of a solidarity based practice, and the importance for social workers of acquiring a clear knowledge of the historical and contemporary political, economic and social injustices and oppressions which have formed the contexts of post disaster recovery efforts.

Disasters can prompt progressive State and institutional responses. Gregory Nucleous shows that the Turkish army invasion of Cyprus in 1974 led to the internal displacement of a third of the population. In response to pressure from mobilized citizens, the government hastened to provide progressive services and the welfare state that had lagged behind Cyprus' European neighbours.

In Uzbekistan, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to widespread poverty and unemployment with approximately a quarter of the workforce needing to leave as legal or illegal migrant workers. The rise in abandoned children prompted the government to import social work help from the West. Western academics and professionals had declared this nation to have ‘virtually no experience with civil society’, the latter defined as the existence of non-government organisations such as those established by current Western social work. The failures of these initiatives are traced by Terry Murphy to a lack of appreciation of the reality of family- and ethnically-based networks of social supports and mutual obligations, imbued with a mixture of Islamic values of charity and older Zoroastrian social practices of the wealthy providing all community physical and social infrastructure. More recently, Communism endorsed neighbourhood based committees overseen by elders which mediated family disputes and ensured the meeting of people’s individual needs. Murphy provides an excellent discussion not only about cultural relevance but also about social work’s strategic need to demonstrate that it can open up possibilities that traditional local systems cannot provide by themselves.

Academics Carmen Hinestroza and Vasilios Ioakimidis discuss the extreme conditions of Colombia with mass killings, kidnappings, 50 years of civil war and 4.9 million displaced people. The context of mass displacements include the drug lords, armed right wing paramilitary groups, state sponsored disappearances and violence by multinational companies to force peasants and Indigenous people from lands rich in natural resources. Having saturated the outskirts of Bogota’s squatter towns, thousands of Afro-Columbians and Indigenous people have occupied the central park of Bogota, partly as a political act of visibility to the middle classes. Only by spending much time to create a space of trust through democratic and participatory processes which ensured the displaced communities maintained control at all times, were social workers able to use their connections to resources and facilities to meet people’s immediate needs. The authors conclude that social work would not be possible without adopting the goal of the displaced to return to their own lands. This involves working through with people the historical and contemporary structural causes of such mass suffering and building the broad based solidarity movements that will in time, make possible a cessation of current brutal conditions.

Ashok Gladston Xavier unpacks the roles of social and community workers in mediating between Tamil and Sri Lankan rural communities and creating new relationships of friendship after the official end of the civil war. Marla McCulloch shares her experiences as a Red Cross mental health worker in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. She comments on the irrelevance of much American social work practice which remains silent about startling inequalities. Reima Ana Magdalic discusses her journey as a social work student during the war in Bosnia, the UN sponsored social services after the war and the lack of efficacy of these models imposed from above and from outside.

Crises and disasters offer scope for social work, student and volunteer campaigns. Dora Teloni analyses the struggle to protect the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Greece. Maria Pentaraki exposes the scale of the 2007 Greek bushfire in Peloponnesus, as linked to decades of government attempts to open up these public and semi-rural farm lands

to developers. Pentaraki sets up a field education opportunity for final year social work students to experience the link between individual post-recovery policies and pre-existing structural inequalities. Grassroots activists mobilised land owners to demand compensation and continue the struggle against undemocratic tactics of the state allied with developers. Pentaraki illustrates the effectiveness of community development knowledge and practices and comments on the unfortunate predominant focus of social work curricula on micro-level issues.

The final theme of the book concerns alternative forms of social work, or what Lavalette calls 'popular social work'. The case study activities tick all the boxes pertaining to the domain of professional social welfare: meeting immediate physical needs, ensuring mental and emotional survival, stopping isolation, keeping up the morale of groups, remedial action to counter trauma, and the prevention and reduction of depression and social disintegration. Lavalette calls such processes 'popular social work', because they do not necessarily include welfare professionals. Popular social work raises questions about what good practice might be and how to incorporate the transforming dynamics of community solidarity into curricula. It also offers insights about the nature of society and the ubiquitous intersections of politics, economics and state policies implemented often for unjust goals. For example, in the most recent Haitian earthquake, aid was not distributed to Haitians but diverted to the wealthier areas, to tourists and UN compounds. Australians heard daily news reports about the priority focus of Haitian and UN authorities and US troops on the restoration of civil order and prevention of looting. In contrast, grassroots reports show an absence of looting and instead individuals taking necessary supplies to sustain human life (Solnit 2010, cited on p 9).

Chris Jones and Michael Lavalette's chapter '“Popular social work” in the Palestinian West Bank: Dispatches from the front line' reports on a project to initially interview young people under occupation and discovering instead 'some magnificent welfare projects', carried out by unqualified people. Similarly, during a 33 day intensive Israeli bombardment of Lebanon in 2006, as the traditional welfare services of Beirut shut down, a grassroots organisation Samidoun involving 1000 volunteers, created a remarkably effective system providing for the immediate physical needs of refugees and transmitting up to date information through the use of information technologies and mass media. Finally, Vasilios Ioakimidis shares the buried history of the Greek liberation movement during Nazi occupation and civil war, built on citizen rights to work and democratic participation, including an effective network of social work provisions. This popular, labour and human rights inspired movement and home grown social work was crushed post World War II by American military, political, social and cultural interventions, including the importation in 1946 of what became the official social work profession. This model was based on English language social theory and psychodynamic knowledge and focussed on individual casework, assisting the state to establish social control and a military dictatorship for the ensuing decades.

A strength of the book is the wide use of references by authors of historical sources and current social analyses. If nothing else it provides access to rare historical material not only about prominent world events, but about the diverse forms of social work practice around the world. As Vasilios Ioakimidis comments in the Conclusion, the chapters illustrate well

known social and community welfare principles such as the importance of a holistic approach, where physical, cultural, educational and political needs and dimensions interpenetrate each other. In addition, rather than people being primarily self interested, crises demonstrate ordinary citizens' spontaneous willingness to join in collective action and to find new ways of working together. Democracy emerges from below and small-scale localised responses can develop into broader social movements. Although the publishers do not list *Social Work in Extremis* as a text book, I believe that it ought to be included for the teaching of social work and social welfare as an integration of skills and knowledge applied flexibly and creatively to changing contexts.

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