

Social work education, disruptive thinking and 'welfare words'

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Key themes...

1. **Neoliberalism...**
2. **Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), hegemony, common sense...**
3. **Raymond Williams (1921-1988) & keywords...**
4. **Welfare words**

Neoliberalism

- The gap between rich and poor...reaching new extremes. The richest 1% have accumulated more wealth than the rest of the world put together. Meanwhile, the wealth owned by the bottom half of humanity has fallen by a trillion dollars in the past five years. **Just 62 individuals now have the same wealth as 3.6 billion people – half of humanity**' (Oxfam America, 2016).
- Neoliberalism...**stripping away the 'protective coverings** that embedded liberalism allowed & occasionally nurtured' (Harvey, 2005)

Neoliberalism...

- Neoliberalism 'transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour, along with humans themselves according to a specific image of the economic. ALL conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured in economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized' (Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, 2015).

Neoliberalism...

- Complex responses to this logic...
- Populist/ Far Right: Trump, Le Pen
- Centre-Right: 'Business as usual', but **NEW** narratives: Theresa May & post-Brexit vote 'one nation' Tory rhetoric in the UK, Macron & Gallic Blairism
- Left: Corbyn, Sanders, Mélenchon & *La France insoumise*
- Antonio Gramsci's refers to an '**interregnum**'; a period of uncertain duration in which an old order is dying, but a new one cannot yet be born...'**a great variety of morbid symptoms will appear**'.
- A 'period of tremendous insecurity...unstable configurations of many kinds, & chains of *surprising events* take the place of predictable *structures* (Wolfgang Streek, 2017)...**OUR (SOCIAL WORK) TIMES?**

Neoliberalism...the Grenfell Tower fire in London



- Grenfell Tower: powerful symbol of the impact of neoliberal austerity
- Role of public sector workers including the ambulance crews, health staff, police, fire brigade, housing workers & social workers playing supportive role with survivors & loved ones

Neoliberalism...the Grenfell Tower fire in London

- Decades of deriding & dismantling the 'social state' (Bourdieu)
- Conservative governments of Cameron & Osborne/May in UK '**stripped bare the state and its social and physical protection of citizens**' (Polly Toynbee, 2017).
- British Association of Social Workers supports 'the calls for urgent attention to the risks people may be exposed to now as a result of poor quality, poor standards & insufficient investment in housing, particularly social housing which is most often occupied by people with low incomes & few housing choices'.

Neoliberalism...the Grenfell Tower fire in London

- Illuminates the **social violence** of neoliberal austerity
- Aditya Chakraborty...‘Spectacular examples of **social violence**, such as Grenfell, are thankfully rare. They usually occur out of public sight. This decade of austerity has been a decade of social violence...tales of private misery, of a person or a household behind a closed door plunged into stress, anxiety, depression or worse’ (June, 2017)...
- **‘Spending cuts, deregulation, outsourcing:** between them they have turned a state supposedly there to protect and support citizens into a machine to make money for the rich while punishing the poor’.
- **What happens when welfare begins to dissolve? What concepts & ideas can social work education avail of to understand (& resist) such developments?**

Gramsci...hegemony and 'common sense'



- **Hegemony:** Control maintained not just through violence & political & economic coercion, but also through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the ruling class and elite strata can become the 'common sense' values of all

Gramsci...hegemony and 'common sense'

- How does social work function within specific **NATIONAL** & **GLOBAL** hegemonic orders?
- How is hegemony experienced in specific professional 'fields' (Bourdieu) & how might it be altered, transformed, overcome?
- Despite 'empowerment' talk, do social work educators risk being complicit in bolstering current market-dominated interactions & relationships?

Gramsci...hegemony and 'common sense'

- **'Common sense'**: a blurred, hazy and defective lens through which to view the world because it incorporates information which is objectively inaccurate or crucially incomplete.
- Gels with the tendency of ruling elites to 'manufacture ignorance' to justify the way society is hierarchized and regulated (Slater, 2012).
- Helps comprehend the rise of the so-called 'alt-right' & its deployment of 'alternative facts' to try & create a new socially toxic hegemony (see also Crehan, 2016).
- Language...

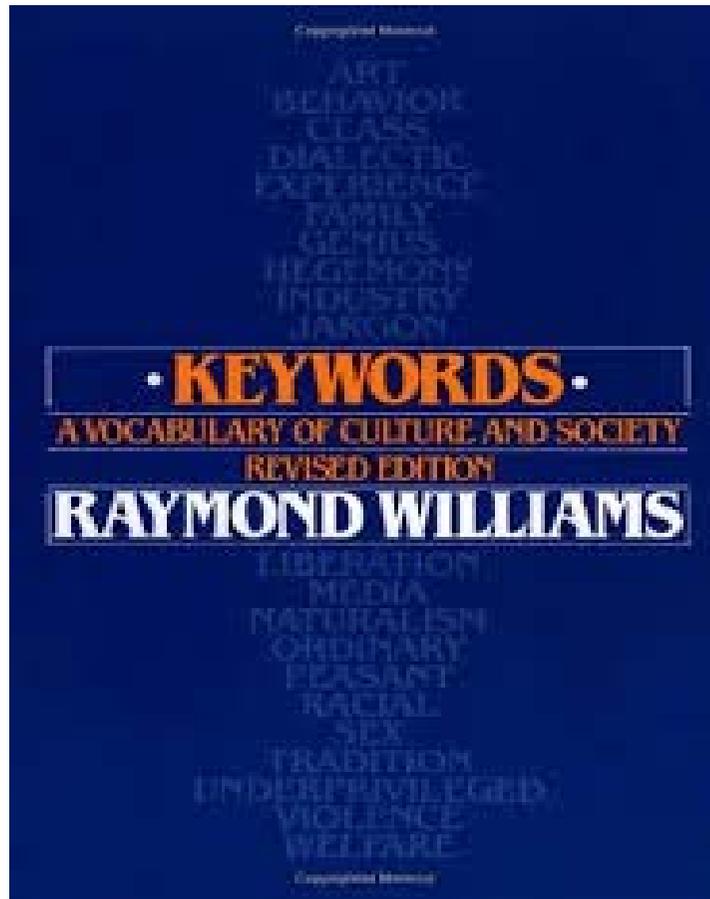
Gramsci...hegemony and 'common sense'

- 'surprising that social workers, who are largely dependent on language, should have paid so little attention to words and what it means to speak a language' (Timms, 1968).
- Language is not only means by which the social work task is 'described and constructed in different ways at different historical junctures, but...also the cornerstone of intervention, the lifeline through which all communication between individuals engaged in the process, takes place' (Gregory and Holloway, 2005).

Gramsci...hegemony and 'common sense'

- 1) **'Sacred language'** (e.g. Codes of ethics)
 - 2) **'Official language'** (Bureaucracy)
 - 3) **'Colloquial language'** (everyday interactions with one another) (Chris Beckett, BJSW, 2003)
- Important to analyse the 'concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation' (Hall, 1996).
 - Social and economic change can never be prompted by mere words alone, but ideas & culture potent in consolidating, or disrupting, a given social order.

Raymond Williams and Keywords

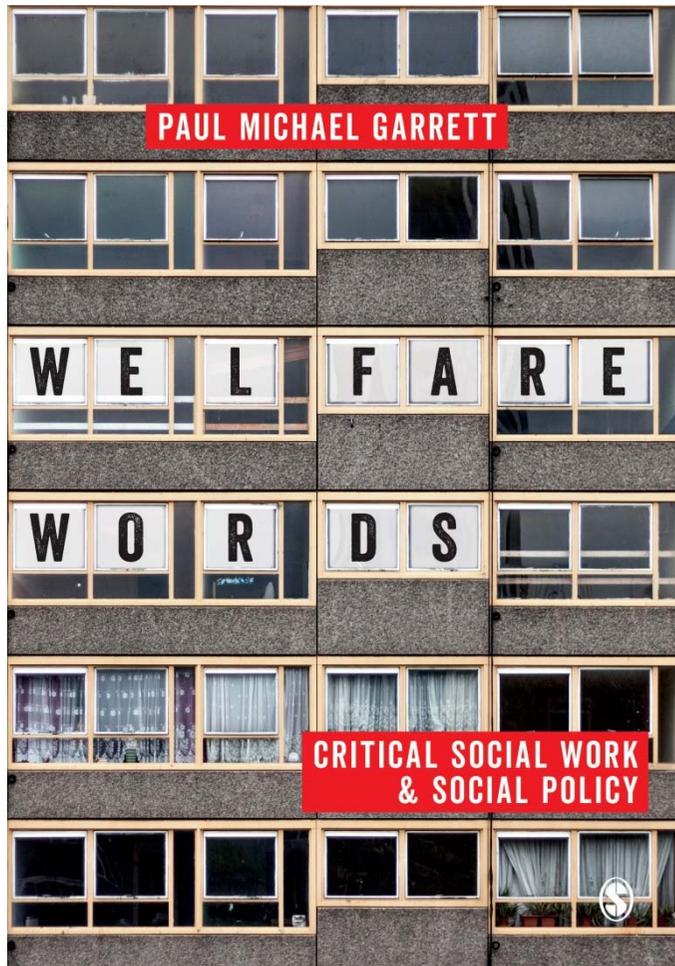


- Raymond Williams (1921-1988).
- *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976)
- Keywords help to constitute & distil 'common sense'
- A focus on keywords helps us to **punctuate, interrupt (& disrupt)** dominant narratives with & beyond social work

Raymond Williams & Keywords...

- 110 'micro essays' on significant words in the mid-1970s – early 80's (**bureaucracy, communication, creative, expert, family, modern, reform** etc.)
- Honed focus on specific words & phrases...
- How words & phrases become inculcated, sedimented & reinforced within the everydayness of cultural & institutional logics
- Analysing 'keywords' in the social conditions they arise, circulate and are apt to shift in meaning.

Welfare words...



- What are 'welfare words'?

Welfare words...

- Words or phrases used by **'primary definers'** (Hall *et al.*, 1978) to steer debates & enhance a neoliberal political, economic & cultural agenda.
- Create & sustain **the social logic or 'spirit' of capitalism** (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).
- **Even if not neoliberal in origin**, such words & phrases are pivotal in **discourses and narratives** related to **social marginality** & are targeted at particular groups lacking **economic capital** & holding significant stocks of **'negative symbolic capital'** (Bourdieu in Bourdieu *et al.*, 2002).

welfare words...

- “Making **“Anti-Social Behaviour”**: A Fragment on the Evolution of “ASBO Politics” in Britain’, *British Journal of Social Work*, 2007, 37 (5): 839-856.
- **Welfare Dependency**
- **Underclass**
- **Social Exclusion**
- **Early Intervention**
- **Resilience**
- **Care**
- **Adoption**
- Methodological questions: Choosing & compiling a corpus, analysing
- Different national contexts (e.g. China & ‘Harmonious Society’)

Welfare words...

- **Gendered** & **racialised** as well as classed
- Promoted by figures located within the state and/or particular fields of **'expertise'**
- The **media**
- Appealing to wider 'common sense' understandings.
- Part of a larger **'screen discourse'** (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001) obfuscating massive inequalities.

Welfare words and 'social problems'

- How is a 'social problem' constituted?
- Why *now* rather than *then*?
- Who are the determining forces?
- What type of 'solution' is likely to be mooted by 'experts'?
- Who are the targets of proposed 'responses'?
- Are the voices of the 'targets' heard (or silenced or muted)?
- How does the 'social problem' relate to a wider constellation of 'social problems'?

Welfare words...conceptual resources...

- Managing the **'relative surplus' population (Marx)**
- **'Social Factory'/'Work Society' (Negri etc.):** stress the centrality of work in ALL areas of life.
- The **'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello)**: the upbeat, 'can do' vibe associated with some facets of neoliberal vocabulary & rhetoric. **(See my 'Re-enchanting Social Work? The Emerging "Spirit" of Social Work in an Age of Economic Crisis', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 503-521).**

Welfare words...conceptual resources...

- **'Symbolic Violence' (Bourdieu)**: might aid comprehension of welfare words particularly those which construct or label individuals & groups in a derogatory manner
- **'Territorial stigmatization' (Wacquant)**: alerts us to the evolution of **'neoliberal penalty'** and how the boundaries between penal/welfare policies & practices is becoming hazy
- The **'Police' (Rancière)**: encourages us to have regard to classifications & the larger encompassing structure in which welfare words are housed

Welfare words...case study: 'welfare dependency'

- An implicit tenet of **SOCIAL** work: human beings are **SOCIAL**, relational & (inter)dependent
- How did the stigmatising 'welfare dependency' become so prominent?

6 key elements central to the constitution of 'welfare dependency' talk...

- 'Welfare Dependency' in the USA
- The shadow of the prison
- The global 'workfarist turn' & international regimes of conditionality
- Enhanced focus on conduct & the role of workfare's 'organic intellectuals' (e.g. Mead, Murray etc.)
- Tonalities (The 'structure of feeling' on 'welfare')
- The potency of 'welfare' myth-narratives...

Welfare words case study: 'welfare dependency'

Baptist Union of Great Britain, Methodist Church, Church of Scotland & the United Reformed Church (2013) *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty.*

'Common sense' narratives maintain the poor are:

- lazy & don't want to work;
- addicted to drink and drugs;
- are not really poor, but simply are incompetent in managing their money;
- on 'the fiddle';
- have an easy life;
- the cause of the 'deficit' triggering 'austerity' measures impacting on everyone.

Back home in Ireland...the socially toxic discourse on 'welfare'

