

Social work in Britain during the nineteenth century history essay



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Deacon et al 1997, George 1998 and Barns et al asserts that social work exists primarily within a societal context from which it emerges. Even though today there are external influences such as globalization and pressure to compete within the international economic market exerting pressure on how the social policy is administered. The fact still remains that social policy will be attached to a particular society or community and society it exists in. In trying to understand the origins of British social work it is important to acknowledge the social-political and economic climate prevailing at a given historical period. Harris and McDonald (2000), Harris and Yueh-Ching Chou (2001) This is shared by Jordan 1984: 13 when he queries: 'Is becoming a social worker primarily to be understood in terms of "helping", "caring" or therapeutic content of the job, or according to the official, bureaucratic, legal and even potential coercive powers and responsibilities it entails.

Social work origins can be traced to the mid 19th century as one of the solutions to tackle poverty during a period of Victorian plenty. The country as a whole was at the peak of Great economic prowess from trade, industry, finance, agriculture, forestry and fishing/ This prosperity brought pride and satisfaction among the successful elite citizens who claimed the achievement was through individual hard work. The existence of poorness was not a concern and it was blamed upon an individual. Poverty was hardly noticed by law and was described as self-inflicted and an unfortunate necessity. Historically the COS is viewed as the originator of social work. One main aspect of COS was its emphasis and focuses on individual casework an approach still evident in contemporary s/w with evidence from Victorian London it was evidenced that poverty, crime and begging were massive. In

these environments there were genuine people in poverty needing help. The COS believed and noted that the poor law agenda was inadequate and actually worsened the situation of the poor. Above all the massive growth of other charitable organisations duplicated duties with the main COS and had an impact on the poor people. These two factors disillusioned and demoralised people to engage in emancipator strategies there was no distinction between deserving and undeserving it led to people to be complacent and they just started exploiting and depending on poor law/charity for support than reinventing themselves to be independent. This resulted in weakening family structures and this impacted on society at large.

The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the Workhouse came into force as a measure to reflect the changes in society and introduced the principle of less eligibility. The previous Poor Law was set up in Agricultural context based on local parishes relief and was proving inadequate and incompetent with the present societal needs and demands. This was because of the shift from agriculture to Industrialisation and urbanisation. Poor people were to be treated less favourably and harshly so much that if they were genuinely poor they would voluntarily enter the Workhouse. Parry (1979) affirms that the society which created the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was a decentralised rural society derived from private and local agencies existing in the Industrial revolution, with limited resources and techniques in the field of government and administration. This affected their performance and quality of work as they lacked central control, consistency and vision.

The principle of less eligibility was reinforced through the 'workhouse test' which would liaise with the Poor Law Authorities having the final say on whether individuals seeking support were genuine and would prefer to enter and experience the harshness of the workhouse. It is important at this stage to highlight that the role of social work was to help the deserving helpable from those undeserving poor destined to the workhouse. The gate keeping role of social work was created as a deterrent to unregulated small charities which were emerging duplicating roles and causing confusion within the charities. The small charities were a threat as they undermined the genuine philanthropic efforts in enforcing discipline that was desirable to be reinforced by charity. These small charities were accused of entertaining clever paupers who took advantage of private philanthropy to avoid the workhouse. Thus the social work business came as a result of this transformation of philanthropy from Charity Organisation Society engaging with the workhouse regime.

The transformation of philanthropy was seen as a necessity as there was chaos and misguided principles within charity. There was an overhaul of operations and an introduction of relief distribution principles ensuring the deserving poor would use help to rebuild their lives up. Technically it was the COS intention to let the Workhouse operate harshly and effectively so that those paupers categorised for charity would be passed to the COS and those for the workhouse passed to the workhouse. This ensured remoralisation of the paupers and control reinforced by the Poor Law and philanthropists.

Charity Organisation Society existence depended on membership which had strict methods and values which resulted in the development of social work.

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Also the emerging professional elite influenced hard work and effort and adopted professional procedures. This stance of the elite shaped and determined the operations of the COS. Assessments were introduced based on moral character and behaviour. Checks and enquiries on the lifestyle, personal history, circumstances and an assessment of existing help and any other recommendations for additional help as a possibility. All this information was submitted to the local Charity Organisation Society Committee to draw up an action plan for the Caseworker to implement. The action plan could include a referral to a sister charity, reassessment, a referral back to the Poor Law, individual visits or reformatory intervention. There was a transformation of philanthropy from unskilled duty to an organised professional activity. The social work approach was rebranding people to suit the new capitalistic society they lived in. This obviously brought tension with religion and politics. The COS argued that it was significant to separate the causes of individual difficulties and identify individual troubles with the individual in order to intervene more directly with their lives. This approach continued until the 2nd World War when the state directly intervened and provided for Social work intervention.

Walsh et al (2000) holds that Britain experienced major social, economic and political changes in the 18th and 19th century. This resulted in the emergence of new social problems, new economic relations, new political institutions and legislation which were masterminded by the government as a necessity to ensure stability and social control. The main factors in the 19th century were the increase in population, urbanisation and changes in

employment. These can be associated to external forces in relation to social work but they had a huge impact on its origins.

Industrialisation changed the family structures from subsistence work and family to factory work and family. As machinery was invented jobs were relocated from farms to factories. People were attracted to work in factories and relocated to urban areas in search of work causing overpopulation. This also changed the employment industry as Agriculture, forestry and fishing declined as a result of the emerging manufacturing, mining and industry hence urbanisation. Consequently this contributed to the deterioration of living social conditions in which people lived in. Housing shortage, overcrowding, sanitation problems, disease outbreak, exploitation of workers and widespread poverty. The poor people could not afford to look after themselves. Children were malnourished, abused and exploited. QUOTE CHN ESSAY.

In addition to social change there was a shift in political power from a few elite individuals to a more democratic ideology. The elite few who held power used this power to protect their interests at the expense of protecting the general population and resolving social issues affecting the general public.. The elite few were also concerned with maintaining law and order at home and external security of the country. All this changed when the Parliamentary Reform Act 1832 brought a democratic parliament. A further challenge came from the emerging class of entrepreneurs and industrialists which threatened the traditional authority. This meant different sections of the population began to receive extended political power.

As political power spread through society the government approach refocused shift from maintaining law and order and the economy to a more involvement in social welfare issues. Despite the shift government role only extended to regulating and controlling social problem areas rather than promoting social change; a role described as that of a 'nightwatchman' Driver and Martell 1998

The above reveal that there are different approaches to interpret and explain the growth and origins of social work as an organised and regulated profession. Seed (1973) identified three basic phases in social work development. These are: Individual casework which originated from Charity Organisation Society (COS) Woodroffe, 1962. Lewis 1995. Social administration followed which was involved in poverty relief linked to the Poor Law but aligned to the COS. Finally Social action which promoted the settlement movement in Britain and America. The three phases will be explained individually but they do interrelate and have constantly resurfaced in the entire history of social work in different forms.

Key figures like Octavia Hill can be linked to both the COS and the settlement movement. Canon Barnett originally supported the COS before establishing the Tonybee Hall in East London in a move to promote and reinforce social change. This meant they had the role of caseworkers, group workers and reformers. Poor Law and charity was important for the effective and smooth running of COS. In some cases hospital almoners worked as caseworkers as well as financial administrators.

The COS introduced structures and systems that guaranteed their mission and principles. One of the main tasks was to coordinate with the philanthropist to avoid confrontation and competition among charities. It emerged the COS managed to win an understanding with welfare, charity and the poor law. It was believed charity would become the first place to seek for help and then in the worst cases they would volunteer for w/h.

Second priority for COS was to establish an organisational structural framework which was systematic and consistent to help those who qualified as in need. The COS original intention and role was not to be a provider of charity, but a coordinator of other charitable organisations. However with developments COS district committees became well established and took the role of provider themselves. The COS had a major crucial task to monitor and oversee the process of judgement to see whether individuals qualified or did not qualify for support “ the deserving/undeserving eligibility criteria. This again can be the roots of s/w practice today. The process of investigation, information gathering and the well organised examination of individual circumstances are still today prevalent in s/w in assessment which led to a judgement/ decisions resulting in eligibility criteria in today’s practice various types of support apart from financial charity were available such as exploring ways that would empower/ emancipate people’s wellbeing at the same time promoting independence. Although all these measures were put in place still there was the dilemma of not helping those who most need help, but were not recognised as needy.

The work of the COS has met its demerits and shortcomings in that it was said to be harsh, did not manage to distinguish need/ undeserving accurately and the help dispensed was not enough and inadequate to combat need.

This is propounded by Webb (1926) when he mentioned “ the administration of the poor law...supplemented by charities assistance according to the tenants of the COS... had next to no effect either on the poverty or on the misery of the poor.

Finally the COS acknowledged the need for training systematic programme which today is one of the significant attributes of s/w. Also there was a general sense of realisation that welfare provided was a matter for the state as well as the family and individual responsibility. The influence of the COS and individual casework came to a difficult in terms of different perspectives and ideas. This was a result of the expansion of social work into different societal areas like psychiatry, and hospital casework which sought different approaches to the traditional COS approach.

Social work as administration dates back to the period before the formation of the COS in the work carried out by Poor Law Relieving Officers whose duty was to administer the duties outlined by the Poor Law Act of 1601. Their role was further stimulated by the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 when they ensured the concept of “ less eligibility” which was approved by the Report of the Royal Commission on Poor Laws. Officers had to ensure relief in whatever form was less attractive than the lowest paid worker. Boards of Guardians administered the Poor Law at local level reporting to a central Poor Law Board which controlled workhouses and regulating issues relating

to Poor Law nationwide. As the Poor Law Officers needed to carry out assessments, exercise judgement, an understanding of human needs/problems and financial administration their quality of work was reported to be of poor quality and inconsistent. It is argued that they would have been better off with some training. In response to this a National Poor Law Officers Association was formed in 1884 to improve the status of these officers. This did not change the attitude of the public they served.

Social work as social action can be traced in the settlement movement established by Canonm Bennett in the 1880s. The movement shared a number of beliefs underpinned and complimenting the COS. Although they practiced differently in principle they both shared the same moral principles which was a belief of education. They all believed financial assistance was not enough to eradicate poverty within society but empowerment through knowledge and education within individuals and communities. They believed that the the privileged had an obligation to support the less privilege. They embarked on training courses and university opportunities to raise awareness of poverty, its causes and impact. As highlighted by Gilchrist and Jeffs the movement had three basic ideas; Scientific research development into the root/ causes of poverty, the importance of education as emancipation to wider horizons and opportunities for poor people to improve their lives and the enhancement of local communities through leadership.

The three principles differed from the COS individualistic approach but rather envisaged Community and group education as paramount to solve poorness and human problems to improve life. Cannon introduced the idea that educated people be linked within poor communities and engage with the

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poor to have as feel and get first hand experience from the poor. This would create common ground and enhance community development. Although the settlement movement expanded relations and support from the COS deteriorated. Professionalism later changed the original ideas of Pioneer settlement movement and it was assimilated into other professions.

Critics have identified that the individual casework practiced in the 19th century was pathologising and blaming the individual not looking at the broader picture disregarding disadvantage and poverty. The other concern argue that social work was ineffective. Brewer and Lait (1980) asserts that social work was overzealous and encompassed a broad range of roles and functions instead of being narrow and more focused and defined.

Furthermore Woorton (1959) queries that social work does not deserve a professional status as it just carried out and still carries out instructions from the traditional health and welfare agencies. The blame on social work being disorganised was shifted to the lack of education and training. This debate has widened due to recommendations from the Barclay report which advocated for a more wider involvement in social action.

Having explored the origins of social work it is important to mould them into a way forward framework for future practice. Mullaly (1997) suggested that social work need to help disadvantaged people either to adjust to social demands or to amend these structures to meet the individual circumstances.

Payne (1962: 2) further suggested that social work need to contain three basic elements which are: individualist-reformist, socialist-collectivist and reflexive-therapeutic. However Mullaly (1997) argues that even if a social

worker adopts a progressive approach they will automatically engage in
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supporting the framework of society, the legislation and statutory requirements. This is supported by Pinker (1982) when she mentions that social workers have no mandate to work against the system that employs them and it is unfair to use service users' problems to transform the politics of welfare.

Basically there are three explanations why state welfare emerged in the 19th century. These explanations justify the reason why I adopted the perspectives I highlighted earlier. The functionalist approach advocates for social policies that solve social problems and promote stability. This compliments with the events in the 19th when the government intervened and involved in welfare as a measure to meet and address the demands of Industrialisation and urbanisation. The government had to intervene to meet to resolve the unmet needs that contributed to social problems in the population.

While embarking on resolving unmet social demands critics explain that the government did not realise emerging social class relationships resulting in class conflict. The industrialisation and urbanisation process brought the second perspective into place as in Marx's conflict perspective. This conflict upset the social order and social relations in Britain. As mentioned earlier there was a tradition of an elite few protecting their own interests. This minority group of people had the privilege of owning the means of production i. e factories and other productive institutions. The rest of the population were the workers who produced goods that were sold to make a profit controlled by the elite few employers. In return the workers got little wages insufficient to sustain their wellbeing. This system is called Capitalism.

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The capitalist employer and the worker are engaged in a conflict due to the unfair balance of power and distribution of profits. Thus the welfare state emerged as a result of the conflict. The emerging capitalist economic relationship rendered the employer more powerful and the worker powerless. Eventually the workers organised themselves into Labour movements and Unions which challenged the status quo hence the introduction of the provision of welfare.

As Anderson 1990 described the period as 'decommodified' period in a capitalist state. This emerged from the fact that Capitalism turns all aspects of life into 'commodities' that can be packaged, brought and sold. The availability of housing, health, education and leisure became commodified as access to them depended on individual ability to pay for and buy them. Thus the idea of strong labour movements led to many aspects of welfare to be free and decommodified. The state comes under pressure to provide welfare and intervene for its citizens. The conflict approach believes state intervention should be decommodified in order to avoid further class conflict. This brings about a redistribution of wealth and resources as welfare fund is funded by taxes on wealthy people. This was witnessed mostly at the end of the 19th century.

The essay has explored the history and development of social work highlighting the main forces that have influenced contemporary practice. As identified internal and external forces have surfaced within the discussion such as increase in population, rural-urban migration and the Industrial revolution. Within the social work context three key principles emerged- Individualistic/therapeutic, administrative and collectivist. These still exist <https://assignbuster.com/social-work-in-britain-during-the-nineteenth-century-history-essay/>

today as the basis of practice. Having explored the influences to the development of social work it is important to acknowledge that the field is determined and controlled by the social-economic and political agenda existing at a given period in time. Above all the 19th century is remembered for the significant development and origins of social work.