1968: The Turning Point Year When U.S. Social Work Failed to Turn

Michael Reisch, Ph.D., University of Maryland, USA

Abstract

The year 1968 was a potential turning point in the history of U.S. social work. After a generation of inward looking conservatism, significant numbers of American social workers revived the radical tradition of the profession that the purges of the post-war McCarthy period had repressed. New social movements, particularly the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and second wave feminism, and the efforts of activists outside of social work, from Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez to the National Welfare Rights Organization, inspired new approaches to advocacy, research, practice, and education. Inside and outside professional organizations and social service agencies, social workers began to advocate for progressive policies, the use of more expansive and more democratic practice frameworks, and the inclusion of content on race, gender, class, and sexuality in social work education. For a brief period, it appeared that a major transformation of the profession was possible, even inevitable. Although the events of this critical year produced some important changes in social work practice and education, they did not change its fundamental orientation. Ironically, both the ultimate failure of the era's radical activism and the introduction of identity-based content into the profession's vocabulary and mission made U.S. social work more vulnerable to conservative attacks during the past half century. The developments that resulted from the "year of the barricades" also

made it more difficult for the profession to articulate a unified vision for a rapidly changing environment and to translate that vision into new models of practice, research, and education.

Introduction

The British historian, G.M. Trevelyan, once remarked that 1848 was the turning point in European history when Europe failed to turn. Although of considerably lesser global significance, one could apply a somewhat similar description to the impact of 1968 on the social work profession in the U.S. The response of the organized profession to what Todd Gitlin (1987) termed "the year of the barricades" was short-lived and reflected more its reformist tradition than a radical new direction. One could even argue that the influence of the tumultuous events of 1968 set the profession on a course that made that attainment of its stated social justice mission more difficult. This article explores the short and long-term consequences of 1968 on U.S. social work and the implications of that dramatic year for contemporary and future practice.

Background to 1968

It is only through the wisdom of hindsight that the events of 1968 seem inevitable. Just as French observers in the early or mid-1780s could hardly have foreseen the impending revolution and its lasting consequences, in the early 1960s few Americans foresaw what would occur in 1968 or that the nation would still feel its effects a half century later. This myopia afflicted the leaders of the social work profession as well.

In the early 1960s, the U.S. social work profession was still reeling from the destruction wreaked by the anti-Communist purges of the McCarthy era. The repressive climate of this period not only reversed some of the policy reforms the social work profession had achieved during the two previous decades, it redirected most of its activist impulses towards professional status enhancement (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). The Rank and File Movement, whose influence

peaked during the New Deal era when it had over 15,000 members (more than the American Association of Social Workers), had ceased to exist by the early 1940s – a victim of internal sectarian schisms and government suppression. During its brief existence, it had regularly criticized the reformist tendencies of the profession from a left-wing perspective and drawn attention to domestic social conditions, including racism, and the global threat of fascism (Fisher, 1980).

The infamous "blacklists" closely associated with post-war McCarthyism had actually begun in the late 1930s, with the establishment of the House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). These blacklists occurred within the social work profession as well. In 1938, Smith College School of Social Work fired its Associate Dean, Bertha Capen Reynolds, a leading social work radical and the most published social work scholar during that decade, because of her Marxist political views. By 1942, it was clear that no other school of social work would offer her a position. For more than a decade, she was frequently the target of government investigation and attacks by public and private welfare officials. Tragically, as future events revealed Reynolds' experience was not unique (Andrews & Reisch, 1997; Schrecker, 1998).

Purges decimated the progressive leadership of social work unions in both the public and private sectors, lead to the dismissal of social work faculty in numerous universities and the firing of practitioners in public and private agencies alike. In major cities with liberal traditions such as New York, public welfare departments denied benefits to otherwise eligible clients because of their alleged political affiliations. For a generation, the organized social work profession largely withdrew from its previous advocacy efforts on behalf of excluded and marginalized populations, redirected its research to safe issues such as family dynamics, and

focused internally on professionalization. This political and ideological retreat contributed to the growing contradiction between the profession's social justice rhetoric and the realities of its daily practice. Consequently, as the first stirrings of social change emerged in the U.S. – particularly in the civil rights movement and nascent protests against the war in Vietnam – social workers were largely unprepared to respond to or to capitalize on changing environmental conditions. The connections they had previously established with low-income communities, labor unions, and civil rights organizations had largely disappeared (Karger, 1988; Reisch, 2009).

In hindsight, it seems remarkable that even at the height of the modern civil rights movements (~1955-1965) leading social work publications, including the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, made scant references to racism or racial inequality (Simon, 1994). For example, the first *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1960) did not refer explicitly to race or ethnicity, and the *Code* did not use the mild term "nondiscrimination" until 1967. NASW did not take a forceful stand on these issues until the late 1960s and schools of social work did not incorporate racial or gender justice into their curricula until the 1970s. With few exceptions, social workers largely "kept silent on the appalling disparity which exist[ed] in [U.S.] society" (Dubey, et al, 1969, p. 122). During the early and mid-1960s, speakers at the liberal National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW) focused on civil rights rather than institutional racism (Berry, 1963; Collins, 1965). Most social work research and policy advocacy stressed – explicitly or implicitly – the deviant features of so-called minority cultures. This provided the intellectual foundation for policies that focused more on "fixing" these cultural deficiencies than on addressing the structural roots of people's problems. Although major social work organizations rhetorically embraced social action by the late 1960s (Franklin, 1990), they continued to regard social action as an ancillary component of practice.

A few social work leaders, however, challenged the underlying assumptions of the "culture of poverty" thesis that informed the work of democratic socialists like Michael Harrington, liberal reformers, and conservatives who opposed the anti-poverty policies that Harrington's book, *The Other America* (1963) had inspired (Killian, 1964). At the 1965 conference, Whitney Young, director of the Urban League and president of NASW, equated racial equality with human rights and economic and social justice (p. 53). He challenged U.S. social workers to go beyond using non-controversial words such as "inclusiveness" and "human relations" and acknowledge the unique problems confronting racial minorities. Adopting a more radical perspective, activists outside of social work, such as Malcolm X (1964), sought to heighten awareness of racial and cultural differences in order to spur community mobilization. Over the next decade, feminists, and lesbian, gay, and disability rights activists emulated this approach.

Isolated portents of potential change, however, began to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s among social work scholars and community-based practitioners in major urban areas. New perspectives on juvenile delinquency and poverty influenced the policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and created the prototypes of experimental programs and innovative models of service delivery implemented by the federal government through its "War on Poverty" (Gillette, 1996). Social workers also contributed substantially to the passage of landmark legislation that created Medicare, Medicaid, the Older Americans Act, the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), Community Action Programs (CAPs), Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and expanded federal housing, educational, and nutrition assistance. ith the exception of the Community Action Programs established by the EOA, which required "maximum feasible participation" by community residents, and participation by social workers

in the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), these initiatives largely reflected the reformist tradition of the social work profession that dated back to the Progressive Era (~1880s-1918) and the New Deal period (Katz, 1989). For the most part, the field was unprepared for the more radical, social change oriented developments that erupted in the mid and late 1960s, particularly those that addressed long-neglected issues of racial and gender equality (Abramovitz, 1999; Quadagno, 1994).

Community Action

Beginning in 1964, inspired by the civil rights movement and encouraged by the infusion of federal dollars, local organizers in the government-funded Community Action Programs created a wide range of grassroots, neighborhood-based, and social action programs. The CAPs pushed for the expansion of welfare rights and greater political participation by low-income community residents. For a brief time, the effects of this "backyard revolution" (Boyte, 1980) were so dramatic that they threatened to disrupt the balance of power in major cities (Rose, 1972). Although the leaders of much of this activity emerged from outside the social work profession, community organizers within social work played an important role and revived interest in community organizing within the field to some extent (Fisher, 1994). The reintegration of activist principles into social work did not occur, however, without a struggle. Many liberals in the profession opposed the disruptive tactics activists used and their structural change goals (Specht, 1968). Consequently, a split emerged during this period between grassroots organizers and planners that persists today.

The National Welfare Rights Organization

The response of the social work profession to the short-lived National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) reflects the inability or unwillingness of the mainstream social work profession to grasp the meaning of contemporary events. Dissatisfied with the liberal

antipoverty agenda of the Johnson Administration and influenced by the Black Power movement and activists in controversial social service programs like Mobilization for Youth (MFY) and Harlem Youth in Action (HARYOU-ACT) in New York (Brager & Purcell, 1967), the NWRO asserted that poor people had a legal and moral right to assistance. Although mainstream organizations, such as NASW, cautiously endorsed this new agenda, they tried not to alienate the profession's traditional political and media supporters (West, 1981).

Soon, however, this local activism took on a national character when the NWRO adopted the "insurrectionary strategy" published in *The Nation* in May 1966 by future academics Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven (1974). Their goal was "to capitalize on the social unrest of the period to mobilize welfare recipients to take action on their own behalf" (Reisch & Andrews, 2002, p. 145). By the end of 1968, assisted by local clerical and secular activists, including many young social workers, the NWRO claimed over 22,000 members, 523 local chapters, and affiliates in 46 states. In the process, it became one of the few national organizations of poor people in U.S. history, particularly poor women of color. Its allies included organizers of the Poor People's March on Washington, the former Commissioner of Welfare in New York, the Nation of Islam and progressive labor groups like the United Farm Workers and the Social Service Employees Union (Nadasen, 2005, 2012). It appeared well prepared to take on the liberal bastion of the social work profession, the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW).

The Reckoning: The May 1969 NCSW Conference

The impact of the events of 1968 on the social work profession in the U.S. are reflected most clearly in developments at the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW) – long the liberal, reformist voice of social work – during this critical five-year period. In 1966, most major

papers focused on the problem of poverty and recent policy responses to this pressing issue; only one addressed the importance of social workers becoming more involved in politics. The following year, the conference's emphasis shifted to the growing urban crisis, particularly as it affected African Americans (then called Negroes) and, to a considerably lesser extent, the need for agency change in response to rapidly changing social conditions.

The focus on community-based issues and the potential response of policymakers to urban problems continued in 1968. For the first time, however, the influence of activists within the profession began to appear. In May, the organization scheduled a social action forum at its annual conference that included participation by the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, the new National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), the National Federation of Student Social Workers, and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). A conference paper connected domestic problems with the issue of peace and disarmament, reflecting growing concern about the war in Vietnam. In November, the NCSW created a Social Action Task Force charged with drafting an action strategy for the Conference (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

The critical year for the NCSW was 1969. The conference program included a number of papers that introduced the topic of social revolution and linked it to issues affecting the Black community. The more significant action, however, occurred outside the formal sessions. At the opening plenary on May 27, the leadership of the NWRO attempted to take over the conference; its members and allied blocked the room's exits, and demanded $35,000 from those in attendance. The next evening, the NWRO, supported by the NABSW and the student-based Social Welfare Workers Movement (SWWM) repeated this confrontational tactic and gained some modest concessions. The disruptions also attracted considerable media coverage, but the

activists soon realized that their actions have achieved "very little of real consequence for social welfare" (Richan, 1973, p. 150).

The repercussions of these dramatic confrontations continued in 1970, when the NCSW attempted to return to its traditional focus on the nation's social policy priorities especially in the areas of welfare, poverty and racial justice. More than any single event, the disruptions of the 1969 NCSW conference symbolized the profession's failure to recognize the existence of a critical turning point in its evolution and its failure, in the words of Black Panther Party leader and future Congressional Representative, Bobby Seale, to "seize the time." They underscored the schism between liberals and radicals in the profession and reflected the different responses of these factions to the emerging racial, gender, and class politics of the day.

For a short period, it seemed possible that the confrontation at the NCSW conference might inspire the development of a radical movement within the social work profession. Through a combination of popular education and direct action, the youthful members of the socialist Social Welfare Workers Movement, which had supported the NWRO at the 1969 NCSW conference, promoted community-worker control of social service organizations, deprofessionalization, and major structural changes in the U.S. economy (Wenocur, 1975). Its influence, however, was short-lived and confined largely to young, white social workers in major metropolitan areas, who in the words of one of its founders failed to "surmount their own social class positions" (Wenocur, quoted in Reisch & Andrews, 2002, p. 156). Although the National Association of Social Workers had formally called for the abolition of white racism in 1969, pressure to preserve professional prerogatives produced growing tensions between mainstream social service agencies and community-based organizations in which racial and ethnic minorities played major roles (Rose, 1972).

The Aftermath of 1968

One consequence of 1968 for U.S. social work was the growing influence of "new social

movements" (NSMs) based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. These movements

broadened the profession's conceptual frameworks and expanded its practice emphases. Yet,

they also made it more difficult to construct a comprehensive vision of social work's goals.

Conflicts also emerged among the NSMs as well. For example, while feminists within social

work successfully challenged long ignored gender-based inequalities in society and the

profession, they largely ignored the specific needs of women of color (Abramovitz, 1999;

Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman 1986; van den Bergh 1995). Another conflict appeared in groups

with which some activist social workers were involved, between those with broad critical and

structural goals, such as ACORN, the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO), and ACT-

UP, and those that focused, at least initially, on small scale changes at the local level, such as the

Kensington Welfare Rights Organization in Philadelphia (Reisch, 2008).

The Changing Language of Social Work

By the 1970s, however, these developments began to alter the profession's language and focus.

For the first time, the literature openly recognized racism and proposed new practice approaches

that reflected the needs and values of minority communities in fields such as child welfare,

criminal justice, mental health, and family practice (Billingsley & Giovanonni, 1972; Dodson,

1970; Miranda, 1979; Morales, 1978). Scholars called for "ethnic sensitive practice," "cultural

competence," and "bicultural models" and emphasized the relationship of political-economic and

psycho-social factors in both clinical and community work (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Lum,

2011; Solomon, 1976). Divisions persisted, however, between social workers who viewed

cultural differences as barriers to effective practice and those who stressed the common traits of

all people (Ragan, 1978). Eventually, these divisions and the increasing popularity of culturally specific services produced attacks on traditional models of social work practice.

Racial minority and female critics of mainstream theoretical constructs rejected a universal idea of social justice in favor of a focus on overcoming group-specific forms of oppression based on social identity (Chestang, 1970; Dodson, 1970; Moore, 1970; Morales, 1971; Shannon, 1970). By the late 1970s, ethnic or gender-specific practice had become the norm in U.S. social work often supported by the use of the new term empowerment (Bretz, 1978; Morales, 1978; Miranda, 1979; Ragan, 1978). The revised NASW *Code of Ethics* (1979) officially sanctioned these trends.

Changes in the Social Work Literature

One way to assess the consequences of 1968 for social work in the U.S. is by examining the focus of social work literature immediately before and after this watershed year. To do this, the author conducted a content analysis of articles, editorials, letters, and comments published in four major peer reviewed journals (*Child Welfare*, *Social Casework*, *Social Service Review*, and *Social Work*) and the papers selected for inclusion in the *Proceedings* of the annual National Conference on Social Welfare, the leading social work conference, between 1966 and 1970.

From 1966-1968, journals such as *Social Work* and *Social Service Review* reflected the influence of alternative issues and policy perspectives inspired by the federal War on Poverty. In *Social Work*, for example, numerous articles discussed poverty, the expansion of public welfare, a range of urban problems, and the nature of community change and social action. They debated current policy proposals, particularly about income support and desegregation, and analyzed the effects of the Community Action Programs established by the new Office of Economic Opportunity. A few addressed the challenges that the existence of racial and class divisions

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posed for policy and program development and service delivery. In late 1967, published pieces first referred to the growing national welfare rights movement, campus disturbances against the war in Vietnam, and racial conflict – no doubt reflecting the urban riots and massive anti-war demonstrations of the previous spring and summer.

The following year, a series of essays debated the profession's ethical responsibility to engage in advocacy and social change at both the neighborhood and societal levels. Authors' positions reflected considerable disagreements with the field regarding the relationship between activism and professionalism. An editorial that appeared in early fall 1968 entitled "We Grieve for America" discussed the impact of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy that occurred in the spring, growing urban unrest, and the attack on demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention that took place in Chicago in August. This trend continued in 1969 and 1970; *Social Work* published another editorial about the efficacy of demonstrations, and an increasing number of articles and letters about politics and advocacy, ethnic cleavages, racism, the function of social conflict, and the role of community action.

In 1970, however, critiques of the perceived excesses of community activists in the CAPs and street protests began to appear and editorial comments decried the abandonment of the nation's "liberal spirit" and the "course of national madness" on which the U.S. had embarked. While one author (Rein, 1970) proposed that social work should attempt to become a more radical profession, others disagreed with his perspective arguing that it undermined social work's status and integrity. Another editorial in *Social Work* in December 1970 entitled "Despair is Unprofessional" reflected these tensions and the uncertain future of the field.

The shifting coverage of contemporary events in *Social Service Review* was similar. From 1966-1968, the journal largely reflected the evolving focus of federal policies through

publication of articles on such issues as the role of the profession in social action and social change, the expansion of legal aid for the poor, and proposed reforms in social welfare and criminal justice policy. Only one article mentioned the significance of identity issues in practice. In addition to discussing these issues, readers' comments also responded to the implications of contemporary events. They discussed civil rights, the underlying assumptions of the controversial Moynihan Report on the Negro family (1965), the role of unions in social work, organizing in low-income communities, the conditions and rights of the poor, and the potential for a "segregated profession" – by race and method – to emerge.

In 1969 and 1970, although the journal continued to respond to new policy developments, particularly those proposed by the incoming Nixon Administration, the focus of the publication shifted somewhat. Perhaps influenced by the actions of the National Welfare Rights Organization and other advocacy groups, articles commented on the "crisis in public aid" and referred to the importance of recipients' views of the social service system for the first time. Others assessed the efficacy of different models of community organization and community-based service delivery that had recently appeared. In response to widespread social unrest, comments discussed the causes of riots, how to "clean up the cities," and – of particular note, the underlying role of racism in creating the nation's social problems and the dramatic response to these problems. In 1970, a number of articles addressing the historical and contemporary effects of race and racism appeared for the first time. The discussion of the potential for radical social work to take root also continued, although it received little support in letters submitted by the journal's readers.

Changes in the content of the other two journals examined (*Child Welfare* and *Social Casework*) were less extensive – perhaps because of their specific focus – but were no less

dramatic. For example, from 1966-1968, *Child Welfare* published several pieces on welfare policy, housing segregation, urban issues, the impact of federal programs such as Head Start, and the importance of client participation in change efforts. Yet, a number of its articles focused on the cultural deficiencies of minority communities, such as unmarried parenthood, reflecting the prevailing "culture of poverty" thesis (Quadagno, 1994). Echoing the aforementioned Moynihan Report, they stressed the importance of family planning and dealing with the problems of teenage Negro motherhood.

By late 1968, however, a subtle change in tone began to appear. As in other journals, articles addressed the *strengths*, not merely the deficiencies of minority clients, the importance of paying attention to value differences between workers and clients, to clients' perceptions of the social service transaction, and to the need to address the underlying structural problems in U.S. society. Although a number of articles retained a dominant cultural focus, an editorial in 1969 addressed the "Challenge of Change," and articles during the next two years discussed the role of race and poverty in child welfare practice. Essays also drew attention to such emerging issues as transracial adoption, the importance of community action to overcome the problems of the "ghetto," and the need for the nation to adopt a preventive focus in social policy development.

The change in emphasis of *Social Casework* was more noticeable. In the two years prior to 1968, it published only a handful of articles on contemporary issues other than a few that addressed recent federal policies. In 1968, however, it published a number of articles on social work with the poor from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Articles also appeared on race relations and societal change. In response to contemporary events, pieces during the following year discussed the consequences of the urban crisis, emerging worker-client conflicts, and the seeming fragmentation of the profession. Essays also appeared on the role of culture and

its effects on low income Black families. This trend continued in 1970 when the journal published widely on such topics as the role of practitioners and agencies in advocacy, social action, and community, institutional and policy change; the specific needs of the Black community; and the effects of race and racism on practice. In addition, for the first time articles addressed racial issues affecting a minority other than Blacks and criticized sexism within the social work profession, a precursor of developments in social work literature in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Impact on Practice and Research

These complex trends had several contradictory effects. On the one hand, they inspired new forms of scholarship, new models of social programs, the integration of new theoretical frameworks into research and education, and the acceptance of a broader definition of social justice (Hill Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Nussbaum, 1999; Morris, 2002; Young, 1990). On the other hand, by undermining the traditional liberal focus of the profession, they inadvertently provided opponents of social welfare with the conceptual ammunition to attack anti-poverty programs and justify a rollback of recently enacted reforms (Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984), a trend that continues to this day.

By the early 1970s, except among conservatives within the profession, which the events of 1968 revealed were more numerous than previous assumed, U.S. social workers generally agreed that they needed to address the structural foundations of social inequality. This involved changing the field's "emphasis on individual pathology and rehabilitation" to a focus on "the basic systematic changes … [including] the removal of socioeconomic and racial barriers to an equitable redistribution of the power, wealth, and income of the nation" reflected this shift (Dumpson, 1972; pp. 4-5). The growing emphasis on cultural identity and the resultant

preference for identity-oriented practice and "selective" social policies, however, hampered the introduction of a more critical perspective (De Anda, 1984) as some observers soon noted. Longres and Bailey (1979), for example, argued that essentializing the concepts of race and gender and separating them from their social construction made it more difficult to articulate and practice a more comprehensive definition of social justice.

The Impact on Policy and Politics

By the late 1960s, the public perception of anti-poverty policies as "Black programs," promoted by conservative politicians and their supporters in the media, produced increased opposition to social welfare, in general, particularly among whites (Edsall & Edsall, 1992). This backlash soon extended to other significant policy developments in the 1960s and early 1970s (Moynihan, 1969). These included the 1965 Immigration Act (Takaki, 1994), the Community Action Programs (which gave considerable power to African American and Latino activists) (Rose, 1972), support for Native Americans' cultural and territorial rights (Weaver, 2014), Affirmative Action (Farmer, 1978) and passage of Title IX of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* (Abramovitz, 1999).

Summary and Conclusion

The events of 1968 represented the apotheosis of the decade's social activism and optimistic views of social change. Although social workers participated in virtually all the social movements of the period, they did not play a leadership role in any of them, with the exception of the NWRO. This may have been the result of the lingering effects of McCarthyism and the endurance of the professionalizing impulse within the field. For a fleeting moment, however, the tumultuous year 1968 also symbolized the potential for an alliance between social reformers and

social activists within the social work profession, and the formation of coalitions that bridged long-standing racial and class divisions.

For the social work field, the major impact of 1968 – and the period immediately surrounding it – was on practice and education. Even if temporary, it rekindled the profession's obligation to engage in social action at the community and policy levels, and was "a final step in the liberation [of the profession] from the heritage of McCarthyism" (Thursz, 1966, quoted in Reisch & Andrews, 2002, p. 158.) Most American social workers, however, particularly the majority that practiced with individuals and families, maintained a reformist posture consistent with their professional aspirations. They preferred to promote modest changes within existing institutions and rejected the use of disruptive tactics or the application of more critical analyses of social conditions. This emphasis on "dynamic homeostasis" led the field to embrace apolitical theoretical practice frameworks in the 1970s and 1980s, such as systems and ecological theory (Reisch & Jani, 2012; Jani & Reisch, 2011).

The effects of 1968 on schools of social work were more consequential and, to some extent, more long lasting. The struggles of women and communities of color inspired a new level of awareness among students and faculty and led to the infusion of additional content on racism, sexism and, ultimately, other forms of societal marginalization and oppression into schools' curricula. The current emphasis on multiculturalism, social justice, diversity, and empowerment in social work education (Council on Social Work Education, 2015) – even if "honored more in the breach than in the observance" – echoes the underlying sentiments of 1968, even if most proponents of these concepts are ignorant of their historical origins.

The liberation movements of the period also highlighted the contradictions between the profession's social justice rhetoric and the continuing focus of U.S. policy and practice on

individual, family, or community pathology, often tied (not always subtly) to racial, gender, or ethnic characteristics. While the profession soon embraced the importance of affirming group identity that these movements promoted, for the most part it could not go beyond opposing obvious manifestations of individual and institutional inequality, to address their underlying structural roots in both policy and practice. Although the anti-poverty programs and social movements that peaked in 1968 had a substantial, if often unacknowledged impact on U.S. society, they also made it increasingly difficult for the profession to advocate for social policies that reflect a universal, instead of a group-specific concept of social justice. The profession has also been unable to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework for practice, research, and education that integrated the particular concerns of excluded groups, instead of addressing them as distinct areas of inquiry and work. Finally, perhaps of greatest importance, during the past five decades the social work profession in the U.S. has largely failed to take advantage of the possibilities that existed a half century ago to forge permanent alliances with organizations created by clients and constituents and lasting coalitions with allies outside the field. In recent years, the marginal role that U.S. social workers have played in emerging movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo vividly demonstrate this failure.

There are several possible explanations for this failure. One is the recurrent political and social isolation of activist social workers, inside and outside the academy, who adopt a critical perspective on society and practice. A second explanation is the field's persistent obsession with a form of professionalization that widens rather than narrows the gap between its ethical imperative to pursue social justice and the day-to-day nature of most practice. A third reason is that the movements of the 1960s, which peaked in 1968, raised issues about race, gender, class, and (later) sexual orientation whose implications the profession has not yet fully recognized.

Two major questions, therefore, remains unanswered: Were the events of 1968 and the response they generated in the U.S. social work field anomalies – unique phenomena, the products of a historically specific and unreproducible context? Does the continuing existence of the social conditions that inspired these events (albeit in new forms) leave open the possibility that the past is merely prologue? Given recent political, economic, and ideological developments, there is no better time than the present to test these hypotheses.

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