

REVIEW: FROM PUBLIC STREETS TO PRIVATE LIVES

Bob Holman

Cree, Vivienne E. **From Public Streets to Private Lives: The changing task of social work**, Aldershot, Avebury, £30, 1995, ISBN 1-85628-847-1, 179pp.

On the face of it, a detailed study of the history of a medium-sized Scottish voluntary agency may seem interesting yet hardly relevant to the billion-pound welfare industry which now contains social work. However, Vivienne Cree's investigation, originally written as a PhD thesis, skilfully draws upon original documents and interviews with key participants to show both how the many changes experienced by Family Care (as it is now called) reflected some of those occurring in social work at large and also how they explain the position it is in today.

The agency began in Edinburgh in 1911 as a branch of an international organisation, the National Vigilance Association (NVA), which campaigned against prostitution, the white slave trade, and sexual deviance. The Edinburgh branch enthusiastically lent its weight and also expressed indignant opposition to the sale of 'rubber goods' through magazines. During World War One, members patrolled the streets (the 'Public Streets' of the title) to protect soldiers from being molested by women. Apparently, the records do not say whether the women needed protection from the soldiers! After the war, the agency developed more practical services for women who were beginning to seek help because they were homeless, pregnant, or on the run from parents or spouses. By the 1940s, now named the Guild of Service, the agency specialised in a case-work service for unmarried mothers and

*Bob Holman is a voluntary neighbourhood worker in Easterhouse, Glasgow and Visiting Professor at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of **The Evacuation. A Very British Revolution**, Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1995.*

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adopters and won itself a reputation as a highly professional social work organisation. In 1978, the name over the door was again changed, this time to Family Care as it sought to find a role in adoption counselling, volunteer befriending and a community based project for women and children.

DISCOURSE

So much for the historical outline. More interestingly, what brought about the changes both within and without the agency? In terms of explanation, Cree draws heavily upon the approach of Foucault which gives prominence to the concept of discourses (Foucault 1972). Cree explains:

For Foucault, discourse is much more than verbal representation or even a way of thinking and producing meaning. Discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' it is through discourses, that is, the mix of beliefs, ideas and concepts which make up and organise our relation to reality that power and knowledge come together.
(p.7)

From the many discourses, between individuals and groups, come the knowledge, values, power and contradictions that make up social work at any one time.

The general idea of discourse is not new to theorists of social change. Marxist thought has long used the concept of contradictions to shed understanding on conflicts within society in general and social work in particular (see Corrigan and Leonard 1978). Paulo Freire spoke of *praxis*, the extensive dialogue and reflections which led to action (Freire 1972). These authors would add that discourse does not just come out of thin air but is shaped by economic and political structures. In other words, those unfashionable words 'social classes' are still relevant. Further, as Freire would emphasise, the important question is just who is involved in the discourse? Perhaps **From Public Streets to Private Lives** should have given more attention to which social classes or social groupings have been excluded from influencing the direction of social work.

The strength of Vivienne Cree's study - unusual in social work authors - is that she takes a particular theoretical perspective, which she calls 'feminism and Foucault' (p.6) and carefully applies it to the course of one social work

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agency. Her insightful analysis makes sense of much of what has happened in social welfare. For instance, Cree shows that 1990s conflict between staff and committee members and between professionals and volunteers were foreshadowed in the tussles within the Guild of Service. Lady Charlotte Learmouth joined the executive committee in 1944 and later became its chairperson. She was a progressive who caused some of the older committee members, 'the old ladies with hats', to resign. She wanted a professional agency with a quality service. These objectives were fully shared by the long-serving organising secretary, Kay Stewart, who earned the Guild a reputation for providing a casework service for unmarried mothers. Vivienne Cree states that Kay Stewart served on the 1946 Clyde Committee on Homeless Children (p.94), although I can find no record of this. However, she obviously agreed with the committee's recommendations for the care of children and was instrumental in the Guild founding Edzell Lodge where 12 children were looked after by skilled staff who also maintained links with their mothers. Why, then, did these two women with similar aims come into conflict? Their differences revolved around the part to be played by the committee, with Lady Learmouth wanting members closely involved in decisions about users which Miss Stewart considered the preserve of the professional staff. Further, the latter disapproved of committee members - the amateurs - taking out children from Edzell Lodge. In 1954, the organising secretary resigned 'unable to reconcile herself to a specific difference of opinion over a child in care' (p.74). The battle reflected the statutory sphere where elected members of local authority children's committees, who were initially very closely involved with decisions about individual children, later faced arguments from both administrators and social workers that they should keep their distance. Another but related debate in the Guild of Family Service arose when volunteering sprang into vogue, so raising the issue of how closely volunteers could be involved with clients. As Cree ably describes, these conflicting debates in committees, in offices, and in the social work press, were the melting pot from which practice and policy eventually solidified.

VOLUNTARY BODIES

With a voluntary body as her focus of investigation, it is not surprising that the author is particularly interesting when she considers the discourses around the nature of the non-statutory sector. Following Kramer, she considers three roles traditionally associated with voluntary bodies, namely that they innovate, that they promote democratic involvement and self help,

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and that they constitute alternatives to state services (Kramer 1981). Did Family Care (and its predecessors) accord with these roles?

Viviene Cree established that the NVA was innovative and led the way in campaigning for and initiating provision for vulnerable women and their children. The Guild of Service's children's home, Edzell Lodge, was 'hailed as the first family group home in Scotland' (p.136) while some of its adoptive services were of a pioneering nature. Thereafter, Cree argues, innovation was on a small scale and seemed to confirm Kramer's suggestion that, once an agency becomes institutionalised, innovations consist of 'small scale, non-controversial, incremental improvements or extensions of conventional social services with relatively few original or novel features' (p.136).

Turning to local involvement, the author explains that Family Care 'made a deliberate move away from volunteer involvement as part of its professionalisation process from the 1950s to the 1970s. Not only were volunteers removed from direct service provision with clients, they were also gradually distanced from decision making and policy matters' (p.140). Commenting on the agency's position a few years later, she continues, 'there has been no opportunity for single parents to contribute to agency policy and practices at executive level' (p.140).

What of alternative provision? In the past, the NVA, the Guild of Service and Family Care did provide services which were different from statutory ones. The agency perceived a social need and attempted to meet it - sometimes with the aid of a general grant from the local authority. But today, in the era of the welfare market and the contract culture, Family Care can only obtain extensive financial support if it is prepared to run services which are closely specified by the local authority.

Viviene Cree's analysis is valuable in that it makes a detailed study of an actual agency and so challenges conventional wisdom about the roles of voluntary bodies. It has some general application for, undoubtedly, some of the older and larger voluntary societies are frequently lacking in innovation, involvement and independence. But it also reveals the limitations of the single case study approach because it concentrates on just one particular kind of voluntary agency, a well established professional one with origins rooted in well-heeled Edinburgh. It thus overlooks different types of voluntary bodies, particularly neighbourhood or community groups. A case study of one of these might show it running food co-ops on a peripheral estate under the control of local residents. In short, it would reveal a voluntary sector

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which is innovative, does major on local involvement, and which does offer services different from the local authority.

SOCIAL WORK TODAY AND TOMORROW

In the 1990s, Vivienne Cree has few doubts that the kind of social work she has researched and practised is under threat. She writes, 'Social work practice has become more regulatory, more inspectorial, and more "masculine" in style, while the more "feminine", counselling aspects of social work are in the process of being separated off into private or voluntary counselling agencies' (p.154). Not surprisingly, social work is losing what Charlotte Towle - who Cree cites - used to call 'the cause', the pressure for social reform (Towle 1969).

As a researcher, Cree is mainly concerned to explain how social work has reached its present position rather to discuss future developments. Therefore I must suggest that hope can be discerned in two unexpected quarters, both of which she touches upon. First, the church and social work. Cree points out that active Christians played a foremost part in the origins of the NVA and that 'Christian voices of morality and service continue to play a significant part in social work discourse today' (p.140); in particular, she mentions the Social Workers Christian Fellowship. As a member of the SWCF, I am not an unbiased commentator, but I reckon that it and similar bodies do still hold that social work is a vocation based on certain values - such as a belief that all individuals are valuable to and equal before God - which have applications for the way in which social work should be practised. Of course, Christianity or any other religion can not be the sole contributor to social work values, but I believe that its insights and principles can be a challenge to the gods of mammon and careerism which have invaded welfare agencies.

Second, community social work which is reviving again as evidenced in the British Association of Social Work's Special Interest Group in Community Social Work. Community social work is significant because it emphasises co-operation between social workers and users, because it focuses on values, and because it recognises that social deprivations stem largely from structural causes which are in need of fundamental change. In brief, it counters some of the failings of contemporary welfare, as identified by Cree.

Social work is at a crossroads. Some commentators even predict that it will be swallowed up altogether by the new welfare industry which is geared to

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economic demand and supply rather than to meeting social needs. But Cree's final words do contain optimism. She writes, 'if negotiation, contestation and resistance are endemic in social work's formation, then change is possible. It is up to us to push for the kind of social work task with which we wish to be associated' (p. 158). It's up to us.

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