

# Towards a critical history of child protection social work

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# Introduction

- Absence of Welfare State (19th century)
- Welfare State (20<sup>th</sup> century)
- Disappearing Welfare State, Individualism combined with Child Protection 'Muscular Authoritarianism' (21<sup>st</sup> century)

# A social and economic history of child protection

130 year-long period characterised firstly by rise and fall and rise again of 'big' children's charities

- 1880s      Confidence: children rescued, parents blamed:  
The NSPCC locate the root cause of abuse in the abusive parents' failure to feel proper regard for their children rather than in the parents' necessity (for child begging)
- 1960s      Crisis: existential and financial crises
- 2015      Certitude: return to child rescue and parent blaming (internet use, childhood obesity)?

# A social and economic history of child protection #2

And period also characterised, secondly, by the rise of the role of local government:

- 1948 Children's Departments
- Late 1950s – 1973 The short summer of progressive Children and Family Social Work?

The expansion of the Welfare State produced a generation of social workers committed to challenging structural inequalities, liberal values, radicalism, but also, crucially, progressive legislation (1963 Children and Young Person Act, Social Work (Scotland) 1968 and resources dedicated to preventative children and family work.

1948 – early 1970s 'The high water mark of social work's reforming potential'

# 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> Century Child Protection a state of constant panic and exhaustion

‘A sense of crisis has been almost perpetual since 1973’ (Parton)

## ‘Signal events’

- 1973 the death of Maria Colwell: ‘We have lived with an increasing sense of **‘moral panic’** ever since’ (Parton)
- 1986 the death of Jasmine Beckford: rise of rule of pessimism? (Clapton et al 2013)

# 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> Century Child Protection: a state of constant panic and exhaustion #2

- 1987 and 1990      Cleveland and Orkney
- 2000                      abduction and murder of Sarah Payne, The NSPCC and the News of the World's summit on paedophiles, call for ban 'Brass Eye' spoof (NSPCC)
- 2003                      Brief return of family support: 'It is not possible to separate the protection of children from wider support to families', Laming Report, 2003 1.30)

# 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> Century Child Protection: a state of constant panic and exhaustion #3

- But, 2004                      ‘Every Child Matters’ legislation: ‘wholesale lack of trust in parents’ (Munro)
- 2007                              Death of Peter Connolly confirms increased emphasis on such lack of trust and, child rescue
- 2015                              A Perfect Storm of Anxieties, Panic and Moral Panics: Yewtree>Historic Sexual Abuse, Social Media dangers. The net ever-widens.

# 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> Century Child Protection: a state of constant panic and exhaustion #4

‘There are increasing pressures on social workers to do more with less, burn-out and disillusionment is expressed in high vacancy and turn-over rates and practice is suffering from a rise of cynicism among state social workers and what has been described as a ‘coarsening of attitudes’ (Clapton et al, 2013)

‘a child protection culture mired in muscular authoritarianism towards multiply deprived families’ (Featherstone et al)

# Is reform possible or is 'child rescue' a doomed project?

## The return of rescue

'Social workers, their managers and other professionals should always consider the plan from the child's perspective. A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to **rescue** children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes. (HM Government (2013, emphasis added))

# Is reform possible or is 'child rescue' a doomed project? #2

... protection involves a very different conception of the relationship between an individual or group, and others than does care. Caring seems to involve taking the concerns and needs of the other as the basis for action. Protection presumes the bad intentions and harm that the other is likely to bring to bear against the self or group and to require a response to that potential harm. Protection can also become self-serving, turning into what Judith Hicks Stein calls “the protection racket” in which the need for protection reinforces itself. (Tronto 1994: 104-05)

# Is reform possible or is 'child rescue' a doomed project?#3

No evidence that public care reduces harm (Ritchie)

State makes a lousy parent (Sutherland)

'Furthermore, a lesson from that period (1970s and 1980s) was the importance of recognising secondary or system abuse. This lesson seems to have been forgotten by the cheerleaders for removal today' (Featherstone et al, 2013).

# Is reform possible or is 'child rescue' a doomed project? #4

## Parton

- There is something in the cultural, political and institutional contexts of child protection...which means it might prove very difficult to move things forward...'
- Social work and child protection (failure) seem to be tied together by an umbilical cord.

# Another social work? 21<sup>st</sup> Enlightenment values versus Victorian ideas

‘Children are not free-floating individuals. However tempting it looks in the face of another tragedy, there is no easy moral mandate to rescue more and more children from impoverished families and communities. We need to understand and work with the relational ties of blood, kin, friendship, place and community. These are the primary contexts for the resolution of children's needs’ (Featherstone et al, 2014).

# Another social work? 21<sup>st</sup> Enlightenment values versus Victorian ideas #2

The Empire ('3<sup>rd</sup> World' social work) to strike back?  
Community Social Work: Savings clubs and local employment and labour-exchange circles and other community actions... Social work education needs to renew its emphasis on training social workers in negotiating with the utility companies, housing departments, loan companies and the welfare agencies that the most impoverished are regular in struggle with; accompanying this should come a thorough knowledge of the benefits systems.

# Another social work? 21<sup>st</sup> Enlightenment values versus Victorian ideas #3

Instead of exporting a failed child protection project to the rest of the world, social work needs to adopt the more pedagogical practices of European and elsewhere in which advice-sharing and mentoring are privileged over more deficit-driven approaches.

Social work thinking needs to rediscover scepticism, radicalism (private troubles/public issues) and renew its moral compass informed by the realities of most of the children and families with whom we practice today...

Thank You.