

article

Radical social welfare and anti-authoritarian mutual aid

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Current social welfare systems of the Global North are now questioned and privatisation is seen as a viable alternative. This article explores how neoliberal conditions of austerity and privatisation have indirectly created systems of mutual aid that concurrently function as forms of protest, organising and social care. Written from a social-anarchist perspective, the article draws from organising case examples and my own experiences in anti-authoritarian community organising and radical social services in the US. Prevailing models of social welfare and social work are questioned, and challenges in organising models that place emphasis on autonomy, solidarity, mutual aid and direct democracy are discussed. The article concludes that while radical alternatives may challenge institutionalised social welfare that protects against the state and capitalism, there is still room for reflection, critique and dialogue regarding radical practice.

key words neoliberalism • radical social work • mutual aid • social anarchism • community organisation

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Introduction

Many governments of the Global North have downsized, dismantled and ‘colonised’ (Spolander et al, 2016) social welfare programmes through neoliberal privatisation (Harvey, 2007), which has moved from ‘explicit theory to default practise’ (Schram, 2008: 307). Neoliberalism has strained existing institutions of social care and exacerbated social, economic, political and environmental problems (Martinez and Garcia, 1998). Such constraints have catalysed community-based systems of mutual aid that challenge contemporary understandings of social welfare by functioning as forms of protest, organising and social care. Understandings and feelings regarding social, ecological, economic, political, cultural and spiritual conditions often determine types of organising. Neoliberalism, neofascism (Giroux, 2016; Neiwert, 2017), hate (Feinberg et al, 2019; Kunst et al, 2019), violence (Berkowitz et al, 2019), individualism (Santos et al, 2017), poverty and inequality (Pilkington, 2018), and impending ecological collapse and its catastrophic outcomes (Ceballos et al, 2017; Sánchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys, 2019) highlight the desperate need for organising that contextualises

'glocalised' (Moxley et al, 2005) problems, as well as practices that nurture links between 'direct action and direct services' (Shepard, 2014). In these times, social work must critically and reflexively examine accomplishments and missteps found in the 'lessons of alternative and collective methods' (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013) – as well as its intentional and unintentional complicity with neoliberalism (Reisch, 2013a) – and use such wisdom towards a re-conceptualisation of praxis that may challenge the state and neoliberal capitalism. In line with other radicals, such as Michael Reisch (2013b: 77), this article seeks to create a 'counter-narrative' by 're-learn[ing] certain lessons and recaptur[ing] our historical memory and sense of agency' through a 21st-century lens. It is my hope that this article may inspire other radicals to reflect upon accomplishments and missteps.

Given global crises and the need for relevant approaches to address them, I draw from a social-anarchist perspective and explore organising cases in Greece, the US and Canada, as well as my own experiences in anti-authoritarian community organising and radical social services in the US. I begin by briefly discussing the development of social welfare under neoliberalism, which sets the tone for a rethinking of the concepts of social welfare and their implementation within an anti-authoritarian orientation. From a social-anarchist standpoint, I argue for a need to rework conceptualisations of social welfare as mutual aid. I then build upon the idea that social welfare practices should be rooted in the mutual aid principles of autonomy, solidarity and participation by examining and critiquing the current state of social work practice in the US and its institutionalised role. I then descriptively review three cases that I feel exemplify the zeitgeist of anti-authoritarian organising under neoliberalism. I subsequently reflect on challenges that I have experienced in similar projects and close with recommendations on how to mitigate these challenges and build upon strengths towards a social work that has potential to resist capitalism and the state.

Neoliberalism and social welfare

Communities affected by neoliberal policies of austerity and privatisation bolster existing social welfare projects and networks, and craft new structures within (and outside of) public and private institutions. Projects and networks utilise a prefigurative politics that promotes autonomy, solidarity, mutual aid and direct democracy – a politics that undergirds organising that acts as protest as well as social welfare. Prefigurative politics is a politics of praxis (Freire, 1970) as it seeks to build and live futures in the present, where ends are means, and processes and outcomes are the same (Crass, 2009).

Welfare states with robust social welfare programmes have traditionally functioned as basic protections against capitalism. As a result, a number of beneficial social securities have been achieved. Even so, underlying tensions exist between social work, capitalism, 'wicked policies' (Briskman, 2013: 51) and the state. The first tension is that relationships between the state, capitalism, social welfare and social work can manifest as exclusive, paternalistic and controlling. The second tension exists between social welfare that seeks to control and social work that fosters advocacy for individual and community self-determination, autonomy and authority in dealing with social problems. From Grenfell to Flint, community organising practices that reject statist and private sectors in favour of alternative 'middle way[s]' (Breuggemann, 2012: 42) as resistance to ideological 'third way[s]' (Ferguson, 2004) have surged. Such undercurrents present an opportunity to reframe practices that resist neoliberal effects.

Further, because language and standpoints consistently inform practice (Dominelli and Campling, 2002), a re-examination of individual and collective understandings of social welfare is useful.

Redefining social welfare

Definitions of social welfare and social work reflect unique histories, contexts, geographies, cultures, norms and mores. The origins of welfare state capitalism come from 16th-century ideals of Western, state-sanctioned religious charity and social control. These ideological underpinnings – namely, notions of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ poor, and the discrimination, surveillance and means testing of beneficiaries – are rooted in religious duty and devotion (Piven and Cloward, 1972). For some time, moral piety operated as a means to quell dissent, maintain social order and whiteness, preserve capitalist productivity, and uphold gendered structures and ideas of the family (Abramovitz, 2017). Until the Great Depression of the 1930s, private religious charity and municipalities were able to ‘manage’ poverty, and therefore threats of poor and working-class opposition to the state, capitalism and the greater social order (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2017).

Welfare state capitalism and neoliberal social welfare have continued, reinforced and made efficient social control and oppression. In the late 1970s, neoliberal policies began a decades-long process of the privatisation and dismantling of US social welfare programmes under the guise of ‘personal responsibility’, ‘government waste’ and ‘innovation’. Now, cultural capitalism (Žižek, 2009), universal basic income (UBI), philanthrocapitalism (Aschoff, 2015), social entrepreneurship and the nonprofit–industrial complex (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2017) reflect a deep transformation of the welfare state. Negative outcomes of the neoliberal project highlight innate contradictions between the state, capitalism and social welfare. Due to intrinsic inconsistencies, a rethinking and re-conceptualisation of social welfare as an ‘intrinsic part of any society’ and not a ‘functional extra’ is essential (Millet, 1997: 38). The urgency of a response to need is accelerated by the neoliberal dismantling and privatisation of structures of care, and capitalism's rapid destruction of the planet (White, 2015). Along with the risks of a lack of social protection, exacerbated eco-social threats place marginalised populations at risk, and the Earth and its life forms on a path to ecocide. Mutual aid and its principles provide a possible framework for building social welfare and social work that meets proximate need while challenging neoliberal structural threats.

Mutual aid as social welfare

Similar to current understandings of social welfare, reassessments are moulded by history, context, geography, culture, norms and mores. However, due to modern social welfare systems being built upon notions of worthy and unworthy poor, as well as the discrimination, surveillance and means testing of beneficiaries, viewing ‘social welfare’ as something outside of the state and capitalism seems natural. Reconsidering social welfare as a system of social support that ensures the well-being of everyone, without the need for oppressive, hierarchical and institutionalised structures, subverts the idea of (and need for) systems of social control that partially ensure the basic minimum of social welfare for people, leading to a

social welfare that facilitates community empowerment, autonomy and solidarity by people, with people and for all people – outside the state and outside capitalism. A radical social welfare, or anti-authoritarian mutual aid, that is aimed at ‘bring[ing] about a society in which men [sic] will consider each other as brothers [sic] and by mutual support will achieve the greatest well-being and freedom as well as physical and intellectual development for all’ (Malatesta, 1909: 2) paves the way for a system of social care that is collapsed into society itself, becoming a part of everyday life.

Radical approaches to social welfare and social work are not new, and many social welfare ideals have rich linkages to anti-authoritarian traditions (Reisch and Andrews, 2002; Pyles, 2009), such as social anarchism (Kropotkin, 1902; Gilbert, 2005; Ward, 1996, 2011; Shepard, 2014). Social anarchism is a philosophy that has been marred by scorn, misunderstanding, misrepresentation and misinformation. This has been due to:

- anarchism's core tenets, which question the legitimacy and subvert the foundations of established order;
- the nebulousness and fluidity of its terms and theories of knowledge, ethics, reality and being; and
- well-established internal tensions between collectivism and individualism.

Social anarchism is one of many quasi-unfixed variations in anarchist thought. It is based on anti-authoritarian socialist and communist practices, and seeks to ‘dismantle oppressive, hierarchical institutions.... [And to] replace those institutions with organic, horizontal, and cooperative versions based on autonomy, solidarity, voluntary association, mutual aid, and direct action’ (Fernandez, 2008: 52). It also aims to ‘establish a post-capitalist, egalitarian social order.... [Where] decision-making [is] decentralized’ (White, 2013: 117). This is accomplished through the ‘workplace or local occupational group [anarcho-syndicalism]’ or the ‘self-governing neighborhood or “commune” [anarcho-communism or communalism]’ (White, 2013: 117). Social anarchism is theorised to ensure an economic distribution that is social, inclusive, participatory, autonomous, equitable and equal – channelling the maxim ‘from each according to his [sic] ability, to each according to his [sic] needs’ (Marx, 1875).

Mutual aid is an organisational concept of social welfare at the centre of social-anarchist and anti-authoritarian traditions, with their practices and variants birthed from this central idea. ‘Mutual aid’ is a somewhat nebulous term, and broad in scope, but it can be viewed as a “voluntary and complementary” exchange of goods, resources and/or services for mutual welfare – or ‘people giv[ing] what they can and get[ting] what they need’ (Shepard, 2014: 166). Foundational values of mutual aid are antithetical to conventional understandings of sanctimonious charity and psychopathologised helping as they do not present a moralistic hierarchy of giver over receiver, nor a delineation between the two. However, in some cases, unavoidable hierarchies present themselves as some people are incapable of giving and/or participating, which may lead to power differentials like ‘horizontal violence’ (unintentional divide and rule) (Ledwith, 2016). Mutual aid may take the form of support groups, cooperatives, unions, solidarity economies or networks of support that ‘emphasize the significance of autonomous creativity in the struggles against states and capital’ (Shantz, 2013: 62).

Mutual aid is a native component to human experience. By observing the natural world, the influential anarcho-communist thinker Peter Kropotkin (1902) saw mutual

aid as intrinsic to nature, as well as a sociobiological and prehistoric quality intrinsic to humans, their preservation, procreation and evolution:

But whatever the opinions as to the first origin of the mutual-aid feeling or instinct may be whether a biological or a supernatural cause is ascribed to it – we must trace its existence as far back as to the lowest stages of the animal world; and from these stages we can follow its uninterrupted evolution, in opposition to a number of contrary agencies, through all degrees of human development, up to the present times. (Kropotkin, 1902: 144)

Despite ongoing academic contentions and the evolution of thought surrounding the innateness of mutual aid, altruism and cooperation in humans, there are contemporary grounds that mutual aid, cooperation and altruism are deep-seated behaviours of our species (Tomasello and Vaish, 2013). Altruistic and cooperative tendencies can be seen in the earliest forms of social welfare and social work, and are further exonerated as inherent when compared to centralised forms of authority and power, which have caused social work values and qualities to be moulded and corrupted by market forces.

Social work and social welfare in the US

Social work has a rich, albeit flawed (Lasch-Quinn, 1993; Rossiter, 2011; Occhiuto and Rowlands, 2018), history tied to the mutual aid tradition (Newns, 2005; Shepard, 2014). Social work's institutionalisation by the state, neoliberal capitalism and charity has seen dramatic shifts towards professionalism, such as state licensure, and a 'dependency on commodities and professional "experts" [and] the manifestations of the commodification of needs and market-supplied services' (Shantz, 2013: 62). The rules of the state and market have come to dominate social welfare and social work in the US, effectively steering the profession away from the principles and values of mutual aid. Deficit-oriented practices such as the medicalisation of human difference (Mullaly, 1998), psychotherapy (Chi-leung and Hoi-kin, 2013), psychopathology, toxic individualism, the neomedical model (Brady and Moxley, 2016) and the 'church of individual repair' (Specht and Courtney, 1994: 13) have fostered domineering hierarchies and a move away from one of social work's original practice modalities rooted in popular education, understanding and solidarity: community organising (Hamington, 2010; Kim, 2017). Walter Lorenz (2015: 3) notes that backward movements in social work to 'Victorian notion[s]' of individualism have 'pla[yed] into the hands of social policies that blame individuals for their problems', and that 'social work is not therapy. It is not counseling. It is not coaching. But it is dangerously drifting in that direction.' In the US, social work has become deeply enmeshed with the neomedical model and psychopathology (Fisher and Corciullo, 2011), with few community practitioners remaining (Rothman, 2013; Fogel and Ersing, 2016). Reisch (2013b: 716) refers to these individualistic shifts as 're-individualisation', an uncritical embrace of neoliberal influences such as evidence-based practice and positivism.

Neoliberalism has also infiltrated social work through 'marketisation', which has 'transformed the basic tenets of social work practise and undermined the profession's ethical foundation' (Reisch, 2013a: 67). Marketisation is an underlying practice and value of neoliberalism, and since the 1970s, it has further engendered a practice shift

towards an emphasis on professionalisation and medicalisation. The political economy of war, militarism, nationalism, racism and xenophobia have also shifted social work and its discourse from ‘welfare safeguarding’ to ‘security safeguarding’ through the process of ‘securitisation’ (McKendrick and Finch, 2017), which Kamali (2017: 136) describes as ‘boundaries of citizenship’ against the Other. This trend has certainly risen in the post-9/11 era, as evidenced through the rise of neofascism, nationalism and isolationism in the US, Europe and elsewhere.

In envisioning social welfare as mutual aid, a view of social work as a ‘profession’ and discipline that can be practised and studied by anyone, not just a privileged or loan debtor class, is useful. Currently, those on the margins of the profession and discipline may be viewed as pariahs of radical thought and praxis – a thought and praxis that ‘promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people’ (IFSW, 2014) over paternalistic, individualistic and medicalised orientations that hold potential to uphold and reify systems of oppression. The outcomes of licensure and professionalisation lend credence to viewing ‘professional’ in the context of radical social work or social welfare as mutual aid as simply meaning ‘what someone does with their time’ irrespective of chartered bodies or associations. In a new, radical paradigm of ‘professional’ social work, marginalised voices and organising practices may be uplifted, valued, studied and included.

In line with promoting counter-narratives, it may be useful to challenge ‘official social work’ (Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2011: 2) discourse, which views and treats people, neighbourhoods, communities and organisations as ‘clients’ needing ‘intervention’, to a ‘popular social work’ (Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2011: 2) that views and regards people as co-organisers in struggle. A radical paradigm maintains a potential to transcend such deficit-oriented models promoted by the state and capitalism through alternative models of social welfare and social work that concurrently function as forms of protest, community organising and non-medicalised direct practice. Ioakimidis (2016) describes five pillars underlying radical practice as ‘democracy, empathy, militancy, anti-oppressiveness, and structural practise [DEMOS]’ and that these principles represent ‘the populace of a democracy as a political unit’. Principles such as these are difficult to enact within structures with which they are ultimately at odds; however, an examination of contemporary practices and how they advance (and hinder) the mutual aid principles of autonomy, solidarity and participation may highlight possibilities for a realistic, radical practice under neoliberalism and ecological collapse.

Infrastructures of care and resistance: social welfare, protest and community organisation

Autonomously localised structures of social care created by and with marginalised communities hold potential as workable alternatives to institutions. In this section, I will explore a number of descriptive cases gleaned from news publications that I feel highlight how neoliberalism has opened up structures of resistance that function as protest, organising and radical social welfare in the West – defining characteristics of the New Community Organising (NCO) era (Shepard, 2005; Izlar, 2019). While brief descriptive examples may seem inadequate, their discussion is not intended to provide in-depth analysis, but examples of anti-authoritarian praxis under neoliberalism that provide a ‘phenomenon within its context’ (Yin, 2003: 5). The

first case demonstrates the effects of neoliberal austerity in Greece and the radical social welfare alternatives that have replaced state-run social welfare programmes. The second case draws from organising community gardens in the US in resistance to unjust, racialised and industrialised food systems, poverty and food waste. The third case explores prefigurative, Functional Communities (FCs) in Canada organised by the poor, people experiencing homelessness and their allies and accomplices as a means to meet immediate need, organise community and end homelessness in the West.

Greece: all you need is a need

The Greek debt crisis led to an immediate slashing of public services, which left the nation with thousands of people ‘abandoned by the welfare state’ (Truell, 2015). In response, grass-roots organisations made up of social workers, neighbourhood committees and activists used ‘organic’ networks of social solidarity that ‘support[ed] people who [did] not have access to ... shrinking welfare services’ (Truell, 2015). An Athenian drop-in centre for people experiencing homelessness and food insecurity echoed a politics of prefiguration and social cohesion, where – as an alternative to state bureaucracy, which often requires paperwork, distressful means testing and waiting lists – anyone could come for shelter and help. A drop-in centre worker reflected this spirit of prefiguration and anti-oppressive practice: ‘All you need is a need. No papers – it’s okay, no ID.... We have only one rule in this building ... it must smell like a home’ (Truell, 2015). While funding cuts carved out spaces for radical practice outside of the state and capitalism, it put many Greek social workers in poverty, leading many to ‘re-conceptualise’ social work and their roles within it. According to Ioakimidis and Teloni (2013: 43), re-conceptualisation manifested as social workers increasingly identified with ‘service users struggling for survival’ and no longer saw themselves as ‘unconditional all[ies] of the state or the politically “neutral doer[s]”’, nor as maintaining a ‘dual loyalty’ (Briskman, 2013: 51). Maria Pentaraki (2016: 2) refers to this consciousness raising from the ‘collective disaster’ of austerity as a ‘shared reality’ between social workers and service users. For example, a social worker who had not been paid for nine months and depended on food from the Red Cross expressed a sense of autonomy and solidarity with others at the drop-in centre: ‘I can just be a social worker.... I don’t have to justify social work to my managers because they understand it.... This is a community of people, not a day center for the homeless.... Everybody’s dignity and humanity is safe in here’ (Truell, 2015).

Since 2008, autonomous community centres in Greece have swelled to 250 nationwide, with many serving unique needs. A worker managing an abandoned building – one of dozens in Athens reclaimed for the more than 3,000 Syrian refugees as alternatives to the inhumane camps filled with tens of thousands – echoed the tensions felt by workers and service users under neoliberalism: ‘People trust us because we don’t use the people as customers or voters’ (Kitsantonis, 2017). Networks of solidarity have become the default in Greece to the ‘chagrin of the authorities’ (Kitsantonis, 2017). Due to grass-roots community organisations being ‘stretched ... to [the] breaking point’ (Truell, 2015), tensions between direct action and direct services among those providing social welfare alternatives have arisen. Some have placed emphasis on masculinist organising tactics such as direct confrontation with authorities, while others have emphasised feminist organising practices such as social and public health services to those left behind, and some have advocated for

a combination of the two. Despite internalised tensions, Greek anti-authoritarian social welfare organising has filled gaps left by austerity while challenging state and capitalist institutions. Similar to the goals of early American community work (Knight, 2006), ‘bottom-up’, mutual aid-based social work is embodied through a large increase in the number of community-run projects such as cooperative kitchens, housing, sanitation and even Internet and other services traditionally overseen by municipalities. Organising around such functions (for example, services, interests and/or needs) (Gamble and Weil, 2010) fosters linkages to larger structural problems while acting as forms of protest and robust direct services. However fragile, radical alternatives may be more trenchant, empowering and just because they have the potential to form a ‘dual power’ that may dissolve the functions of the state into a non-hierarchical collective existence.

The US: gardening in the food swamp

The US is the largest generator of food waste in the world. It is estimated that the US wastes ‘close to half of all produce grown’, a total of around 60 million tons (Goldenberg, 2016), which highlights the ‘socially disturbing coexistence of food waste and food insecurity’ (Himmelheber, 2014: 128). The roots of food waste are a combination of the capitalist industrialised food system, state-subsidised food staples that ensure low prices and American ‘throwaway’ culture (Brones, 2018). Food waste has highlighted not only the disparities and priorities of neoliberal capitalism and the state in the face of food insecurity and racialised poverty, but also its complicity in wasted energy and climate change (Cuéllar and Webber, 2010). Capitalist inefficiencies and statist subsidies have ensured the promulgation of cheap, unhealthy ‘food swamps’ in low-income communities of colour. Food waste in the face of poverty has been a catalyst for the development of anti-authoritarian projects such as community gardens.

Communities of colour in the Bronx, New York City, have rejected ideas of ‘food deserts’ and have advocated the use of the term ‘food swamps’ because:

There's the cake spot, the McDonald's spot, the Burger King spot, the cuchifritos spot. But you go into the one grocery store and the food there will cost you disproportionately more as a poor person, and that's a function of a globalized and commodified food system we want to change. (Helmore, 2017)

Community garden organisers in New York City have created a network of some 500 gardens that provide an estimated 39,000 kg of food to neighbourhoods, empowering locals to eat healthily, maintain autonomy over public space, resist racist, capitalist and statist food systems, and organise community. The impetus for these projects has been cited as ‘structurally reinforced cycles of poverty, and harsh inequities ... that result in far too many women being unable to rise out of poverty and sustain their families’ (Helmore, 2017). Tanya Fields, one of the lead organisers of the city’s autonomous, federated community garden network, the Libertad Urban Farm, echoes anti-authoritarian sentiment that community projects should be autonomous: ‘Food injustice is a symptom of a larger disease which happens to be economic exclusion. It's about how we build our communities without ready social, educational, or financial capital’ (Helmore, 2017). Existing research in the community work literature echoes Fields’s idea that community projects should be autonomous.

Dorothy Gamble (2012: 329, 339) suggests that 21st-century community work should be collaborative and guided by 'real participation' methods that 'help people become actors in their own destiny', and that this can only be accomplished through organising focused on the long term, through functional models like community gardens. While FCs, such as the Libertad Urban Farm, operate as vehicles that meet need (for example, a lack of healthy food), they may also strengthen social ties, build community resources and foster a sense of pride and community (Ohmer et al, 2009). In community gardening, positive community health and welfare outcomes are bound together with a 'social glue' (that is, the community project) with which state and capital cannot compare. Autonomous networks of solidarity, prefiguration and community not only foster resistance to neoliberal and statist systems of food provision by linking direct action with direct services, but also ensure that the short term and the long term are indivisible, and provide a glimpse of 'roads not taken' (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013: 105).

Canada: personal failures or capitalism?

Combinations between neoliberal privatisation, a lack of government funding, gentrification and the medicalisation of social problems have caused Western inequality, housing insecurity and homelessness to dramatically increase. Canada is experiencing a homelessness crisis never before seen, with some 200,000 people experiencing homelessness every year (CBC, 2013). Neoliberalism, austerity, individualism, war and climate change have accelerated these problems and made those without adequate, permanent housing more vulnerable to poor health outcomes, housing discrimination and poverty. As evidence of 'bi-partisan indifference to the lives of the poor' (Alliance Against Displacement, 2017), radicals have pointed to: a rejection of Housing First models by paternalistic, bureaucratised social services; statist definitions of 'homes' and 'housing'; the municipal catering to landlords and property investors; the number of empty homes in relation to the number of people that need them; and an overreliance on shelters intended to be transitional. Organising slogans for many have been 'Homes Not Shelters', 'Homes Not Jails' and 'Food Not Bombs'. While such slogans may seem simplistic, they are only so in wording. These NCO slogans may operate as a means to communicate what communities are for, what they are against and how they set out to address what they see as problems.

In the Global North, communities of people experiencing homelessness and poverty, radical social workers, and activists have addressed homelessness immediately through the seizure of empty buildings, the construction of makeshift shelters and cities in public and private spaces, and the creation of solidarity networks. In Maple Ridge, British Columbia, Canada, the Anita Place Tent City – named after impoverished social worker Anita Hauck, who died in a clothing bin – is a place where:

low-income people refuse to apologize for their existence, where they take up space as one group of residents among many, where hate is fought and opposed rather than navigated and accommodated ... we are beginning to name and fight poverty and housing insecurity as a problem of capitalism, colonialism, and government austerity, not 'addiction' or individual mistakes. (Drury, 2017)

Organised by people experiencing homelessness and poverty, the Anita Place Tent City was founded in 2017 as a means to concurrently organise and provide immediate relief in the form of ‘emergency shelter, food and water, health services, and a safer community space that we [were] denied by government austerity and the cult of “individual responsibility” in the often hostile world around us’ ([The Volcano, 2018](#)). Anita Place Tent City functioned as a:

home for the homeless, a sanctuary for people stigmatized and attacked in the rest of the town, a defense against the opioid overdose crisis, a political vehicle to fight for housing justice and against displacement, and, most importantly, a place where low-income people can realize their community, and their freedom. ([Alliance Against Displacement, 2018](#))

The prefigurative organising of Anita Place Tent City empowered residents, allies and accomplices to:

- effectively resist municipal attempts to shut down the community and further displace its residents; and
- demand dignified social housing.

According to Anita Place Tent City residents, social housing meant that ‘housing must be affordable at welfare and pension rate. It must not be institutional, it must just be regular apartments where we can live and our kids and families can live with us or visit, which should be considered culturally appropriate for indigenous peoples’ housing’ ([Alliance Against Displacement, 2017](#)). Similar to community projects in Greece and the US, the Anita Place Tent City is a powerful example of the radical mutual aid model of social welfare that channels anti-authoritarianism towards empowerment, autonomy, solidarity and direct democracy. These NCO methods call into question the effectiveness of hierarchical institutions such as the state and capitalism, masculinist organising models (that is, the Alinsky model), and the roles of power elites (for example, politicians, bureaucrats, self-appointed community leaders and businesspeople) in the process of social change. Although radical frameworks hold promise as effective and empowering vehicles for social change and social welfare, they are not immune to contradictions, problems and challenges.

Challenges

Radical social welfare organising promises to carve out systems of care and resistance within the state and capitalism, but they are susceptible to problems. Organising may benefit from the critical, careful and reflexive analysis of organisers (for example, self-analysis and analysis of the individual and collective process of and by co-organisers), organising and how processes relate to autonomy, solidarity and non-hierarchical power relationships, as well as short- and long-term goals. I have organised with FCs and radical social welfare organisations since the beginning of my community work, and I have experienced, caused and witnessed severe problems, conflicts and inconsistencies within non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian organising. This may be due to a number of reasons, for example: conflicting (or non-existent) priorities; a lack of attention to processes (and consistencies within), visions and

goals; privilege, pressure and reinforcement from existing systems of oppression; and conflicting perspectives. For me, many of the challenges that I experienced and observed in community projects have been related to:

- a lack of community analysis and attention to reflexivity within organising, which has created unjust hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, ability, class, age, gender, need, interest and knowledge;
- tensions between organisers and within organising processes based on conflicting philosophies, organising visions and privileged hierarchies; and
- organisational structures and outside tensions imposed by the state and capitalism.

Analysis, reflexivity and change

In my work with community gardens, community technology centres, food-sharing organisations and gift economies, for example, I have consistently noticed a lack of attention paid to community analyses and organising processes. I have observed that there is little to no initial organisation around identifying needs or interests in community projects – or even a perspective that community analysis is *considered* community organising or necessary. Many radical anti-authoritarian social welfare projects are developed from close-knit racially, ethnically and economically homogeneous ‘affinity groups’, and not by people affected by the social problems that these projects set out to address. This has exhibited notable complications in drawing service users into organising, effectively turning some community projects into radical charity, not solidarity. A lack of analyses has also created unjust hierarchies between organisers and the organised, reflecting and preserving existing hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, gender, class and so on. Much like tensions in mutual aid, some of these hierarchies are based on ability, time and interest in contributing to a project, but problems rooted in a lack of community analysis and a lack of diversity among organisers may be lessened or eradicated if attention is paid to processes and outcomes. Making no distinction between process and outcome is a cornerstone of radical organising practice. A lack of community analysis also has the potential to overlook and subvert existing systems of social care that may not be immediately visible to organisers (Izlar, 2019).

Privilege, praxis and power

Organising challenges may be addressed by a consistent, reflexive praxis of and by organisers regarding their standpoints and positions. Many of the community projects that I have been involved in have made insufficient efforts to analyse organising itself (for example, processes, sub-processes, conflicts, effectiveness and consistency between processes and outcomes), and many organisers have not practised self-analysis or the analysis of co-organisers. This may be due to the time and work required to put towards organising, as well as standpoints and privileges. Although much of the organising that I have seen and experienced has been quite effective in direct services and direct action, a lack of care towards roles in organising has lessened strengths and impacts, and a synthesis between the two. A synthesis between direct action and direct services is what makes radical community projects, radical social welfare and social work as mutual aid a challenge (and alternative) to systems of oppression.

By bypassing self-appointed community leaders, politicians and other systems of power, direct action and direct services that subvert these systems become long-lasting models for radical social change. However, the strength and effectiveness of radical community projects are only as good as their organisers and practices. An acute self-awareness of problems in organising related to power differentials (for example, whiteness and cis-hetero-patriarchy), within and outside of organisations, is critical to amplifying community autonomy and long-term community change. If issues of internal and external tensions related to power and hierarchy are ignored, projects and organising may be diverted towards short-term outcomes, technicalities, the disempowerment of organisers and project participants, and the preservation of entrenched power relationships (Izlar, 2019).

Funding and structure

It has been said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, 2003). This statement may be true to those that have not attempted to challenge capitalism and the state on an emotional, intellectual or experiential level. However, it does represent one of the most significant and challenging aspects of organising within capitalism: the structures of oppression that mould and influence action. The totality of capitalism is seemingly insurmountable, and this is likely due, as Jameson (2003) alludes, to the veil in front of those within this system of oppression. Community organisation reflects the tensions and influences of capitalism and the state, and despite attempts in radical organising to subvert capitalism and the state, results have been tenuous. A significant threat to organising prefiguratively under capitalism is the internal structures that are influenced by outside structures such as funding and regulation.

Community organising is rarely funded, and radical organising especially so. The likelihood of power elites to fund the destruction of the systems of power that they benefit from is unlikely. The shift towards the privatisation of public services has left community organisations competing for what funding is left in the private sector, and many are sceptical of the requirements of funding sources. Even so, the funding that does exist is centralised into charitable structures that are ‘partialized and entrepreneurial’ (Brilliant, 2005: 255). Funding may pervert and deradicalise organisations, putting them on a path of maintaining dissent instead of challenging power. External tensions of funding and control may cause internal tensions in organisations that want to pay organisers as well as maintain organisational autonomy. Interrelated conflicts of action may leave community organisations with a twofold dilemma:

1. maintaining autonomy at the expense of organisers and community empowerment; and
2. funding organisers and building community capacity, but losing autonomy and being forced to adhere to the terms and conditions of funders instead of community members.

These problems are exacerbated by the need left by the neoliberal destruction of systems of social welfare.

Conclusion

Community responses to neoliberalism and the state, while offering radical alternatives, are susceptible to de-radicalisation, disempowerment, subversion and absorption into the state, capitalism and other systems of oppression. [Shepard \(2008\)](#) notes that in order to move beyond these oppressive institutions, radical and alternative systems of social welfare should include:

- a practice of not taking money that controls service provision and organising;
- a service user-driven organisation; and
- an emphasis placed on mission rather than a focus on securing funding as an observation of these principles may foster solidarity and understanding by staying focused on problems instead of technicalities.

In order to maintain the resilience of radical, prefigurative social welfare organising that ensures autonomy, solidarity, mutual aid and direct democracy while resisting the influences of the state and capitalism, it may be useful to:

- imagine what social welfare alternatives look like and how they may effectively function in meeting direct need while empowering individuals and communities to make structural changes to social problems;
- conduct continued internal and external critical reflexive analyses of organisers, organising, organisations and communities in how they relate to power dynamics, hierarchies and intersectionality;
- maintain consistent and agreed-upon organising models, procedures and political philosophies that are in sync with community and organisational values and principles;
- ensure a focus on mission and vision, process and outcome, and principles of prefiguration in setting and working towards goals;
- ensure a critical awareness of internal and external influences and pressures; and
- transform the austerity-induced hopelessness of communities into critical consciousness and community mobilisation rooted in hope.

Although radical social welfare alternatives have challenges, they seem to be more resilient, empowering and effective in meeting need and organising community than existing statist and capitalist institutions. Radical social welfare and social work may look like these alternatives (or something entirely different), and their challenges may be mitigated if organising is reflexive, inclusive, non-hierarchical, communicative, prefigurative and federated. It is up to social workers (this phrasing refers to practitioners regardless of credentials and training) to question the roles of institutions, as well as their roles within them, and to work with their communities to imagine what radical alternatives to current failed systems of social welfare look like. Given neoliberalism's stranglehold on systems of social care, and growing scepticism towards effectiveness, equity and justice within private and public institutions ([Krings et al, 2018](#)), the opportunity to craft a new social work and a new social welfare that is based on the principles of mutual aid, instead of the rules of the state and market, is all the more important and feasible. Under the pressures of these times, there appears to be no other road to take.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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