Journal of Child and Youth Care Work
 0741-9481

RADICAL YOUTHWORK: CREATING A POLITICS OF MUTUAL LIBERATION FOR YOUTH AND ADULTS

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ABSTRACT: Tensions between those who believe that youth work should socialize youth and those who believe it should address youth in a liberatory practice constitute an ongoing struggle for those involved in youth work. This paper proposes youth work as a radical liberatory practice designed to subvert and overcome disciplinary social regimes. Essential to this effort is a serious engagement of the practices of undoing whiteness, decolonizing social service, investigating the post-colonial world of late-stage capitalism, and interrogating the practices of power.

Key words: : radical youth work, whiteness, liberation, post-colonial, Foucault, Negri, power

> . . . the real political task. . .is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely, through them, will be unmasked, so that one can fight them. (Rabinow, 1984, p.16)

Youth work began with the creation of "adolescence". This cultural distinction of an age group between children and adults began in the 19th century (Perrot, 1997, p.68) and was finalized as a distinct developmental stage of life in 1904 (Hall, 1904). Until that time, there was no clear distinction between youth and adults. It was only with the advent of the Industrial Age that youth, or young adults, became adolescents. In pre-industrial societies, the transition from child to adult was without the intermediary period called youth (Mitterauer, 1986, 1992). While there were certainly concerns over how young people comported themselves, they were subject to the same disciplinary and supportive societal forces as older adults.

This began to change as young people joined the factory workforce in Europe in the late 18th and early nineteenth centuries. According to Mitterauer (1986, 1992), these young people were one of the largest work forces within the early factories and mills. As they experienced the appallingly poor working conditions, they began to organize as a political force. The first organizations formed specifically to "work with youth" were given the task of de-politicizing their activities and "re-patriotizing them" (Luzzatto, 1997).

This resulted in political denunciations of young people centered in fear and uncertainty about their role in the emerging bourgeois society. While this certainly has constituted one of the ongoing societal discourses relating to adolescence, another discourse was forming that has had even greater relevance to the development of the field of youth work. This was a shift away from youth as a societal issue to youth as a particular biological and psychological stage in life. This new concept is what Foucault (1978) has referred to as nineteenth century *biopower*. Anne Stoler (1996) describes biopower as the "disciplining of individual bodies" and "the global regulation of the biological processes of human beings. It is this 'technology of power centered on life that produces a normalizing society"(p.33).

The development of biopower allows a group of people such as youth to become objects of discovery, categorization, and observation. It is this shift that allowed for the creation of the "modern or psychological" adolescent in 1904 (Hall). It is with the advent of the observable, definable, and discoverable adolescent that modern youth work was born. The field of youth work was, and is, deeply shaped by the development and construction of ideas and "truths" about youth/adolescents throughout the modern/industrial period. These ideas shaped not only the world of adolescence but also the world of the youth worker.

It is at this historical intersection, when the construction of identity of youth and youth worker collide, that two kinds of youth work become possible. One type of youth work is premised on the institutional forces of developing capitalism, imperialism, and the beginnings of the nation state. Such youth work is designed to control and discipline youth to become what Foucault (1978) called *docile bodies*, subject to the regimes of capitalist and nationalist interests. Such youth work I would designate as *colonial youth work*. It is disciplinary youth work that holds, according to Arieli (1997), that the task of youth workers is to:

> . . .bring together. . .those who are. . . "not properly socialized"--whom the prevalent educational and care approaches seek to change--together with those who know the 'proper' social codes and are expected to generate the desired change in the ones who don't by intervening in the course of their maturation.(p.1)

This discourse of the necessity of youth work as a socio-political intervention in the maturation and development of the biological adolescent is, I would contend, constructed of the same fabric as the biological constructions of other colonial projects such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. I would argue that its claims to truth are premised in the same regimes of knowledge and power and that its central task has been one of forced assimilation.

This field of colonial youth work holds as its central paradigm a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices that have become known as *whiteness*

(Roediger 1991). While a full explication of the history of this term is beyond the scope of this article, suffice to say that whiteness goes beyond skin color or geographical origin. It incorporates, instead, a social force based on degrees of assimilation and resultant privilege. This privilege and assimilation can be seen in youth work by observing the modes of selection by which youth attend conferences, perform for adult audiences, and hold positions of power within schools, community organizations, and youth work agencies. The youth selected for inclusion into the world of adult youth work are generally the youth best disciplined in following behaviors associated with the dominant power structure.

Because of this centrality of whiteness, colonial youth work (youth work that has as its central premise the disciplining of youth bodies and youth minds to comply with the interests of the nation, the corporation, the family, or the agency) holds many of the same problems as other forms of forced assimilation. In this regard, youth work that attempts to address racism, sexism, heterosexism, or class issues, while still espousing, as its central premise, the disciplining of youth to comply to social norms, is operating within a fundamental contradiction. For the youth worker who wishes to challenge the primacy of whiteness in all of its many effects and forms, it is necessary to step outside the frameworks of colonial youth work and engage a different set of ideas, beliefs, and practices. For such a youth worker, it becomes essential to "undo" whiteness or, to put it another way, *decolonize* youth work.

To decolonize youth work is to engage in what might be called *radical youth work.* I use the term *radical* intentionally to indicate a shift away from safety and the normative force that safety implies. Furthermore, I employ the term radical because of its relatively recent association with political movements focused on various efforts to challenge the forces of domination and control associated with capitalism in both its global and national forms. It is important to note that the interests of capital have always included the ability to discipline, exploit, assimilate, and exclude various populations within nation states as well as on a global scale. The development of biological paradigms such as race, gender, class, and the developmental theories related to age have provided working models for the colonial project throughout the past three hundred years. It would be my contention that any effort to construct radical youth work must include, as a central element, a challenge to this unholy alliance of scientism and capitalism as a defining force in youth-adult relations.

To accomplish the development of such a field of radical youth work, it must be engaged within the actual lived conditions of the youth and adults involved. This means acknowledging and incorporating the effects of what has been called post-modern capitalism or, to use another term, globalization. If we are to decolonize the field of youth work and re-establish it as a radically liberatory project, it is essential to understand that the world has entered a moment of profound and comprehensive change. This is a change that encompasses all aspects of human endeavor, wherein

the old structures of imperialism, modernism, the nation state, and capitalism and their respective regimes of truth are mutating. We are no longer within the purely colonial world but rather within a world in which the old forms of colonialism still exist but alongside new forms and new modes of domination and control. This is a complicated and uncertain historical moment into which we have entered--a moment in which we have found new ways of organizing the flow of money, goods, services, labor, families, nations, and identities without fully relinquishing the forms that these held within the previous colonial system of organization.

One might refer to this moment as *post-coloniality.* In the simplest sense, post-coloniality refers to the conditions that ensued following the physical removal of European colonial forces from other lands and peoples. While this has not been fully achieved (the settler colonies of the United States and Australia being two notable examples), for much of the world, the period of military and physical colonization has ended.

Post-coloniality, however, is not simply a term that means *after colonialism* or *after independence.* "It addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 2). Perhaps one of the most confusing but hopeful aspects of the post-colonial moment is that it incorporates new possibilities of liberation and resistance as well as new forms of dominance and control. In overthrowing colonial power, ". . .countercolonial resistance. . .drew upon the many different indigenous local and hybrid processes of self-determination to defy, erode, and sometimes supplant the prodigious power of imperial cultural knowledge" (Ashcroft, et al., p.1). This hybridization of local knowledge and colonial ideas which are reconstituted to overthrow dominant ideologies is one of the hallmarks of post-coloniality.

However, as Antonio Negri (1996) has pointed out, the history of capitalism is one in which every advance in the liberation of the peoples of the world from the forces of capital exploitation constitutes a crisis for capitalism as a system of control and domination. For capitalism to succeed and progress, such efforts to give people control over their own lives and the means of creating and sustaining such control must not only be defeated but also be assimilated by capital into new forms and modes of appropriation and control.

It is within this contradiction of capitalist interests that the post-colonial moment produces, for youth work, an intersection of possibility. Within such a moment, the very structure of power itself becomes vulnerable to radical change. It can, of course, remain an oppressive force, as Negri points out, but it also holds within it the inherent seeds of liberative force. To engage this kind of force, however, we must engage power in a new and different sense.

In his stunning introduction to "Anti-Oedipus", Michele Foucault (in Deleuze & Guattari, Eds., 1983) implores us, "Do not become enamored of power". The seductions of hierarchical power in our positions as adult youth workers are always residing within the inherent force of privilege.

After all, we are the gatekeepers to school, housing, food, family, and community. We often hold, through our positions, the capacity to deny youth access to these things in the short or the long term. At the same time, youth workers are profoundly disempowered within their own adult society in terms of pay, professional respect, and working conditions. It is, thus, tempting for youth workers to focus on their own disenfranchisement and to seek access to professional affiliation or the development of an academic discipline of youth work within the adult world of privilege and power. It is tempting to do this alone, as adults, without seeing ourselves in alliance with the youth we serve.

This is the seduction of power. It promotes our self-interest and fragments our commonalities as humans struggling with a system of exploitation that encompasses not just youth workers, but also youth, families, communities, and the institutions and governmental structures within which we all live our lives. To truly become effective as a radical youth worker, one must resist the rather small gains to be achieved through "power" in favor of the infinitely rich gains to be achieved by joining the broadest coalition of human beings in order to restructure the material conditions within which we all live. This we must do through the radical application of love and production. That is to say, we must be guided in what we produce, in the youth work field, by principles of loving desire for absolute human connection--in other words, by the power of love rather than the love of power.

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