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**Social Work for Lazy Radicals. Relationship building, critical thinking and courage in practice.**

**Jane Fenton (2019)**

**London. Red Globe Press. 198 pp. ISBN 978-1-352-00245-4. Paperback £23.99. E-book £19.99**

Jane Fenton's book has clearly been germinating in her teaching of social work students, but it is also firmly rooted in practice and will be of interest to those entering the profession and experienced staff alike. The challenge to neoliberal managerial methods and discourses that underpin much of contemporary practice is evident in recent literature and debates and incorporates the social work reform attempts of the last decade to calls to rethink and re-humanise practice. Ferguson (2011), Featherstone (2014) and Ruch (2018) come to mind when we think about relationships in practice, while Hood (2013), Bywaters (2015) and others have critiqued the inefficiencies and sometimes the cruelty of managerialism and techno-rational practice. Fenton arguably goes further with a welcome and readable call for a revitalisation of the tradition of radical practice. Radical practice is not new. The roots of social work can be seen as coming from a radical impetus, although the more conservative elements of contemporary practice can also be traced to earlier pioneers in the field. These competing traditions might be located on a continuum that posits social work as a discipline between an understanding of the primacy of social context on one hand, and seeing social problems as individually located on the other. This oversimplification might point us to the territory that Fenton explores so deftly.

So why "lazy radicals"? The title will draw attention and there is a good humoured and droll quality to Fenton's writing. This is not to mistake her serious intent. Fenton writes that for

many, the profession is part of a wider political project that involves action on a range of issues, but we don't all have the time, wherewithal or perhaps the courage to be fully engaged activists. What we can all do is to ensure that our practice does not support the inequalities that our work often participates in or generates and that by engaging in a critical analysis of what we do on a day to day basis we are more likely to understand people's problems in the complexity of their social context. Daily Mail readers might at this point be reaching for the green ink, but seeing and working with context does not mean making excuses or taking responsibility away from people. It is not naive to try to understand the choices people make in a critical way, it is likely to lead to more effective and meaningful practice.

In the first part of the book Fenton draws on a wide range of thinkers and writers to analyse the current state of the profession. I found this an engaging and energising analysis although not everyone might be convinced. For me, anyone that manages to coherently bring Bauman, Gramsci and Michael Gove into a discussion of social justice must be doing something right. The discussion is the framework for a thorough examination of how these ideas might be directly implemented in the workplace. The structure of the book takes the reader through the building blocks of radical practice to a suggested practice model. The scene-setting chapters on Dependence, Independence and Values, Bureaucracy, Regulation and Professionalism, examine the neo-liberal hegemony in social work and the implications for current practice. Fenton then moves to the main parts of the book, describing how Lazy Radical Practice can be achieved. Chapters 3-6 cover relationship building, trust and emotional engagement (chp. 3) knowledge and critical thinking (chp. 4) and moral courage (chp. 5). Each chapter includes practice examples and a useful concluding summary. Fenton ends with a deft overall summary and suggestions for the future.

I really enjoyed this book. It requires effort from the reader but this is a call for critical reflection and action, which takes us away from managerial glibness and guides us through the complexity of practice in a meaningful way. That demands our attention and effort. I don't agree with everything here. I understand the criticisms of parenting programmes for example, but I have seen these delivered in thoughtful and dare I say it radical ways – but Fenton is certainly not asking for uncritical acceptance of everything she has to say. Far from it. I would highly recommend this book for anyone and everyone in the field and it will certainly be on my reading lists. It is an antidote to accepting “there is no alternative” to inequality. Perhaps it needs no other recommendation.

## **References**

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Reviewer. Dermot Brady, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Kingston University.