SOCIAL WORK AND CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY: THINKING ABOUT ‘KEYWORDS’

Paul Michael Garrett, NUI Galway, Republic of Ireland

‘Sociology and Social Work’, University of Chester, August 2015
INTRODUCTION

- Raymond Williams (1921-1988) honed focus on specific words & phrases...
- Aids our deciphering of how ‘keywords’, such as ‘welfare’, operate as sites of discursive and political struggle
- Inspires our attentiveness as to how particular words & phrases become inculcated, sedimented & reinforced within the everydayness of neoliberal cultural & ‘institutional logics’
- Alerts us to the fact that neoliberal ‘reforms’ are often presented as ‘non-ideological’, ‘pragmatic’, translating ‘common sense’ into sensible policy ‘solutions’

1. Williams & Keywords
2. ‘Welfare’, ‘Welfare Dependency’
3. Social work & the ‘Workfarist Turn’
Other Conceptual Resources for Thinking about Keywords...

- Williams: supplement not replacement...
- Managing the ‘relative surplus’ population (Marx)
- ‘Social Factory’/’Work Society’ (Negri, Weeks and the autonomous Marxist tradition)
- Doxic thinking & symbolic violence (Bourdieu)
- ‘Territorial stigmatization’ (Wacquant)
- The ‘police’ (Rancière)
- Frames of war – frames of welfare? (Butler)
- Modes of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault)
- Hegemony and ‘common sense’ (Gramsci)....
THINKING WITH WILLIAMS...

- **Common Sense**...‘a form of “everyday thinking” which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection...Typically, it expresses itself in the vernacular, the familiar language of the street, the home, the pub, the workplace and the terraces’ (Hall and O’Shea, 2015). Hazy lens: incorporating inaccurate/crucially incomplete information.

- Keywords help to constitute & distil ‘common sense’: time, geographical place, field
THINKING WITH WILLIAMS...

- *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976)
- 110 ‘micro essays’ e.g. bureaucracy, communication, creative, expert, family, modern, reform etc.
- Changing meaning of words, throughout history indicative of more substantial processes of social and cultural transformation
- 40 years later...**punctuating & interrupting**
- Analysing ‘keywords’ in the social conditions they arise, circulate and are apt to shift in meaning.
- Words ‘artillery to be purposefully aimed’ (Durant, 2006, p. 12)....Gramsci’s ‘war of position’
- ‘Mugging’ in *Policing the Crisis* (Stuart Hall et al, 1978)
THINKING WITH WILLIAMS...

- Materialist BUT acknowledged the power of ideas in consolidating or weakening the social order.

- ‘reservations about semantic and lexicographical work as a force for change’ (Durant, 2006).

- ‘I do not share the optimism...of that popular kind of inter-war and surviving semantics which supposed that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes...I believe that to understand the complexities of the meanings of class contributes very little to the resolution of actual class disputes and class struggles’ (Williams, 1983).
THINKING ABOUT ‘KEYWORDS…


‘Questioning tales of “ordinary magic”: “Resilience” and neoliberal reasoning’, British Journal of Social Work, published online 15 April, 2015


Other satellite words we might be able to identify?

Gender-ness of words, racialisation...

Methodological questions…? Choosing & compiling a corpus, analysing…
THINKING ABOUT ‘WELFARE’

- How did the stigmatising ‘welfare’ become so prominently deployed at this conjuncture?
- Neoliberal ‘war of position’ against the social state.
- Replacement of ‘social security’ with ‘welfare’
- Surveillance & structural disrespect of claimants…
- See ‘Customer Charter’ in Garrett (2013)
- Growth of ‘food banks’
THE ‘WELFARE STATE’...


- Used in print as early as the 1920s (Wincott, 2014).

- Widespread use after social security reform became operational on 5 July 1948 (Wincott, 2014)

- 1949: ‘the year when the phrase “welfare state” broke through into political debate’ in Britain (Wincott, 2014).
‘WELFARE’ AS A KEYWORD

- Post-war ‘Fordist’ welfare structures: ‘interaction of 3 main factors’ (Saville, 1957)
  1. struggle of the working class against their exploitation;
  2. requirements of industrial capitalism for a more efficient environment, need for a highly productive labour force;
  3. recognition by property owners of the price of political security.
- Welfare as ‘management or regulation of “problem” populations’ (Clarke, 2004).
- For ‘all its well-documented limitations – its familist assumptions, its limited conceptions of citizenships, its bureaucratic ethos and the ways it embedded class inequalities – the welfare state in Britain, like welfare states that emerged in most advanced capitalist countries in the post-war period, provided its citizens with some degree of security and freedom from fear’ (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013)...implicit recognition of inter-dependency...
‘WELFARE DEPENDENCY’

- An implicit tenet of SOCIAL work practice: human beings are SOCIAL, relational and (inter)dependent entities?
- While ‘conditioned in fundamentally significant ways by cultural considerations, dependency for humans is as unavoidable as birth and death’ (Kittay in Lynch, 2007).
- Is ‘welfare dependency’ now tending to subsume more benign, relational, rounded understandings of ‘dependency’?
- Ideologically cover for workfare/activivation...
- Strategies of ‘active proletarianization’ (Offe, 1984): converting dormant labour power into wage labour and profit.
- Work frequently insecure and precarious (Bourdieu, 2003).
- In the UK 1.8 million people on ‘zero hours’ contracts (Office for National Statistics, 2015) = population of Kosovo.
6 ELEMENTS CONSTITUTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY DEPLOYMENT OF THE KEYWORDS ‘WELFARE DEPENDENCY’

1. ‘Welfare Dependency’ in the USA

2. The shadow of the prison

3. The global ‘workfarist turn’ & international regimes of conditionality

4. Enhanced focus on conduct (and the role of workfare’s ‘organic intellectuals’)

5. Tonalities (The ‘structure of feeling’ on ‘welfare’)

6. The potency of ‘welfare’ myth-narratives
1. ‘WELFARE DEPENDENCY’ IN THE USA

- UK roots and lineages of ‘dependency’ (Welshman, 2013).
- The ‘symbolic mecca’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant)
- Dependency carries assumptions about ‘human nature, gender roles, the causes of poverty, the nature of citizenship, the sources of entitlement, and what counts as work and as a contribution to society’. Seeking to ‘dispel the doxa surrounding’ current discussions of dependency and ‘by contrasting present meanings of “dependency” with past meanings…to defamiliarize taken-for-granted beliefs in order to render them susceptible to critique’ (Fraser and Gordon, 1997) – Sanford Schram

- The Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (1996): aspirational libertarianism & punitive ground war against the poor…
2. THE SHADOW OF THE PRISON

- Convergence with penal policy (Wacquant, 2009).
- ‘Welfare’ offices are borrowing the ‘stock-in-trade techniques of the correctional institutions...a constant close-up monitoring...intensive record-keeping and case management, periodic interrogation and reporting, and a rigid system of graduated sanctions for failing to perform properly’ (Wacquant, 2009).
- ‘Biometric imaging increasingly deployed... applying for welfare mirrors the experience of being booked for a crime; after being interrogated about family and finances, individuals are photographed and fingerprinted’ (Gustafson, 2011).
2. THE SHADOW OF THE PRISON

- **USA**: references to ‘recidivism’ among welfare recipients Anderson & Gryzlak’s (2002) and Gurmu & Smith’s (2006).

- **UK**: Benefit recipients ‘found to be playing the system’ dubbed ‘repeat *offenders*’ in Department for Work and Pensions report aiming at ‘radically reformed welfare system between now and 2015’, (Gregg 2008, emphasis added).

- **Australia**: claimant opposing the ‘coercive authority’ of case managers subject to ‘breach’ *notifications* –disciplinary measure applied in criminal justice to probation clients (McDonald & Marston, 2005). Not simply symbolic changes…

- In UK in the 12 months to April 2014 16.7% ‘jobseekers incurred financial penalties for not taking up ‘job’/training offers. In Ireland, number of ‘job seekers’ having benefits cut for ‘non-engagement’ highest ever in 2014.
3. GLOBAL ‘WORKFARIST TURN’ & INTERNATIONAL REGIMES OF CONDITIONALITY

- Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programmes (Lavinas, 2013).

- Latin America: ‘the laboratory for the world’s favourite new anti-poverty device’ since late 90’s (The Economist)

- Global spread of CCTs in the developing world and beyond.

- Social workers co-opted in the administration and running of schemes.

- Chile: to qualify for $24 monthly benefit (gradually decreasing to $11) recipients must sign contract accepting ‘personalized assistance’ with their health, education, employment, family life, housing situation and income, monitored through frequent meetings with social workers.
4. **Enhanced Focus on Conduct (& The Role of Workfare’s ‘Organic Intellectuals’)**

- ‘Organic intellectuals’ (Gramsci) of the neoliberal project.

- 1980s-1990s, academic ‘expertise’ pivotal in defining and amplifying retrogressive ‘keywords’ such as ‘underclass’ and ‘welfare dependency’ (Murray, 1990; 1994).


- Conservative scholarship on ‘welfare’ more strident after the collapse of the ‘degenerated workers’ states in 1989.

4. Enhanced focus on conduct (& the role of the workfare’s ‘organic intellectuals’)

- Nichols and Zeckhauser (1982): cash assistance available only with ‘restrictions on the choices made by intended beneficiaries’.

- ‘Ordeals’ – ‘demeaning qualification tests and tedious administrative procedures’ serve ‘a sorting function’.


- Inconveniences, even when fatal, are evidence the system is working (Black Triangle, 2014).
5. Tonalities (The ‘Structure of Feeling’ on ‘Welfare’)

- Impact of the New Labour project...
- James Purnell (‘Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 2008-2009’) & the semantics of politics
- No longer the ‘Secretary of State for Social Security’: ‘social security’ is ‘something handed down’ (Purnell, 2008).
- ‘A wholly different story’: welfare as ‘way out of worklessness and a way up the career ladder, but not a way of life’.
- ‘Security’ becoming wholly conflated with ‘anti-terrorism’ & becoming decoupled from ideas associated the post-war welfare settlement?
5. Tonalities (‘Structures of Feeling’ around ‘Welfare’)

- ‘Activation’ policies targeted at claimants also connected to the concerted ‘activation of emotions’ against them (Clayton et al., 2015).


- Pitying the ‘children whose parents are addicted to crack-cocaine’: ‘Dad has passed out on the mattress in his own vomit, mum is crouched over a table, preparing her fix. What you don’t see is the child hidden in the corner crying’.

- The ‘Troubled Family’ trope: idle, parasitic work units, bedevilled by multiple problems, need to be ‘enabled’ to enter the labour force.

- British Social Attitudes Survey (2012) and apparently significant shifts in ‘common sense’ perspectives...

- In 2001 88% agreed government should be mainly responsible for ensuring unemployed people have enough to live on; 59% think this now.

- In 2001 43% thought government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it led to higher taxes, compared to 32% in 2007 and 28% now.

- 62% agree unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work, 27% in 1991, 54% in 2007.
6. THE POTENCY OF ‘WELFARE’ MYTH-NARRATIVES …..

Baptist Union of Great Britain, Methodist Church, Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church (2013) *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*. The ‘common sense’ narratives maintain the poor are:

1. lazy & don’t want to work;
2. addicted to drink and drugs;
3. are not really poor, but simply are incompetent in managing their money;
4. on ‘the fiddle’;
5. have an easy life;
6. prompted the ‘deficit’ which was causing the ‘austerity’ measures impacting on everyone.
SOCIAL WORK AT THE ‘WORKFARIST TURN’

- The ‘new institutional order represented by welfare-cum-workfare…impacts on social work – both as collective entity and set of practices’ (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006).

- SW enmeshment in practices easing/compelling the ‘welfare dependent’ into paid work. Different in different national settings.

- In North America (Abramovitz, 2005), Nordic countries (Kananen, 2014) and European states, such as Belgium, social workers operate as ‘job coaches’ for the unemployed (Roets et al., 2012).

- Australia: Job Services Australia (JSA) & Centrelink. ‘Workfare Oz-style’…social workers ‘less than fully aware of what is happening, and what has already happened to them’ (McDonald & Chenoweth).
Is social work vulnerable to incorporation into workfare regimes? Does social work have affinities with the social logic of workfare??

Historical dimension: clients should not become ‘dependent’ on state services and interventions.

Social worker as ‘maintenance mechanic’ (Davies, 1981). The role is to ‘develop the abilities of individuals to survive and thrive under their own steam...For example, work with a problem family can involve pressure to get a man to work’.

‘Involuntary clients’ (Trotter, 1999) and possible fusion with ‘activation’ discourses?
SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AT THE ‘WORKFARIST TURN’

- 24/7 surveillance to maintain registered ‘social worker’ status prompting social workers to comply with enforcement of ‘workfarist’ measures?

- Discursive coalescence between ‘workfarist’ activation and some trends in sociology? Undue emphasis on AGENCY. The attempts made to import ‘third way’ sociology into the profession’s theorisation (Ferguson, 2001).

- Embedded in the work of Giddens uncritically encompassed ‘benefit dependency’. ‘Positive welfare’ and ‘active risk taking’ on the part of the ‘poor’.
Can educators in the ‘field’ of social work contribute to devising and implementing a panoply of resistance strategies to defend the ‘left hand’ of the state?