

Societal/Cultural Change

“There is a shift at a level below politics which could be more significant than any negotiations taking place in Geneva.”

-E.P. Thompson

“The revolution will not be televised.”

-Gil Scott-Heron

I included the above quote by labor historian E.P. Thompson and musician Gil Scott-Heron because, too often, it is believed that society and culture remain stagnant. It is argued that change, if it is to happen, will be something that occurs at a specific time. Societal change is occurring as I write this. So what is it that we, as social workers, need to do in order to both recognize and take part in societal change?

The Past

Understanding how change has occurred historically is crucial to gaining insight into the present and working towards changing the future. Historians concerned with societal change have often asked the question “who decides what is historically significant.” The answer often is related to the dominant ideology of the time. In opposition to that, historians of the “New Left” began to approach historical research from the “bottom-up.” E. P. Thompson’s monster text The Making of the English Working Class is one example, Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States is another. These texts argued that the lens provided by traditional historical texts did not allow us to see true

cultural change. A look from the top down reveals the way in which war and political legislation changes the culture. A look from the bottom up reveals the way in which grass-roots change occurs. In Thompson's essay "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" he argues that crowd action that is often referred to as food riots can be seen as popular resistance firmly rooted in lower class opposition. Reinterpreting historical moments in the context of understanding societal change is an important first step for those interested in changing the future.

The Present

If we, as social workers, can begin to understand how change happens historically, it becomes easier to identify movements in the present. Denny Falk, author of "Riding the Third Wave: New and Revised Roles for Social Workers during the Coming Transformation" states the following:

"As a profession that developed along side the industrial revolution and has been perceived as meeting the needs not otherwise addressed in industrial society, social work must be especially atuned to the changes now confronting us."

It is clear that something significant is happening. It also seems evident that the change occurring currently is less steeped in ideology than movements of the past.

Understanding concepts surrounding Human Rights and the way in which these rights, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, The Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and others are providing groups of people whose rights are being eliminated with a common language.

Additionally, understanding the “rules of the game” is important to understanding societal change and resistance to change. Working to understanding global capitalism is crucial to identifying reasons for change, the way in which change can occur, and the strong resistance to change that occurs daily. Once we begin to understand and identify significant movements for societal change, action is essential. Involvement is crucial in the present.

The Future

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”
-Albert Einstein

Through a study of the past and present, we can begin to articulate an ideal future. Falk uses the work of futurist James Robertson to discuss the way in which we begin to articulate a future that values humanity over consumption and capital. Both authors stress the coming paradigm shift. While the study of the past and present are an important way to inform the future, we cannot predict what the future will look like. We cannot possibly understand completely the change that is occurring currently and the way in which the dominant culture will resist these changes. We can, however, use our imagination. By imagining an ideal future, it allows us to create a road map and to identify the road maps created by others. We are, at once, identifying the changes that already are occurring on an individual level and throughout the society and working to place our own voice within this movement to take part in shaping the future.

Sources:

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