

THE FLIGHT TO ETHICS : A RETREAT FROM POLITICS

This is a revised version of the contribution I made to the In Defence of Youth Work Critically Engaging Seminar on 'Politics and Ethics in Youth Work' in Birmingham, November 5, 2013. I have taken the opportunity to clarify a number of points and to add some references that might be of interest.

Lest I be misunderstood before I even begin I have no quarrel with the importance of grappling with ethical dilemmas. It seems to me they haunt practitioners at every turn, especially so perhaps in the current climate of hostility and austerity. However I do not believe these dilemmas can ever be separated from politics. Politics and Ethics are inextricably interrelated.

Defining Ethics and Politics

Before going further I must identify what I mean by ethics and politics. As for the former I can but direct you to Sarah Banks' opening chapter in 'Ethical Issues in Youth Work' [1], where she uses as an exemplar a particular ethical dilemma faced by a youth worker, wondering what to do about knowing that a young person, with whom she was building trust, had stolen from a shop. What was it best to do? What was it necessary to do? In this sense, by and large, ethics focuses on the individual's struggle to weigh up and balance competing principles, competing pressures from inside and outside of themselves, in the quest to do the 'right' thing.

As for politics I mean the question of who holds power and in whose interests they utilise that power. Somewhat unfashionably I want to insist that there is an overarching mode of power, capitalism expressed through the intent and actions of a ruling and dominant class. Now this does not mean I fail to recognise that the imposition of and resistance to power is played out at all manner of levels within society – in the family, in the school, in the pub, in the local community association, in the workplace and so on. Indeed in the late 1970's I was a tutor on a part-time youth work training course, within which the title of one session, borrowed and amended from the Scriptures, was 'when two or three are gathered together, politics rears its head'. This understanding of the way in which the power relations of class, gender, race and sexuality revealed themselves at the most intimate of moments owed everything to the social movements of that tumultuous period. It was symbolised by the feminist insistence that 'the personal is political'. We tried to grasp the interrelatedness of the micro and macro in politics through such clumsy formulations as 'racially structured patriarchal capitalism'. Our efforts owed nothing to the then burgeoning post-modernist view that 'power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere', which strikingly Howard Sercombe draws upon within the chapter on 'Power' in his influential 'Ethics in Youth Work'[2]. Without doubt Foucault is right, if not alone, to see power as diffuse and discursive, but contrary to his theory power is also decisively possessed and concentrated. In my opinion the last three plus decades of neo-liberalism have confirmed the continued existence of capitalism as a totalising, universalising, global mode of power. [3]

Taking a philosophical and historical turn

But before you forget my use of the word 'overarching', I must show, following the lead of Cornelius Castoriadis, that I have read a little Aristotle. In the 'Nicomachean Ethics' Aristotle speaks of politics as being the most architectonic of what he dubbed the sciences concerning human beings. To develop this analogy, if the building we live in is badly constructed, if its politics do not serve the common good, ethical efforts to improve our well-being, to do right by one another, can be no more than necessary, but insufficient repair jobs to the structure.

Let me now take an historical turn. I want to propose that the 19th and 20th centuries were profoundly the political centuries. As Castoriadis argues, “it is this era that, more than any other period in human history, seems to have conferred upon politics the most important role in the solution of human problems and to have engendered, usually for the better but sometimes for the worse, people's massive participation in political activities.”[4] Through the creation of their own organisations – unions, councils, parties, movements – people sought to achieve social justice. They possessed a vision of a better world. Doing politics, taking collective action was the way to change society. Ethics was left to the clerics.

Indeed within youth work historically ethics has been barely mentioned. Venturing back to the post-Albemarle days I revisited a favourite booklet published in 1972, 'Working with Youth', co-edited by Bernard Davies, within which there is no mention of ethics, even in Bernard's own concluding chapter on 'Values'. [5] To be honest this absence was of little concern to those of us coming into the work across the 70's and 80's. Our task, we believed, was not to 'ethicise' youth work, but politicise it. Thus we witnessed the flowering of autonomous work with young women and black young people, an explicit engagement with the politics of sexuality and disability. In the ensuing neo-liberal decades these explicitly political advances have come under severe duress. So much so that it is only recently, for example, we have seen a renaissance of feminist youth work.

This said, there is no doubt that the conscious, collective belief in the political project to change the basis of society, the allied aspiration to radicalise youth work, have been severely dented. On the world stage we have experienced in the East the collapse of the Stalinist dictatorships, masquerading as communism, coupled in the West with a wide and deep disillusionment with representative democracy and an often corrupt self-serving political class. Within youth work itself the favoured political party, Labour, its municipal socialist days consigned to history, transformed itself into New Labour, whose leader, Blair, hailed Margaret Thatcher as an inspiration. Foreshadowing the Coalition's policies New Labour viewed youth work more and more as an agency of behavioural modification. Today the imposition of a preordained outcomes agenda distorts and indeed threatens the survival of youth work as a distinctive, young person-centred site of practice.

Rejecting Politics, Renewing Ethics?

For three decades now we have faced one of the most successful political ideologies in recent times. Neo-liberalism with its emphasis on 'possessive individualism' and the rule of the market has become the common-sense of our age. At its heart is an assault on all thing collective that might constitute, even in embryo, an alternative way of understanding the world and comprehending the future.

At the very least, therefore, let me suggest it is no coincidence that the undermining of a belief in the possibility of creating a society founded on 'the common good', a rejection of politics in the grand sense, is accompanied by a revival of an interest in ethics, the attempt to find some sort of principled guide for the acts and behaviours of individuals, who have given up on the future. So too this turn to the issue of individual conduct mirrors the withdrawal of citizens from public life into private existence. It is the contemporary rebirth of the Athenian 'idiot', [from the Greek, *idiotikos*, meaning private], who was not stupid, but was reviled in his time for being self-absorbed, disinterested in public affairs, a bad citizen.

Indeed privatisation is the watchword of neo-liberalism:

- privatisation at an individual level, seeking to turn us in on ourselves as satisfied, but never satiated consumers and compliant citizens.

- privatisation at a social and economic level with its onslaught on the very notion of collectively owned and controlled public services focused on need not profit.

The ruling class in their desire to maintain and expand their power do not think and act within separate categories – economics, international relations, culture, education, the media, even youth work. They do not observe these distinctions in driving the train of their ambition. Meanwhile we remain trapped in compartments sometimes of our own making. For example, talking about the ethics of this, that or the other – the ethics of science, witness the proliferation of ethics committees, the ethics of advertising, the ethics of journalism and closer to home the ethics of youth work – plays into the hands of a totalising mode of power, which seeks to hide from us its all-embracing intent.

Implications for Youth Work

What are the implications of my argument for ourselves and for youth work? Given we claim as a profession to be committed to social justice, to the holistic development of young people, given we are speaking about ethics, about morality, I suggest we need to engage with politics on at least three interrelated levels:

1. Firstly we must engage at an international and national level. If you disagree with my analysis of capitalism as a mode of power, an overarching regime that tries to determine both our thinking and activity in the interests of a tiny fraction of humanity, what is your riposte? What do you think is going on in the world? If you believe that the present regime is as good as it gets or indeed you don't bother yourself about what it is or what it might be, this is a political conclusion from which ethical considerations flow. If you agree with me that the world is fundamentally unjust and unequal this is a political judgement with its own inexorable consequences. At a minimum it demands that we are in touch with people's attempts to challenge injustice and inequality. As citizens and youth workers passionate about the common good what is our relationship to campaigns opposing youth unemployment, loan sharks, 'fracking', hospital closures, the demonisation of immigrants and so on..? In the past this relationship to the wider world might have been provided by the Labour Party, now an advocate of that logical absurdity, ethical capitalism, but more often it was fulfilled through participation in the trade unions, the social movements and community action.
2. Secondly, more immediately within youth work itself, we have to ask, what is the relationship of our youth work institutions to the overall regime of power, expressed today in the neo-liberal policies of successive governments? To what extent are our employers in the local authority and voluntary sector, the National Youth Agency or the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services or indeed the training agencies accommodating to or resisting the imposition of the neo-liberal agenda. What are the implications for ethics if our institutions embrace willingly or unwillingly a target and outcomes culture utterly at odds with the open, voluntary and exploratory tradition of our work with young people? To take but one stark example the Young Foundation's Framework for Outcomes with Young People argues explicitly that the purpose of our endeavours ought to be the making of the 'emotionally resilient' young person, who will basically put up with whatever the system throws at them.[6] Across the country youth workers against a backdrop of cuts and redundancies are pressured to embrace this instrumental and pseudo-scientific fait accompli. I have yet to hear any of our leading Chief Executives voice any ethical concerns about the direction in which youth work is travelling.
3. Finally and obviously we reach the question, already touched upon, of our own particular

political and ethical orientation and how this impacts upon the above levels and our relationships with those, with whom we work.

To try to illuminate this a little more and to illustrate the shifting character of the dominant ideas in a given period I'll offer an example from my own history from almost four decades ago.

1. At the first level in the mid to late 1970's we stood on the cusp of a rupture with the social-democratic consensus that had lasted since the Second World War. Within this agreement the ruling class had accepted the need for a supportive Welfare State as the basis for its continued dominance. However sections of the ruling class were increasingly unhappy with the consequences of this compromise and were looking to change the name of the game. In particular they believed the collective organisations of working people had to be weakened. Thus this was a period of considerable political turbulence as the workers and social movements sought to resist the tearing up of the post-1945 deal. For my part an attempted understanding of this conflict led to an involvement in industrial disputes, the struggle for women's rights, anti-deportation campaigns and the like. By and large my analysis and activity was not shared by many colleagues at work. They stuck to a commonly repeated mantra that they shouldn't get involved in politics.
2. Thus at the second level, the question of the response of my employer and the wider youth work institutions to this scenario, tensions gradually emerged. Lagging somewhat behind the shifting circumstances a naïve apolitical, pluralist outlook prevailed. This meant workers retained a significant autonomy, which allowed them, if they so wished, to challenge the status quo. In the Wigan Youth Service this led to a major clash over the emergence of a pioneering feminist practice with the appearance of Girls' Nights. In the Community and Youth Service Association this revealed itself in a bitter dispute as to whether women in the organisation had the right to caucus.[7] I cannot remember anyone describing the differences, the dilemmas, as being ethical. It was all about politics.
3. On the third level I had been converted to Marxism on the road to Wigan Pier. Unusually the small group I joined was influenced heavily by the local Women's Group and the local wing of the Asian Youth movement. In the climate of the time, whilst perceived as a mite dangerous, I was not intimidated into suppressing my views. Although I did finish up being disciplined for supporting a 'bolshie' Members Council.

This aside, to give you one practical example of a political [and ethical] dilemma I faced. I was approached by a young woman and her boyfriend about her unexpected pregnancy and the possibility of termination – in their words, “because I was the only person they could trust”. After much dialogue I agreed to support their decision and to keep it completely confidential. In fact I drove the young woman unaccompanied to Leeds for the abortion. I did not think in terms of ethics. I thought in terms of politics and morals, being especially influenced by my participation in the National Abortion Campaign [NAC] and a commitment to 'a woman's right to choose'.

Obviously the backcloth to our debate today about politics and ethics has changed dramatically. I think it is more fraught to be political or so it appears. Yet there is much ado about the need to be ethical. In terms of the example of the pregnant young woman, who was also a Roman Catholic by birth to add to the complications, I believe I would do the same again. In doing so I would be identified as acting unethically, not least simply for making the unaccompanied journey.

Youth Work a Contested Space? A Distinctive Practice?

And yet, despite growing attempts to erase this fact, youth work remains a contested space, within which differing political ideologies clash, indeed ought to be encouraged to clash. With the expansion of prescriptive work with young people the classic opposition between youth work as a tool of social conformity and youth work as a medium of social criticism retains all its political and ethical pertinence. I do not think I exaggerate in saying that we face a concerted effort to impose a uniform and instrumental version of youth work, which serves directly the interests of neo-liberal capitalism.

In the midst of this turbulence Ethics need beware. It is clear that I am suspicious of ethics denuded of politics. I struggle with Howard Sercombe's formulation that 'ethics is the essence of the profession'. Will ethics be enough to preserve youth work as a distinctive site of practice?

Coming Clean about Politics

For my part a necessary starting point is to declare our political perspective, however provisional it might be, as the prerequisite for critical encounters with one another, with the youth work institutions and with the movement of society as a whole. In my opinion it makes little sense to talk of a specific ethics or politics of youth work. If ethics and politics mean anything worthwhile, if they are to have a continuity and integrity, they must apply to our lives as a whole, to the gamut of social relations.

My own post-Marxist stance is to advocate the ethics and politics of autonomy and democracy, which as an initial premise refuses the historical separation between the private and the public, between ethics and politics. At its heart is the continuing struggle to collaborate collectively in the never-ending task of creating a just society. If I am to be free, you must be free too! This aspiration is incompatible with the capitalist mode of power. As a way of understanding and acting in the world it is bedevilled by contradiction and uncertainty. It demands that we reflect constantly on what we are up to. In terms of ethics it offers me no guarantee that I will always do the right thing, although I will try my best. Inevitably as Aristotle insisted via his notion of 'phronesis' there will be moments when our judgement in particular circumstances finds us having to question and even transgress the norms, which usually guide our actions.

Perhaps you will find this a contrary conclusion, but, if nothing else, it does draw us into the world of ethical rules, guidelines and indeed codes, which will be taken up in the ensuing contributions by Sarah Banks and Maralyn Smith, but unfortunately not by Howard Sercombe, who is unable to be with us because of family bereavement.

Thanks for listening.

Footnotes/References

1. Banks S.J. [2010] *Ethical Issues in Youth Work – Second Edition*, Routledge : London – see Sarah's opening chapter, 'Ethics and the youth worker'.
2. Sercombe, H. [2010] *Youth Work Ethics*, Sage : London - see Howard's chapter, 'The Ethics of Power'.
3. *Capitalism as a Mode of Power*: Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan interviewed by Piotr Dutkiewicz at <http://bnarchives.yorku.ca/364/>

4. Castoriadis, C. (1997), *The World in Fragments*, edited and translated David Ames Curtis, Stanford University Press : Stanford – see the chapter, 'The Ethicists' New Clothes', which as as ever with Castoriadis has influenced my thinking profoundly.
5. Davies, B. and Rogers, J. [eds] [1972] *Working with youth*, BBC : London.
6. See the interview, 'Threatening Youth Work : The Illusion of Outcomes' at <http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress/?m=2013091>
7. Taylor, T. [2011] 'From CYSA to CYWU: A Radical Journey Subverted' in *Reflecting on the Past*, Gilchrist, R et al [eds], Russell House : Lyme Regis