The new internacional agendas: what role for social work?[1]

Las nuevas agendas internacionales: ¿qué papel para el trabajo social?

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If social work is to be truly international, it needs to address newly emerging international issues, specifically terrorism and global warming. Both of these raise profound implications for human rights and social justice, and hence social workers have significant contributions to make to addressing such issues. However to do so, social workers in western countries will need also to accept the loss of legitimacy of the western modernity, so that their theory and practice can be influenced by post-colonial writers and alternative knowledges and wisdoms from the global south, and from indigenous people. A number of curriculum proposals are made, with a view to developing more appropriate international social work education programs.

Si el trabajo social tiene que ser verdaderamente internacional, necesita dirigirse a los emergentes acontecimientos recientes, específicamente al terrorismo y al calentamiento global. Estos dos temas originan profundas implicaciones para los derechos humanos y la justicia social, y por ello, los trabajadores sociales tienen contribuciones significativas al respecto. Aún así, para poder hacer esto, los trabajadores sociales de los países occidentales necesitan aceptar la pérdida de legitimidad de la modernidad occidental, de forma que su teoría y práctica pueda ser influenciada por escritores post-coloniales y conocimientos y saberse alternativos del sur global y de las personas indígenas. Se realizan un número de propuestas curriculares con la perspectiva de desarrollar programas educativos internacionales en el trabajo social más apropiados

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Introduction

Social work is moving to embrace internationalism at a time when the nature of 'the global' and the emphasis of international discourses are changing, and it is important for social work to engage with the new international discourses, while at the same time maintaining its unswerving commitment to the old and now somewhat unfashionable idea of social justice, and this is what I want to explore in this paper. I will do so from the position of a privileged, western, white, English-speaking male, with all the consequent baggage, but also with a strong sense of unease and uncertainty about just how much people like me can still contribute to the world; we have made such a mess of it that we are going to have to learn a lot of humility, and then to change radically, if we are to stop being part of the problem and become part of the solution.

Social workers have played important roles in addressing a number of the major global issues that have dominated the internationalist agenda in the twentieth century, such as poverty and inequality, peace, human rights, race, HIV/AIDS and refugees, as well as more specific professional areas such as inter-country adoption. However in most of these, social workers have not been high-profile, and have been seen by others as marginal, when compared with lawyers, economists, development theorists and international relations experts. There is nothing new in that – it is social work's lot to be always struggling for recognition, and that is only to be expected; after all, social work represents the views of the vulnerable, of the marginalised, of those whose voices are not readily heard, and so social work will always be unfashionable and will threaten the agendas of the powerful. We should be proud that the powerful find us awkward and unsettling, and I hope they always will.

In the 21st century, however, while those older issues remain critical, new agendas have emerged, which now dominate the headlines and the attention of governments. The most significant of these are, of course, terrorism and global warming. At first sight these may not seem to be of particular concern for social work, but I want to suggest that both terrorism and global warming raise critical issues that should be of great concern to social workers, and that demand a strong social work response in the international arena, while at the same time maintaining our primary commitment to social justice. If we ignore them, we will lose our relevance.

Terrorism

Terrorism had existed well before 9/11, of course. There have been many instances of small groups holding large populations in terror, with the threat of unexpected violence and indiscriminate killing, since ancient times. Historically, terrorism, including state terrorism, is not unusual, and living with the threat of terrorism is the norm rather than the exception. It is small wonder that many people in non-western countries, on hearing about what happened in the USA that day in September 2001, simply shrugged their shoulders and said "welcome to our world". In this sense, the terrorism of 9/11 has perhaps ironically done us a service; it has forced those of us who live in the privileged west to acknowledge to some degree the precarious and insecure life that is the norm for most people in the world, and it has significantly eroded our smug isolationism, and our sense that really nasty things only happen to other people in other places. Hence there is a new imperative to engage with the rest of the world, and there is a potential that this could serve to help drive a new internationalism.

Unfortunately, this potential has not been realised, and the responses to terrorism have, almost without exception, served to exacerbate the issues which led to the problem. Powerful nations of the west have chosen to flex their muscles and reassert their power and dominance, rather than to stop and reflect and examine their own responsibility in shaping a world where there is such inequality and such injustice that some people feel they have no alternative but to resort to the methods of terrorism. We have seen many more deaths as a result of the reaction to 9/11 than there were on that tragic day itself, and the death count, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, keeps climbing. On top of this, the significant erosion of human rights and civil liberties through various forms of 'anti-terrorism' legislation, in countries throughout the world, has left all of us less protected and more vulnerable to arbitrary state action. Furthermore the exacerbation of racial, cultural and religious intolerance, bigotry and discrimination, whipped up by frenzied and hysterical conservative media, and allowed to fester by governments which either actively or passively condone such obscenity, has resulted in suspicious and divided communities, and in many people feeling deeply persecuted, devalued and in some cases directly terrorised by the threat of arbitrary violence, aimed simply at a population group rather than at any individual. That is what we are supposed to be fighting against, according to our political leaders, but we are actually doing quite a good job of encouraging it. The response to terrorism has, tragically, been largely tribal and exclusive rather than multi-cultural and inclusive.

So what does this mean for social work, and for social workers? I believe social work has responses to make, at different levels. One of these, which in the current climate is particularly courageous, is to apply a classical social work systemic analysis to terrorism, refusing simply to pathologise the individual,

though of course strongly and unreservedly condemning their violent actions, but seeking to understand those actions in a wider context, just as a social worker would do with any offender. That context is historical, political and cultural, and the actions of terrorists must be understood this way. It is important that we seek to articulate this analysis in a wider arena, even though in the west there are powerful conservative forces which seek to stifle such an analysis from the public domain. However, that analysis is certainly being undertaken elsewhere in the world, and we need to understand and validate it if we are to engage internationally. One cannot understand contemporary terrorism without understanding the historical background, and the sad fact is that in most western countries there is a profound ignorance of the history that had led to where we find ourselves today. For example it is important to remember the historical legacy of religious tolerance taught and practised by the Muslim religion (Boisard, 2003; Armstrong, 2000), often in sharp contrast to the violent and oppressive history of Christianity. It is also important to point out that the Middle East in its present form, with its current borders, is largely a creation of the western powers in the early 20th century, designed for their interests and their enrichment, rather than in the interests of the people who live there. From this perspective, those of us who live comfortable lives in the predominantly Christian west are centrally implicated in the crisis in the Middle East, and in the advent of global terrorism (Fisk, 2005). Terrorism is, in large measure, a response to the world we have created and before thinking about solutions we have to realise we are part of the problem.

Such historical and systemic analysis is a necessary precursor to dialogue and understanding, but dialogue and understanding are sadly lacking in much of the public response to terrorism. Social workers can play their part in facilitating such dialogue, especially those working at the community level, but also those working with families, with colleagues in our work places, in professional forums, and, most importantly for this group today, in social work education.

It is also imperative for social workers to take a strong stand on the fundamental importance of human rights, and against the weakening of human rights which is both implicit and explicit in anti-terrorism legislation, and in the actions of security forces. Social work, as a human rights based profession (Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2003) cannot stand by and accept this erosion of the rights of our fellow citizens, whether Muslim or not. We really have more to fear from the responses to terrorism than we do from terrorism itself. Those responses threaten the social justice and human rights values of social work, and our stance must be to assert that any response to terrorism must accept those social justice and human rights imperatives.

I will return to some of these ideas a little later, but first I want to turn to the other global issue of the moment, namely global warming.

Global Warming

The environmental crisis facing the world has a number of strands. While global warming is the most prominent environmental issue of the moment, we also need to remember peak oil, over-fishing of the oceans to a now dangerous level, desertification, topsoil erosion, the build-up of toxic chemicals in the food chain, crises of water security, the dangers caused by nuclear waste, and so on. Today I only have time to discuss global warming, but we need to remember that this is only one of several ways in which our profligate disregard for the planet we live on is coming back to bite us.

Global warming represents a far more serious and long-lasting threat to the world, and to the lives of all of us, than terrorism, and we can only wish that governments would spend as much time, effort and resources on countering the impacts of global warming as they do on fighting the so-called 'war on terror'. Global warming has at last arrived on the mainstream global agenda, and the tragedy is that it is about 15 years too late (Spratt & Sutton, 2008). Gone is the time when we could respond adequately to the threat of global warming without it having a major impact on economies and lifestyles. It is now inevitable that global warming *will* impact economies and lifestyles, and the critical question becomes *whose* economies and *whose* lifestyles. Tragically, though unsurprisingly, national governments are reacting to the threat of global warming by placing national interests first, trying to ensure that it is someone else who has to suffer. This was the cause of the failure of the Copenhagen talks, and it means that, inevitably, the economies and lifestyles that suffer most will be the economies and lifestyles of the world's poor and disadvantaged.

The threat to disadvantaged people, communities, populations and nations is twofold (Adger et al., 2006). First, there is the threat from the impact of global warming itself, in that most of the world's poor live in areas that are thought to be most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. There are likely to be many millions of climate refugees, forced to seek refuge because their homelands are no longer habitable. This will be as a direct consequence of the ecologically disastrous activities of people in the developed west, and yet it is hardly likely that the consequent moral obligation to provide assistance will be taken seriously by advantaged wealthy nations. We only need to look at the pathetically inadequate response to the present refugee crisis, where millions are homeless as a direct or indirect result of the wars and the global economic and cultural imperialism from which the wealthy minority has benefited. Given that shameful record, surely the chances of the wealthy west looking kindly on even

larger numbers of future environmental refugees are minimal. In addition, the poor are not going to be able to afford the extra costs of living in a world of rapidly changing ecologies, and the rush of the rich to look after themselves will leave few resources for the disadvantaged. This is likely to happen within nations as well as between nations, and Hurricane Katrina is a sobering example of the poor, in the world's richest country, not only being vulnerable to the ravages of severe weather, but also the least likely to receive adequate and appropriate help in its aftermath.

The second threat to the disadvantaged is that they will suffer not just from global warming, but from the policies and practices that the rich nations implement, and impose on the rest of the world, in <u>response</u> to global warming. Economic development, the most effective route out of poverty, may well be stalled in the world's poorest nations (heaven forbid that we should stall growth in rich nations – that would be sacrilege), if the rich impose stringent emission limits on others including those who cannot afford the new technologies of clean energy sources. It is now clear that the planet cannot survive the rest of the world living the lifestyles of the developed west, and there are two possible outcomes: either the west itself may choose to limit its massive over-consumption and lead the way in truly sustainable and simpler living (but this is highly unlikely), or the less developed nations must be prevented from enjoying the fruits of economic development (and this is both highly inequitable and highly dangerous, from the viewpoint of global security).

The enthusiasm for biofuels, in both Europe and North America, is one example of the climate change solutions that apparently suit the developed world while doing great harm to the less advantaged. Massive conversion of rainforest and other natural vegetation, or small landholdings, to palm oil plantations is being implemented by global agribusiness throughout much of the developing world, denying local people their traditional living, creating many more landless people who go to already overcrowded cities seeking work and finding a life of poverty, and causing a food shortage where oil palms are replacing crops. An apparent 'solution' to CO_2 emissions that seems so obvious and sensible in the west is beginning to cause great hardship elsewhere.

As another example, in my own country there is a loud and continuous call, by environmentalists and political progressives, for Australia to invest heavily in renewable energy research and development, on the grounds that Australia stands to benefit economically from such investment. Is that really why we should do it, for our own profit? If Australia is to benefit, one needs to ask "at whose expense?", and the answer is not hard to find.

In both examples, the environmental crisis is being redefined as an economic opportunity, as another way in which the developed advanced economies, and particularly the wealthy elites within them, can make a profit at the expense of the rest of the world. And the same can be said of the green consumer movement, encouraging us all to consume new green products, instead of suggesting that perhaps we should just consume less. The status quo, of the rich profiting at the expense of the poor, and of profligate consumerism, has not changed with the changing temperature.

It is also important to look at the national as well as the international level, when considering how the poor will be further disadvantaged by responses to climate change. It is inevitable that the price of energy, and the price of oil, will rise significantly in real terms, in response to market pressure and government policy, and this will have the greatest impact on those least able to afford to pay the increased bills. Whether governments will choose to couple these changes with increases in social security to compensate those most at risk, will depend largely on the political lobbying power of people like us.

Indeed, we can see a depressing familiarity with the way in which governments are now dealing with climate change. They are dealing with it in the way they have become accustomed to dealing with other issues, such as poverty, unemployment, crime, racism, and others with which social workers are all too familiar. Sadly, indeed tragically, they are unlikely to be any more successful. Like these other problems, climate change challenges vested interests and power relations. Politicians know instinctively that they must deal with such difficult issues by crafting policies that look as if they are doing a lot, but that actually do little to challenge or upset existing power interests and political sensitivities. They are so skilled at doing this, that they are responding to climate change in the ways they know best: lots of political spin, repackaging of existing policies to make it look as if they are doing something new, ten year plans (by which time it will be someone else's problem), deliberate massaging of the statistics wherever possible, and, as a substitute for action, a bewildering array of commissions, task forces, working parties, official inquiries, commissioned studies, panels of experts, and so on, exploiting any differences between them as a further excuse for putting off significant action. There is a clear parallel with, for example, poverty. Just as the solution to global warming – dramatically reducing greenhouse gases – is obvious, similarly the solution to poverty is obvious: significant redistribution of income and wealth to bring about a more equal society, both nationally and globally. But this threatens powerful interests, who happen to own media, and it threatens the perceived comfortable lifestyles of the more privileged. So for centuries we have been trying to 'do something effective about poverty' without doing the one thing that would unquestionably solve the problem. We have instituted lots of programmes and policies,

and had countless inquiries and task forces, but the poor remain poor. Climate change is similar. The levels of greenhouse gas reductions required to avert a potentially catastrophic rise in temperature are such that we will be unable to achieve them without change to the lifestyles, power and wealth of the privileged (Spratt & Sutton, 2008). So we already see politicians doing what they do best; pretending to do something while making sure they do as little as possible. We will all suffer as a consequence.

Let me cite just one example, among many. One of the major sources of greenhouse gas emissions is the jet aircraft, and there seems to be little that can be done to make jet planes cleaner in this regard. Yet the emissions from international flights are not counted within a nation's carbon emission targets – they are international, so a system of national accounting conveniently leaves them out. At the same time as major cuts in greenhouse gases are being talked about as imperative, there is a massive projected increase in international air traffic, especially to Asia. Airlines are busy investing in new aircraft for the expanding market, and governments are aiding and abetting all this by building new airports and expanding old ones to handle the extra demand. Australia's busiest airport, Sydney, is expected to double its passenger numbers by 2024, and this trend is replicated in airports around the world. None of us wants our current freedom to take low-cost flights to anywhere in the world to be taken away from us, and the growing incomes in Asia mean that many millions more will want those low-cost flights, resulting in major opportunities for investment and profit – and global warming. While paying lip service to the need to control emissions, governments are actively pursuing policies that will worsen emissions, and are able to use a loophole to prevent being held to account by international treaties. And nowhere do we hear of anyone questioning the ecological obscenity of ownership and use of private and corporate jets. In this light, we are justified in asking if anyone is really serious about climate change. The answer seems to be 'only if it is someone else who has to change their life, not me'.

There are clear signs that governmental responses to global warming, though they are now starting to happen, are too little too late. Those few places, like California and parts of Europe, where something serious is being done, stand in contrast to much of the rest of the world where prevarication is the norm. There now seems to be little or no chance that the rise in global temperature can be limited to 2 degrees Celsius, which is the level that scientists suggest is a threshold for major and probably irreversible ecological change. Global warming, at a level that will affect economies and lifestyles, is inevitable. Like poverty, we cannot prevent it, we may be able to alleviate the worst effects of it, but we will have to learn to live with it and its consequences.

This will have significant impacts for social work, and especially for international social work. There is every likelihood, especially after Copenhagen, that the policy response to climate change will be to ensure that the economies and lifestyles of the well-off are affected as little as possible, that profits will continue to be placed before people, and that the poor will be left to fend for themselves. As social workers, we cannot stand idly by and watch this happen. Climate change will increasingly affect attempts by social workers to work internationally, as it will become another generator of social and economic inequality and injustice, and climate refugees will become a major social work concern (Adger et al., 2006; Northcott, 2007). Social workers need to understand how it affects the populations they work with in different parts of the world, and should be engaged in the debate about climate change, arguing forcefully for the importance of social justice and human rights being at the forefront of policies designed to cope with and ameliorate global warming. We need to be looking at global warming not as a scientific problem, but as a social problem. It is directly caused by the social, economic and political system, and it cannot be adequately addressed unless that social, economic and political system is also addressed. In that way it is no different from other social problems, about which social workers justifiably claim expertise. Leaving global warming to the scientists is the equivalent of leaving poverty to the economists, mental illness to the psychiatrists, and crime to the police. These are social problems, requiring social solutions, of the kind that we are well-equipped to articulate. And, like other social problems, expecting the god of the market and the captains of industry to solve the problems of global warming is, I would suggest, a folly. Our reliance on the market and the private sector is part of the problem. To make it part of the solution will require a lot more than well-intentioned platitudes. Global warming forces us to ask fundamental questions about our lifestyle, our consumption, our assumptions about what constitutes the good life, our relationships with and responsibilities for each other, the viability of our local communities, and what we can demand as a matter of 'right'. These are all areas where social workers have expertise, and it is surely our responsibility to contribute that expertise; after all, the stakes could hardly be higher, with the future of the planet very much in the balance.

As I indicated previously, climate change is but one of several environmental imperatives facing the world at this time. These combine to reinforce the lesson that we simply cannot go on living as we have been, and that technological fixes alone will not be sufficient. We will need significant change to the economic, social and political order if human civilization is to survive in some sustainable form. The reluctance of both government and corporate leaders to admit this means that we will experience significant global crises before a new order emerges. Social work will have a major role to play in dealing with those crises, not only in helping the victims, but also by applying crisis theory to the global society, recognising that times of crisis are times of opportunity, and seeking creative, socially just alternatives.

What the new order will look like we can only guess, but the one thing of which we can be absolutely certain is that it will not be a simple continuation of the present.

A significant danger of these new global agendas, terrorism and global warming, is that they will marginalise the 'older' global agendas of human rights and social justice. In the rush to address, or to be seen to address, these new imperatives, global poverty, human rights, HIV/AIDS and other such concerns risk being seen as 'yesterday's issues'. Social work's commitment to the values of social justice and human rights require that we do everything we can to ensure that the solutions implemented to address the new global problems do not also exacerbate the old ones. Social workers must insist that terrorism and global warming be addressed in ways that respect and promote, rather than erode and undermine, human rights and social justice.

A third global trend: the loss of legitimacy of the west

To these two trends of terrorism and global warming must now be added a third, one which is not constantly in the headlines, but which is receiving increasing attention from scholars and commentators, namely the loss of western legitimacy. Those of us in the west need to accept the uncomfortable reality that for ever-increasing numbers of people in the world, the west has lost its legitimacy, and the western project of Enlightenment modernity has been exposed as morally bankrupt (Carroll, 2004; Said 1993, 1995). Western government aid programs are firstly for the benefit of the donor countries, not the recipients, and this is now openly admitted by governments, who justify aid programs on the basis of 'national interest'. Global institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF are blatantly pursuing the interests of western governments, and impose structural adjustment on poor nations with devastating consequences. The inability of the current global regime to prevent massive poverty, easily preventable child deaths, and the AIDS pandemic, despite obscene levels of wealth and over-consumption in sections of the developed world, is an indictment on the project of western modernity. While Buddhist monks, armed only with moral authority, bravely challenge the generals in Burma, the mighty west, devoid of moral authority, looks on, impotent; it is a telling symbol of our times. The undermining of democratically elected governments if they dare to challenge western interests has a long and shameful history, and has turned many people against the west. Increasing numbers can see through the sham, and for many the war on terror was the last straw. Francis Fukuyama's prediction (1992) that western liberal democracy was the ideal towards which the whole world would aspire and converge, creating the end of history, has been shot to pieces, as it becomes clear that many people are turning away from the western dream. Globalisation, while it has favoured some, has exploited many others. The west

now stands exposed as morally bankrupt and hypocritical, and those of us in the west who articulate an internationalist vision, including social workers, are faced with the challenge that for increasing numbers of people our motives will be automatically suspect, we will be mistrusted, and will be assumed to be guilty until proven innocent. We need to revisit the postcolonial critique, not as simply an interesting intellectual exercise, but as a challenge to how we interact with the rest of the world.

In the contemporary world, colonialism is alive and well, and any notion that we live in a post-colonial era is surely mistaken. However the postcolonial critics are not suggesting that, any more than the postmodernists are suggesting that modernity no longer holds sway (Young, 2001). Rather, like postmodernism, postcolonialism represents the expression of voices that call into question the dominant discourse. These are the voices of the colonised, voices that have largely been silenced in shaping the modern world. Postcolonial voices argue that the dominant colonial discourse, the discourse of the west, shapes the way the world is constructed, shapes the very ideas that hold sway, shapes the accepted wisdom in all fields, shapes ideas of what count as reasonable, appropriate, responsible, logical, realistic, progressive, innovative, creative, exciting, and, in this era of evidence based everything, it shapes what counts as 'evidence'. This dominant colonial discourse acts repeatedly and systematically to reinforce the power of the colonial culture and to devalue and marginalise the traditions of other cultures. From this perspective, everything must be understood in terms of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, and that relationship is acted out all the time through policy, programme and practice, through the conventional wisdom of economics and the market, through media, symbolism and cultural globalisation, as well as, where necessary, through violence and military intervention. Such colonisation, especially in the world of instant mass global communications, does not necessarily involve invasion and occupation. It can be achieved more effectively, efficiently and subtly in other ways, through control of the media, through the export of popular culture, through the education system, and through the economic power of corporate interests.

Colonisation often proceeds with the best of intentions, promoted by good people who genuinely believe that they are acting in the best interests of the colonised. Soldiers with guns usually make the least effective colonisers; rather it is the missionaries, the teachers, the professors, the economists, the health workers, the agriculturalists, the aid workers, the engineers, and, of course, the social workers, who are far more effective at spreading the dominant way of looking at the world and, in the process, marginalising and devaluing other world views, and, by implication, those who hold them. In the process, the world view of the coloniser can become that of the colonised, and the colonised will often become themselves convinced that the colonising power has the superior wisdom, knowledge, technol-

ogy, religion, language, science, medicine and intellectual tradition. Hence the colonisers are welcomed as the bringers of wisdom, and as the key to economic, political and cultural maturity and success. Those with ambition seek to study in the land of the coloniser, to learn the language of the coloniser, and to adopt the cultural practices of the coloniser. In this way there is a continual process of validation of the colonising culture and devaluing of the local or indigenous culture, perpetrated by a willing collusion between coloniser and colonised, each firmly convinced they are acting for the best (Young, 2001; Said 1993, 1995).

Of course this process is never complete, and there are always voices of resistance. Sometimes these take the form of militant action and resistance or independence struggles (sometimes labeled 'terrorism'), and at other times they take the form of peaceful protest, of trying to work through existing democratic systems, and of seeking to validate and affirm those traditional knowledges and understandings, not only through politics, but also through literature, art, film, music, poetry, theatre, and scholarship. The postcolonial struggle is not merely about political or economic independence; it is also about having these other voices and world views heard and validated, and about questioning the comfortable consensus on which the privileged colonial world is based. In the process of liberation, eventually the voices of resistance become stronger, and as the weaknesses and contradictions of the coloniser become more apparent, the colonising power loses legitimacy, and with that legitimacy it also loses its power to set the agenda, and to control. That loss of legitimacy is the context which the west now faces.

This analysis, of course, is not new for social workers. Social workers, perhaps more than any other profession, have taken this analysis on board. But despite this, social workers I believe are still often guilty of being part of the colonialist agenda. It is so easy for us to assume that the social work practice and education that we know is what other people need, and to set up programmes to help others to do it the way we do. In Australia, for example, it is sad to see some social work schools seeking to export their programmes to Asia, and to recruit aggressively students from overseas to study social work in Australia, regardless of the cultural, political and social differences involved, and without any agonizing about the colonialist impacts of our international work. This is despite our own recent Australian experience of having to move beyond the British and American constructions of social work, with which my generation of social workers was educated, and to establish our own Australian research, theory, practice and education. I fear we have fallen into the trap of following our universities in seeing international students as an economic opportunity – it is the same as defining the environment just as an economic opportunity – rather than as deserving a professional and ethical response. This is not to

say we should not be creating international links and learning from others, of course we should, but if international work occurs, as it often does, with a lack of any debate or analysis about the dangers of colonialism, there is nothing surer than that it will perpetuate such colonialism, and not be ultimately for the benefit of the countries concerned. Colonialism can be very seductive; it is so easy to believe that we have the answers that people want, and that what they need is what we are able to provide. And it is easy to be seduced by the inspirational stories of people's struggle for liberation and autonomy, so that we seek a role for ourselves in the story, seeking to 'help them to do it properly'. In doing so, we become colonial in our attitude; despite our protestations to the contrary, it is our own agenda that we are serving, and our own needs that we are meeting. Social workers are, I believe, better than most at resisting the temptations of colonialism, as colonialism involves acting in someone else's 'best interests' which, with its associated moral dilemmas, is familiar territory for social work. We know the dangers, from many decades of experience, and we know the importance of including a power analysis in our work.

But perhaps the most important thing for social workers to learn from the post-colonial critique is the importance of letting go. We need to let go of our preconceptions, our frameworks, our models, our theories, our objectives, our intervention strategies, our assumptions about knowledge and skills, our belief in Enlightenment progress, our materialism, our western hang-ups, and we need instead to listen and learn, humbly and sincerely, from others, in the genuine belief that our world view is not superior to any other, and indeed that it is our western world view that is the cause of so much suffering and op- pression, and that ultimately endangers the entire planet. We need to realise that it is only by letting go of the baggage that we will open ourselves up to other possibilities, other wisdoms, and other world views. It is only by letting go that we can enter into dialogue, which is a precondition for international work, as it is the only way we can learn *from* rather than learn *about* other people and cultures, and the only way we can work *with* rather than work *for* people internationally. Letting go is not easy. It makes us vulnerable, and removes the comfortable security of our models and frameworks. But it enables us to respond to another not as professional, westerner or expert, but simply as a human being, the most powerful encounter we can have.

I will return shortly to a discussion of how we might educate for international social work in a way that does not reinforce colonialism, but first I want to return to terrorism and global warming. Colonialist as- sumptions can be clearly seen in the global reaction to both issues, and this represents a significant reason why the mainstream responses, to both terrorism and global warming, are likely to be less than fully successful.

The colonialist assumptions behind the response to terrorism, especially the so-called 'war on terror', are plain to see. It was only when terrorism became a problem affecting the powerful west that it became seen as serious and urgent. The reaction to terrorism is one which completely locates terrorism as a problem of 'the other', the deranged suicide bomber, who is perceived as the product of a society and a culture that is a threat to what we call 'civilisation'. The demonisation of the terrorist, and by implication his/her culture, enables the west to avoid turning a critical gaze on itself, and to look at the part that we have played in creating the world of the terrorist. The western experts know what terrorism is, they define it, and they know what must be done to 'stamp it out'. They need in the process to persuade, cajole, coerce and threaten other governments to do what needs to be done, to do the bidding of the west and the powerful vested interests of the developed world, to fall in line, to accept both the diagnosis determined by the west, and the treatment prescribed by the west. It is an old story, and what we know is that it is an approach that is bound to fail. Colonialism breeds resistance, and that resistance may take the form of more terrorism, not less; indeed that has evidently been the outcome of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And if we think about global warming, again the definition of both the problem and its solution is dominated by western thinking. It is the threat to western lifestyles that is really galvanising people to action, rather than any threat to the lifestyles of the world's poor. Of course in one sense it is overwhelmingly a western problem, as it is the wasteful and unsustainable lifestyles of the west that have caused the problem in the first place. But part of the reason for this is that the so-called 'developed' west has steadfastly refused to listen to the wisdom of Indigenous People, whose cultures and civilisations have lasted a lot longer than ours, and who have some important things to teach us about sustainability and living in harmony with the earth. It is a measure of the colonialism with which we treat the problem that the whole issue of global warming is framed only within the parameters of western science, and hence the only solutions we can visualise are those prescribed by western science, through western reasoning and embracing western assumptions about the world, its processes, and the way it changes. I am not suggesting that western science is irrelevant, but rather that the western scientific paradigm does not take account of other traditions of wisdom and understanding (Midgley, 2001). Seeking to understand and solve the problem of global warming only from within the western scientific perspective takes no account of the fact that it is that same western science that in only a few hundred years has made such a mess of the planet, while other ways of understanding the world have generated greater environmental sustainability, and maybe they have something important to tell us.

So colonialism is alive and well, in the responses to the two great perceived threats of our time, terrorism and global warming. This underlines the importance of the analysis of colonialism, and its centrality in any consideration of international social work. In the remainder of this paper I want to make some modest suggestions of how as social work educators we might go about facing up to these challenges, and how we might make social work education more truly internationalist, and prepare students for international practice. None of these is particularly new or radical, but in the current global context they are worth revisiting.

Some curriculum proposals

First, we must make students comfortable with uncertainty, and ready for an uncertain world. The certainties and predictabilities of modernity are collapsing, and the heroic efforts of managers and planners to impose yet more evidence-based modernist certainty on us are surely doomed to failure. This requires students to engage with postmodernism, and ambiguity, and to embrace uncertainty and contradiction, not as negatives, but as opportunities for creative action. With this goes a need to value and promote difference, rather than accepting the boring uniformity of modernity, and the promotion and celebration of difference and diversity is of course a key part of social work education. Rather than arming students with an array of theories and models to make them feel comfortable, secure and certain, we need, I would suggest, to be helping them to be uncomfortable, insecure and uncertain, and to accept that discomfort, insecurity and uncertainty are characteristic of the human condition in the era of postmodernity. That the world is facing a period of crisis – ecological, economic and political – seems inevitable, as the existing order is so blatantly unstable and unsustainable and as policy makers persist in underestimating and avoiding the challenges that face us all. We need therefore to prepare students for this, recognising that times of crisis are times of opportunity, and to explore the opportunities for creative international work that crisis, rather than certainty, will create.

It is important next to reiterate the importance of understanding poverty and inequality. An examination of the web sites of social work schools in my own country of Australia shows that their research concentrations are most commonly in child protection, health, mental health, ageing, disability, gender, issues such as race, multiculturalism and Indigenous issues, and professional issues such as accountability and ethics. These are all important, of course. But poverty and inequality, concerns that were critically important in the history of social work, are largely lacking. It is true that poverty intersects with a number of these other areas – we do consider poverty in a secondary way – but it is no longer seen as a major area for study, research and teaching in its own right. The point for present purposes is that

international social work is basically about poverty and inequality. It is the obscenity of global poverty, and the unequal distribution of global resources, that make international social work so necessary and so difficult, and that result in the massive lack of resources to provide adequate health care, housing, education and employment for the people of the global south. But how can we do international social work if at home we define social work in such a way that poverty and inequality are no longer its core concerns? I would suggest that if social work education is to equip social workers to work internationally, a thorough study of poverty and inequality, nationally and globally, and a rediscovery of our profession's historical commitment, is fundamental.

Human rights represents both a powerful ideal and a strong basis for action and for moving beyond the constraints of national identity. Yet we should not be teaching human rights on the assumption that the idea is both unproblematic and self-evidently good. By concentrating on the legal mechanisms of human rights and on UN conventions and institutions, important though they are, we have created a human rights regime which is hardly accessible to the vast majority of the world's people, but is the province of a small and highly privileged group of lawyers, academics, politicians, diplomats, and leaders of NGOs. They are hardly representative of the voices of the world's poor and disadvantaged, and the language in which human rights are defined, and in which the mechanisms to protect human rights spelled out, is not very accessible, as it is largely written by, and for the benefit of, lawyers. In this sense, the human rights project is dominated by the voices of the privileged elite, is a discourse of the powerful about the powerless, and so reinforces the disenfranchisement of those most likely to be victims of human rights abuse. It is no wonder that human rights have been attacked by people from the non-Western world, by women, by the poor, by Indigenous people, as being not a discourse of their making (e.g. Pereira,1997). Human rights have been framed within Enlightenment modernity, and thus have found diversity, context and culture particularly difficult to address. As Enlightenment modernity reveals its contradictions and inadequacies, so do the conventional framings of human rights embedded within it. So for social workers to embrace human rights, we need to develop alternative understandings, which I suggest should concentrate on the idea of 'human rights from below', and exploring understandings of the human that extend beyond the bounds of modernity. This sees human rights, and human responsibilities, as embedded within our lived experience, and as enacted in our daily lives (Ife, 2010). Human rights as a participatory democratic project, where we share different understandings of 'the human' and what that means in terms of our rights and responsibilities, is a powerful basis for dialogue, and progressive social work practice. This can provide a way of relating to others through our shared humanity, rather than through professional roles, and can be a major organising principle for an international social work curriculum (Ife, 2008).

The next curriculum area which is important for international social work is the incorporation of postcolonial studies, so that students understand the profound and insidious effects of colonialism. Further to that analysis, there are a number of safeguards against colonialist practice, which apply to all social work, but most particularly to international social work, and these can be built into a curriculum. These include: the importance of letting go; critical self-awareness; openness to critique from others; sensitivity to the language we use, including such obviously colonial words as 'strategic', 'tactics', 'targets', 'campaigns' and 'intervention'; the need to be wary of objectives, targets and outcomes, and instead to rediscover self-determination, broadly understood, as a basis for practice; understanding our location in the dominant colonising culture; allowing people space and time for validation of their own cultures and traditions; and the importance of listening and learning before teaching and intervening (see Ife, 2010).

It is also important for those engaged in international social work to be aware of international issues. In the current context, some understanding of issues such as terrorism and global warming, in the ways I discussed earlier, is absolutely necessary. Social workers also need to understand the role of the UN and its agencies, the role of NGOs, the role of the World Bank and the IMF, the neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas, globalisation and the power of the global corporations, the complexities rather than the simplicities of the Middle East, of Africa, of Latin America, of Asia, of Eastern Europe, the legacy of the cold war, and the origins of cultural and religious tensions, on all continents, that go back centuries if not millennia.

This brings me inevitably to the study of history, and the lack of historical awareness is one of the tragedies of our age. The level of historical ignorance in the general community regarding Iraq, for example, or Islam, is deeply disturbing, and results in the most extraordinary statements being made in the media, which remain unchallenged. To work internationally, without understanding history, is impossible, and that history goes back far further than many of us appreciate. A colleague of mine, working with a Kurdish client, started her first interview by asking him simply to tell her his story. "Where would you like me to start?" he asked, so she replied "at the beginning". "Well," he said, "have you heard of Alexander the Great?" A historical legacy like that, where Alexander the Great is an important part of this man's story, is hard for most of us in the west to understand. The study of history is not a luxury, but is an imperative for international social workers, and indeed for all social workers. We can talk about working cross-culturally, and cultural competencies, but we can only begin to understand a

culture if we understand something of its history, and indeed how our own history intersects with that culture's history.

Another important component of the study of history is to help students realise that the modern nation state is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. This is the beginning of helping them to think beyond the nation state as their primary identity, not as citizens of a particular country, but as human beings, and to question the primacy of 'the national interest' as the central determinant of policy and international morality. Until we can help people towards thinking of the global interest, or the human interest, to realise that the needless deaths of thousands of children daily from preventable diseases is just as much an assault on our humanity as the tragedy of 9/11, and deserves just as strong a response, until we can help students to let go of their national identities to embrace something much richer and wider, we will achieve little in international social work, and the key issues facing our world will remain unresolved.

Above all, we must be listening to the voices of those from the global south. The postcolonial critique is about hearing and validating those voices, rather than allowing anyone else to 'speak for them'. As I have already indicated, in my own field of human rights, we can see a good example of how not to do it, with the concentration on top-down legalistic understandings of rights. This serves as an example of how readily we can respond to serious international issues, with the best of intentions, and end up simply reinforcing top-down colonialism. If we are genuine about a post-colonial international social work, we need to be listening to the voices from the south, to learn *from* them rather than *about* them, and this needs to be incorporated in the education experience, as we prepare social workers for international practice.

We can do this by helping students ask what it would be like if the development relationship was reversed. Are we prepared to experience the 'development' programmes we so readily impose on others? For example, would farmers in the USA or Australia welcome a visit by experts from Africa to 'teach' them about sustainable bioregional agricultural methods, would community workers in American or European cities feel they had anything to learn from community workers in the Philippines who have so successfully mobilised the urban poor of that country to become a viable political force? Would we welcome community development workers from India to help us in bringing back a sense of community in our increasingly fragmented and alienated societies? Would we welcome Muslim visitors from the Middle East to teach us about religious tolerance, recognizing the historical tradition of tolerance in Is-

lam, and also recognising that the level of religious intolerance in our own communities has reached dangerous levels?

The problem is that the world view of the west has been so privileged that if we are to move beyond colonialism we need to make a deliberate and conscious effort to critique that western world view, and to validate the wisdom, experience and skills of other traditions. If we can do that, we can then develop a practice based on dialogical action. This is the basic principle that two people, in genuine dialogue, can learn from each other, and that the collective wisdom of the two is greater than the sum of the parts. Genuine dialogue, of course, is very hard for us to achieve. It is counter to the way we have been socialized. It requires getting away from the characteristic western approach of debate, where it is one side against the other, and where the aim is to win. Instead, the aim is to learn, and to move forward together in an equal partnership. This involves the important idea of working in solidarity. In East Timor, shortly after the crisis in 1999 when the multi-national military force and lots of international NGOs had descended on that country wanting to 'help', three of us (I was representing the International Federation of Social Workers) were fortunate to have an extended meeting with the East Timorese leader, Xanana Gusmao. I asked him which group he thought was doing the most appropriate work in assisting the people of East Timor, and his immediate reply was "the trade unions, because they understand what it means to work in solidarity". There was a significant presence of trade unionists there, who had volunteered to help with the reconstruction of the country, and according to the East Timorese leader they understood more about how to work appropriately than all the NGOs with their development theory and so-called expertise. I believe this is an important lesson for social workers wishing to work internationally.

All this is nothing new for social work of course, though to work this way we will need to reject much of the modern managerial approach to social work. We need to be valuing process rather than outcomes and objectives, in the interest of that often ignored social work ideal of self-determination. We need to be perhaps more value-based than evidence-based, and we need to be defining knowledge, competencies and skills in such a way that deconstructs the privilege built into both the discourse of professionalism, and the discourse of the west. Social workers, in my experience, can do this well. It is what I believe is at the basis of all social work, but especially of international social work.

Indeed the experience both of terrorism and especially of global warming should demonstrate the bankruptcy of much of the conventional wisdom of the west, and its views of what must count as appropriate development, and should make us suitably humble about our knowledge and skills base. It is the sup-

posedly superior wisdom and technology of the west that has got the world into the unsustainable mess it is in, and which threatens our very survival. It is now time to be listening to other voices, and to be listening genuinely, hoping to learn rather than to teach. In that way, international social work, where social workers from very different cultures and traditions have the opportunity for genuine dialogue, may, rather than being just an appendage of mainstream social work, become the stimulus that leads to the kind of revolution that we have to have if we are to live in a world, not just a nation, based on the principles of humanity, namely human rights and social justice.

One way in which we can do this is by realizing that there are other sources of knowledge than text books, journal articles and research reports. Indeed if we confine ourselves only to that sort of reading we will never understand other traditions, as those ways of knowing are so grounded in western epistemology. In preparing students for international social work (and indeed I would argue for all social work), we must take account of other forms of knowledge, including stories, music, poetry, drama and dance; all of which are repositories of great wisdom, and have been from well before the refereed journal, the research report or the control group study. To quote Deleuze, "science and poetry are equal forms of knowledge" (Deleuze, 2006 p. 18), a point also argued at more length by Mary Midgley (Midgley, 2001). To recognise this is not to lose intellectual rigour – rather it is to acknowledge that there are other intellectual traditions from which we can learn, and to realize that we have lost the ability to apply something called 'rigour' to these sources of understanding. How can we begin to understand the Arab world, for example, without not only knowing some of the history, but also reading the poetry, hearing the songs, listening to the stories, with their rich mix of interconnected love, politics, history, family and nature, and the deep sadness and yearning as well as the love of the everyday and the deep humanity, that adds many layers of understanding and appreciation. As another example, a colleague in Melbourne, in introducing students to ways of working with Indigenous Australians, begins his course not in the classroom, but at the state Art Museum, with its rich and moving exhibition of Aboriginal art.

In this light, we must also mention spirituality, an important recent area of interest in social work (Gale et al., 2007). It is perhaps even more important in international social work, which so often involves working with people who have a strong sense of spirituality in their engagement with the everyday, and whose spiritual traditions are often different from those of the social worker, especially if that worker comes from the western secular tradition. In my experience, a respect for the spiritual can be reached through dialogue with those of different belief systems, that take us outside our own spiritual boundaries, and this is perhaps most powerfully felt in dialogue with Indigenous people, who have remembered

our spiritual connectedness to each other and to the land, in a way that modern society has, to its detriment, forgotten.

These proposals point to an international social work curriculum with some different emphases, though I know there are many social work educators who are seeking to put such ideas into pedagogical practice; and those who are need all the support they can get, given the often hostile political climate for such ideas. This is a challenge, indeed, for those of us who are concerned with international social work, and who believe that, in the globalised world, all social work is now international social work. Such a perspective also challenges many of the sacred cows of evidence-based, outcomes-driven practice, which fits so well with the privileging of western modernity, and the colonialist imposition of these ideas onto the traditions of others. To practise internationally we have to be skilled at letting go of many of the comfortable western assumptions which are so much part of our lives and professional and national identities, it is hard for us even to realise them. But as so many people have found, it is in letting go that we learn, and it is in letting go that we are able to grow, to change, and to make a real difference, working in solidarity with others.

I will conclude with a short poem by an Arab poet, which describes the letting-go of a national identity, and indeed the spirit of international social work. The poem is entitled "An Answer", and so perhaps the next time a student asks us for "the answer", we should give them this:

<div align="center">

An Answer

The stranger asked me what my country was
My country knows no exile, no "abroad"
I told her: My country is anywhere I meet
a stranger I can share friendship and love with
My country is an idea flowing with light
It is not bound to a flag or a piece of earth
I've left behind the tranquil motherlands
to those grown used to a settled life
I've raced the winds on every horizon
The winds and I have sworn companionship

Ahmad al-Mushari al-'Udwani

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