

MSW10 Speaker Series

Craig Fortier on Abolition: Rethinking Anti-Opressive Engagement, April 12, 2023

Key Takeaways:

Ruth Wilson Gilmore inspires Craig with these questions, so pertinent to social work:

1. What makes people's lives vulnerable?
2. What are the processes by which we need to deal with harm in our society?

Craig offered their practice insights and creative imaginations related to key SW spaces and approaches to address societal harms which they discussed in detail: 1) *Carceral & Extractive*; 2) *Service & Band Aid*; and 3) *Mutual Aid & Social Solidarity*. Craig also drew on the wisdom of Marianne Kaba who points out that abolition work involves imagining a society grounded on "cooperation instead of individualism", on "mutual aid instead of self preservation".

Craig saw in their work how youth programs have increased levels and manner of surveillance, while social workers are feeling increasingly powerless. Carceral approaches are getting in the way of community's experiences of positive social change.

Social workers need to recognize and be critically conscious of their complicity in working within **carceral and extractive** spaces involving:

- surveillance,
- containment,
- dispossession,
- punishment, and,
- coercion.

For instance, replacing cops to address mental health concerns in the community may produce a different type of carcerality perpetuated by social workers.

Social workers also operate within spaces where **service and band-aid** provisions restrict meaningful change as these approaches involve:

- neoliberal mechanisms of *non-profit industrial complex*,
- merely acting within the *buffer zone* where advocacy work could be superficial,
- *band aids* or piecemeal solutions,
- *co-optation* where there is token participation of service users without any real change,
- *professionalization* that creates social distance between social workers and community and promotes Eurocentric standards.

Craig contends that social workers need to deal with harm in society by adopting **mutual aid and social solidarity** approaches that demonstrate:

- Community led
- Principles of mutuality

- Decentralized – horizontal rather than hierarchal structures
- Anti-capitalist
- Abolitionist

In this perspective, policing is an intervention and taking care of our communities is preventative.

Craig discussed that networks that advance abolitionist social work may be guided by this question: How do we create responsive, community-based alternatives to our current social work models?

Recognizing the importance of acknowledging the sources of our knowledge, Craig talked about the work of Chris Dixon, which is built upon the work of Ashante Austin, which is built upon the work of John Hallaway, which is built upon the work of the Zapatista women's philosophy of social change.

Dixon describes social work that is within, against, and beyond.

Within: spaces for mutual support, critical reflection, humility; and unlearning of contradictions, hypocrisy; sites of imperfections and supports for shifts in perspectives and action-taking

Against: spaces to build solidarity and to assemble forces to struggle against dominant structures of power.

Beyond: spaces of possibility and imagining projects bring to life new ways of being.

Craig also talked about Hope in the Dark, reminding us how we can mimic the natural, living world: mushrooms are a metaphor for understanding social justice work, where the visible aspect of social movements (the mushroom above the ground) is the visible aspect of deep, long term, underground events – the work of collaboration, patience, and tending to relationships.

We can take a decolonial approach to social work and social work education – we can take ourselves and our practice deep in community, organizing with community members, building sustainable relationships across and within the community.