The Rhetoric of Urgency and Theory-Practice Tensions

Tom Grimwood

University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster LA1 3JD

Abstract

What does urgency mean for social work today? It seems that whichever way one turns, a sense of urgency is prevalent: whether the persistent time pressures exerted in day-to-day practice, or the recurrent themes of impending crisis confronting the profession itself. Frequently, these strains on time and resource perpetuate a division of 'theory' and 'practice'. In some cases, this is simply a re-assertion of the view that a social worker should get the practice done, and think about the theory later. But there is also a sense in which, under the neoliberal governance of social provision, urgency has become far more of an *inherent* feature of social work. This suggests a need to re-think the ways of acknowledging and representing this urgency, the problem of time that underlies the relationship between social work practice and theoretical inquiry, and the models of critique that can be applied to it. This paper applies an interdisciplinary approach to considering the impact of urgency on practice, by drawing together social work research with the tools of classical rhetoric and philosophy, in order to continue the growing discussions around the conceptual basis of social work, and in particular the concept of time itself within neoliberal social care.

Introduction

What does urgency mean for social work today? It seems that whichever way one turns, a sense of urgency is prevalent: whether the persistent time pressures exerted in day-to-day practice, or the recurrent themes of impending crisis confronting the profession itself. Frequently, these strains on time and resource perpetuate a division of 'theory' and 'practice'. In some cases, this is simply a re-assertion of the view that a social worker should get the practice done, and think about the theory later. But there is also a sense in which, under the neoliberal governance of social provision, urgency has become far more of an *inherent* feature of social work, and in particular the practices of 'self-shaping' which have historically formed a core element of practice. This suggests a need to re-think the ways of acknowledging and representing this urgency, the problem of time that underlies the relationship between social work practice and theoretical inquiry, and the models of critique that can be applied to it. In this paper, I want to – however paradoxical it may seem – take some time to consider the impact of urgency on practice, and its association with resource pressures and lack of time for theoretical discussion or reflection.

Rather than present an exhaustive survey of literature on the topic, though, I want instead to take a philosophical-rhetorical approach by re-reading some representative research

in order to continue the growing discussions around the conceptual basis of social work, and in particular the concept of time itself. This is important, because as well as being demanding and immanent, urgency is also something which is *persuasive*. As such, rather than immediately reach for one of our favourite high-level theories for an explanation and solution to the problems that urgency presents, there first is a need to interrogate *how* this persuasiveness is structured and formed. This is because the manner of this persuasiveness is mobile, dynamic and multi-layered: as well as something immanent and demanding, there is also something *rhetorical* about urgency that needs addressing if we are to take seriously the division it instigates between theory and practice. The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the rhetorical underpinnings of urgency and their relationship to the theory-practice division within social work. It is important to clarify that 'rhetoric' is not used here as a pejorative term for misleading or vacuous speech, but rather to the understanding of the art of persuasion (see Crowley and Hawhee 1999); a persuasive discourse aimed at securing the 'adherence of minds' in a given audience (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008: 8). While it may seem contradictory to conduct a rhetorical analysis of urgency in practice – given the former requires a careful unpacking of issues that the latter does not afford – this paper aims to present an interdisciplinary dialogue between social work, philosophy and rhetoric in order to argues that urgency enforces a problematic distinction between theory and practice, resting on particular conceptions of time and space. I will suggest that a specific model of time has become dominant within social work discourse, which is secondary to the spatiality of practice. This model of time enforces a more general distinction between theory and practice, which are identifiable through three dimensions through which urgency appears in social work discourse: the urgency underlying decision-making; urgency as a symptom of complexity; and the role of urgency in the disciplinary strategies of insecurity and self-forming. The resources of rhetorical analysis, I will suggest, offer alternative ways of conceiving and framing the urgent.

Time, Space, and Crisis

Review the introductory text to new books on social work and we will typically see them claiming to address the most pressing and urgent questions; we will be informed that social work is at a crossroads; we will read about impending needs to be immediately addressed. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore how embedded the language of urgency has become within social work discourses. While there is a certain element of academic style contributing to this – claiming mundanity rarely gets a readership excited, after all – Donovan et al. (2017) have argued for a close link between broader social and economic crises and social work identity. Likewise, in a review of literature in the Scottish Executive's *The Role of the Social Worker in the 21*st *Century*, the prominence of this sense of impending crisis is noted, not just in the UK but in 'many other countries' where 'the nature of social work and the role of the social worker are also under review.' (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse 2005: 9) Aware of the historical prevalence of the language of crisis that has long accompanied discussions of social work identity, the report remarks:

> But even if there seen to be no "crisis" as such, for others it is clearly the case that social work has reached a critical stage in its development – professionally, structurally and organisationally […]. Less a "crisis" and more a recognition that social work has reached a point where change may be required. (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse 2005: 8)

One point worth noting here is that the literal meaning of crisis is *a time of intense difficulty or danger; a time when a difficult or important decision must be made* (from the Greek *Krisis*, decision). As such, it is striking that alongside the readiness of social work literature to identify 'crisis', the report follows much of the literature in offering distinctly *spatial* or *territorial* explanations of what is, fundamentally, a temporal figure. The report lists

examples of crisis as the erosion of professional boundaries; the fact that much 'social work' is being carried out by non-qualified workers/carers; the failure to recruit and a shortage of qualified social workers; the lack of recognition amongst other professions; working conditions and the lack of resources necessary to allow social work to be effectively practised. Crisis is here represented through the lack of bodies-in-space (failure to recruit, high turnover rates, lack of resources), or the lack of bodies to fill space (the space of social work intruded upon, the collapsing of boundaries between the social worker and other professionals or para-professionals).

In some senses, this articulation of social work in spatial (rather than temporal) terms should not be surprising. The very fact that social work is, in McBeath and Webb's words, a 'contingent non-linear task' of 'complex indeterminate work' (2002: 1018) means that its expertise is structured, at least in part, by its situated *locality*. Social work is a practice, and practice is identified through place. As Roger Smith argues:

> in order to achieve a holistic approach to practice, social workers must first bring an appreciation of their own *structural location* and the associated "baggage" which exercises significant influence on both the opportunities available to them and the constraints which they experience. The *place* which the social worker occupies and the perceptions associated with this are thus implicated in all aspects of practice. (Smith 2008: 193, my emphasis)

It follows that, when social work identity is considered to be in crisis, the role of time typically emerges as a consequence of the spatializing or 'placement' of practice. For example, the British Association of Social Work's '80/20' campaign in 2018 (see https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/FINAL%2080-20%20report.pdf) – the name deriving from the discovery that children's social workers spent 80% of their time on administrative tasks and 20% in direct contact with service users provides one example of this.

The spatial constraints of administrative work means that there is not enough time for the location of practice to be realised. At the same time, the emphasis on the spatiality of practice may come at the expense of closer analysis of the temporal effects of urgency, as well as how this shapes the relationship between theory and practice.

To explore this in more detail, I want to break down the different aspects of urgency in this context. One way of doing this is to use the classical distinction between different modes of proof: logos (rational proof), pathos (emotional proof) and ethos (proof based on character). Using this as a model, the following sections explore how urgency is not simply the absence of time, but also a *logos* (a technicity of decision-making), a *pathos* (a sense of insecurity derived from the complexities of neoliberal care systems), and an *ethos* (a particular form of self-creating discipline), which frames social work's responses to social problems.

Urgency and Decision

Perhaps the most straightforward way of understanding urgency within a social work context is to align it with decision-making. Indeed, in the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) framework which regulated social workers in England until the end of 2019, the word urgency appeared only once, under 'assessment': a core social work skill is to assess the urgency of a case and prioritise accordingly.

Decision-making involves a complicated interaction between theory and practice, through which the latter supersedes the former. In an interview discussing the social analysis of neoliberalism since 1989, postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that when we make a decision, 'the world intrudes into our thinking as a question of urgency.' (2017: 90) The more urgent the decision to be made is, the more abruptly we have to stop thinking theoretically, given the endless possibilities theory may throw at us. Urgency can 'cut short' thinking, Chakrabarty remarks, even if *where* it stops may be quite arbitrary. In the HCPC

context, this arbitrariness is due to urgency being an imposition on a varied and multiple number of questions a social worker could be asking about their assessments: what factors of the client's context, actions and relationships they have considered out of the infinite differences within practice (a point that Aristotle first made in the *Nichomachean Ethics*). There is no clear stopping point where theoretical reflection naturally reaches a decision by itself, because there will always other perspectives to consider, alternative meanings, histories, translations, genealogies and so on.

But what is the nature of this imposition of practice into theory? Clearly, urgency does not *just* impose the recognition of a lack of time, or limited time. Rather, Chakrabarty's point suggests that the force of urgency is better understood as a specific *distance* imposed between, on the one hand, assessment decisions made (practice), and on the other, critique or reflection (theory). Understanding urgency in this way allows us to move beyond any unhelpful equivocation of urgency with simply 'lack of time.' Contrary to Chakrabarty's claim, though, I do not agree that decision-making makes us stop theorising altogether. The notion of urgency as a forced decision compels us rather to adopt a *certain model* of thinking, and agency; which is itself based on perpetuating a certain distance between theory and practice. Perhaps the best illustration of how this distance is produced and maintained can be seen with the application of particular time- and risk- management strategies to local practice, explicitly in order to deal with stress and anxiety borne from an over-saturation of urgency. For example, an article in the online social work magazine *Community Care* talks about dealing with stress through the management of time. It does this by using the 'Eisenhower distinction' between activities which have an outcome that leads to us achieving personal or professional goals (which are 'important' activities), and those which demand immediate attention, usually around achieving someone else's goals (which are 'urgent' activities, because the consequences of not doing them are more clearly visible):

Go back to understanding "how much" time you can spend on resolving the issue that comes up unexpectedly. Importance and urgency are different and they love to compete. My advice? Manage urgency effectively (i.e. what CAN you do?) and focus on importance. (Betts 2015, online)

The article is clear that urgency is something to be managed, whereas importance is more intuitive: what is 'important' is for *you* to decide (even if the conditions of urgency are rarely the responsibility of the individual). This is persuasive, fundamentally, because of an implicit binary it draws between the subject and the object of the discourse. The objective technicalities of the urgent are managed by the subjective appraisal of what is important *to you* (the non-technical, human social worker). In this way, the representation of urgency here draws upon and maintains a familiar set of dichotomies, where one side is privileged as more valuable than the other: object-subject, technical-human, bureaucratic-relational.

There are two points of interest around this binary representation of urgency as form of decision-making. Firstly, the alignment of the urgent with the bureaucratic and technical and the important with the personal risks what political theorist Wendy Brown calls a 'depoliticization' at work in the substitution of 'emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating solutions to […] problems.' (2006: 16) Replacing questions of social justice – why does the social worker have to decide between urgent and important in the first place? What resources have been taken away to prompt the decision? – with a therapeutic or behavioural one provides both a rhetoric of empowerment through individualisation, and a consolidation of responsibility on the individual alone. Secondly, and more importantly to the topic at hand, the association of 'urgent' issues with measurable, objective markers risks overstating the capacity one has to differentiate 'urgency' from 'importance'. To put it another way, the distance between decision and critique or reflection which this rhetoric of urgency insists upon seems to also imply a certain *timelessness* of critique. The distinction between the

urgent and the important heavily implies that the former is allied to time demands, while the latter escapes those demands (and hence, 'important' is something distinct from 'urgent'). If urgency imposes time restrictions, then this can be 'managed'; but managed *in what time*?

This implicit binary is often seen in the promotion of theoretical inquiry in social work more generally. The lack of time pressure is promoted, quite rightly, as one of the benefits of theorising. Gray and Webb argue that the 'joy of "thinking social work" is in creating alternative modes of understanding through critical engagement with competing perspectives.' (Gray and Webb 2013: 7) Typically, theory is considered within the (hopefully) safe havens of supervisions or University modules, where scenarios can be replayed and revisited, or the traditional 'case study' text-box examined. The problem, however, is that without a sense of *time* at work in our critical reflections, we stop paying attention to what we might in fact be bracketing when we bracket time. Indeed, a range of social, material, interpretative and temporal considerations are likely to be ignored in this model of 'timeless' case studies. Roger Smith (2008) relates how a colleague of his suggests that power in social work can be framed entirely by the notion of 'lateness', and the ways in which this is defined, experience and justified. Power relations are expressed in the differing ways in which 'being late' is dealt with in transactions between agencies, practitioners and service users – who is held accountable, for example. In this way, removing the temporality of an example can lead critique can become a deceptively uncritical performance; time can be the hidden carrier of materialities of practice.

There are important reasons for understanding these temporal materialities of practice. If there is a distance between the decision and critique or reflection – between practice and theory, effectively – then the main tool of decision becomes *technical,* rather than critical or reflective. The routes to 'managing' the pressures of urgency are found in assessment tools, decision-making frameworks and so on. As a result, the persuasiveness of this urgency is not as straightforward as a manager telling a social worker to make a decision, or the needs of the

service user determining a quick response. Instead, its rhetorical power is embedded within the technological and bureaucratic regimes that allow decisions to be made. As is well-known, the landmark *Munro Review of Child Protection in England* (2011) identified the way in which a *managerial preoccupation with timeliness*, recording, procedural compliance, standardised assessment, productivity measurement and risk aversion was detracting from the 'quality decision-making informed by a relational approach to knowing and doing in social work practice.' As many have argued, these technical tools frequently privilege certain kinds of knowledge over and above others: knowledge which serves certain models of government and state control (see, for example, Tsui 2004), and devalued other possible models of expertise rooted in the 'ground-level' workings of everyday wisdom, community-focused interpretation and user-based alternatives. Parton and O'Byrne famously identified this as a distinction between the 'technical-rational' and the 'practical-moral' approaches to practice (2000: 30-1). Healy points out that the 'dominant discourses' governing the technical-rational approach to social work, broadly construed – biomedicine, economics and law – are all 'strongly aligned with Enlightenment ideals of objectivity, rationality, individualism and linear notions of progress. In many health and welfare institutions, these discourses profoundly influence what counts as true, right and rational ways of proceeding.' (Healy 2005: 18; see also Thyer 2009) In this way, it is less the content of the individual tools themselves, and more the epistemological assumptions contained within such techniques of decision-making which shape urgency in practice.

The expectation that objective and rationally progressive techniques would enhance the predictability of outcomes at first appears to help social workers deal with urgency. But as the Munro review demonstrated, in many cases it has ironically promoted another form of urgency as a consequence: that is, they produce an accelerated expectation that the 'right' decision will be made. Thus, if the urgency of decision-making imposes a distance between practice and

critique, it would seem that the specific distance utilised by technical-rational approaches result in uncertainty, rather than the completion they promise. Correspondingly, there seems to be a link between the need to *manage* urgency – to keep things moving on time, and to keep social work technically efficient – and the very *prevalence* of urgency; a point which leads Cynthia Gallop to note:

> the growing neoliberal momentum toward theories and practices that bring order, predictability, and cohesion to our profession has begun to tip the balance in the social work profession in a manner that has many in the field questioning who we are, and what we actually do. (Gallop 2013: 2)

Urgency and Complexity

Gallop notes the 'neoliberal momentum' at work in some of this drive for time management, and this leads us on to the next rhetoric of urgency. Urgency also emerges as part of the complexity of situating social care in the global world today. Urgency is, in this sense, a key component of neoliberalism, and the effects it has had on social work and social care to date.

Neoliberalism has become a term denoting the bogeyman of social policy, despite widespread ambiguity over its precise meaning; indeed, in some cases, this ambiguity is precisely how it appears to be such a bogeyman. As Andrew Whelan notes, 'neoliberalisation is not a coherent and tangible force in the world; it is a label ascribed to an unpredictable array of such forces in unpredictable motion, usually in dialogue with other, often contradictory forces.' (Whelan 2015: 8; see also Clarke 2008) In principle, liberalism is a utilitarian method, and lends itself to utilitarian ethics: rational and calculative based on the ends justifying the means. However, late modern capitalism is somewhat paradoxically characterised by an excess of anti-rational, anti-utilitarian actions. Risk and short-termism is prioritised over the retreat of

government into administration; steadfast growth is replaced with chaos and abrupt change; and, Franco Berardi nargues, 'conditions of info-acceleration and hypercomplexity' (2012: 12) mean that the epistemology of prediction and certainty – the technical-rational methods – become dysfunctional within neoliberal governed social care.

Neoliberalism is driven by the urgency of its own inevitability: as Margaret Thatcher once famously said, 'there is no alternative'; while Mark Fisher commented that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism' (2009: 1). But the 'omnipotence' of neoliberalism (Clarke 2008) this translates into a complex urgency on a ground level, as the work of Vassilus Karagkounis demonstrates. Following the 2008 financial crisis, neoliberal policies instigated harsh austerity policies, which inevitably meant increased workloads for social workers and the shrinking of the workforce due to cuts in social care budgets. In his work on austerity measures in Greece and its effect on social work, Karagkounis argues that the effects of austerity highlight the shortcomings of the prevalent methods of social work, which are based on medical or functional models of casework at an individual and family level. But this, he argues, has fallen short for two reasons: first, the limits are reached when more than a set number of individuals need help (as there is not enough time or resource): but furthermore, the complexity of the broader problems, and the necessity of linking personal welfare with wider economic policies, means that the shortcomings of casework are exposed by austerity measures. While casework may still be helpful for alleviating short-term problems for service users, Karagkounis suggests it is shown up for its shortcomings.

> Despite these inevitable variations [of austerity], the impact of neo-liberal policies poses a significant challenge to social workers in terms of effectively responding to rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions and to complex and deepening problems that many individuals, families and communities face. (Karagkounis 2017: 652)

Urgency this manifests itself in two ways, from this practice-based perspective. Firstly, individual 'cases' are harder to separate from the broader changes around them. As the economies of states become increasingly interdependent, Stanford (2010) has argued that risk is used within neo-liberal societies to mobilise fear as an emotive medium for advancing the values of safety and security. As a result, how social workers view themselves:

> has become dominated by the legions of polarised identities that cumulate around notions of risk—dangerousness and vulnerability, independence and dependence, responsibility and irresponsibility, trustworthiness and untrustworthiness, culpability and innocence. Within this analysis, overwhelming fear operates as a core constituent for defining the personal experience of risk within contemporary society. (Stanford 2010 p.1066; see also Webb 2006)

The almost unfathomable complexity of the neoliberal economic field results in a range of competing insecurities which effectively hold up and support the delivery of government. This prompts a second sense of urgency, which is specifically related to how social movements have attempted to respond to the current world economic order. That is the need for a non-complex, and often binary, response: the good versus the bad. We see this on a grander scale in politics: the more complex the world, the more urgent the desire to see a really *good* good guy, or really *bad* bad guy; what Berardi describes as an aggressive desire for identity to fill the void where traditional heroism has been unable to sustain itself in late capitalism (Berardi 2015: 5).

This rush for an answer has a knock-on effect for the relationship between theory and practice. Karagkounis sees the return to *critical social work*, or the Global Social Work Agenda, as the only route to resist austerity. But the radical social work tradition for its 'idealistic theoretical prescriptions of critical thinking' (Ferguson 2013: 119), which remains

premised on negative critiques that lead, Harry Ferguson argues, to only platitudes and superficial gestures towards social change that, in fact, *restrict* a deeper discussion. While I am sympathetic to this particular criticism, Ferguson also suggests that the real problem is that this offers no *practical* solutions. But the point of 'urgent complexity' is precisely that a clear practical solution will not simply "appear" in neat and representative ways. As such, Ferguson's critique falls short by maintaining the division between theory and practice, while effectively leaving the ways in which urgency is persuasive to one side.

Urgency and Discipline

What is at stake in leaving this to one side, though? In his later work, Foucault (1997, 2008) uses the ancient Greek term *askēsis* to discuss how the self is exercised and trained and, through such training, transformed. For Foucault, this ancient emphasis on 'taking care of oneself' has been superseded by the drive to 'know oneself' (McGushin 2007: 31), resulting in the taking for granted of relationships between power, subjectivity and truth. However, it could well be argued that this originary notion of an ethical transformative 'training' of the self has been core to social work throughout its history. The development of a service user's 'character' was fundamental to the moral idealism of the Charity Organisation Societies of the late 19th century in England. Working with the hidden depths of the self was key to the shift to psychoanalytic approaches to social work in the interwar period, and in the 1970's, enabling 'self-actualisation' was a key mantra of the therapeutic turn in social work. Today, models of casework and person-centred practice compete with critical social work and the structural understanding of identity over the most appropriate tools of self-development (Pierson 2011: 199-203; Grimwood 2016: 127-8). Likewise, the neoliberal context in which these models compete is itself built less on an explicit ideology, and more on a number of *techniques of self-shaping* which model service users and service delivers as economic agents. Foucault famously

talks of the neoliberal subject emerging as an 'entrepreneur of himself' (2008: 226), through the practices of 'normative reason' embedded within neoliberal policies (Brown 2015: 30). Understanding these as fundamentally *ethical* practices – that is to say, contributing to a persuasiveness based on the ethos or 'self' within an argument – provides a ground on which to consider the ways in which the theory-practice division manifests itself within the current context of neoliberal social care.

In 1981 Margaret Thatcher ominous declared that: 'economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.' (Butt 1981) The effects of this change on hearts and souls is documented by Berardi, who notes that social psychology has 'remarked that two pathologies are of great actuality in these last decades of liberalist hyper-capitalism: panic and depression.' (2009:c100) Once, the problem of social relations was alienation. Now, Berardi argues, the problem is over-connection. Along similar lines, the psychologist Jeff Sugarman has worked specifically on the ways in which the urgency of neoliberalism affects the psyche. He writes:

> In neoliberalism, governing occurs by providing individuals with choices and holding them accountable for the choices they make. However, many of the life choices with which individuals are now faced are the result of reduced government services that, in effect, transfers risk from the state to individuals. Risk and uncertainty are nothing new. But, in the climate of neoliberal economics, there is less and less separating those who pursue risk intentionally for profit, from the rest of us for whom it is being woven ideologically into the fabric of everyday life, whether it is matters of personal health, the care and education of our children, the increasing unpredictability of employment, or dignity in old age. Along with increased risk, the current emphasis on choice, autonomy, and self-reliance insinuates failure as self-failure, for which one is

expected to bear sole responsibility. There is diminishing appreciation that individuals' predicaments are a product of more than simply their individual choice, and include access to opportunities, how opportunities are made available, the capacity to take advantage of opportunities offered, and a host of factors regarding personal histories and the exigencies of lives. (Sugarman 2015: 105; see also Salecl 2010)

This collapsing of the private and public self suggests that we cannot simply turn to practice or reality to escape what urgency does to theory. As Matko Krce-Ivančić argues, 'anxiety relentlessly reminds the neoliberal subject that she has not yet done enough on herself,' (2018: 263) and as such is not simply a side effect of the disciplinary processes, but is in fat key in establishing what he terms 'neoliberal subjectivty' (274). Individuals are left to themselves, but are still 'overseen' through the establishment of fields of power and practice. In the UK, this has been seen profoundly with the personalisation agenda, whereby service users are given private budgets to have autonomy over their care. But the problem is that the time it takes for state services to be withdrawn is quicker than new services take to be created; hence Burton comments that '"Personalisation" is a bureaucratic word for a bureaucratic response to the political failure of social care.' (Burton 2010: 301) For Ehrenberg, depression develops 'after the disciplinary behavioural models and the rules of authority… that assigned a destiny to social classes and gender collapsed faced with the new norms pushing each and everyone to individual action, forcing individuals to become themselves.' (cited in Berardi 2009: 99) He goes on: 'the responsibility of our lives is now fully assigned to each of us. Depression manifests itself as pathology of responsibility, dominated by the feeling of inadequateness.' Berardi comments: 'happiness is not a matter of science, but of ideology.' (90)

Rethinking time: from Chronos to Kairos

The point of this paper is not, however, to repeat the well-worn critiques of neoliberal self-shaping. Where, though, do these three 'proofs' or persuasive conditions leave our opening question on the meaning of urgency? Writers like Sugarman and Berardi demonstrate how neoliberal disciplining interweaves rationality, emotional response, and models of the self; thus, while this rhetorical analysis has pointed to three dimensions of urgency, and aligned them with the three classical models of proof (logos, pathos and ethos), these are, of course, frequently interlinked. For example, the requirement on a social worker for meeting targets may appear to be the domination of a logical argument; however, it tends to elicit both pathos responses and ethos (as the BASW 80/20 report found, the space in which the social worker has to complete bureaucracy requires a change in character, or change in assumption of self).

But these dimensions of urgency raise another point for rhetorical consideration. This is the way that urgency typically manifests itself in terms of a *chronological* form of time. That is: discourses of urgency are dominated by a linear form of time that can be measured and quantified, such that the demands of time rest within corresponding forms of knowledge and practices of knowing. If we are to continue examining urgency through a rhetorical lens, we can note at this point that classical rhetoric often employed two concepts of time: *chronos*, which was linear, measurable time, and *Kairos*, which was a more situational kind of time, perhaps close to 'opportunity' in English or 'opening'.

> A Kairos-based discourse does not seek certainty prior to writing, but rather views writing and speaking themselves as opportunities for exploring issues and making knowledge. A rhetoric that privileges Kairos as a principle of invention does not present a list of rules… but rather… is not only attuned to the history of an issue (chronos), but is also aware of the more precise turns the arguments

surrounding an issue have taken and when they took these turns. (Crowley and

Hawhee 1999: 35)

Kairos thus refers to a 'timely or appropriate moment'. This concept was largely neglected in the Enlightenment, as it was not well-suited to the rational and predictable grounding of modern knowledge. A 'passing instant' is not teachable, and at odds with the planning, strategizing and management of technical processes. Kairos, according to Hawhee, marks the 'emergence of a pro-visional subject, one that works on – and is worked on by – the situation.' (2002: 19) So it is not just a moment which 'we' seize – in the classic neoliberal mantra – but rather one that mediates subject and context, time and place. Neoliberal chronology, in particular, emphasises the crisis of individual decision; Kairos focuses on the broader fluctuating interactions between individual and context.

The space-time configuration of Kairos offers a different lens for thinking about urgency. The idea of opportunity or moment seems perhaps one way of countering the urgency of calculation and measured chronos, without relying on a disciplinary territorialism built upon binary oppositions – social worker/health worker, theory/practice and so on. Too often, this binary opposition is implicit in the call for a more embodied and dynamic model of social work – such as the 'technical rational' versus the 'practical moral' of Parton and O'Byrne – which, I have argued, can bracket temporal issues that obscure some important material aspects of practice. Two examples may help to suggest how Kairotic time translates into social work, in light of the previous three ways in which urgency is persuasive in determining the relationship between theory and practice.

1. Ian Hyslop proposes the idea of social work offering an 'in-between': social work provides a 'socially configured understanding' arising 'from the practice of social work in the space between the poor and the powerful.' (2018: 20-1) This knowledge, Hyslop argues, furnishes social work with a distinctive 'identity claim'. As an example of this

in action, Hyslop cites 'a very experienced and inter-personally flexible hospital social worker who spoke of working with multiply disadvantaged people so that they are not 'lost', [and] described explaining the need to record *social history* with a client in order to humanise individuals within the wider clinical system.' The social worker said:

> …we're doing this because it's really important in the hospital notes that you're not seen as just a diagnosis or a number – that you're seen as a person who's got kids and that…It always works, but I do mean it genuinely.

> This is one example of what Hyslop argues shows 'social work occupies an intermediate location' (27); a focus on juggling, balancing, bridging and relationships, within the confines of systems built on the urgent requirement to increase efficiency. While Hyslop – as other writers have – insists on the intermediacy of location and spatiality, this invocation of historical time opens up an important aspect of the in-between-ness he describes.

2. As we have seen, in his work on austerity in Greece, Karagkounis argues that his preferred response is to 'revive the radical tradition of social work'. He argues that this is 'a *necessity of our times*; social work owes it as much to itself and its foundational values of equality and justice as it does to its citizen clients.' (652) Here, Karagkounis follows a general characteristic of critical social work writing, by calling on particular histories of social work: not simply as a descriptive account of how we got to be where we are, but also as a *motivational* device to inspire the 'critical' aspect of social work practice (one sees something similar in Michael Reisch's historical accounts of social work (2002), for example, which has been criticised precisely for its over-emphasis on social work's radical contribution to society at the expense of its more humdrum, or less effective, components).

While these are both examples of social work using temporal stories – of the client, or of the profession – the point of their success is not their *chronological* rhetoric. Simply reminding a hospital that a client has a history is not effective in itself, and neither is Reisch's history always accurate. The point is not that they are temporal, but that they are *timely*. This timeliness – knowing when to speak of the radical history of social work, knowing when to insert the client's social history into their hospital management – seems to be key to the in-between-ness that Hyslop describes; but also something that does not necessarily commit the social worker to a 'practical-moral' position *outside* of the technicalities of assessment and so on. It is view of time that is about opportunity and meeting in the moment – time in the form of Kairos – rather than simply escaping the ordered and functional demands of time.

The principle of a Kairotic social work does not, of course, provide immediate answers to the multiple problems that the rhetoric of urgency poses in and of itself. But I would argue that reconceptualising the persuasiveness of urgency in terms of the timeliness of moments is a step towards avoiding the distancing of theory and practice in their conventional binaries. Furthermore, it offers a route into a number of conceptual approaches that might provide a constructive dialogue between social work and rhetoric on the problem of urgency.

References

Asquith, S., Clark, C., and Waterhouse, L. (2005). *The Role of the Social Worker in the 21st Century: A Literature Review*. Report commissioned by the Scottish Executive.

Berardi, F. (2009). *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Cadel, F. and Mecchia, G. (trans.) Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

-------- (2012). *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

-------- (2015). *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* London: Verso.

Betts, Zoe (2015). "'Clarity from the chaos': tips for time management in social work." *Community Care.* Available at: https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/07/28/clarity-chaos-tips-time-management-social-work/

Brown, Wendy (2006). *Regulating Aversion: Toleration in the Age of Empire.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

-------- (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* London: Zone Books.

Burton, J. (2010). "'Call it Personalisation if you like: the Realities and Dilemmas of Organising Care in a Small Rural Community.' *Journal of Social Work Practic*e, 24:3, pp.301-313.

Butt, R. (1981). ''Economics are the Method: the Object is to Change the Soul: Interview with Margaret Thatcher.' *The Sunday Times*, 3rd May. Available at https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475

Chakrabarty, D. (2017). 'Postcolonial Criticism after 1989: A Conversation with Gal Kirn and Marian Burchardt.' In Burchardt, M. and Kirn, G. (eds). *Beyond Neoliberalism: Social Analysis after 1989.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.83-93.

Clarke, J. (2008). 'Living with/in and without neo-liberalism.' *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology*, 51, pp.135-147.

Crowley, S. and Hawhee, D. (1999). *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. London: Allyn and Bacon.

Donovan, J., Rose, D., & Connolly, M. (2017). 'A Crisis of Identity: Social Work Theorising at a Time of Change.' *British Journal of Social Work*, 47:2, pp.2291–2307.

Ferguson, H. (2013). 'Critical Best Practice.' In Gray, M. and Webb, S. (eds.), *The New Politics of Social Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 116-127

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester: 0 Books.

Foucault, Michel. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press

-------- (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France.* Burchall, G. (trans.) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gallop, C. (2013). 'Knowing Nothing: Understanding New Critical Social Work Practice.' *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics.* Available at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/982d/edc12bb3e53f77cefe915dccc8d322fc9556.pdf

Gray, M., and Webb, S. (2013). 'Introduction.' In Gray, M., and Webb, S. (eds.), *Social Work Theories and Methods*. London: Sage, pp.1-10

Grimwood, T. (2016). *Key Debates in Social Work and Philosophy.* London: Routledge.

Hawhee, D. (2002). 'Kairotic Encounters.' In Atwill, J. and Lauer, J. (eds.) *Perspectives on Rhetorical Invention*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, pp.16-35.

Healy, K. (2005). *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating Frameworks for Practice.* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Hyslop, I. (2018). 'Neoliberalism and social work identity.' *European Journal of Social Work*, 21:1, pp.20-31.

Karagkounis, V. (2017). 'Social work in Greece in the time of austerity: challenges and prospects.' *European Journal of Social Work*, 20:5, pp.651-665.

Krce-Ivančić, M. (2018) 'Governing through Anxiety.' *Journal for Cultural Research*, 22:3, pp.262-277

McBeath, G. and Webb, S. (2002). 'Virtue Ethics and Social Work: Being Lucky, Realistic and Not Doing One's Duty.' *British Journal of Social Work*, 32, pp. 1015-1036

McGushin, E. (2007). *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press

Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro Review of Child Protection: a Child-Centred System*. Report commissioned by the Department of Education, British Government.

Parton, N. and O'Byrne, P. (2000). *Constructive Social Work: Towards a New Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Perelman, C., and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (2008 [1969]) *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press

Pierson, J. (2011). *Understanding Social Work: History and Context.* Berkshire: Open University Press

Reisch, M. (2002). *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*. London: Routledge.

Salecl, R. (2010). *Choice*. London: Profile Books.

Schram, S. (2000). *After Welfare: The Culture of Postindustrial Social Policy*. New York: New York University Press

Smith, R. (2008). *Social Work and Power*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Stanford, S. (2010) 'Speaking Back' to Fear: Responding to the Moral Dilemmas of Risk in Social Work Practice. *British Journal of Social Work*. 40:4: 1065-1080.

Sugarman, J. (2015). 'Neoliberalism and Psychological Ethics.' *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 35:2, pp.103–116

Thyer, B. (2009). 'Evidence-Based Practice, Science and Social Work: An Overview.' In Roberts, A. (ed.), *Social Worker's Desk Reference*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1115–119.

Tsui, M. (2004). 'The Supervisory Relationship of Chinese Social Workers in Hong Kong.' *The Clinical Supervisor*, Vol. 22, No.2, pp. 99-120.

Webb, S. (2006). *Social Work in a Risk Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Whelan, A. (2015). 'Academic Critique of Neoliberalism.' *SITES: New Series*, 12:1, pp.1-25.