Opening out: limits and contradictions

It will be apparent from the discussion in the last chapter that what divides social workers who adhere to some kind of revolutionary philosophy from the rest of our colleagues is an unwillingness to commit ourselves wholly to those activities which can officially be construed as ‘helping’. Because we are sceptical of their ultimate efficacy, we choose instead to devote a considerable amount of our time and energy to work which we argue is the only road to a longer-term solution to the problems which people in our society have to face. Whereas professionals, as Kay McDougall puts it,¹ turn their occupation into a way of life, revolutionaries seek to extend their way of life into their occupation, steering the difficult course between their own beliefs and values, those they are expected to purvey and enforce, and those of their clients. Sometimes, as in the case of the squatters, radical perspectives conflict, but if revolutionaries must understand that people’s need is sometimes so urgent that they cannot afford to wage a long-term struggle, so groups which win their demands from the authorities need to realise both that their gain is likely to be another’s loss, and that there are probably large numbers of others, so far unable to organise, who have similar needs. A victory loses much of its worth unless its lessons are extended; pressure-group and revolutionary politics may overlap but in essence they are quite distinct.

Given the inherent constrictions on social work which I have described, radicals, and especially revolutionary radicals who stress long-term strategies, have to confront two questions. Can there in fact be any form of social work which is genuinely radical? If not, can remaining in social work be justified? I have already suggested some kinds of answer to the second question and will return to it at the end of the chapter. I shall now attempt to pursue some of the dilemmas

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and possibilities of social work practice in a more positive way than hitherto.

Is radicalism viable?

For all the ease with which apparently radical initiatives lose their impetus through absorption into the amorphous welfare network, belief in the possibility of radical social work has not died down, partly because of individual motivation, partly because social work is one of the few occupations which carries a licensed mandate to seek change, and most of all because the duties we have to carry out can involve vivid and often painful contact with other people which we need to explain and resolve, for our own sakes as much as for theirs. The problem with social work is that it does not allow us to rest content with the bureaucratic roles in which we are cast. Since the official modes of ‘caring’ reinforce that bureaucracy, we have to find other ways of attempting to express care in which a more honest personal involvement will be possible. There is a further consideration. Capitalist division of labour has placed us in the role of examining and improving human relationships. What we discover may make us pessimistic about immediate or small-scale change, but radicals do have an obligation to make our knowledge relevant to a future society, even though our specialised role will probably no longer exist. (A similar obligation falls on revolutionary workers in all sectors. For instance, the Combined Shop Stewards Committee of Lucas Engineering have produced a plan for converting their factories and machines to production of greater social value.) We cannot expect social work ever to be the full embodiment of a new and non-authoritarian caring but we can at least use it as one base for experiments towards a new social philosophy in which the dichotomy between individual and social need will become obsolete. Perversely enough these opportunities tend to present themselves more often in settings outside ordinary field social work, whose constrictions channel radicalism into more direct militancy. It is, however, on fieldwork that this book has been based and I must regretfully limit myself to fieldworkers’ problems.

The use of statutory powers

Probably the greatest general disquiet among social workers derives from the availability of powers to remove children and adults against