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# SAFE STREETS FOR REAL PEOPLE: A CASE STUDY OF NEOCONSERVATIVE POLICY FROM A STRUCTURAL SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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### Article abstract

The *Safe Streets Act* of Ontario [SSA] ostensibly regulates aggressive panhandling, but is widely regarded as a contemporary vagrancy law that criminalizes people experiencing homelessness. This paper presents a case study of the SSA in which an ideological analysis is employed to highlight the extent to which dominant political paradigms shape conceptions of social problems and their appropriate remedies. Specifically, it explores the mechanisms inherent to neoconservative ideology which serve to blame individuals for their problems and construct vulnerable people in need of support as villains worthy of exclusion and punishment, rationalizing punitive responses to poverty. This approach is diametrically opposed to the aims of structural social work and therefore must be challenged. An alternative policy response is presented as it might emerge from a social democratic worldview, which is more congruent with social work ideals. This paper thus illustrates how radically the nature of social problems is transformed when viewed through contrasting ideological lenses. The paper concludes that there is great value in using political paradigms to unpack existing and create new policy in the context of structural social work mandates; doing so contributes to the paradigm shift that a profession committed to fundamental social change must help ignite.

# SAFE STREETS FOR REAL PEOPLE: A CASE STUDY OF NEOCONSERVATIVE POLICY FROM A STRUCTURAL SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

*Élyse LeBlanc*

**Abstract:** The *Safe Streets Act* of Ontario [SSA] ostensibly regulates aggressive panhandling, but is widely regarded as a contemporary vagrancy law that criminalizes people experiencing homelessness. This paper presents a case study of the SSA in which an ideological analysis is employed to highlight the extent to which dominant political paradigms shape conceptions of social problems and their appropriate remedies. Specifically, it explores the mechanisms inherent to neoconservative ideology which serve to blame individuals for their problems and construct vulnerable people in need of support as villains worthy of exclusion and punishment, rationalizing punitive responses to poverty. This approach is diametrically opposed to the aims of structural social work and therefore must be challenged. An alternative policy response is presented as it might emerge from a social democratic worldview, which is more congruent with social work ideals. This paper thus illustrates how radically the nature of social problems is transformed when viewed through contrasting ideological lenses. The paper concludes that there is great value in using political paradigms to unpack existing and create new policy in the context of structural social work mandates; doing so contributes to the paradigm shift that a profession committed to fundamental social change must help ignite.

**Keywords:** homelessness, criminalization, neoliberal welfare state, social democracy, social policy analysis, critical social work

**Résumé :** La *Loi sur la sécurité dans les rues* de l'Ontario régleme ostensiblement la mendicité agressive, mais elle est largement considérée comme une loi contemporaine sur le vagabondage qui criminalise les

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personnes sans-abri. Cet article présente une étude de cas de la *Loi sur la sécurité dans les rues* employant une analyse idéologique pour souligner la mesure dans laquelle les paradigmes politiques dominants façonnent les conceptions des problèmes sociaux et les moyens appropriés pour y remédier. Plus précisément, il explore les mécanismes inhérents à l'idéologie néoconservatrice qui servent à blâmer les individus pour leurs problèmes et à présenter les personnes vulnérables ayant besoin d'aide comme des vilains méritant l'exclusion et des sanctions, rationalisant ainsi les interventions répressives en réponse à la pauvreté. Cette approche est diamétralement opposée aux objectifs du travail social structurel et doit donc être remise en question. Une réponse politique alternative est présentée, telle qu'elle pourrait émerger d'une vision sociale-démocrate du monde, plus conforme aux idéaux du travail social. Ce document illustre donc la transformation radicale de la nature des problèmes sociaux lorsqu'ils sont vus à travers des lentilles idéologiques opposées. L'article conclut à l'utilité des paradigmes politiques pour décortiquer les politiques existantes et en créer de nouvelles en respectant les mandats structurels du travail social; cela contribue à un changement de paradigme qu'une profession engagée dans le changement social doit contribuer à déclencher.

**Mots-clés :** itinérance, criminalisation, État-Providence néolibéral, démocratie sociale, analyse de politique sociale, travail social critique

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*THE STATED INTENTION OF THE Safe Streets Act* of Ontario [SSA] is to deter aggressive solicitation. However, researchers agree that it is part of a growing trend in decreasing the visibility of poverty by criminalizing homelessness and restricting the activities, movements, and use of public space by those identified as disorderly (Chesnay et al., 2013; Esmonde, 2002; Gaetz, 2009; Hermer & Mosher, 2002; O'Grady et al., 2013; Sylvestre & Bellot, 2014). Using the SSA as a case study and applying ideal ideological types developed by Mullaly and Dupré (2019), this paper demonstrates the power of dominant sociopolitical paradigms in constructing social problems and dictating appropriate policy responses, resulting in drastically different approaches. Specifically, it illuminates how neoconservative ideology transforms marginalized and vulnerable

citizens (in this case, traumatized youth living in poverty) into villains who are worthy of social exclusion and criminal punishment. This facilitates net-widening and justifies intrusive interventions which aim, in neoconservative terms, to rid the streets of society's "detritus." Using an alternative model more congruent with social work ideals—social democracy—this paper presents a radically different social welfare approach which may contribute to the paradigm shift necessary for a more socially just society.

I begin by summarizing the historical political context surrounding the SSA and outlining my theoretical framework. I then examine the mechanisms within neoconservative ideology that serve to rationalize a punitive response to homelessness. Next, I present a theoretical construction of homelessness as addressed within the social democratic paradigm. Finally, I discuss implications for structural social work given its commitment to effecting fundamental social change.

### **Historical and Political Context**

Homelessness has emerged as a humanitarian crisis in Canada, largely due to increasing neoliberalism and its erosion of the welfare state (Hulchanski et al., 2009). Precariously housed youth, who constitute around 20% of the Canadian homeless population (Gaetz et al., 2016), face unique challenges that make them particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and laws like the SSA. Compared to unhoused adults, more youth live on the streets; they experience higher rates of mental distress, suicide, and overdose; and they often have fled or been driven from unstable homes (Gaetz et al., 2016). Being shut out from employment and many social welfare programs, youth are more likely to turn to informal, quasi-legal, or illegal subsistence strategies such as panhandling, sex work, drug dealing, theft, and squeegeeing—that is, rapidly clearing the windshields of cars stopped at red lights—heightening their risk of victimization, with little recourse for protection (Gaetz, 2009).

As Parnaby (2003) recounts, in the late 1990s, squeegeeing had become essential to the survival of youth experiencing homelessness, and its growing visibility served as the catalyst for the SSA. This act was born from the re-elected Conservative government of Ontario's' populist "common sense revolution," which saw massive cuts to social programs, vilification of the poor, scapegoating of Big Government, and a "broken windows"—style law-and-order agenda. Parnaby (2003) describes how, as draconian austerity measures led to unprecedented levels of visible poverty, the Ontario government simultaneously promoted intense fear-mongering over (allegedly) mounting social disorder and crime, which resulted in moral panic surrounding the increasing presence of "squeegee-brandishing youths" on Toronto street corners. By the summer of 1999, just ahead of the Ontario general election, the Conservatives—running

on a tough-on-crime platform—were poised to oblige constituents’ demands for government intervention (Parnaby, 2003). In the throne speech later that year, Premier Mike Harris promised new legislation that, as the Attorney General later stated, “empower[ed] police to crack down on squeegee people who harass and badger motorists and to stop aggressive panhandling” (Flaherty, 1999, p. 284).

Various concerns emerge from the *Act*. First, the SSA claims to “regulate conduct that interferes with the safe use of public spaces,” rationalizing that “all people in Ontario have the right to [enjoy public spaces] without being or feeling intimidated” (Flaherty, 1999, p. 284). However, the pretext of safety is dubious, given that the SSA’s provisions are redundant: the *Criminal Code* already addressed threatening or dangerous behaviour (O’Grady et al., 2013). Indeed, the parliamentary debates repeatedly implied *fear* was the primary concern, not actual threat (Flaherty, 1999; Mazzilli, 1999; Stewart, 1999; Wettlaufer, 1999), arguably because there was none. Further, the SSA prohibits aggressive soliciting, which appropriately includes physical threats or abusive language. It, however, also includes anything “likely to cause a reasonable person to be concerned for his or her safety or security” (s 2(1)), including a range of nebulous behaviours such as “obstruction” or “[p]roceeding behind, alongside or ahead of the person solicited” (s 2(3)). Captive audience provisions similarly widen the net, and specifically render squeegeeing illegal irrespective of conduct. Moreover, a first offence under the SSA is punishable by a fine of up to \$500; subsequent convictions by a larger fine, up to six months in prison, or both (s 5)—devastating penalties for the deeply impoverished. Finally, proponents maintained the SSA would only target those acting aggressively, yet admitted it allowed significant police discretion “over what they feel is aggressive or non-aggressive” (Stewart, 1999, p. 443). I examine why the SSA overlooks such concerns and indeed is constructed to render homeless youth as dangerous, and therefore contributes to making them invisible.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the lenses of structural and poststructural social work. In structural social work, practitioners must not only tend to society’s oppressed: they must also challenge, dismantle and rebuild the inherently alienating, exploitative, and unjust neoliberal capitalist system (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Social work in this construction is informed by values of social justice, human dignity, and equity. Thus, critical policy analysis must be accompanied by the transformation of dominant social structures—a paradigm shift that is contingent on an alternative societal vision (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). This approach is further informed by poststructuralist philosophy in which *knowledge* is understood to be an amalgam of competing social constructions constantly being shaped

and reshaped by prevailing societal discourses and their underlying power relations, whereby dominant ideas become enshrined as *truths* (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Accordingly, rather than being an objective entity separate from the social environment, policy is inextricable from its milieu and inevitably reflects current social arrangements (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). The welfare state then, is a dynamic social construct embodying the “ruling ideas” of society, which naturally tend to reflect dominant interests, often at the expense of subordinate groups (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 231).

Moreover, as Bacchi (2009) elaborates, this poststructuralist view challenges the belief that social policies aim to solve existing problems. Instead, policies are solutions which construct their own problems by implicitly defining them. These *problem representations* reveal what, from the policymaker’s viewpoint, is the true nature of the “problem,” and this is what dictates the corresponding policy response, demonstrating that we are governed by problematizations rather than by policy itself (Bacchi, 2009). Examination of such representations is necessary to reveal implicit intentions and potential impacts of policy, to destabilize prevailing social constructions, to identify that what is made can (and perhaps should) be unmade (and reveal clues as to how), and to allow us to conjure worlds in which social problems are produced radically differently (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). In interrogating the SSA using an ideological framework, such “unexamined ways of thinking” are brought to light, offering insight into how dominant paradigms can be taken apart and rebuilt atop different foundations (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 16). To this end, this paper interrogates the SSA by unpacking its neoliberal and neoconservative underpinnings, and then posits an alternative policy response using a social democratic lens.

The framework adopted in this paper borrows Mullaly and Dupré’s (2019) neoconservative and social democratic ideal types, which are distilled into shared elements. The paper explores eight elements. The first two—the view of human nature and society—form the core of the ideology. The next four—social beliefs, the role of the nation state, economic beliefs, and political beliefs—expand the inner structure, but are mutually reinforcing and intersecting. The ideology’s conception of social problems—the seventh element—naturally emerges from this substratum, and from it flows the corresponding notion of social welfare. This classification allows for direct comparison of paradigms, and helps analysts draw links between ideology, social welfare policy, and social work practice. This comparison promotes awareness of alternative modalities of economic and human welfare, disrupting the idea that our current system is “the natural and inevitable product of some evolutionary process” (p. 74).

## **The Neoconservative Ideology of the SSA**

First, Mullaly and Dupré's (2019) elements will be used to demonstrate that neoconservatism permeates every aspect of the SSA, and that this ideology and its operationalization in policy conflicts with social work values and mandates of social justice and equity. Next, these same elements will be situated within social democracy to build an ideal picture of the welfare response within this paradigm, which more closely aligns with the ideology of social work.

The central tenets of neoconservatism are individual responsibility, inequality, social Darwinism, and laissez-faire economics. These tenets give rise to the conclusion that social problems originate from individual weakness and moral deviance (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). This position allows for supposedly undeserving people to be blamed, stigmatized, and ostracized for their struggles, and thus creates a rationale for punitive populist measures (Sylvestre & Bellot, 2014). I discuss these issues in further detail below as they relate to the SSA.

### *Human Nature*

The neoconservative position of humans as isolated, selfish, lazy, and amoral creatures who respond only to incentives and disincentives (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019) is embodied in the SSA, which criminalizes subsistence strategies associated with poverty. Indeed, wishing to advance a law-and-order agenda, but with no empirical evidence of danger to justify the SSA, policymakers invoked emotional appeals and moral judgements to construct an urban mythology of so-called squeegee people as villainous characters who posed a threat simply by daring to exist in public space (Parnaby, 2003). Implicit in the SSA is the suggestion that panhandling and squeegeeing are lifestyle choices rather than survival strategies. In fact, during the bill readings, one MPP interpreted a panhandler sitting under a store's "help wanted" sign as indicating that far from being destitute, this person simply found it "easier to be part of the underground economy" (Stewart, 1999, p. 443). Another maintained that "these [people] are not homeless, they are thugs who want money that they have not earned and that they *do not deserve* (Mazzilli, 1999, p. 442, emphasis added).

### *Society*

For neoconservatives, society is merely an aggregate of individual interests, structured according to an assumed natural hierarchy wherein the wealthy are inherently superior in fitness and morality to the poor (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). This notion of societal hierarchy legitimizes the punishment of those considered unworthy. Within this paradigm, a law that protects "all people in Ontario" and "permit[s] us to take



back our streets for the citizens of this province” (Martiniuk, 1999, p. 533) by punishing those undeserving of aid, safety, dignity, or even acknowledgement, is not only righteous but common sense. Those who have earned their place are entitled to enjoy *their* streets unencumbered. The targets of the SSA have been categorically excluded from the definition of “citizen”—they have sunk so low as to completely fall off the social ladder—and, having lost the right to occupy public spaces at all, let alone safely, may also be displaced.

### *Social Beliefs*

The neoconservative values of liberty and individualism situate (economic) inequality as beneficial because it drives survival-of-the-fittest competition (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Accordingly, the SSA devalues people who use drugs by interpreting them as responsible for their own suffering, and their intoxication as “aggressive” (SSA, 1999, s 2(3)(5)) (and thus as a choice). A separate, seemingly unrelated section in the *Act* prohibits the disposal of objects such as used syringes and condoms in public places (SSA, 1999, s 4), implicitly targeting those involved in the sex trade and people who use intravenous drugs. Opposition MPP Michael Bryant highlighted this concern, stating that “[t]he squeegee people and panhandlers are being put in the same bill as used condoms and used syringes, as if they’re all garbage that we can sweep from the streets of our cities” (Bryant, 1999, p. 447). Similarly, although using a neoconservative lens, children are exempt from blame (being unable to care for themselves), a group colloquially known as “squeegee *kids*” are nevertheless held responsible for their misfortune. At best, they are “middle-class kids who have left comfortable homes out of youthful and misguided rebellion” (Esmonde, 2002, p. 66). Through a neoconservative view, they are typically recast as “thugs” who use “fear and intimidation” to “prey” on hardworking, law-abiding citizens (Mazzilli, 1999, p. 442)—who in contrast are “constantly held hostage in their travels through public [spaces]” (Hermer & Mosher, 2002, p. 13).

### *Nation State*

Neoconservatives view the state’s role as providing the basic conditions for laissez-faire capitalism by protecting private property, maintaining law and order, and assuring subordinate groups comply with dominant economic interests (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Proponents of the SSA suggested panhandlers threatened property and business through graffiti and (literal and figurative) broken windows, and by deterring customers from businesses (Martiniuk, 1999, pp. 530–531). The SSA has, through its captive audience provisions and ticketing measures, designed commercial environments as hostile to people working for spare change (O’Grady et al., 2013). The SSA has thereby designated this group as a



subordinate, undeserving class, interfering with free market access and disturbing business class interests. Private property is favoured over the lives and dignity of these human beings. Indeed, SSA enforcement has been employed in a targeted manner to discourage panhandlers and squeegeers from working in areas dense with affluent shoppers and tourists (O'Grady et al., 2013).

### *Economic Beliefs*

According to Mullaly and Dupré (2019), neoconservatives view laissez-faire capitalism as providing a fair arena for competition, which rewards those who work the hardest and persevere against any odds. Therefore, offering assistance to the poor, especially at the expense of “hardworking, responsible, and honest taxpayers,” is unfair, and subsisting outside the labour market is cheating (p. 89). This rationale provides further impetus for (in neoliberal parlance) taking back the streets for those who have earned them. This rationale also helps sustain capitalistic myths, since too much obvious destitution risks shaking public faith in market forces, potentially leading to demands that the state intervene, destabilizing not only the economy but also the perceived legitimacy of the entire system.

### *Political Beliefs*

Neoconservatives expect governance through a ruling class that caters to the interests of the economic elite (of which they are a part), on the basis that “the art of governing is too important” to be left to anyone but the fittest—that is, those actively supporting the established hierarchy (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 88). Neoconservatism’s tendency to assign human worth according to capitalist measures of success can be exploited to construct any group harmed by current social arrangements as an enemy Other, silencing and further excluding the marginalized underclass—and thus maintaining the social order. Indeed, in the 1999 throne speech, the Lieutenant Governor implored MPPs to “always remember the interests of those who sent you here and strive to improve government so that it benefits *real people*,” whom they qualified as “hard-working taxpayers” (Weston, 1999, p. 15, emphasis added). Such rhetoric exemplifies how “the people” (the middle class) are pitted against lower *subhuman* classes, lest the former develop sympathy for the latter, or realize that they in fact share a common oppressor.

### *Social Problems*

Neoconservatives assume social problems arise from individual failure (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). The SSA epitomizes this view, criminalizing people for turning to survival strategies largely necessary due to conditions created and exacerbated by the very government whence

it came. While the *Act* purports to punish dangerous behaviour, it instead penalizes people for being “too weak” to pull themselves out of poverty—it is “activated by a solicitation, not obstructions or threats” (Esmonde, 2002, p. 74). Indeed, neoconservatism’s staunch belief in individual accountability, and its circular reasoning (the successful are deserving because they are successful) ensures that the *SSA* translates the very “gestures of the homeless” into threatening acts and turns the embodiment of need itself—the mere presence of an indigent person in public space—into a potential offence (Hermer & Mosher, 2002, p. 19). This casts struggling human beings as offensive *bodies* that must be evicted from spaces reserved for “real people.”

Ironically, it is those whom the *SSA* constructs as dangerous who are “constantly held hostage in their travels through public [space]” (Hermer & Mosher, 2002, p. 13). Street-involved individuals report living in constant fear of attack or theft, feeling continuously monitored, and having every aspect of their daily lives—including securing basic needs—complicated by police presence (Bennett & Larkin, 2018). They are at high risk of violence, exploitation, and sexual assault (particularly women and youth), yet lack adequate legal recourse, as they are often reluctant to report incidents to police when engaged in quasi-legal or illegal activities for survival (Gaetz, 2009). Further, they expect to be dismissed or harmed by officers who routinely harass them and are known to commit physical, psychological, and sexual abuse against these and other marginalized populations (Kauppi & Pallard, 2016). In a neoconservative paradigm, police do not exist to serve and protect the underclass. Tellingly, the *Act* was amended in 2005 so that “legitimate” charities became exempt from the captive audience provisions (*SSA*, 1999, s 3 (3)) and so “can solicit in the name of indigent people, but indigent people cannot solicit for themselves” (Chesnay et al., 2013, pp. 167–168). This amendment all but confirms that social status—not behaviour—is the offence.

### *Social Welfare*

Neoconservatives believe that government holds no responsibility for its peoples’ needs, since, as alluded to above, the market and individual drive will ensure needs are met (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Further, they view the welfare state as encouraging dependence and deviance, thus exacerbating social problems rather than solving them (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Asking for help—whether by words, gestures, or simply by daring to exist in public view in a state of need—is an affront to be punished and stigmatized. In effect, poverty *should* be painful, lest people lose their motivation to work, thereby robbing the business class of its (cheap) labour force. As such, any government assistance will be meagre, temporary, conditional, and stigma-laden (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Keeping visible poverty to a carefully curated minimum sustains the illusion of a meritocracy, while

broadcasting the inhuman treatment of the poor is a reminder of what awaits those who do not work hard enough.

In line with this philosophy, ticketing during the SSA's first decade increased exponentially despite declining *Criminal Code* violations, generating fines exceeding \$4 million (virtually all of them unpaid) with only 20% of infractions allegedly involving aggressive solicitation (O'Grady et al., 2013). Such ticketing practices suggest malicious intent. Moreover, these penalties are immensely damaging for someone scraping by on spare change: unpaid fines become legal debts, which, along with criminal records, actively prevent street exit and reintegration into mainstream society, ultimately propelling the revolving door between the streets and prison (Sylvestre & Bellot, 2014). Additionally, criminalizing homelessness pushes street populations deeper underground, and drives them out of downtown cores into less busy, more dangerous areas, away from their livelihoods, from crucial services, and from one another—their primary source of safety and community (Gaetz, 2009; O'Grady, et al., 2013). It also keeps them out of the public eye.

At face value, using fines to deter desperately impoverished people from engaging in some of the few income-generating strategies available to them is counterproductive at best. However, when examined through a neoconservative lens, the SSA is performing exactly as intended. Poverty remains largely invisible, swept out of sight and mind from spaces frequented by and sanitized for the affluent, making way for neoliberal goals of so-called revitalization and gentrification, protecting business interests, and preserving capitalistic myths required to sustain a system predicated on inequality and exploitation.

To conclude, neoconservative ideology as operationalized in the SSA and associated legislation (also often positioned as benign) (Kauppi & Pallard, 2016; Ormond, 2014) ensures the devaluation, invisibility, and exclusion of youth (and others) on the street as a means of reinforcing conservative values of self-responsibility and meritocracy. It enables the state to punish and surveil the underclass, even as it places vulnerable persons at increased risk of victimization and exacerbates homelessness (Chesnay et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2009; O'Grady et al., 2013; Kauppi & Pallard, 2016; Sylvestre & Bellot, 2014). As such, it is completely at odds with the aim of structural social work—ensuring all people are free from domination and exploitation and can fully achieve their innate human potential—and social work ethics, such as respect for the inherent dignity and worth of humanity, and the promotion of autonomy, social justice, and the right to participation (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). An alternative means of constructing the situation of homeless youth is offered by adopting the ideological model of social democracy.

## Homelessness Within the Social Democratic Paradigm

Social democracy is founded on the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, the conviction that inequality is antithetical to human fulfilment, and the belief that humans are naturally communal creatures who favour collectivism, freedom, and equality (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). These principles emphasize societal and collective responsibility regarding vulnerable citizens and generate supportive policies aimed at eliminating social distress and barriers to human agency. Homelessness and other forms of extreme poverty would be considered a societal failure requiring an urgent humanitarian response.

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) caution that, in its pure form, social democracy is limiting; it ignores intersectionality, leaves no room for difference or diversity, and subordinates all other forms of oppression to that of the working class. In line with these authors, I adopt a reconstituted form of socialist ideology that addresses these shortcomings.

### *Human Nature*

Within social democracy's worldview, humans are interdependent, rational, responsible social beings with intrinsic worth, inherent potential, and innate cooperative tendencies who will thrive when given the right environment (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). An isolated social being cannot reach its full potential, nor can a single person create the conditions for success—this responsibility falls to society. This ethos, applied to homelessness, suggests opportunities for positive change and growth.

### *Society*

Society becomes an expression of the collective, while solidarity, cooperation, and equality are prized over competition and hierarchy (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). In this light, individual suffering costs the collective; dominant–subordinate social arrangements are harmful and undermine our communal nature; and allowing social exclusion, especially of the most vulnerable among us, is inhumane—doing it on purpose is criminal. A response to homelessness would thus recognize marginalized persons as valuable citizens rather than a burden, and would seek to constitute them as part of the community.

### *Nation State*

A social democratic state is responsible for its citizens, who it values and cares for by promoting the collective good, emphasizing cooperation over competition, increasing democracy, and overseeing the economy to ensure equitable distribution of resources, income, and opportunities (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). The state would aim to eliminate extreme

poverty and its degrading subsistence strategies. Failure to do so would reflect poorly on the state, not on the individual who has been let down.

### *Social Beliefs*

Equality, freedom, and collectivism are core to social democracy, alongside humanitarianism and the right to democratic participation (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Because they have inherent worth, all persons are entitled to dignity, safety, and the opportunity to reach their full potential. This entitlement means not only a minimum standard of living, but access to enough resources to freely exert agency over their basic life conditions, and the opportunity to self-actualize. These rights are currently severely constrained for a person living on the streets under the SSA and associated legislation. Their potential has been sacrificed in favour of those deemed more deserving. From a social democratic perspective, homelessness is a failure of our collective responsibility. In solidarity, we must work toward eliminating all forms of social distress, according to principles which foster self-determination and empowerment (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

### *Economic Beliefs*

Social democrats insist the state must intervene in the economy to ensure it meets social needs rather than individual profit (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). They would be disturbed by anyone needing to live off spare change. A social democratic lens would have the state seek to curtail extreme wealth disparities and alleviate poverty using redistributive methods to ensure everyone's basic needs are met, at the expense of those who can most afford it.

### *Political Beliefs*

Social democrats champion participatory democracy and believe political processes should never be superseded by economic interests (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Those experiencing homelessness should be instrumental in developing solutions because they can best articulate their needs. Concentration of wealth and power in the hands of those benefiting from a system would be diffused among the people in the interest of the common good.

### *Social Problems*

Social problems are seen as structural byproducts of an individualistic neoliberal capitalist society that is fundamentally counter to human nature and needs, meaning it is the system that needs fixing, not the people (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Any degree of homelessness would be recognized as a critical warning that society is not functioning as it should—for the people. It would be met with appropriate empathy,

urgency, and attention to systemic factors, recognizing that, while immediate relief takes priority, the ultimate goal must be exposing and transforming the underlying structures of inequality that throttle human potential to the detriment of society (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

### *Social Welfare*

Social welfare, then, is a fundamental human right and essential for individual wellbeing and a healthy, functioning society (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Any policy addressing homelessness would be supportive and would involve an immediate moratorium on policies and legislation that criminalize poverty and survival behaviours. Urgent and unconditional financial, material, physical, and mental relief would be delivered from a trauma-informed, housing-first, and harm reduction perspective. Community-based peer support networks would be established and ongoing wraparound services would be offered to ensure people are set up for success. Once the immediate crisis was addressed, the focus would turn toward rebuilding the welfare state and restructuring social institutions to meet human needs, while reducing intersectional forms of oppression by centering marginalized voices. Particular attention would be paid to defunding the carceral state and reallocating resources to social programs, and decolonizing the healthcare, child welfare, and education systems. Ultimately, social democracy seeks to transition from capitalism to socialism, with the welfare state as a steppingstone (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

### **Implications for Social Work**

The SSA aligns with a larger package of laws, regulations, and practices that “restrict the activities, movements, and use of public space by people who are homeless,” increasingly criminalizing poverty in Canada (O’Grady et al., 2013, p. 543). This larger package includes ostensibly neutral ordinances concerning loitering, public intoxication and urination, laying on benches, sitting on sidewalks, jaywalking, spitting, and littering, which are selectively enforced against those relying on public spaces for survival (Kauppi & Pallard, 2016; Ormond, 2014). It also includes passive measures such as hostile architecture that is designed to prevent some of these activities (Chellew, 2019). This alignment is indicative of a pervasive neoliberal Canadian attitude towards poverty: homelessness is mistakenly viewed as deserved or a choice, reinforcing notions that those without homes (and the poor in general) are criminal and disposable. This attitude has been exemplified in Manitoba, where, for example, Winnipeg city councilor Jeff Browaty recently suggested that people spend the night in bus shelters in freezing temperatures so they can “party,” and used social media to demand that the Chief of Police evict them (Abas, 2021); Premier Brian Pallister promised to

crackdown on panhandlers in downtown Winnipeg so that “Manitobans never have to feel afraid taking their families to a Jets game” (PC Party, 2019, para 2); and a \$351 million *Human Rights* museum, complete with a shining glass “Tower of Hope” (McNabb, 2014) was erected overlooking Winnipeg’s poorest neighbourhood, where homeless camps are routinely demolished. Such judgements of human worth have been underscored by COVID-19. While our leaders profess that we are all in this together, some are forced to choose between overcrowded shelters with a higher probability of infection or risking a fine on the streets. During this period, Ontarians living outdoors have been ticketed for violating public health orders that they have no means of following (Luscombe & McClelland, 2020), while Quebecois have been denied curfew exemptions even after a man froze to death steps away from a shelter forced to close for the night, because, according to the premier, this might encourage (real) people to pretend to be homeless (Mignacca, 2021).

According to Mullaly and Dupré (2019), social work is an inherently political profession operating within a dominant political paradigm that has not only diverged from its purported values but is also actively engaged in destroying or restructuring the welfare state in favour of the economic elite. Many neoconservative assumptions continue to form the backbone of the present welfare state while the strongest and most self-serving threads of this ideology result in a political feedback loop that perpetually skews the system in favour of the advantaged and against the powerless. Ingram et al. (2007) posit that governments either negatively or positively construct “target populations” based on their political power and whether society at large views them as worthy, resulting in policy that further excludes the disadvantaged from democratic participation, while encouraging the advantaged to keep voting in a system that produces policies that benefit them (p. 93). Compounding this issue, the powerless are increasingly being criminalized, subjecting them to “the politics of punishment” (p. 103) and reinforcing the carceral state. In addition, policy stubbornly persists in the same direction long after the need for change has been demonstrated, and policies that are punitive and that target those cast as undeserving are particularly resistant to any conflicting evidence (Ingram et al., 2007). As an example, the SSA remains in place twenty years later despite having been constitutionally challenged for overstepping provincial jurisdiction and infringing on no fewer than five Charter rights (*Rv Banks*, 2001).

This phenomenon suggests social work may be involved in an ideological battle rather than an evidence-based one. A particular challenge relates to the state in its role of maintaining social control. Finkel (2006) demonstrates that, despite Canadian governments of various political orientations having provided social programs to benefit the working class, they have never meaningfully redistributed wealth. As the interface between social welfare policies and the public, social workers



are in a unique position to help effect change. However, many social workers see the discipline as circumscribed by a political paradigm that is diametrically opposed to its mission, and practitioners paradoxically find themselves trying to change a system that appears inherently unjust. Mullaly and Dupré (2019) argue that these are false dichotomies, and that in order to achieve structural social work's dual goals of alleviating immediate suffering while working towards dismantling the structures of oppression and rebuilding a more just society, a dialectical approach must be adopted. Ingram et al. (2007) also suggest that, with an understanding of social construction, transforming prevailing attitudes toward these groups is possible. Social workers must embrace the welfare state as having both emancipatory and repressive functions, and must work from both within and without the system, addressing the personal and political simultaneously. If policies, the welfare state, and the foundation of social reality itself are constructs that can be unmade and remade, and if the dialectical approach is correct, then rebuilding the system does not necessarily require completely destroying the existing one: some components are valuable and might be reused.

Identifying where there needs to be transformation or where elements might be reused solidifies the crucial importance of critical analysis in structural social work. This paper has showcased how an ideological framework can help take apart the component parts of varying social constructions embedded in policy and provide a possible blueprint for reconstruction. This approach to analysis is valuable both in the pursuit of more humane policy and in challenging the status quo to be able to shift towards fundamental social change. This type of deep questioning also encourages practitioners to critically examine their own assumptions and thought processes as situated within the sociopolitical context, as well as how these influence praxis. Finally, insofar as this paper demonstrates one possible application of Mullaly and Dupré's (2019) framework, as a case study it may prove useful for students beginning to learn about social policy and help prepare them for "critical thinking and analysis, innovative and independent problem-solving, and ethical and creative decision-making" (p. 53). Such preparation has the potential to help social work move from a liberal-humanist view limited to helping individuals adjust to a harmful system, to a critical one which seeks to restructure the system causing harm in the first place (p. 74).

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) argue that a paradigm shift can only occur when the dominant paradigm can no longer adequately explain away anomalies. There are signs that this may be happening. Movements like Occupy Wall Street, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter have exposed social injustice and cracks in the system that are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, as evidenced by growing mainstream support for defunding the carceral state. COVID-19 has also highlighted gaps in Canada's social safety net and the fallacies of free market capitalism and

revealed that, when a crisis affects people with political influence, the response is swift and decisive. However, the dominant paradigm will not be replaced without resistance. To sustain current momentum, social workers committed to change must amplify the voices of the marginalized, oppressed, exploited, and powerless, as they demand to be heard and fight for emancipation (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

## Conclusion

In analyzing the SSA using two opposing ideologies, I have illustrated the power of dominant societal discourses in developing and generating support for policy and demonstrated that social problems are inextricable from the sociopolitical context producing them. Neoconservative ideology, centered on individual blame and capitalistic value judgements, is incompatible with social work values, and generates policies that further marginalize and oppress already vulnerable groups, with devastating consequences. Moreover, it contributes to the self-perpetuating nature of capitalism by maintaining the legitimacy of the current dominant-subordinate social order, and further concentrates power in the hands of the wealthy. A social democratic model that emphasizes collective responsibility for the vulnerable and aims to diffuse political power and restructure society according to human, rather than economic, needs would produce outcomes more congruent with social work values based on inherent worth, human agency, and the pursuit of social justice. As such, structural social workers are called upon to challenge the existing social order and push for fundamental change, which, in a dialectical model, means transforming the system without obliterating the existing one. To this end, an understanding of its inner structure, which can be garnered from ideological analysis, is invaluable. It is my hope that the analysis herein has established that, if it is to live up to its own ideals, social work cannot afford to be apolitical.

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