POLICY VERSUS POLITICS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE POLITICIZATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN HONG KONG

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Introduction

In the field of policy analysis, there has been a debate over the Eastonian paradigm, which assumes a unilateral relationship between politics and policy, and the Lowi paradigm of inverse relationship, that is, policy influences politics. David Easton suggested that the policy process can be understood as a system. The political activities of various parties represent the “input” into the “black box” of decision-making mechanism, and the consequential policy decisions are the “output” of such a system. On the other hand, Theodore Lowi challenged such a paradigm by stating that “policies determine politics.” He also argued that “governments coerce.” Policies are manifestations of government coercion upon the civil society, and this process of coercion provides the context in which politics takes place.

In contrast to both these views, the premise of analysis in this article is that there exists a dialectical interrelationship between policy and politics. The interaction between a particular policy - the “thesis” - and some political processes - the “antithesis” - will result in a synthesis, that is, some consequential policy decisions. However, a synthesis of the first order will become a thesis at another level. An antithesis will follow, thereby constituting another cycle of antagonism which will call for further reconciliation. Such a cyclical development as embodied in Hegelian dialectics is the driving force of political changes in a society. It should be emphasized that the significant role of the modern state contributes to the crucial position of state policies in the midst of such a policy-politics relationship.

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The dialectical interaction between policy and politics can be illustrated in this present case of the politicization of social workers in Hong Kong. Historical incidents in the development of Hong Kong, coupled with the fact that the nature of the Hong Kong government is essentially one of a capitalist state, have resulted in the government’s increasing commitment to social welfare provisions in recent years. Such social welfare policies have provided fertile ground for the social work professionals to mobilize their clientele and to pressurize the government for more equitable social policies. In response to such political demands, the government has resorted to some administrative adjustments. However, such an attempt to synthesize the contradiction between policies and politics has itself brought about another round of conflict, which again sets the stage for further attempts to accommodate the constantly changing relationship between politics and policies.

The Social Context of Political Development in Hong Kong

The neo-Marxist school of urban sociology provides a useful conceptual framework for the analysis of the role of the state in a capitalist society. In this kind of society, the government shoulders the responsibility for providing infrastructure facilities and other necessary collective consumption items, such as housing, welfare, and education, for the social reproduction of labour, which is essential for capital accumulation in a capitalist social order. The government’s involvement in the political-economic configuration of society inevitably politicizes the entire social formation and therefore arouses various critical political issues.\footnote{A brief account of the development of social policies in Hong Kong can help to illustrate this point. Faced with the constraint of limited land space in the territory on the one hand, and the increasing momentum for economic development on the other, the Hong Kong government has to devise various means to extract land for development. Large-scale reclamation from the sea and excavation from hillsides could not adequately resolve the problem. The government has therefore also resorted to the redevelopment of the urban fringe which has been used to accommodate squatters, temporary housing areas, and resettlement estates. This entails massive population dislocation.
and generates discontent among the affected sectors of the community. The result is increased tension between the administration and the people.4

At the same time, the government’s commitment to provide public housing to those in need has drawn it closer to numerous public housing tenants.5 Such issues as housing management, allocation of public housing resources, and so on, have indeed been catalytical in bringing about urban social conflict in Hong Kong throughout the 1970s.6

Development in the social welfare services in the 1970s has also fostered the proliferation of a group of enlightened and increasingly demanding “oppositional intelligentsia” of social workers.7 Having been trained and equipped with liberal democratic ideas embodied in their professional knowledge, the social workers have become increasingly demanding for more equitable social policies. Furthermore, the recognition of community development needs in deprived communities has prompted them to become engaged in various urban social and residents’ movements.

In response to the intensifying pressure for changes from the grassroots, especially as they are mobilized and organized by the social workers, the government has created new formal channels of participation. The District Administration Scheme introduced in 1982, which has been instrumental in creating a district-based administrative structure, represents one such policy measure.8 The politicization effect which ensues the Scheme has brought about fresh pressures for increased democratization of the entire political system. With the movement for democracy taking on renewed strength after the publication of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in September 1984, which promises a “high degree of autonomy” for Hong Kong after China’s resumption of the territory’s sovereignty in 1997,9 the government has been forced to open up the Legislative Council to limited franchise elections in 1985.10 Public access to the legislature is expected to continue in an expanded form in the 1990s.11

The above account of the historical development of the Hong Kong political system serves to illustrate the intimate interrelationship between politics and policies. It therefore sets the frame of reference for the following discussion on the policy implications of the increasing politicization of social workers in the territory.
The Role of Social Workers - Welfare versus Politics

Unlike their western counterparts whose funding comes from more autonomous sources, the social work profession in Hong Kong has been relatively dependent upon government support. Although the government has consistently recognized the voluntary agencies’ role as partners in social service provision, it seems increasingly apparent that these agencies are at best unequal partners relying upon government subvention. It therefore follows that the government may have some degree of control over, or even determination of, the role of the social work profession in the entire social order of Hong Kong. Hence, the question of whether social workers should take up a more political role in addition to their original welfare role hinges upon the intention of the administration. While the profession may enjoy, and indeed exercise, a certain measure of autonomy in its political pursuits, the government can virtually set the parameters to restrict the profession’s room for political maneuvering.

The increasing commitment of the government to social welfare provisions, administered directly through the Social Welfare Department or indirectly through subventing the voluntary agencies, is essentially a pacifying device to satisfy the public’s welfare demands. Welfare provisions, in addition to other manifestly coercive social control devices, represent another aspect of the government-public interface. The social workers in the respective subvented agencies serve as mediating agents in such an interface, replacing the official bureaucrats. Generally speaking, social workers have performed satisfactorily in this role. Yet, such a limited welfare role needs to be redefined when some activist social workers begin to explore new frontiers by using adversarial tactics to pursue welfare objectives. As a matter of fact, the last decade has witnessed the growing involvement of social workers in grassroots mobilization, organization and confrontation with the administration in matters related to other areas of social policies, especially housing. The most visible cases are those incidents when victims of squatter clearance and public housing redevelopment are organized by community workers to demand appropriate rehousing rights.
Viewed from a positive and macroscopic perspective, such efforts of the activist social workers can serve to enhance the political development of Hong Kong. Through increased mobilization of the people, the general political integration of the society can be fostered. More specifically, according to an experienced social work academic, the efforts of these social workers serve three functions. First, they educate the public about their right to have their grievances redressed. Second, they can draw government and public attention to problems of urban slums. Finally, they can help train indigenous leaders at the community or district level. In short, such mobilization can help the development of a greater participatory culture among Hong Kong people. This kind of acculturation is especially important in light of the prospects of self-governance in 1997, when Hong Kong will become a Special Administrative Area vested with a high level of autonomy under the People’s Republic of China.

The Government’s Position: Counteracting Social Workers’ Political Role

Insofar as the government is concerned, its interests lie essentially in the maintenance of its legitimacy. An overly politicized society would not only be a hindrance to the efficient management of public affairs, but it may also usher in undue public scrutiny or criticism of the government’s work, thereby eroding public confidence in the administration’s competence to solve societal problems. For these reasons, the government has, over the years, devised some measures aimed at curbing the social work profession’s efficacy in political mobilization. In the first instance, the government engaged in a process of re-allocation of functions in 1985, effectively removing the management of community centres at the district level from the portfolio of the Social Welfare Department. The City and New Territories Administration (CNTA) has since taken over this function. The CNTA is the executive arm of the District Boards and is vested with the political role of mediating between the government and the citizens. It should be pointed out that such community centres are usually located in densely populated residential areas, especially in the proximity of public housing estates. It is
therefore obvious that the government has taken bold steps to counteract the social workers' ability to mobilize residents concerning local issues.

Side by side with this changeover of management responsibility of the community centres, the government is also becoming more active in infiltrating the grassroots through its own machinery. One way of achieving this is by vesting the CNTA with the function of revitalizing the Mutual Aid Committee movement. The mutual aid committees were originally the mechanism through which the government could secure local people's participation in such officially sponsored mass programmes as the Fight Crime Campaign and the Clean Hong Kong Campaign. With the development of the District Administration Scheme, and the establishment of its executive arm, the CNTA, it is the intention of the government to resurrect these government-supported local residents' organizations. This can be seen as yet another step in the government efforts to counteract the social workers' efficacy in organizing residents to form independent organizations which are normally unsympathetic to government policies. In addition, it is alleged by the Secretary of District Administration that a more elaborate system of area committees will be introduced to serve the respective constituencies under the District Administration Scheme.

Hence, it is quite clear that the government is making efforts to regain its foothold at the grassroots level, principally through the institutionalization of more official channels or government-sponsored organizations. With the provision of these avenues for public access, the government anticipates that the people will turn away from social workers, thereby restricting or even eradicating their political influence in the community. When this happens, the social work profession will be left with an essentially apolitical role of service provision, which is a return to its initial position.

A Critical Review of Government's Political Role at the Grassroots Level

The government's initiative to reach out to the public is certainly commendable. By opening up channels for the solicitation of public opinion and for the redress of citizens' grievances, a more responsive administration may
eventually ensue. However, as a policy measure to substitute the social workers’ political role, such a move on government’s part may have to be carefully re-examined.

The task of grassroots mobilization requires extensive contact with the common people. This has considerable manpower implications for the government. The rapid expansion of the City and New Territories Administration brought about by the progress of the District Administration system has already created a monstrous bureaucracy at the district level. Any attempt to move towards greater government responsibility for residents’ contact and organizational liaison will necessarily incur further bureaucratic expansion. This might eventually result in what some scholars have referred to as the phenomenon of “Big government” or “overloaded government.”

A second consideration is that social workers have generally performed their role as mediators between the public and the administration in a more than adequate fashion. They are generally well received by the public. Their professional skills and their essentially non-governmental identity have helped to build up an element of public trust in their commitment and capacity to serve the community. This element of trust is crucial for effective expression of public opinion on public policies. One cannot be entirely sanguine that public faith will persist if social workers are substituted by government officials. If the public no longer sees these “mediators” as neutral, their utility and efficacy as “bridges” between the people and the administration would also be called into question.

Furthermore, social workers have demonstrated their capacity to mobilize the grassroots to form residents’ organizations, district-concern groups, and the like. To some extent, these organizations have become a form of “opposition” which can act as a check and balance mechanism on the administration. This is especially important as Hong Kong has yet no established political parties. The displacement of social workers from the political arena, particularly at the grassroots level, may likely dissolve such an established oppositional front. The substitution by government officials in the organization of the people might be interpreted as yet another version of the government’s tactics of the “administrative absorption of politics” which was deployed extensively in the 1960s and 1970s. This would
represent a regressive step in the development towards democracy in Hong Kong.

Finally, the government may be placed in an embarrassing position if it has to take up the role of mobilizing citizens to become watchdogs of the elected office-bearers at the various levels of the representative government. Social workers can better serve this educational and conscientising role of encouraging constituents to exert pressure on elected councillors or District Board members through their civic education programmes as they can serve as a buffer between the government bureaucracy and elected politicians. The existence of this group of mediators, who would be more likely to be regarded as impartial by both sides, would be more conducive to the smooth functioning of the political system.

The foregoing considerations can in fact be understood as some of the policy implications of the government's attempt to displace social workers from their political role in society. Unless these implications are fully studied and addressed, the wisdom of government's move may leave much to be desired.

**Need for the Accommodation of Increasing Grassroots Political Participation**

Perhaps the strongest argument against the government's policy is that the politicizing role of social workers can in no way be effectively curtailed simply by the instigation of a few official channels of public participation. Initially, as social workers moved from their original service role to the political role of rallying grassroots participation through informal channels (such as protest and campaigns), the public at large have been gradually attuned to a more politically conscious culture. In recent years, such political acculturation has been further boosted when social workers move into the formal government structure through elections into the District Boards, Municipal Councils and the Legislative Council. As individual social workers gain a foothold in these institutions, they also bring their accompanying residents' organizations and their respective power-base constituencies into the political arena. This has resulted in the general increase in
grassroots political participation in both the formal and informal aspects. It appears essential that the government should devise further policy measures in response to these political developments.

The emergence of district-based grassroots organizations may capture the focal point here. These district-based, usually called "livelihood concern groups" are actually aggregations of people from different backgrounds. With the social workers acting as core members, these organizations essentially comprise representatives of local leaders from residents' organizations in the district. In addition, as some of the social workers succeed in gaining elected seats in the District Boards or the (Municipal) Urban/Regional Councils, such concern groups virtually become the office of elected members or councillors. Thus, they perform the dual functions of soliciting and channelling grassroots opinions to the formal decision-making machinery of government on the one hand, and of policy critic at the district level on the other hand. In effect, these district concern groups can be viewed as some form of a "shadow cabinet" or monitoring mechanism which runs parallel to, and imposes a degree of popular check on, the official channels of participation through the respective boards and councils.

In face of the encroaching threat of these groups, the government has yet no specific policy measures to assimilate their influence and activities. It appears that government should seriously consider building up better communication with these concern groups so as to elicit their initiative and support in district affairs. The elaborate system of sub-committees under the District Boards can perhaps be utilized to accommodate the participatory demand of these groups. This can be achieved by incorporating representatives of these groups into the sub-committees.

Furthermore, in view of increasing grassroots concern over district affairs, precipitated to a certain extent by the efforts of social workers' mobilization at both the formal and informal levels, the mechanism of District Administration in its entirety should be reviewed. The duplicating functions between the regionally-based Urban/Regional Councils and the district-based District Boards are becoming obvious. Tensions have been escalating between the two bodies. As the District Boards are based on smaller and therefore more defined geographical constituencies, they can
generally be expected to be more adept at tapping community demands than
the more broadly-based Municipal Councils. Grassroots participation through
the District Boards would therefore be more effective.\textsuperscript{20} Hence, it appears
justifiable to consider empowering the District Boards with more district-
based authority, even if this entails cutting back on the powers of the two
Municipal Councils. This might serve to provide opportunities for more
active grassroots participation in the political process. Already there are
views from certain sectors of the community that the Councils should be
abolished in favour of the District Boards in view of better public recognition
of the latter’s achievements.\textsuperscript{21} Such a move may help to streamline and
rationalize the present three-tier government structure which many have
found to be cumbersome.

Contrary to the government’s intention of diminishing the social
workers’ role in grassroots mobilization, it is the author’s position that the
profession’s role could be extended to cover those frontiers which are
unexplored under the present system of public service provision. For
instance, the public housing estates are merely served by multi-service
centres providing mainly recreational facilities or personal counselling
services to specific target groups. The more political function of mobilizing
the residents into voicing their opinions in an organized manner is somewhat
inadequately performed by government-subvented voluntary agencies serv-
ing a limited scope of selected communities. Although the City and New
Territories Administration is vested with the responsibility of helping organ-
ize mutual aid committees in housing estates, the shortage of manpower
affecting the department and the fact that the staff are often preoccupied with
other internal departmental duties effectively hamper the department’s
efficacy in this respect. It would therefore be a breakthrough in existing
policies on community development, or “community building” in the
government’s terminology, if government were to subvent voluntary agen-
cies in the provision of community organizing service in public housing
estates. The experience of the “block development” approach in the 1960s,
though not totally immune from flaws, can still be reconsidered in such
pioneering attempts towards organizing residents of public housing estates.\textsuperscript{22}
It is particularly significant as half of the population in Hong Kong is living
in public housing estates. Furthermore, the private housing sector also deserves some attention. Community development efforts and services for the private housing residents are called for, especially in those areas with serious environmental and community problems. A more enlightened and politically conscious populace would definitely be contributive to the democratic development of Hong Kong as a whole.

All in all, the irreversible trend of increasing political participation of Hong Kong people has precipitated the need for the government to devise fresh policy measures to accommodate such participatory demands. To cite Lucian Pye's notion of "participation crisis," the Hong Kong government should develop a holistic perspective of political participation in the territory. It should also streamline its political and administrative structure to render the system more responsive to such increasing political demand. In the terms of Kitschelt, the "input structure" of political participation is developing tremendously. It is necessary for the "output structure" of the administration to improve its efficacy and efficiency to adapt to this process of rapid transformation.

Conclusion

The politicization of social workers in Hong Kong, viewed from their gradual shift from the service role to an active involvement in informal and then formal channels of political participation, is essentially a manifestation of the dialectical relationship between the bipolar arenas of policy and politics. The increasing role of social workers as agents for political mobilization and acculturation of the grassroots is by no means an historical accident divorced from its social context. By virtue of their penetration into the grassroots through service provision, which itself is the result of more active government intervention in social policies in the last few decades, the social work profession has committed itself to an intimate relationship with the general populace. This position of the social workers vis-a-vis the people is not rivalled by many other professions. The educational attainment of the social workers, and the social status conferred upon them by the public, have virtually given social work practitioners the label of "middle class." Their
socio-economic status means that they often have the necessary “civic orientations” underlying political participation. Their sense of involvement in society, so strongly rooted in their professional training, coupled with their perceived political efficacy, further enhance their aptitude to participate in the political arena. The increasing solidarity of the professional community brought about by the development of professional organizations provides the impetus for a group or even partisan identification. Their constant interaction with government policies, principally through their involvement in welfare work for their clientele, also gives them the justification of policy-relevance for their political participation.  

The policy implications of social workers’ politicization involve the definition of their role in the entire political context of Hong Kong, as well as the accommodation of increasing grassroots political participation activated at least partly by social workers. As far as the former aspect is concerned, the participation of social workers in informal channels of politics has served as the stepping stone for their eventual involvement in formal political channels. To cite Wolfsfeld’s conception of political efficacy, the social workers have evolved from having the “mobilizational efficacy” of organizing the people in informal channels, to gaining “institutional efficacy” of working through formal channels. The two concepts of mobilizational and institutional efficacies are defined respectively as the belief that political actions organized outside or within the formal framework of government can have influence on the political process. Their accomplishment in the two respective arenas serves as reinforcement to their political orientation towards greater participation. Moreover, their professional training, neatly echoed by the ready receptivity of their clientele, enables them to have a wide repertoire of political skills. They may well be conceived as what Wolfsfeld called the “pragmatists” who are “an elite of highly motivated individuals who are both willing and able to take on a variety of political roles.” It is therefore justified to assert that the social workers can rightly perform their role as mediators between the government and the people, or in a macropolitical perspective, the role of enhancing political mobilization and political integration of the Hong Kong polity. The government should seriously reconsider its policy stance of depoliticizing the profession. An experienced social work academic has observed that:
"[The] government does not want to give an official mandate to social workers to work with residents organizations, particularly in the political task of facilitating communication between government and residents." \(^{27}\)

Yet, in the light of the positive contribution that the profession can make to the political development in the territory, it may be appropriate for the government to adopt a more liberal attitude towards the political role of social workers.

Having recognized the functional role of politicization of social workers, it is equally important for the government to recognize the need to accommodate any resultant political demands by means of some policy measures. As the social workers are mostly active at the grassroots level, it is crucial to have sufficient mechanisms to cater for increased grassroots political participation. The District Administration Scheme can be a fertile ground for development along such a direction. However, it is anticipated that only with enlarged administrative authority and enhanced political status that the District Boards can claim to serve a useful political accommodation role. In the longer term, the Executive and Legislative Councils may also have to be opened up to facilitate democratic development in the territory. Social workers can now enter the uppermost political echelon through limited franchise elections. Their political influence in the system is likely to persist.

Social workers have demonstrated their competence in their role of service provision. They have also shown their efficacy in political participation at both the informal and formal levels. Although the latter is taking on increased significance, experience from various countries with elaborate formal channels of participation has shown that participation through informal channels is no less important. While the former can serve as the official response mechanism to the latter, the latter serves as a monitor of the former. As the Hong Kong people have to live up to their destined future of self-administration with a high degree of autonomy, it is essential to develop a more participatory culture and a corresponding political structure accommodating such political demands.

Hansen has demonstrated that with increasing participation of the
people, a higher level of concurrence between leaders’ and citizens’ opinion can be guaranteed.\textsuperscript{28} The legitimacy of the political regime can thus be secured and more responsive administration can be envisaged. In short, increased politicization of Hong Kong society is both an inevitable and a desirable development. If policy and politics are dialectically related, it is imperative for the government to devise suitable policy measures, not so much to suppress politics but to channel it into meaningful and responsible modes of popular expression which would ultimately be conducive to an improved political order.

NOTES

7. Ladd uses the term “oppositional intelligentsia” to denote a group of intellectuals who are prone to challenge the existing regime. See D.L. Johnson, ed., \textit{Class and Social Development: A New Theory of the Middle Class} (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982).
11. The Hong Kong political system is characterized by a three-tier structure in which the Legislative and Executive Councils are the uppermost level of policy-making. The Urban and Regional Councils are the middle layer responsible for municipal services, and the District Boards are the district-based consultative bodies vested with some executive functions in community problem-solving. Access to official seats in these channels exhibits a decreasing pattern from the lowest level to the highest; the District Boards are characterized by universal suffrage whereas the Legislative Council is only opened up for restricted and indirect elections. The Hong Kong government has yielded
to pressures from the public, or, more precisely, the vocal democrats, when it promised to introduce
direct elections into the legislature in 1991. For details, see Hong Kong Government, *White Paper:
The Development of Representative Government: The Way Forward* (Hong Kong: Government
Printer, February, 1988).
12. The Hong Kong government has reiterated the proposition of having a “partnership” relation-
ship with the voluntary sector in the provision of social services in Hong Kong in its White Papers on
welfare policies and the annual reports of the Social Welfare Department.
13. J. Leung, “Community Development in Hong Kong: Contributions Towards Democratization,”
14. J. Leung, “Community Participation from Kaifong Association, Mutual Aid Committee to
District Board” in Joseph Y.S. Cheng, ed., *Hong Kong in the 1980s* (Hong Kong: Summerson Eastern
Publishers, 1982).
15. Speech by the Secretary of District Administration in the Hong Kong Legislative Council on
17. Ambrose King, “Administrative Absorption of Politics in Hong Kong: Emphasis on the Grass
18. Hong Kong Council of Social Service, Community Development Division, *List of New
Community Organizations*, January 1988 and *Survey on Community Workers’ Opinion on the
Relationship between New Community Organizations and Community Development Service*, 1988.
19. “Concern Groups: A New Ground for Community Work Practice,” *Community Development
20. A recent survey by the author reveals that the District Boards can command greater confidence
from their constituents than the Urban/Regional Councils. See W.T. Chui, *A Study on the Voting
Behaviour of Hong Kong Citizens in 1989, Urban/Regional Council Election* (Hong Kong: Research
report, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, September 1989).
21. During the period of consultation on the Green Paper on the further development of
representative government published by the Hong Kong government in 1985, there had been views
expressed on this issue.
22. The Social Welfare Department and the University of Hong Kong had jointly launched an
experimental project on block development in Sau Mau Ping public housing estate in 1968 to develop
residents’ sense of belonging and mutual help.
Kischelt, “Political Opportunity Structure and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four
24. The above discussion is based upon Verba, Nie & Kim’s formulation of the various models of
political participation, which are the Socio-economic Status model, Policy Relevance Model, Party
Mobilization Model, and Group Consciousness Model. See S. Verba, N. Nie, & Kim Jae-on, *The
Modes of Democratic Participation: A Cross National Comparison* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications,
1971).
25. G. Wolfsfeld, “Political Action Repertoires - The Role of Efficacy,” *Comparative Political
Studies* 19(1, April 1966): 104-29.
26. Ibid., p.117.
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