

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Warner J., *The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection*,  
Bristol: Policy Press, 2015**

Emotions comprise an important context for many concepts developed within social sciences<sup>1</sup>, and recently interest in the role of emotions in shaping political processes also seems to have grown. Although the notion of emotional politics is used in works on racism, slavery or citizenship as social constructs<sup>2</sup>, it is difficult to tie it to a single coherent theory or concept. The way it is used by different authors implies a constructionist paradigm, broadly speaking, but so far it lacks precise operationalization and its analytical usage seems rather intuitive.

The reviewed book fits into the above-indicated tendency, as it does not bring satisfactory theoretical conclusions. However, it should be acknowledged as an input into the scientific debate upon cultural and political aspects of the modern welfare state, which has been emerging over several years within a few different paradigms. Contrary to the empirical analyses focused on various elements of the “welfare culture” and the “social consciousness of elites”, Jo Warner tries to capture and describe the dynamics of discourses which both mirror and shape an arrangement of rules and institutional practice which is constantly reformed on all levels (from macro to micro). The book, written by the researcher and lecturer

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<sup>1</sup> A review of the classical sociological concepts from this point of view can be found in “The Sociology of emotions” (J. Turner, J. Stetseds, Cambridge University Press 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., P. Joanide (2015), *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness*, Stanford University Press; M. Franz (2015) *Will to love, will to fear: the emotional politics of illegality and citizenship in the campaign against birthright citizenship in the US*, “Social Identities” Vol. 21, Iss. 2;

from the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent, can be viewed as a summary of studies on the public debate surrounding the British welfare system, mostly with respect to the sector of child welfare. To some extent both the selection of the subject matter (the media and politics) and the approach to the analysis (searching for “irrational” sources of changes in the perception and functioning of the welfare system) seem to correspond with the moral panics conceptual framework applied in the author’s earlier works, which she invokes several times in the present work under review.

The notion of “emotional politics” is seen by the book’s author as a complex set of practices: “By introducing the concept of emotional politics, I explore the way emotions as anger, disgust and shame over the abuse of children are not only personally and subjectively felt, but also generated and experienced collectively” (Warner 2015<sup>3</sup>).

The assumption that emotions are political has been borrowed from sociological works, mostly from Simon Williams and Gillian Bangelow, who in their work “The lived body” (1998) encapsulated the concept of emotions as a keystone between the biological, individual, social and public. Although judgments based on “rational” argumentation are traditionally valued in public debates, emotions still comprise a stable element of narrations constructed by both the political left and right. Nevertheless, the author does not systematically reconstruct the “emotional codes” used by various representatives of different ideologies. She recalls the analyses by Norman Fairclough (2000) on the rhetoric of Tony Blair’s public speeches, as well as more recent studies on statements and pronouncements by the leaders of the Tories and Labour, where such categories as empathy or compassion play an important role. In turn, group identity and conformism is frequently constructed by pride and shame. To capture the complexity of the societal rules concerning emotions, Warner uses the term ‘*emotional regime*’, borrowed from Arlie Hochschild’s works (2002), defined as “taken-for-granted feeling rules (rules about how we imagine we should feel) and framing rules (rules about what we should see and think). Together these rules shape how we see and feel about everyday reality” (Hochschild 2002: 118, quoted after: Warner 2015).

Underlining the complexity of mechanisms shaping the interrelations between the media and the audience, the author recalls the assumption that

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<sup>3</sup> The reviewer’s copy of the book (licensed by Kindle Library) does not contain page numbers, which is why the quotations in this article are not accompanied by precise bibliographic references.

in the age of tabloidization, texts play the key role in shaping the language of debates surrounding social policy. She also convincingly defends the decision to narrow the analyses and focus on discussions concerning child welfare. Warner claims that the whole of images of human suffering can bring about a decline in audiences' sensitivity (she recalls the notion of *compassion fatigue* borrowed from the research on post-traumatic stress, see: Wilkinson 2005). However, children's suffering still has the power to trigger fierce reactions, rooted among other things in empathy and another psychological mechanism – a tendency to identify oneself with a parent or guardian.

These mechanisms are seriously challenged by media releases on child abuse by the closest family members. Warner gives examples of studies by British scholars pointing out that in such cases the media does not usually explicit images of suffering (such as photographs from autopsies), but rather publishes photos from before the acts of violence (showing smiling, healthy children), which in turn increases the tension between the information about the abuse and the utopian image of a happy childhood. The narrative structures of such releases are mostly subordinate to attempts to make them meaningful in the context of social norms attached to social class, gender or race.

Subsequently, the above-described processes are quickly transferred to the political level, as children are easy to present as a common good. If we perceive them as “the future of the nation”, publications about child abuse can be interpreted as a message about our collective negligence as “caring parents”. This leads to attempts to assign moral responsibility and to pose questions about gaps in the system of formal and informal care, grounded in unrealistic assumptions about their total infallibility. Warner gives much attention to claims for reform frequently invoked in such moments of crisis and inspired by the expectation that social services could and should exercise a total control. This situates the reviewed book in the heated scientific debate on the dominant perceptions of risk and risk management in social work and surrounding it.

Finally, the argumentation presented in the book contains a postulate which could be described as strictly political and emancipatory. Namely, by getting back to the first welfare scandals involving children described by the British media, where social workers were cast as scapegoats, the author points out the resulting changes, both in legislation and helping practice.

A just and in-depth depiction of mechanisms used to construct a negative image of social work and social workers can be, in turn, a starting point for constructing the opposite images. Stemming from digressions about interrelations

between the scientific debates and social practice, the above postulate can be invalidated as the exemplification of a utopian faith in the whistle-blowing role of social sciences. On the other hand it should be kept in mind that the reviewed book was released at the moment when the language and argumentation of several works written by authors (such as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, Daniel Dorling, Guy Standing or Thomas Piketty) entered into the mainstream political debates and seemed to modify dominant conceptual frames, within which important phenomena and socio-economic processes had been previously perceived. Although Jo Warner's proposal is much more modest, both in terms of theoretical reflection and the range of analysis, its accessible language and content predispose it to become the subject of heated discussion in the circles of social work practitioners and managers.

The book seems to be more a well-written essay (which corresponds with a great Anglo-Saxon tradition of argumentation) than a thorough but hermetic academic work. The argumentation extends here to the forefront, which – together with the catching “journalistic” chapter titles – corresponds with the author's intention to make the analysis interesting for the representatives of the child care sector. The main argumentation is enriched by different bibliographical references, which can be seen both as a limitation (eclectism) and a merit (eruditeness), as they seem to be brought together under one goal, which is the interpretation and contextualization of empirical data.

The structure of the book seems rather clear (with the exception of the last chapter, later discussed in this review) and subordinate to above-reconstructed goals. A detailed description of the methodological procedure was placed at the end of the book, in the Appendix. This solution can be seen as a gesture to non-academic readers. The empirical basis for the reflections comprise qualitative data: press articles, documents, and political speeches. Although the author does not resolve these issues explicitly, she has focused mainly on elite discourses. Her methodological strategy is summed up as follows: “In this study, I used methodological techniques that would enable me to discern and make explicit the main themes in the press coverage by locating patterns in the way different aspects of the story were presented” (Warner 2015). In turn, the juxtaposition of press articles and political documents was aimed at pointing out commonalities. The short description of the research procedure refers both to the criteria for data selection as well as technical aspects of her analysis, inspired by Sara Ahmed's (2004) and Beverly Skeggs's (2004) works devoted to emotional politics and

the articulation of social class in political rhetoric, as well as by the studies on moral panics.

The examples of debates discussed in the book from the years 2008–2014 were selected purposely, and a reader who is not familiar with the British welfare debate should trust that the author points out events of special meaning, both because of their range and because of the consequences for legitimization and the daily functioning of child care system. The political documents included in the analysis were retrieved from the official register of parliamentary debates, on the basis of keywords (mostly children's and politicians' names). Only textual data were subjected to coding (which, in the case of media releases, may limit the results of the analysis), which was planned in accordance with the procedure designed and implemented by Lee and Ungar (1989) and comprised of such categories as topics, emotional distance, and moral norms. From the technical point of view, rigorous rules of the three-step route followed from open through to focused and selective coding.

The empirical part of the book begins with the chapter titled "Heads must roll? National politics of anger and the press". Warner turns back to a media and political scandal from 2007, triggered by the death of 18-month old Peter Connelly (named "Baby P."). The analysis is mostly aimed at revealing the role of anger both as a background for social services actions and as a factor mobilizing and bonding the national community. The central element of case study is aimed at showing the processes of quick crystallization and the directing of emotions, including a thorough analysis of David Cameron's speech.

The following part of the study is devoted to the role of disgust in reproducing a negative image of the lower classes. Similarly to the previous chapter, this one can be seen as continuation of reflections published elsewhere (Warner 2013a, 2013b). In this case the analysis covers press releases from two trials of mothers accused of killing their children (2008 and 2013). The category of class-based and directed disgust as a tool for moral regulation of social relations seems to be an interesting input into the long discussion on the social construction of the *underclass* as "the Other"<sup>4</sup>, as it reveals the tension between the fantasy of innocence and vulnerability of a child figure and the public image of the "undeserving" and their immoral life, which are key elements of media stories of mother-murderers. Warner (2015) argues that this tension influences every

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from disgust, fear and shame – which are more broadly discussed in the literature – also play an important role.

day helping practices, as “social work operates in the wider context of moral condemnation of people living in poverty rather than compassion” (Warner 2015).

Chapter 4, based on an analysis of political documents, can be seen as a passage to reflections on the role of *commemoration, and collective remembering* in the process of formulating claims for reforms. Both the recollection of children’s names and public case reviews are seen as the starting points for a specific vision of the system’s improvement, grounded in the myth of total control (eliminating any risk of mistakes or negligence). Warner pays special attention to articulation of the idea of introducing an alternative training system, aimed at replacing “toxic bureaucrats” with “new” heroic social workers.

The problem of risk tolerance in the area of child care is discussed exhaustively in Chapter 5, mostly in the context of conflicts of interest among certain collective actors and the role of these fights in constructing their group identity and distinction. A return to the arguments presented in the Chapter 3 brings about new reflections on the role of moral condemnation of the underclass as an element of the status game, played by the middle classes more intensively, as the role of solid, socio-economic foundations of the social structure, as well as the role of rules governing the distribution of deference within British society, decline.

The analysis leads to conclusions which would not be contrary to common sense, although Warner underlines that the negative image of the underclass and their crippled parenthood is a significant reference point for the construction of an internally contradictory model for the middle classes. Also the interrelations between social workers and clients, and especially the justification for intervention in their privacy, is considered as a consequence of class position.

In Chapter 6 the author passes on to analysis of three official documents representing a specific category of *serious case reviews*, which in accordance with British law are obligatorily published in cases of a child’s death caused by abuse or negligence<sup>5</sup>. The idea to include them in the book is justifiable, as they “reflect and generate feeling rules that include profound regret at past actions and intense anger at the ease with which, in hindsight, the child’s suffering might have been prevented. Documents also implant feelings and framing rules into the rationalities of practice, particularly in the processes of risk and blame” (Warner 2015).

Moreover, they comprise not only the result of documenting helping practices, but are also texts which are extensively used in the media and in political debates, and they make up part of the process of constructing social relations. The

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<sup>5</sup> Such reports are kept in the national repository and accessible to the public.

specificity of this institutional context can be especially interesting for a non-British reader. Warner convincingly shows how the above-mentioned procedure is instrumentalized to persuade audiences that some mistakes could have been easily prevented, which both boosts the eruption of anger and reinforces the belief that the childcare system can be totally effective, and that its weakest link is the social workers.

In the Chapter 7, the author tries to reconstruct the elements of emotional politics within childcare systems outside the UK. However, the criteria for her selection of Australia, Holland and New York does not seem clear, nor does the criteria for data selection and the scope of analysis (national level juxtaposed with the local etc.). The conclusions, especially in relation to different strategies for reworking the tensions between two key orientations – at *child protection* and *child welfare* – are very thought-provoking in certain parts, but in light of the fact that the previous chapters constitute a comprehensive whole, they seem out-of-place and fragmentary.

The summary of main topics and conclusions contained in Chapter 8 is also a starting point for a broader discussion on the institutional and public role of social work in the process of power transmission. The author raises some important claims: “The public institutional role of the social work is to articulate different feeling rules about social work and the communities social work is largely engaged in. To do this it is necessary to extend certain elements of our own politics to a much wider audience, and to do so with renewed energy. The most important element of our politics that I argue we need to communicate to others is the politics of social suffering. Social suffering serves to focus attention firmly on *power* (...)” (Warner 2015). This, in turn, paves the way for compassion, which – so long as it not is confused with pity – can become a starting point for collective action based on mutual trust.

To sum up, the book by Jo Warner may be criticized for its insufficiently deep theoretical reflections, as it lacks the construction of a conceivably precise concept of emotional politics. Nevertheless, in my opinion such publications deserve appreciation for different reasons. They offer analyses which are both methodologically grounded and rooted in broad (even if eclectic) scientific reflections. In addition, such books refer to current problems which are widely discussed in public debates surrounding public policies. Being both critical and attractive for practitioners, they play an important, and sometimes underestimated, role as they raise the sociological imagination and the ability to recognize the macro-social, political and cultural contexts surrounding legal solutions,

administrative decisions, and everyday practice. It is worth underscoring that in Poland the market niche for such works – which go beyond the technocratic language of ministerial instructions as well as the hermetic language of sociological theory – remains underdeveloped.

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