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Social Work at the Beginning of the Great Recession

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Author(s):	*Michael Kelly, Michael Lauderdale and Noel Landuyt*
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From the Editors:
Social Work at the Beginning of the Great Recession

The Journal opens the second decade of the new century with articles examining topics of rural social work, worker retention, and preparation for working with child neglect. It also includes three book reviews, two of which focus on aspects of the economy and the other explaining the reasons why we need to understand major problems in Africa.

Characteristics of the Great Recession

The Journal issues this year, like last year, are coming in the context of one of the most serious economic periods in the last one hundred years for the United States. We see it as having many economic and social disruptions similar to the Great Depression, and in the last few weeks it has begun to be referred to as the Great Recession. Job losses, time between losing a job and getting another, rates of home foreclosures, homelessness, and unemployment have not been this great since that calamity of the 1930's.

The Passing Paradigm

We suspect that what we are seeing is more consequential than a cyclical correction that characterizes economic activity. Rather Western societies may be facing the end of a paradigm that has lasted for more than one hundred years. If so, it will have great consequence for social work and social work continuing education. We know that the creation of the profession of social work coincides with the passing of an agricultural paradigm and the three large-scale changes in American society: industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

Industrialization had several components. One was work simplification and specialization. Rather than making an entire product the worker was taught to do one task, repeatedly. This made it possible to employ persons with lower level skills but also introduced considerable tedium in the work place. In industrial or factory settings the worker did not own tools or the raw materials. Those belonged to the factory owner and the worker was paid a wage. Work was not done at home nor, often, near the home, and thus family chores were unattended until the worker returned home. Factory work created powerful psychological changes for the worker that often lessened ties to the home and diminished the amount of time at home, yet family prosperity increased because of the regular pay the worker received.

Industrialization required that large numbers of workers be near the factory, which encouraged urban growth. With industrialization farms and villages experienced loss of population which was absorbed by a few large cities. Thus, industrialization and urbanization were companion processes. Chicago is an illustration of this process as well as being important to the history of social work. It grew from a prairie village and river portage in 1860 with a population of 121,000 to a metropolis of 3,376,000 in 1930, the nation's second largest city. It was supported by an enormous labor force that handled the products that arrived on the railroads, highways, and ships – such as grain – and worked in the meat processing and auto manufacturing plants

In the 1900 census farming states were the most populous and Iowa, for example, was the approximate center of U.S. population and ranked 9th in size out of the 48 states. Yet it and other farming states like Indiana lost real or relative population for a hundred years after 1900 as the new paradigm transformed the nation.

But as the grand paradigm of the 20 century continued, industrialization absorbed so many workers that farm hands were scarce and jobs were unfilled at the factory. Immigration became a mechanism to secure more workers for the abandoned jobs in agricultural, ranching and forestry and the ever growing new jobs in the factories. This led to decades of persons coming from southern Europe, China and Mexico much as Irish, Germans, Swedes, Scots, Africans and English came in the 18th and 19th Century.

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Urban living -- with at least one adult and often both adults gone from the home during the work day -- weakened the resources of the family to care, educate, and protect family members. The cost of housing and the fact that grandparents often did not make the move to the urban area made most families nuclear rather than extended. Such conditions created a variety of social needs formerly addressed by small neighborhoods and extended families. Uniform, public education was one of the first institutions created to fill the gap of adults at home to care, educate, and socialize children. Also immigrants often came to America with limited skills in English as well as a need to learn the skills of urban living in a foreign country. Public schools, trade and industrial unions, and churches served as important socialization structures for these thousands of new citizens. Social work learned from an earlier experience in London at Toynbee House and created settlement homes in American cities with perhaps Chicago's Hull House being the best known. These forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration created a profession to serve the needs of individuals, families, and neighborhoods buffeted by these forces.

These three forces transformed the United States from a land of farms and small villages to an urban nation that by the 1950's was the farm and factory to much of the world. Great affluence was generated and by the 1960's the country was the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. Social work played a critical role in this rural to urban transformation, preserving and modifying social structures. It provided the social glue to the atomizing tendencies of industrialization and urbanization.

Returning to Classical Economists

The wealth of the country increased average wages, and political and business leaders by the 1970's began to push the idea of lower tariff and trade quotas and trade policies to encourage manufacturing and farming in lower-wage areas of the world. Such global concerns grew out of America's participation in the two World Wars of the 20th century and its replacement of Great Britain as the world's most powerful nation. During much of the 20th century America conducted a proxy war with the Soviet Union for hegemony in the world. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which lead to the dissolution of the USSR, America moved into high gear, promoting the message of free markets and increased trade. This was the classical message of Adam Smith of the advantages of *competition* and *capitalism*. It was argued that increasing world trade would let product manufacturing and farming migrate to areas of lower costs. This was essentially the concept of the late 18th century's David Ricardo's of *comparative advantage* that promoted economic specialization with each country or region doing those economic tasks best suited to it and trading with others to secure other market needs. With high labor costs America must reduce any manufacturing and farming with significant labor contents and move labor into other areas. The solution, perhaps though not stated, was that Americans could use their educational system to train displaced and new labor to do higher wage tasks with the comparative advantage of high innovation in America. This entire process of implementing comparative advantage and thus enhanced trade between countries and regions was termed globalization and was thought to offer greater prosperity around the globe.

The strategy worked until the creation of the OPEC cartel in the 70's reduced the availability of oil and exposed one single factor upon which the paradigm of industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and globalization was based. That factor was readily available and cheap petroleum.

As our review of Friedman's book on global challenges notes, we do live in a world of ever more scarce and expensive natural resources. Such concerns bring in the third classical economist, Thomas Malthus.

A New Paradigm

There is reason to suspect that higher natural resource prices, especially for petroleum, will end the current paradigm and force the world and certainly the United States to rearrange its economy and ultimately its society and culture. Cities with large suburban neighborhoods, where auto transportation is critical and fuel costs rising, will be increasingly impoverished. The advantage will go to smaller cities with favorable energy expenditure-to-return ratios. Extremely large cities will be at a disadvantage as well because of their expensive infrastructure, including office buildings, factories, and homes.

For several decades business and labor will be experimenting to determine what size of buildings and urban dwellings are most efficient relative to the cost of energy and the availability of water and transport of food. Perhaps a Kansas City, Missouri, Des Moines, Iowa, or Montgomery, Alabama, will be closer to the prosperous city of mid-century than Los Angeles or New York City.

As this new paradigm is created, social work must look to tasks that help some areas deeply wounded by the failing paradigm, such as Detroit or Philadelphia, deal with extreme unemployment, poverty, and violence. Here the tasks will be community organizations for protection and self-help in building homes, repairing schools, creating gardens. In communities more effectively sized for a new paradigm of local self-sufficiency, social work tasks will be how to design, fund, and operate programs that care for the vulnerable. Education, particularly continuing education, will have high importance in all communities as the workforce must develop thousands of new skills. In some cases it is re-learning tasks in farming and manufacturing lost to the last two or three generations. In others it will be in education to promote job development. Both tasks are critical in that for more than a hundred years people have been dependent upon incomes to purchase food, shelter, and clothing. Few people remember how to garden much less do they understand animal husbandry, such as raising and processing chickens, caning and freezing fruits and vegetables, or sewing clothing, which were among the myriad tasks of self-support practiced by our grandparents and great grandparents in the America of the 19th century.

Wrapping Up

In this issue we have articles by Timothy B. Conley, Murphy, Ewan, and Stoeckel on educational priorities among rural social workers. Leung, Brown, Chavkin, Fong, and Urwin examine the impact on retention of social workers, comparing those who have participated in Title IVE programs and those who have not. Cochran offers a theory on successful social policy advocacy. In "Notes from the Field," Bundy-Fazioli and Hamilton address educating social workers on child neglect. Book reviews are by Moodie-Dryer of Allard's *Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State*; Mungai of Lyman, P. N. & Dorff, P. (Eds.) *Beyond Humanitarianism: What You Need to Know about Africa and Why It Matters*; and by Parker of Friedman's *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: How We Need a Green Revolution – and How It Can Renew America*.

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