Resisting politics of authoritarian populism during COVID-19, reclaiming democracy and narrative justice: Centering critical thinking in social work

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Abstract
Authoritarian populism that fosters deep hate of ‘Others’ and a desire for obedience and order, has attacked the fundamental principles of social work and democracy. During the global health crisis, another global pandemic – xeno or racism – is evoked to corroborate authoritarian populism. We critically analyze the dynamics of populism that shift the focus from ‘people’ to ‘problems’ and how it has been intensified during COVID-19. Using narrative justice as a guiding framework, we invite social workers to critically reflect on how this politics has impacted marginalized populations and injuries done to democracy and how social workers can contribute constructing social justice narratives.

Keywords
Authoritarian populism, COVID-19, critical thinking in social work, narrative justice, post-truth politics, racism

To make a global commitment to respect human dignity and rights as the center piece of social work, the three main global bodies representing the social work profession – International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) established the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development in 2010 (hereafter, the Global Agenda; for details of the Global Agenda history and reports visit https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/the-global-agenda/). In 2018, Rory Truell, IFSW

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Secretary-General, called on social workers to contribute to the 2020–2030 Global Agenda to set priorities for the profession. In this call, ‘one of the biggest social challenges’ was, Truell (2018) noted, ‘the election of authoritarian leaders that seek to undermine people’s rights and basic democracy through military or police control and by corruption, manipulation and lies’ (p. 756). As a backdrop, the year 2016 was a turn to explicitly showcasing authoritarian populism as shown in the United Kingdom’s referendum decision to leave the European Union (a.k.a. ‘Brexit’) and the US presidential victory of Donald Trump.

Populism rests on two main ingredients: one is the idea that there is a corrupt elite which invokes deep popular dissatisfaction with the current state, and the other is a belief that power should be properly restored to ‘the people’ (Graves and Smith, 2020). By its definition, populism presents itself as a seemingly democratic device. Müller (2016), however, criticizes that ‘it often hides dangerously anti-democratic impulses which can stray into authoritarianism’ (cited in Graves and Smith, 2020: 3) and the power is not restored to the marginalized or non-White immigrants. Common characteristics include skepticism toward established authorities such as mainstream media, journalism and science, an aversion to others or outgroups, anti-global but pro-national interest, searching for order and obedience, and invoking a desire to turn back the clock, while yearning for a strong authoritarian savior to enforce nostalgic ‘better’ times (Graves and Smith, 2020).

Political responses to COVID-19 across the world have reinforced this authoritarian populism which has significantly reduced democratic freedoms and civil liberties, expanded psychological and physical borders and increased xeno or racism globally (Lee and Johnstone (2021a); Bieber, 2020). As we describe later, under increasing far-right authoritarian governance intensified by the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, it is not a coincidence that George Floyd was knelt on, so he was unable to breathe for 8 minutes and 46 seconds and killed by militarized police violence on 25 May 2020. This outrageous hate toward ‘others’ has continued today including the recent Atlanta shooting that killed six Asian women, yet Cherokee County Sheriff Reynolds denied naming this shooting spree as a racist massacre since for the suspect, Robert Aaron Long, a 21-year-old White man, it was ‘a really bad day for him and this is what he did’ (BBC News, 18 March 2021). During the pandemic, most social work training and outpatient services have moved online, and many social work faculties and practitioners have been preoccupied with finding solutions to adjust to the so-called ‘new normal’ in teaching and practice. Amid this ‘problem solving’ and pervasive narratives of yearning for the past ‘pre-COVID era’ as if that time was perfect, we would like to pause and critically reflect on this meta-narrative and analyze current social phenomena, the underlying politics, and the impact on marginalized populations that may govern present and future social work practice and education. Drawing from the construct of narrative justice ( McGregor, 2018), we then attempt to map out local and global social actions by social workers, social work organizations, and other public intellectuals to resist authoritarian populism to foster a practice of hope toward instilling a just and humane society.

We first introduce the characteristics of authoritarian populism and how it has pervasively impacted people, especially marginalized populations, during COVID. Although this phenomenon is global, considering the space we utilize examples mostly from North America, while briefly referring to similar global trends. Then we illustrate how this global trend injures the social work values of humanity and social justice and impacts social work practice and education. We close with a discussion around how to resist the impact of far-right populism by challenging dominant discourses and constructing competing narratives on social justice in social work education, practice, and research.
Authoritarian populism as a killjoy for social justice and democracy

On 7 November 2020, the world witnessed the Democratic leader Joe Biden’s victory in the US presidential election. Does this mean that the concern about the growing authoritarian populism at least in the United States can be put to rest because the authoritarian leader Trump who ‘symbolises the global decay of democracy’ (Cooper and Aitchison, 2020: 4) moved out of the White House? Positioning this question differently, does the birth and existence of authoritarianism have to do with a presence or absence of authoritarian leaders or is it a broader ideology and governing politics that continues to thrive even when an authoritarian leader is less visible or absent?

In The Authoritarian Personality, one of the most influential and widely debated works on the topic, Adorno et al. (1950) attempted to understand and explain why economic struggles brought on by the First World War and the Great Depression contributed to the mass popularity of fascist movements across Europe in the 1920s to the 1940s. Applying a Freudian psychodynamic theory of prejudice, anxiety, and ideology to their theorizing, they argue that ‘status anxiety produces authoritarian discipline which produces repression of faults and shortcomings and of aggression against authority’, which is then ‘projected onto minorities and outsiders’ (Brown, 1965: 504). In this seminal work, they developed several scales to measure pre-fascist tendencies (the F-scale), ethnocentrism or anti-Semitism (the E-scale), and political-economic conservatism (the P-E-C scale). The F-scale consists of 12 traits ranging from a strong belief in authority and obedience to a belief that sexual perversion was common in outgroups. One of their central findings is that ‘a man who is hostile toward one minority group is very likely to be hostile against a wide variety of others’ (Adorno et al., 1950: 9).

Quoting Adorno et al., Graves and Smith (2020) help us to understand that this authoritarian world view is not just derived from the psychological profile of leaders but rather a disturbing social phenomenon triggered under certain conditions that seek ‘order in the face of an exaggerated sense of external threat and economic hopelessness’ (p. 4) and that these conditions produce an authoritarian leader. Several critical scholars have supported this theorizing: Hetherington and Weiler (2018) illustrate that the fixed-fluid or ordered-open outlook has shown little difference across Republicans and Democrats since the 1990s and has become progressively deeply polarized since then. Stenner and Haidt (2018) also argued that the authoritarian outlook is a triumph of order over equality, equity and justice. What is clear is that at the heart of this authoritarian governance whether it is a right- or left-wing political government, is a search for order, attraction to the status quo, deep hatred of outgroups and newcomers and a desire for obedience and ordered behavior. Although Trump recently lost the American presidential election to Biden, it may not signify a pendulum swinging back to an increased liberal ethos toward a democratic society. In fact, critical scholars argue that populism is ‘a significant political force, replacing the traditional left-right political spectrum’ (Graves and Smith, 2020: s1). Regardless of which political parties won, authoritarian populism continues to injure principles of democracy – human rights and freedom, equity, and justice, and this demands social actions to interrupt its expansion.

Using Canada as an example, in 2019, Justin Trudeau, leader of the Liberal party of Canada defended his second term as Prime Minister (2015 to present). However, the aversion toward visible minorities and immigrants which is ‘strongly linked to an ordered outlook’ (Graves and Smith, 2020: 22) in populism has not subsided but is more upfront in political debates and has divided the nation. The Angus Reid analysis noted that the number of Canadians who oppose or support immigration has been steady over the last 40 years. Interesting is the difference in public opinion between
different party leaderships that in 2014, when the Conservatives were in power, 36 percent of respondents said there should be fewer immigrants admitted, but in 2018, under the present Liberal government, 49 percent held this belief (Galvin, 2018). According to Perry, the Director of the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism at Ontario Tech University, since 2015, there has been a 30 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslims, Jews, immigrants, Indigenous people, women, and LGBTQ communities in Canada and that minimally there are 130 active far-right extremist groups across Canada. For example, since 2017, there has been fierce controversy around banning the religious face covering (e.g. hijab) and in June 2019, Bill 21 was passed in Quebec which banned public sector workers (e.g. teachers, health care providers, etc.) from wearing religious symbols on the job (Desjardins, 2017; Miller, 2019). It was not a coincidence then that in 2017, a mosque in Quebec was the site of a killing spree that took six lives and cemented the dangerous atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment in Canada. In March 2020, posters messaging the ‘replacement’ of European immigrants were glued to the front of the offices of the newcomer settlement organizations and the LGBTQ advocacy group in Saskatoon (CBC News).

Also, there have been disturbing statistics capturing ordered populism in Canada (Habib, nd). In 2017, a Radio Canada poll showed that 74 percent of Canadians favored a ‘Canadian values test’ for immigrants, which was born out of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant policy (Desjardins, 2017). Conservative leader Andrew Scheer used ‘stop mass immigration’ as his platform in the 2019 election. Although an immigration expert and social work scholar, Usha George, noted that there was in fact no mass immigration in Canada, the Leger poll suggested that conservative voters are far more likely (81%) to favor limiting immigration levels, whereas only half of liberal voters favor this (41%; Wright, 2019). The Digital Democracy Project survey in 2019 found that Canadians were much more likely to overestimate than underestimate the number of refugees and immigrants admitted to Canada (Cain, 2019). The project lead, Loewen, noted a lot of misinformation about immigration in Canada. Before the election in 2019, a Leger poll suggested that many Canadians (63%) believe that the federal government should limit immigration (Wright, 2019). People’s Party of Canada leader, Maxime Bernier, ran for the federal election promising to end the official national policy of Multiculturalism. He boldly presented a platform of far-right authoritarian populism.

The Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (1996–2015), the current Ontario Premier Doug Ford (2018 to present), known as ‘Trump of the North’ (Lewsen, 2020), and the former Conservative leader Andrew Scheer (2017–2020) are some of ‘local’ Canadian examples of populism, but they are reinforced by similar strong political forces of populism globally – Marine Le Pen in France, Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Victor Orbán in Hungary, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland, Petro Poroshenko in Ukraine, Sebastian Kurz in Austria, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Although authoritarian populism focuses on nationalistic interests only and takes deglobalization even anti-globalism as their forefront, their contagious effects are global. This global trend of populism corroborates one another creating an even bigger meta-discourse marking authoritarian populism as a global norm.

Why now do we have authoritarian populism? Graves and Smith (2020: 6) argue that ‘these forces have been percolating for a long time’, unfolding for several decades with ‘the long accumulation of stagnation and hyper-concentration of wealth at the top that eventually produced a shift in the societal outlook’. Since the Great Depression in the 1920s, global economic crises have hit hard in various parts of the world. Since the 1980s, for example, there was Black Monday in the United States (1987), the Asian financial crisis (1997), global financial bank crash (2007–2009), and European debt crisis (2009–2019). Meanwhile, reminiscent of Adorno et al.’s theorizing, heightened anxiety around inevitable economic recession under capitalism has been projected to minorities around the world. Critical scholars note that these periods were also times of anti-immigration
and anti-multiculturalism globally, and even called the ‘failure of multiculturalism’ (Collet, 2011; Shields et al., 2016) or the ‘crisis of multiculturalism’ (Lentin and Titley, 2011). This aversion toward others manifested as xeno or racism has been further heightened during COVID.

Known to have originated in Wuhan, China, COVID was mislabelled as the Chinese or Asian virus and there has been the explosion of hate crimes globally, as if the origin of the pandemic is the only reason why we have issues of racism and inequity (Human Rights Watch, 2020). We argue that the current xeno or racism is not an isolated social problem that has arisen during the pandemic, but that it is a recent manifestation of authoritarian populism. We argue that it is critical for social workers to understand these governing ideologies and politics that have been pervasive nationally and globally, because if not understood and resisted, this will be present after COVID and will significantly impact the lives of individuals and communities we serve. Next, we briefly illustrate the characteristics of governing mechanisms in authoritarian populism: problem-focused politics and post-truth politics, and how these politics have played out during COVID-19.

**Politics of authoritarian populism during the pandemic**

**Problem-focused politics**

According to Foucault (2007: 122), we need to understand that the art of governing is premised on the notion that ‘one never governs a state, a territory, or a political structure. Those whom one governs are people, individual or groups’, thus shifting our attention from government to governance. Recently, scholars have highlighted a critical shift in the discourse on governance from the notion of ‘people’ to the notion of ‘problems’ in countless areas of public life (e.g. climate change, global financial crises, transnational terrorism), frequently invoking solutions (e.g. when there are problems there should be solutions!), even legitimizing radical inhumane measures put in place and justifying governance itself (Enroth, 2014). It permits then authoritarian leaders and administrations to declare that they have the problems solved (e.g. Trump’s claim to build walls on the Mexico borders ‘to stop illegal immigrants coming to our country’). This then masks the human cost of problem-solving measures such as Trump’s policy of zero tolerance heralding stringent immigration controls at the US–Mexico border resulting in the traumatizing separation of children from their families (for details, see Mindock, 2018). We agree with Enroth (2014), who argues that ‘the discourse on governance, too, makes contingency look like necessity and necessity like a justification for new forms of governing that would be difficult to justify within conventional political discourse’ (p. 71). In authoritarian populism, this ‘new art of governing’ allows the veneer of necessity to mask ‘false politics’.

There are serious consequences of this shift from the notion of ‘people’ to the notion of ‘problems’. It promotes governance as less centered on the nature and role of systematic and consistent state policies, but rather reactive to solving ‘problems’ and subsequently showcasing ‘output’ and ‘performance’ of getting the job done. Dilemmas, paradoxes, and inconsistency in public policies are hence acceptable since governmental efforts are addressing impending ‘problems’. For example, during the pandemic, to stop transmission, border closures were exercised, while people fleeing violence were kept in-between in refugee camps often overcrowded with few health services, which made social distancing unfeasible and exposed them highly vulnerable to the infection. To address the economic recession some businesses are still open even while COVID infection rates increase, and to address food shortage, temporary migrants in agriculture and meatpacking industries are allowed entry without proper health services being put in place (see Shields and Alrob, 2020, for detailed examples and related policies). Characteristically, the notion of ‘people’ is less highlighted in arguments about justification for political actions, and if considered then constructed divisively between us and them where humanity, justice, and equity are underlined for ‘us’ only.
(e.g. we need security, so stop immigrants. We need food so others can come and work for us!) but unseen for ‘others’ (e.g. inhumane conditions and high infection and death rates for temporary migrants in essential services).

Post-truth politics

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2016), the term ‘post-truth’ means ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ and was named as Word of the Year 2016 since 2016 was ‘the year of a particular right-wing post-truth discourse explosion’: in other words of populism with authoritarian leaders globally – all of whom claimed ‘to liberate “the people” from the tyranny of technocrats, experts, scientific evidence, or scientific consensus’ (Braun, 2019: 1). Post-truth politics refers to ‘a mode of politics less influenced by objective facts than by emotions or beliefs’ [italics added] (Braun, 2019: 1) and has several characteristics.

First is the appeal to emotions, especially fear politics. To constitute fear politics, you need to create enemies who threaten you. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been a pervasive anti-immigrant rhetoric represented in emotionally charged terms like ‘global anxiety’, ‘refugee crisis’, and ‘arising fear’ against immigration as ‘a threat’ to national security (Alkopher, 2018; Hirvoner, 2017; Zevnik, 2017). Zevnik (2017) explains how deploying imagined and/or exaggerated threats increases anxiety inside and creates fears among people which then operate as ordering principles and subsequently any exceptional measures that are enacted, often disguised as policy or law, are legitimized and normalized as ‘the place of authority’ (p. 239). The role of threats is known as ‘a pre-condition for the emergence of ordered populism’ (Graves and Smith, 2020: 10). The cycle of politics of authoritarian populism involves deploying problems or threats or crises as ‘a new normality’, turning them into ‘grounds for politics of fear’ (Zevnik, 2017: 249), demanding security and order, and consequently legitimizing authoritarian measures. For example, on 28 February 2020, the leader of Italy’s La Lega party, Matteo Salvini, demanded an anti-immigration policy ‘iron-plating the borders’ to ban the recent arrival of a migrant boat from North Africa, although at that time, Italy only had 288 reported cases of COVID-19, while the whole of the African continent had just a single case (Davis, 2020).

Second is the imagined revival and glorification of the past in the present. Trump’s last campaign promising to ‘Make America Great Again (MAGA)’, Farage’s cry to ‘Take Country Back’ to the Lost Empire, and Le Pen’s call for the French Resistance are clear examples (Casaglia et al., 2020; Lee and Bhuyan, 2019). de Saint-Laurent et al. (2017) point out the dangers of this rhetoric, since ‘they are bringing us back to the past as it actually happened – a past where populism successfully brought nationalist leaders to power’ (p. 147). Not specifically referring to certain historical eras but ‘embracing a convenient nostalgia for the past’ in his MAGA campaign, Trump was implying that ‘periods where African Americans, women, LGBT, and most minorities had limited rights and limited access to the public sphere’ (p. 148) were the times when the United States was great. Also, in promising British people to take back control, UKIP’s Brexit campaign used ‘a certain representation of UK’s past – the Great British Empire . . . while indirectly praising British colonialism’ (p. 149). This nostalgic glorification features the colonial and/or nationalistic ‘master’ narratives only, marks them as desirable, and the present without this master rhetoric is positioned as problematic, needing to be liberated by authoritarian leaders to bring us back to the idyllic past. Meanwhile, subjugated voices are pre-empted and lost. During the pandemic, a master narrative that ‘others are dangerous and carriers of COVID’ has become pervasive and this has resulted in increased violent racism around the world. Human Rights Watch (2020) reports endless incidents of xenophobic attacks, violence, and harassment of people of Asian descent across the globe (also see Lee and Johnstone, 2021b, for detailed examples globally).
Third is the use of the ‘meta’ narrative as an ‘ordering’ device that makes sense of current phenomena and creates order in a complex world. Deploying simplification, Braun (2019: 432) notes, this meta-narrative is ‘contingent and value-laden’ often ‘obscuring others’, while merging a broad range of phenomena into ‘a new universalizing meta-narrative’ that revitalizes a ‘split’ such as good versus evil. It thus creates ‘a division between “us” and “them” and mobilizes hate and resentment against “them” to expand their own power base’. In the period following both 2016 Brexit and the US elections and similarly in the 2019 Canadian federal and 2020 US presidential elections, it was apparent that these countries were bitterly divided. Rose (2017) rightfully predicted, ‘The ultimate geopolitical consequences of these votes will be a matter of debate over the coming years’ (p. 555), while populism governs the people’s minds creating divisions between proponents with privileges and opponents in the margins. In fact, this division is the fertile soil where populism thrives because they need imagined enemies to create fear politics and hate to legitimize authoritarianism and implement inhumane measures (Cooper and Aitchison, 2000; Lee and Bhuyan, 2019). For example, even when the world witnessed the brutality of police militia against Black people and uncountable people mourned the death of George Floyd, Trump positioned himself as the ‘president of law and order’ and was outspoken about mobilizing the American Federal army to crack down on protesters from the Black Lives Matter movement calling them ‘domestic terrorists’ (NBC News, nd; Starr et al., 2020). Cooper and Aitchison (2000) note that even Mark Esper, the Defense Secretary under the Trump Administration, opposed this idea: ‘[T]he comments amounted to endorsing the armed, far-right militias that have threatened black communities and protest the lockdown. This is a deep crisis of American democracy’ (p. 10).

Fourth is the attack on critical thinking, anti-science, and increased policing, surveillance, and border control, which are inevitable to keep the simplistic meta-narrative as the ordering device of the authoritarian regime. Graves and Smith (2020) note that the authoritarian meta-narrative often speaks to ‘those in the less educated portions of society, who put less emphasis on reason and evidence and more emphasis on moral certainty and order’ (p. 19). A range of such policies include under- or de-funding and abolishing critical and scientific fields, while implementing policing devices to pre-empt such conditions. Thus, Braun (2019) argues that ‘It is the hallmark of autocratic governance not just to manipulate facts but to destroy the conditions for ascertaining validity altogether’ (p. 435). In fact, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists (2020), Trump has been notorious for his attack on scientific evidence (Carter et al., 2019). During COVID, he said, ‘I wanted to always play it down’ and ‘it will go away’, in March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced it as a global pandemic. He consistently prioritized his politics over scientific evidence and recommendations at key moments, leading to a 200,000 COVID death toll in September 2020 – nearly half the number of Americans killed in the Second World War (Dearen, 2020).

Even before COVID, the high technology revolution using Internet and telecommunications had already created ‘extraordinary avenues for ongoing monitoring of human behavior by states and private corporations alike’ and became ‘the power of the security and surveillance apparatus’ that Cooper and Aitchison (2020) call the ‘erosion of human rights’. During the pandemic, this surveillance has been further reinforced, especially tightening border control, in many cases, becoming xenophobic nationalist reactions to keep out ‘the others’ who are deemed as a threat, while calling for more securitization of migration (Shields and Alrob, 2020). What is clear is that the border is not only a physical and geographical boundary but also symbolic and performed to govern and disempower people who are otherized. Vaughan-Williams (2008) thus called this border politics ‘the generalised bio-political border’. Critical scholars note that border control with walls and walling processes do not actually stop people from crossing but rather perform as a symbolic response to perceived crises that threaten sovereign state capacities to secure territory, citizens, and economies. In fact, Shields and Alrob (2020) argue that ‘a heavy focus on borders is
designed to shift attention away from other areas where government resources to address COVID-19 and post-pandemic rebuilding are greatly lacking’ (p. 4), such as health insurance and services, long-term health care facilities, and the food industry. And such governments’ own shortcomings are projected onto others in blame shifting exercises.

Finally, the rise of online social media and organized lying are observed. As the world has witnessed Trump’s impulsive use of Twitter for airing his personal opinions to disseminating announcements about national politics, ‘[S]ocial media and the related fragmentation of the public sphere, the formation of echo chambers, fake websites, bots and other instruments of systematic manipulation, anonymity, simplification, polarization and the brutalization of language are generally regarded a key component’ (Braun, 2019: 434) of populism. Deploying social media and master and meta-narratives in public spaces, authoritarians tend not to hide some facts to deceive some people, but to destroy facts for all (Arendt, 1993 [1968]). Quoting Hannah Arendt, Braun (2019: 435) argues that ‘organized lying shields those in power’ and ‘bears an element of violence in it as it does not stop at denying unwelcome facts but goes on to destroy the dissidents themselves, the dissident views, and/or the conditions under which dissident views can emerge altogether’ (Braun, 2019: 436). Furthermore, ‘organized lying leads to delusion in that it destroys the ability to tell truth from falsehood and find a common ground for acting in concert’ (Braun, 2019: 436). This signifies a serious failure or fatal erosion of democracy (Giroux and Filipakou, 2020; Straume, 2014). Furthermore, Cooper and Aitchison (2020) warn of the dangers ahead when COVID-19 and authoritarianism co-exist: ‘The new authoritarians have an ideological preference for a strong state with reduced civil liberties. These preferences draw on “law and order” traditionalism . . . By transforming the state into a vehicle for a ruling clique, they seek to dismantle the capacity of the state’ (Cooper and Aitchison, 2020: 12) for pursuing democracy. This confirms the argument:

nothing about ordered populism serves the public interest. Instead, its anti-democratic nature makes it incapable of solving the problems that spawned its rise in the first place. Ordered populism is xenophobic, mistrustful of science and journalism, and unsympathetic to equality and gender issues. Arising out of fear and anger, ordered populism is ultimately unhealthy for Western democracies and their societies and economies. (Graves and Smith, 2020: s2)

How then would social workers position themselves to reclaim social justice and democracy?

**Positioning social work profession, reclaiming democracy during global challenges**

Marginalized people and human rights are invisible when the master narrative centers problems and fear politics as the governing tactic. When hearing a simplistic meta-narrative or disempowering master narrative, social workers should pause and critically reflect on the underlying dynamics that silence subjugated narratives and pre-empt the humane and just discussion that is crucial for democracy. This *capacity for critical thinking* has always been central to the social work profession and is especially crucial during the global challenges with COVID and racism. However, while authoritarian populism has pervasively grown around the world, we are also aware that the social work profession has faced challenges to keep the professional values of social justice and social justice-oriented practice central before and during COVID-19.

Social work scholars have expressed concerns that the social work profession is too preoccupied with professionalism and neoliberal new public management and with a narrow focus on the needs of individuals and families, while neglecting the wider social issues. They observe that, at
times, social justice values become both organizing and disorganizing principles for social work (Dominelli, 2017; Postan-Aizik et al., 2020). Others have noted that some social workers are significantly influenced by master narratives, to a point where they have absorbed some of the populist discourse demonizing marginalized ‘others’ (Park and Bhuyan, 2012).

On Liberty, J.S. Mill (2011 [1859]) underlined critical thinking as a bulwark against tyranny. Quoting Mill, social work educators Fenton and Smith (2019) warn social workers about neglecting critical thought which lets people hold on to ‘common sense’ or populist meta-narratives. Mass use of social media encourages this conformism where people uncritically follow ‘common sense ideas’ without critically questioning underlying dynamics. This is so pervasive that ‘the development of the critical thinking skills that are essential for social work practice’ (Fenton and Smith, 2019: 1) has been highlighted as imperative today, as illustrated in several studies.

Fazzi (2016) found that social work students in Italy learned more codified and standard responses after their social work program. Whittaker and Reimer (2017) found that reflecting on an ethical dilemma, social work students in the United States were motivated to comply primarily with rules and procedures. Similarly, Sheppard et al. (2018) conducted a collaborative research with six centers and six universities on ‘critical thinking’ capacities for those entering qualified social work practice fields in England and Wales and found that social work students who completed the degree requirements scored significantly lower than a UK population normative sample on assertiveness and critical thinking. There were huge variabilities where 25 percent of the sample scored substantially below the chance mean in critical thinking capacities. They note that this is ‘a serious concern’ in the social work profession, where critical thinking is considered to be ‘at the heart of practice’ (Sheppard et al., 2018: 1869). Fenton and Smith (2019: 8) also found that ‘the newest generation of social work students appear to have internalised a neoliberal ethos of individualism – recognising individual “rights” to identity while expressing punitive attitudes to the poor, unemployed and “undeserving”’.

Fenton and Smith (2019) thus suggest that

[A]ll of this has implications for the kind of learning and teaching strategies that might be employed in preparing social workers to be critical thinkers and to be comfortable in the ‘strangeness’ that might be their experience in encountering a range of views different from their own. (pp. 10–11)

We agree with them and furthermore would like to suggest expanding areas for critical thinking capacities for social workers. In addition to social workers’ critical thinking capacities around their own biases and attitudes toward the ‘strangeness’ of outgroups, we argue that it would be important for social workers to engage and critically reflect on politics and ideologies that govern a mass group of people since social workers aim to make changes in not only individuals but also systems and social environments. Giroux (2015) notes that critical thinking is an essential and central part of the informed voting and the democratic process. Promoting social workers’ critical thinking around the current challenges of COVID and racism is thus in line with the core of social work and contributes to promoting democracy.

There are two main points we invite social workers to join with us to critically reflect on and resist the current pandemic related issues. First is challenging several pervasive discourses around COVID. One of them is a meta-discourse that COVID impacts all as an equalizer. The data overwhelmingly show the uneven impact of COVID as it reflects the health inequity of marginalized populations. Numerous sources of US public health data highlight higher burdens of COVID-19 cases and deaths among ‘communities with high proportions of people of color, high poverty, crowded housing, and high levels of racialized economic segregation’ (Krieger, 2020: 1620).
Boston Consulting Group conducted research on COVID-19’s racial divide and found the disturbing fact that a disproportionate number of Blacks, Hispanics, and other people of color in the United States are infected and/or dying from COVID-19. About 85 percent of incremental COVID-19 deaths among Black people are due to the greater risk of exposure and less access to COVID-19 testing; despite making up 14 percent of the US age groups between 19–65 years, Black people account for 32 percent of all COVID-19 deaths; and COVID-19 infection rates for people of color are two to three times higher than the rates for White people (Brimmer et al., 2020).

Another pervasive discourse is that “since the outbreak of COVID-19, we will never go back to ‘normal’, as if pre-COVID was normal. Before COVID, it was not benevolently normal when economic redistributive justice was sharply divided between the wealthy and the poor and between global north and south; child poverty rate was so high; homophobia, transphobia, violence against women and gender-based violence were pervasive; Black racism, genocide of Indigenous people for generations, and surveillance of others were embedded within our legal systems; disproportionate numbers of racialized people were kept in correction systems; refugees and immigrants were too often framed as illegal within immigration systems.

In reality, it was never a desirable ‘normal’ for marginalized people before COVID and their experiences of disparity and inequity have been deeper during COVID, which will more likely continue as it is after COVID, if we do not act on making changes. Society with inequity and racism is not a desirable normal. As Brand (2020) notes, the present global challenges may be a moment for the collective test for all (including social workers) – not going back to the unequal status quo which was in many aspects ‘abnormal’.

The other main area social workers should engage in is constructing social justice narratives. Under the politics of authoritarian populism, social workers should pay attention to not only what has been talked about but also what has not been talked about – that is about social justice. Baldwin (2013) comments that a narrative approach ‘offers something unique in its concentration on the structures that shape stories and storytelling practices, as well as being able to explore the work performed by stories within and between discourses [italics added]’ (p. 3). Narrative offers a unique tool for confronting populism as it employs the popular modality of storytelling accompanied by the analytic deconstructive discernment of the public intellectual.

Changing the narrative can be a powerful form of resistance born out of critical thinking capacities. In his book Narrative Justice, Rafe McGregor (2018) applies narrative ethics to understanding crimes against humanity and terrorism and argues that narrative representations provide moral knowledge and that can be employed to evaluate and understand responsibility for inhumanity. McGregor further argues that narrative justice can be a means of opposing injustice and a means of moral improvement and that it is thus critical to cultivate narrative sensibility as an important tool for both moral improvement and political justice.

The construct of narrative justice has been actively incorporated into social work and other related fields. For example, the Dulwich Centre has focused on promoting narrative justice in their narrative therapy work and community work (see Narrative justice and human rights, Dulwich Centre, n.d.). Public intellectuals have used narrative justice to build hope amid extreme state violence and racism against Black Lives Matters such as the Narrative justice project by the Wakeman Agency (2018) and Narrative justice as the next frontier for social change by Registre (2018) as well as Anti-Asian or Anti-Immigrants or Anti-Black Violence during COVID such as Narrative and COVID-19 by the Narrative Initiative Organization (Fickes, 2020) and On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying by Dionne Brand (2020). Social work scholars Mckenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2017) underline the significance of narrative resistance as ‘a platform for tangible applications to support people’s efforts to resist harmful storyings of their lives’ (p. 189). Narrative justice proponents agree that without narrative justice we cannot achieve social justice because
people are silenced: their own experiences and stories are never allowed to speak, never fully understood to self and others, and never connected with others to form allies and solidarity for social change. Changing and constructing the narrative are critical in working toward social justice.

Unveiling frictions of pervasive normative narratives and constructing just and humane narratives during COVID, there have been numerous resistances in practice, research, and education by social work scholars and other intellectuals. On 1 July 2020, the IFSW report, *The social work response to COVID-19 – Six months on: Championing challenges in services and preparing for long-term consequences* (Truell, 2020), is such an example that highlights how social workers around the globe have taken initiatives to make a difference during the pandemic. Social workers are encouraged to construct a visionary narrative of the post-pandemic profession reflecting social environment changes through community work, policy changes that support the well-being of all and social services that reach beyond individual, illness-focused, and case management approaches. Social work peer-reviewed journals, to name a few but not limited to, *International Social Work, Journal of Human Rights and Social Work, Social Work*, and *Social Work in Heath Care* have put out calls for special issues on social work during COVID to support social work practitioners, students, and scholars. Also, *Social Work 2020 under COVID-19* (hereafter, SW2020) is a free online journal started in the United Kingdom to ‘provide an open outlet for the many issues, difficulties and creative responses related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need for sense-making around these’ because there were ‘limited immediate platforms to raise these issues, start dialogue and record experiences’ (Sen et al., 2020: 1117). Consequently, SW2020 can become a platform for grassroots social work voices during and post COVID-19. Having these professional centers as the placeholders for social workers during the pandemic is critical to build community and to appreciate common and different experiences. Mapping out the wrongs is crucial so it cannot be denied under post-truth politics. Constructing equity and justice narratives is essential so that it can help build the community, and imagination and hope can re-vision and re-write just and humane narratives for the environment where we all live.

**Conclusion**

Social work practice and education cannot be free of politics. A critical social work scholar, Stéphanie Wahab (2020) points out,

> there is no place of innocence within helping work. In fact, ‘we’ (social workers), often perpetuate and inadvertently hold up these systems of dominance and technologies of oppression through our attempts at ‘helping’. How can we not, given that most of us operate and, are dependent on the State and institutional systems born of colonisation and categorising people, even for our forms of resistance. (p. 8)

She further urges social workers ‘concerned with freedom and justice to consider our complicity in systems of oppression and domination’ (Wahab, 2020: 8). In this article, we attempted to join her invitation to look at our complicity during the two pandemics – COVID-19 and xeno or racism – and to honor recognizing complexity as fundamental to building a *practice of hope*. Trying to make social work education and practice apolitical and not critically reflecting on current governance practices and its impact on people would mean being blinded to complicit support which will then maintain the status quo of authoritarian populism. Giroux and Filipakou (2020: 2092–2093) underline ‘the task of developing a discourse of both critique and possibility’ for ‘educated hope’ as critical pedagogy in the age of authoritarianism. The aforementioned examples illustrate positioning social work in social action, research, and changes toward promoting hope amid the global pandemics of COVID and racism.
On 2 November 2020, IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW announced ‘co-building inclusive social transformation’ as the Global Agenda for a Social Work and Social Development Framework for 2020–2030 (IFSW, 2020). This would include ‘the development of new social agreements between governments and the populations they serve that facilitate universal rights, opportunities, freedom and sustainable well-being for all people nationally and globally’. As the first theme between 2020 and 2022, they announced ‘Ubuntu: Strengthening social solidarity and global connectedness’. Ubuntu, meaning ‘I am because we are’ thus highlights the significance of solidarity and social workers’ joint construction of a socially just world. Giroux and Filipakou (2020) note that authoritarianism breeds a paralyzing cynicism and deadens democratic values, educated hope, and humane connections. Quoting Angela Davis, Wahab (2020) articulates, ‘as isolated individuals we will always be powerless, we will never have the means of which to even imagine justice. But as communities we can achieve anything’ (p. 11). Ubuntu thus captures where we as social workers can take a stance during the global pandemics.

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