

Unsettling Social Work Innocence: Reading Jessie Taft at the Margins of History

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Summary: This study was an exploration of our aspiration to write a different kind of social work history, one that unsettles the usual formulations focused on drawing distinctions between valorized heroes and condemned villains; binaries that produce tales flattened of complexity. Through the reexamination of a few strands of the life and work of Jessie Taft (1882–1960), a figure both celebrated—as a feminist, “lesbian foremother,” and an architect of modern social work—and neglected in the field’s understanding of its development as a profession, we endeavored to engage in a more nuanced kind of story-making apparatus, focused on reading the traces at the margins of traditional histories. We paid attention to the silences and exclusions rather than relying on presences and assertions; we read both as imbrications rather than contradictions, resisting the will to power that renders nuance a problem. Uncritical acceptance of the benevolent founding of social work, we argue, forecloses our capacity to acknowledge its long history of perpetuating racisms, nationalisms, and imperialisms, and much more. It, more importantly, impedes our ability to struggle candidly with their formulations in the present day.

Keywords: social work history, Jessie Taft, marginal perspectives, power relations, critical historiography, eugenics

Titel: Die Unschuld Sozialer Arbeit irritieren. Eine Lektüre Jessie Tafts an den Rändern der Geschichte

Zusammenfassung: Diese Studie untersucht unser Anliegen, eine andere Form der Sozialarbeitsgeschichte zu schreiben, die gängige Darstellungen infrage stellt, welche zwischen idealisierten Held:innen und verurteilten “Schurk:innen” unterscheiden und dadurch komplexe Zusammenhänge vereinfachen. Anhand ausgewählter Aspekte aus Leben und Werk von Jessie Taft (1882–1960), einer zugleich gefeierten und in der Fachgeschichte vernachlässigten Figur, entwickeln wir einen differenzierteren Zugang zur Geschichtsschreibung. Im Mittelpunkt steht für uns das Lesen von Spuren an den Rändern traditioneller Narrative. Dabei richten wir unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf Schweigen und Auslassungen statt auf offensichtliche Aussagen. Beide verstehen wir als miteinander verflochten, nicht als Gegensätze. Wir argumentieren, dass die unreflektierte Annahme einer wohlwollenden Gründung der Sozialarbeit die Anerkennung ihrer Verstrickung in Rassismus, Nationalismus und Imperialismus erschwert und zugleich die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit diesen Kontinuitäten in der Gegenwart behindert.

Schlüsselwörter: Sozialarbeitsgeschichte, Jessie Taft, Marginalität, Randperspektiven, Machtverhältnisse, Kritische Geschichtsschreibung, Eugenik

1 Reading at the Margins of History

The historian Linda Gordon emphasized in her 1994 study of the meaning of “welfare” that the task of “uncovering” the past “requires examining not only what happened but also what did not” (Gordon 1994: 3). The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu similarly insisted that it is necessary to study “what informants don’t say, or say only by omission, in their silences,” to “wonder about these things that no one says” (Bourdieu 1993: 52). Scholars have noted such silences in U.S. social work historiography, which “has long been the legitimator of kings” (Gordon 1994: 3) dominated by a focus on a handful of figures such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond—along with their respective domains, the Settlement Movement and the Charity Organization Society—venerated as pillars of the field’s founding. Too many elements of the field’s past—especially the perspectives and deeds of the racialized and gendered Other—have been discounted (Armfield & Carlton-LaNey 2001; Carlton-LaNey 2001; Chapman & Withers 2019; Ernst 2024; Hounmenou et al. 2025). The study of the legitimated, however, constitute an insufficient history of the field. In recounting her research across the vast aporias of the colonial archive, the historian Lisa Lowe (2015) asserted that such absences and silences must be understood not as inadvertent omissions, but the result of events, perspectives, and connections which have been “actively suppressed or merely deemed insignificant” (ibid.: 5).

The study of marginalized histories is crucial, not only to give due credit to those whose ideas and labors were, given structural exclusions, often accomplished outside the mainstream of the developing field, but because marginalized histories illuminate the significance and meaning of events and ideas that have long been centered. The examination of the margins of the text, to borrow Jacques Derrida’s (1967, 1982) terminology, is necessary, in other words, to the assessment of even the victors of history and that which has come to count as “self-evident, universal necessity” (Foucault 1991: 76) through the accepted familiarities of their story.

Informed by these notions, we examined the legacy of the life and work of Jessie Taft (1882–1960), a prominent force in the development of the social work profession in early 20th century United States. Taft serves as a thought-provoking exemplar for the study of the complex interplay between presence and absence, inclusion and marginalization for a handful of reasons. She is undoubtedly a “canonical” (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2009: 328) figure whose work shaped social work as we know it today. The Functional Movement, which she co-founded with life-long professional and domestic partner Virginia Robinson, introduced a short-term, present-focused treatment model that rejected the Freudian determinism dominant in the era to establish a “new psychological foundation for all casework” (Lubove 1980: p. 79) which remains intact today. Yet few social workers today are likely to have more than a passing familiarity with Taft’s work or her impact on the field. Taft’s biographical reckonings, moreover, are vitiated by both glaring admission and less obvious elisions. Uniformly left out from nearly all biographical accounts, for example, is the inconvenient fact that Taft (along with Robinson) was a eugenics fieldworker trained and employed by the Eugenics Records Office (ERO), the Carnegie-funded research center established in 1910 by the biologist and eugenicist Charles Davenport.

Scholars have urged that Taft’s near forgotten “double legacy as a pioneer of feminist pragmatism and an innovative social work professional” (Reuland 2015: 1) as well as an

occluded “‘lesbian’ [foremother]” (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2009) should occupy a more prominent position in the history of the field’s development. Sociologist Mary Jo Deegan (1986) argued that Taft was “a brilliant social theorist who established a theory of clinical sociology based on the work of G.H. Mead and Otto Rank” (ibid.: 42) and an “insightful feminist” (ibid.: 34) whose “work on the female self, the feminist movement, functional therapy, and the use of time in a client relationship are particularly promising areas to study” (ibid.: 42). Taft was “an outstanding example” (ibid.: 31) of an early woman sociologist, whose contributions have been too long discounted. Fredriksen-Goldsen and colleagues (2009), moreover, identify Taft as one of “social work’s ‘lesbian’ foremothers” (ibid.: 325) whose contributions should be studied as part of the necessary recovery of erased queer histories in the field’s developmental history.

We agree fully that Taft’s impact on the field is a topic worthy of more attention. If historical analysis is to be undertaken to better inform the current state of the field, however, the task at hand, in our view, was not simply a rediscovery of a prominent social work leader who has faded from disciplinary history or the recovery of an under-sung, feminist, and “lesbian” heroine whose deeds are insufficiently celebrated. Instead, our aim in this exercise in working through some of the thorny problematics of history-construction was a more nuanced history that traced complexities layered in Taft’s work and the ideas and ideals that undergirded that work. To this end, we first reassess Taft’s established status as a progressive stalwart (Reisch & Andrews 2014) through the examination of her engagement with the eugenics movement.

Secondly, we engaged in a closer scrutiny of Taft’s legacy as an iconic early feminist (Rosenberg 1982; Seigfried 1996; Livingston 2013). Feminist scholars acknowledge social work’s historically complicated relationship to race and gender status quo formations (e.g., Dominelli 2002; Gringeri et al. 2010; Park et al. 2017; BlackDeer, 2023). Yet the tendency to flatten this history in service of championing the oft under-appreciated deeds of women is still commonplace. Feminist social work scholar Lena Dominelli’s (1997) account is an apt example: “The ‘founding mothers’ views of social work as a people-centered, service-oriented activity became marginalised when counter ideas espoused by men who became leading architects of modern social work were adopted as policy” (ibid.: 44). That women have a particular capacity for goodness—innately *qua* their gender *or* earned through lived experience of gender oppression—is a claim that functions to shore up gender essentialism. As feminist philosopher Sophie Lewis (2025) demurred: “Why would women not be horrible; aren’t they part of history?” (ibid.: 7).

Finally, we re-read Taft’s writings on the Functional School, “one of the most influential approaches to social work practice” in its day, and whose many “values, ideas, and concepts” are today “taken for granted as ‘givens’ within social work in North America and Europe” (Furman 2002: 7; see also Lloyd 2013; Reamer 2024). Functionalist social work advocated for a focus “on the problem that the client presented,” and positioned the social worker as a tool of aid” who functions as “an agent on behalf of an empowered client” (Lloyd 2013: 1). This focus can be identified as early formulations of some of social work’s most cherished contemporary commitments, such as theories of person-in-environment (Kondrat 2013), and the strengths perspective (Furman 2002). Yet, to take Functionalism’s benevolence at face value obscures the complicated operations of power embedded within its theories and practices, and by extension, within the theories and practice of contemporary social work itself.

The history of U.S. social work is fraught with foundational figures—reformers, practitioners, and academics—whose objectionable politics and questionable sciences hampered neither their enjoyment of prominent careers nor their subsequent enshrinement as venerable architects of the field (Park & Reisch 2026). In today’s social work, in which historical analysis of its origins and motivations are relegated to the margins, the troubling beliefs and deeds of those founders have been all but forgotten. We endeavored to write a more complex story: What would re-reading Taft look like if the content of the margins—“the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, [and] strategies” (Foucault 1991: 76) at play—were taken as imbrications that provide nuance, rather than contradictions to be occluded?

Primary sources for our analysis included materials from archives such as the Eugenics Records Office and the Charles B. Davenport Papers at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. We examined the Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW), which began in 1874 as the Conference of Public Charities and became in 1880 the National Conference of Charities and Correction (NCCC), then was again renamed the NCSW in 1917. We reviewed the contents of three social work journals influential in the era: *Social Service Review* (1927~) established by Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge, two stalwarts of the Settlement Movement (Diner, 1977, p.2); *The Family* (1920~), a Charity Organization Society (COS) journal established with Mary Richmond at the helm and continues today as *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*; and *The Survey* (1897–1952), a consolidation of several COS and Settlement publications edited by prominent social workers of the era, which was less scholarly, but much more widely-read than *The Family* or *Social Service Review*. An expansive selection of secondary sources was also reviewed.

2 The Eugenical Impulse

U.S. social work’s evolution from its philanthropic charity roots to a profession based on scientific casework and social reform occurred in the late 19th century era of scientific optimism, in which emerging social science fields deemed themselves capable of not only describing the world but transforming it for the better. This tumultuous era marked by massive social, economic, and demographic upheavals saw the rise of professions and professionals “devoted to the study and care of the insane, feeble-minded, epileptic, criminal, and pauper” (Haller 1963: 167). By the century’s end, such fields of expertise dedicated to generating new technologies and ideologies for understanding, categorizing, and managing human beings and their environments, became established as academic disciplines and professions (Bernard 1930; Cravens 1985).

A common preoccupation of the era’s social scientists, including those constructing the field of social work, was the role of heredity in the transmission of so-called physical and mental defect, dependency, and delinquency (Leonard 2011). The parameters and mechanisms of heredity were “still in great flux at the end of the 19th century” (Dunbar 2007: 30), and a wide range of theories were at play (e.g., Lamarckism, neo-Lamarckism, Social Darwinism, Weismannism, as well as theories of social, rather than biological, heredity) (Kelsey 1909; Stocking, 1962; Dunbar 2007; Raymer, 2018). For all its environmental emphasis and

its commitments to benevolence, the developing field of social work was not exempt from the influence of hereditarian thought. The “vogue of hereditarianism was too broad, its emotional relevance too visceral” (Rosenberg 1974: 229) and its logics too deeply embedded in the zeitgeist to be underestimated even in the work of those defined by a “strongly environmental emphasis” (ibid.: 205).

Arguably the most influential type of hereditarian ideology was eugenics, a term coined in 1883 by the British statistician Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, who founded the field of biometrics and created now commonplace statistical procedures such as correlation and regression analysis (Gillham 2001). Eugenics was embraced by prominent intellectuals and politicians across Europe and the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹ If the popularization of its arsenal of statistical inquiry and psychometric testing (Dixon-Román 2020) provided eugenics “scientific” legitimation, it was institutions such as social work that afforded it moral authority and real-world application. In fact, eugenics and social work were importantly co-constitutive (Chatterjee 2025; Park & Reisch forthcoming). Funding for the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), the center of eugenics research in the U.S., was enabled by one-time settlement worker Mary Harriman Rumsey, the daughter of wealthy philanthropists, who, like so many others of her generation, embraced eugenics as a new and powerful method for social reform (Kevles 1985). Social work supporters of eugenics included Homer Folks, a pioneer in child welfare and who served twice as the chair of the NCSW (National Association of Social Workers 2025) and Elmer Southard, one of the founders of psychiatric social work, now called clinical social work. Even Mary Richmond and Jane Addams have been re-examined in new light for their eugenical leanings (Kennedy 2008; LaPan & Platt 2005).

From 1910 to 1924, the ERO trained 258 field workers, primarily white middle-class women, educated in the natural sciences at elite women’s universities, but systematically excluded from professional scientific careers. They were dispatched to hospitals, schools, prisons, asylums, and private homes across the country to conduct invasive community-based investigations, collecting and classifying data on the “physical, mental, and social traits” of individuals, families, and communities (Bix 1997: 626). Field workers, described by LaPan and Platt (2005) as “a new kind of social worker” (ibid.: 143), were central to Davenport’s primary ambition: the creation of a vast archive of hereditary data, “a sort of inventory of the blood of the community” (Kevles 1985: 55), which would provide evidentiary substrate for policies for carceral enclosures and compulsory sterilization. A 1911 article in *The Survey* declared the establishment of the ERO “of vital import to all interested in social welfare” (Eaton: 352), and averred that the collaboration between “social workers and biologists,” could stymie the “evil results of given unfit marriages” (ibid.: 352) and, through the accumulation of “knowledge...gained and rightfully used” (ibid.: 352 f.), insure “at the very least, a birthright of health and normality” (ibid.: 354).

Two ERO field workers who would go on to great prominence in social work were Jessie Taft and Virginia P. Robinson, members of the second cohort (1912) of trainees (Eugenics Record Office 1916a). Both Robinson and Taft long-maintained contact with the ERO, submitting regular missives to the ERO’s “Personals” column, which documented the trajectories of former trainees (Eugenics Record Office 1916a, 1916b, 1917a, 1917b, 1918, 1921). The 1917 *Eugenical News* reported that five years after her ERO training, Robinson

1 Eugenics’ influence is enduring. In 2022, forced sterilization, whose greatest impact continues to be upon Black disabled women, remained legal in 31 states and the District of Columbia (cf. National Women’s Law Center 2022).

was “engaged in study of groups of cases in penal institutions” (Eugenics Record Office 1917b: 54) at the Laboratory of Social Hygiene, a research institute affiliated with the New York State Reformatory for Women (NYSRW). Taft, on leave from her directorship of the Mental Hygiene Committee of New York’s State Charities Aid Association (SCAA), was also at the Laboratory, working “under Dr. Mabel Fernald, testing women at the Magdalen home, New York City” (Eugenics Record Office 1917a).

Neither seemed to have ever reckoned with, even less publicly disavowed, their years of active participation in eugenics and their contribution to a movement that rationalized decades of racial segregation, forced sterilization, immigration discrimination, and the pathologization of disability and difference. Taft asserted at the 1918 NCSW that while sterilization was “logically the solution for the problem of prevention of propagation of the mentally unfit” (ibid.: 545), until “the general level of enlightenment on social problems is materially raised” enough for this to be recognized, segregation of the unfit from the general population must remain the “practical solution” (ibid.: 545). While Robinson (1930) critiqued the eugenic movement as methodologically “superficial and unscientific” (ibid.: 21), she held still in 1930 that eugenics had made a “contribution towards a social program for the treatment and control of the burden of feeble mindedness” (ibid.: 21). In her 1962 biography of Taft, the couple’s sojourn as ERO field workers appeared only as a point of nostalgia.

“Nothing remains in my memory from the classes; but field trips through the sandy paths of the New Jersey pine woods in intense heat, in search of ‘Pineys’ to interview, are unforgettable. These trips and the charts of family histories we constructed from them were valuable preparation for the field trips in Rockland and Dutchess Counties (New York) in the following year, as eugenics fieldworkers from the Laboratory of Social Hygiene—which Jessie Taft describes amusingly in her paper, ‘The Relation of Mental Hygiene to Social Work,’ in 1926” (Robinson 1962: 34).

3 Complicating Feminisms

The feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century developed its own brands of eugenical theory, wherein women’s rights were figured as social purity causes essential to the betterment of the human race (Ziegler 2008). The entanglement of eugenics and feminism in the U.S. has commonly been investigated through histories of the birth control movement (e.g., Gordon 2002; Davis 2003), most famously exemplified in the work of prominent feminist and founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger (1922). The early field of social work, on the other hand, driven as it was to improve its stature among the rapidly evolving social and psychological sciences, kept a professional distance from more overt forms of feminism and the birth control movement alike (Gordon 2002). This does not, however, mean that social work, eugenics, and early feminisms did not have other kinds of entanglements. An interesting example of one such imbrication can be found in *The Woman Movement from the Point of View of Social Consciousness*, Taft’s PhD dissertation (published in 1916), described by Robinson (1962) as Taft’s “effort to establish for herself her worth as a woman in the world of men” (ibid.: 37).

In it, Taft (1916) situated the women’s movement as an expression of “the protest of the age against the impossible situation in which humanity finds itself today” (ibid.: x), and, along with the labor movement, considered it a part of a broader response to the social dislocations

produced by industrialization. Critiquing what she considered the futility of more militant strands of the women's movement, she argued that "to clamor for rights, to inveigh against men as the oppressors of the sex, is not only bad taste but beside the mark" (ibid.: 52). The "real goal" (ibid.: 56) of social movements was, Taft insisted, the creation of a "a society which no longer leaves the social forms and relationships whereby human impulses are expressed to chance or physical force but subjects them to rational control" (ibid.: 56). In so doing, Taft undercut her own structural critiques of industrialization as well as the women's movement's demand for rights or emancipation, reframing them instead as more generalized problems of human advancement to be resolved through science.

This is not to suggest that Taft was unaware of or indifferent to the social and economic strictures that constrained the lives of women. She critiqued restrictions imposed on women by normative notions of domesticity and sexual and marital relations, as well as the deplorable working conditions many women endured. She argued that a rise of a "culture of individualism" (ibid.: 50) was a byproduct of mass industrialization and counterposed this troubling modern phenomenon against what she saw as the natural tendency of women for sociality. We do not quibble with the characterization of Taft as a pragmatic feminist (Deegan 1986), nor the idea that her description of unmarried women "turning to other women, building up with them a real home, finding in them the sympathy and understanding, the bond of similar standards and values, as well as the same aesthetic and intellectual interests, that are often difficult of realization in a husband" (Taft 1916: 11) could be said to be a theory of a kind of covert "lesbian" sociality. What we draw attention to here is the tangle of her logic, wherein a trenchant critique of the conditions that constricted women's lives coexisted alongside a clear dismissal of collective struggle against those conditions as marginal "militancy."

In Taft's conclusion that the "fundamental purpose of the woman movement, therefore, as of any great social movement, is bound to be the producing of social scientists" (ibid.: 57), moreover, rationality and science are elevated to a plane of neutrality, displacing political contestation with expert knowledge. In her unmitigated faith in the ability of science—in "theories which promise salvation" (ibid.: 57), including eugenics—to adjust human behavior through social control, her understanding of the constrictions upon women's choices are upended. Taft's feminism can be understood, in other words, as a project of professional formation, a vision for social reform rooted in contemporary taxonomies of social and racial hierarchies congruent with the maintenance and furtherance of "western civilization" (ibid.: 52). Indeed, throughout her dissertation, Taft marked eugenics as a viable mechanism for ensuring western civilizational well-being (ibid.: 6, 9, 10, 49).

Upon completing her PhD in 1913, Taft began work as Assistant Superintendent of the NYSRW in Bedford, New York, under its eugenicist superintendent Katherine Bement Davis. Taft's acceptance of this role "without rebellion," due to her faith in "Miss Davis' belief in the institution" (Robinson 1962: 41), is another illustration of the complexity of Taft's feminist ideals. At "Bedford," Taft soon "schooled herself to put handcuffs on a girl who 'smashed out' and to accompany her and the guard to the disciplinary building and solitary confinement" (ibid.: 41). Taft's compliance to the dictates of this carceral institution stands in stark relief against the girl's rebellion against it. Solitary confinement, where Taft visited "the girl daily and help[ed] her work out some of the problems that had led to her behavior," is naturalized as a space in which helping could occur. The need for both imprisonment and the "help" provided, are located in the girl's own "problems" and bad "behavior" (ibid.: 41). The reality

of Bedford as a penal institution, and Taft's function as a jailer operationalizing its disciplinary mechanisms are occluded from view.

Robinson's account of a letter Taft received in 1935 from a "girl" who had been imprisoned at Bedford for "masquerading as a boy" (ibid.: 42) in 1915, offers another example. The letter described Taft as a person who had kindly "befriended" (ibid.) the still institutionalized writer who, decades later, sought her guidance: "having some idea of me you would know just what a struggle I have ahead of me, and I thought your letters would be of a very great help with advice" (ibid.: 43). Although Robinson did not preserve a copy of Taft's reply, she noted that Taft retained a memory, "vivid and filled with compassion," of this "powerful girl," whose "struggle to survive in Bedford kept her in the disciplinary building in solitary confinement almost constantly" (ibid.). The ongoing struggles noted by the writer—"up till now I've not lived either a normal life or one within the law" (ibid.)—and the writer's sense that Taft "probably knew me better than I knew myself" (ibid.), we conjecture, is an illustration of the interiorization of disciplinary power and cis-gender normalization.

We, therefore, put Taft's "compassion" under scrutiny. It is eminently possible that she felt compassionate towards this apparently gender non-conforming "girl" known by the name "Jack." Taft was, however, an executive member of the institution that kept Jack in solitary confinement and was a functionary who "could maintain order during Sunday services in a crowded auditorium full of restless occupants by the sheer force of her eyes upon them" (ibid.: 41 f.). Keeping in mind the Foucauldian (1977) notions of the panopticon, an institutional surveillance that works to forestall resistance through the internalization of self-regulation, accepting Taft's compassion at face value seems an untenable discounting of the play of power.

Underscoring the arc of Taft's career with admiration, social theorist John Reuland (2015) recounted that in the spring of 1913 Taft was "soaking up the wisdom and praise of her advisor, the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead; by the end of the summer, she could handcuff a recalcitrant inmate with ease" (ibid.: 1). The temptation to advance an unmitigated resuscitation of Taft's work as a woman lost to history in a male-dominated field, or to attempt to wrest Taft's feminism from its carceral entanglements in order to preserve not only her progressive legacy but to claim her as a champion of "the woman question" (Taft 1916: 12) is understandable. We move, instead, to complicate the innocence of historical recovery, and assert that carceral violence is embedded in both Taft's legacy as "a pioneer of feminist pragmatism" and as an "innovative social work professional" (Reuland 2015: 1).

4 Examining the Functional School

Social work in the U.S. underwent a marked turn towards the psychological in the late 1920 s, a pivot that eventually coalesced into the set of practices and philosophies now known as clinical social work (Dunlap 2017). Taft's thinking followed suit, shifting from earlier investments in the possibilities of social control through environmental and correctional adjustment to a decidedly psychological approach to social work that would have a lasting, if under-recognized, impact on the field. Social works' growing embrace of psychological frameworks in the early 20th century manifested in two schools of thought: the Functional and

the Diagnostic, both invested in developing theoretical and institutional scaffoldings to allow social workers to do psychotherapy as an integral part of their profession. The psychoanalytically oriented Diagnostic School found its principal institutional homes at the New York School, now Columbia University's School of Social Work, and at Smith College's School for Social Work. *Mental Hygiene and Social Work*, published in 1929 by Porter R. Lee and Marion E. Kenworthy, two New York School faculty, was the first social work text to be explicitly grounded in Freudian principles (Dore 1990). The Functional School, helmed by Virginia Robinson and Jessie Taft was centered at the University of Pennsylvania. Its theoretical commitments are articulated in Robinson's *A Changing Psychology in Social Case Work* (1930), and Taft's *The Dynamics of Therapy in a Controlled Relationship* (1933).

The gulf between the two schools' approaches to social work were pronounced.² The Freudian Diagnostic School emphasized the unrelenting and unconscious influence of past experience on personality formation, centering the analysis of pathology and its treatment. The Functional School drew inspiration from Otto Rank, who veered from Freudianism towards Enlightenment humanism to foreground the relational process between the therapist and client predicated on the functioning of free will and human agency in both.³ The Diagnosticians advocated long-term, insight-oriented analysis of the psychic interior; Functionalists promoted short-term practice attentive to the client's present psychological and environmental conditions (Dunlap 2017).

Although both schools played important roles in social work's professional trajectory, Taft and Robinson, and the Functional School they developed, are credited as architects of the educational basis and professionalization of modern clinical social work. Indeed, the difference between Diagnostic School's use of the terms "treatment," and the Functional School's use of the term "helping" (Popple 2018: 215) is a defining nuance for today's social work identity. Yet, to simply accept the Functional School's "helping" as a more benevolent formulation than the Diagnostic School's "treatment" obscures the complicated operations of power embedded within Functionalism's theories and practices, and thus within modern social work itself.

In 1933, Taft explained that her understanding of therapy had shifted, "from the notion of a reform of the "other" through superior knowledge of life and psychology, a concept closely allied to that of scientific control," to an "acceptance of therapy" as only possible when it is "divorced from all hint of control, unless it be of the therapist's control of himself in the therapeutic situation" (ibid.: v). Taft's (1933) rejection of the idea of therapeutic control, or perhaps more accurately, her "acceptance" (ibid.: v) of the impossibility of control, was a departure from the scientific commitments that marked her earlier years. "No one," Taft insisted, "is going to experience change" because a therapist believed it was "good for society, good for his family and friends or even good for himself" (ibid.: 4). In Rankian fashion, change could come only from the free will of the client himself.

Taft's (1933) analysis was centered on her work with two young patient named Helen and John. Helen, charged with tearing her clothes, books, and house curtains, was brought to Taft for therapy by her father who insisted that Helen should "act as if she was afraid when she ought to. It ain't natural for a seven year old girl to look the principal in the eye and tell him she

2 Dinner attendees at a late 1930 s social work conference were reportedly asked, "Which side of the room do you want to sit on, the diagnostic or the functional?" (Popple 2018: 253)

3 Rank developed these ideas in *Will Therapy* (1929, 1931) and *Truth and Reality* (1929), translated into English in 1936 by Taft, his disciple and one-time analysand.

won't sit on the bench" (ibid.: 30). In Taft's documentation of 16 clinical hours spent with Helen, Taft highlighted her new definition of therapy, wherein the therapist's core task was to allow neither the patient's nor the clinician's will to succeed in "conquering" (ibid.: 100) the other. Taft illustrated her rejection of the usual model of therapeutic control through an admitted failure on her part, an instance in which she succumbed to the "traditional morality and pedagogical responsibility for the young" to become "caught in the net of content to the extent of trying to teach her something about the folly of tearing one's own clothes" (ibid.: 101). In a show of self-reflexivity, Taft deemed Helen's "resentment" of Taft "taking advantage of her to preach" to be eminently "justifiable" (ibid.: 102).

All the while asserting that "therapy in the sense of socially desirable behavior can never be the goal of this type of analytic relationship" (ibid.: 109), Taft nevertheless recounted that reports from the institution to which Helen went for three weeks immediately following their work "indicate no behavior problem" (ibid.: 109). Notwithstanding Taft's claim to the contrary, in other words, the enduring metric for evaluating the efficacy of therapy was Helen's reformed—non-problematic and socially desirable—behavior in the ongoing grips of institutional control. However sincerely held, Taft's (1933) insistence that "even the 'cure'" must be left "to the will of the patient" (ibid.: 108), functioned to obscure the real power differential between the two across the material scales of age, class, education, and the demarcation of the normal and the deviant.

In Taft's work with John, a seven-year-old boy with "nothing but the fear and uncertainty of a new foster home" (ibid.: 115) and a desperate wish to "go back to his mother" (ibid.: 128), the dynamic of power in treatment is also palpable. Taft held crucial material control over the boy as a worker "partially responsible" (ibid.: 115) for the determination of his foster placement. While acknowledging that her role as a placement officer ran "the risk of being handicapped in carrying through the therapeutic relationship" (ibid.: 128), Taft nevertheless claimed that control could be kept at bay. Her astonishing claim that this fearful boy in foster care could opt out of the therapeutic relationship—that "he was free to stop if he so desired" (ibid.: 131)—as well as her admission that despite a dozen hours spent in therapy with her, John "never knew clearly" (ibid.: 131) that she held the power to determine his fate, belie Taft's claim that the clinical encounter was innocent of control.

The Functional School's emphasis on therapy "divorced from all hint of control" (Taft 1933: v), is enticing. As laudable as the stance of neutrality may sound to a modern clinical social worker intent on the co-construction of a therapeutic encounter and responsibly analyzing power and justice in the clinical relationship, we contest the idea that the will to resist power can be a sufficient bulwark against its operations. The shroud of neutrality functions, in our view, to obscure the material operations of clinical surveillance and discipline.

5 History as Palimpsest

This study was an exploration of our aspiration to write a different kind of social work history. The purpose of our (re)examination of a few strands of the life and work of Jessie Taft, a figure both celebrated *and* neglected in the field's understanding of its development as a profession, was neither to refute the acclaim rendered to her as a pioneering figure, nor to aid

in the resurrection of her as a forgotten feminist and progressive icon. We aimed, instead, to dislodge the customary distinctions drawn of heroes and villains, whose usual positioning in valorization or condemnation generate histories flattened of complexity. Such familiar story structures, in our view, are founded upon an epistemology predicated on the occlusion of the operations of power. We endeavored instead to study the traces at the margins of traditional histories, paying attention to the silences and exclusions rather than relying on presences and assertions and reading both as imbrications rather than contradictions. We worked from the conviction that the pertinent question may not be whether Taft and her work can be claimed as feminist or progressive but the question of what labeling her work as such might do. What kinds of dynamics of power become hidden from view in the unarticulated encounters?

In March of 2025, the White House issued Executive Order 14253, entitled “Restoring truth and sanity to American history,” which declared that, in the past decade, the nation had “witnessed a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation’s history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth” (Trump 2025). The erasure of “divisive or partisan narratives” (Halligan et al. 2025: 1) produced by a “revisionist movement” (Trump 2025) in historiography, have already begun to take place throughout the nation. Clearly, as historian Peter Novick’s (1988) asserted, “myths are not only concerned with origins; they function in the present” (ibid.: 4).

The present functioning of founding myths is relevant not only to the history of the nation but of social work. Historian Michael Ignatieff’s (1998) observation that all nations “depend on forgetting; On forging myths of unity and identity that allow a society to forget its founding crimes, its hidden injuries and divisions, its unhealed wounds” (ibid.: 166), is aptly applicable to U.S. social work, whose amour propre as a protector of the wretched and the vulnerable, also requires the forging of benevolent myths of its founding. Uncritical acceptance of the benevolent myths of the field’s past is an active choice on our parts to render its long resume of perpetuating racism, sexism, gender binarism, heteronormativity, nationalisms, imperialism, as matters to be “actively suppressed or merely deemed insignificant” (Lowe 2015: 5). It is a choice that forecloses our ability to struggle candidly with ongoing conflicts about power and identity that have resurfaced with force in the present day. Resisting the will to power that renders nuance and contradiction a problem to eradicate requires us, as Lowe urged, “to imagine a much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now” (ibid.: 208).

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