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Against Difference and Diversity in Social Work - The Case of Human Rights

“It is necessary to examine, in a detailed way, the contemporary theory of Evil, the ideology of human rights, the concept of democracy. It is necessary to show that nothing there leads in the direction of the real emancipation of humanity. It is necessary to reconstruct rights, in everyday life as in politics, of Truth and of the Good. Our ability to once again have real ideas and real projects depends on it.” (Alain Badiou, Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil)

This paper argues that the politics of the “right to difference” and diversity in social work is a malign tendency that is symptomatic of the malaise of postmodernism and other fashionable trends in human rights discourse. It is suggested that if the bed-rock of present day social work ethics rests on the normative concept of human rights as worked through postmodern preoccupations with difference and diversity, then, this is a morally bankrupt perspective. The fixation of the “right to difference” in social work and the associated postmodern valorization of fragmentation run parallel with neoliberalism with its celebration of difference and diversity. A case example is offered as a manifestation of these articulations. The paper offers a limber set of conceptual devices for rethinking social work ethics on difference and diversity through a reading of the writings of the French political theorist Alain Badiou. His subtractive ontology of truth is presented as an essentialist alternative to the relativist discourses of difference and diversity. It is argued that if social work is to recover a progressive politics that are relevant and attuned to front-line practice, we must reinstall the concepts of sameness and equality against those of difference and diversity. Therefore, social work should be “indifferent to differences” by transcending the politics of difference.