

Beyond the Rank and File Movement: Mary van Kleeck and Social Work Radicalism in the Great Depression, 1931–1942

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In this article we critically examine the radical views and actions of Mary van Kleeck during the Great Depression. As the Director of Industrial Studies for the Russell Sage Foundation, van Kleeck was arguably the most prominent radical woman affiliated with social work during the Great Depression; however, current scholarship has limited her contributions to social work's radical minded rank and file movement. In this study, we redress this situation through an analysis of her work both within and without the rank and file movement. We pay special attention to her efforts to promote social planning, organized labor, and advanced technology as ways to resolve the Great Depression, and we identify how her views were distilled from social work's founding knowledge base within modern social science. We conclude by revealing both positive and negative implications of her work for contemporary social workers struggling to address various social issues associated with economic globalization, advanced technology, and America's declining commitment to the welfare state.

Introduction

At the 1934 National Conference of Social Work (NCSW) meeting in Kansas City, Mary van Kleeck, Director of Industrial Studies at the Russell Sage Foundation, delivered three papers that encouraged social workers to oppose the New Deal, align

themselves with organized labor, and to promote the principles of social and economic planning (van Kleeck, 1934a, 1934b, 1934c). Delivered during an intensely anxious period in American history when radical alternatives to capitalism, including socialism and communism, were considered serious and relevant solutions to the depression, van Kleeck's presentations served to galvanize a budding form of social work radicalism known as the rank and file movement (Fisher, 1936, 1980; Leighninger, 1987; Spano, 1982). Recognized by most historians of social work and social welfare as the most significant radical movement in social work history, rank and file social workers such as van Kleeck, Harry Lurie (Director, Bureau of Jewish Social Research, New York City), Gordon Hamilton (Professor, New York School of Social Work), Eduard Lindeman (Professor, New York School of Social Work), Ewan Clague (Director of Research, Community Council, Philadelphia), Bertha Reynolds (Assistant Director of Social Work, Smith College), and Jacob Fisher (Editor, *Social Work Today*) helped develop social work's first and most powerful unions in its history and forced the profession to examine its relationship with government, organized labor, and its own client base (Ehrenreich, 1985; Fisher, 1980; Gordon, 1994; Leighninger, 1987; Spano, 1982; Walkowitz, 1999). Indeed, the rank and file movement in social work managed to challenge the establishment sanctioned American Association of Social Workers (AASW) in both size and power through the early 1940s (Gordon, 1994; Walkowitz, 1999).

Although van Kleeck deserves the credit bestowed upon her by historians of social work for stimulating the rank and file movement, her experience and influence as a social work radical in the 1930s extends far beyond this movement and has yet to receive sufficient attention by historians of social work. For instance, van Kleeck directed numerous studies for the Russell Sage Foundation during the 1930s that produced wide-spread public debate on unemployment, crime, and the coal industry (van Kleeck, 1931, 1934d). In addition, she helped draft the Frazier-Lundeen Bill; a left-wing inspired measure that provided more generous and comprehensive coverage than the Social Security Act (Gordon, 1994; Walkowitz, 1999) and published numerous articles in a multitude of well-regarded liberal and radical journals such as the *Nation*, *Common Sense*, and the *New Republic*. In part-

nership with the International Industrial Relations Institute (IRI), she developed a radical social analysis that blended elements of Soviet Communism and the left-wing of American technocracy into an alternative social system called social-economic planning. Indeed, by the late 1930s she was recognized by individuals inside and outside social work as a leading figure in both the social work and American left (Alchon, 1991; Gordon, 1994; Walkowitz, 1999).

As the most prominent left-wing radical in social work during the Great Depression, a study of van Kleeck sheds light upon social work then and now. It provides important knowledge about how and why radicalism forms in social work and the historical antecedents that may give rise to its formation. It reminds us that social work did not unanimously support the New Deal and that the differences expressed by practitioners, educators, and activists reflected contrasting interpretations of social work's core mission and knowledge base. It also illuminates the power of women in general and van Kleeck in particular in both social work and society in an era often noted by historians for the declining power of the progressive era feminist coalition (Buhle, 1998; Cott, 1989; Gordon, 1994; Muncy, 1991; Ware, 1981). We believe an understanding of Mary van Kleeck's views and activities in the 1930s provides valuable insights for contemporary social workers struggling to understand their place within a global economy characterized by rapid technological change.

In this article we examine the views and activities of Mary van Kleeck within the context of the three themes that most characterized her work during the Great Depression: the need for social work and society to advance the goals of social planning, organized labor, and modern technology. Everything van Kleeck did and said during the 1930s was related to one or more of these themes and her work cannot be properly understood in any other context. Drawing extensively upon her private papers held in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College and her published writings, we provide a critical history of van Kleeck that recognizes both her strengths and limitations. Our focus is upon her views and activities that represent her experience both inside and outside the general boundaries of professional social work; though we pay considerable attention to her experiences outside the traditional realm of social work to illuminate the

diverse ways van Kleeck practiced and represented radicalism in social work. We conclude by providing contemporary social workers with lessons designed to inform future initiatives in practice and research.

The World Social Economic Congress,
Amsterdam, Holland, August, 1931

Mary van Kleeck's depression era radicalism took root at the International Industrial Relation Institute's (IRI) second tri-annual World Social Economic Congress (WSEC) held in Amsterdam, Holland in 1931. Founded in 1925 by an international coalition of mostly women personnel workers, social workers, reformers, and social scientists; the IRI was a private, non-sectarian, research and advocacy institute formed to address an intensifying international debate, stimulated by observers and employees of industry, that the post-World War I developments in corporate welfare programs, scientific management techniques, advanced technology, open-shop campaigns, and social and political conservatism threatened to empower employers to an extent that jeopardized worker security, standards of living, and government protection of free speech (Alchon, 1985, 1991; Chambers, 1963; Dumenil, 1995; Hawley, 1979). A variation of the technocratic wing of American progressivism, the IRI did not reject developments in technology or scientific management that were contributing to economic growth, but desired to harness their power as a means to reduce economic and political *inequality*, improve the *conditions* of labor, and guarantee employment *security*. IRI members believed that their independent status, scientific outlook, and international composition provided a basis where creative yet practical solutions could be developed, placed under intense scientific scrutiny, and publicized through publications and international conferences (Aiken, 1977; Alchon, 1991, 1998; McClymer, 1980).

Mary van Kleeck was elected the IRI's Associate Director at its founding meeting in 1925. Van Kleeck was attracted to the IRI because it both reflected her views and provided an opportunity to explore those views outside the confines of conventional institutions. Van Kleeck had served as the Director of Industrial

Studies at the Russell Sage Foundation since its founding in 1908. In this position she established herself as a leader among the social and political reform set in New York City for her well documented and publicized investigations that exposed the dangerous work conditions and low pay of female laborers employed in New York City's industrial trades (van Kleeck, 1913a, 1914b, 1914). Despite her early popularity and success within the mainstream of the mostly male held field of social science research, van Kleeck's views drifted leftward throughout the war and postwar period, and it became increasingly difficult for her to give full expression to these views within the constraints of the modest liberal and reformist halls of the Sage Foundation (Aiken, 1977; Alchon, 1991, 1998; Glenn, Brandt, and Andrews, 1947).

By the mid 1920s van Kleeck's scientific investigations of female labor conditions in the industrial trades of New York City, combined with a brief stint as director of the Women's Branch of the Industrial Service Sector of the Army's Ordnance Department during World War I and involvement in Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover's Committee on Business Cycles and Unemployment, convinced her that social justice for the lower classes in general and women in particular was possible only if the objectives of business were 'social' and not 'individualistic' (Alchon, 1991; Ball, 1991; van Kleeck, 1913a, 1913b, 1914, 1924). By "social" van Kleeck meant government sponsored social planning that relied on production models for "use" and not "profit." Only under such a model, van Kleeck and other leading technocratic progressives such as economists Thorstein Veblen and Simon Patten believed, could the benefits of advanced science and technology be organized to promote progressive goals such as higher standards of living for all individuals, safe workplaces, and social and political equality (Alchon, 1985, 1991; Lerner, 1948; Patten, 1907; van Kleeck, 1924). What separated technocratic progressives from more traditional Marxists and socialists was their strong belief in science and that expert social engineers were required to lead the economy (Aiken, 1977; Alchon, 1985; Lasch, 1965; Lerner, 1948). That is, technocratic progressives shared the progressives faith in science, liberalism, education, and politics and Marxists and socialists beliefs in social and economic planning; however, they parted ways with each through their strict belief that expert

driven social planning and modern technology could overcome social questions regarding class conflict, political corruption, and entrenched inequality.¹ To address the anti-democratic implications entailed in a system directed by expert scientists and advanced technology, many technocratic progressives, including van Kleeck, suggested that labor needed to 'manage' industry and that the social engineers would work *cooperatively* with them to establish acceptable production 'plans' (Aiken, 1977; Furner, 1975; Pittenger, 1993). Thus, van Kleeck believed that under these arrangements American society would become fully "socialized."² Indeed, van Kleeck believed that social work's, "social", and "scientific" outlook, combined with its strategic position between business and labor, made it an ideal institution to both advocate for the needs of labor and marshal public support for social planning (Alchon, 1991, 1998; van Kleeck, 1924, 1932, 1934a). Thus, van Kleeck viewed the independent and internationally configured IRI as an opportunity to undertake and disseminate empirically based research studies that examined various dimensions and issues associated with social and economic planning.

The WSEC opened on August 23, 1931 to a large contingent of journalists and writers representing major newspapers and journals from around the world. The conference boasted an eclectic mix of well-known and controversial presenters and participants including, Dr. H.S. Person (Managing Director of the Taylor Society, New York), Edward A. Filene (William Filene's & Son's Co., Boston), Dr. Lewis Lorwin (Institute of Economics, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.), Paul Kellogg (Editor-in-Chief, *Survey*, New York), Otto Neurath (Director of the Social Economic Museum, Vienna), and Mr. V.V. Obolesnky-Ossinsky (Institute for Economic Research of the State Planning Commission (GOSPLAN), Soviet Union). The breadth of presenters and participants reflected both the IRI's respectable status in 1931 and the depth of dissatisfaction in capitalism that was spreading throughout liberal, progressive, and radical circles as a result of the intensifying world economic depression (Aiken, 1977; Cook, 1999; Fischer, 1990; Gordon, 1994; Leuchtenburg, 1963). The majority of Conference papers focused on the depression and many advanced solutions that reflected van Kleeck's interest in a planned economy, a strong organized labor sector, and the

application of technological innovations to improve both efficiency and conditions of work (Fledderus, 1932). The conference highlight, however, was provided when representatives from the Soviet Union presented a series of papers discussing their experience with social planning under Communism in general and the results from their Five-Year Plan in particular.

The Soviet presenters were advertised as independent scholars and scientists and not as “official” representatives of the Soviet Union. This was an important attribute to van Kleeck as the reliability and validity of Soviet scientists, academics, and policy representatives was generally regarded as quite poor due to the Soviet Union’s closed and secretive character.³ Adding to the excitement was the fact the WSEC was the first public meeting where preliminary results were to be disseminated regarding the Soviet Union’s Five-Year economic plan. The Five-Year Plan was developed under the leadership of Joseph Stalin to address Russia’s ongoing struggles with the transition to Communism following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.⁴ The Five-Year Plan was established in 1928 as an attempt by Soviet officials to improve industrial and agricultural efficiency and production levels by encouraging rural to urban migration, agricultural collectivization, and broader input from labor within the centralized planning process (Lewen, 1994; Skocpol, 1979).

The Soviet scientists presented findings indicating that unemployment had been essentially eliminated and that standards of living were rising throughout the country. They attributed the improvements to careful planning, advances in technology, the spread of collective industrial and agricultural enterprises, urbanization, and managerial involvement by labor (Lewen, 1994; Obolensky-Ossinsky, 1932). This was happening, the Soviet representatives reminded their audience, while economic depression continued to ravage nations dependent upon industrial capitalism (Obolensky-Ossinsky, 1932).

Van Kleeck was measurably influenced by the Soviet presentations. More than any other paper or discussion, the Soviet presentations provided van Kleeck evidence that social and economic planning *worked*. Although she had arrived at the conference a supporter of social and economic planning objectives; the opportunity to interact, discuss, and absorb information from

Soviet social scientists both reinforced those views and situated her in the camp of liberals, progressives, and radicals commonly referred to in the 1930s and beyond as “fellow-travelers”, “communist sympathizers”, or small “c” communists (Caute, 1973; Heale, 1998; Schrecker, 1998).⁵ This meant she supported the Soviet Union in principle, but was not an official member of the Communist Party. Although van Kleeck was not a Communist Party member, her views and actions following the 1931 WSEC were filtered through the lens of social planning and Soviet communism.

Van Kleeck Confronts Social Work and the New Deal, 1932–1934

Over the next three years, Mary van Kleeck established herself as a leading force in the American left in general and the social work left in particular. She established close ties with Soviet officials, worked diligently against Administration backed New Deal initiatives, and gave form and direction to the burgeoning rank and file movement in social work (Alchon, 1991, 1998; Gordon, 1994). In the summer of 1932, van Kleeck’s personal commitment and connection to the Soviet Union was strengthened when she embarked on a conducted tour of Russia. In 1932, it was fashionable for committed American radicals, disillusioned liberals, and intellectuals to visit the Soviet Union to observe the inner workings of communism, advance contacts with Communist officials, or to simply get away from the worsening economic depression (Caute, 1988; Heale, 1990; Hollander, 1981). Indeed, it was even common to see advertisements for conducted tours of Russia in popular social work journals such as the *Survey* (Chambers, 1971; “When We Choose to Plan”, 1932).

Van Kleeck arrived in early July eager to observe the Soviet Union’s approach to social planning and to make contacts with Soviet academics and officials. Although she understood the towns, factories, and institutions she encountered were far from representative, van Kleeck remained impressed by what she observed. In a letter to John Glenn, Director of the Russell Sage Foundation, van Kleeck noted her, “5½ weeks in the U.S.S.R. were completely satisfactory” (van Kleeck to Glenn, July 9, 1932,

MVK Archives). She noted observing that unemployment had virtually disappeared and that standards of living appeared to be on a steady rise. She was especially impressed with the attention given by Soviet planners to the process of collective decision making in industry. Van Kleeck wrote to Glenn: "The procedure of planing is developing on fundamentally sound lines in that it is being decentralized in such a way as to ensure the participation of those who are closest to the actual work in a given unit of industry" (van Kleeck to Glenn, July 9, 1932, MVK Archives). Determined to make an objective assessment of the Soviet Union, van Kleeck wrote to Glenn that they were still struggling to bring prices in line with quality. "Of course the difficulties in the U.S.S.R. are tremendous to-day. . . . For example the Russian peasant no longer wishes to be barefoot. They all want shoes but the manufacture of shoes is insufficient and hence high prices are paid for poor quality" (van Kleeck to Glenn, July 9, 1932, MVK Archives). Van Kleeck returned to the United States further convinced that the basis for a just society and the solution to America's depression existed in the principles of social planning.

The influence of van Kleeck and social planning in social work and the American left expanded throughout 1932 and 1933. In 1932 van Kleeck delivered a well received paper encouraging social work to embrace social planning at the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW) meeting in Philadelphia. Paul Kellogg, Editor-in-Chief, of the social work affiliated journal the *Survey* devoted the entire March 1932 issue to a discussion on social planning and its potential as a solution to America's depression ("When We Choose to Plan", 1932). On August 3, 1933 she received national attention and acclaim from left-wing sources across the nation when she resigned from the National Recovery Administration's (NRA) Advisory Council following President Roosevelt's decision to eliminate a clause in the New Deal initiative that protected organized labor's right to strike within industries covered by NRA codes (Daniel, 1980; *The Nation*, 1933). Van Kleeck was incensed by Roosevelt's decision to erase his pledge of support to organized labor in regards to the NRA legislation and resigned after only one day of service to the applause of left-wing organizations and journals around the country (*The Nation*, 1933).

Van Kleeck's most profound and influential moment in social work did occur, as many historians have pointed out, at the NCSW annual meeting of 1934 held in Kansas City, Missouri (Ehrenreich, 1985; Gordon, 1994; Leighninger, 1987; Spano, 1982; Walkowitz, 1999). The economic depression was in its fifth year and despite New Deal initiatives and President Roosevelt's pledge to restore stability and growth, leading economic indicators continued to move downward (Leuchtenburg, 1963, Patterson, 1986). Social and political agitation was on the upswing as labor demonstrations, especially those initiated by the communist inspired unemployment councils, were becoming commonplace and membership in the American Communist and Socialist Parties were reaching record levels (Diggins, 1992; Heale, 1990; Lipset, 2000; Warren, 1966). Although most social workers continued to support the liberal reform path of the New Deal, an increasing number of social workers were attracted to radical alternatives, including Soviet communism, that promised to put a permanent end to economic depressions and improve their own economic and professional security (Ehrenreich, 1985; Fisher, 1980; Leighninger, 1987; Spano, 1982; Walkowitz, 1999; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Collectively identified in social work as the rank and file movement, this dissenting contingent had formed discussion clubs and protective organizations between 1931 and 1934 in major urban areas including New York City and Chicago (Fisher, 1980; Spano, 1982; Walkowitz, 1999). The essential purpose of these organizations was to protect their tenuous employment security, support radical movements, and encourage social work to adopt a radical position and mission in American society (Fisher, 1936, 1980; Gordon, 1994; Leighninger, 1987; Spano, 1982; Walkowitz, 1999; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Thus when van Kleeck arrived at the NCSW meeting in Kansas City, many of the attendees were eager to hear her radical views; particularly as a contrast to the New Deal inspired conference agenda.

Van Kleeck's presentations at the conference drew overflow crowds. In her most influential and widely debated paper titled "Our Illusions Regarding Government", van Kleeck cautioned social workers about rushing to support the New Deal. Van Kleeck argued during her address: "This reliance upon government commits social work to the preservation of the status

quo and separates them from their clients . . . leading them . . . into . . . defense of the politicians in an effort to protect political institutions" (van Kleeck, 1934a, p. 474). She asserted social work's support of the government was blind and based upon, "the theory which has largely dominated the political programs of social work . . . that government stands above conflicting interests and in a democracy can be brought, by majority vote, to decide between those conflicts and compel . . . policies which are in the public interest" (van Kleeck, 1934a, p. 475). She informed her audience that this position is illusory as it fails to recognize that capitalist processes compel government to support business interests. She boldly stated her position as follows: "Government is essentially dominated by the strongest economic power and becomes the instrument to serve the purposes of the groups possessing that power . . . If all groups in the community have common interests then the government . . . will have united support. If, however, there be conflicts of interest between groups in the community, . . . then the community is . . . a house divided. The government will then represent the strongest power . . . Our illusions regarding government arise out of a refusal to recognize these conflicts" (van Kleeck, 1934a, pp. 476–477). Van Kleeck suggested to her audience that social and economic planning was the only alternative to existing arrangements that incorporated the objectives of social work including higher standards of living and steady rates of employment (Van Kleeck, 1934a).

Van Kleeck's presentations drew loud ovations and stirred raucous debate (Springer, 1934). In a society fraught with tension and plagued by doubt regarding the eternal viability of capitalism, van Kleeck challenged her audience to have the courage and foresight to abandon the status quo and accept the radical path of social and economic planning. Although van Kleeck's presentations at the 1934 NCSW meeting garnered nationwide media attention and spurred formidable growth in social work's rank and file movement, it ultimately failed to provide social workers a basis upon which they could distill her radical views throughout the ranks of professional social work. This was the case since her analysis left social workers with essentially no place to practice.

Van Kleeck's suggestion that social workers should avoid actively supporting government social programs because it had been corrupted by the profit motives of business also automatically excluded most social workers from practicing within private social agencies. The majority of private social welfare agencies in 1934 were funded through the surplus profits of corporations or individuals (Ehrenreich, 1985; Walkowitz, 1999; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Thus, if the business industry is fundamentally corrupted by the profit motive than how could social workers justify working for private social agencies? Her argument that social workers should align themselves with labor to counter these arrangements did not offer a realistic solution to this dilemma. While social workers could theoretically align themselves with the principles of labor by supporting their causes and forming social work unions, organized labor was not in the habit of employing social workers to provide social services to union members and they had not expressed any interest in doing so (Polsky, 1991; Walkowitz, 1999). Thus, this left social workers with private practice as their only potential source of financial support and stability. However, since social work's mission and existence in 1934 was still predicated on serving low income individuals, despite the growth of clinical practice during the 1920s, this was an unrealistic option; especially given the severe economic depression that encompassed America in 1934. The only practical recourse for social workers, then, was to engage in revolutionary practice designed to usher in a socially planned society that would either make room for them on their terms or prevent the demand for their services. While van Kleeck wanted social workers to accept that a social and political revolution might be necessary to achieve her radical objectives, few social workers had expressed interest in, or had experience with, revolutionary activities (Crocker, 1992; Fisher, 1980; Polsky, 1991; Walkowitz, 1999). Thus, despite the overwhelming response she received in favor of her views at the 1934 NCSW meeting, much work remained for van Kleeck to identify practical ways to translate that enthusiasm into actual social work policies and programs; a process that would be made more complicated by ongoing developments in Europe.

Van Kleeck, Social Work, and the United-Front, 1935–1942

Van Kleeck's efforts to advance the goals of social planning and radical social action within social work and society following her appearance at the 1934 NCSW meeting in Kansas City was shaped by the Communist Party's decision to pursue a popular-front strategy in 1935 (Diggins, 1992; Heale, 1990; Warren, 1966). The popular-front, also commonly referred to as the united-front, was established to stem the momentum and power of Fascist regimes in Europe; most notably represented by Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany (Warren, 1966). Communists in particular and radicals in general worried that a Fascist Europe would possess the economic and military power required to threaten the existence of the Soviet Union (Heale, 1990; Schrecker, 1998; Warren, 1966). To address this situation, Soviet officials announced in mid-1935 the creation of a united-front between communists, liberals, progressives and radicals in an effort to bolster resources and eradicate political divisions that Fascist governments could exploit for their own gain (Leuchtenburg, 1963; Warren, 1966). In practical terms, the popular-front required communists to de-emphasize the divisive and conflictual character of their revolutionary doctrine and replace it with an ideology rooted in gradualism; an approach that encouraged support for liberal democracies and New Deal style social programs (Heale, 1990; Spano, 1982; Warren, 1966).

To accommodate the popular-front, van Kleeck pushed aside her radical and revolutionary rhetoric and adopted a more modest liberal and progressive platform that advanced gradual economic and political reforms. In social work, van Kleeck directed her reformist impulse toward the bustling union movement. Social work unions were established in both private and public agencies in the early 1930s as a means for social work practitioners to improve deteriorating working conditions, employment security, and salaries (Alexander, 1976; Haynes, 1975; Hunter, 1999; Spano, 1982). Drawing on the increased levels of agitation and political power expressed by industrial and agricultural unions, left-wing social workers who were increasingly identifying themselves in working class terms began forming unions

to advance their personal and professional interests (Alexander, 1976; Haynes, 1975; Hunter, 1999; Fisher, 1936; Hunter, 1999). The largest number and most active social work unions were in New York City, though strong unions also existed in Chicago, Philadelphia, and St. Louis (Alexander, 1976; Haynes, 1975; Fisher, 1936; Spano, 1982). The majority of social work unions grew out of the discussion clubs and protective organizations that emerged in the early 1930s and were considered part of a broader strategy to increase class consciousness for the purpose of stimulating fundamental economic and political change (Fisher, 1936, 1980; Haynes, 1975; Spano, 1982). With the onset of the popular-front most social work unions, the majority of which were affiliated with United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA), shifted their focus from promoting fundamental social change toward advancing worker rights and supporting the New Deal (Alexander, 1976; Fisher, 1980; Gordon, 1994; Haynes, 1975; Walkowitz, 1999). The expansion of social work unions raised questions amongst leaders in the field about ethics, tactics, and purpose.

In the latter half of the decade professional journals including the *Survey* and the rank and file movement's *Social Work Today* published an assortment of feature articles addressing the ethics of strike tactics in social work agencies, the role of private interest in public organizations, and the extent social work unions served as fronts for communist activity (Gambs, 1936; Lurie, 1935; "Should Social Work", 1936; Taylor, 1936). As a staunch defender of organized labor, van Kleeck argued in support of social work unions and the use of conflict tactics. Although van Kleeck recognized that unions in the popular-front era could encourage unwanted divisions within liberal oriented agencies, she justified their existence and tactics by suggesting social work unions would foster alliances and coalitions with the broader organized labor movement and were a necessary means for workers to protect their interests given the expanding influence of business and political forces throughout the social agency network. She argued in an article published in *Social Work Today*: "Upon the labor movement devolves the responsibility for support of measures which social workers naturally advocate. By becoming part of the labor movement, they are strengthened in their advocacy, and they may in time broaden the scope and increase the effectiveness

of the trade unions in the development of a social program" (van Kleeck, 1936, p. 6).

As an effort to further both the cause of labor and the popular-front strategy, van Kleeck in 1936 enrolled in the American Labor Party (ALP). The ALP was founded in 1936 by a cross-section of union members, intellectuals, and professionals to address the immediate needs of labor and to establish a radical political basis to challenge the existing two-party system through the ballot instead of revolution (Heale, 1998; Leuchtenburg, 1963; Warren, 1966). The ALP's objectives were broad and included passage of the Lundeen-Frazier Bill, government protection for unions, higher wages, better job security, a more progressive tax system, and more generous government support for farmers (Gordon, 1994; Hunter, 1999; van Kleeck, 1936; Warren, 1936). Although the ALP envisioned itself as an eventual challenger to the Democratic and Republican parties; in concert with the united-front strategy they channeled their energies in 1936 toward the re-election campaign of President Roosevelt as a means to ensure the defeat of the reactionary Republican Presidential candidate Alf Landon (Gordon, 1994; Heale, 1990, 1998; Leuchtenburg, 1963; Warren, 1966). Van Kleeck explained her interest in the ALP in the following manner: "I am convinced that it [ALP] is vital to American democracy and in the best interests of the people as a whole that a labor party should be built, organized by the trade unions and farmers organizations and supported by professional groups by small business men and by individuals active in civic and social movements. All these must unite . . . for the maintenance of civil liberties . . . and against the undermining of general standards of living by the lowering of wages and salaries" ("van Kleeck joins," 1936). Few rank and file social workers joined the ALP, though van Kleeck viewed it as a fundamental means to challenge the status quo and she retained her membership through the late 1940s and eventually ran for local political office on the ALP ticket in New York City during 1948 (Alchon, 1991, 1998).

Beyond defending the principles of union action, van Kleeck spent considerable time and effort defending their rights and actions in practice and supporting a wide range of social and political causes. For example, She defended social workers who went out on strike for better pay and work conditions at several

New York City hospitals, she endorsed the controversial and conflictual 1937 sit-down strikes staged by Detroit area auto workers, and she supported the formation of an employees union at the Russell Sage Foundation (Alchon, 1991, 1998; Hunter, 1999; Miller, 1935; "Sit-in", 1937; "Sit-Downs", 1937; van Kleeck, 1936b). Moreover, van Kleeck supported the Loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War, publicly denounced efforts by Congress to institute an oath of allegiance in the United States, criticized federal immigration officers attempts to deport the noted British writer John Strachey for allegedly belonging to the Communist Party, participated in public debates in support of the proposed Fair Standards and Labor Act of 1938, advocated for a liberalization of benefits and eligibility requirements for Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and published a positively reviewed book in 1936 advancing the goals of social and economic planning titled, *Creative America* (Alchon, 1991, 1998; Paulsen, 1996; "Protest Rises", 1935; Spano, 1982; "Summary of Main Provisions", 1938; van Kleeck, 1936a, 1939).

In August, 1939, the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact splintered the popular-front and pushed van Kleeck to the outer margins of American radicalism and the social work rank and file movement. The Pact signed between Hitler of Germany and Stalin of the Soviet Union entailed a nonaggression clause between the nations and the development of economic cooperation (Warren, 1966). Overnight, the Pact turned Russia into an enemy of America. The basis of the popular-front was to defeat, or at least hold in check, the advancement of Fascist Germany across the political landscape of Europe. The signing of the Pact implied Russia and Germany had joined forces and that Russian communism was moving toward fascism and totalitarianism and away from liberalism and democracy (Diggins, 1992; Leuchtenburg, 1963; Warren, 1966). Feeling betrayed, scores of American liberals, professionals, and radicals, including many small "c" communists, abandoned the popular-front and became staunch anti-Communists and anti-Stalinists (Heale, 1990, 1998; Schrecker, 1998; Warren, 1966).

The Pact, however, did not turn every radical against Russia and communism. Although it aroused suspicions regarding the motives, ethics, and intentions of the Soviet Union, a minority of American liberals, intellectuals, professionals, and radicals

remained faithful to both communism and the Soviet Union (Schrecker, 1998; Warren, 1966). Van Kleeck was among the crowd that remained loyal to the Soviet Union and she defended the Pact as a strategic maneuver by Russia to protect their own political interests. She did not believe that Russia had entered into an alliance with Germany and she remained convinced that the Soviet Union had no interest in Fascism. Indeed, van Kleeck and other radicals who remained faithful to the Soviet Union, interpreted the Pact as a, "necessary step for peace and democracy in these countries . . ." (Warren, 1966, p. 194).

Although the rank and file movement initially reserved judgement on the Pact; it eventually divided the movement and was a significant contributor to its dissipation in the early 1940s. Many rank and filers, especially those with Jewish roots, simply could not fathom an alliance with Hitler and Germany under any circumstances (Fisher, 1980; Hunter, 1999; Spano, 1982; Walkowitz, 1999). Moreover, many rank and filers were pacifists and the Pact signaled to them that Russia had more serious imperialist intentions than they previously believed was the case and, thus, it threatened to bring America into the escalating World War as an enemy of Russia (Warren, 1966). The majority of rank and file members were also only marginally attached to the Soviet Union and communism. They were drawn to the many variations of communism and socialism floating about in the 1930s and were angry over the seemingly depression inducing nature of capitalism; but their primary interest tended toward economic stability, liberalism, and peace (Gordon, 1994; Ehrenreich, 1985; Walkowitz, 1999; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Without the establishment of a clear and practical plan to advance radicalism, most rank and filers in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact returned comfortably to the New Deal; this time not as part of a popular-front strategy but as committed enthusiasts.

At the outset of the 1940s, van Kleeck found herself on the far margins of the American left in general and social work in particular. Rather suddenly, van Kleeck recognized her views supporting social and economic planning, which had galvanized the social work left in 1934, were reinterpreted as a prescription for illiberalism and totalitarianism (Alchon, 1991; Haynes, 1975; Hunter, 1999; Walkowitz, 1999). Nevertheless, van Kleeck

continued to promote social and economic planning throughout the 1940s until her retirement from the Russell Sage Foundation in 1948. To her the Pact was a bump in the road and not an iceberg. She had never professed to be a pacifist as her support for World War I and her speeches and writing on revolution during the 1930s indicated. She opposed imperialism and violence in principle, but accepted the Marxist position that violence may be necessary to eradicate the capitalist impulse from society. Moreover, she had never held to a strict interpretation of Soviet communism and she believed that social and economic planning could exist without the Soviet Union (van Kleeck, 1934d, 1936a). Although her specific prescriptions of how social and economic planning would actually differ in practice from Soviet communism remained vague, as it did for most noncommunist social planners in the 1930s, her commitment to the ideals never wavered (Aiken, 1977; Warren, 1966).

Lessons for Contemporary Social Workers

Mary van Kleeck's views and activism regarding social planning, organized labor, technology, and the role of government within a democratic-capitalist society during the 1930s provides important lessons for contemporary social workers struggling to understand the social and political disinvestment in the American welfare state, economic globalization, and rapid technological change (Brooks, 2000; Greider, 2000; Houppert, 1999; Jansson, 1997; Prigoff, 1999; O'Meara, Mehlinger, & Krain, 2000). For example, given declining social and political support for the welfare state, social workers may benefit by revisiting van Kleeck's views on the nature of government in a democratic-capitalist society and consider adopting a critical stance toward government sponsored social programs that questions their intentions and adequacy to meet the needs of social work clients. Although few individuals are suggesting a need for extensive social and economic planning as a solution to contemporary concerns expressed by social workers and other liberal and progressive minded professionals regarding the declining scope of the welfare state, there is growing public interest in the organized labor movement and third-party politics as a means to counter discontent among progressives and

radicals with the direction of American politics, economics, and culture (Ards, 1999; Borosage, 1999; Cooper, 1999; Moberg, 2000; Schakowsky, 2000; Sifry, 1999). Thus, it may be an opportune time for social workers to revisit van Kleeck's suggestion developed in the 1930s that they align themselves more closely with organized labor and third-party political candidates and causes.

Van Kleeck's depression era experiences, however, also reminds contemporary social workers the importance of establishing strong coalitions, maintaining philosophical flexibility, and understanding the practical needs and objectives inherent in professional social work practice. For example, van Kleeck argued in convincing fashion that social workers should align themselves with organized labor. She failed, however, to establish a sufficient plan that social workers could utilize to obtain employment opportunities *within* the labor movement. We believe that if social work is to obtain a genuine presence within the organized labor movement it will require both an increase in the number of social work unions and a formal partnership with organized labor that firmly establishes social work services and programs within the arena of organized labor.⁶

Van Kleeck's unwavering belief that modern technology possessed both the power to raise the standards of living and to emancipate the working class from industrial drudgery is a stark reminder of the utopian character technology has possessed in American culture (Alchon, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Shapiro, 1999). Technology has not, in either communist or noncommunist societies, been the harbinger of social justice, economic equality, or full employment. Indeed, van Kleeck's experience in the 1930s reminds us the importance of adopting a critical approach toward new technological developments that promise to resolve pressing social, political, or economic problems.

Taken together van Kleeck's activities in the 1930s provide contemporary social workers a powerful female role model. She was a first rate left-wing agitator and researcher who wielded substantial power and achieved the respect of her peers in social work and beyond. In a time when many social workers blindly accepted the New Deal, van Kleeck dared to question its merits and challenge the motives and intelligence of its architects. Thus, her activities in the 1930s remind contemporary social workers

that political dissent and radicalism have deep roots in social work history; and that women have been at the forefront in establishing those roots.

NOTES

1. The differences between progressives, liberals, and radicals between 1890–1930 were often quite subtle and the source of great social and political debate and controversy. For excellent accounts of the similarities and differences between progressives and radicals in this period please see, Mary Jo Deegen (1988), *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books; Charles Forcey (1963), *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippman, and the Progressive era, 1900–1925*. New York: Oxford University Press; Richard Hofstadter (1955), *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* New York: Random House; Christopher Lasch (1965) *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type*. New York: W.W. Norton;
2. Technocratic progressives, as did the left-wing of progressivism in general, shared and borrowed many principles, ideals, and objectives with Marxism. Like Marxists, technocratic progressives believed that the profit motive undermined the social potential of capitalism and that advanced technology—the motive force of modern capitalism—had to be organized along social and not individual lines. Moreover, most technocratic progressives agreed with Marx and Engels argument that modern capitalism produced alienated labor through the institution of mass production and wage labor. Technocratic progressives and radicals believed under a fully socialized economy with labor participation in management that advanced technology could be used to eliminate alienated labor, enhance leisure for all classes, and raise the standards of living. Where technocratic progressives differed from Marxists was in their outlook on revolution and the role of working class in stimulating a revolution. Technocratic progressives in the 1920s clung to the hope that social-economic planning could be ushered into America, in true progressive fashion, through the dissemination of research findings proving its rationality and social worth that would lead to fundamental legislative reforms or through political elections. What eventually transformed technocratic progressives into technocratic radicals was their support during the early 1930s for working class revolutionary activity. For scholarly accounts on the similarities and differences between technocratic progressivism and Marxism and the emergence of technocratic radicalism in the 1930s see, William E. Aiken (1977), *Technocracy and the American Dream: The Technocratic Movement, 1900–1941*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Christopher Lasch (1965), *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type*. New York: W.W. Norton; Shlomo Avineri (1968), *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Guy Alchon (1998), “The ‘Self-Appraising Sincerity’ of Overreaching Theory, Biography as Ethical

Practice, and the Case of Mary van Kleeck" in Helene Silverberg (ed.). *Gender and American Social Science*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

3. Although the Soviet presenters were "independent", they were approved by Soviet officials. Thus, while they were free to present their research findings as they saw fit, it was probably the case that Soviet officials approved their participation because it was believed they would provide supportive comments on the Soviet Union's experiment with communism. Moreover, one can speculate that Soviet officials were comfortable with allowing social scientists to represent "themselves" and not "Russia" since they recognized the conference was a gathering individuals who generally held favorable views on social planning and communism.
4. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 established communism as the governing social system in Russia. Soviet communism, based largely on the teachings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, abolished private property, production for profit, and a Czarist government in favor of collective property, production for 'use', and a worker's state. For detailed descriptions of communism, the conditions in Russia that inspired the Bolshevik revolution, and the intended objectives of the Soviet Union once communism was established, see, Karl Marx (1967), *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. (Frederick Engels, ed.) New York: International Publishers; Karl Marx & Frederick Engels (1964), *The Communist Manifesto*. (Joseph Katz, ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster; Leon Trotsky (1932), *The Russian Revolution: The Overthrow of Tzarism and the Triumph of the Soviets*. New York: Doubleday; Theda Skocpol (1979), *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
5. The terms fellow-traveler and communist sympathizer attained a pejorative character during the anticommunist fervor of the late 1940s and 1950s to an extent that even today it is impossible to separate these terms from that era. Thus, we have decided to avoid their usage in this study and in their place we will either use small "c" communist or more generic terms such as communist supporter. The term social-economic planning was applied by van Kleeck and others in the 1930s to avoid the tag of "fellow-traveler" or "communist sympathizer" whenever it was possible, and because she and others believed it represented a social system unique in its own right. For scholarly works that address the political sensitivity of fellow-travelers and communist sympathizers see, Ellen Schrecker (1998), *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; M. J. Heale (1990), *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press; Frank Warren (1966), *Liberals and Communism: The "Red Decade" Revisited*. Bloomington, Ind: University of Indiana Press.
6. A rare example of social work services provided to union members occurred in the 1940s when the National Maritime Union employed social workers on its staff. For an account of this experience see Bertha Capen Reynolds (1963), *Uncharted Journey*. New York: Citadel Press.

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