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Social Work Under Rising Authoritarianism

with Stephen Pimpare, PhD

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Peter Sobota [00:00:11] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork Podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, it's good as usual to have you along everybody. It's March of 2026 and the U.S. Is 14 months into the current administration's second term. To quote today's guest, if we observe what's already taken place and take the administration at its word for what's yet to come, it means arbitrarily stripping people of citizenship, mass deportations and detention camps. Efforts to dismantle the civil service, closing off immigration into the U.S. From select countries, armed military being used on U. S. Soil to assault and even kill protesters, a Department of Justice and Internal Revenue service turned into the persecution of perceived political enemies, need a breath, a withdrawal from NATO, the World Health Organization, and the Paris Climate Accords. The end or scaling back of support for Ukraine's defense against Russian invasion, new bombing of Iran, tariffs that will likely have national and international inflationary effects, anti-science cranks leading public health agencies, a possible end to investments in renewable energy, and attacks on gender non-conforming people of all kinds. They've even mused about ceasing the Panama Canal, annexing Canada, and Greenland. These tactics and activities are typically associated with authoritarian leaders to weaken democratic institutions, spread disinformation, scapegoat vulnerable communities, stoke violence, weaponize fear, and rewrite or even erase history. Our guest today, Dr. Stephen Pimpare, asks, why should social workers see rising authoritarianism as their issue? Well, for starters, the CSWE educational policy and accreditation standards include, amongst others, that social workers achieve competency with demonstrating ethical and professional behavior, advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice, engage anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in practice, and engage in policy practice. And our ethics remind us of our responsibility to the broader society. Dr. Pimpare will provide context and definitions, explain the complicity verse courage question in the profession, address the educational and professional readiness to counter rising authority, and finally, the risks inherent and what meaningful social work resistance would look like. Stephen Pimpare, PhD, is professor of public policy and director of the master of public policy program at the Vermont Law and Graduate School. Dr. Stephen Pimpare, hi, and welcome back to In Social Work. It's nice to see you again.

Stephen Pimpare [00:03:10] Thank you, likewise, Peter.

Peter Sobota [00:03:11] Yeah, fantastic. So you and I recorded a podcast back in 2022. I think the title was pretty close, Politics and Social Work, I think it was, or Politics for Social Workers. And back then, you were pretty much, it was a call to action about the opportunities that were present in the political and social environment for social workers back then, and to make progress towards structural change and social action. Oh, those seem like innocent times. Today? Well, today is March 6th, 2026, as a day of our recording. And Donald Trump is once again, the president of the United States. And I don't really want to spend our time kind of figuring out how he was elected again. But more so now, what can be done that he is actually, you know, turning out to be even more radical and authoritarian than many feared he might be when he actually got elected. So your article, Social Work Under Rising Authoritarianism in the United States kind of struck me as a lot more urgent than our last discussion. And you argue that the U.S. Political context is really now authoritarianism. When you, Steve, talk about rising authoritarianism in the United States, again, for you, what does that mean? Why do you believe that? What's going on?

Stephen Pimpare [00:04:53] So I guess the first thing to point out is that I actually started drafting that article prior to the outcome of the 2024 election operating on the assumption of a Harris victory, but that article was very much about we cannot close our eyes to the fact that we inhabit this incredibly precarious moment. In the history of the Republic, and even with a Harris victory, there is urgent work to do, because absent fundamental reform, we will always be a single election away from something that looks like an authoritarian regime. It turns out we were unable to use that moment to bide our time and to make up for what I would argue are the profound failures of the Biden administration to recognize the threats to democratic systems themselves and to act in the kind of aggressive fashion that I thought we needed to be acting in in order to prevent someone like Trump coming to power again. So that's sort of thing one. I think that context. Is really important to my thinking because Trump in my mind is not the cause of problems. He is a symptom of a long line of urgent problems that we have failed to address for, you know, pick your starting point for the entirety of the history of the republic or for the last 40 years. One way or another, this threat has been coming and has been building. And without understanding some of that history that got us here, I think it's hard to think critically about how we find our way out of it.

Peter Sobota [00:06:45] I also thought, you know, our election wasn't an aberration, either, because this pretty much this kind of right-wing thing went on, yeah, I mean, across, anyway, so I think that's important in the context.

Stephen Pimpare [00:06:58] And, you know, the other bit of the context is right, we've sort of got, we got post COVID backlash happening all over the world, incumbents all over the world as inflation was spiking, less in the United States than it was in most other countries. But nonetheless, you see a similar pattern all around the world. And that is incumbents lost in 2024. The other thing that I think is useful just to point out to people, more people didn't vote. Than either voted for Harris or Trump. And I think that's useful as we try to wrap our heads around, how did we get here? How do we wind up electing this kind of individual? Well, we didn't, a very small subset of the population did. And in part, because they were lied to. And because of fractured and polluted information environment, those lies wound up having purchase. So I want to go back to the actual question you first asked me, which is why is it that I am thinking about this moment as authoritarian? And it's worth saying, I don't think that we are seeing rising authoritarian. We are inhabiting an authoritarian regime. It is one that is still struggling to fully consolidate, but we are absolutely in an authoritarian regime and. Operating outside the bounds of the U.S. Constitution as we

have historically understood it. The Constitution no longer functions. And I think that that ugly hard truth is one of those things we need to wrap our heads around as we think about how we get out of it.

Peter Sobota [00:08:34] So some of the pushback that I get when I talk with people is, hey, you know what, this is just kind of, we've seen this before. This is familiar partisanship, polarization-based, and you're not buying that at all. Absolutely not.

Stephen Pimpare [00:08:49] I mean, let's start, and we have a long history of people in the United States, of course, lots of other places in the world as well, but a long story of people, in positions of political power, abusing that power, using it in ways that are not in the interest of the nation, or particularly using it, in ways, that single art out for harm, particular and vulnerable groups of people. Right, that's a very old history, right? What we haven't historically seen, unless maybe we think about the slave power in the South at its peak, armed masked agents of the state moving through American cities and shooting dead American citizens who are engaged in acts of legal protest. Over the course of an ordinary year in recent history, police officers and other armed agents of the state kill about 1,000 people a year. So all of that context, I think, becomes really useful and important. This is different. We've got a president who, in many respects, is increasing not even pretending to be bound by law. Right? If we think all the way back to early 2025 and the operations of Elon Musk and Doge, who violated an almost endless parade of existing laws enacted by Congress and constitutional provisions and literally just started zeroing out budgets of agencies created by Congress in a way that, to the best of my knowledge, no other president has tried to in the past. The last one was Nixon. Who made some efforts not to spend money that Congress said that he could spend. The Supreme Court stepped in, he lost the case, he wound up spending the money. This administration doesn't care. As part of that sort of taking an ax to agencies that the administration did not like for ideological reasons, they pretended that they were engaged in acts of budget cutting. They did not save any money, in fact, increased money. Look at just the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for international development, right? This is an agency created in the wake of World War II in part of what we call U. S. Soft powers, a way for us, in fact, to have power and influence political and economic around the globe by doing good things, right. Estimates are that over the life of USAID prior to last year that agency saved somewhere in the order of 90 million lives globally. Since it's dismantling, reliable estimates are that over 700,000 people have died just in the last year because of the absence of the work that USAID used to do. And the projections are we are looking at millions of dead by 2030 as a consequence just of the work that this administration unilaterally took upon itself to dismantle an agency. They are losing all along the line in court. By the time courts catch up, it's all.

Peter Sobota [00:12:17] Too late. Exactly. And it's a great, you know, I don't remember who coined the phrase authoritarian playbook. But if you're aware of it, it's you know it's like it's their marching orders. It is, I mean, including the attacks on higher education and Universi-

Stephen Pimpare [00:12:38] universities, media, law firms, judges, nonprofits, unions, oversight and regulatory bodies, protesters, opposition party leaders, comedians, right? This is incredibly familiar if you are even minimally aware of the rise of authoritarian regimes in other country. One of the very first things you do is you attack the media, you attack universities, you attack the courts. And you attack the ability of lawyers and others who would fight back to be able to do that without fear of reprisal. And in this case, reprisals means if we feel like it, we will either shoot you dead or we will haul you off to a

foreign torture. To one of the massive concentration camps that we are building around the country. And I wanna say, cause this is one of those things you were talking earlier about things that people push back against. When I talk about what we are erecting as a network of concentration camps, I am drawing upon the work of Andrea Bitzer, who if you don't know her, you should, who is, I think it is fair to say, the foremost authority on concentration camps globally, over long periods of history. And Pitzer is perfectly comfortable describing what it is that we are doing as erecting a network of concentration camps that operate outside what we understand to be the law. It's a way of disappearing people. We are disappearing.

Peter Sobota [00:14:18] Yeah, and let's not forget, part of the playbook, then, is rewriting the history after you've done all this.

Stephen Pimpare [00:14:26] It's all the anti-DEI stuff and the legislation about what you're allowed to say and what you're not to say. The parks service ripping out placards in all of our national parks that talk about the history of Native Americans, the history African Americans, and the history of women. If you are not white and male and straight identified, then they do not recognize you as someone who not only is part of our past and the creation of the nation. But you are not someone they recognize as having rights in this present moment. And I don't think I am being hyperbolic. I know it, this is one of those moments, right? When to describe in plain clear language what is happening makes you sound like a madman.

Peter Sobota [00:15:13] I'm going to ask this question, but if we kind of narrow the focus to, you know, social work under rising authoritarianism in the United States, why should social workers see this as their issue?

Stephen Pimpare [00:15:29] So I mean, first part is when you swore an oath to the code of ethics, typically at your graduation from your degree program, did you mean it or did you not? I mean that quite literally, right? There are formal obligations in the code that whether you like it or not, you are to fight on behalf of social and economic justice and to fight on behalf of marginalized populations.

Peter Sobota [00:15:51] And in social work competencies that have been revised recently. So go on.

Stephen Pimpare [00:15:56] We can see right now that the folks who are most under threat are in some ways the very essence of vulnerable populations and marginalized peoples who theoretically we should be personally and professionally obligated to defend, right? Most notably right now we're looking, we're seeing what, attacks on immigrants, but it never ends there, right, so we've already seen under the guise of supposedly removing dangerous immigrants from the shores, and we've now got good data that somewhere in the neighborhood of 75%, 80%, 85% of all of the folks who have been rounded up by ICE and CPB over the last year have absolutely no criminal record whatsoever. So that whole lie is a lie. That's not who they're going after. But also, again, think in mind what happened in Minnesota. Right, to good and pretty. Those were U.S. Citizens shot dead by agents of the state because in the language of some members of the administration and their allies, they were race traitors, right, because they had aligned themselves with those vulnerable populations that were under assault, right. So they were killed in the name of immigration enforcement, right. But there's another piece of this that even predates the administration coming to power, And that is the, I think in many respects, bipartisan attack on trans people, right? And we could see it by the Harris campaign's utter unwillingness to make

even the most basic claims of the barbarism of singling out this very small marginal population and demonizing them. Here is why this worries me in particular other than it is immoral on its face. Every act of singling out a population for dehumanization does not inevitably lead us to ethnic cleansing and genocide, but my reading of history tells us that every act of ethnic cleansing and genocides begins with the dehumanization of a population, with the creation of an enemy. Everyone, I would argue, has a moral obligation to resist that, to fight back against that, to learn lessons from our friends in Minnesota and defend our neighbors. But social workers, I think, on top of that, have a professional obligation. If we're serious about supposedly what we say about who we are and what we do and why, then this is an urgent moment. For everyone, whether they feel prepared for it or not, to identify something that they can do and commit to doing it.

Peter Sobota [00:18:51] To me, social work as a profession seems to have this kind of inherent tension, I'll call it. You know, we kind of see empathy as this core competency and a value that really guides all aspects of practice. At the same time, we're called to act as catalysts for social change and to fight systemic inequalities. So advocacy, you know, this is not something I need to talk to you about, but it often demands kind of a kind of, a confrontational stance against systems. While empathy, you know, is, I'm going to be kind of cynical here, a nurturing, non-judgmental approach to individuals, politics, political action. And you know for a lot of practitioners, It's not something they spend a lot of time engaging in. You know, we're kind of like, what I actually hear is a lot of working within the system and then working, you know, getting in there and making the system better rather than something that I would call more radical, like upheaval. So even universities are adopting these kind of stances of neutrality. If you buy all that, can social work ethically claim political neutrality.

Stephen Pimpare [00:20:16] I think not just now in this moment, but every act of supposed neutrality typically means that you are aligning with power. And I think part of what's missing from that analysis, and I think as a descriptive matter, it's fair, right? That tension among many clinicians, right, and speaking particularly about clinicians, that they understand sort of that tension in their job is in fact. Right. Meet the client where they are, create a space where they feel comfortable in sharing and resist the urge to pass judgment in order to help them achieve whatever personal goals they would like to achieve. Right. However, I'm not here talking about clinical interventions. Right. And when we look at people with enormous power, right, who as we speak, right. After having bombed nine countries. Have decided and having deposed the leader of Venezuela have decided that we are going to wreak havoc upon the people of Iran after having decapitated their leadership. There are some people, I would argue this is a very unsocial work thing to say, who do not deserve our empathy. They should be shunned, they should be vilified, They should be excised from the public sphere, right? Just as after the end of World War II, Germany engaged in a project of denazification, to literally remove them from power in every way possible and literally make laws that would limit their ability to rise again. They're trying now through the AFD party. But nonetheless, that strategy worked pretty well for a number of decades.

Peter Sobota [00:22:09] Absolutely

Stephen Pimpare [00:22:10] We need to be thinking, right, should we survive this moment, right? And not all of us will. It is worth noting, right. Especially those who are most vulnerable. We need to be think about what does the project of demagification look like, right! How do we resist the urge to feel sympathetic, right?! I mean, again, very unsocial working. I feel absolutely no empathy or sympathy for someone like Stephen

Miller. He's an absolute monster. Who is using the power that he has to wreak havoc upon vulnerable and marginalized people and to suggest that we should be neutral, looking at that kind of power imbalance strikes me as its own kind of immoral act. It is not hard, it seems to me, under those circumstances to pick a side.

Peter Sobota [00:23:03] Well, I think, you know, historically, you know, to just name a few, you know, people like Saul Alinsky, Paul Cavell, Leslie Margolin, and John McKnight, who I think is a sociologist, they've argued that, you know, social workers are actually, in the end, more often agents of social control than agents of change and liberation. So how does that really Set us up. For resisting authoritarianism, how did we lose our way? Steven, tell us.

Stephen Pimpare [00:23:39] Well, I think the open question is whether we ever found our way as a profession, right? We tell ourselves all kinds of stories about who we are and where we come from. And we're always not to pick on them, but at the Hunter College School of Social Work, you walk in the lobby and there's this great big giant mural of Jane Addams. Most schools of social work, first of all, don't actually think seriously about the kind of work that she did. In those low-income immigrant communities in the late 19th century. And the curriculum in most schools tends not to reflect that understanding of social work. And it is worth reminding folks that Adams was drummed out of the profession and public life because of her opposition to World War I, right? So there's this rhetorical celebration of the folks who were genuine radicals. But when you look at the curriculum and the national organizations and the systems of power within the profession, they're conservative. They're conservative with a small C, right? They're cautious. They are uncomfortable with the notion that they should be engaged in political work, which I get because it's harder and it's messier and it is more complicated.

Peter Sobota [00:25:07] Let's hang out there if you don't mind. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but let's just, I'm just, what I heard is that you think we're overly risk-averse. Is that fair? 100%. Yeah, okay. So let's drill down a tiny bit here, if I could. What do you think social workers, in the most practical terms, what are we actually risking if we speak out?

Stephen Pimpare [00:25:33] So I think the answer to that depends on what kind of action or resistance we're talking about and who we are talking about, right? Each of us occupies different positions in institutions, in families, in neighborhoods, and that creates different levels of power available to us and vulnerability that puts us at risk, right? You know, easy for me to say, as I often do, that one of the things that folks in all professions need to be doing is thinking about organizing their own workplaces, right? One of the ways to understand the advances made over the course of the 20th century, not the only way to understand it, but one of these ways to the rise of a more economically and politically inclusive society is the power that unions wielded because a union has real power, right? A union can threaten to withdraw its labor and limit the ability of those institutions to function more effectively than any of us individually can exert that kind of power and authority. Now, We live in a world under Democrats and Republicans alike in which national labor laws aren't so great. They're not enforced so well. You are absolutely making yourself vulnerable if you are doing work in your workplace to organize a union. If you're a lone parent, barely making by, you don't have lots of other alternatives for employment and your job would be put genuinely at risk. You need to think about that. I am not suggesting for a moment that everyone route out into the world and be as aggressively active and engaged as they can. I am suggesting that most people have more opportunities to exert the power they have than they do and they don't think critically about it because it's hard, because it is exhausting, because it scary. And I guess the long

game all of that. But we are living in a moment where to repeat myself, the administration having been given another $75 billion with a B for ICE and CPB, they are building a network of concentration camps largely funneled off to for-profit private providers. Just as it works with our prison systems, You think those beds are gonna go empty? If those contractors are being paid? They're going to run out of people who they identify as immigrants and start sweeping up others. And again, that sounds hysterical, right?

Peter Sobota [00:28:32] Yeah, it's what we're doing.

Stephen Pimpare [00:28:34] It's what we're doing. It is literally what we do.

Peter Sobota [00:28:37] Right. Yeah. Yeah, I think, you know, somebody like to just go back to, you know, some of the stuff I've read about, uh, Cavel and even Alinsky in terms of, of, of organizing is that when they're critical of social work, they, they say, they ask us to think about, Hey, are you spending all of your time trying to get your clients ahead or are you helping them? Together into communities of let's face it what we're talking about is power as much about we're talking about empathy we're, talking about the ethical and maybe even radical use of power and and you know part of what I wonder I'd be interested in your thoughts on this does the fact that we and a lot of the places where social workers work are kind of embedded in mostly state systems like child welfare and. Kind of policing relationships, benefit administration, that kind of stuff, public universities. Do you think we're kind of structurally held back from resisting shifts because it puts us face to face with essentially withdrawing services from people who we went to work at those places to serve?

Stephen Pimpare [00:29:59] You know, this is another place where maybe just sort of thinking about power relations is important, right? Because you think any one of those, you know, sort of public welfare, supposed public welfare bureaucracies, right, is that you've got a hierarchy there, right. You've got the benefit applicant or potential recipient who is in the weakest position on their own, right you've then got the caseworker who has power over that individual. But then you have the caseworker's supervisor or the institution who has power over that case.

Peter Sobota [00:30:34] That's a lot of layers.

Stephen Pimpare [00:30:35] So you've got layer and that of course is grossly oversimplifying how that actually plays out, right? Again, if your continued employment, if whatever pride you take in your job is linked to your ability to perform as it is that your supervisor expects you to, right? You are almost inevitably aligning yourself up rather than down. You are aligning yourself with. The mission and the needs of the institution, which are often not about securing the well-being of those clients who are sitting across the other end of your desk, but about distributing very paltry aid to very large numbers of people in the most efficient manner possible. We can see this playing out, particularly post-welfare reform in the 1990s, as these systems are operating around the country. More and more of what we used to think of as casework is taking away whatever limited discretion used to be available to those caseworkers in determining who would get aid, who would not, who would be helped, who did not, which was always a loaded process filled with bias and discrimination, right? More and more what those case workers are doing. And I'm thinking particularly of Los Angeles, a case that I'm more familiar with. Is they are literally just sort of typing things into a machine and literally hitting a button, and the software calculates whether that individual should receive benefits or not. And your performance is not evaluated on long-term well-being of that client because the way that they're dividing up

labor is like a Ford assembly line. You're not actually working with that client. You've got a little piece of it. Your job is for the food stamp program, right? And that's all you do when somebody else does other documentation for participating in work readiness programs, yada, yadda, yata. You're judged on how quickly you move through those processes as if you were working on a physical assembly line, which to me says, let's look at the 19th and 20th century history of workers on assembly lines, pooling their power and organizing. In order to improve their working conditions and to do it in such a way that improves the well-being of the people who they are purporting to serve. One thing to point out, a real-life example, we can look at all kinds of teacher strikes. Chicago comes immediately to mind, who are engaged in what has come to be called organizing for the common good. And we think about a strike. It's like, well, it's for my wages and benefits, right? And it is still often that. But if we look at the very large Chicago, and then again, LA teacher strikes of recent history, they were also fighting for smaller class sizes, for more social workers to be available in the schools, for more nurses to be able in the school, for additional resources to be available for those parents. Who may be first-generation, not native English speakers who could use some help with all kinds of things, right? So to use the power that they have by threatening to withdraw their labor and shutting down that system, to use it just not for their narrow wellbeing, but to use more broadly. One of my complaints about social work as a profession, and this is long-standing and it predates Trump. Is that, to my mind anyway, too much of the political advocacy work that we do. Us, licensure requirements. I'm thinking of the ongoing interstate compact, which I think is a great thing. I think of some of the fights that are starting to go on about AI programs being used to provide therapy and some social work chapters around the United States organizing against those things. I am not arguing that that's bad. I am arguing that at least to my mind, that is too much of what the organizing that social work profession engages in looks like, rather than mobilizing aggressively right now on behalf of immigrant communities that are under assault, for example.

Peter Sobota [00:35:16] You know, I was thinking about this in my own role. You know I'm an academic and I have been teaching in an MSW. I've been teaching courses in an MSW program for 25 years or something like that. What I was really wondering is to what degree, and of course I know our curriculum better than anybody else's, but you know, are we really preparing our students to recognize, like, democratic backsliding? Do we, do we, I don't, I think I kind of do, but I don t do it as deliberately as probably I think would like to or want to. And I wonder, if we're not doing that, are we filling our time more with training, helping students to just learn how to adapt? To whatever policy environment they're in or exists at the time. So I think my question, I'd be interested in to the degree that you know, or have the ability to evaluate. Do you think we're preparing students to recognize, you know when democracy is at risk and what that looks like and what to do? No.

Stephen Pimpare [00:36:36] But I'm not sure that anybody is. I can say, I am not currently teaching in a social work program, right? My grad program that I run is public policy focused with an eye toward social work adjacent issues. We've got a very large restorative justice program. We've gotten really strong concentrations in environmental justice, environmental law and policy, animal rights and animal welfare, et cetera, et cetera. I spent the bulk of my career in graduate schools of social work, mostly in New York City, but in other places. And I used to joke that I taught all the things that nobody else wanted to teach and that students didn't wanna take. So I would teach social welfare, history, social policy, advanced social policy and research methods. Well, actually that's where it happened.

Peter Sobota [00:37:27] In our curriculum, so that makes sense. Go on, yeah.

Stephen Pimpare [00:37:30] And that's about it, right? That's where that kind of attention to the political world works. And I can, you know, without naming names, tell you the number of fights that I had with program directors around the core syllabus that the program was using. And my complaint that it was too anodyne, right, that it wasn't this. Know, this, this what's the old complaint about history? Well, it's what's just one damn thing after another, isn't it? And then a lot of those courses were, well, it was just one damn thing after another. Right? It's like, well this happened, and then this happened. And then this other thing happened, and this other thing happened. And, you know, in the policy courses, it's like, well, you know, there wasn't a whole lot, but then we had the New Deal and then we have the Great Society, and then we had yada, yada yada. And, social work did a better job earlier than a lot of other professions in expanding that history beyond sort of the top-down great man version of that, right? I think fair to say social work was earlier to include. Native perspectives and African-American perspectives and women's perspectives and immigrant perspectives and LGBTQ perspectives and so on. But nonetheless, those were, I think, again, in my experience, kind of secondary. And those efforts to, so I won't name names. I was, I'm really close. You almost went there again. And the Dean who had this conversation with me is no longer at that particular school, but nonetheless, I am gonna do something very uncharacteristic and be cautious about this. Because also I don't think that it is a problem with one institution, right? But was having a conversation with the Dean about stepping in to a program in order to teach a policy advocacy course. And this was as many schools are, both social work and others. Adjacent to a low-income community of color, and I was explicitly told as part of that hiring process that I was not to send students out into the community or to engage in the kinds of local issues that the community was interested in out of concern that they would be adverse to the interests of the institution itself.

Peter Sobota [00:39:57] Yeah, that's what I was speaking to not as directly before, but yeah, that’s real.

Stephen Pimpare [00:40:03] That's real. And it pops up in other places too, right? There's now, you know, I mean, Dorothy Roberts now talks about child welfare as the family policing system. And I think that language is becoming more widespread. And it's not important just that the words change, but that it causes us to think differently about those systems. And social workers have been complicit in the most oppressive parts of those systems literally since the early to mid 1800s, right, that we have been complicit in the functioning of those systems. And one of the arguments I make in the article that you referenced is that perhaps we should learn a lesson from 12 step programs. That urge people to undertake a fearless, what is it? Fearless and something moral inventory, right? Just sort of take a moment and think about where are you positioned in systems of power and hierarchy in your own life and in your professional life, right. What are the spaces that are available to you in order to improve wellbeing, in order improve people's lives and what are you doing or not doing? To take advantage of that potential power you have, right? Organizers talk about it often as activating power, right. And ultimately that has to be collective, going back to an earlier part of the conversation, right, there's only so much any of us individually can do, but boy howdy, when we all start to work together in common cause toward a common goal, I would argue that that kind of This census politics is what Pippin and Cloward call it, right? That disruptive politics, that making noise, that causing good trouble, as John Lewis used to refer to it, right? All that stuff that makes us squishy and uncomfortable. Every advance in social, cultural, economic, and political advancement over the course of our entire history has at its heart a social movement. Has at its heart

groups of people binding together and pushing against the system to make it do things that it doesn't want to do.

Peter Sobota [00:42:21] And just to add to that, I think when I think about my own professional and even personal experiences, the other thing that happens is when you take small steps, is that you, you almost, I always met like minded people who I didn't know exist. 100%. Yeah and and that's you know that's the whole social capital political capital idea and but it's true you you you find people who are there, but you just can't find them. You don't know where they are.

Stephen Pimpare [00:42:54] And there has never been a more urgent moment for us to find our people. This is one of the arguments for showing up at a protest, not just because it really does matter and numbers really do matter. But also, I'm here in New York City and I've been to the ones that I have been able to get to. I always feel so much better afterwards. I feel energized. I feel like, okay, it's not just me. I am surrounded by people, right? And in New York, right, they all look different, right. Surrounded by this incredibly diverse array of people, all of whom, maybe in different ways or for different reasons, are just as angry as I am. Right. There is something that is so energizing. About that. That is, again, because you need to pool power collectively in order to effectively exert it against institutions that would resist you, but you also need to do it because there is joy to be found in doing work that matters with other people.

Peter Sobota [00:44:11] Absolutely. All right. So we're no longer afraid of what's going to happen. It's here. And you've made that abundantly clear. So then the question becomes, so what can we do? And I think that's where a lot of social workers, students, practitioners, and even academics go, it's too much. It' too big. It too fast. The process makes it impossible to overturn. You know all the excuses. So what I want to do is spend the remaining time we have in getting as practical as possible. And I know you have some ideas about this. So when it comes to social workers and rising authoritarianism, what can we do as a you know, big thing, and also as individual people.

Stephen Pimpare [00:45:05] So let me start by saying that it is overwhelming. You're not imagining it, right? That's real, right. But, and this gives me some bizarre comfort. That's the point, right, going back years now, Steve Bannon, who some of you I hope are familiar with, as we make a catalog of monsters, he's right toward the top of that list. Do we have to admit it? Okay. Right. But has been. Arguing for a number of years, and he is engaged in trying to foment a global rise of right-wing authoritarianism, but argued that as a matter of strategy, it's what he calls muzzle velocity. So if you are engaged in doing seven illegal things every day. The opposition can't pay attention to all of them. They can't resist all of him. They can fight back against all of. So maybe you will get away with three or four of them and you'll lose ground on the others. But the next day you do an additional seven illegal illegal things, right? So if it feels like, you know, heaven forbid turning on the news and you should never turn on television in order to get information about politics. They are not interested in educating you. They want to sell you stuff. And this is really important. Turn off your TV for political news. But if you found sources that you trust and you feel as if it is impossible to keep up, that's because it is. And this literally my full-time job is paying attention to this stuff. I'm the person at my institution is supposed to have all of the answers to what just happened in the Texas Senate primary this week and how do we think about that. I'm supposed to know all the stuff. It's overwhelming. I am professionally obligated to pay attention to all the stuff. Most of you listening are not. You are not so the first thing I would say is think about what your strategy is, right? If you find that that the news makes you stressed and anxious and overwhelmed and frustrated and powerless,

use your clinical skills. What would you tell a client who is confronting that? Right? Don't do it, man. Right? I know, you know, I've got, I got, you know, friends who have sort of shut off stuff completely. I've got others who set aside a time and they turn in once a week to get caught up on the news. I got others who like set aside time early in the day to get called up, right? Think about whether maybe you want to manage that yourselves, right. So first thing is you don't have to pay attention to everything. Because you being stressed by doom scrolling, that's not going to help anybody, least of all you. You don't have to do everything either, but you have to something. And I would say, it doesn't ultimately matter what that is. Pick a thing that matters to you. Pick an act that you care about. Pick a group that you're care about, pick a community that you are care about and think about what is it that you can do? What kind of skills do you have that might be useful to the kind of work that I promise you is already going on in those spaces, right? And I think this is really important not to show up thinking that you have answers or that you're gonna take control, right, but to show recognizing that there is probably lots of work that has been going on for years in those space, show up being willing to learn, and then to think about how it is that you can contribute and how to make that part of your routine. It's a thing that you do, and it can be super simple, right? If you've got a community fridge in the neighborhood, right, if you're cooking on the weekend for the family, right. Cook some extra, put it in containers, bring it over to the fridge, or if you're out shopping. And there's a sale on canned beans, pick up an extra 10 cans and drop them off at the community fridge. Literally something that small may look small, but it matters. And it gets big because you will meet other people who are engaged in other kinds of work. You will start to learn about what's going on in the spaces where you're at and the needs that people have and how they can be met, right? If we think about... The extraordinary solidarity that the people of Minneapolis in particular.

Peter Sobota [00:49:45] I was just thinking about that. Yep, I was just thinking about that.

Stephen Pimpare [00:49:50] That didn't come out of nowhere, right. They started building those networks of community support in the wake of the uprisings after the murder of George Floyd and have continued to sustain that. So a lot of what you saw on your devices was people showing up. We learned at literal risk to their own lives, right? To protect people against armed mass agents of the state. But what you didn't see is all of the people who are organizing to bring groceries to people who were afraid to leave their homes and couldn't go to work because of fear that they would be hauled off to a torture prison by ICE. All that kind of behind the scenes stuff, just as important as the more visual signs of resistance.

Peter Sobota [00:50:38] I think it's fascinating and inspiring that those citizens literally are putting out a master class and a blueprint that is now there for that taking.

Stephen Pimpare [00:50:53] There is so much to learn about the work that they did and how they went about doing it. So, so, so much. And I can tell you, I've been to a couple of trainings here in New York City of people who are specifically sort of, and you know, this kind of work has been going on in community organizations in the city and many other cities for decades, right? Decades and decades and decades, but are adjusting how they think about effective intervention and resistance and defense of vulnerable populations. They're adjusting those scripts based on what it is that they have learned by watching what the people in Minneapolis are doing. It is absolutely extraordinary and it's one of those things. And, you know, going back to sort of this empathy question is, and maybe this makes me, I don't think it makes me naïve, but it's not a thing that I'm usually prone to saying out loud, I think most people are decent. I think most people care about other

people. I think most people do not want to be moral monsters. I think most if they can find ways to be in community with others and to be helpful to other people right that I mean apart from just the objective good that that does.

Peter Sobota [00:52:14] Makes us feel better. Yeah, I think a lot of us are kind of hardwired for that. And, you know, the other thing I wanted to mention while you were talking, what hit me, is a lot of this resistance, if you will, or this action. It doesn't have to look like outright resistance. It's, you, know, like you said, the small things. Those... That most of us are probably going to do this at the local level. We're not going to go to state legislatures or to DC. We are going to it in our communities. One of the things now that you're talking, I'm kind of happy that I did this, I suggested to some of my students who were really fired up but didn't know how, I recommended if they want to influence their community, run for the library board or the school board. Because man, those are the heart. Don't ignore that's crunching. Yeah, exactly, exactly so.

Stephen Pimpare [00:53:15] Yeah, so go on, I don't want, I want. And there are lots of particularly sort of smaller towns that are literally begging people to run for those offices, right? And that's not only, those are not only spaces where you can do some good, right, get on a zoning board and see if you can't get some housing built, for example, right. But that's also, right and this is again, right sort of the. The rise of the radical right did not happen overnight. They started seriously organizing in the early 1970s, I sort of mark it as the founding of the Heritage Foundation in 1973, but they have been building power for 50 years, give or take. And part of how they did it was getting people to run for school board. Right, and figuring out what that was and taking over school boards and doing an enormous load of harm, right, to the educational project and the students in those schools, but then take that and say, great, you've figured out this, now maybe you'll go for a state assembly seat, right? And to sort of build a cadre of people who have been trained up through the ranks so that they can eventually land in those national policymaking positions, That's right. But you sort of think about building knowledge as well as building power. And again, going back to community organizing work, always being done most effectively with other people, I would argue too that all political advocacy work is done with other People, right? It is building coalitions. It is thinking strategically together about where are those spaces, even if they are limited, all politics has not ended in this moment. There are still spaces, more of them at the local and state level than at the national level now probably, not probably, yes, but there are still spaces where if you work with other people and think strategically, you can effect change. It's what it always is. It's hard, it's exhausting. You're probably gonna lose the first couple of times you try before you figure out, right? Before you learn from those losses to be more effective and strategic and find ways to win, right. Here's the problem, right, all of what we are talking about requires energy and requires effort, right and everybody's exhausted right now in one way or another, right again, in part, because that's what they want.

Peter Sobota [00:55:50] And it's probably, I'll be provocative here, maybe. I don't think it's good enough to say that you do this through your job. Oh, no. I think it is. That is grossly insufficient. Yeah.

Stephen Pimpare [00:56:01] I mean, I get it. And it feels like that. But no, right. Because that's I mean unless unless what you are doing is right. Right. James C. Scott used to talk about these as weapons of the week looking at things like slave stratagems, right? It's like, you know, there's this particularly pernicious strain of history that thinks about African slaves in the American South as being passive, right, nothing could be further from the truth, right and there were Right? Mind you, like slave uprisings, which typically resulted in

mass slaughter. So what often would happen in those spaces is that people would look for ways to disrupt the productivity of those plantations without being caught. So you'll move a little bit more slowly. Maybe you do something in not quite the right way so the thresher breaks down more often than it should, right? Think about your own place of employment. If it is engaged in doing harm to people, but you still need to keep your job because you need to pay your rent and feed your family, what are the ways that you can be disruptive in those spaces and get in the way of the harm that those institutions are causing while still keeping your job?

Peter Sobota [00:57:23] I want to ask you two things. If authoritarianism deepens, unabated, from where we are now, what do you think happens to social work?

Stephen Pimpare [00:57:34] Things are going to get worse before they get better. And I think it is useful for us to keep that in mind. It does us no good to put blinders on and act as if somehow magically things will be fine. Things will not be fine, certainly if we don't all find ways to act. But I think even if we all start to find ways, to act, I think there's all kinds of reasons to believe things will get worse before they get better. I guess...

Peter Sobota [00:57:56] And for social work?

Stephen Pimpare [00:57:59] For everybody.

Peter Sobota [00:58:00] For everybody?

Stephen Pimpare [00:58:01] For everybody.

Peter Sobota [00:58:02] How about this? If social work, the profession, and us individual social workers, you know, if we fail to confront authoritarianism, what do you think history will say about us at that point?

Stephen Pimpare [00:58:16] Well, nothing good, right? I mean, this, again, this is going back to where we more or less started, right. It's like, I think we all have an obligation just as humans and as citizens to look for ways to defend people who are particularly vulnerable and are under assault by the government itself. Social work has, I think, a particular obligation to be engaged in that kind of work, each of us individually, but this is one of those spaces where, there are no shortages of complaints about the National Association of Social Workers along a host of dimensions, or CSWE for that matter, right? Although I think a little bit less dysfunctional than the NASW has been of late. If we operate on the assumption that there is some potential moral authority that social work as a profession can draw on, and I am willing to contemplate that as a hypothesis, then it is an absolute dereliction of duty not to use that in whatever ways we see possible. It doesn't mean, right.. A press release, right? We need to be thinking in a much more sophisticated fashion, again, about what kind of power we have, where that power resides, and how to most effectively exert it. Maybe it's with building coalitions, right, maybe it's, again, in a different world with different people leading these institutions. We get, you know, the NASW and the American Psychological Association, and maybe, I don't even know, the American Sociological Association… to work together and think about strategically.. And again, I don't know, fill in your own blank, right? Maybe it's so you start to think about building toward a national strike of social work instructors to try to draw attention to the issue. So we've got this incredibly fractured and polluted information environment, which is always an authoritarian's best friend. So part of the challenge is how do we capture attention? How do we draw people's attention to those issues and those populations that

we care about and then use that attention to try to make things better and to not act as if we need to make all the things better in all the ways. We're going to pick a thing. We are going to focus our attention there. We will make that a little bit better and then if we succeed, we will find something else. We'll focus our attention there and try to that thing a little bit better too. That's part of the challenge here when faced with literally, I would argue an existential crisis in a thousand different ways is to not then think, well, then I too need to be thinking, right, on the grand scale and existentially. It's no, think about the way a coral reef gets built, right, little tiny bits of coral over long periods of time eventually creates this immovable, powerful structure.

Peter Sobota [01:01:23] Barrier, yeah. I think the theme for me today has really been centered around two words, obligation and opportunities. Lots of both. Final word for you, Stephen.

Stephen Pimpare [01:01:33] So I argued earlier that we have to recognize that we are operating outside the bounds of the U.S. Constitution as we have come to understand it and I genuinely believe that and I think that that is step one in understanding how we think about what we do about it right. That is terrifying. What that also means is that creates this enormous opportunity to think about what kind of world we want to build, right? I would argue that the United States Constitution has failed us right from the start. It has been a disaster. It is fundamentally undemocratic in a thousand different ways, right. And at the best, We have had something that we might want to refer to as a democratic political system from 1965 until let's say last year, right? The enactment of the Voting Rights Act, right. We're a really young democracy, right, and part of the reason that we are still not fully democratic and sliding farther and farther away from that is that the basic political institutions themselves were expressly designed to limit our collective ability. To represent ourselves, right? Don't take my word for it, take James Madison's words. What that means is that we can engage in an act of extraordinary and profound imagination. What is the world that we wanna see? What does a genuinely democratic representative system look like? What kind of role can we all play in that? What kind role does money play in our political system and how do we restore some relative equity among population groups. How do we take ourselves out of the lead for incarceration or violence or gun deaths or high infant mortality and high poverty, right? These are things that were true long before Trump. How do then rebuild something that is radically better than the status quo ante?

Peter Sobota [01:03:41] Perfect. We'll leave it right there. Thanks again to our guest, Stephen Pimpare, for joining us. The Hopeful inSocialWork podcast team is Steve Sturman, our web and tech guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant, content and guest coordinator. Say hi, Ryan. (Ryan: Hello!) And I'm Peter Sobota. We'll see you next time, everybody.