Social work’s theories and practices reflect the times in which they live. In a deep sense, social work is defined by the evolving relationship between the state and the individual. Any changes in definition of either the political or the personal therefore result in shifts in how we understand that domain in which the state and the individual meet. This domain or discourse we now know as the social. Recent upheavals in the philosophy and politics surrounding welfare have resulted in redefinitions of both the social and those who work-the-social, rightly called social workers. In the wake of such changes, social work’s knowledge base and practice repertoire have also experienced major alterations in their character.

I want to argue that in these new political and cultural contexts many of social work’s theories and practices have become analytically more shallow and increasingly performance-orientated. The concept of modernity will prove useful in helping us to understand the rise of the social worker in the nineteenth century. It will allow us to track her evolution from diagnostic caseworker to care manager, from applied social scientist to service coordinator.

Modernity has faced two crises, each brought about by perceived excesses in one or other of its two defining dimensions of liberty and discipline (Wagner, 1994). The first crisis witnessed growing misery and social unrest suffered under the worst features of nineteenth-century liberalism with its heavy emphasis on human freedom and individual autonomy. The solution to these problems of social disorder led to attempts to discipline and regulate social life. Social work, along with other forms of collective action in the emerging welfare state, formed as part of this disciplining process. But by the 1960s, there were growing feelings amongst New Right radical