

EDITORIAL

The Brazilian social formation in Social Work's contemporary debate

Lucas Bezerra¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1297-2224>**Joana Valente Santana²**<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4033-1317>¹Federal University of Alagoas, School of Social Work, Post-Graduate Program in Social Work, Maceió, Alagoas, Brazil.²Federal University of Pará, School of Social Work, Post-Graduate Program in Social Work, Belém, Pará, Brazil.

Received on 18.09.2025. Approved on 29.09.2025. Revised on 02.11.2025.

The contemporary debate in Brazilian Social Work has seen a growing presence of reflections on the Brazilian social formation. This movement, particularly visible in the last decade, is manifested through the expansion of research, master's and doctoral theses, book publications, study group initiatives, and scientific outreach courses directly linked to the historical and social foundations of the national reality. This trend can be observed across all regions of the country, and the publication by *Katálysis Journal* of a special issue entitled *Social Work, the Social Question, and Brazilian Social Formation* stands as clear evidence of this movement.

This renewed interest, undeniably collective, while encompassing a diversity of researchers, does not emerge by chance. In general, the initiatives addressing this theme over the past ten years have aimed to engage theoretically and politically with Brazil's changing conjunctural landscape. Among the principal "events" shaping this historical trajectory are the process that culminated in the 2016 juridical-parliamentary-media coup; the election of the far right in 2018; the rise of Bolsonaroism; the 2022 electoral victory of left-wing, progressive, and democratic forces; the coup attempt of January 8, 2023; and, most recently, the conviction of individuals implicated in that conspiracy, including former president Jair Bolsonaro. It was in the middle of this high tension in Brazilian society, at a time when the democratic struggle had become paramount, that social workers, in collaboration with researchers from other fields, deepened their analysis of the major issues shaping the country.

Brazil, with all its abundance, complexity, and inevitable as an object of study, has become a fruitful and stimulating focus on the profession's research agenda. While pointing to the qualification and refinement of the treatment given to the historical foundations of Brazilian formation¹ in our intellectual production, this movement develops from a *political-organizational concern*. From this perspective, the reflections by Brazilian Social Work regarding the national context demonstrate a theoretical and practical commitment with the "subaltern", aligned with the profession's strategic social orientation.

It is important to highlight that the attention given to the Brazilian social formation in the contemporary professional debate has revolved around different main themes: (i) the social question; (ii) the racial question; (iii) the agrarian, urban, and environmental question; (iv) regional and inter-regional inequalities; (v) the



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

links between capitalism, racism, and patriarchy; (vi) social policy; and (vii) conjunctural studies. Within this wide-ranging scope, researchers show a pronounced interest in tackling these issues while taking into account *the specificities of Brazil's social formation*, recognizing its historicity, complexity, and ties to the structural processes that shape the national reality.

This process has significantly contributed to *broadening the profession's theoretical-critical corpus*, enhancing our analysis across at least three key dimensions: (i) the understanding of the social question; (ii) the narrative of Social Work's historical development as a foundational element of the field; and (iii) the trajectory and substance of social policies in Brazil.

It is, above all, within the *stricto sensu* post-graduate programs in Social Work that these debates are most prominently visible. On one hand, there is a growing number of trained social workers engaging with this thematic area in postgraduate research. Simultaneously, post-graduate programs in the field have welcomed researchers from other areas of knowledge, such as History, Economics, and Social Sciences. These scholars are generally aligned with critical social thought and interested in studying Brazil, yet often find limitations within their original disciplines. This dynamic serves as further evidence of the intellectual maturity attained by Brazilian Social Work (Netto, 2011a) and of its consolidation not only as a professional practice but also as a field of knowledge production (Mota, 2013).

The novelty of this trend, however, lies not in the *emergence of the debate*, but in its *expansion and diffusion*. Brazilian Social Work has long included the major themes of national formation among its central concerns. What we witness today, therefore, is the outcome of a historical process linked to the critical renewal of the field – one that found a crucial foundation in its dialogue with the broader social thought produced in Brazil².

From this perspective, the current generation of researchers not only inherits this legacy — which includes the very delineation of the profession's ethical-political project — but also commits to confronting the theoretical, political, and ideological challenges of their own time.

Regarding the ideological struggle in particular, there is a notable vitality of contributions linked to the Marxist tradition for interpreting Brazil, as condensed in the works of prominent thinkers such as Caio Prado Júnior, Jacob Gorender, Florestan Fernandes, Ruy Mauro Marini, Nelson Werneck Sodr , V nia Bambirra, Cl vis Moura, Heleieth Saffioti, among others.

On the other hand, we observe the revitalization of conservative and reactionary perspectives, accompanied by the expansion of forces supported by different forms of irrationalism. This dynamic ultimately highlights the dispute over the meanings attributed to history and the interpretation of contemporary Brazil. Hence the importance of Social Work research remaining committed to interpreting reality in its historical specificity, while articulating the singular and universal dimensions inherent to every social phenomenon. In the struggle against the advance of irrationalism, the defense of the “science of history” (Marx & Engels, 2007) and the rationality of the dialectical method are essential, since through this method, the apprehension of reality maintains the necessary relationship between subject and object (Netto, 2011b). This requires an interpretation of what exists in objective reality, capturing the multiple determinants that shape both the professional practice of social workers and the focus of research within the field of Social Work. All determinations of social life are mediated in concrete reality and form part of a single bourgeois, ethnical, racial, and patriarchal sociability.

In line with the theme of this issue, we understand that a major contribution offered by approaching the foundations of Brazilian social formation is the possibility of better historicizing the “social question” in our country. Pushing forward the historical reconstruction of its origins and development remains an open challenge, with much still to be investigated, understood, and critically examined. Even today, for instance, it is frequent to find the argument that the “social question” in Brazil only emerged in the early twentieth century, in the context of the post-1930 urban-industrial expansion. On the contrary, the progress of historiographical research in Brazilian debates already allows us to recognize the presence of the “social question” in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the productive landscape was mainly agricultural and for exports, while industrialization was beginning to take its first steps amid tensions involving, in an interconnected way, both enslaved and free people reacting to the inequalities produced by the nascent and expanding dependent Brazilian capitalism (Badar , 2008; Mara & Bezerra, 2021; Castelo & Rocamora, 2024).

These still underexplored elements point to the need for a deeper and more critical investigation into the genesis of the “social question” in Brazil. Engaging in dialogue with the country's interpreters can enrich this endeavor, helping us to formulate the essential question: *how can the “social question” be interpreted in*

light of the historical particularities of our social formation? Moreover, grasping the “social question” within a given social formation, in all its complexity, requires going beyond the analysis of its immediate forms of manifestation — the so-called “expressions of the social question” — and situating it within the historical foundations that give rise to it in concrete reality. It is in this movement of historicization that one of the most crucial tasks of Brazilian Social Work today resides.

This historical concern with Brazil's social formation carries a strategically political and pedagogical dimension for the professional project (Bezerra, Medeiros & Nogueira, 2019), insofar as understanding the country's reality is an essential condition for historicizing the “social question,” identifying the particularities of the profession's development in Brazil, and providing critical tools that can strengthen the professional practice of social workers.

This is not a secondary concern, but rather a foundational element that sustains the unity between education and professional practice. This requires that the discussion not be confined to a single discipline or isolated curricular component, but instead take on an *integrating character*, connecting the foundations of Social Work, the critique of political economy, the analysis of social policies, and the agrarian, urban, environmental, ethnoracial, and gender questions, among others.

As Ianni (1989) reminds us, to know the country's history is to unveil the social history of its people. This constitutes critical ammunition, essential for ensuring that Social Work continues to contribute, alongside the working classes, to confronting the dilemmas and contradictions that permeate our national reality, while pushing forward proposals for its radical transformation.

Between Belém and Maceió, October 2025.

References

- ABEPSS. Associação Brasileira de Ensino e Pesquisa em Serviço Social. Diretrizes gerais para o curso de Serviço Social: com base no currículo mínimo aprovado em Assembleia Geral Extraordinária de 8 de novembro de 1996. Rio de Janeiro: ABEPSS, 1996.
- BADARÓ, M. (2008). Escravizados e livres: experiências comuns na formação da classe trabalhadora carioca. Bom Texto.
- BEZERRA, L., MEDEIROS, E., & NOGUEIRA, L. (org.) (2019). Formação social e serviço social: a realidade brasileira em debate. Outras Expressões.
- CASTELO, R., & ROCAMORA, G. (2024) Capitalismo dependente e escravidão nas origens da “questão social” no Brasil. Proceedings of the 18th ENPES, ABEPSS, Fortaleza.
- IANNI, O. (1989). A questão social. Revista USP, 3:145–154. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9036.v0i3p145-154>.
- MARA, E., & BEZERRA, L. (2021). A busca como medida: a “questão social” na formação social brasileira. Temporalis, 21(42):110–125. <https://doi.org/10.22422/temporalis.2021v21n42p110-125>
- MARX, K., & ENGELS, F. (2007). A ideologia alemã. Supervisão editorial: Leandro Konder; tradução: Rubens Enderle, Nélio Schneider, Luciano C. Martorano. Boitempo.
- MOTA, A. E. (2013). Serviço Social brasileiro: profissão e área do conhecimento. Katálysis, 16(n. esp.):17–27.
- NETTO, J. P. (2011a). Ditadura e serviço social: uma análise do Serviço Social no Brasil pós-64. Cortez.
- NETTO, J. P. (2011b). Introdução ao estudo do Método em Marx (1st ed.). Expressão Popular.
- PEREIRA, E. M., & FRANÇA, G. de S. (2021, jul./dez.). Oito notas sobre formação social brasileira e renovação crítica do Serviço Social. Temporalis, 21(42):143–157. <https://doi.org/10.22422/temporalis.2021v21n41p143-157>

Notas:

- ¹ It is important to note that the historical foundations of Brazilian education are defined in the Fundamental Core Areas of the ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines: Core Areas of Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Social Life, Core Area of Foundations of the Socio-Historical Development of Brazilian Society, and Core Area of Foundations of Professional Work. Regarding the core area that deals with the particularities of socio-historical formation, the ABEPSS Guidelines state: “This core area refers to knowledge of the economic, social, political, and cultural constitution of Brazilian society, in its dependent, urban-industrial configuration, in its regional and local diversities, articulated with the analysis of the agrarian and agricultural question, as a fundamental element of national historical particularity. This analysis focuses on understanding the changes that allowed certain patterns of capitalist

development to take hold in the country, as well as the economic, social, and political impacts specific to Brazilian society, such as social inequalities, class, gender, and ethnic/racial differentiation, social exclusion, etc.” (ABEPSS, 1996, p. 11).

² On the relationship between Brazilian social thought and the critical renewal of Social Work, see Pereira & França (2021).

Lucas Bezerra

lucas.araujo@fsso.ufal.br

Ph.D. in Social Work from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Adjunct Professor at the School of Social Work and the Post-Graduate Program in Social Work at the Federal University of Alagoas.

Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL)

Av. Principal da UFAL – Faculdade de Serviço Social, Cidade Universitária

Maceió – Alagoas – Brazil

ZIP Code: 57072-900

Joana Valente Santana

joanavalente@ufpa.br

Ph.D. in Social Work from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Full Professor at the School of Social Work and the Graduate Program in Social Work at the Federal University of Pará. CNPq Research Productivity Fellow. President of the Brazilian Association of Education and Research in Social Work – 2025/2026 Term.

Federal University of Pará (UFPA)

Augusto Corrêa St., 01, Campus Universitário do Guamá

Instituto de Ciências Sociais Aplicadas – Guamá

Belém - Pará – Brazil

ZIP Code: 66075-110

Acknowledgements:

Not applicable.

Funding Agency

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

Both authors are equally responsible for all stages of manuscript preparation.

Ethics Committee approval

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

The authors consent with publication of the present manuscript.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No research data was generated or employed.

Overseeing Editors

Mailiz Garibotti Lusa – Editor-in-Chief

Ricardo Lara – Editorial Board