

# Editorial

## Social Work: analytic contributions to professional practice

This issue of Revista **Katálysis**, **Serviço Social: contribuições analíticas sobre o exercício profissional** (*Social Work: analytic contributions to professional practice*), presents an overview of the multiple theoretical and political trends underway in the professional universe and discusses their relation to the essential elements of professional activity. These trends are seen in the direction imprinted on the profession by the production and reproduction of social relations, in the implementation of professional education, in the interpretation of the historic determinants of this professionalization and in the ways of explaining and realizing the responsibilities of social workers in the contemporary historic scene marked by profound historic economic, political and cultural transformations.

The diversity of perspectives found here in the interpretations of the process of institutionalization and development of the profession within different national societies, of the current challenges confronting the work of the social assistant – in the inseparable theoretical-methodological, ethical-political and technical-operative dimensions – condenses the professional and academic debate in the field of Social Work in Brazil. At the same time, it opens a dialogue with work concerning the European Union (Portugal and Germany) and other Latin American countries (Uruguay and Argentina). At the same time, visibility is given to the challenges confronted by social workers in the construction of a collective professional project, the social foundation of which is the social forces that struggle for social hegemony.

The articles presented here intensify a rigorous and demanding theoretical debate that has a scientific basis and is dedicated to understanding the determinants of social life beyond their empiric manifestations and to deciphering the discourses of social agents such as they appear at the surface of social life. The articles also examine the “scientific” formalization that legitimates and reiterates these discourses, and undertake the *theoretical criticism* needed to unveil these discourses. This is a pre-condition for identifying the teleological dimension of work, and for elucidating the meaning and the social effects of professional activities on the social subjects to whom they are aimed and, in particular, on the subaltern classes. They seek to affirm their social interests and needs on the public scene, in the struggle for rights of citizenship, with this understood as a historic process that involves the socialization of political, economic and cultural power (COUTINHO, 2000).

The articles gathered in this issue of *Katálysis* analyze and respond to professional challenges that are historically circumscribed: they involve Social Work, but do not explain its internal barriers that are drawn by the deep and broad transformation underway in capitalist society, in the context of the global expansion of capital, which reinforces the combined unequal development of regions and countries, companies and production sectors, social classes and cultural formations, which are tinged by the traces of their historic particularities (LÊNIN, 1976; MANDEL, 1985).

In the counter-trend of a long recessive wave on the world scene, under the hegemony of financial capital (CHESNAIS, 1996, 1998), orchestrated by the multilateral agencies in the shadow of the North American empire, Capitalism has advanced in its vocation of internationalizing production and markets, and in its demand for “structural adjustment” policies from the national states. These policies give free reign to speculative financial capital without regulation and to the profitability of large multinational conglomerates, while radicalizing the “social question”.

The conservative character of the neoliberal project is expressed, on one hand, by the naturalization of the capitalist order and by the social inequalities inherent to it that are considered inevitable. This obscures the living presence of collective subjects and their struggles for the construction of history in favor of the exaltation of isolated individuals, according to liberal canons. On the other hand, this conservative character is expressed in a historic regression that is condensed in the dismantling of accumulated social conquests, which resulted from historic struggles of the working classes, consubstantiated in the universal social rights of citizenship, which are mediated by the State. The neoliberal project presents these conquests as “threats or difficulties” that are the cause of the “excessive social spending” that is at the root of the fiscal crises of the States. This is complemented by the spread of the liberal idea that “social well-being” pertains to the private realm of individuals, families and communities, and that gives priority to voluntary work and philanthropic initiatives. This is part of a broad effort to moralize the “social question” by disqualifying it as a public, political and national issue (YAZBEK, 2001) and to depoliticize the notion of civil society. The intervention of the State, to attend social needs, focuses on social programs to combat extreme poverty and control social risk. It attempts to transfer the provision of social rights to market and philanthropic forces. Soares (2003, p.12) reaffirms:

*Philanthropy substitutes social rights. The poor substitute the citizens. Individual help substitutes collective solidarity. The emergency and provisional substitute the permanent. Micro-situations substitute public policies. The local substitutes the regional and the national. It is the current trend of dedicating a minimal to the social sphere to confront economic globalization. Globalization is for grand capital alone. When it comes to work and poverty, each one fends for herself – preferably with a state that is strong when it comes to sustaining the financial system and bankrupt when it comes to social care.*

The “liberalizing shock” realized by recent governments has included commercial openings, privatizations, financial deregulation, the increased precariousness of labor and monetary orthodoxy – and has not overcome the fragility of the Brazilian economy. In fact the perverse results of neoliberal policy are the combination of: unemployment, recession, economic denationalization and an increase in foreign vulnerability.

In the sphere of the organization of production of goods and services, the Fordist-Taylorist standards have come to co-exist with high technology forms of organization of production that incorporate scientific advances, but that have as a counterpart labor relations that are regressive for workers interests. The deregulation of capital increases the rate of absolute and relative surplus value, which the discourse of capital defines as “flexibility”. This flexibility is imposed not only on production but also on the management and remuneration of the labor force, the labor market, on social and labor rights and on consumption standards. This movement in favor of the economic growth of oligopolies and against social development viscerally affects the union struggle at a moment of recession and unemployment. Faced with the competitive world market, the need to improve the quality of products is a requirement to protect the super profits of multinational companies and the high interest rates that favor the agents of financial institutions. At the level of production, this involves reducing costs and broadening profit rates, while the lowering of costs of the so-called “labor factor” has a decisive weight, involving confrontation with the organization of labor and union struggles, salary cuts and the erosion of rights won through struggle. Reducing costs for capital are also seen in the implementation of the so-called polyvalent worker, the widespread streamlining of companies and in the capturing of surplus value from sub-contracted companies to which are transferred the risks of market oscillations. This productive restructuring radically affects the organization of work processes: the consumption and management of the workforce, the conditions of labor relations and the content of work itself. The work shift is

intensified and increased, the number of work posts reduced and working conditions and labor rights become more precarious. Simultaneously, worker participation, consent and adhesion to company strategies and goals is sought in an intense mystification of roles.

The culture of “post-modernity” in its neoconservative version is produced at the base of the current stage of what Harvey (1993) calls the “flexible accumulation of capital”. It is in keeping with the universal mercantilization and the inseparable, discardable, superficiality and banalization of life and generates tremors and fissures in values and ethics that support human emancipation. Post-modern thinking counters the social theories which, based on categories of modern reason, cultivate the “grand narratives”. It thus questions and flattens the positivist and Marxist paradigms and turns plans and utopias to shreds. In complement, it emphasizes the importance of the fragmented, the ephemeral, the intuitive and the micro-social. It invades art, culture, imaginaries and their beliefs, common knowledge and the ethnic, racial, religious and cultural dimensions, as it constructs identities that are drained of history (NETTO, 1996; SIMIONATTO, 1999).

The land of this society is mined with daily resistance and struggles inherent to a situation that is adverse to workers, who lack the stronger social bonds that would give them more influence in the public image. This situation that is an impediment to the realization of rights, contradictorily attests to the urgency of the debate that considers the particular social-historic and cultural conditions that support the construction of rights as conquests and or concessions of power and the dilemmas of their realization in social practice. These are the very dilemmas faced by Social Work.

It is this dense historic ground that supplies the social bases of the polemic that is presented here. This historic process is altering occupational spaces, and social conditions and relations that circumscribe the work of the social assistant as well as the social needs and demands expressed in the “social question” whether by means of public policies or social struggles.

The relations between the social forces condition the relative autonomy that social workers have to determine the theoretical, ethical and operative routes of their daily professional exercise. But professional responses are also forged with support from the reserve of forces accumulated by social workers in their professional culture, ethical debate, academic production and through the systematization and exchange of professional experiences. The reading of class relations and of relations between classes and the State – in particular, of social policies as the basic mediation for professional practice – is mirrored in the way that the social processes that influence the construction of the social bases for legitimation of the profession are appropriated and analyzed, in the formulation of work

proposals and in the selection of ethical principles that inform the arsenal of strategies and technical-operative procedures that they make viable in the realm of the contradictory social relations that govern sociability in the society of capital.

The reader will find in this issue of *Revista Katálysis* a distinct set of articles that are grouped around the issue of *fundamentals of professional practice*. The potential and the centrality of *theoretical-practical education of professional practice* in current curricular guidelines in this country, considered in their multiple implications and dimensions, is *Yolanda Guerra's* theme in the opening article of the journal. *Ximena Baráibar Ribero* analyzes the transformation in the regimes of social protection in Uruguay, as determined by neoliberal guidelines. She highlights the impacts of social policies – as spheres of provision of services and of professional insertion – in Social Work, whose activities were historically inscribed in the execution of those policies, a space which is now disputed by voluntary work. *Maria Helena Nunes* presents us with a conceptual debate about the “society of risk”, considered to be the posterior phase of industrial society or class society and which emphasizes the generalized dangers and insecurity in the stage of “reflexive modernity” (to use the terms of Beck and Guiddens) and their refractions in the “agency of the social assistant”. This is conceived as the capacity of the reflexive subject to analyze the strategic direction that, by participating in the social regulation of the Welfare-State, is imprinted on the construction of citizenry based on a “theory of human emancipation” in the framework of post-modernity. *Vera Maria Ribeiro Nogueira* discusses the legitimacy of professional intervention, emphasizing the primacy of the ethical-political project of Social Work in Brazil, based on data from recent national events and in particular, the IX Brazilian Congress of Social Assistants. The author affirms that professional discourse and practice do not indicate a paradigmatic crises in the research and work of social assistants in Brazil given the supposed reversal in the materiality of their actions due to the structural adjustment policies implemented in Latin America.

The history of Social Work is reconsidered by *Alejandra Bettina Facciuto* by contemplating the influences of developmentalism in Argentine Social Work and its relations with the movement to reconceptualize Social Work. *Elizabeth Ortega* and *Myriam R. Mitjavila* also review the history by conducting a re-reading of the process of institutionalization of Social Work in Uruguay, in the period known as neobatismo (1940-1960), associated to the expansion of the processes of medicalization of social life. The author maintains that the transformations that took place in the etiological models of the infirmities that organize knowledge in the field of health, in the realm of Pan Americanist strategy, allow the installation of new

elements of power (in the Foucaultian sense), thus redefining professional fields, including Social Work. Meanwhile, the trajectory, profile and particularities of professionalization of Social Work and of professional education in Germany are the object of the text of *Vera Herweg Westphal*.

Occupational spaces and professional responses are considered from distinct angles and directions: *Teresa Kleba Lisboa* and *Eliane Aparecida Pinheiro* dedicate themselves to the practice of social assistance in relation to violence against women, understood as a violation of Human Rights and a public health problem, emphasizing theoretical-methodological contributions, technical-operative tools and strategies and possibilities for intervention in the realm of public policies: *Maria José de Oliveira Lima* and *Claudia Maria Daher Cosac* map the profile and activity of social assistants in companies from São Paulo State's Ribeirão Preto macro-region who are involved in human resources management, from the corporate perspective. The process of insertion of Social Work in the Family Health Program in Campina Grande (PB), the professional attributions and the difficulties and challenges in the concretization of social rights are the themes of articles by *Francisca E. Bernardino*, *Joselita A. Brasileiro*, *Kathleen E. Leal Vasconcelos*, *Luciana P. Cavalcante* and *Sâmbara Paula Ribeiro*.

Concluding this issue, the reader will find the analysis by *Sergio Lessa* of a controversy about the complementarity between ethics and politics, presupposed in the professional project.

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