

Editorial

Social Work in Latin America: a review of the challenges and opportunities

If we review the issues that have convoked the various professional events throughout Latin America in recent years, we find - in one form or another - a discussion of the ethical-political dimension of Social Work from a critical perspective. This is a realization that the professional field is currently undergoing a collective change, which is opening new paths, based on accumulated capital and in relation to the social-political context in which we live. We continue to reflect upon Social Work in relation to the social conditions and its capacity to respond to them. As Nicolás Casullo affirmed, we remain “with a critical vigil, alert like questioning theories before the devastating spirit of the time”. This critical vigil recurs in the pages of this edition. As expressed by one of the articles, our region is experiencing a historic moment, with a strong Latin American bent, as has not been seen for many decades. Latin America is being ridden by an attempt to break with the immediately preceding times and the destiny is not at all assured a priori. But the intent exists, with a strength that grants the resurgence of political and social forces that are expressed through the politicization of needs. As could not be otherwise, this process is reflected in our debates, in our questioning and in our production.

Concerning the latter, we know that at various moments of history, the hegemonic discursivity of Social Work suffered imbalances in its positions, at times in favor of more structural analyses, at other times in favor of problems specific to the field. But an understanding of the macro-problem must necessarily be accompanied by an analysis of the professional field in strict terms. The field is newly interpellated and demands restructurings and a renewed effort to reconsider the insertion of Social Work in the social relations that define the current scenario, as well as the impact of the current social transformation at the heart of the profession, professional training and the production of knowledge.

One positive quality found in some of the articles presented here is a scrupulous theoretically based articulation between the text and the context of our profession, which places on the agenda for debate important questions that include: the relationship between Social Work and democracy, Social Policies and their contradictory yet indispensable character as an area for dispute in the field of access to social wealth, a recovery of central categories – such as dependency – for the self-understanding of the Latin American situation and thus, the production of knowledge, professional training and the history of the profession. All

of these themes are substantive and not accessory, for two reasons. First, because they allow establishing convergences between the modifications in the field of the distributive struggle at the social and governmental level and of Social Work. Second, because they mark the possibilities and limitations of the consequences and direction of our professional activity.

It appears that new opportunities are arising. In fact, the central issue that articulates this publication indicates this, by proposing a discussion about Social Work in Latin America: review, challenges and opportunities. This issue has a precedent in a very important publication from CELATS that coincidentally had the name *Trabajo Social en América Latina. Balance y perspectivas* [Social Work in Latin America. A Review and Perspective], published 1982, a time in which this extraordinary professional movement called “Reconceptualization”, demanded a revision, at the same time that our societies entered the dramatic spotlight of neoliberal reconstruction. It thus appears that when we identify times of review and challenge, we can suppose that we are undergoing a time of inflection and that it is necessary to stop, reflect and make proposals. I believe that this new challenging movement allows the rebirth of certain utopias. A utopia that, as Feyerabend said, is not any pipe-dream but a possibility to evaluate in the fairest possible terms both the misfortunes and the opportunities of this transformative moment. It is thus a utopia that denies the escapism of idealistic proposals, but that is capable of simultaneously reaching this prudent optimism that helps us to identify the tasks of this moment, at the heart of the institutions in which our work is inscribed - that is the academic, labor union and professional institutions.

The various authors that occupy these pages - who encompass seven countries and express different and divergent theoretical perspectives – present problems that stem from solid cores of professional labor and establish solid theoretical bases. They do so with a conviction, that is not fundamentalist, but well founded, and with utopias, not Promethean but reasonable, from a reason that is not prescriptive but questioning, and thus capable of placing new issues on the agenda for collective debates. All of the themes presented are controversial and allow diverse points of view. The positions of the authors present a range of trends, but all of them cast us to a more complex approach to Social Work that is immersed in the complex web that

develops in the inter-relations between State, Market and Society. For this reason, they shed light on the discussion about the perspectives and challenges of Social Work.

In relation to these challenges and perspectives, I understand – and this issue presents sufficient reasons to do so – that our position in support of the expansion and demandability of social rights and their democratic administration continues to be valid. This represents the interiorization in the professional field of the current demands of the various social and political actors. The demandability and justiciability of social and economic rights is a social, political, cultural and legal process, and for this reason is so compelling to us as a professional category. The form and the degree to which a State complies with its obligations in terms of economic and social rights should involve the active and organized participation of civil society, and this participation is constitutive of citizenship.

A strategy of demandability requires a social platform, the sustainability of actors, of organizations, of social subjects who recognize themselves as subjects of rights, and as such have the capital necessary to organize and mobilize themselves, and demand their complete realization. To do so, an important change in any strategy for demandability of rights would certainly involve the inversion that we strive for in the recomposition of the social fabric and also in the use of the potential nuclei of demandability of the laws, the exploitation of the existing legal shortfalls, of the administrative acts that violate rights and of the antecedents in our own and other countries, which provide us an immense field of investigation.

At the beginning we mentioned that we maintain a critical vigil. This is what critical work is composed of. Critical work which is not limited, in my understanding, to a ethical-political project, but that intends to trigger an intellectual project. Thus, it is a criticism that encompasses theory, methodology, ethics and politics. It is a criticism that is not romantic, and is thus not nostalgic for a supposedly satisfactory past. It is critical work that helps us to free ourselves from immediacy, from discontent, from impossibility and which illuminates “what is left to be done” and allows us to recognize the distinct social moments as necessary but not eternal. This stimulates us to study reality, while warning of its transformative trends – and not only dreaming of what we want.

The pages of this issue steer us in this direction and as a whole contribute to reaffirm the meaning of our work, which is nothing else but to reduce the asymmetries through the construction of justice.

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