

Marx, Marxisms and Social Work

To raise the debate about “Marxisms” in Social Work involves confronting deformations, distortions, derivations, revisions and reductionisms suffered by Marxist thinking in the short period since this dialog was incorporated to the content of the professional education of social workers. Nevertheless, to begin by highlighting these consequences is not to ignore the enriching that the assimilation of this thought has provided to Social Work. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, thanks to this theoretical-methodological option, the endeavor of opposing the hegemony of the dominant classes in the academy became nearly solely that of Social Work, so much so that the course is now the refuge of philosophers, economists, educators and other professionals who seek a radical break with the positivist legacy.

To recognize, here and now, the quality of the great Marxist intellectuals linked to Social Work whose intrinsically critical production became a reference in the social sciences, would be an easy task. Nevertheless, the mention of Marxism in the plural – Marxisms – leaves no doubt about the proposal of the invitation made by *Revista Katálysis*. I am therefore responsible, from the perspective of “totalizing knowledge” (WOOD; FOSTER, 1999), for the difficult task of synthesizing what important researchers have already demonstrated by addressing this theme. In this sense, before delving into the specifics, I turn to Netto (1989), whose contribution is essential for understanding the developments of the approximation of Social Work to the Marxist tradition. There is, according to Netto, a “genetic antagonism” between Marx’s thinking and Social Work, but at the same time, the “inclusive and encompassing macroscopic frameworks of bourgeois society” constitute a common ground, that makes both “unthinkable outside the realm of bourgeois society”.

From different perspectives, both Social Work as well as Marxism have the “social question” as a substrate. But, while Social Work “arose with a vocation to support the administration of the ‘social question’ in the framework of bourgeois society” the social question is, for Marx, “a complex that is absolutely inseparable from capitalism”. Thus, this diverse relationship with a single substrate has an “insignificant role, if compared with that which distinguishes them”. In this way, the author does not exclude possibilities of interlocution between Social Work and Marxian thinking, but demonstrates, through the movement that makes them incompatible, implications that “design a scenario of exclusion” in the theoretical plane. Above all by considering that the “profession is institutionalized and affirmed by nurturing a set of knowledge anchored in a theoretical line (that of conservative thinking) that is antagonistic to Marxist thought.”

The dialog between sectors of Social Work and Marxist tradition began in the 1960s, at the interior of a social movement that is not exclusive to Brazil or to the profession. At the time, in addition to the pressure from revolutionary movements and the student rebellion, especially in France (1968), Brazilian universities did not escape the internal influences of the military coup of 1964. It is in this context that the Reconceptualization of Social Work in Latin America arose – a process that questioned the meaning of professional action and thus introduced Marxism to the contents of professional education – with repercussions and derivations of thinking of Marx that are on the professional agenda until today. Materialized in the discipline Methodology of Social Work, this content was formally inserted into professional education in 1982, in an environment marked by internal struggles between conservative thinking and critical thinking. The option for a new perspective was apparently lacking an approximation to Marxian sources and to the classics of the Marxist tradition, but this is not what reality showed. To the contrary, research by Quiroga (2000, p. 138) demonstrates that there was and still are different understandings of Marxism. In the derivations indicated, Quiroga distinguishes:

[...] Marx emphasizes the determination of the economic factor as the sole element, the generator of the development of society, a Marx that over emphasizes the role of classes, of their struggle, of the meaning of

the individual constructing his history, separated from the material base that sustains him; a Marx that is ‘methodological’ in a precisely positivist sense, or that is, who is reduced to method; a Marx that is atrophied to the dimension of social scientist ‘investigator’ of society, disconnected from his conviction of the need for its transformation.

The approximation of Social Work to the Marxist tradition was conducted “under highly reduced theoretical demands – the requirements that commanded it were from above all an ideological political nature, from which arose a strongly instrumental perspective in this interlocution” (NETTO, 1989, p. 97). Quiroga clarifies that the majority of the teachers she interviewed did not have access to Marx’s original texts, with their education steered by the thinking of Althusser, whose epistemological reflection gave primacy to the subject in the scientific process.

In *O estruturalismo e a miséria da razão* [Structuralism and the Misery of Reason], Coutinho (2010, p. 175-176) affirms that “Althusser and his school sought to present structuralism (or their particular version of it) as the result of a correct ‘reading’ of Marx”. And retorts: “under the pretext of ‘rediscovery’ of the true Marx, an objective destruction of the essence of the Marxist inheritance is practiced and its substitution, consciously or unconsciously, by a fashionable bourgeois philosophy.”

I would not say that Social Work’s option for Althusser had the conscious or unconscious pretense of a “rediscovery” of the true Marx, even if, as was found, most of the professors did not read Marx. Nevertheless, despite the biased approximation, Social Work assimilated isolated elements of Marx’s thinking that responded to a predominant line of questioning in the profession, distinguishable from the idea of Marxist hegemony. This is false, and in view, explains the eclecticism.

Like Netto (1989, p. 100-101), I believe there is a centralization of the debate that needs to be confronted. In his words:

[...] I am inclined to think that the debate is centralized by professionals linked to the Marxist tradition (or who are close to it) ‘because the effective distinction of the category is not being made explicit’. In this case, the polemic can die-out, given that distinct protagonists, representatives of other trends, are not heard – and the loss is collective, given that there is no open confrontation of ideas, Marxists and non-Marxists fail to reciprocally stimulate each other in the privileged ground that is that of the ideal confrontation.

In thesis, every social worker is a Marxist. Why is it so difficult to recognize the differences? It appears to me more appropriate to say that Social Work is the profession that most brings together questioning human beings, but this does not make them all Marxists.

I would emphasize that the education of this professional, despite enormous advances, has still not been able to accumulate the intellectual resources needed for this questioning to be constituted in the bridge that connects all social workers to the “totalizing knowledge.” This is why there are so many Marxisms, which do not allow aspiring to a unified opposition to capitalism.

In addition to the biases mentioned, it is difficult for Social Work, because of its interventionist nature, to escape activism, which tends to be subordinated to positivist ideologies. Analyzing “the Stalinist narrowness”, Coutinho (2010, p. 180), demonstrates how “countless sincere Marxists” combat the inheritance of Marx and put in its place “the most fleeting ‘fashions’ of decadent thinking.”

In Brazil, particularly in the Lula era, in which the subtlety of contradictory initiatives created the “apology of new developmentalism” (MOTA, 2012), the greatest challenge to Social Work is to analyze this historic moment. Are the professionals prepared to conduct this analysis without capitulating to irrationalism? Ana Elizabete Mota, who knows this material much better than I do, reaffirms the profession’s condition as protagonist of a professional project based on values, principles and guidelines inherent to a given social project: an emancipated and radically human society. In this sense, it is fitting to permanently strive for an education based on Marx and on Marxist tradition.

I end here, not for having concluded, but because of my own limits and a lack of space. With sincere appreciation to *Revista Katálisis*, I leave the readers with the articles that compose this issue of the journal and with the task of considering that there is a society to be transformed.

Maria Augusta Tavares, João Pessoa, January 2013.

References

- COUTINHO, C. N. *O estruturalismo e a miséria da razão*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2010
- MOTA, A. E. (Org.). *Desenvolvimentismo e construção de hegemonia: crescimento econômico e reprodução da desigualdade*. São Paulo: Cortez, 2012.
- NETTO, J. P. O Serviço Social e a tradição marxista. *Serviço Social & Sociedade*, Cortez, ano 10, n. 30, p. 89-102, maio/ago. 1989.
- QUIROGA, C. Invasión positivista en el marxismo: el caso de la enseñanza de la metodología en el Servicio Social. *In: BORGIANI, E.; MONTAÑO, C. (Org.). Metodología y Servicio Social hoy en debate*. São Paulo: Cortez, 2000, p. 121-170.
- WOOD, E. M.; FOSTER, J. B. (Org.). *Em defesa da história: marxismo e pós-modernismo*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1999.

Maria Augusta Tavares

guga2004@uol.com.br

Doctor in Social Work, Federal University at Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)

Post-doctoral studies in Social Work at the Instituto Superior Miguel Torga, Coimbra, and in Economics at the School of Economics at the University of Coimbra and in contemporary History at the Institute of Contemporary History of the New University of Lisbon, Portugal

Associate Professor II in the Department of Social Work at the Federal University at Paraíba (UFPB)

Address

UFPB – Departamento de Serviço Social

Conj. Humanístico, Bloco 4 – Campus I

João Pessoa – Pernambuco – Brazil

CEP: 58059-900