

THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Social Work in Spain: historic contexts, singularities and current challenges

Rosana Matos-Silveira

University of Granada, Spain

Translated by Jeffrey Hoff

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Abstract: This article analyzes the historic nature and construction of the so-called welfare state in Spain, as well as the particularities of the process of construction and consolidation of Social Work as a profession and discipline. It presents the important role of the profession in the implementation, organization and consolidation of the public social services network with the predominance of the professional bureaucratic-administrative model. It concludes by indicating the main current challenges to Social Work in a context of a strong crisis in the capitalist economic model and the radicalization of the social question.

Keywords: Social Work. Social question. Welfare State. Social services. Spain.

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Introduction

The Spanish citizenry in general and the working class in particular are currently experiencing the devastating consequences of the radicalization of the social question¹. Meanwhile, the government applies unjust neoliberal policies as an excuse for not applying fair and alternative measures to escape the current crisis of capital. This establishes “one more scenario of the many global expressions of the naturalization of the capitalist order and of the social inequalities inherent to its liberal conservative project” (IAMAMOTO, 2009). In fact, the same neoliberal proposals have been applied in Spain as in the rest of the world and the same process of structural transformation is underway (NAVARRO; TORRES LÓPEZ; GARZÓN, 2011).

The first year of the mandate of the Popular Party government led by Mariano Rajoy has just ended (2011-2012). This government has applied by decree drastic cuts in social spending with the complicity of most of the political class at the service of the dominant privileged classes. These measures consolidate alliances between those responsible for the current macroeconomic depression: the financial bourgeoisie, the business owners and the high bourgeoisie with better returns in the country's banking sector (which has enormous political influence and is dominated mainly by Germany, the United Kingdom and France).

The current crisis produces various phenomena: restrictions on credit, strong reductions in consumption, private debt, collapse of the real estate market, decline and standstill of the economy and as a result, a strong increase in unemployment.

The also excessive growth in financial activity that wound up causing the recent banking crisis in our country, but it manifest with a certain particularity because it has coincided with three particular circumstances: an impressive real estate bubble; and particularly severe indebtedness and lack of national savings; the supervision of the financial institutions somewhat different than in other countries because they have already suffered very devastating crises a few years earlier (NAVARRO; TORRES LÓPEZ; GARZÓN, 2011, p. 38).

The incipient Spanish welfare state² finds itself strongly threatened in attempts to maintain itself and improve so that it can face the new social challenges and transformations. The main challenges are: the aging population (with the resulting increased demand for healthcare and social services); the increased precariousness of the labor market and progressive scarcity of jobs; changes in the structure of households (single-person, late emancipation of children, single parent families); incorporation of women in the labor market (creating difficulties for the care of young children, those with disabilities, illness or the elderly); the increased population of immigrants who are in irregular administrative situations; inequalities in healthcare and quality of life; lack of housing and work for youth; and an increase of those who do not finish school.

Given this situation of structural violence that is a frontal attack on the pillars of the welfare state, Spanish social workers have reacted and denounced the reduction of public services to the minimum. Social services, for example, are the main context of the work of the profession (BARBERO, 2002), but they are now being reduced, possibly to be privatized.

From this perspective, this paper analyzes the current situation of the profession in light of the crisis and the challenges presented by the new expressions of the social question. It takes a historic look at the process in which the profession has been constructed in Spain focusing on the contexts in which the profession originated, its singularities and the current challenges in light of the new challenges.

Singularities of the process of construction of the “welfare state” in Spain

Late modernization is one of the historic peculiarities of Spain. Since the 19th century the country has developed its own logic to respond to the socio-political challenges created by the economic model impelled by the British industrial revolution. For Montagut (2008), one reason for this economic-industrial delay was the slow transformation of Spain's agricultural sector, which is an essential element in modernization, creating a strong contrast with development in Great Britain, France and Germany. This “insufficient, delayed and feudal agriculture with protectionist policies – that have been impeding economic reconversion towards industry” (TORTELLA, 1994 *apud* MONTAGUT, 2008, p. 144) is combined with geographic and cultural obstacles and educational deficiencies and literacy considered the lowest in all of Western Europe.

In the historic period of the Restoration (1874-1931) the ideologies and concepts that characterize the construction of the Spanish social question became viable. This led to the emergence of the contemporary liberal state and parliamentary and governmental activity – with their political-institutional effects – and the

bases for the so-called “Social Reform” began to be established (SILVEIRA; LOZANO, 2012). In 1903, the Institute of Social Reforms (IRS) was created to prepare legislation about the regulation of the labor market and to produce studies about social and labor problems. In this historic period, with clamor for political and institutional modernization, important laws were passed: for Sunday rest for workers; concerning strikes; the construction of “low cost housing”; to regulate the 8-hour work day; worker retirement; and to create unemployment insurance.

But it was during the government of the 2nd Republic (1931-1936) that policies concerning the labor market were implemented, with the legalization of unions, salary increases and reductions of the work shift. The republican government, in addition to investing strongly in education and training policies, established two important measures: the creation of the Caja Nacional del Seguro [National Insurance Bank] for unemployment (1931) and the Strike Law (1935). It was a short period but with great significance for the development of Spanish social policy³.

Nevertheless, a historic fact that served as background for understanding the genesis of the Spanish welfare state is located during the Franco government, which was instilled in 1939 after an atrocious civil war that led to four decades of totalitarian and authoritarian military dictatorship. This was a period when class oriented policies and those for the domination of gender were imposed, highlighted by the complicity of the Spanish Catholic Church, which, with an appeal to military values and strength, played an essential role in the reproduction of a patriarchal, totalizing, reactionary and racist ideology (NAVARRO, 2004).

Under this Franco regime there was a progressive – and clandestine – rise in community movements that called for better living conditions, to respond to the uncontrolled urbanization of the large cities in the 1960s. Unions also began to appear again. The Social Security System also became consolidated, but was “adapted to industrial Fordism, to the model of economic growth of the neocapitalism of late Francosim” (CABRERO, 2004, p. 75). Thus began a period of weak economic development led by the so-called “technocrats of Opus Dei” – an organization characterized by fanaticism, a highly hierarchical structure, elitism and authoritarianism – which, far from establishing a pre-democratic project, identified with the totalizing ideological apparatus of the dictatorial regime (NAVARRO, 2006, p. 142).

It was in this particular context that the bases began to be established for a midterm welfare model considered by business sectors as unsustainable and by union sectors as insufficient and underdeveloped (HIDALGO LAVIÉ, 2004). The Franco regime was obliged by the very logic of capitalist economic growth and by social demands to progressively embark on the construction of a social reform it did not foresee and did not want, based on the corporativist extension of social security (CABRERO, 2004).

The approval of the Constitution of 1978 led to a break with the dictatorial regime and the country passed from a Providence-State to a democratic model of the welfare state undertaking an institutional turn in the course of Spanish social reform with the recognition of a broad range of social, civil and political rights. This was a period in which the Spanish state underwent a structural change and reforms in which the protagonists were the institutions. There was also a decentralization of a local character, increased social debates, and consequently, processes of democratic transformation (BUENO ABAD, 1998).

Since the 1980s, new social reforms were encouraged through the territorial configuration of the so-called “State of the Autonomies”. A universalized and spatially decentralized structure of welfare services was established. This allowed the autonomous communities and respective provinces and municipalities to manage their specific interests with corresponding financial guarantees. In this way, the municipal administrations acquired increased importance in the context of a Europe that promoted the principle of subsidiarity. New policies for management of the public welfare were proposed, based on governance and public policies, on the strengthening of the competencies of local government and on citizen participation (GIJON; MATOS; MORATA, 2010).

This led to the establishment of the Spanish welfare state, which was denominated by Esping-Andersen (2000) as a “conservative-corporativist” welfare regime. The Spanish theoreticians Moreno y Sarasa (1993), Rodhes (1997), Moreno (1997, 2006) y Ferrera (1995) called this a “Mediterranean welfare regime”, which would include Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece and which is characterized by different needs and lifestyles: micro family solidarity and a conjunction between universalism and selectivity in the welfare policies. It was organized around four main issues: healthcare, education, social security (guaranteed income) and social services. These pillars each involved their respective social rights:

- a) Healthcare: universal right to the National Healthcare System and to basic healthcare services;
- b) Education: universal right to basic and mandatory education (6-16 years);
- c) Social Security/guaranteed income: right to retirement income based on previous contributions from the recipient or not, a payment for unemployment, limited to support and help to people without resources and in a situation of need;

d) Social services: universal right to access the public social services system; limited to the economic benefits of the public social services system; to the benefits of the system of care for those system of care those in a situation of dependency and promotion of personal autonomy (CASADO PEREZ; GUILLÉN SÁBADA, 1987).

The welfare state in Spain was thus established from a functional perspective in detriment to that of a social pact in a deeper sense. The fact that its roots were set in the Franco period explains this particularity (AGUILAR; LAPARRA; GAVIRIA, 1993). In other words:

Spain could consider itself a specific case of social reform that was politically blocked as a consequence of a civil war, which consolidated a capitalist route of growth *manu militari*, which regained its course in the 1960s through the contradictory articulation between semi-Fordist economic growth and the development of social security, in the institutional framework of the political dictatorship under which was established some of the material foundations of the social reform on which was built the democratic social reform of the late 1970s (RODRÍGUEZ, 2004, p. 72).

In comparison with the other European Union countries, it can be affirmed that Spain established a welfare state based on medium to low social spending, which was decidedly European, with a decentralized organization, with great deficiencies in the quality of many of its services – except that of healthcare⁴ – and which externalized a good portion of responsibilities to the family, especially to the role of women for the care for the elderly and children.

Singularities of the construction of Social Work in Spain

Social Work in Spain, as a profession and a discipline – mainly since the second half of the 19th century, until the first third of the 20th century – inherited a large history of institutional and social practices constituted by ideologies and concepts produced by conflicting relations and powers of social classes, groups and genders. All of this took place in a context marked by seven historic peculiarities that shaped the construction of its welfare state and that are presented below:

a) **The origins of the profession** have been marked by the near past, related to the Civil War and the last four decades of the dictatorial regime, with the Catholic Church maintaining decisive control over the creation of the Schools of Social Work. Humanitarian and religious impulses from the dictatorial government marked the origins of the profession, and were strongly influenced by academic content from before the 1970s. This has significantly limited the development of the profession as an independent space in the first decades of its progression (ESTRUCH; GÜELL, 1976; ZAMANILLO, 1987; ZAMANILLO; GAITÁN, 1991). In turn, the strong influence of National-Catholicism, led by the women's section of the Falangists can be considered as one of the historic particularities of Spanish Social Work.

b) **The isolation that Spain suffered internationally.** This factor contributed to radicalizing the paternalistic focus of the profession. Professional practice was confused with apostolicism, delaying and obstructing the possibility of sharing professional experiences with other countries that had begun a process of emancipation of the discipline. In fact, until the late 1970s, the profession had a role of legitimizing the dominant social order and structures (ZAMANILLO, 1987).

c) **Late professional concern for the “social question” and for overcoming the paternalistic concept of the profession.** Despite the incipient concern for the social question by the part of the younger sectors of the profession in the period of developmentalist sociopolitical changes and economics in Spain from 1957 to 1962, in reality, the most important changes for the profession occurred during the democratic transition. This marked the beginning of the phase of social services and of the technical character of the profession, in order to overcome the until then paternalist and merely assistance-oriented residues at the intra-professional, inter-professional and inter-communitarian levels, through various channels such as professional schools and union, popular and political organizations etc. (ZAMANILLO, 1987).

An important fact had been the incorporation of the studies by social workers in the university Schools of Social Work (Real Decreto 1850/1981, August 20, 1981). This helped guarantee quality technical and scientific education for social workers, in keeping with the guidelines of the University Reform Law, which offered support for teaching and research. This incorporation to the university system triggered a generational change in the profession, with the incorporation of young people, although most were women.

d) **The influence of the Hispanic-American reconceptualization in Spanish Social Work was not generalized.** In the 1970s, an intense search took place for self-definition and professional recognition in

a context in which the Spanish democracy inherited from the dictatorship considerable economic, social, political and cultural delays. A strong desire rose among professionals to develop new ways of handling the social question and the reflections of Hispanic-American reconceptualization were imported by many social workers. Nevertheless, the movement was not generalized. Spanish social workers continued to be trapped “between the impotence of an educated demand under the principle of philanthropy and their lack of training to combat problems with a higher level of technical competency” (ZAMANILLO, 1987, p. 98).

While the Latin American influence remains, “today it is no longer believed that Social Work can change society, but merely channel resources to satisfy the needs of individuals and simultaneously conduct work for prevention, promotion and education” (CRESPO, 1982 *apud* BARBERO, 2002, p. 98).

e) **The implantation, organization and consolidation of the public network of social services: a fundamental role for Social Work.** In the first years of the establishment of the new social services, professionals had to handle a significant lack of resources needed for conducting their work. They were under strong pressure to adopt urgent and assistance-oriented interventions in detriment to conducting a reflexive and critical professional practice (BARBERO, 2002). It must be considered that this process took place under socio-economic conditions that were very different from those in the countries that inspired the policies and implemented them nearly 20 years earlier.

To place this in context, when the dictator Franco died, the Spanish welfare state was the most underdeveloped of Europe⁵ (NAVARRO, 2006). But it was also a period of a number of general and student strikes against cuts in retirement pay, the precarious conditions of the labor market, the public sector and in support of the establishment of a basic social salary and retirement pay not based on contributions (DE LA RED VEGA; BREZMES NIETO, 2003).

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It should be emphasized that during the 1980s and the early 1990s, the profession had an essential role in the creation and consolidation of the Spanish social services system. The appropriation of the Concerted Plan for Basic Payments in Municipal Government of 1988 consolidated the incipient public social services systems, a fact that had a decisive repercussion on the expansion of the hiring of social workers. There was a greater approximation to the population, through community work that sought to detect social problems in the neighborhoods. With the support of the democratic municipal governments, agreements were reached with civic entities and social services centers began operations (BARBERO, 2002).

This is a relevant period for the consolidation of democratic stability in Spain and its location in the European context coincides with a substantial increase of social public spending. It was a time of “legal concretization and of dynamism in the creation of infrastructure and measures for social intervention (universalization of education and healthcare, pensions, and the autonomous social services laws etc.)” (BUENO ABAD, 1998, p. 12).

f) **Predomination of the bureaucratic-administrative professional model.** With the beginning of democracy, the profession appropriated a bureaucratic-administrative model of intervention. Therefore, the institutional responses are presented in a complex context of modernization and creation of infrastructure and instruments for social intervention. Priority was given to administered management of social problems (processing documents, granting payments, automatic application of resources, derivation of demand etc.) in detriment to intervention based on the interactions and stimulus and support for collective processes and social relations (BARBERO, 2002).

g) **Debility in the construction of knowledge about and from social-work.** Since the 1990s, until today, professional discourses have arose that emphasize the internal potential of Social Work and the need to overcome the “cult of experience” and the immediacy that has impeded the construction in Spain of a reflexive practice with theoretical elaboration.

Despite advances in the publication of specialized journals that address themes related to Social Work, debility remains in relation to the construction of professional knowledge based on reflexive praxis, which often leads many social workers to explain the behavior of people who need assistance as complaining, victimization and blame (BARBERO, 2002).

Final considerations: new and old challenges for Spanish Social Work

We have seen that Social Work has developed in Spain in various contexts: its roots are found in the progressive and democratic spirit of the Second Republic and its first and staggered steps were taken under the domination of the military dictatorship and the Church, through actions of a palliative assistance-oriented nature.

Since the 1980's, preventive-promotional care began to be approached, given an important fact: the official recognition of Social Work studies and the incorporation of professionals to various realms of the social services system. In the European Union, since the 1990s there has been a rise of new criteria based on social policies. In Spain, Social Work began to be consolidated as a profession and discipline, but still from a techno-bureaucratic functionalist perspective.

Today, with the strong crisis of financial capital⁶, social workers in Spain appear disconcerted and indignant. They have reacted by impelling collective fronts for mobilization and recovery⁷, denouncing the social injustices of the neoliberal policies, and questioning the institutional political apparatus where they are inserted. Nevertheless, we agree with Zamanillo (2011) that many challenges remain and that there is a long road to travel to revive the ethical-political project of Social Work: a constitutional aspect of the profession that continues to be something accessory in Spain and not debated in its depth and importance. For this reason it is necessary to question professional action, assuming a critical, reflexive Social Work, which is committed to the ethics, authenticity and political responsibility that suppose overcoming the following challenges:

- a) To break the "chains" that bind professionals to bureaucratic work posts and subsidies.
- b) To fight for a pedagogic educational proposal that goes beyond fragmentation and increases the knowledge of social workers, analyzing power relations on an international level.
- c) To analyze the global relations of domination that affect Social Work at a local level.
- d) To revive the concept of citizenship and care for ethical policies supported by ethical professional values.
- e) To reflect on the role of social workers: do we generate more dependency? Should we not intervene in situations in which demands are made?
- f) To promote permanent education to initiate dialog based on reality.
- g) To give greater emphasis to the capacities of the population served than to their needs, giving potential to community Social Work.
- h) To deepen the relationship between critical theory and practice to overcome the "practicism".
- i) To work with the ethical premise that individuals do not act in an isolated or divided manner but as subjects of their own history⁸.

Confronting these new and old challenges involves reclaiming the "social meaning of the profession" as a collective (YASBEK, 2003, p. 38) from a critical perspective, constructing a new ethical-political Project (IAMAMOTO, 2006; BORGIANNI; GUERRA; MONTAÑO, 2003). This also involves recognizing that the profession is historically inserted in the contradictory process of social relations – reproducing and preserving capital, which does not invalidate participating in its transformation (YASBEK, 2003), or giving potential to the dominated population, strengthening their power, now through resistance (FALEIROS, 2003).

From this perspective, it is necessary to recognize that Social Work is intrinsically linked to the social question and the treatment of its expressions manifest in this historic time of capitalist crisis, and its forces and their impact on the world of labor; a situation that gives new dimension to social policy in all its quadrants, creating a focused and assistance-oriented dynamic (ROSSETTI, 2011).

Given this scenario, Spanish social workers confront the challenge of not remaining Framed within a positivist world by executing in a noncritical way shrunken and worn social policies, but to support the interests of the working class by mobilizing it to denounce these increasingly accentuated situations of injustice and inequality. Perhaps there is a turning point or a change of meaning that questions the installation of the profession in the administrative framework of social policies and social services, promoting actions and proposals that equally embrace the community, preventive, political, ethical, theoretical and epistemological dimensions of Social Work.

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Notes

- 1 The definition of the capitalist “social question” which we use here following Pereira (2001, p. 54), has no relationship with the meaning that was given to it at the time of the industrial revolution in 19th century Europe when it expressed a “forceful political confrontation”. It also does not refer to the contradiction between labor and capital and between production forces and relations of production that generate inequalities and poverty. It refers to “political conflict, determined by these contradictions”, that are visible in Spain where the state gives priority to the interest of capital and of the dominant group.
- 2 The term “welfare state” used in this article refers to a model, the form of socio-political and economic organization that is the fruit of the transformations produced in the various spheres of social life of European capitalist democracies after World War II (MONTAGUT, 2008).
- 3 According to Navarro (2004) during the period of the Republican government, “public schools” were created, ending the hegemony that the Catholic Church had over schools during the previous monarchies; and “agrarian reform” began (which would affect the Church among other landowners), “Social Security” (which antagonized the banking sector), “abortion and divorce” (which antagonized the Church), “the right of labor to organize” (which antagonized the business community), “the reform of the Armed Forces” (which antagonized the military hierarchy), “the recognition of the plurinational character of the Spanish state” (which also antagonized the Armed Forces), and many other measures needed to modernize the country. In reality, many of these rights were already extended in other European countries, but not in Spain.
- 4 Currently, since July 2012, the universality of Spanish healthcare is no longer a fact. Immigrants in an irregular administrative situation do not have access to basic free-of-charge healthcare. In addition, a reform was imposed with large cuts in the Disabilities Law, which had been one of the greatest advances of the Spanish welfare state.
- 5 Navarro (2006, p. 42) affirms that in 1975 the indicators of economic and social well-being in Spain (such as infant mortality, educational level, consumption power of families, women’s integration to labor, and others) were the worst in Western Europe, along with Greece and Portugal, which had suffered under similar dictatorships.
- 6 For a deeper look at the singularities of the Spanish economic crisis see: <<http://www.vnavarro.org/?cat=5>>.
- 7 The following links show some of the examples of professional organization in light of the current crisis: <http://www.cgtrabajosocial.es/granada/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=66&Itemid=1>; <<http://mareanaranjaragon.wordpress.com/llamamiento/>>; <<http://estrecho.indymedia.org/granada/noticia/los-trabajadores-y-trabajadoras-del-%C3%A1rea-bienestar-social-granada-se-plantan>>.
- 8 Notes from a lecture presented by Teresa Zamanillo entitled *La responsabilidad política del/a trabajador/a social* [The Political Responsibility of the Social Worker], held at the School of Social Work of the University of Granada November 16, 2011.

Rosana Matos-Silveira

rosanadm@ugr.es

Doctor in Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universidad de Granada (UGR)

Professor in the School of Social Work at UGR

Subdirector of the Department of Social Work and Social Services

Grupo Investigación Sepise-UGR

Address

Universidad de Granada – Facultad de Trabajo Social

Grupo Investigación Sepise-UGR

Edificio San Jerónimo, 2ª planta

Despacho 2bis

18071

Granada – Spain