

Social Work in Latin America

Styles of conversion and resistance

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Abstract

This article focuses on the history of social work in Latin America, as a branch of knowledge and as a caring profession. A few critical, if not openly polemical, issues are at stake. The discussion will highlight the field of social work from two angles: first, as a system of thought connecting concepts, theories, and ideological lineages to major issues of political and social policy import; second, as a professional complex, comprising embattled or firmly established territories of public action. In both cases, theoretical and analytical derailments, or indeed collisions with the social science, and particularly social policy, literature, should call for a much-needed revamping in the field. The discussion will bring the international literature to light, when – and only if – insights or questionings may touch upon the Latin-American scenario.

Keywords: Social workers. Sociology of professions. Social policies. Marxism and social work.

Brazilian social scientists have a long tradition of international dialogue. This tradition does not in fact recognize closed frontiers; it does not involve sociologies in dialogue only, but encompasses areas such as Social Work, and the “sociology of social work” is a field or territory in need of interdisciplinary research and theoretical debate. Scholars in the field are influenced by the intellectual discourse and academic fashions that propagate overseas and affect sociological discourse. The case of Brazil undoubtedly mirrors what takes place in other regions of the Continent: Brazilian scholars have attempted to mould their careers into European models or matrices, or seek influences from the main intellectual currents in the United States, rather than acknowledge and cultivate Brazil’s common heritage – however feeble or unequally partaken – in Latin America.

The reference to Latin America, particularly to case studies of Brazil, Chile and Peru, recalls an important study by social worker scholar Manuel Manrique Castro, conducted at CELATS – Latin American Center for the study of Social Work, Lima, Peru – during the 1970s. Manrique’s study, “From apostles to agents of change: Social Work in Latin American history” (text in Spanish, unavailable in English), is an attempt to retrace the long history of the discipline in the continent. The author seeks to describe the critical stages of a still fledgling intellectual field, building upon its institutional leaders, academics, and activists. He traces the beginnings of the profession to historical developments in European countries, where the Social Doctrine of the Church and Catholic social teachings envisioned the role of the new professionals as missionaries preaching the gospel of Social Work. If this was a powerful factor in the delineation of the Latin-American professional and university field in the 1920s, Manrique suggests that later developments followed an Anglo-Saxon tradition of community work (see also Pearson, 1976, p. 17).

A few words of caution should follow from a reading of Manrique’s seminal work. Notwithstanding its many accomplishments, particularly

the use of a myriad of archival documents, the book has a tendency to simplify the European and American history of Social Work. Historical processes are to a certain extent frozen by their structural determinants – often named or briefly indicated, rather than carefully discussed – leaving little space or ‘degrees of freedom’ for the roles played by political and professional actors. When Manrique Castro pays attention to the interplay among the emerging fields of Social Work and Public Health, once again external or structural factors and forces dictate, or impose, this interplay. For him, the actors are really marionettes or puppets controlled by far distant economic or structural ‘manipulators.’¹ In other words, historical agency – particularly the impact of the work of pioneers and of those who resisted or boycotted them – does not appear to play a fundamental role in the process. Equally simplified and portrayed as impending evil are the foreign institutions – international official agencies and philanthropic foundations – with a direct or indirect effect on the proposal and implementation of directives for action. Manrique’s work, for all his undeniable attempts to produce a solid historical-sociological argument, falls prey to unacceptable oversimplifications cast in an ideological straitjacket. In fact, this respected scholar is not to blame for the shortcomings of his otherwise valuable work, for this ‘mode of reasoning’ is quite frequent, if not hegemonic, in the Social Work literature of our time.²

In this line of analysis, I now turn to the main unsolved problems of sociological and historical interpretation in the field. As stated earlier, such problems are typical of the larger body of Social Work production in Latin American countries, as may be found in the books

¹ Brazilian anthropologist Ruth Cardoso takes up these matters quite forcefully, when cautioning against “the traps” and constraints of method, that may eliminate “flesh and blood” social actors from the picture drawn by anthropologists. (Cardoso, 1986, p. 105) Her words are quite applicable to the Social Work literature, particularly in its Marxist vein.

² A paper by Nursing scholars calls attention to the need for resistance against “forms of powerful discourses” which currently prevail and shape the profession (Holmes, Roy, and Perron, 2008). In a similar vein, the present text calls for a critical appraisal of entrenched discourses in the field of Social Work in Latin America.

by Maguiña (1979) and Yamamoto and Carvalho (1981), two references widely respected in present-day course syllabuses and bibliographies, in addition to Manrique's classic. Faulty historicizing and theorizing are not isolated episodes in the literature. Already during the 1980s, a collective study produced by CELATS (1986) in Peru grasped some of the shortcomings just mentioned. In the opening pages of *Trabajo social en America Latina: balance y perspectivas*, the authors deplore a tendency of seminars and congresses, over more than a decade, to interpret Social Work practices as directly deriving from the needs of capital. Social Work practices are "totally submitted by structural constraints to the functions [of capital accumulation]" (quoted from Quiroz, in CELATS, 1986, p. 18; the translation is mine). It was that kind of analytical simplification about overarching economic structures, antedating the developments of Social Work, which undermined the "concrete analysis of concrete social policies" and the "mutual determination of political-economic and politico-ideological factors" (ibid, p. 19).

Classrooms do suggest, in the Brazilian experience, that doors keep closed to a genuine dialogue with social science most recent theoretical renewal and policy debate. Term papers by Latin-American Social Work students indicate that the discipline and their instructors, instead of addressing the open possibilities and the wide range of their subject matter, have unfortunately clung to a quite dogmatic, disciplinarian, branch of Marxist thought³.

The problem in this approach is the usual ahistorical Marxist frame adopted by Social Work throughout the continent. The philosopher Agnes Heller, whose mentor in Hungary, Georg Lukács, was one of the most respected Marxist scholars in his time, was a sharp defender of a socialist theory of history that did not relegate "human responsibility

³ This continuing trend toward a praise of a doctrinarian, "cut and paste" brand of Marxism, was also criticized in a paper delivered at the 2003 ANPOCS Annual Congress in Caxambu, Brazil, by UERJ Social Work Associate Professor Dayse de Paula Marques Silva, titled, in Portuguese, "A teoria única" (Silva, 2003). Her critique – a dissenting voice, among very few others – of Brazilian undergraduate courses and their option for a "one-and-only" theory in social work remains valid today.

to the periphery of human affairs”. (Williams, 1984, p. 281; Wolin, 1986, p. 196-200; see also Touraine, 1984). This is, in my view, the crucial failure of Social Work theory in Latin America: to restate my argument, the theoretical production in Social Work has the tendency of neglecting ‘historical agency’. As Jennifer Klein suggests in another context, a narrative taking historical agency into real consideration should address “historically constituted relationships embedded in time” (Klein, 2004, p. 632)⁴.

At this point, my argument should briefly approach the topic from another angle, that is, from the Social Work production in countries considered for a long time as the bearers and forums of radical thought. The controversial presence of Marxism in the field is also a matter for heated debate in England and in the United States. This topic – the focus on “mainstream Social Work” and the close comparative analysis with Brazilian, Chilean, and Peruvian (under)development in the field – should obviously require some investment of time for careful research in the future, in order to raise some of the crucial issues involved in the international debate. As stated before, this more encompassing scenario of global import is not the focus of the present article.

I

However, let me touch upon these international trends in a quite sketchy way. A book originally edited in England (Bailey and Brake, 1976) focused on “radical Social Work” and became an obligatory reference in the literature for many decades. The volume brought an introductory chapter that has since become a classic in Social Work. In a long, inspired, and combative opening chapter, North-American scholars Richard A Cloward and Frances Fox Piven argue against the wrong road

⁴ Klein places herself in that European intellectual current led by Heller and Alain Touraine. Since the mid-1980s, Touraine’s work on *Le retour de l’acteur* became a stronghold for the rehabilitation of the actor as a bearer of social interaction in time and of a valuable place in historical processes. Such claims assign these authors to a position quite distant from the state of art in Social Work.

taken by their colleagues, who insisted upon “mastering the abstract and convoluted theoretical schemes produced by academic Marxism.” (Cloward and Piven, 1976, p.XIII) The authors take many of their colleagues to task for getting involved in ceaseless, dogmatic quarrels: “The more intense the preoccupation with differences of doctrine among Marxist scholars, the less we had to concern ourselves with what Social Workers should do” (p.XIII). In a similar vein, Marjorie Mayo’s own chapter in the book suggests a view of community work quite distinct from a widespread notion among her peers, who erroneously equate community work with the colonial and neocolonial experience of social control of the underclass (Mayo, 1976, p.134). Mayo acknowledges that the roots of community development programs did spring from colonial and neocolonial times, but contends that they presently contain “the outlines of potential counter-institutions” (p. 138), by providing an emphasis on community action, citizen participation, class solidarity and self-confidence (p. 143).

The road not taken, a more recent book by Social Work scholars Michael Reisch and Jane Andrews (Reisch and Andrews, 2002), is a superb historical account of the emergence and growth of the profession, as a seedbed of both radical and conservative views. By focusing closely on activist reformers, the authors guide the readers through a *historical* trip, starting from the US Progressive Era until the end of last century, when issues of race and gender, age and social suffering, community action and social movements involved Social Workers in a search to empower excluded nationalities, classes, communities and individuals. The historical-sociological approach is perhaps the authors’ most valuable contribution, aptly complementing the steps taken by Bailey’ and Brake’s collective efforts more than 30 years ago. Among so many studies in the international literature on Social Work, *The road not taken* is perhaps the most ambitious and the best intellectual accomplishment in the past decade, for it introduces a historical approach and a fresh, non-dogmatic theoretical foundation, into the study of Social Work

and society. The book brings to light the early work of past generations of professionals that initiated a radical tradition in the field: “In an increasingly ahistorical culture, we are ignorant of those elements of our past that challenged the status quo and deny the roles that radical actors and ideas played in bettering the lives of people” (ibid, p. 3).⁵ The authors follow the trails of militant action by Social Work pioneers, such as Jane Addams, and provide examples of active women’s organizations.

The work by Reisch and Andrews, published in 2002, should be required reading for Latin American college students – notwithstanding the fact that only a minority has basic English reading skills, a handicap that should be overcome. In fact, this major work invites us to reflect on the sad absence of a *historical* demarche in Brazil and in other Latin American countries, in light of, or in spite of, the unsuccessful efforts taken in that direction by the Centro Latinoamericano de Trabajo Social, in Peru. One major contribution to the “required reading” literature comes from Richard Sennett, one of the major sociologists of my generation. His work *Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality* is a sharp criticism of welfare state’s policies that are tantamount to charity, or to compassion that wounds. Sennett knows what he means: his own mother was a Social Worker in Chicago. Both lived in a housing project during the 1940s, and Sennett never met his father. While praising his mother’s professional growth and personal endurance during his own adolescent years, Sennett’s account of the profile of Jane Addams, the late nineteenth century’s militant Social Worker dedicated to community organizing, is inspiring (Sennett, 2003). No socialist Social Worker would deny the absolute importance of respect toward the other, the conduct Jane Addams exemplified. In this way, the social worker’s search for an explanation based on structural factors and capitalist relations of production would still require a firm look at the social psychology of dependency – the challenge to “cross

⁵ Australian social work scholar William De Maria sounds a similar note, praising earlier generations of social workers that engaged in militant action (De Maria, 1992; Reisch and Andrews, 2002, p. 210).

the boundaries of inequality” with a profound sense of respect for the people. If one looks at Jane’s example as a militant and professional social worker, it shouldn’t surprise us that her passion reached several fields of action, including the provision of “sanitary living environments for lower class women, children, and immigrants” (Southward, 2011, p. 51). In this way, we are back to other roads “not taken” by the profession in its more recent specialized functions and targets for action: the focus on health as a constitutive element in the array of professional roles has since become a target for health professionals working separately from social workers. Should these roles be taken up by social workers, they may follow the roads opened by University of Queensland professor Karen Healy, in her advocacy efforts to promote health, youth, and child protection services (Healy, 2001)⁶.

A recent paper by Maria Inês Amaro, a faculty member at the Catholic University Center of Studies in Social Work and Sociology, in Lisbon, attempts to map the contemporary debate (Amaro, 2008). The author proposes two main analytical categories, Critical Social Work and Structural Social Work, as encompassing perspectives which differentiate, rather than bind together, the discussions in the field. Following the views of Faleiros, her former doctoral thesis advisor, Amaro calls the former framework post-Marxist and post-Structuralist, and traces it to a Foucaultian line of thought. Its militant character is stressed, though it could be contended that this “activist” profile reflects the possible influence of Erving Goffman, rather than Foucault’s.⁷ As to the so-called Structuralist framework, Amaro aptly describes it as deterministic, reflecting a Marxist demarche which allows little space

⁶ A second edition of Healy’s book has been published in 2014 by Palgrave Macmillan, *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating Frameworks for Practice*. Her book’s first edition, quoted in this article, was translated to Spanish.

⁷ The impact of their work was, and remains, quite strong. Goffman’s *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* was published in 1961, and Foucault’s book on *Madness and Civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*, appears in the same year, in a translated edition by Vintage Books.

to subjectivity and a political involvement with the Social Work of caring (Amaro, 2008; Faleiros, 2013). The author brings to light the contribution of Faleiros, whose attempt to place the debate over and beyond the polarities between actor and structure, however forcible, has not received the attention it deserves in the Latin-American literature and political debate (Faleiros, 2001)⁸. In fact, his influence has not really been felt even in the field of social policy – a topic of analytical and political importance that has been the focus of Social Work scholars and professionals in other regions and countries, like Australia and Canada.

II

To restate the discussion thus far: a dialogue between two matrices of thinking and professional work, addressing both their foundations and contemporary developments, is a challenge to the Social Work literature. The literature in Latin America, briefly sketched in this article, indicates that a small, but critical group of authors, is not uncritically aligned with the main current of thought in the field. Among the few scholars who have been swimming against the tide, Norberto Alayón, from the University of Buenos Aires, and Vicente de Paula Faleiros, at the University of Brasília, deserve special attention (see Alayón, 2004; Faleiros, 2013).

Vicente de Paula Faleiros has been a key supporter of a redirection of Social Work theoretical and analytical work toward issues of direct social policy relevance. While attempting to cross the bridges between Structural and Critical Social Work – the latter being quite close to a Radical proposal – Faleiros has produced a vast bibliography touching upon issues of ageing, youth exclusion and violence, the professional relations of care and disability studies. In a similar vein, Norberto Alayón deplores the strict alignment of Latin American Social Work

⁸ Jose Paulo Netto, a Marxist scholar and a strong voice in the field of Latin-American Social Work – with echoes in Portugal – has a passing remark about Faleiros' critical views (Paulo Netto, 2007, p. 166).

research and teaching with academic Marxism, particularly on the part of his Brazilian peers. In his view, the Social Work literature fails to bring to light the formative stage of the reform-minded profession in Latin America, dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the case of Argentina, claims Alayón, the joint action of social workers and public health nurses did make a difference in the extension of health care to the underprivileged and those discriminated against (Alayón, 2004, p.281). A small, quite active group of historians of nursing in Brazil has recently pointed in the same direction, when discussing the first cohorts of professionals in Public Health Nursing and Social Work in the country. Since the 1930s, the two careers were opened to women in interdisciplinary programs at the Anna Nery School of Nursing, founded and funded by the Rockefeller International Health Board in Rio de Janeiro (Aperibense; Barreira, 2008). Their careers, no doubt framed and constrained by a patriarchal society, allowed them, nonetheless, to mould new professional roles and cultivate a commitment to care in a modernizing, rapidly urbanizing, Brazilian society (Castro-Santos, 2008; Castro-Santos; Faria, 2008).

Two crucial points, as I close my argument. A first closing remark must address the engagement of Social Work in the “new social movements” of contemporary societies. Australian scholar Richard Hugman makes this point quite clearly: no matter how engaged in anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices, “the notion of ‘equity’ was not initially a part of the ideology of early Social Work.” (Hugman, 1998, p. 193). In this way, the emergence of strong, independent, grassroots social movements, with a particular emphasis on values of social justice and citizen empowerment, was hampered either by quite powerful State apparatuses – as was typically the case in Latin America –, or by the corporate action of organized labor unions coexisting with a basically unorganized political society. A much needed tool for the growth of the profession today is a knowledge of the nuts and bolts of bureaucratic systems. The sociology of bureaucracy has a lot to contribute

to the intellectual training of social workers, in quite the same way as the power and effectiveness of organized labor depends upon the knowledge of the functioning of State apparatuses⁹

Thus, students of the early history of Social Work should not fall prey to that grave mistake of historical analysis, namely, *anachronism*, which takes so many of us to project our present hopes and expectations to a temporal context with even more obstacles than social movements are bound to face today. A second point relates to my own expectations about the possibilities of a new paradigm for Social Work in Brazil and all over Latin America. I suggest that the discipline lacks a rediscovering of its political dimension “in the streets” (ibid, p. 195), or, if I may recall De Maria’s provocative statements about international Social Work, that it also lacks a new pedagogy “in the classroom” (De Maria, 1992). If I may single out the Brazilian experience today, an agenda for Social Work should resist monolithic theoretical thinking and conspiratorial pictures, rejoice in transgressing existing boundaries of historical and sociological analyses, and reject an all-or-nothing mode of analytical discourse that closes doors and eliminates insights.

“... to distort history sistematically b representing it as essentially a clash of characters, exaggeratedly good and exaggeratedly bad. (R. G. Collingwood, 1946).

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⁹ The literature on the sociology of bureaucracy and the State is vast and encompassing. A classic reference in the field is the book, translated and published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica (Kamenka and Krygier, 1981), from the original title *Bureaucracy: The career of a concept*, with precious chapters on Weber and Lenin, the State, and bureaucracy. One of the lessons social workers should learn from this book is that in many ways the configuration of social movements, political parties and the State have their own bureaucracies and should be a special focus of interest and political action.

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