

EDITORIAL

The production of knowledge in social work and the relationship with the ethical-political project: the field's confrontation with conservatism

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In Brazil, Social Work was one of the first occupations in the social field to be granted recognition and regulation in the 1950s¹. Over almost nine decades of existence - considering the founding of the first Faculty of Social Work in 1936² as the great milestone – the profession has been charting a course marked by many breakthroughs from the ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and technical-operational perspectives, but they are also paths permeated by contradictions, tensions and ruptures with conservative approaches and stances, which were decisive in the origins of the profession, dominant during the institutionalization process and which still persist both in the sphere of training and work.

In the wake of these progresses, the production of knowledge in the area has been of great help, becoming a sphere for strengthening the critique of the contemporary context and affirming the professional ethical-political project. However, conservatism is persistent and its confrontation is not a privilege of current times; in fact, it has appeared in the history of Brazilian Social Work since the past, even though the current professional project is no longer under its influence. In Boschetti's analysis (2015, p. 639), "it was in the history of resistance and struggle against this conservatism, which always wanted to subordinate and place the profession at the service of the reproduction of capital, that the Ethical-Political Project [...] was constituted as a dynamic and living process".

In its historical path, the production of knowledge in the area of Social Work has improved significantly in recent decades in both qualitative and quantitative terms, especially since the creation of the first postgraduate programs in the 1970s. Kameyama (1998, p. 4), assessing the production of knowledge from 1975 to 1997, highlights that "the themes of Social Work are closely intertwined with the events that occur in society and that impact on the profession in terms of demands or requirements". This observation reveals a fact that is continually unfolding in the production of knowledge in the field of Social Work right up to the present day.

The Brazilian *stricto sensu* postgraduate program is quite recent,³ having been in existence for just over 50 years since the first master's degree courses were created, and around 40 years since the first doctorate courses were introduced. Despite its early days, the field has a growing and recognized theoretical-methodological background consistent with critical social theory, built up gradually and democratically throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, which underpins the current hegemonic professional project.



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As correctly noted by Netto (2006) and Mota (2013), Social Work is not a science with its own independent theory. However, its professionals engage in research, studies, and investigations, contributing theoretical knowledge that is integrated into the broader social and human sciences. It is within this framework that Social Work has gained recognition as a field of knowledge production.

As a field of research, Social Work belongs to the Applied Social Sciences and is recognized by the agencies that regulate and promote research and postgraduate studies (Mota, 2013). As Garcia and Fernandez (2018) note, in 1976 Social Work was included by the Coordination of Superior Level Staff Improvement (CAPES) as an area of knowledge, which is very important for recognizing the academic-scientific status of the profession. In line with Sposati (2007, p. 18), it is worth emphasizing that “the recognition of Social Work research in the scientific institutions of CNPq as an area of study and CAPES as an area of knowledge production was and still is, in a way, the result of countless struggles”.

As a profession, Social Work has a generalist training that requires professionals to have a dual skill, investigative and interventional, guided by the same social and political direction, and which are interdependent and complementary. For society, the interventional dimension is the most noticeable, it is the one that generates perceptions about whom the social worker is and what they do, which, in the words of Guerra (2017), is the profession’s way of presenting itself. This corresponds mainly to the technical-operative dimension, giving the profession social visibility, but without disregarding the theoretical-methodological and ethical-political dimensions.

The production of knowledge, on the other hand, is more directly linked to one of the necessary dimensions of professional work and training, namely the investigative dimension. It is worth mentioning that, at the origins of the profession, this dimension was not as key as it is today, and research was not even considered relevant. For example, Sposati (2007) emphasized that research only became a compulsory subject in the training of social workers in 1982.

Since the 1980s, the challenge has been to show that research is not just an activity for the academic environment and professors, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level, and that it should be seen as an important part of professional work. Furthermore, as Carvalho and Silva (2005) stress, it is through research that new scholars can be trained and the links between undergraduate and postgraduate courses strengthened.

Research and professional work must necessarily go hand in hand in a relationship of reciprocity and feedback on work and training. According to Bourguignon (2008, p. 118), “the basis of research for Social Work is professional practice, and the possibility that research offers the profession is to overcome the obstacles that the daily routine of this practice places in its way”.

Therefore, according to the author, it is necessary to reject the idea that research is a practice restricted to a few professionals and that it requires mastery of sophisticated techniques. Research needs to be assimilated as systematic questioning, resulting from creative and permanent dialogues with everyday reality. It must be understood as an activity that is organic to the role of social workers and also as raw material for the production of knowledge. Research is an integral component of professional practice, and it should include means to translate the ethical-political project of the profession into concrete outcomes, aimed at building a just society.

When analyzing the most recent production of knowledge in the field of Social Work, Santana and Miranda (2022), focusing on the 2,293 scientific articles published in 814 journals during the four-year period 2017-2020, show that “Social Work, by persisting in the field of the Marxist tradition, places itself as an area of interaction with the Social Sciences and with anti-capitalist social struggles” (Santana; Miranda, 2022, p. 185). This perspective by the authors illustrates that, despite the rise of conservatism, ultra-neoliberalism, and the reduction of funding for public education and other social policies, the field of Social Work has continued to uphold the principles guiding education and practice, in alignment with Marxist critical social theory.

According to the authors, the bibliographic production in the field, as reflected in the leading journals, has been explicitly critical of the bourgeois order. It addresses a broad spectrum of issues encompassing various expressions of the social question, including class antagonisms, racial inequality, and oppression related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age. The predominant theme in the articles was health, with 223 publications, likely due to the significant impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Brazil and the world from March 2020 to May 2023. Moreover, since the establishment of Resolution No. 287 in 1998, social workers have been recognized as public health workers. Health, along with Social Assistance, is one of the primary sectors employing social work professionals, as noted by Pinheiro and Bellini (2021).

In view of the above, from a broad perspective, it is fair to say that the production of knowledge in the field of Social Work has been a powerful source of resistance against conservatism, for both training and professional work. This resistance is very necessary for the preservation of the ethical-political project. From this perspective, the creation and consolidation of postgraduate courses at the master's and doctoral levels across various regions of the country have been significant. In 2023, there were 38 programs in the field, with 36 in operation and two in the process of being launched. Of these, 22 offer both master's and doctoral programs concurrently (CAPES, 2023).

Despite being relatively small in terms of the number of programs compared to the other 50 fields of knowledge recognized by CAPES, Social Work has firmly upheld principles and interests essential to maintaining high-quality postgraduate courses. Notably, Social Work is the only field without a professional Master's course at the specialization level. All programs in this area are academic and conducted face-to-face.

Since the 1970s, postgraduate studies have played a crucial role in the field of Social Work, significantly contributing to the expansion of both bibliographical and technical knowledge. Today, these studies have immense potential in advancing critical analyses of the bourgeois order, deepening social theory, and enhancing professional training and practice across various expressions of the social question. In an era characterized by the rise of ultra-neoliberalism, which exerts pressure on social protection and promotes the denial of scientific knowledge, these academic endeavors are particularly important. They provide essential opposition to conservatism within Social Work and uphold the ethical-political project of the profession.

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Notes:

- ¹ In the 1950s, Law No. 1,889 was enacted on June 13, 1953, outlining the objectives of social work education, its structure, and the roles of individuals holding Social Worker and Social Agent diplomas. This was followed by the publication of the first regulatory law for Social Workers in Brazil (Law No. 3,252) on August 7, 1957.
- ² According to Iamamoto and Carvalho (2001), the first Faculty of Social Work was established in 1936 in São Paulo, thanks to the efforts of the São Paulo Center for Studies and Social Action (CEAS). Founded in 1932, CEAS aimed to train its members in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and to enhance their understanding and intervention in social problems. The primary goal of CEAS was to increase the efficiency of social workers' activities.
- ³ According to Garcia and Fernandez (2018), the first master's programs in Social Work were launched in the southeast, with PUC-Rio and PUC-SP starting in 1972 and UFRJ following in 1976. By the late 1970s, additional master's programs were established: PUC-RS in 1977, UFPB-JP in 1978, and UFPE in 1979. Regarding doctoral programs, Kameyama (1998) notes that the first was created at PUC-SP in 1981, followed by UFRJ in the same year, UnB in 1991, and UNESP-Franca in 1993.

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