

Social Service, History and Challenges

This edition of the *Revista Katálysis* considers Social Work as a profession and a field of knowledge in its historic and theoretical movement, in different scenarios and tendencies. These are challenging contexts that present the profession a new, extensive and disturbing agenda.

We begin with the understanding that the Social Question, in its genesis and development, is in a nuclear position as the object of professional intervention and also of the study and research undertaken by social workers in their intellectual function of constructing knowledge in the field of Social Work and social policies. These two dimensions compose the realm of Social Work and of social policy as the material field of professional activity.

The new configurations of the social question, considering the complexity that they acquire in the contemporary world, expand the challenges to be confronted and revealed as the issues raised in this edition make clear. It is essential to remember that the social question is a reference for understanding the development of social policies. Despite redefinitions in the context of the contemporary crisis and the impacts that affect them in the new processes of accumulation, the essence of the social question remains the same, because it involves a structural issue that cannot be resolved in a social economic formation that is exclusionary by nature.

The context of crisis and changes that characterize recent years raises questions for Social Work, particularly considering two factors: that of the new manifestations and expressions of the social question, which result from the structural transformations of capitalism, and the processes of redefinition of the systems of social protection and of social policy in general that emerge in this context. New connections with the globalized world redesign urban and rural spaces and territories configuring a new scenario with multiple recompositions in terms of labor, illegalities, poverty and unemployment.

We face a complex, ambivalent and contradictory reality in which once again history raises a “dispute for the meanings of society”. And, among the central disputes to be faced in coming years is the struggle for the place of the social in the construction of the nation. The directions taken by this debate and its politicization will allow social policies and the profession to either forge forms of resistance and defense of complete citizenship for the subaltern, or to merely reiterate conservative and assistance practices. The risks that we confront in this dispute are related to the fact that social actions, particularly those aimed at the most poor, remain on the plane of assistance and of moral and humanitarian responsibility and are not guided by an emancipatory perspective, through the mediation and construction of rights. Until now, proposals for social policies in the country do not go beyond a selective, emergency-oriented vision and the realization of actions of a palliative nature.

Each day, social workers face new and old questions such as: the exploitation and expropriation of labor, its precariousness and intensification; violence against women, children, adolescents and the elderly; gender and ethnic discrimination; people living in the streets or in precarious and unhealthy housing; children and adolescents without protection; the mentally ill; drug abuse; AIDS; the difficulties faced by the disabled; aging without resources; hunger and malnutrition and many other issues related to the social question, inequality and poverty and their multiple destitutions.

As we have often affirmed, it is inserted within this context, challenged by the changes underway, and living daily with the violence of inequality and poverty, that Brazilian social workers engage in the conflict that their work involves: to advance in their political-ethical project in the direction of a more just and egalitarian sociability. We certainly have great challenges ahead and while we know that social policies are not designed to have the capacity or objective to reverse structural issues and the high levels of inequality found in the world today, we also know that social policies respond to the concrete needs and rights of their users and often make the difference in allowing a decent life.

In this process, professional activities become technical-political mediations and are necessarily redefined based on concrete conditions. To the degree to which new situations raise new challenges and demands, the profession must seek to redefine its procedures and strategies for action, adapting them to the new demands and redefinitions of the labor market and the social situation. This movement by the profession is made with references that follow a social direction supported in the effort to establish a collectively constructed professional project.

This perspective involves an ethical-professional commitment to the social struggles of the subaltern classes and to the conquest and fruition of rights (existing and new) to social, economic and political equity and equality.

The issues addressed in the articles in this issue of *Revista Katálysis* demonstrate once again a profession that, especially through the mediation of social policies, interferes in the processes related to the social reproduction of life. These processes are realized in a web of relationships permeated by class, gender, ethnicity and social political, ethical and cultural aspirations, as well as components of an emotional and caring nature. The work of social assistants interferes in the material, social and cultural conditions of the life of the users who access and benefit from social policies, programs, services, resources and goods, and in their behavior, values, ways of life and thinking, their forms of struggle and organization, their practices of “resistance” and their constitution as political subjects in the web of social relations. The work of social assistants can collaborate in the construction of hegemony or of counter-hegemony and, above all, can politicize depoliticized relations.

Social workers intervene in the social relations that are part of the daily life of the population with which they work. The professional intervention takes place through the offer of goods, resources and services and by the exercise of political and socio-educational actions. This socio-educational action by social workers can take on both disciplinary characteristics aimed at “smoothly” inserting the population that uses their services in institutional frameworks and social life, and can also be guided by an emancipatory perspective.

It is important to remember that competencies of social workers are required in various public and private organizational contexts, and the issues that social workers handle vary according to the place that the professional occupies in the labor market.

Social Work, its exercise and its process of producing knowledge, has no other route but to emphasize the analysis of new expressions of the social question and of social struggles and forms of collective organization for the construction of a new social order, as well as an analysis of the responses by the state, society and the profession in the realm of social policies and the public sphere, to confront the needs and social rights of the majority of the population.

Brazilian social workers face countless *challenges* in their arduous movement of interfering in this process, in the realm of social policies and in other fields of professional exercise, where they always have a role of politicizing and giving visibility to the interests and rights of the subaltern classes in the public sphere.

Finally, it is not by chance that we emphasize that Brazilian Social Work faces the challenge of conducting the difficult task of *(re)constructing the political in social policy*, which requires participating in the creation and dissemination of a *culture in which the rights of the population with which we work cannot be denied*.

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