



8. *Brazilian social work*

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Key words

Social work, Brazil, training policies for professional

Introduction

This study¹ aims to analyse three aspects of Brazilian social work: first, we provide a general overview of Brazil, a country marked by extreme inequality that permeates the economic and social relationships of its population, including rapid economic growth and the preservation of inequality; second, we examine the main challenges faced by the country's social workers; third, explore whether Brazil's undergraduate and graduate programs are oriented toward training that is centred on a critical, creative, and purposeful perspective. This paper is a review article that is constructed with the intent of outlining the main features of the profession in a country marked by contradictions: Brazil is the 7th

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largest economy in the world, 3rd in social inequality, and 85th on the human development index.

1. Brazil: Country of contrasts

Brazil has an area of 8,547,403 km² and is located in eastern South America. In 2013, its estimated population was 201,009,622 (Us census bureau, 2013), and it is the fifth most populous country in the world². Brazil is also one of the most economically unequal countries in the world. In 2012, 40% of the Brazilian population was poor and earned only 11% of the national wealth (Instituto brasileiro de geografia e estatística, 2013). This inequality is highlighted by race and gender. Data from the Instituto brasileiro de geografia e estatística (Ibge) show that 22.4% of the Brazilian population was vulnerable in 2011 according to social and/or income criteria. However, this inequality is also expressed differently by region: 40% of the population was vulnerable in the north and 40.1% in the northeast, but only 11.3% in the south (Instituto brasileiro de geografia e estatística, 2013).

Brazil reduced extreme poverty from 25.6% of the population in 1990 to 4.8% in 2008. Still, 8.9 million Brazilians lived on a household income of less than Us\$ 1.25 per day in 2008. The 2013 report of the United Nations millennium development goals (Un, 2013) indicates that the number of families living in favelas (slums) decreased from 32% to 27%. Based on data from the National household sample survey (Pesquisa nacional por amostras de domicílios, 2012), the Institute of Applied Economic Research (Instituto de pesquisas econômicas aplicadas) shows that the proportion of people living under the official extreme poverty line fell from 4.2% in 2011 to 3.6% in 2012, i.e., 6.5 million people were still in this situation in 2012 (Instituto de pesquisas econômicas aplicadas, 2013).

In 2012 the estimated life expectancy at birth was 74.6 years, 71 years for men and 78.3 years for women (Instituto brasileiro de geografia e estatística, 2013). In the same year the fertility rate was esti-

² The population is concentrated in the southeast and northeast regions (70.1%), while the south, north, and central-west regions contain 29.9% of the population.



mated at 1.76 children. These indicators demonstrate the aging process that the Brazilian population has experienced in recent decades. Between 1980 and 2010, the population under 14 years of age fell from 38.24% to 25.58% of the total population, while the population aged over 60 increased from 5.93% to 9.98%³. The rising proportion of elderly in the total population will require new pension commitments, either by reaffirming the current rules for contribution periods and the retirement age, which would have to be accompanied by a guarantee of new sources of financing, or by modifying the current criteria for access (Marques, 2012). Currently, the aging process has not only resulted in a decrease of the population under 14 years of age and an increase in the elderly but also in an extremely important increase in the working age contingent. Thus, the population aged between 15 and 59 years, which represented 27.51% of the total in 1980, increased to 64.44%. Data from the Ibge show that between 2010 and 2020, between 67% and 70% of Brazil's population will be between 15 and 64 years of age.

Regarding the labour market, the unemployment rate in 2012 was 5.5%, compared with 11.7% in 2002. Informal work also decreased consistently and reached its lowest level in 2012, at 39.3% (in 2002, it was 51.2%) (Instituto de pesquisas econômicas aplicadas, 2013).

While there is still a large contingent without job security, the situation for children also requires significant action. The National household sample survey (Brazilian institute of geography and statistics, 2011) indicates that 3.7 million children and adolescents aged 5-17 years old were working in the country in 2011 (8.6%). The lack of protection for children is also demonstrated in the infant mortality rate. According to the *State of the world's children report 2013*, the rate of deaths per 1,000 children under five years old in Brazil fell from 19 in 2010 to 16 in 2011 (Unicef, 2013). Although the country reached its millennium goals, it is still well below the averages in Uruguay, Cuba, and Canada (7, 6, and 5, respectively)⁴.

³ The latter population group was defined according to Law 10.741 from October 1, 2003, called the Elderly statute (Estatuto do idoso), which considers the beginning of the third age to be after 60 years of age.

⁴ All of these indicators hide the unequal situation between the regions of Brazil (the worst rates are in the north and northeast regions).



Boschetti (2007: 92) states that «Brazilian capitalism implemented (in the 1930s) a model of social security predominantly sustained by the logic of insurance», with a contributory character that was focused on the protection of workers in the formal market. Only with the Federal Constitution of 1988 was the system of social security reorganised under new principles and guidelines. However, the process of constructing a social protection system in Brazil was always sector-specific; each sector had its own distinct conceptions, inclusion criteria, managers, and forms of management and funding. As a result, today there are fragmented social protection policies – health care is universal; social security is a right associated with formal work/contributions; and welfare is for those who need it, but most of the programs are focused on extreme poverty (the growth in financial support from the Ministry of social development was given to focused programs such as the Continuous cash benefit (*Benefício de prestação continuada*)⁵ and the Family grant program (*Programa bolsa família*)⁶.

It is in this scenario of inequality and social injustice that the Brazilian social workers⁷ defined the expressions of the social issue as their

⁵ The Continuous cash benefit is an individual, non-transferable benefit, but not a lifetime benefit, which ensures the monthly transfer of one minimum wage to the elderly aged 65 years or older and to a disabled person of any age with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. In both cases, recipients must prove that they do not have other means of ensuring their own livelihood, including having it provided by family. Per capita monthly household income must be less than one-fourth of the existing minimum wage (Brazil, 2013).

⁶ The Family grant program involves a direct income transfer for families in poverty and extreme poverty across the country. The Family grant (*Bolsa família*) program integrates with the Brazil without poverty plan (*Plano Brasil sem miséria*), which focuses on the situation of 16 million Brazilians with per capita household incomes below R\$ 70 per month and is based on ensuring income, productive inclusion, and access to public services. Data from 2013 from the Ministry of social development indicate that the Family grant program serves more than 13.7 million households across the country. Depending on family income per person (limited to R\$ 140) and the number and age of children, the value of the benefit received per family can vary from R\$ 32 to R\$ 306.

⁷ Social services in Brazil emerged in the 1930s, tied to the Catholic Church. The creation of the first School for social services occurred in 1936 (in the city of São Paulo)



object of intervention. For Iamamoto (1997: 14), «social workers work with the social issue in its varied everyday expressions, such as how individuals experience them at work, within the family, in housing, health, public social assistance, etc. The social issue of inequality is also rebellious, as it involves subjects who experience inequality and resist and oppose it. It is in this tension between producing inequality and producing rebellion and resistance that social workers work, situated in this space driven by different social interests, and it is not possible to disregard them or flee from them because they make up life in society».

For the Brazilian federal council for the social services (Conselho federal de serviço social - Cfess), a «Sw (Social worker) acts in the multiple refractions of social issues shaped in the contemporary social order. Its technical procedures are instruments tied to an intentionality that goes beyond institutional requisition, whose demand is placed without theoretical and ethical-political polishing» (Conselho federal de serviço social, 2012: 30). However, the road to this point was not easy. It has been a process of fighting and disputes between antagonistic positions. Thus, it is fitting here to review the trajectory of this profession in Brazil over the last almost 80 years.

2. Brazilian social work

The first schools of social work in Brazil emerged at the end of the 1930s with the introduction of the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in the country. In the 1940s and 1950s, the country began to recognise the importance of the profession and started regulating it in 1957 (Law n.3252).

Professional training for Brazilian social work underwent important changes after the so-called social work reconceptualisation movement in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Netto (2001), after the 1960s, traditional social work experienced an international crisis. This crisis was tied to the depletion of the post-war capitalist development standards, which had a crisis of their own in the 1960s, creating

to be formed from the «girls of society» who were devoted to social apostolate and was initially guided by the European theoretical framework (Iamamoto, Carvalho, 1985).



a «favourable framework for the mobilisation of subaltern social classes in defence of their immediate interests[...]» (Netto, 2001: 143).

Political organisation materialised in the sparkle of social movements (among blacks, women, youth, and urbanites) that at the time ('60s) questioned the rationality of the bourgeois state. Within the profession, the bourgeois order created an answer regarding the professional practice of traditional social work (Netto, 2001). Questioning this social work was «inscribed in the dynamic of breaking imperialist moorings, the fight for national freedom and transformations in the exclusionary, concentrated, and exploitative capitalist structure» (Faleiros, 1987: 51).

The so-called social work reconceptualisation movement, which occurred in Latin America beginning in approximately 1965, was an expression of the process of questioning traditional social work. In this environment, social workers questioned the appropriateness of their professional roles and procedures considering the manifestations of the «social issues» and the regional and national realities, thereby «questioning the effectiveness of professional actions and the efficiency and legitimacy of their representations [...]» (Netto, 2001: 146).

For this author (Netto), two elements should be highlighted in the context of the social work reconceptualisation movement in Latin America. First, for the first time in the profession's trajectory, there was an approximation to the Marxist tradition, even though the approximation was not made based on the original sources of Marxian theory. Second, the professionals pursued coordination in a continental plan because the Movement enabled a debate about issues regarding Latin American particularities.

In Brazil, Netto (2001) states that in the '60s and '70s, there was a renovation process in social work⁸ that was intimately linked to the period of bourgeois autocracy. This process was initiated because in the

⁸ The author defines renovation as «the set of new characteristics, within the constrictions of bourgeois autocracy, that social work articulated based on rearranging traditions and assuming contributions from contemporary social thought trends, seeking to invest itself as a professional institution endowed with practical legitimacy through responses to social demands and through its systematization and theoretical validation through remission of social theories and disciplines» (Netto, 2001: 131).



'70s, the military governments⁹ tended to request to validate the actions of traditional social work. However, the state's actions contributed to the renovation process of social work, especially regarding two aspects: practice and professional training.

With regard to practice, the «conservative modernisation» process (tied to heavy industrialisation in the context of development) generated an expansion of the labour market for social workers because of growth in the expression of «social issues» and the treatment of these expressions through the social policies of the dictatorial government.

With regard to training, the renovation involved a diversified theoretical-methodological debate, especially after the '70s. Institutionalised professional training (that is conducted within the universities) ended up forming a theoretical vanguard that debated questions beyond «pragmatic jobs» (professional work). The teaching frameworks began allowing theoretical-methodological discussions that questioned the bourgeois autocracy (Netto, 2001).

In this context, three main theoretical-methodological lines developed in Brazilian social work that characterised the renovation that developed differentially, both in chronological and theoretical terms. The first direction is called the «Modernising perspective» by Netto (2001). Based on structural functionalism, this theoretical approach valued technical and instrumental rationality in which social work professionals should formulate and plan social policies as a way of contributing to development. The perspective was an attempt to adapt social work as an interventionist instrument based on social techniques that should be operationalised within a capitalist development faced with the political and social demands of the post-1964 period (Netto, 2001).

The second strand is called the «Re-updating of conservatism» by Netto (2001). The predominant theoretical guideline was phenomenology. In general, the re-updating of conservatism should be «to deter and revert the erosion of the traditional professional ethos and all of its socio-technical implications while also configuring itself as an alternative

⁹ Living under a period of military dictatorship (1964-1984), Brazil experienced intense and increasing manifestations of expressions of social issues resulting from numerous economic and political crises. This situation required a clear position from the profession in critiquing professional conservatism.



able to neutralise new influences that come from reference frameworks peculiar to the Marxist inspiration [...]» (Netto, 2001: 203, italics from author).

The third strand of Brazilian social work's renovation movement, called «rupture intention», is characterised by a critique of traditional social work. It represented the attempt to break with the legacy of conservative theoretical-methodological thought (the positivist tradition). It rescued the critical trends from the pre-1964 period that were positioned against the country's social and political situation. This perspective used the Marxist tradition and had its primary theoretical incursion through the elaboration of the Belo Horizonte method.

This strand was confronted with the bourgeois autocracy at the theoretical-cultural level. At the professional level, its goals clashed with the requirements that professionals respond to the demands of «conservative modernisation» and, at the political level, the corporate project opposed the dictatorship's project. Netto (2001: 248) states that a central element of this theoretical perspective was that it «always had an ineradicable «character of opposition» in the face of the bourgeois autocracy, and this not only distinguished it – as a strand of the renovation process of social work in Brazil – from other professional currents but also responded or its trajectory» (Netto, 2001: 248, italics from author).

The theoretical debate developed during the Brazilian social work renovation period was reflected in professional training at the undergraduate and graduate levels¹⁰, and the Rupture intention strand gained strength at the end of the 1980s regarding the theoretical-methodological direction of social work.

In historical terms, the III Brazilian conference on social work (*III Congresso brasileiro de serviço social*) in São Paulo in 1979, which was known as the «Turning point conference» (*Congresso da virada*), reflected the renovation of Brazilian social work, notably the approximation of social work to critical social thought with a Marxist basis¹¹.

¹⁰ The first graduate programs in social work were created after the 1970s (Master's from Puc-Rj and Puc-Sp, in 1972, and Ufrj in 1976 (Capes, 2010).

¹¹ According to Abramides and Cabral (2001: 39, our translation), «The III Cbas should be understood within the socio-historical framework of the period, namely within the large worker protests and the working class' fight for classist unions, the



Developed in a time of strong opposition to the military regime, the debates from the Conference expressed, according to Netto (2009), the political struggles surrounding Brazilian democratisation articulated through an anti-capitalist conflict. The author states: «Here, the novelty and rupture with conservative tradition, the ‘turning point’, in short: through the III Conference, social work entered the political scene and did so «against the dictatorial order». Within the professional vanguard that implemented this entry, there are not only democratic segments – there are also groups that combine the fight for democracy with the anti-capitalist struggle» (Netto, 2009: 31, italics from author).

The «Turning point conference» corresponded to a moment of strengthened and deepened critical social thought in Brazilian social work that was anchored in the strand called «Rupture intention» (Netto, 2001) and that expressed the approximation of social work to Marxist thought in the 1980s and 1990s. According to the same author, this strand influenced theoretical teaching (undergraduate and graduate¹²) in the universities, broadening the subjects of study with a dialogue with social sciences and revealing an intellectual majority in Brazilian social work¹³.

Following the changes in critical thought, the so-called Ethical-political project of social work was developed in the ‘90s. Netto (2006) shows that the roots of this project were in the transition from the ‘70s to the ‘80s at a time when there was a critique and rejection of professional conservatism, as noted above, in the context of the fight for democracy in Brazilian society, providing for the emergence of a new professional project.

«The fight against the dictatorship and conquest of political democracy enabled the opening, within the professional body, of the dispute between different corporate projects, which were confronted in the movements of the social classes. The democratic and popular aspira-

organization of the popular movement, and the political union reorganization of social workers at a regional and national scope».

¹² The first programs for a Phd in social work were created in the 1990s in Brazil.

¹³ The book by Marilda Villela Yamamoto and Raul de Carvalho, *Relações sociais e serviço social no Brasil: esboço de uma interpretação teórico metodológica* (Social relations and social work in Brazil: outline of a methodological theoretical interpretation), published in the ‘80s, was an important milestone in the production and intellectual strengthening of Brazilian social work based on Marxist thought.



tions, radiated from the workers' interests, were incorporated and intensified by vanguards of social work. For the first time, within the professional body, corporate projects reverberated, which were different from those that responded to the interests of the dominant classes and sectors [...]» (Netto, 2006: 11).

In general, the core of this professional project consisted of the recognition of freedom as a central value, which was understood as the possibility of choosing between concrete alternatives and being committed to the emancipation and autonomy of individuals¹⁴ and the defence of human rights (Netto, 2006). The project had a clear political dimension that signified the fight for equity and social justice, the universalisation of access to public goods and social services, and the defence of citizenship and human rights for the working classes. The project valued political participation of a democratic nature, and its adherents were in favour of socialising wealth that was socially produced. It required a commitment to ability based on the intellectual improvement of social workers through an investigative approach that valued skilled professional training along with theoretical-methodological assumptions that enabled a concrete reading of social reality.

In the wake of the '90s – and entering the 21st century – the professional entities of Brazilian social workers (especially the Brazilian association for teaching and research in social work (*Associação brasileira de ensino e pesquisa em serviço social* - Abepss¹⁵) and the Cfess strove (and have been striving) to ensure the professional training of social workers based on the ethical-political project for social work. The curricular guidelines organised by Abepss (1996), which have permeated the professional training of social workers, focus on two fundamental categories: the social issues and the work. These guidelines indicate three elements in professional training that should be ar-

¹⁴ In this respect, «this professional project is tied to a corporate project that proposes the construction of a new social order, without exploitation/domination of a class, ethnicity, and gender» (Netto, 2006, p.15, italics from author).

¹⁵ This organisation was created in 1946 as the Brazilian association for social work schools a decade after the implementation of the first program for Social work in Brazil. This important academic-scientific entity completed 66 years in existence in 2012 (Abepss, 2013).



ticulated: the theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operative dimensions¹⁶.

Curriculum guidelines are approved by the Ministry of education and aim to provide orientation or guidance for the pedagogy policy project in Brazilian universities. They define how a professional in the area of social work should teach regarding the expression «social issues». This is in accordance with the formulation and implementation of proposals which aim to address social issues thorough public social policies, entrepreneurs of civil society organizations and social movements. They also define that it is necessary for a professional to have a generally critical formation both intellectually and culturally. They must also show that they have the competence for practicing their profession, creative ability to propose new interventions, in the context of social relations and the labour market. It is important to take note that these guidelines define that this professional practice should be articulated and compromised with respect to the values and principles that are constitutive of the Code of ethics of social work in Brazil, as established in 1999.

With respect to competence and abilities, the education of social worker professionals should teach them on the basis of three articulated dimensions. These dimensions are as follows: theoretical/methodological, ethics/policy and technical/practical. These aim to provide a critical learning of the elements of social life from an overall perspective or a totality. Thus, these curricular guidelines are designed to provide an orientation for the education of a professional which will have the following three integrated core fundamentals.

The first is the core of theoretical/methodological fundamentals of social life, which implies the articulation of these fundamentals with ethics policy, which takes into account the understanding of social beings within an historical totality and the comprehension of bourgeois society and its contradictory movement.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the guidelines for professional Brazilian social workers have been an area for exchange between researchers involved in undergraduate and graduate programs and social workers who are involved in the implementation of public and private policies. The subjects of the Congresses and their Findings between 2000 and 2013 demonstrate a critical perspective of Brazilian social work.



The second is with respect to the core of fundamentals regarding the social historical formation of Brazilian society, which aims to present the historical particulars of this society. This is presented by taking into account the formation and urban and rural development in its regional and local diversity. In this aspect we are proposing to analyse the meaning of the profession of social work. This should be done by recognizing its contradictory character, given the nature of its insertion in the relations between classes and that of the state, and therefore incorporating the institutional dynamics in both the public and private spheres.

The third is the fundamental core of professional work, which encompasses the aspects which constitute social work as a specialization of work. This includes «its historical, theoretical, methodological and technical trajectory, and the ethical components which involve the exercise of the profession, research, planning and the administration of social work and the internship period» (Brazil 1999: 11).

Therefore, the three core fundamentals present: «[...] an innovative logic which goes beyond the fragmentations of the process of teaching and learning, opening up new paths for the construction of knowledge as concrete experience attained through the practice and formation of a professional. This is not to be seen as a system of classification nor autonomy and as a consequence the relations between the three fundamental cores express, on the contrary different levels of learning the social and professional reality, subsidizing the intervention of social work. In addition, there is a set of inseparable knowledge, which is attained from the learning of origins, the manifestations and addressing the social question, the fundamental basis of the profession and articulator of the content of professional formation» (Brazil, 1999: 11).

In these terms, Iamamoto (2012: 4) argues: «Contemporary Brazilian social work shows a renovated academic-professional and social feature, focused on the defence of labour and workers, with broad access to land for producing livelihood and a commitment to affirming democracy, liberty, equality, and social justice in the field of history. In this social direction, the fight for affirming the rights of citizenship, that recognises the effective necessities and interests of social subjects, is now crucial as a part of the process of accumulating strength for inclusive social development for all social individuals».



At the same time that the professional entities tried to establish a critical social direction in professional training and practice, the advance of neoliberalism and the pattern of capitalist accumulation have been an obstacle to the realisation of the ethical-political project for social work. The decrease in Federal government spending for social and public policies has represented a setback in the realisation of rights and has greatly reduced the ability of social workers to defend rights.

Accompanying the transformations in Brazilian society, the profession has also undergone changes that required new regulations: law 8662/93. Also in 1993, social workers instituted a new ethics code that expresses a contemporary professional project dedicated to democracy and universal access to social, civil, and political rights.

Professional practice is also guided by the principles and rights established in the Constitution of 1988 and complementary legislation regarding social policies and the rights of the population. There cannot be any type of discrimination in professional care.

According to the Federal council of social work, there are currently approximately 120,000 professionals in Brazil registered with the Regional councils for social work (Cress). Brazil is second in the world in number of social workers, trailing only the United States.

As for the profession's profile, it is mainly composed of women (just over 90%). The study confirms the trend of integrating social work into institutions with a public nature, with almost 80% of the active category working in this sector. Health, welfare, and social security are the areas that employ the most professionals. Although social work is a «liberal profession», its work «is tensioned by the sale and purchase ratio of its skilled work force. The condition of the salaried worker-whether in public institutions or in 'non-profit' private and business areas – makes the professionals not have control over the working conditions and resources at their disposal in the institutional space» (Raichellis, 2011: 428). The author notes that similar to other sectors, the social work sector experiences temporary outsourcing of social workers providing services to governments and non-governmental organisations.

The social work profession has been challenged with the following question: how to ensure social rights in the face of the actions of a ne-



oliberal state, the global capital crisis, structural unemployment, and the complexity of the «social issues»?

Within social work, a debate has developed regarding the difficulty faced by social workers in articulating the rational theoretical construct based on the Marxian dialectical method while managing the demands of professional practice. Santos (2010) indicates that both the conservative and vanguard segments of the profession have found that the Marxian theoretical formulation has not advanced the instrumentalisation of the practice, which again raises the issue that «in practice, theory is different». Starting from the assertion of a lack of clarity regarding the tools and techniques of social work professionals because of an erroneous incorporation of the relationship between theory and practice in the conception of historical-dialectical materialism, Santos states (2010: 2):

«In fact, what such verbal and written statements express is the difficulty of understanding the relationship between theory and practice and, consequently, the relationship between theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operational dimensions of professional intervention. This results in faulty expectations regarding the potential of these tools and techniques, sometimes overvaluing them and sometimes ignoring them. Therefore, it is a problem that cannot be ignored or masked and directly involves professional training».

It is worth noting that Abepss has recently been dedicated to the discussion of a supervised internship in the field of professional training due to the advancement of the commercialisation process of higher education in Brazil, especially distance learning¹⁷. In 2005, Brazil had 146 programs, and this number increased to 446 in 2013 (427 classroom courses and 19 distance courses) (Brasil, 2013).

The central issue in the discussion is that the distance learning method hinders quality training with academic rigor. Cfess and Abepss (2010: 3) note that «unlike core countries, where information and communication technologies add new pedagogical possibilities, in peripheral countries, the use of these technologies has meant technological substitution. A poor higher education policy for poor people, since

¹⁷ Abepss is dedicated to the construction of a national internship policy as a way to strategically protect the project of professional training (Abepss, 2013).



reportedly distance learning (Ensino a distância - Ead)) is associated with the provision of education to the most impoverished segments, was stated in the national education plan approved by the Fernando H. Cardoso administration» (and maintained in the Lula and Dilma administrations). In 2009, while in-person courses (in public or private schools) offered 34,287 seats, the distance courses offered 107,440 (Associação brasileira de ensino e pesquisa em serviço social, 2011). That is, for every three seats in Ead, there was one seat offered for classroom teaching.

One impact on professional training is the difficulty of placing students from distance learning in a supervised internship. The National internship policy proposed by Abepss argues that the internship should provide critical analysis and intervening, purposeful, and investigative ability to the student, enabling an understanding of the concrete elements of the social reality in the capitalist order and its contradictions. Such an internship would enable professional intervention in the varied «social issues» (Associação brasileira de ensino e pesquisa em serviço social, 2013).

Accordingly, in recent years, both old and new challenges are posed for undergraduate training in social work in Brazil. The first challenge refers to the coordination of the theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operational dimensions in professional training. This coordination requires an appreciation of teaching the fundamentals (the theoretical-methodological dimension) to ensure an understanding of the totality of social life, including the new structures and formats of capital accumulation and neoliberalism and the structure of the capitalist state and its historic forms, in which the continuity of market forces and caring for parts of the dominant class has taken precedence to the detriment of the rights of the vast majority of workers.

In terms of postgraduate programs, Brazil currently has 32 Programs (14 with Master's and Phd and 18 with only Master's); of these, approximately 20% were created in the last three years. Between 2004 and 2012, 625 phd theses and 2,563 Master's dissertations were defended¹⁸. As the number of Master's dissertations increased (from 652 between 2004 and 2006 to 1,076 between 2010 and 2012), the number

¹⁸ In Brazil, all Master's programs in social work are academic.



of theses decreased (220 between 2004 and 2006 and 199 between 2010 and 2012). The number of students enrolled between 2010 and 2012 was 2,875 in Master's programs and 1,357 in Phd programs (Coordenação de aperfeiçoamento de pessoal de nível superior, 2013). These figures indicate that an increase in theses should appear for the next triennial reviews of the Coordination for the improvement of higher education personnel (*Coordenação de aperfeiçoamento de pessoal de nível superior - Capes*), the body responsible for the accreditation and evaluation of this level of education.

The challenges are two-fold for training human resources for teaching and academic production that is directed at the interpretation of the manifestations of the «social questions». We believe that understanding the fundamentals of social work and conducting academic research should support skilled professional intervention (the technical-operational dimension), which will in turn contribute to the struggle to realise workers' social rights, although the socio-occupational spaces are increasingly constrained by the logic and implementation of public policies guided by neoliberalism.

A major challenge relates to the organisation of professional social workers at the national and regional levels. The debates developed by Abepss and the Cfess/Cress represent a key channel for theoretical articulation and for political forces that cause social workers to advance the set of political demonstrations by workers in defence of civil, political, and social rights. Undoubtedly, these entities, by combining research with critical thought and professionals involved in practice with students in training, constitute a privileged space for affirming the Ethical-political project for Brazilian social work in defence of workers.

3. Challenges for social work today

The professional practice of social work is affected by the relationships between the social classes and «interferes in processes related to the social reproduction of life in multiple dimensions (material, spiritual, subjective), developing professional actions in different social situations that affect living conditions of the general population and particularly the most impoverished sectors of society» (Yazbek, 2012). We



currently face selective, targeted policies on the one hand, and on the other, increased demand for public policies. We live with unemployment, lack of work (and little prospect of getting a job), criminalisation of social movements, high rates of violence (of all kinds), and hunger and malnutrition in a country that produces enough food for domestic consumption and exportation. The resulting injustice of the current Brazilian «social question» is unacceptable.

Understanding this question requires «deciphering the logic of capital, and its predatory, limitless expansion» because «the more we are able to explain and understand, the more conditions we will have for intervening, elaborating skilled professional responses from a theoretical, political, ethical and technical point of view» (Yazbek, 2012). We agree with this author when she states that «theoretical knowledge is the first tool for the work of a social worker».

In addition to a theoretical framework that allows us to reveal reality, we also need to construct mediations to confront the daily questions that arise in the day-to-day affairs of the profession. People experiencing long waits to access social services do not always have access to a right enshrined in the national constitution. With the increasing urbanisation of Brazil, the right to come and go, urban mobility, and access to leisure, health, and educational services for the working and poor classes are a big problem in our cities. Despite the increase in Brazil's road network, bus fleet, and subways, these services are expensive and of poor quality. Currently, in Brazil and across the world, we are witnessing demonstrations against reforms implemented worldwide that resulted in the loss of rights. We believe the process of building rights is not a legal or technical question but a political one, a place of contradictions, resistance, and many struggles. As noted by Yazbek (2012), it is an issue to be politicised as a strategy that can break, or start to break, the closed circle of domination.

Ultimately, «the struggle for the affirmation of rights is currently a struggle against capital, part of a process of accumulating forces for a form of social development, which may include the development of each and every social individual» (Iamamoto, 2009: 16). This is the path of Brazilian social work's struggle.



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