



# Latin America Social work challenges in equity critical moments and the progress of conservatism\*

Desafíos para el Trabajo Social en América Latina en los momentos decisivos de capital y el avance del conservadurismo

NORBERTO ALAYÓN\*\*



**ABSTRACT** – The article presents several conceptual considerations on Social Work and lays down different proposals to be taken into account in the construction of a possible agenda for the profession in Latin America. It addresses aspects referring to the professional training of social workers as well as the professional activity in institutions and professional category organization.

**Keywords** – Social Work. Latin America. Social Workers' Professional Training. Professional Practice in Institutions. Professional Group Organization.

**RESUMEN** – El artículo despliega diversas consideraciones conceptuales sobre el Trabajo Social y formula distintas propuestas para ser tenidas en cuenta en la construcción de una suerte de posible agenda para la profesión en América Latina. Aborda aspectos referidos a la formación profesional de los trabajadores sociales, como así también lo inherente al ejercicio profesional en las instituciones y a la organización de la categoría profesional.

**Palabras Clave** – Trabajo Social. América Latina. Formación profesional de los trabajadores sociales. Ejercicio profesional en las instituciones. Organización del colectivo profesional.

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\*\* Regular Full Professor at Social Sciences Faculty, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He was the former Associate Dean at the Social Sciences Faculty of the UBA (University of Buenos Aires) (1998-2002). Academic Coordinator of the Latin American Social Work Center - CELATS (1979-1982). Former Professor of Social Work Courses in Posadas, Corrientes and Tandil, Argentina. National and International Congress Speaker. Author of many books, book chapters and articles about Social Work and Children's Rights. Head of the Publishing Area "Society and Social Development" Collection of Buenos Aires. *E-mail*: [nalayon@sociales.uba.ar](mailto:nalayon@sociales.uba.ar)

**W**hat big challenges will the Social Work in Latin America face in the coming years? It will probably, or almost certainly, face the same challenges as usual.

It will face the same usual challenges, which are still big, too big, due to the current difficulties to address them properly.

What can this profession expect when it tries to contribute to improve people's welfare, in a context where society is marching strongly against the grain, in opposite direction, to the old and current aspirations of this hopeful and committed profession, which is not reluctant to lose its expensive goals of contributing to a better society, a better, equitable and equal world, that is, a simply fairer one?

We all know that capitalism and even more those policies oriented to neoliberalism are the main origin of poverty, misery, unfairness, human degradation in their cruel and various severe phases.

And just like that, as usual, social workers are in the face of a tsunami of social Darwinism, which often predominates in the vicious logical global working.

There are many adversities, misfortunes and problems, and Social Work is barely (nothing less and nothing more) a profession, which learned over time -with difficulties and effort- to take a very close look to the origin of social issues.

And sometimes, understanding more and better turns out to be something more harmful to the activity agents' mental health.

And that is how we keep going, between anguish and illusions, between frustration and hope, between tough realities and witness statements and committed actions towards change and transformation.

And at the same time, some of us already staggering and "mildewed" while some others are simultaneously starting, obstinately follow the invocation "don't give up, not yet defeated."

There are not final maturities in men's history; but ups and downs, ebbs and flows, which consolidate, one way or another, with men and women's collective and conscious actions.

The history of the Latin American Social Work remind us the great moments in which we wanted and could go beyond the merely assistance goals by means of promotion and "development" proposals. Then, the new challenges set us off to organization and awareness. In many countries, the conditions imposed by processes of civil-military dictatorships held us back. In other latitudes of the continent, the major possibilities of expression and then the diverse processes of democratic recovery which had been spreading out, placed us in the thresholds of rethinking and reevaluating the insufficient efforts of the so-called "welfare states." However, the later eruption and successful deployment of the neoliberalism barbarity destroyed and pulverized the presence of social rights. Certain exhaustion of neoliberal perspective placed us again in the revaluation of the democratic political system and in the claim of human rights in its fullest and most comprehensive sense.

If poverty and unemployment continue, and rights are weakened or seriously affected, professional performance and social workers committed effort will tend to dilute or sterilize.

Let's go back a little and invoke again the term of the potential agenda of Social Work for the coming years.

We could talk about new debates; future discussions; emerging issues; necessary exchanges; strengthening the training of undergraduate and graduate students; internships in institutions; masters and doctorates degrees in Social Work, going in deeper and better understanding of the different research areas, deepen colleagues articulations to the individual level and professional schools at national, regional, Latin American and even global scope; heavily strengthening national and continental organizations; establishing ourselves as a single professional group with a critical, serious, public reporting, and vindicated of restricted or violated rights voice; etc. It would be the right thing to do and it is fine to do it.

However, I want to remember again, along these initial views, the eternal “obviousness”. That social and structural characteristics of operation condition and overdetermine us significantly, **though not in an ineluctable way**, in the development of the professional practice and in the coming confrontation of social conditions.

I propose to develop some general considerations that I believe should be considered in the construction of the Social Work potential agenda. Then, I will tackle aspects regarding professional training, professional practice in institutions and the organization of the professional group.

### **About Professional Training**

First of all, we should remember, as a general context reflection, that the goals that our profession usually introduces – at least in the formal scope – often collide with the characteristics and purposes of operation guiding our societies.

The formulation of professional aspirations, legitimate but many times voluntary, not contemplating the socio-political reality in which we are immersed in, has taken us to an impasse, skepticism or outright desertion in more than one occasion.

When Social Work proposes its contribution – from promotion and social education – to the improvement of people’s social welfare, it is already facing the first problem of magnitude. Because such goals, valid for humans, do not constitute the economic system priority and often get subordinated to political decisions. This collision comes to mine dangerously, in many cases, even the proper original vocation that took the young to choose this profession.

When the traditional trends of the profession proposed (and/or propose) a naive or accomplice Social Work against injustice and dominant structures, conflict does not exist, neither does contradiction nor the loss of “professional identity”. However it does exist, in this case, a profession that, apart from its agents coincidence, works towards the simple mitigation of social evils, in its most evident shallowness.

For this type of definition, which has the merit of contributing to not questioning anything and, at the same time, sees any type of critical interpretation as a kind of demonic figure full of strange impulses, a strict professional training for trying to reveal the origins and significances of diverse social issues is without a doubt not necessary.

When we, social workers, arrive -in a babbling way, due to poor training which we have been historically receiving- to the deep understanding that issues in which we act upon have a social and not an individual origin, the focus of our concerns and aspirations begins to change.

If social issues and the absence of a proper attention of them have their origin in the social functioning conditions, then it will be a matter of identifying and analyzing those conditions to decide possible and desirable perspectives of the Social Work professional task.

This perception introduces important qualitative changes for the profession profile, having to withstand the firm resistance (not only conceptual) of Social Work traditional areas.

The loss or blurring of the social worker’s professional identity can be verified in the frame of a breaking process, even unfinished in many cases, of progressive bias, which must be assumed and valued as highly positive for the profession.

We will have to contribute to the creation of an alternative identity, contextualized by intra and extra professional, which will contain elements from the former one, but it should respond mainly to the characteristics, needs and goals of a qualified Social Work committed to the interests of popular areas in a certain historical conjuncture.

I assume this will be one of the challenges that should be addressed particularly by the training centers, from its connection to concrete labor instances in which professional practice materializes, achieving an intimate relation and consistence between the agent profile aspiring to form and the leading curricular contents to that end.

The specific national and regional situation must constitute a guiding and education-articulating backbone imparted in Social Work academic centers. This seems obvious, but it is often disturbingly absent in the curriculum conception of future social workers.

To sum up, social workers should be trained in order to correctly interpret reality and act upon in simultaneously, as an intrinsic aspect of our profession. Because, as we know, you can neither act without knowing, nor paralyze the action by pure knowledge.

I highlight that the right thing to do is to struggle for the social workers' training that hierarchies the profession not for mere corporatism, but for an ethical requirement, due to the kind of issues we work with and the people's unfavorable situation involved in those issues. It is not enough to demonstrate "commitment" in an abstract way and then reproduce a training style that outlines "subordinated and impoverished profession for the poor". It is not enough the plaintive complaint social workers suffer as professionals either.

Recognition and appreciation must be present in the action field itself and, in that way, the possession of a solid professional training will contribute to act thoughtfully towards the issues definition and in the appropriate adoption of political and professional intervention strategies to eradicate them.

I also understand that identifying what is necessary to be studied on each subject, with the corresponding bibliography, is the teacher's substantive responsibility, which must not be delegated, appealing to improper justifications about eventual convenience of the use of more participative academic frameworks. This signaling is directed to those teachers who, in many cases, lack competition and say that "the subject program is put together between teachers and students."

In my opinion, another relevant aspect to consider is that concerning student's pre-professional practices. In most cases, youngest and less experienced teachers are put in charge of the academic labor of orienting, directing, and overseeing the student's practices. Taking into account that practice is where the complexity of Social Work as a profession is finally settled, the inverse alternative should be discussed: **the best teachers and with the major experience should be the ones who carry the student's practices.**

To sum up, I consider that academic reflection should be strengthened regarding the following aspects:

- a) How should enabled professionals be trained to scientifically analyze society's functioning in its historic and present perspective?
- b) How should the student be provided with rigorous vision of the profession from a scientific interpretation, far away from idealistic and uncritical appreciations that distort the right comprehension of its nature?
- c) How should the student be introduced to the practice of critical thinking? That is to say, the concern of acquiring knowledge on the social issues he/she will work on, from a historic perspective and in interrelationship with socio-political conjuncture.
- d) How to provide a Social Work interpretation bounded – as it should be – to the great historical and social processes and to the own history of human ideas?
- e) How to provide the student with the necessary theoretical tools which allow them to understand the professional action as a conditioned social practice and immersed in the dynamic of social relationships, where it acquires rationality?
- f) How to contribute to reveal the historical function assigned to Social Work, from a current social relationships perspective, which allows understanding the profession's social, economic and political meaning?

- g) How to encourage the interest for study and reflection among students, emphasizing the need of solid theoretical training as an essential requirement for developing the professional practice?
- h) How to enable future professionals to rigorously put into practice the operations and methodological procedures to intervene in the scope of specific social issues?

### **About Professional Practice in Institutions**

Next, I will make some brief references about the institutional environment.

If the neoliberal orientation of our States strongly determined and blurred the achievements by means of rights recognition, the same way it blocked or weakened those plans and programs whose main target were those rights, another scope of politics – where politics are actually redefined and reconfigured – are the specific institutions.

The formal structure of institutions and the validity of contradictory rules and regulations restrict, in many cases, the possibility of changes in their operation. Likewise, the majority conception that the institutional agents (at any level of their work) have regarding issues and the individual or practices rooted and materialized in informal structures that are hard to modify, are unavoidable aspects to understand the fate of a policy and to define intervention strategies.

A fragmented representation of issues is often verified, in different aspects of concern from several institutional scopes, in a way the State intervention weakens and sterilizes (at best), or restricts to manipulation, patronage, pure control, repression or moralization of the people we work with.

In many institutions, the administrative and professional intervention on the people who have problems is overwhelming for them, and their specific needs are not resolved. The needs (bureaucratic, legal, control) belong to the institutions themselves and not the users.

Many times, in different institutions called “social welfare” or “social development”, users “pass through many hands” in different procedures and interviews in charge of employees or professionals; with messy and even irrational procedures; with endless waits; having to do almost public narratives of the issues they have; in hallways totally crammed with people; with screams and various discussions; with nervous breakdowns and sometimes even blackouts; without enough sits; many times without bathrooms; and, in order to complete the intervention “at their favor”, they are often summoned again to carry out a “new control” or complementary procedure.

People often do not see their problem as “solved”, but they do contribute to meet their institutional and social goals, interests and needs, and also to fulfill the needs of the acting professionals.

The vicious institutional mistreatment puts in evidence – as an optimal social photo – the existence of a fragmented and polarized society, showing different social classes in a clear and cynical way.

It is important to remember, one more time, that institutions are areas of struggle, complex spaces where contradictory positions are settled; places of power struggle for change or maintenance of what already exists.

Without a process of mature questioning and construction of alternative proposals, institutional changes will not come to materialize. For this purpose, it will be necessary to deploy a professional, intelligent and founded practice, carried out in the proper specific area where social issues are processed and attended.

We will have to include, as a Social Work agenda related to professional practice, the need of carrying out comprehensive studies about institutional functioning that allows to specify (if general nature changes cannot be made) selective or gradual modifications, in administrative procedures and ways of

attention that, together with the improvement of service delivery, it accumulates strengths for the realization of new and greater changes.

I remember that expression from Paulo Freire, when he claimed: "In order to accomplish tomorrow what is impossible today, we have to do what it is possible today". And this does not mean claudication or resignation, but political acumen to understand and face the historical circumstantial challenges.

In general, we can say that a good training will allow social workers to interpret how the profession should be practiced and, from that, being in better conditions to deal with promotion, defense and enforceability of rights.

However, this is a complex and contradictory situation: the major and best professional training does not guarantee the change in institutional practices. This has to do with other interconnected factors: cultural changes; labor traditions; wages needs; maintenance and reproduction of social workers' own working space; social worker's weakness and traditional subordination regarding other disciplines and other professionals; lack of experience for articulating strategies, tactics and the creation of alliances in order to introduce intelligence and efficiency to necessary changes; etc.

But we should also acknowledge that changes or institutional resistance to change is bounded to social-political processes of structural nature which prevail in a determined historical moment. Structural nature processes sometimes condition and guide tendencies to introduce and realize progressive changes, while – at other times – solidifying and petrifying what already exists, and strengthening actions immutability and more basic procedures.

Banishing flawed practices and even facing guilds and professionals, which often actively resist the introduction of changes that favor the users, it is not a simple task, by the way. However, it is necessary to assume it with decision and political and professional imagination, studying and analyzing institutional dynamics and foreseeing the consequences of each action emerged or taken.

We agree, in the form of certain criticism, that colleagues which work in institutions often stop reading professional bibliography, by the kind of practices they perform. Or, they consult some text which makes reference to the operating field in which they work.

For the continuity of certain professional practices (repetitive, routine, bureaucratized), it is neither necessary any update, nor reading any new book or even assist to some professional event or congress unless you want to take a break or want to know and enjoy a new geographic location or tourist place.

I think this opinion could be shared specially with those colleagues that, performing as teachers and/or researchers or taking some postgraduate course, they simultaneously work in some institution in order to obtain a salary which allows them to live.

Professionals which are more likely to continue reading and training are those devoted to the teaching activity or pursue masters and doctorates degrees, or have research scholarships.

In order to exercise teaching you need, at least, to read something, to be more or less updated; in order to work in an institution it is enough to repeat a routine, without too much thinking about approaches and the meaning of their actions, because the institutions dynamics and the logical "procedures" established are restricted and imposed over reflective practices.

My personal experience of having worked so many years in institutions and as teacher simultaneously is the base of these considerations. Of course we are describing a prevalent tendency, but neither absolute in all cases nor in all colleagues. It is not about a negative reading or vision of our profession, but an attempt at an objective description of what happens in reality. And then, each of you will be able to draw your own conclusions.

## About professional group organization

As we know, there are some traditional positions that conceive professional Associations and Schools basically constrained or encapsulated only in the granting of enabling professional registration for labor performance, in the graduate's exercise audit, in the checking of the Code of Ethics compliance.

Without doubt, social workers' associative awareness strengthening seems a key aspect for the profession. However, we aspire to the existence of a solid guided awareness, embodied in multiple actions, not exclusively overturned to the claims of an occupational nature (legitimate, by the way), but also bounded to social issues and general situations which are produced in your region or country.

Professional grouping organizations can and must – as I understand – be constituted in a political, social pressure, and power axle that establishes a vehicle to legitimate rights and community aspirations, and particularly, in the case of Social Work, of violated sectors.

I consider that a social workers' school or association should not be external and silent among the diverse and permanent social issues that are registered in your region or jurisdiction.

In the face of the harsh magnitude which diverse and complex expressions of social matter use to be verified in our countries, is it justifiable that a social workers' association or school is devoted only to the approach of professional requirements and aspirations of its corporate category?

Surely, the modalities of expressing, claiming, carrying out administrative and media actions to contribute the public opinion sensitization could be diverse and multiple according to each particular reality, but keeping the belief in the need (and obligation) of making our voice heard to collaborate with good causes.

I reaffirm, then, it would be desirable that social workers' Schools or Associations transform into instruments that, besides improving specific professional claims, they contribute to clarification, characterization and complaint of problems affecting the entire community and, in particular, social problems that affect popular areas.

Professional Schools and Associations which are permanently issued about social problems that affects a huge part of people, can produce a great contribution for social awareness generation about inequality, discrimination, etc. It is important to transmit and reinforce these concepts during the future professionals' training period.

I believe ALAEITS (Latin American Association for Education and Research in Social Work) should be expanded regularly among Latin American important concerns, beyond the specific aspects of our profession. That would allow, beyond fair and explicit witness of professional group about Latin American social workers, that ALAEITS increases its identity, radiates its continental presence and installs the example of a commitment with major human causes in concrete acts.

I want to make reference to a controversial subject I believe is necessary to mention in order to think about it. It is that regarding Latin American social workers' participation in international organizations and Congresses of the specialty. Difficulties, limits, asymmetries and also diverse existence conceptions are known (sometimes very opposing) among global organisms and Latin American organisms of professional category.

However, I support the opinion that our firm participation is still convenient, not as mere passive and docile assistants, but as active and critical participants, with a continuous proactive attitude, lifting up systematically the best values formulated and spelled out by ALAEITS and other Latin American Social Work organizations.

Likewise, I consider it is important to debate on essential procurement, exchange, and articulation with critical and radical professional areas of the USA, Canada, and Britain. There are surely important

critical contributions and developments, produced by colleagues from those countries that shouldn't be unknown or either wasted.

## Two final brief references

I believe it is also useful to alert and discuss about the obligation of addressing with full academic responsibility and seriousness the Masters and Doctorates training in order to avoid magistrates and doctors to proliferate indiscriminately without a solid training, which discredits the very own postgraduate relevance and need.

Finally, I will make a quick reference to the strategic importance of strengthening the research training on the course of studies, including instructional modalities which allow the practice of research practice, during the student's academic cycle.

A profession lacking research, or poorly deployed, will remain hopelessly reduced to a repetitive and barely lucid practice to face the current and future complex challenges of our countries social reality.

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