



More About the 80th Anniversary of Social Services: social rights in times of democratic breakdown*

Ainda Sobre os 80 Anos do Serviço Social: direitos sociais em tempos de ruptura democrática

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ABSTRACT – This article focuses on the current process that is reshaping the cycle of democratic breakdown in Brazil, triggered by the reactionary/conservative forces of August 2016. The working classes are experiencing the harsh consequences of the global economic crisis combined with the political dispute arising from illegitimate governance: massive unemployment, wage restraint, loss of historic labor rights and recently gained social guarantees; in short, worsening poverty against a historic backdrop of overexploitation and dependency. Based on these vectors of analysis, this article reflects on the contradictions that govern social rights and social policy on the periphery of capitalism, centering on variations in social rights within neodevelopmentalist framework and its breakdown, as well as the contemporary dilemmas faced by social services in the complex affirmation/regression of social rights.

Keywords – Democratic Breakdown. Social Rights. Social Services.

RESUMO – O artigo possui como feixe temático o processo contemporâneo que reedita o ciclo de ruptura da institucionalidade democrática no Brasil, desencadeado pelas forças reacionárias/conservadoras de agosto de 2016. Para as classes trabalhadoras estão em curso duras consequências da crise econômica mundial, combinadas com a disputa política decorrentes de uma governabilidade ilegítima: desemprego massivo, contenção salarial, perda de históricos direitos trabalhistas e garantias sociais recém-conquistadas, em suma, agravamento da pauperização no cenário histórico da superexploração e dependência. Com esses vetores de análise, o fio condutor da reflexão versa sobre as contradições que sobredeterminam os direitos sociais e as políticas sociais na periferia do capitalismo, atentando para as modulações dos direitos sociais no contexto da programática neodesenvolvimentista e de seu desmonte, bem como acerca dos dilemas contemporâneos do serviço social na intrincada conjuntura de afirmação/regressão dos direitos sociais.

Palavras-chave – Ruptura democrática. Direitos sociais. Serviço social.

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This article is the product of an enriching dialogue on social services raised by debates that celebrate the passage of time in our profession. It is always a productive moment of reflection, self-assessment and criticism, and of aligning organizational strategies with collective struggles. Moreover, conducting this important celebration, in a rigorous debate on the rise of social services over the last 80 years necessarily brings us to the country's political and social situation, where old and new setbacks stand out and accumulate.

The year 2016 is the stage for a new edition of the legal-media-parliamentary coup that periodically wipes out any hope of democracy for Latin Americans. Brazil is currently in the midst of another breakdown of the democratic institution; although the outcome is unprecedented, for the working class the consequences of the global economic crisis and political dispute between coupists and government factions are already being felt: massive unemployment, wage restraint, loss of historic labor rights and recently gained social guarantees; in short, worsening poverty against a historic backdrop of overexploitation and dependency.

Based on these analysis vectors, the article discusses issues that form an integral part of our common research program as well as recent individual studies, reflecting on the contradictions that govern social rights and social policy on the periphery of capitalism. As such, we begin by discussing the variations in social rights within neodevelopmentalist framework and its breakdown, scrutinizing the contemporary dilemmas faced by social services in the complex affirmation/regression of social rights.

Social rights and the illusion of class reconciliation

When considering Brazil's current economic and political reality, we find important references to identify dominant trends that will determine the power play of national politics and the possible repercussions of these trends within social services, based on the understanding that the profession is founded on social history.

In just over a decade, the self-styled neodevelopmentalist economic policy of Brazil's Worker's Party (PT) governments led Brazilian society through a cycle of rapid and volatile changes that resulted in severe difficulties for social workers, the working class and the population in general. This is the central argument of our article: to analyze the recent dangerous political movements, including addressing the issue of social rights, but from a broader historical perspective. In the context of an illegitimate government, this perilous movement becomes even more complex, since the policy reformulations announced contrast with neodevelopmentalist ideas and reflect fundamental principles that are more in line with market and major capital interests. Moreover, given that the situation changes abruptly and we run the risk of examining the subtleties of the social and political process without duly recognizing elements of continuity and rupture, we aim to present some considerations and historical references. As such, different periods in the Brazilian political process will be overlapped in order to analyze the contradictions involved for social services as well as social rights and policies in light of the class struggle underway in the country's current democratic breakdown.

Our analysis of the recent historical process begins by discussing the *theses and antitheses* of the neodevelopmentalist framework in an attempt to determine where social rights stand in this context. The references of Bresser-Pereira enable an initial approximation of the neodevelopmentalist program, as analyzed by Pfeifer (2013, p.11). The author describes the program as

a formula that stipulates micro and macroeconomic policies of fiscal responsibility and exchange rate regimes, growth in domestic savings and the government's strategic role as a promoter of economic development, confirming this proposal as an alternative to the Washington Consensus and its three pillars of fiscal

austerity, privatization and market liberalization. On the other hand, Bresser-Pereira argues that the introduction of this alternative must include the formulation of a “national development strategy” **directed by an elite consisting of national industry in coalition with the state bureaucracy**. This strategy should be agreed to by the social classes and based on the nationalist economic principle arising from those elites. According to the economist, this agreement would usher in a new national situation, that is, a political and cultural conglomeration vital to the foundation of what I refer to as the Neodevelopmentalist Pact.

In a peripheral society dependent on this poorly designed social project, the pact would require cross-class relations between the “*elite businessmen of national industry in coalition with the state bureaucracy*” and the working class. Assuming that this strategy would be “*agreed between social classes and based on the nationalist economic principles arising from those elites*” expresses both a belated idealism and profound historical alienation from the foundations of dependent capitalism under American hegemony. Hillesheim (2016) deciphered the mystifying class reconciliation policy that was implemented by the Economic and Social Development Council, especially during Lula’s government (2003-2009). For years the unreasonable proposals of payroll taxation were formulated in detriment to employee rights, alongside the intended easing of the CLT (Consolidated Labor Laws), the generalization of outsourcing and the *prevalence of negotiation over legislation*, among other issues harmful to Brazilian workers. It is true that the worst ideas did not come to fruition during the governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, but others were passed by the legislature and, even more ominous, the frustrated pseudo-alliance between capital and labor launched the ideological foundations of the conservative reaction.

The neodevelopmental guidelines for social policies never surpassed the thriving funding of corporate sectors in the fields of health and education, expanding the transfer of public resources to the supposedly nonprofit private sector, or the obscene financialization of federal and state budgets by allocating most public funds to government debt. These guidelines failed to consider looming dependency, as stated in the program of the capitalist Latin American State. The political impotence and theoretical fragility underlying this project quickly take their toll, and the tragedy is repeated.

In the economic sphere, the neodevelopmentalist model was based on investment in infrastructure and expansion of the mass market. In turn, the country’s consumer market expanded by incorporating new consumers, the basis for a process touted as the emergence of a supposed new middle class. As emphasized by Gonçalves (2012), the combination between the extraordinary real growth in the minimum wage and the increase on government social expenditure, particularly through transfer payment programs, resulted in the applied formula. In addition, greater access to credit enabled mass consumption and increased the buying power of the middle class, at the cost of growing debt. However, this strategy stabilized slightly in light of the recent global economic crisis, particularly up to 2010, and with “favorable world economic growth by relaxing restrictions on foreign and public accounts, is the basic determinant of the 2003-2008 period” (GONÇALVES, 2012, p.15).

By contrast, and in a highly controversial way, social protection initiatives were expanded, a fact widely credited by international organizations for overcoming extreme poverty in Brazil. These experiences became a benchmark for other countries¹ due to the significant social indicators achieved. Despite international recognition, within the country these social initiatives by PT governments were and still are fodder for the opposition. However, that is not all. This rejection of social programs aimed at meeting the needs of Brazil’s poor are viewed by some sectors of the population as a means of political “indoctrination”, a handout, or a strategy to “hijack” the poor. This can be confirmed by a simple internet search, where this viewpoint is clearly evident in comments made on social media, as shown in the examples below:

“Damn Northeasterners. Are they afraid of losing their Bolsa-Família benefit?”²

“Only those damn Northeasterners insist on voting for Dilma. I hope it never rains there again. Drought forever”³

“Who’s more corrupt? The poor, who sell their vote in 24 advance installments. What about the corrupters? First are the taxpayers. Second is the government that buys off the poor with what it generously left over for all these benefit program

handouts... Let the poor multiply, we'll increase taxes and everything stays the same so we can maintain the same percentage of corrupt, paid off voters"⁴.

According to Marcos Fernandes G. da Silva (2015), an economist and professor at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, “[...] in the recent literature on economic development policy [...]” it is evident “[...] that ‘resentment toward the poor’ is a symptom of an underdeveloped mentality and world view”. In another analytical perspective, we believe this explains the class conflict in light of the effects of another cyclical global economic crisis, coupled with the impact of the structural crisis of capitalism, as previously mentioned according to the ideas of Mészáros (2011).

We have also studied how the social policy of Worker’s Party (PT) governments contradictorily operated powerful mechanisms to *anesthetize* the social conflict and contain the necessary and even essential politicization of the masses, which should have been boosted through coordinated action in favor of popular participation (PAIVA; ROCHA; CARRARO, 2010; 2014). In the neodevelopmentalist agenda, dominated by the mysterious proposal of class reconciliation, social policy was limited to minimizing the worst effects of poverty through conditional cash transfer programs, such as Bolsa-Família (PBF) and the Continuous Cash Benefit Program (BPC), both part of social welfare policy. These welfare rights are part of the overexploitation of the workforce and play a supporting role alongside other labor compensation mechanisms, whether through a formal wage below the qualifying amount or payment for informal work, both of which predominate in dependent capitalism. These forms of labor exploitation are organically linked to the structural condition of overexploitation, which affects 50% to 80% of the economically active population, depending on the country in question. As such, the contradiction between the welcome and urgent expansion of cash transfer social assistance benefits and their limitations is real, serving capital and worker's interests, but favouring the process of pauperization. In other words, social assistance is essential to the survival of overexploited workers, either to supplement their low salaries, through cash transfers, or to guarantee an income in old age or for disability, when individuals no longer have access to social welfare since they are not employed and therefore not paying tax (even indirectly, deductions are always made), which is ultimately restricted to half the workforce.

In terms of the subjective power of social assistance, which reflects the political and ideological direction, a set of institutional methods with clear and contradictory discriminatory potential were devised and implemented, paving the way for measures to monitor and control individuals (especially those who received the PBF benefit) based on the backwards but widely held view that social problems are private issues resulting from individual conduct and family structure/breakdown. In short, the model is a scattered array of emergency initiatives that fall far short of transforming the living conditions of the population. Moreover, this public policy project aimed at social assistance was never successful in vigorously and decisively meeting social needs on a mass scale.

Intergovernmental management arrangements (with disengaged municipalities and states), shared programs (such as the *minha casa minha vida* housing benefit) and privatizations, camouflaged in government pension funds, social organizations and state-owned companies, dispersed investments and political alliances at the expense of a political move to strengthen the agenda of social movements, with popular participation systematizing decisions. This social rights framework and the design of fundamentally popular social policies could not occur in a situation of economic and political crisis as was the case in Dilma Rousseff’s second term, but would be entirely possible and necessary in the years of economic power seen during Lula da Silva’s time in office. The remaining measures were powerless from a political standpoint, ineffectual at resisting the conservative ascent since they were based on alliances with unpopular and undemocratic opposition parties that shared certain common interests with the federal government, but only for their own benefit. As such, the privileged interlocutors of PT governments in the design of social policies were not the population and social movements, but primarily conservative state and municipal governments as well as the for-profit and/or philanthropic private sectors.

The rejection of a bold process of democratic radicalization in terms of social rights eradicated the alternatives of expanding and consolidating public policies capable of distributing/universalizing income, housing, land, labor and power in the country. In the same (dis)orientation, sizeable and valuable public

resources were distributed without providing concrete solutions for historically underfinanced social security. Rather, social welfare counter-measures were coercively imposed – taking advantage of the government’s majority in Congress thanks to a coalition with right-wing parties – as one of the best examples of unforgettable and indefensible infringements of worker’s rights, in consensus with the pseudo-pact that never existed.

Historical guidelines of the conservative offensive

A look back in history allows us to identify explanatory elements for the development of the class reconciliation policy, which culminated in the August 2016 coup.

Roberto Leher recalls – based on the work of Florestan Fernandes, Ruy Mauro Marini and Mírian Limoeiro – that the incorporation of development as a concept/ideology in Latin America in the 1950s and 60s served as a ban on anticapitalist perspectives, whether in critical theory or politics. LEHER reports (2012, p.11) that for these authors the dissemination of developmentalist ideology “expressed the imperialist interests led by the United States, including the containment of (supposed) communism in anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles”. Soon, however, the molded dictatorships in association with an imperialist core began to replace this dialogic/consensual strategy, putting open and violent government coercion into action. Thus, development underwent significant remodeling.

In that historical period (the second half of the 20th century), the possibility of autonomous development by Latin American nations through strengthening national industry soon proved unacceptable to the interests of international/monopolistic capital, requiring a new plan to be formulated. In this respect, the political and economic mechanisms required for the maturation of dependent capitalism in the imperialist or neocolonial stage are triggered by autocracy, as a continuation of the strategy of dominance established between the local bourgeoisie and Central American nations. The antipode of the openly authoritarian nature of the consolidation of dependent capitalism in Latin America was the Cuban Revolution, one a solitary process while the other saw the rise of a far-reaching system of dominance strengthened by military dictatorships across almost the entire continent.

Based on the Brazilian reality, Florestan FERNANDES (2006) describes how decades of bourgeoisie autocracy in Latin American countries responded to the imposing dynamic of consolidated monopolistic capitalism in the peripheries, in a phase of total imperialism by the United States over countries south of its border. To that end, deeply reactionary class-based policies were adopted, reflecting the autocratic essence of bourgeoisie dominance and its propensity to save itself through open and systematic forms of class dictatorship. The author writes:

We are not in the era of conquering bourgeoisies. Both national peripheral bourgeoisies and those in central and hegemonic capitalist nations have interests and orientations in a different direction. They want to *maintain order, rescue and strengthen capitalism and prevent the decline of bourgeoisie domination and control over the State*. These mutual interests and orientations mean that the political nature of dependent capitalism in fact has two interdependent faces. (FERNANDES, 2006, p. 343).

It is known, and we are reminded by Fernandes, that total imperialism is inherent to monopolistic capitalism. Thus, under the post—war imperialism that was further strengthened in the late 20th century, the dynamic of dependent and peripheral capitalism required a comprehensive association between national and international bourgeoisie sectors, leading to the autocratic dominance that terrorized Latin America during that period. This process reflects the interdependence between economic development and its dark side, the resurgence of working class losses.

For this reason, the two sides of the politics of dependent capitalism – modernizing and reactionary – mean that the bourgeoisies of Latin American nations have become “authentic *‘internal borders’* and true

'political vanguards' of the capitalist world" (FERNANDES, 2006, p. 342). It is this characteristic that revealed the recent coup-promoting facet of broad sectors of the bourgeoisie, entrenched in political parties (the PMDB, PSDB, PP, DEN and others), sections of the judiciary and corporate media, reshaping autocracy in the 21st century.

The duality of a capitalist development project in a peripheral and dependent society, under autocratic regimes, is also explained by Ruy Mauro Marini when exposing the following contradiction from the 1960s and 70s, which seems highly relevant in current times:

Imperialist integration highlights Brazil's tendency to industrial capitalism, making it incapable of creating markets in proportion to its development and driving it to restrict these markets in relative terms.

This is an intensification of the general law of capitalist accumulation, that is, the absolutism of the tendency to pauperism, which strangles the system's productive capacity.

[...] The progression of this fundamental contradiction in Brazilian capitalism leads to complete irrationality, that is, the expansion of production increasingly restricting the ability to create a national market, compressing internal consumption levels and consistently increasing the reserve industrial army (MARINI, 2012, p. 156).

With very distinct traits, PT governments glimpsed an ideal dynamic to reshape the development ideology in the first decade of the 21st century, without the need to assess its historical limitations experienced relatively recently. The current inflationary dynamic, with an exponential increase in interest rates and declining economic production, could rapidly raise unemployment rates to those seen in the 1990s.

The dismantling of major investments in oil and energy infrastructure projects as a result of the sensational anti-corruption investigations by the Public Prosecutor's Office and Federal Police alongside sectors of the Judiciary once again demonstrates heightened capitalist accumulation in Brazil and the world; in other words, pauperism expands with the strangulation of the system's productive capacity in an organized initiative of capital over worker's wealth via greater expropriation of surplus and rising overexploitation, as reported by Marini (2012).

We are now in a different century, but the social dimension of democratic guarantees remains crippled, coexisting with a striking degree of social inequality that always heightens political tension. This tension is felt in everyday life through the perpetuation of endemic violence, primarily against poor youths from the outskirts of cities, indigenous people and popular movements. Weak democracy and explosive social conflicts, primarily as the result of struggles for land and housing.

What is the agenda of the PT government's neodevelopmentalist teleology and its real impact on the problem of income concentration, government debt and land ownership, which are known to be the starkest contradictions caused by peripheral and dependent capitalism? These demands have not featured on the agenda of public debate with the masses, either because they have been frozen out by the media or through the interference of conservative parties from the governing coalition. Rather, they have remained encapsulated in the government, often appropriated in vanities, disputes within the bureaucracy and corporate bias.

Between the decades of the military dictatorship, following the autocratic bourgeois coup (FERNANDES, 2006), and the neodevelopmentalist period of PT governments, were the long years of conservative reorientation of center-right governments, most notably the two terms of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), who served as dedicated translators of the program known as neoliberalism. This period was marked by the containment and/or suppression of social rights and the weakening of trade unions, which involved finalizing intended social welfare and labor reforms. In addition to attacks on these rights by deconstitutionalization, in the late 1990s and early 2000s (during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso or FHC era) workers were subjected to a variety of legislative initiatives that gradually deregulated and

relaxed labor relations, destroying important achievements, especially, as usual, in the area of social welfare.

The neoconservative redemption that came to a close in the 1980s and 90s, in response to another serious cycle of systemic crisis, produced the well-known and disastrous effects of unemployment, the eradication of recently conquered social rights, squandering of public assets and mineral wealth, collapse of the banking system (duly bailed out with public resources), dismantling of national industry, etc. These harmful effects on the national economy and the working class were not eclipsed by the promised tax adjustments.

By contrast, socialization of the costs of this adjustment were, as always, deposited squarely on the shoulders of workers and supported by threatening discourse, with increasingly serious social effects. As reported by LEHER (2012), the worsening of pauperization generated far-reaching political consequences. As a result of the crisis – with Brazil at its epicenter – popular antagonism gained an unexpected dimension in Latin America, “disrupted by the formidable removal process of fifteen neoliberal presidents” LEHER (2012, p. 13), as follows: *Fernando Collor de Mello*, Brasil (1992); *Jorge Serrano Elías*, Guatemala (1993); *Carlos Andrés Pérez*, Venezuela (1993); *Abdalá Bucarám*, Ecuador (1997); *Raúl Cubas*, Paraguay (1999); *Jamil Muhaad*, Ecuador (2000); *Alberto Fujimori*, Peru (2000); *Fernando de la Rúa*, *Ramón Puerta*, *Adolfo Rodríguez Saá*, *Eduardo Camaño*, Argentina (2001); *Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada*, Bolivia (2003); *Carlos Mesa*, Bolivia (2005); *Lucio Gutiérrez*, Ecuador (2005).

Despite this period of turbulence and crisis in the neoliberal project and the subsequent rise to power of democratic governments in many countries, including Venezuela with Chávez, Bolivia with Morález, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina and Correa in Ecuador, today it can be suggested that, after the first 15 years of center-left coalition governments, similar inconsistencies exist between the current neodevelopmentalist project employed by PT governments and the previously unsuccessful neodevelopmentalist experiment. LEHER (2012, p. 15) confirms that

With effect, the rewording and reshaping of social policies employed by PT governments obey the basic grammar structure of proposals by international organizations and major liberal-bourgeoisie lines of thought. This is part of the ruse of the dominant sectors: they succeeded in maintaining the regression of labor law and the pattern of income concentration, but, using targeted policies, were able to progress in terms of “reducing poverty”. What seemed impossible – tackling poverty without transforming the economic base – became an ideology with significant hegemonic power.

With the rise of political forces forged within that trade union movement, there was an expectation that PT governments would break from the macroeconomic policy of previous governments, which ultimately did not occur. The political choices made by these governments have been presented here. However, it is important to underscore that, as reported in several political analyses, the PT did not change when it came to power, but rather changed in order to come to power. At the same time, the party replaced protests on the streets with agreements forged in parliament (HILLESHEIM, 2016). This naturally expanded the possibilities of rearticulating opposition political forces, which led to the offensive of the August 2016 coup.

Analysis of PT governments should consider the structural dynamics of the Brazilian reality, when the country was inserted into a new international order under the domination of financial capital in the 1990s, renewing its status as a peripheral and dependent economy. According to Filgueiras (2013, p. 12), despite distinctions in relation to preceding governments as a result of different objective conditions, PT governments were unable to alter Brazil’s pattern of development, which “[...] remains stuck in the same liberal-peripheral development pattern that defines it as politically, technology and financially dependent country”.

The neodevelopmentalist ideology of PT governments, viewed as false consciousness or naïve consciousness at best, and which, according to Leher (2012), aimed to tackle poverty without transforming the economic base, was dismantled by reality. Whereas the previous abundance of investments and

commodities exports meant the party enjoyed relative hegemonic power, the periods of global crisis quickly destroyed this ideological consensus, primarily due to the disproportionate antidemocratic conservative offensive that employed coup-like tactics in parliament and the government, led by the media and its inflated social support as well as sectors of the judiciary.

Imbued with this ideology, PT governments applied an economic policy based on new public investments alongside mass market expansion measures. The focus was on increasing the consumption of families by offering subsidized credit and income, driven partly by the policy of recovering the minimum wage as well as other social programs. The framework of this strategy has been outlined in the national Multi-Year Plan since 2004. This ideology with significant immediate results is accurately summarized by Gonçalves in referring to the *imperative of governance*, aimed at ensuring State legitimacy and political stability:

In the first decade of the 21st century this issue became crucial in the region following two decades (1980-2000) of instability and crisis, including systemic and institutional crises as well as greater inequality. It is important to note that inequality declined in the first decade of this century, regardless of the model of each country.

The second argument is that ruling groups, focused on *perpetuating power*, recognize the importance of policies aimed at reducing inequality in general, and tackling poverty in particular, in electoral campaigns. Targeted public social spending, cash transfers and specific benefits become efficient vote-winning tools among low income social groups. In other words, income distribution policy plays a key role in the struggle for political power (GONÇALVES, 2012, p.24).

In addition to the demonstrated ideological effects, with the coup of August 2016 the reality of the political and economic crisis revealed that these proposals represent a paradoxical process, since the economic arrangement that triggered the measures of the Silva/Rousseff program, whereby countercyclical economic growth initiatives were stimulated, was short-lived and quickly absorbed by the restrictive global dynamics of fiscal adjustment. This is because this linear association involves the structural limitations and contradictions present in the constitution of dependent economies, since the development of the Northern Hemisphere is an analogous and complementary process to the underdevelopment of the Southern Hemisphere (FRANK, 1966).

Thus, it is important to recognize that income distribution policy can be vital in the struggle for political power, but at the same time it is dysfunctional for capital in terms of intensified class struggles, generally due to capital's offensive seeking to recover profit rates. It is against this background of fragile progress and countless setbacks in relation worker's rights that reflection on the social services institution is situated in present times.

Social services in the intricate situation of affirming/reversing social rights

While fifteen neoliberal Latin American presidents were toppled by popular social protests in the 1980s and 90s, under different social specificities and political dynamics, Latin America began the 21st century victimized by the renewal of the destabilization strategy in different countries. In recent years, Brazil has once again been the stage for coups forged from the well-known combination between the endogenous elements of the reactionary and antidemocratic schemes of national groups and powers, always in conjunction with international interests, particularly those of the United States, as is public knowledge, through the publication of intelligence information by the website Wikileaks⁵. Not all of these attempts succeeded, as was the case in Venezuela with the coup against President Hugo Chavez in 2002, defeated by popular protests and the resounding support of the masses. However, this changed rapidly and since then, 5 presidents have been illegitimately deposed: *Jean-Bertrand Aristide*, Haiti (2004) – who

suffered UN intervention, led by Brazil, in a tragic decision for us and the Haitian people -; *Manuel Zelaya*, Honduras (2009); *Fernando Lugo*, Paraguay (2012); Dilma Rousseff, Brazil (2016).

An antidemocratic political reaction was set in motion, coordinated by major media groups⁶ in conjunction with sections of the Brazilian government itself, primarily in the upper echelons of legal bureaucracy and parliament. The August 2016 coup put into play the most tragic onslaught on social rights that the working class has had to bear since the continuous deconstruction of the guarantees enshrined in the 1988 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil (CRFB/1988). Here, we will address only two: First, a plan has been announced to effectively remove social assistance and welfare benefits from minimum wage adjustments, with a rapid and severe effect on the lives of poor families as well as middle class sectors of the working class. This measure amends and worsens the composition of benefit amounts, but is even more aggressive in modifying the regulations to access these rights, with an increase in the minimum age for retirement and changes to criteria for the BPC, death pension, sickness benefit, insurance, and disability retirement, among other rights. Second, another violent and brutal measure is the planned retention of investments in health and education, separating them from new resources resulting from oil extracted from the pre-salt basin, which, incidentally, the de facto government intends to privatize; in other words, once again national riches will be divested in favor of international capital.

In the field of education, for example, ultra-reactionary proposals such as the *escola sem partido* (school without party affiliation) program and proposed reform of high school education that revives ideals typical of the Vargas dictatorship (known as the Capanema Reform) are gaining ground, in a move of clear technical bias away from a more comprehensive and critical education. In the health sector, proposals have been put forward to eradicate the principle of universal access, as well as others that cater to the private interests of national and foreign economic groups. Transfer payment programs are also being targeted by the adjustment plan of Michel Temer's illegitimate government, which authorized a 12.5% adjustment of PBF benefit amounts while still an interim government. Regardless, he has already warned PBF beneficiaries that the program "will not last a lifetime"⁷. As an "exit strategy" from these programs, the new Ministry of Social and Agrarian Development (MDSA) indicates "productive inclusion" initiatives that demonstrate a clear shift from social protection based on a right-wing idea of citizenship to a perspective of precarious conditions provided to workers as a function of economic surplus, which is the result of overexploited labor (poorly paid, informal and precarious).

We are not experiencing a time of miracles or calm in the global economy. The capitalist crisis, with its ever shorter and more severe cycles, is a decisive factor in the current capital offensive in its financial form, particularly in the strangulation of southern European economies. Along similar lines and further to the south, in the Middle East/North Africa and Latin America, the international capital offensive oscillates between open military aggression, murder, coups, wars, genocide⁸, veiled threats and all manner of destabilization of elected governments, whose misalignment with the dictates of the Empire, whether on open issues such as the case of Venezuela or underlying motives as occurred in Brazil, has produced openly antidemocratic and illegal political processes.

There is already talk about the new Condor plan for Latin America, as mentioned by Ecuadorean president, Rafael Correa, in the face of attempts to destabilize progressive governments in the region, where "military dictatorships are no longer necessary. They need submissive judges and a corrupt media that even publishes private conversations, which is absolutely illegal"⁹.

At this precise moment, we are experiencing a process that, to Brazil's political and economic elite and a significant portion of the so-called "middle class", signifies the desire to "clean up the country" after damage caused by successive PT governments defined by these same elites and part of the "middle class" as "socialist or communist-based left-wing governments" that prioritized labor demands over capital demands. As a result, these governments have supposedly destroyed Brazil's economic development potential, shrinking the economy back to levels seen in previous decades. Through selective accusations of corruption and the assumption of a partisan political stance by some sections of the judiciary and state prosecutor's office, in conjunction with the persuasive power of a monopolized media that acts as a spokesperson for the national and international bourgeoisie, Dilma Rousseff's government was faced with

rising unpopularity as a result of heavy daily criticism by the media in general, and even more so on television. The ever-present policy of protecting the interests of financial capital ultimately accelerated the cyclical process of the economic crisis which, although linked to the global capitalist crisis, is trumpeted by more political conservative forces as the result of political choices made by PT governments. This occurred in combination with pervasive opportunistic legal and political interpretations of possible management irregularities, which are known to have been forged, but were sufficient to simulate the alleged crime of responsibility that gave pseudo-legality to the impeachment of President Rousseff. As a result, for months the Brazilian nation watched and listened, with a wide range of sentiments, the pathetic explanations of congressmen and senators about their reasons for voting in favor of impeachment, mimicking other fabricated processes in the region, as previously mentioned. The legal grounds of the impeachment are so lax that its legitimacy has even been questioned in the international arena.

It is immersed in this dramatic political and economic scenario that Brazil's social services sector celebrates its 80th anniversary. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this scenario progresses from a material foundation, based on a social and historical order with legalities and causalities determined by *teleological pores*, aimed at producing and reproducing this same social capitalist order along a path of narrowing consensus toward veiled authoritarianism. This expression of our presence at the social and technical divide of work is saturated with macropolitical and socioeconomic determinations that, in turn, have been processed by the profession in a unique manner throughout its history and in relation to its own *ethical and political pores*.

The foundations of the Brazilian social service in its 80-year history have been closely examined by the literature¹⁰, with scientific production in the field reflecting significant theoretical maturity based on a critical and dialectical framework. This represents one of the largest and most important legacies of the profession, since it acknowledges not only the academic world, but the labor market itself. This maturity, however, was not achieved without contradictions, which are at times more acutely evident. Although this perspective based on a Marxian and Marxist theoretical and methodological framework is hegemonic within the profession, it does not and could not signify uniformity of thought.

Perhaps now more than ever, social services have undergone major changes as a result of advancing left-wing conservatism and right-wing (neo)conservatism (BRAZ, 2012), both in the field of training and exercising the profession itself. Added to this ambiguity are different political and professional challenges faced in recent times, including: intensification of the class struggle; ethnic and racial discrimination; repeated attempts to undermine advances in gender equality and the rights of sexual minorities; the permeation of alienating religious postulates; and the irrational use of natural resources, among other issues.

It is important to reiterate once again that the political process experienced in Brazil in the 1980s, a period that saw the profession's most significant political and theoretical formulation, was marked by so-called "conservative redemocratization", characterized yet again by "reconciliation by the elite" aimed at defending the interests of the bourgeoisie and halting the political advance of the working class. According to Carlos Nelson Coutinho (1992), this process of overcoming the period of military dictatorship was characterized as a "weak transition", exhibiting "[...] risk in this relatively 'negotiated' form of transition, which always [...] contains a combination of 'elite driven' processes and those based on 'popular participation'; and it is certainly the predominance of one or the other that determines the final result". What occurred in that time of transition was therefore the dominance of conservative forces involving "[...] certainly a break from the dictatorship implemented in 1964, but not only the authoritarian and excluding traits which characterized that traditional form of politics in Brazil" (COUTINHO, 1992, p. 52-53). Nevertheless, as observed by José Paulo Netto (1991), the political and theoretical advances of social services during this period did not fully break from the conservative legacy. The gradual transition from military dictatorship to democratic regime can be considered a decisive factor in reproducing continual conservatism and bourgeoisie ideology, functioning as an obstacle to the process of significant change in the dynamic of Brazilian political life, allowing the reconciliation of class interests to prosper, as seen repeatedly throughout history. This undoubtedly created constraints for the profession that had gained somewhat different elements from those seen in its nationwide development up to that point.

It is important to underscore that Brazilian social services were affected by the economic and political processes that combined the old and the new, in which the modernization envisioned resulted in the preservation of archaic relations within the new capitalist patterns pursued internally.

The municipalization and decentralization of social policies gained ground in the paradoxical regulation of social rights resulting from the achievements of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, producing restrained expansion of social policies under the banner of budget restrictions and neoliberal fiscal adjustments. This significantly improved the job market, albeit on chronically precarious levels. In contrast to the urgent and extensive social needs of the population, this timid and fledgling arrangement of social policies demanded professionals with purely instrumental bureaucratic knowledge, whose scope is limited to the surface of real issues, with an undisputed oppressive impact on professional training. This also demonstrates the advance of neoconservatism within social services and the rejection of so-called social theories based on an overall view, in order to understand the genesis and development of class society. It can be observed that significant accomplishments by social services in terms of incorporating the theoretical and methodological perspective based on the ontology of the social being have already begun to suffer a reversal both in training and intervention itself. This is undoubtedly related to a much broader movement than the processes within social services, since this progression in (neo)conservative thinking can be seen in society as a whole.

It is also noteworthy that, particularly from the 1990s, social services moved away from the most critical social movements, primarily those that openly based their actions on anticapitalist, socialist or communist principles. This is both our choice and a product of the crisis of social movements themselves, which affected left-wing politics around the world, with the collapse of socialist regimes in Europe and Asia. This distance is not as evident in relation to movements aimed at defending civil rights and with agendas that obscure the class dimension, despite addressing the demands of the working class. This detachment by social services was heavily influenced by the ideological processes inherent to the proposed institutionalized participation translated in spaces of social control created at the interface between State and civil society. In this respect, civil society was transformed into a *locus* of cooperation and crisis management, devoid of its political content, in accordance with Gramscian theory. In short, civil society, reduced to a cluster of micro-spaces and different players, incorporates exploitative strategies of harmonizing adjustments to join the capitalist order. According to Wood (2003), these perspectives diminish the concept of civil society and conceal or obscure the forms of domination present in society governed by capital.

The defense of rights in present times, however, requires professionals with theoretical and methodological skills capable of understanding society's contradictory movements in order to direct or target their actions considering the peculiarities of Brazilian society and the institutions in which they operate. This requirement (of understanding the social reality) is therefore a challenge that is concomitant to the struggle for rights. If it is not met, social workers could easily be seduced by the wiles of conservative thinking which, through the labor market, presents demands that are known to conceal social needs (MOTA and AMARAL, 1998) and, as such, need to be addressed in order to deconstruct their historical processual approach. In this respect, it is important to remember a passage by Mészáros (1993) about the need to fight for rights in the context of the capitalist social order. According to the author:

Under the conditions of a capitalist society, the appeal to human rights involves the rejection of private interests and the defense of personal freedom and individual self-realization, in opposition to the forces of dehumanization and increasingly destructive reification or material domination; [...] as long as we are where we are, and while the "free development of individuality" is as far from us as it is, achieving human rights is and remains a highly relevant issue for all socialists (MÉSZÁROS, 1993, p.216-217).

We understand that the boiling point for addressing social services today involves considering its historic, and now known to be contradictory, connection with the struggle to create, expand and defend civil, political, social and economic rights, even though throughout the history of the profession these

struggles have not always been against capitalism and aimed at building an emancipated society. Thus, social services are a combination of process permeated by advances, resistance and setbacks.

If the profession oscillates on the fringes of the dialectics of confrontation between social classes, it is not for lack of solid theory and methodology, but rather the vast and complex contradictions present in daily struggles and work in professional spaces. This link connects us to the struggle of working classes for their rights, far beyond the bond forged by the symbiosis between the profession and the State, made possible by social services' close collaboration with social policies, which are after all our workplace. The bourgeoisie and authoritarian character exposed by the Brazilian government in the situation since the coup will serve as a clearer observatory of our idealistic mistakes, naïve beliefs and, above all, will require self-criticism about our neodevelopmentalist illusions, the dark side of the intractable bureaucracy in social services.

Final Considerations

From the perspective of left-wing conservative forces, PT governments adopted a policy of reconciling class interests, relentlessly safeguarding the interests of financial capital and did nothing to alter the power of major national media, all with a view to achieving governability of a fragile democracy. According to these same political forces, PT governments indeed stand out from previous governments in terms of implementing a set of social programs that were operationalized largely because of a short period of economic growth based on stimulating internal consumption and increased credit. From this perspective, the macroeconomic policy adopted by previous governments, extremely unfavorable to the interests of the working class, was maintained, meaning the effects of the social program were powerless and its recommendations fleeting.

While on one hand it is undeniable that workers under the governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff received real wage increases, on the other it is also true that these gains did not result in lost profitability or reduced social inequality because there was no effective deconcentration of wealth from the wealthiest to the poorest sections of Brazilian society. Thus, overexploitation was repeated in this meandering and unprecedented advance.

Data from studies conducted by Medeiros, Souza and Castro (2015) indicate that, between 2006 and 2012, 0.1% of the country's wealthiest people earned approximately 11% of the total income. At the time these people earned an individual income 110 times greater than the national average. The authors also found that 25% of total national income was appropriated by the wealthiest 1% of the population (including the 0.1% cited). In addition, the same study observed that the wealthiest 5% of the population retained 44% of the country's entire income during the same period, the equivalent of almost half the total national income. In Central American countries, for example, over a similar period, the wealthiest 1% retained between 10% and 15% of the national income.

Despite all the criticisms of the PT governments' liberal policies, social and trade union movements as well as left-wing political parties attempted to join forces to block the President's impeachment, viewed as a preventive parliamentary coup sponsored by the media, the opposition and, opportunistically, the Vice-President of the Republic, who put himself forward as a legitimate holder of the country's highest political office and defender of a government plan denominated "the bridge to the future" which, in essence, means more of the same: fiscal adjustment, the suppression of labor rights and defending capital interests.

In this process, the government that for almost 15 years demobilized workers through a "national conciliation" policy has hitherto been unable to unite efforts to halt the advance of a project that aims to:

- a) destroy left-wing politics in Brazil;
- b) hamper the wealth distribution process in favor of the poorest workers (although little has been achieved in this respect, as previously mentioned);
- c) suppress, deregulate and relax labor and social rights, in addition to;

- d) completing the privatization cycle initiated in the country in the 1990s.

As such, the struggle of the working classes demands new intensity, unity and strategies, but the possibilities of this reaction are still unknown. For social services, the path to affirming its ethical and political project is important when we consider the strategies of struggle and organization with a view to strengthening the field as a political and historical being social and its role as a mobilizer of the working class as a whole.

There is an important final point to consider in the appropriation of this *mysterious field of politics* that goes beyond the classic and slightly obvious characters we know: political parties, the State, entities and other organizations. We know that our most frequent interlocutor is the State, through parliament, employing institutions, municipal, state and federal governments. As such, there is intense but not direct dialogue between the phenomena and interests that capital personifies in these arenas.

Considering politics beyond these classic players involves in-depth and careful debate about power in its different forms. Power that permeates not only the concrete performance of workers/social workers in the institutional arena in which they operate, such as the power at play in our left-wing relations and disputes, and the struggle to achieve and build democracy. It is currently severely and brutally threatened and we cannot minimize this process. We must not nurture skepticism, which mirrors the old relativism inherent to conservative thinking. One of its recurring arguments is that it is pointless to consign these commitments to law or “*put them on paper*” because the practical reality is different, or utopian. What is worse, there is not critical theory to substantiate institutional practice.

We know that values are not abstract; however, this skepticism is ultimately disdainful and distrusting of any collective political initiative that aims to conduct macrosocial analyses and prioritize references. In fact, this is a common response to the great individualistic design: I know, I choose, I act, I decide, even if from a professional perspective there are collective universal, democratically constructed and confirmed references, duties and obligations.

In pursuit of harmony between our ethical and political professional arsenal and the historical reference that guides the organization of worker’s policy in Latin American countries, the process of struggle is radicalized by economic surplus, with the organization of popular participation and mass struggle.

The ethical and political parameters of social services reaffirm the democratic radicalization committed to socializing means of production and socially produced wealth, as well as social, material and cultural wealth. These parameters foster unfettered commitment to social justice, calling for the elimination of all forms of prejudice, which inflates the fight against discrimination, domination and class exploitation. They form part of a long-term and clear class selection political project, which is absolutely essential and decisive in these years of democratic breakdown. May the next 80 years see the reconciliation of social services with their radical anti-capitalist humanism.

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