
article

The Latin American reconceptualisation movement

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This article looks at some characteristics of the reconceptualisation movement that took place in the mid-1960s in Latin American social work. It focuses on the social, historical, political and theoretical influences that allowed a turning point in social work, in both academic and professional practice, marked mainly by the ideological-political debate about the role of social workers within the national liberation process and the commitment to people on a low income. The article sets out the changes from the entry of modernisation ideas in the mid-1950s and the emphasis on community development, prolegomena to the questionings of the current social assistance model as well as the teaching that was being developed in schools and institutes. Finally, it pays special attention to the role played by the social work publisher Editorial ECRO in Argentina in the diffusion of these 'new ideas' in the Americas.

key words social work • reconceptualisation movement

Introduction

This article looks at aspects of the reconceptualisation movement that took place in the mid-1960s in Latin American social work. This involves the reconstruction of part of our professional history, which, as Castel (1997) has taught us, means seeing the present as a consequence of our contested inheritance. In order to understand and act today, the memory of that inheritance becomes necessary (Benjamin, 2005).

This historiographical perspective is in alignment with the position raised by Matus Sepúlveda (2006), where she 'reinvents the memory' of the first years of the profession in Chile, becoming an important reference at the time of writing this article. Matus Sepúlveda penetrates into the centre of the memory, searches for contradictions, revives the voices of protagonists, refuses to believe that everything has been said or done in social work history and has the conviction that this process can help us to better understand our contemporaneity.

From this perspective, a dialogue with history provides an analysis that allows the identification of continuities and discontinuities, turning points, conditions for the existence and logics where certain practices are inscribed. That is why this article focuses on the social, historical, political and theoretical influences that created a turning point in social work in Latin America, in both academic and professional practice. These are marked mainly by the ideological-political debate about the role

of social workers within the national liberation process and their commitment to people on a low income.

The article sets out the changes within social work with the development of ideas of modernisation in the mid-1950s. This brought an emphasis on community development, alongside a questioning of the social assistance model and new ways of teaching in schools and institutes. Finally, the article pays special attention to the role played by the social work publisher Editorial ECRO in Argentina in the diffusion of these ‘new ideas’ and considers the legacy and relevance of the reconceptualisation movement for social workers today.

The onset of the developmentalist period

In order to study the reconceptualisation movement in Latin American social work, it is essential to locate the sociopolitical context against which ideas of modernisation and ‘developmentalism’ took place in the Latin Americas. This involved political guidelines, technical recommendations and ‘development’ financing, led by agencies created by the North American government to influence Latin American countries.

To understand the international political strategy of the United States (US) towards the region, some context is necessary. Campana (2012) points out that during the 1940s and 1950s, many Latin American countries had promoted some wealth redistribution in favour of the working classes. Murillo (2006: 13) further notes that governments drew up plans after the Second World War and in the Cold War context to increase the training and skill levels of the urban and industrial working classes, to expand literacy rates and to increase participation in higher education, all of which helped to create a layer of critical intellectuals among the middle and lower classes. Further, growing social resistance was fuelled by the success achieved by the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and its support to revolutionary movements in the rest of the continent. Against this backdrop, we saw the development of the ‘developmentalist programme’.

One of the most influential development agencies was the Organisation of American States (OAS), created in 1958. During an OAS meeting in Punta del Este in Uruguay in 1961, the North American government, presided by John F Kennedy, launched the ‘Alliance for Progress’. Its founding document, *The charter of Punta del Este* (OAS, 1961), established the region’s priorities. The developmentalist strategy involved the technification of state operations, the creation of national planning entities and the application of certain recommendations on poverty. These recommendations involved planned interventions on populations whose behaviours, practices and social living conditions were considered as obstacles to be surmounted. ‘The action on traditional communities favoured a cultural change which would stimulate national development. It sprang from a firm belief that the traditional values of the poor were the main limitation to the supposed improvements modernisation would bring’ (Campana, 2011: 131).

According to Leguizamón (2008), these theories assumed that external intervention was needed to modernise traditional attitudes and behaviours, because the assumption was that poor and marginalised people not only lack the ability to change, they also resist change. Therefore, it is necessary to intervene on cultural patterns and ‘archaic’ mindsets in order to adapt the population to ‘modern’ patterns of living. According to Romero (1994: 134), the approach adopted by the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), where such theories often originated, was the following: “[D]

veloped” countries could help “developing” countries to eliminate backwardness through adequate investment in key areas. They would be accompanied by “structural” reforms such as agricultural reform.’

Among the interventions proposed with regard to addressing poverty and marginality, community development had a great influence in the region, and especially in social work: ‘The “community development” proposal gives importance to social planning processes aimed at “communities”, focusing on the concept of participation, proposing strategies to reassess education and involving experts to “promote” the process of “change”’ (Arias, 2012: 58). According to Arias (2012), during the 1960s and 1970s the majority of Latin American countries adopted community development proposals in varying degrees as part of their state policies.

Social work was a privileged profession for community intervention. With a long tradition of aiding families, groups and individuals, and having an established role working with people on a low income, social workers could be useful to the developmentalist project as long as their professional profiles were ‘modernised’. According to Moljo (2005: 90), developmentalist ideologies involved an expanding role for social workers to create a more modern and independent society. That is, ‘without disregarding their individual and group interventions’ they should develop a ‘community work mission’ or a commitment to ‘community development’. These involved a training policy for leaders that, in the case of social workers, would establish them as ‘agents of change’.

For example, in Argentina, the national government requested information on social work teaching to the Technical Assistance Administration of United Nations (UN). There were approximately 15 institutes that trained social workers in the country. Chilean colleague, Valentina Maidagán de Ugarte, head of the technical assistance administration, was in charge of evaluating the syllabus and advising college heads on the academic requirements needed to train social workers according to the developmentalist project. In this way, a ‘modernisation wave’ emerged in the profession in Argentina.

After a critical appraisal of professional training, the UN consultant prepared a Recommendation Manual for Social Work Schools. She focused on technical training of students and on a higher course load for pre-professional internships in wellbeing institutions, like health services, schools, etc, so that they became involved in the communities and promoted their participation in removing the obstacles of development.

The Social Worker performs a technical function. He [sic] is also the instrument that makes community efforts more rational, intelligent and effective, in order to promote social welfare and efforts by individuals, families and groups to surmount obstacles that prevent them from living a useful and satisfactory life. (Maidagán, 1957, cited in Alayón, 2007: 178)

The definition of ‘community development’ stated in 1958 by the UN reflects the new guidelines for the training of social workers: ‘Community development is the process by which the people themselves get involved in planning and executing the programmes aimed at enhancing their quality of life. This implies an essential collaboration between them and the governments to provide efficient, viable and balanced development outlines’ (cited in Ander-Egg, 1982: 26).

Maidagán de Ugarte's mission ended with the creation of the Social Service Institute of Buenos Aires in 1959. It was subordinated to the Ministry of Health and Social Service of Argentina. Its syllabus was in accordance with the UN consultant's recommendations and faced much resistance by many schools of social work that did not want to modify their syllabus. According to Campana (2011: 133), 'it was expected that the renewed professional framework of social workers would provide a basis to promote equality conditions, prevent marginality and assist low-income sectors individually or collectively'.

This institute represents a landmark for academic social work in the 'modernisation' period. A similar process existed in other countries of the region at this time. As we shall see below, it also nourished the seed of what would become the reconceptualisation movement in Latin American social work.

Sociohistorical context and theoretical influences of reconceptualisation

As previously stated, during the 1950s and 1960s there were significant levels of social resistance in the Americas and internationally that nourished the debates on social work reconceptualisation. In Vietnam, the US retreat and surrender were 'landmarks that had an overall impact on the system: it was the first time that a worldwide capitalist super power suffered a defeat that had an impact on its inner order' (Murillo, 2012: 58). The French May Events of 1968, China's Proletarian Cultural Revolution and African decolonisation all created a climate where activists in the 'Third World' believed that change was possible. In Latin America, the Cuban Revolution played an essential role in thinking that the liberation of the people was possible. In Chile, the election of Salvador Allende's socialist government also created great expectations among Latin American youth.

Transformations in the Church after institutional changes introduced by Pope John XXIII and the II Vatican Council in 1965 were also a great influence on the radicalisation of ideas in middle sectors and, what especially interests us for the purposes of this article, among social work students and young professionals. In Latin America, 'Third World' bishops and lay people declared that they were in favour of the 'real' poor – not the poor in spirit – and expressed the need for an active commitment to reform society.

On the other hand, social sciences were going through a moment of renovation, nurturing the social work reconceptualisation movement with their theories. In this sense, it is necessary to point out the academic questioning of the modernisation theory, critiques produced from within the Marxist tradition and the development of ideas linked to dependency theory. According to Arias (2012), dependency theorists identified how capitalist development created dependency situations in 'Third World' countries, and questioned the supposed neutral role played by modernisation theories.

Social work reconceptualisation

During the 1960s, the climate of rebellion, criticism and rejection of the established order, the Marxist critique of the world and dependency theory were implanted into the social work profession. Social service pre-professional practices and social service community work were the scene where students and graduates lived with young

activists and ‘Third World’ priests. They were an important means for a professional group to start radicalising their positions and presenting a theoretical, methodological and ideological discussion within the profession. Community work confronted students and professionals with a ‘reality’ that favoured criticism and even community development, which was booming in the mid-1960s.

As a protagonist of these times, Barreix (1971) suggested that when students and professionals, who were trained at schools (created and/or advised by the UN technical committees) in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, started their field practices, or after graduating when they became members of social welfare institutions, a series of events took place from which it was necessary for them to assert:

a) the impossibility of working in a given field reality ... trying to respond ... with methods and techniques conceived in another reality (the US one) to respond to essentially different characteristics ... b) the impossibility of being neutral professionals, i.e., to apply cold uncommitted methods and techniques. (Barreix, 1971: 50–1)

Dialogue between dependency theorists and those in the Marxist tradition developed a powerful critique of technical interventions into ‘backward populations’ and was key to questioning the ‘accepted methodology’ and social workers’ perceived role as ‘agents of change’ (notions that came from ‘modernisation ideas’).

Social workers started identifying and recognising the origin of social inequality in the current relationships of domination in the society and questioning the integration proposals of the ‘marginalised’ or ‘misfits’ to the environment which are typical of that ‘modernising’ thought and the functionalist-theoretical conceptions. These proposals come from the approach of understanding the prevailing model as just and suitable. (Alayón, 2005: 13)

Consequently, the importance of the Social Service Institute created in Buenos Aires in Argentina in 1959, under the technical guidelines of the UN, mainly arises from the fact that its students would go on to found the first journal of social service in the country – *Social Service Today*, whose first issue was published in December 1965 – and then *Social Work Today*, and form the social work publisher Editorial ECRO. They were in charge of revealing and communicating, in Latin America, the emerging new professional ideas. The two publications included people from different political traditions and shades but represented a clear trend towards a breach of the technocratic and conservative methods of social work practice.

It is worth stressing that the process that the profession was undergoing at this period was highly complex and contradictory. It meant both advances and setbacks, that is, it was a construction that entailed debates, ideological commitments and positional reviews. Therefore, it was not a straight chronology of an old professional line substituted or overcome by another one, but different perspectives that lived together and fought to hegemonise the professional field according to competing corporate projects. In fact, Editorial ECRO’s initial publications addressed developmentalist guidelines and the idea of making social work a technical profession. However, in the context of the unfolding social protest and revolutionary movements, the group

started to develop ideas linked to the liberation of the oppressed peoples and the Latin American revolution.

The reconceptualisation movement is considered to have started in 1965 due to a series of landmark events that took place that year. In fact, the ‘1965 Generation’ was the name given to the professional group that started to reject the technocratic model put forward by the developmentalists and instead advocated social work reconceptualisation. According to Barreix, there were three reasons behind the development of the reconceptualisation movement in 1965. First, it was the year of the first Latin American Social Service Seminar, which took place in Porto Alegre in Brazil. This seminar became ‘the annual mandatory meeting of colleagues [committed to] professional re-conceptualisation’ (Barreix, 1971: 52). Second, 1965 was the year the syllabus of Social Service Studies at the Republic University of Uruguay was reformed, with its aim being to ‘start investigating, theorising, teaching and seeking a truly Latin American Social Service’ (Barreix, 1971: 52). Finally, 1965 was the year in which the first issue of *Social Service Today* was published by Editorial ECRO. The journal was published as a ‘permanent communication tool of the new professional ideas’ (Barreix, 1971: 52).

Paraphrasing Palma (1977), reconceptualisation was a Latin American phenomenon that had, as a common denominator, certain interpretations of the reality of Latin America and social work, which allowed its members to recognise certain tasks and challenges that contrasted with the ones typical of the profession in Latin America.

Basically, the self-criticism made by social workers was related to the functionality the profession was undergoing due to the capitalist system and the help given to the peoples to adapt to the social model imposed by imperialism. In this respect, it is logical that reconceptualisation rejected traditional methods of social work – individual casework, group social service and community development – that emerged in the US as the main representatives of imperialism and contained in its formulation the idea of adaptation to the environment. Behind the neutrality of high-tech training that developmentalist ideas promoted so that social workers became ‘agents of change’, there was a political intention: to suppress populations to the development guidelines imposed by the Alliance for Progress.

The awareness that emerged from the influence of dependency theory, set community development in the same ‘package’ as the intervention proposals that started to be rejected in favour of a Latin American social work that identified with the liberation of the oppressed peoples, victims of the capitalist system. Inside this movement, the trend that clearly promoted a breach of the prevailing conservatism in social service and was linked with an emancipatory project for the profession was connected to the 1965 Generation:

In 1967, some members of the ‘1965 Generation’ shyly dare babble a few words that were taboo in those times: ‘change of structures’ as the only way out of underdevelopment instead of ‘change IN the structures’ (or reforms) which made up the ‘developmentalism’ basis and had already proved to be a dead-end path. (Barreix, 1971: 54)

Parra (2006) suggests that the greatest peak of the movement could be situated between 1969 and 1972, for two reasons. First, this was the period when the movement penetrated beyond the Southern Cone borders (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay) and

spread into most Latin American countries. Parra refers to the new actors that joined in the task of debating, producing, investigating and communicating about social work. He points out as indicators of the peak of the movement:

- the participation of Latin American colleagues in regional seminars;
- Editorial ECRO publications;
- the *Social Service Selections* magazine of Humanitas Editorial;
- the activities promoted by ALAESS (the Latin American Association of Social Service Schools), founded in 1965;
- the International Solidarity Institute (ISI).

Second, the movement boom between 1969 and 1972 was a consequence of the fact that conservative social workers and technocratic modernisers 'resignedly or combatively' accepted the need for a renovation of the profession (Parra, 2006: 12–13).

After this peak period, the reconceptualisation movement started losing strength due, among other reasons, to the cycle of dictatorships in the region, which closed the possibility of deepening the most progressive guidelines or the emancipating project and allowed the revival of the most conservative trends led by the Catholic International Union for Social Service (CIUSS). This institution had promoted the training of social assistants in some Latin American countries during the social work professionalisation period (1925–40). In addition, the label 'reconceptualisation' strengthened the technocratic perspectives connected to developmentalism.

Reconceptualisation received and continues receiving criticism. In those years, many colleagues dedicated to the base militancy and neighbourhood work were not able to be in touch with the most theoretical discussions and criticised the movement as academic. However, the climate of the time and the new professional ideas prompted changes at the professional practice level, motivating, many times, the desertion of the institutions that were considered ideological tools of a capitalist state and places where social control was applied and sometimes imitating the professional practice with the party-political militancy.

Reconceptualisation was stressed as communist and away from professional roots by the most conservative sectors. During the decline of the movement, criticism was directed at the perceived lack of theoretical accuracy within Marxist theory and its consequences for the professional collective regarding the methodological proposals of intervention. There was also conservative criticism for the so-called excess of Marxism.

Undoubtedly, the reconceptualisation movement had the typical weaknesses of a process in which, in a few years, there was an attempt to 'redo' the profession, in tune with the climate of the time and the theoretical discussions that, even in contexts of political censorship, were produced by study groups, outside universities or institutes of professional training, made up to review history and study Marxism. The youths' vocation of interfering in the public sphere to change the structures of the capitalist system in accordance with the dissident context of the time, and the effect of the sociohistorical facts of various 'Third World' countries, had the most diverse consequences for social work, not only in the academic environment area, but also in professional practice. However, the heterogeneity of the movement and its weaknesses did not overshadow the importance it had for the profession: the attempt to breach with the most conservative hypothesis and the footprint for the generations to come.

Final reflections

Generally speaking, we could conclude that the reconceptualisation movement promoted a social work from a united Latin American perspective. It was actively committed to the interests of the social sectors we work with and was in favour of an emancipatory project in the Americas. In addition, it made possible a different reading of what is intended to be shown as inexorable fate: poverty, inequality, exploitation etc. These were not seen as ‘inevitable’ but as societal creations.

Those who took active part in this professional renovation process sought to prioritise the profession, to detach it from the burden that the dominant sectors would like to impose on it (its regulatory and controlling functions) and to participate in a political position in tune with the most progressive corporate projects. They undertook the task of investigating and making theoretical-methodological contributions to the disciplinary field, transcending the boundaries of national realities to strengthen the Latin American social service unity, and attempted to incorporate into social work theory and practice the ideas that were forming in the ideological and theoretical discussions in the social sciences.

The legacy of the reconceptualisation is a continuing challenge to our theories and practices. The training of Latin American social workers is marked by a history that is still under construction and subject to much academic debate. In the post-reconceptualisation period and the current profession, the commitments have been updated and other social projects have been thought of. Today, different trends in the syllabus and professional practice co-exist in the social work profession.

However, reconceptualisation projects continue posing questions. In a context where neoliberal attacks are violent and affect our everyday practices, to answer them is a challenge that involves professional commitment and academic debate. Walter Benjamin’s XVI thesis on the concept of history could give us clues to think about and reflect on the reconceptualisers’ unaccomplished wishes and the projects that are worth recovering:

The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, in which time originates and has come to a standstill. For this concept defines precisely *the* present in which he writes history for his person. Historicism depicts the ‘eternal’ picture of the past; the historical materialist, an experience with it, which stands alone. He leaves it to others to give themselves to the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in the bordello of historicism. He remains master of his powers: man enough, to explode the continuum of history. (Benjamin, 1940: section XVI)

We must study and learn the history of the reconceptualisation movement, not as a simple historical moment, but as a guide to a new, engaged social work for the present.

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