

## Expressions of Pragmatism in Social Work: preliminary reflections

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**Abstract:** The premise of this article is that there is need for a critical review of the principles that run through the historic trajectory of Social Work and establish a continuous line between its conservative base and the tendency that seeks to break with this, and even influence it. A critical analysis is conducted of the influence of pragmatism in Social Work that, as an ideal representation of the immediacy of the bourgeois world, would influence the profession from a practical, professional, theoretical and ideological-political perspective, constituting a challenge to be faced by all segments in the category. The paper concludes by affirming that without a critical reading of the fundamentals of pragmatism, it is not possible to advance in the suitable appropriation of Marxist social theory, given that there has been an “invasion of pragmatism in Marxism”.

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*We only think when we face a problem.  
Learn? Certainly, but, first, to live and learn by life, in life.*  
John Dewey<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The intervening nature of Social Work is recognized and sanctioned as Social Work has inserted itself into the realm of the social and technical division of labor as an intervening and institutionalized profession for responding to various expressions of the so-called “social question”<sup>2</sup>, whose foundations, hidden by the very immediacy of reality, are found in the economy and politics. This intervening status confers to Social Work a realm for intervention that is conditioned by the structural components of everyday life and by its relationship with the social question, which in appearance takes place in a direct and immediate manner, but is mediated by social policies. These policies confer to the profession a defined configuration and shapes and institutes mediations and systems of mediations that establish a certain type of intervention in the so-called “social question”.

It is in this framework that pragmatism, as an ideal representation of the immediacy of the bourgeois world, finds the most suitable ground for influencing the profession from a practical, professional, theoretical and ideological-political perspectives. This is because pragmatism maintains that the meaning of social things, processes and practices resides in these things themselves and particularly influences social and professional interventions, it affects not only professions and social workers, but the social subjects of the bourgeois world and the intervening professions as a whole.

This article problematizes the expressions of pragmatism in Social Work, based on two interlinking focuses. The first concerns the nature of the profession, its realm of professional intervention, demands and responses; the second is based on the incorporation of a certain rationality that is constituted to consider the real in its immediacy and in a form of conceiving the relationship between theory and practice. This rationality not only guides the professional representations and self-representations but also influences the appropriation that social workers make of social theories, in particular Marxism, while they “often become confused with it”. Because the social workers are personally involved, the affirmation of the influence of pragmatism in two aspects simply serves the didactic purpose of demonstrating some particularities that pertain more to one given focus than another.

## Practical and professional pragmatism

If we consider the effective insertion of the social worker in the social and technical division of labor, we see that the professional is specialized in responding to demands that require an immediate solution to problems, especially those that place pressure on and threaten the social order.

Capitalist society, whose contradictions are converted into individual conflicts, and can threaten the social order, is dominated by what positivist theories denominate as anomie, which creates the need for professions that can temporize the critical situations that threaten social reproduction. Social Work appears as one of the professions called upon to find consensus for the supposed individual conflicts, to correct “deviant” and lawless behavior and take action in tense situations that threaten and place the social order at “risk”. Conceived as a technique for providing help<sup>3</sup>, for administrating conflicts or as a technology for resolving problems, the profession is required to provide immediate results that alter some variables of the social context, of the everyday life in which the subjects who are the receptors of its professional action are inserted. Thus, beyond the determination imposed by the division of labor, the ontological ground on which the professional exercise is undertaken is daily life.

Everyday life as a space for the realization of the reproduction of individualities and of sociability is the special location for Social Work. The social worker not only has a professional everyday life, but also acts in the everyday life of other subjects, usually seeking their immediate modification. This is because “La vida cotidiana se desarrolla y se refiere siempre al ambiente inmediato” (HELLER, 1994, p. 25).

In the realm of daily life, immediatism, spontaneity, and the point of view of common consciousness predominate. Action and thought are organized to respond to immediate demands, from the perspective of not risking the very survival of the subject and, consequently, his or her social reproduction.

Given the objective demands of the concrete world, “cada uno debe adquirir una capacidad ‘media’, debe tener un ‘mínimo’ de capacidad practica en las cosas mas importantes, sin lo cual es imposible vivir” (HELLER, 1994, p. 22, emphasis by the author). In this space, “el particular se apropia [...] del significado (la función) de las objetivaciones genericas em-si prescindiendo practicamente ‘del por qué de la función’, reaccionando a esta tal

como es y sin cuestionar cuál es su genesis” (HELLER, 1994, p. 293-294, emphasis ours). In this way, in daily life, the subject realizes the “‘immediate’ unit of thought and action,” because

[...] the entire category of action and of thought are manifest and function ‘exclusively’ while it is essential for the simple continuation of daily life, normally, ‘to not manifest itself with special depth, scope or intensity’ (HELLER, 1989, p. 31, emphasis by the author).

From this perspective, we can consider that the pragmatic attitude is a characteristic specific to the immediate unity between theory and praxis. The suppression of the theoretical and ideological-political mediations specific to the grasping of reality in the immediacy of daily life, leads to an appropriation of reality as lacking of mediations. The abstraction of the mediations as a result of an apprehension of reality in its immediacy is the procedure of common consciousness, specific o everyday life, which does not question the genesis and does not reach the apprehension of the fundaments<sup>4</sup>.

Everyday life is characterized as the space in which common consciousness is realized, which requires that individuals be flexible and adapt to the world around them:

[...] the point of view of common consciousness coincides, in this aspect, with capitalist production and with that of the bourgeois economists. For common consciousness the practice is the productive, and productive, in turn from the perspective of this capitalist production, is what produces new value or surplus value (VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 33).

This is what happens with thinking which is constituted from everyday life. It acquires the content expressed in and by the determinations present in daily life, at the same time as it constitutes the content needed for the resolution of the situations of everyday life, while in daily life the correct is also true<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the attitude of everyday life is absolutely pragmatic (VÁZQUEZ, 2007).

As Heller affirms (1994, p. 102, emphasis by the author), everyday thinking receives the very characteristics of everyday life:

[...] in part because the heterogeneous forms of activity must be realized in reciprocal concomitancy and in a relatively brief time, and in part because these heterogeneous forms of activity are ‘diverse’ in different epochs and in various societies or social levels, for which reason ‘a distinct knowledge’ is needed in each case to appropriate from them and realize them. ‘The general structure of daily thinking’, is derived from the former and ‘the concrete content of daily thinking’, is derived from the later.

We insist that everyday thinking, by acquiring the concrete content from concrete situations, is capable of providing concrete responses to these situations, to guarantee the survival of the subject. However, this does not signify any fatalism in Agnes Heller’s approach when she considers that everyday life confines and conditions men to give only one type of response: instrumental responses. It is not a coincidence that this is a space propitious to alienation, although it contains possibilities for promoting “disalienation”, as we will argue below.

As part of the survival of the subject, the intervention in everyday life not only requires an adaptation, but must also allow the subject to make a self-transformation. In other words, everyday life, although it is constituted in a space in which common consciousness is realized, is also a space in which the contradiction, which is inherent to the social reality, is expressed:

To the degree that man seeks to adapt to the world, he is transformed during this process, because he acquires abilities, confronts fears, overcomes obstacles etc., and, in addition, he has the opportunity to assist other men who live in this same process through education and guidance, given that he is seen as ‘representative of that world in which others are born’ (HELLER, 1994, p. 24, emphasis by the author).

Although it is the space for individual reproduction, everyday life is the mediation necessary for the reproduction of the generic nature of man, for the realization of his generic-human dimension. Without everyday life there is no social reproduction. Heller highlights (1994, p. 25): “Everyday life conducts the mediation for the non-everyday and is the school that prepares for it.”

With this affirmation, we see that everyday life presumes a relationship with the conscious generic activities, which allow subjects to transcend their individual-particularity and attain their generic humanity.

This is the basic material presented by the determinations of everyday life that construct a way of thinking and acting in this everyday life, but which go beyond and extend beyond it. It involves a rationality that

not only invades but shapes other spheres of life of the bourgeois social being: artistic activity, theoretical elaboration, the sphere of politics, of law, of religion and others.

The incorporation of a certain rationality, which is constituted to consider reality in its immediacy and in a form of conceiving the relationship between theory and practice, invades both the professional representations and self-representations and has repercussions on the appropriation that the professional makes of theories, in particular, Marxism. In this way, we can affirm that pragmatism assaults Marxism or, using a quite fertile idea, there is an “invasion”<sup>6</sup> of pragmatism in Marxism.

### Theoretical and ideological-political pragmatism

Like any perspective on man and the world, pragmatism constitutes a type of thinking that sustains everyday praxis, given that it incorporates a certain rationality that consists of the form of thinking about reality in its immediatism and acting upon it. This leads to a certain form of conceiving the relationship between theory and practice, influencing the appropriation that social workers make of social theories, in particular, Marxism, and often identify themselves with it.

An analysis of the trajectory of the profession and its relationship with “theories” allows affirming that, in Social Work, pragmatism became a trend whose theoretical orientation is more common than we may suppose, influencing both the professionals in the academy as well as those involved in the execution, planning and evaluation of social policies.

We find that pragmatism is responsible for the deep empiricism that the profession nurtures and for a certain way of conceiving the relationship between theory and practice<sup>7</sup>. In this approach, as in Social Work, there is an exaggerated emphasis on practice, which is identified as pure experience, and on habits and customs that are understood to be true if successful and if they serve the immediate resolution of problems. Pragmatism is also responsible for the deep disdain that in general some professionals feel for a critical theory, not for any form of knowledge, not for instrumental-practical knowledge, but for one that effectively looks for the fundamentals, and for this reason, does not always yield immediate responses.

The seminal authors that deal with the broad universe which in the social sciences is known as pragmatism<sup>8</sup> have strong differences among each other and do not reach any consensus about its nature. For some, pragmatism is a theory of meaning (Peirce); for others, a method or a theory to reach the truth (James and Dewey); for others, it is a philosophy. There are also those who conceive it as a lifestyle. But the scope of this trend is so broad that it encompasses not only different concepts, but also opposite ones. Its importance goes beyond the fact that, at the beginning of the 20th century, pragmatism represented the main trend in the United States. In this way it became promoted as the *American way of life*<sup>9</sup>. In this way, both pragmatism as well as neopragmatism came to be hegemonic trends in certain moments and situations. It appears to us that of its leading authors, Dewey and his instrumentalism was the one who exercised the greatest influence on the social sciences, especially on Education<sup>10</sup>, Psychology and Social Work.

For the purposes of this article, we will analyze the relationship of pragmatism with Social Work based on the three categorical nuclei proposed by Thamy Pogrebinschi (2005), an author who has been dedicated to studying pragmatism as social and political theory. These nuclei are intrinsically related. They are: a) anti-foundationalism; b) consequentialism; c) and contextualism.

In the first axis of its categorical nucleus, anti-foundationalism, pragmatism denies any possibility of basing reality on objective and universal truths considered to be abstract and left aside for being restricted to the realm of metaphysics. Here is located the idea that the foundation of pragmatism is not to be guided by fundamentals.

It questions *a priori* concepts and the role of theory in allowing any generalizing perspective to point to trends in historic development. In this concept, truth is the fruit of its practical consequences, determined by the use of the pragmatist method where “pragmatism can only be understood pragmatically, that is, by testing its consequences” (POGREBINSCHI, 2005, p. 26). Thus, it denies any knowledge that is based on universal concepts, or that is, that is not the fruit of experimentation with the method, with which it questions the existence of objectivity in reality. It is up to pragmatism to present and interpret concepts in the domain of “experience” and they are only accepted to the degree that they allow a modification of action. This involves a type of knowledge that is applied to change or to a theory of social action.

In this way the truth of concepts is in their capacity to operate changes in subjects. It is the result of the investigation of subjects and of arguments constructed from this investigation, so that knowledge cannot be indifferent to the context of which it is part, which will be addressed below.

The second categorical nucleus of pragmatism is that of consequentialism. Charles Peirce<sup>11</sup>, the first to coin the term pragmatism, was also the first to base the meaning of concepts on the experimental consequences

derived from them (POGREBINSCHI, 2005), establishing a contrast with Cartesian rationalism. Peirce's concern was to verify the consequences that a concept operated on future experiences. For Peirce, the meaning of things is established by a list of conditionals, so that the meaning of a concept depends on its experimental consequences, thus making pragmatism an observational science: every hypothesis must be established by observation and by reasoning, which thus disqualifies any hypothesis that lacks experiential consequence. Pragmatism winds up being "a type of test to verify if concepts and theories are in fact related to experience" (POGREBINSCHI, 2005, p. 41).

As a good mathematician, he maintained that all thought can be known through symbols. Thus, his scientific method is the method of observation through experimental procedures: to construct, manipulate, observe and test<sup>12</sup>. From this was derived a type of experimental rationality, we can say an instrumental and procedural one, whose final objective is to know the processes though the results they produce.

Another pragmatist who belonged to the Vienna Circle was William James. For James (1979), an idea is true to the degree to which belief in it is advantageous to the life of the subject. In this instrumental concept, what is important for the subject is truth in and of itself, and not its correspondence with reality. As James affirmed: "truth is the name of everything that proves to be good in terms of belief" (JAMES *apud* POGREBINSCHI, 2006, p. 44). It is not possible to separate what is best for people from that which is true for them, in such a way that truth can be defined as "what is best for us to believe" (JAMES *apud* POGREBINSCHI, 2006, p. 127). Thus, "an idea is true to the degree to which to believe in it is advantageous to our lives" (JAMES, 1979, p. 59). Consequently, the test of truth consists in finding that which best guides us in life, in the sense of us continuing to adapt our experience. For this reason there are no certainties in reference to the process of knowledge.

From Dewey's perspective<sup>13</sup>, consequentialism became converted into instrumentalism. Dewey questioned knowledge of the foundations of things, of internal logic. For him, the relevance of knowledge is constituted to the degree that it serves as an instrument for the resolution of problems. What is important in the theoretical-practical relationship for pragmatism is not the relationship between theory and reality, but that the theoretical formulations are constituted in a guide for investigation. Thus, these theoretical formulations are valid to the degree that they are useful and successful in the investigation of the reality in which the subject is inserted. In this way, it is not important that theory be the closest possible expression of reality, but that it serves as a guide to test if the theoretical concepts in fact relate to the experience of the subject, and thus gain their veracity from it.

The third categorical nucleus of pragmatism is perhaps the most significant for demonstrating its influence on Social Work. This involves contextualism. It is not by chance that Dewey was the pragmatist thinker who invested most in this idea.

For Dewey, context is something inherent to the lives of subjects, it is intrinsically related to the individual's ways of being and thinking. In contextualism, the emphasis falls on experience, considered as the context in which investigation is conducted. This context is in constant transformation, demanding from the subject a permanent process of adaptation. The biological character of education in the preparation and adaptation of subjects to the environment is notorious<sup>14</sup>.

Pogrebinschi, based on her studies about the issue, attributed to Dewey the elaboration of a social pragmatism. According to her, although pragmatism is more than a theory of action, it involves a theory of action.

It is important to mention that pragmatism in its various tendencies, especially Dewey's instrumentalism (1976, 2007), highlights the individual subject as a rational being, a protagonist of action, from which results his conviction in the articulation between reason and experience. This will result in a given way of conceiving the relationship between theory and practice which are influenced by the given causal conditions, so that thinking allows the subject to proceed to his own adaptation. In this way, Dewey sought to establish the basis for a contemporary experimental science. His research also highlighted a focus on the individual and not on society.

It can be seen that for instrumentalism, the goal of the subjects is not knowledge, but knowledge is always mediated by action, by experiences, in such a way that the appropriation of knowledge always has an instrumental character, seeking a command of reality. The results of knowledge are the consequences that it produces.

Dewey considered the scientific method to be the main instrument aimed at the process of knowing, "which is always the result of a modification in the environment seeking the adaptation of the subjects." It is worth emphasizing here the mediating and instrumental function of consciousness-knowledge in the effort to survive. In other words: for Dewey, thinking is nothing more than an instrument aimed at the solution of practical problems, from it comes a type of knowledge that comes from what is learned by solving problems. Thus, knowledge is all thought that is confirmed by action.

The pragmatists generally maintain that the importance of an idea must be measured by its utility, success and efficiency to deal with a given problem, resulting in the conception that ideas serve as "guides for action". They consider knowledge as a type of practice (theoretical practice) which can be accredited by the success



in attaining the goal that it proposes, by its practical consequences, with experience as criteria for correcting theoretical formulations. Or as Dewey said, (1950, p. 4, emphasis in the original),

[...] in the genuine sense of 'pragmatic', that is, that consequences function as necessary proofs of the validity of propositions, whenever these consequences are operatively achieved and are such that they resolve the specific problem that triggered the operations.

Dewey, to the degree that he considers that all knowledge comes from experience, winds up denying theory, or a certain type of theory, that which dedicates itself to the search for fundamentals, given that he based his work on the premise that "for practical man [and professional practices also see themselves in this way], practice is self-sufficient, it does not require more support and foundation that is not inherent to it" (DEWEY, 1950, p. 35). For this reason, practice is reduced to a set of experiences and theory is seen as experience placed in practice. Thinking fulfills stages that allow resolving certain problems in each one of which men find effective instruments for their interaction with the world.

This concept guides the practical-interventionist professions, which are self-defined as "applied", to use an eclectic set of knowledge, selecting from each theory, method, doctrine or style that which appears most suitable to them to achieve the desired results. It is the "theory of results", the practical application of experiences reflected by the common consciousness, which does not involve the constitutive logic of experiences, and for this reason is not capable of interpreting them. Thus, "practice speaks for itself" (DEWEY, 1950, p. 35). Or as Vázquez affirms (2007, p. 34), "common man is disposed to laugh at the philosopher who, absorbed by theory, walks through the sky of speculation and falls into the world of practical things."<sup>15</sup>

In this way, the "interventionist" or "applied" professions, by the condition in which they insert themselves in reality, in general, restrict truth to the concepts that can be applied in the situations of daily life<sup>16</sup>. In Social Work the idea has also been recurrent that truth is in the consequences achieved as a result of the instrumentality of the subjects, that is, of their ability to resolve immediate-practical situations<sup>17</sup>.

But pragmatism, as the way of being in the immediacy of the bourgeois world and of its ideal representation, considered from experience, operates with such subtlety that we have difficulty perceiving that it is only a way to "grasp the apparence" of the real and not the way of being of the real itself. It operates at a level of praxis, whose insertion in and immediate apprehension of reality comes to be the practical attitude of common man in everyday life. The pragmatic attitude and thinking in everyday life naturalize and are naturalized by typical bourgeois rationality. Pragmatic thinking and attitudes, by allowing the insertion of professionals in reality, ratify in the profession a type of realism, which is itself naive, which is in contrast to critical realism. Thus, this "immediate and naive attitude of common consciousness" (VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 28), in reality, is not at all naive, although it is limited to immediacy, either as an option or as a lack of it, given that bourgeois man possesses

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[...] a consciousness of praxis that was forged in a spontaneous and non-reflexive manner, even if it does not lack [...] by being consciousness, certain ideological or theoretical elements in a degraded, rough or simple form (VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 35).

Because in the space of everyday life expressions of the "social question" are confirmed, they are considered in and of themselves and not as a result of the class struggle. Thus,

[...] this structure, which in everyday life does not appear to be a phenomenon of alienation, is necessarily a manifestation of alienation 'in art, in science, in moral decisions and in politics' (HELLER, 1989, p. 39, emphasis ours).

Nevertheless, Vázquez warns (2007, p. 35) against the contradiction found in this relation, given that the subject:

[...] is aware of the conscious character of his practical acts. That is, he knows that his practical activity is not purely mechanical or instinctive, and that it requires a certain intervention of his consciousness, but in relation to the true content and meaning of his activity, that is, to that which refers to the conception of the praxis itself, he does not go beyond the previously expressed idea: praxis in a utilitarian, individual and self-sufficient (atheoretical) sense.

In this conception, the character of utility and efficiency of all knowledge is the criteria for acting in analogous situations, with provisory judgments that are crystalized in prejudices, as marks of pragmatism. A product of a consciousness that does not reflect reality in its totality, does not express the intentional praxis, but only the repetitive practice, which is typical of everyday life<sup>18</sup>. Thus, we also find that the social worker,

[...] devoured by and in his 'roles' can guide himself through everyday life by the simple appropriate compliance with these 'roles'. The spontaneous assimilation of the dominant customary norms can be converted by itself into conformism, to the degree to which that which assimilates them is an individual without a 'nucleus'; and the particularity that aspires to a good life without conflicts reinforces even more this conformism with his faith (HELLER, 1989, p. 37-38, emphasis ours).

In everyday life we often act with a basis in confidence and faith, as two modes particular to this sphere. Nevertheless, they are limited by and themselves create limits to a type of intervention in the real. In everyday life, we act as a function of provisory judgments, which even if they are denied by the social reality are not aborted due to belief, faith and habit formed by experience.

Given that everyday thinking is pragmatic, each one of our daily activities is accompanied by a certain faith or a certain trust. There is no place for faith when what is at stake is the correctness of the manipulation or of the materialized objectification; in principle, experience is enough to realize the necessary corrections (HELLER, 1989, p. 34).

There is no place for faith, if a professional recognizes the theory that guides him. The professional's mistake is to conceive that he can conduct his professional exercise without theory. One who is ignorant of the social theory that guides him winds up being a tool of its manipulation. The same is true of those who think that the role of theory is to sanction and justify what exists. As Gouldner affirms (1970, p. 14):

[...] those [...] who believe they can separate the development of theories from the transformation of society do not act, in reality, without theory, but with one that is tactical, and for this reason, cannot be analyzed or improved. If they do not learn to use consciousness, they will be used by it.

Only by means of ontological analysis can the professional reveal the social meaning of the profession as an activity that, inserted in the social and technical division of labor, constitutes a particular manifestation of Social Work, a meaning that can only be learned

[...] by a consciousness that captures the content of praxis in its totality as historic and social praxis in which its specific forms are integrated and present themselves (work, art, politics, medicine, education) as well as their particular manifestations in the activities of individuals or groups (GOULDNER, 1970, p. 36).

In light of these reflections, we recognize that the bourgeois order, despite the coexistence of various rationalities within it, suffers from a dominant type of rationality unique to Western capitalist society. Thus, by being conceived as the hegemonic form "of dominant rationality", it penetrates various spheres of social life that come to be organized based on their pragmatic, utilitarian, instrumental components, constituting bourgeois sociability itself, which is transversal to classes, class segments, institutions and social and professional practices<sup>19</sup>.

This rationality has been running through the historical trajectory of the profession and is expressed in the socio-historic context and in the format of social policy. It is also expressed in the socio-occupational space where the intervention is realized, in its orientation and the demand placed upon it to solve problems, in the confirmation of results through qualitative goals, and in the utilitarian and instrumental use of the ethical-political professional project and its principles and orientations, and in that of the theoretical and ideological-political references that guide professional interventions. In this field, inspired by Quiroga's (1991) helpful expression, we believe that pragmatism has "invaded" Marxism, making an instrumental

appropriation of Marxism that is expressed in the demand for a Marxism that resolves the immediate problems of professional practice.

Nevertheless, only the analysis of the foundations of the classic theoretical-methodological formulations can allow us to determine its categories of analysis<sup>20</sup> and how they are chosen. As Gouldner affirms (1970, p. 21),

In sum, the problem is: what are the social and political results of the intellectual system that we examine? [and which serves as our foundation] Do they liberate or repress men? Do they bind them to the existing social world or allow them to transcend it? This rationality not only invades Marxism but becomes confused with it<sup>21</sup>.

This pragmatic appropriation of Marxism by the profession, which is a product of the presence of instrumental reason, based on a view that the truth of a theory is directly based on the results that it produces, (re)establishes new challenges. These include: the influence of instrumental reason and the tendency to convert all knowledge into models and methodologies for intervention<sup>22</sup>; the constant demand for theories that permit interventional agendas (with a true compulsion for theories of result or theories of action<sup>23</sup>); and a deferment of the functionality of the profession in light of technical-instrumental procedures are expressions of a vision of Social Work as a social technique (to provide help, administer conflicts, resolve various problems, manage poverty, “for the application of rights”). This is where we identify, even if in a preliminary manner, the permanence of practical, theoretical and ideological-political pragmatism in the profession.

### **In conclusion: the necessary Marxist reading of the foundations of pragmatism**

Because we live under the effects of a hegemony of instrumental reason, Marx’s social theory must avoid its attacks and rid itself of its contaminations.

In contemporary capitalism, pragmatic logic finds increasing space to affirm itself. Individualism and subjectivism, the “centrality on the subject” and not on the social being, the emphasis on utilitarianism and not social utility aimed at transformation, are its determining and recurrently resignified marks.

In terms of Social Work, the falling back on the most elementary empiricism condemns it to an ingenuous and false antirealism; as is false the conception that is increasingly present in the profession, of Social Work as social technology (for providing help, mediating conflicts, resolving problems, and guaranteeing rights). In the profession’s historic trajectory, the influx of pragmatism has left its marks: on the conception of the profession as an instrument at the service of the project of capital, in the conception of the practice of psychosocial help, in its focus on the subject, in its educational function seeking adaptation and adjustment, in its obsession for techniques, instruments and methodologies of action, in the profound eclecticism, in the disdain for fundamentals. Pragmatism is expressed, above all, as a characterization of what Netto (1990, p. 117) called traditional Social Work: “an empiricist, reiterative, palliative and bureaucratic practice”. Today, these influxes are presented, for example, in the criteria for professional education that are increasingly more pragmatic, in the rationality adopted that is reduced to the logic of competencies and manipulative behaviors, in the levity and superficiality as current characteristics of knowledge, in the categories of analysis of reality that are reduced to instrumental categories, in agnostic thinking, as the negation of the possibility to ascend to the knowledge of the constitutive logic of processes and practices (social, political and professional), that is, to reach the fundamentals of social life. As Heller affirms (1989, p. 39), “modern science, increasingly shapes itself to pragmatic foundations”, studies restrict themselves to mere surveys of empiric data, reducing themselves to experimental activities, mere descriptions that are limited to the realm of perceptions, sensations (intuition). The substitution of theory by belief and by faith, “the conversion of political questions into problems of sensibility”, the transformation of radical criticism into romantic criticism and of the social question into problems of a personal order, of self-esteem and or of “empowerment”.

The demands that we make of Marxism to give immediate responses to immediate situations cancel its practical-critical contents. This pragmatic Marxism is the result of the pragmatic influence in Marxism, converting it into an instrumental, aseptic, positivized, Marxism, totally abstracted from the perspective of coming to be, deviated from the imperative need for revolution. Only ontological criticism is capable of exposing the logic of pragmatism and its influence in the contemporary world. However,

Investigation in and of itself cannot untangle the liberating potential of academic sociology or of historic Marxism. It also demands action and criticism, the intention to modify the social world and the intention to modify the corresponding science, one and the other, profoundly interlinked, even if they only are because social science is both part of the social world and a ‘conception’ of it (GOULDNER, 1970, p. 22, emphasis by the author).



Everyday life, as a space that synthesizes the ontological foundations of social life, demands a pragmatic attitude for individual and social reproduction, but also allows reflecting upon what determinations and needs require a pragmatic attitude for their reproduction. Concerning the profession, it is the principles that guide it, expressed in their regulatory instruments (its code of ethics, the law that governs the practice, and curriculum guidelines) that formulate the basis for a clear and forceful refusal of the pragmatic attitude and of the common sense that accompanies it.

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## Notes

- 1 This epigraph is intended to express the spirit of pragmatism, indicating its identification with a type of thinking that became hegemonic in the bourgeois world.
- 2 The social question, an essential element of capitalist social relations, is an expression of a new dynamic of poverty that appeared in the 19th century, no longer produced by need, but by abundance. The constitution of the “social question” under capitalism is a designation of conservative thinking that indicates processes resulting from a given type of exploitation of labor by capital, and refers to the rise of the working class and the threat that it represents to the bourgeois order as it comes to demand its recognition as a class. Therefore, the social question is linked to the conflict between capital and labor and for its public recognition, requires an organized working class. The development of capitalist society, by producing the “social question”, produces the socio-historic conditions that require that it be addressed by social policies, allowing the creation of a socio-occupational space for the social worker as the executor of these policies.
- 3 Especially help in the psycho-social field.
- 4 In this respect, we indicate the interesting text of Coelho (2009). See also the master’s dissertation by Brandão (2010).
- 5 We can explain: this does not mean that common thought does not reflect the objects, but does so in their phenomenality. In this condition, the consciousness that reflects the phenomena does not do so to grasp the *nooúmenon* (the essence of the object) in the same way in which the object is not converted into a concrete thought, and is certainly not reflected in a critical-transformative perspective.
- 6 According to Quiroga (1991).
- 7 It is not necessary to mention the relationship between U.S. pragmatism and the English pragmatism of Bacon, despite criticisms that Peirce, James and Dewey made of Bacon, and by considering pragmatism as an alternative to empiricism and rationalism.
- 8 What we call pragmatism here was a school of philosophy in the late 19th century. In 1871, in Cambridge, in the United States, a group of intellectuals, concerned with liberating philosophy from the excesses of metaphysics and the formalism of a Cartesian theory of knowledge, came to meet under the name of the Metaphysical Club. In 1872, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), philosopher, scientist and mathematician, submitted for criticism from his colleagues a set of ideas concerning a method that he called pragmatism. Since then, it became an intellectual movement, constituting a school of thought.
- 9 It is important to recognize that pragmatism rose precisely during the passage from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism (at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century), in the United States, in a period after the U.S. Civil War. This period was also marked by the separation between church and state and by the strong development of science and technology.
- 10 The field of education has been strongly influenced by Dewey’s pragmatism, especially in what was called the New School Movement, whose ideas were propagated by a great intellectual like Anísio Teixeira, among others.
- 11 Peirce’s Darwinist and agnostic spirit is evident.
- 12 “For Peirce, the mind is a practical mechanism given that it is instrumental for the survival of man: just as meaning is adapted to its purpose, the subject adapts to his goal and the mind serves him as an adaptive mechanism to confront the external environment” (POGREBINSCHI, 2005, p. 39).
- 13 John Dewey (1859-1952), U.S. psychologist, philosopher, educator made an unquestionable contribution to behavioral psychology and a pedagogy of adaptation.
- 14 In Dewey’s approach, the view that the needed reform of society must involve a moral reform of subjects through education is unquestionable (CARVALHO, 2011).
- 15 This is a joke about those concerned with apprehending fundaments.
- 16 Perhaps this explains the true compulsion that some fields of knowledge, including Social Work, feel for the formulations of Bourdieu (1996): whose notion of *habitus* as the practical sense that gave origin to a theory that explains the generating principle of practices, establishing the primacy of practical reason, based on the notion of a theoretical practice in which “one only learns to do by doing”.

- 17 From this results what we know today as the formation of competencies.
- 18 According to Vázquez, *op. cit.*
- 19 Netto (1992, p. 37) shows that “bourgeois society, with monopolies organizing and regulating the market, produces and reproduces its particular social agents”. Moreover, it creates the institutional political and practical structures capable of sustaining it in the planes of its social production and reproduction.
- 20 In Marxism, the categories can be ontological and logical. The former are part of the way of being of the real itself. They are modes of being, determinations of existence, captured by the subject by asking the objects of reality how they are. They constitute “forms that move and are moved by the material [conditions] itself” (LUKÁCS, 1978, p. 2-3) which is the social reality. The logical categories are the constructions that reason realizes to interpret these ways of being, from which emerge the different interpretations made by social theories. The rise of capitalism, for example, is interpreted by social theories in different ways, such as Weber’s Protestant Ethic and Marx’s theory of surplus value.
- 21 For Vázquez (2007, p. 241): pragmatism identifies the true with the useful. This thesis of utility can confuse some people if it is recognized that Marxism does not see knowledge as an end in itself, but as an activity of man linked to his practical needs which it serves more or less directly, and in relation to which he incessantly develops.
- 22 An example of the previously criticized BH Method (developed at the Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais between 1972 and 1975). About this, see Santos (1993), Netto (1990) and Montaña (2007).
- 23 Which is certainly related to the success that Habermas had in Social Work.

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