

THEMATIC SPACE - SOCIAL WORK: TRAINING, PROFESSIONAL WORK, AND CONTEMPORARY THEORY TRENDS

The production of knowledge and the ethical-political project of Social Work

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Abstract: This theoretical essay has as its object the production of knowledge in social work and emphasizes its importance in the current conjuncture. It was written from the analysis of contributions by authors of this area that reflect on this theme and from Marxist authors who analyze the method and the production of knowledge from dialectical historical materialism. To do so, it chooses two premises. The first refers to the production of knowledge as one of the expressions of human activity that, in the movement of reality, seeks the apprehension of particularities as expressions of concrete thought. The second refers to the defense of the necessary linkage of research in the field of social work with the social meaning of this profession, which, in the contemporary era, bears itself in a direction sustained in its current and radically current political ethical project.

Keywords: Production of knowledge. Social work. Ethical-political project.

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Introduction

We live in times of densification of the socio-metabolic control strategies of capital, among which are linked new structural dimensions of control over the established work processes, among other aspects, through the socio-technical division of labor and its necessary articulation with the ideological support that, in the words of Mézaros (2011, p. 99), must be “fused so that they can characterize the condition . . . of hierarchy and subordination as the unchanging dictate of ‘nature itself’”.

Materialized through the intensification of the forms of control, exploration/oppression and precariousness of work, counter-reforms and the dismantling of social and civil rights that put democracy in Brazil, especially after the 2016¹ Coup, this idea is imposed as a duty to be unquestionable; naturalized. To this end, the socialization of conservative, authoritarian, and prejudiced values becomes central.

The resistance to this idea requires the apprehension of sociohistorical determinations that appear disconnected, but which are peculiarities of sociohistorical reality that are not feasible to the empiricism that evidences them as natural and dilutes them from the own process in which they are materialized. In the field of morality, without the procedural connection necessary to apprehend them, such particularities figure as a defense of a priori values, similar to conservative ideas.

In this sense, not by chance among conservative and moralistic tendencies, is the disqualification of science and education as a fertile and autonomous field in the production of knowledge. In this logic, the knowledge to be stimulated is that which respond directly to market interests.

This is the main reason that free and quality public education suffers from a series of counter-reforms that metamorphose the essentiality of education, particularly in the study in focus, to the one it builds within the university. The dictates imposed directly in the light of the interests of the World Bank², because of the higher education inscribed in the process of commodification and mercantilization.

The worsening of the dismantling of the field of rights in Brazil and, particularly of public universities, not only in the sphere of funding, precarious teaching, but also by the trends of disqualification of knowledge and science that became stronger and even more visible when faced with a fruitful field particularly from the electoral process during 2018; coping strategies, resistances and advances are needed beyond the complexification of this ideology. Thus, given the Brazilian reality in the current conjuncture, the debate about the production of knowledge becomes increasingly central.

The production of knowledge here is understood in its free and autonomous approach to the movement of the real, capturing its particularities, basing the social meaning of knowledge to its ineliminable organic relationship with the education and training of professionals who, in fact, are at the service of society; from the perspective of overcoming the dehumanizing logic of capital, which is based on profit-making, individualism, competition, the extraction of human energy, dehumanizing the human. And systematizing reflections on it in the current conjuncture, as well as analyzing it in the context of the process of vocational training and the work in social service in the current conjuncture becomes the scope of this article.

For theoretical and methodological support, we sought to approach the theoretical productions that have contributed significantly to the field of study in question. To this end, two central axes were designed: the first on the production of knowledge in the light of reality and the second on the production of knowledge and the ethical-political project of social work.

One of the central assumptions in this article is defined by the production of knowledge as one of the expressions of human activity³, as well as social research as a process of approximation to reality seeking the apprehension of its particularities as concrete thought. To this assumption are added reflections on the social meaning of social work research, which is based on a direction sustained in its current and radically current ethical-political project.

The production of knowledge in light of reality

Several theoretical and methodological paths illuminate knowledge production and social research in the social sciences and particularly in social work. These paths are circumscribed in certain traditions or theoretical matrices shared by a set of thinkers whose ideas may have differences, however, they have central elements that articulate them, among them not only the agreement with a particular social theory but also sustained by a political-ideological dimension that places them in a particular theoretical-methodological field.

Social theory is understood as a complex and systematic way of explaining the constitution and reproduction of a particular object, phenomenon, that is, the movement of reality. To this end, every social theory becomes a unit of explanation of reality through its constitution immanently articulated with the method.

The assumption is that the apprehension of reality occurs through investigative processes that explain and apprehend the dynamics of the real, taking into account its complexity and contradictions. It is based on a certain tradition, that is, on the theoretical-methodological perspective that comprises the analysis of reality as concrete thought in the light of its particularities, its historical determinations and the dialectical movement in which it is built and deconstructed. Such is the perspective for approaching and understanding the object of study.

It is understood as fundamental the social theory of Marx which, according to Paulo Netto (2009), presupposes the theoretical knowledge as the knowledge of the object as it is in itself, in its real and effective existence. The theory is the actual movement of the object transposed to the brain of the researcher, it is the real produced and interpreted in the ideal plane. It is not, therefore, the naturalization of aspects of the movement of social reality, but, on the contrary, it is the process of a historical-dialectical approach based on material aspects, that is, the most faithful movement possible of the object itself.

By ideal reproduction of the real movement of the object is meant the process of approximation in the plane of thought to the constituent elements of the object itself, implying the existence of the real independently of the researcher's thinking.

This movement of approach to the object itself demands from the researcher the ability to grasp its essence, which as a phenomenon now reveals itself, sometimes hides in the world of pseudoconcreteness. Kosik (1976, p. 11) contributes to this debate by stating, among other things, that the real, the thing itself manifests itself in the plane of immediacy in the "everyday environment" not immediately to the research subject. For him, the world of pseudoconcreteness consists of:

the complex of the phenomenon that populates the everyday environment and the common atmosphere of human life, which, with their regularity, immediacy and evidence, penetrate the consciousness of individual agents, assuming an independent and natural aspect.

It is essential to be clear that knowledge does not find the real, but pursues it in its particularities, grasping and reproducing it mentally. For this, it is necessary to ascend from the abstract to the concrete which, according to Kosik (1976), is a movement in thought and thought.

Knowledge arises from/about the real world by presupposing a method which, departing and entering the world of pseudoconcreteness, of appearance, comes as close as possible to the essence of the object itself. This process takes place from the real as a starting and finishing point, goes beyond pre-established rules that define the way to do the research. It is a moving path that provides reflection and a differentiated, investigative and creative look from the apprehension of the totality and the immanent contradictions to the real as concrete thought.

For the apprehension of the real in its immanent totality the researcher needs to extract its constitutive categories, which are:

forms of being, determinations of existence⁴, structural elements of relatively total, real, dynamic complexes, whose dynamic interrelations give way to ever-broadening complexes, both extensively and intensively. (Lukács, 2012, p. 297).

This process of category extraction must be illuminated by the real in its movement, through the analysis of facts and events, social relations, the objective conditions of the subjects participating in the research, among many other instituting elements and instituted by the real in its entirety. Hence the need to permanently inquire into reality. Therefore, for the apprehension of the constitutive categories of the object of knowledge, it is necessary to move from the "chaotic representation of the whole" to the "rich totality of the multiplicity of determinations and relations" (Kosik, 1976, p. 30). To this end, it is believed that the dialectical historical materialist method⁴ is what allows this extraction of categories based on material, historical-ontological⁵, from the abstract to the concrete, moving from the simplest to the most complex determinations, with a view to the concrete totality, in a synthesis of multiple determinations (Fernandes, 1989, Chapter 4, pp. 409-417).

Capturing the categories of the movement of the real, grasping the particularities beyond the world of pseudoconcreteness becomes a central process in the perspective adopted here for the production of knowledge, and especially the investigative/interventional processes immanent to a profession such as service. which, inscribed in the socio-technical division of labor, is daily demanded by the expressions of the social question, becoming central to the social service the capture of socio-historical determinations in their daily concreteness, whose material base is the ground of the historical subjects.

Knowledge production and the political ethical project of social work

To question the process of knowledge production that is built on the socio-historical trajectory of the profession, in the current conjuncture, is challenging. It is a profession that aims at the fertile ground of daily life in which the historical subjects are situated in their concrete everyday experiences. We refer here to both social workers and users of the services and policies they enable and / or manage. They are subjects immersed in daily life in which human actions often materialize far from teleological processes that found and move values and purposes. But, a daily life that, in its dialectical unity, also presents itself as a possibility of overcoming this distance and which are inscribed as a field of human praxis.

This is a profession that has the investigative and knowledge production process immanently linked to work, presupposing knowledge as “valid and effective when its acquisitions are expedient for practical action whose experiences will, in turn, enrich the knowledge and provide you with an ever new force.” (Lukács, 1967, p. 237).

This practical action materializes in daily and, according to Heller (2004, p. 20), daily life:

It is not out of history, but in the center of historical happening; it is the true essence of social substance . . . everyday life is the life of the individual. The individual is always simultaneously being particular and being generic. In the case of man, particularity expresses not only his isolated being but also his being.

The analysis of the individual being, in a given reality, in a given time/space, necessarily requires knowledge of the particularities of that real, because there is an immanent relationship between the universal, the particular that objectify and materialize in the singular, whose movement occurs through a complex field of mediations. Lukács (1978, p. 88), analyzing dialectics in Marx, calling it authentic science, stated that the production of knowledge takes place in a movement that:

It extracts structural conditions and their historical transformations from reality itself and, if laws are formulated, they embrace the universality of the process, but in such a way that from this set of laws can return to the singular facts of life. It is precisely this concretely realized dialectic of universal, particular and singular.

For Marx (2002, p. 21) it is fundamental that, in “each particular case, the empirical observation necessarily highlights - empirically and without any speculation or mystification - the connection between social structure, politics, and production.”

The analysis of the experiences and concrete perception, of immediate, of the human concrete, is understood as a first exercise of abstraction, from which it is possible to establish connections and relationships given their particularities captured in totality and, to which one returns, in a dialectical process.

Understanding this reality demands from researchers social workers, the apprehension both from the social point of view, with its general elements and its particularities as from singular and everyday phenomena. According to Lefebvre (1991, pp. 112-115):

To penetrate the real, therefore, is to reach through thought an ever-broader set of relations, details, elements, particularities captured in totality. This whole, this totality, on the other hand, can never coincide with the totality of the real, with the world. The act of thought detaches from the totality of the real, by means of a real or ideal cut, what is correctly called an object of thought. . . . Dialectical reason affects not only the abstract universal, but the universal that comprises in itself the richness of the particular, that is, the concrete universal.

This object of thought, the concrete thought is located in a given historical, political and economic conjuncture in which social subjects are in movement. There must be, under Lukács (2012, p. 27), “a mirroring of objective reality. When this is neglected, it necessarily results in permanent confusion between objective reality and its immediate mirroring, which – considered ontologically – is always subjective.”

In this analytical perspective, the close link between epistemology and ontology also reveals itself as praxis. Thus, the apprehension of mediations of objective reality is not done without an ethical-political direction. To know is also to take a political position and, at the current juncture, among the challenges in the production of knowledge in vocational training is the position contrary to the logic of mercantilization, commodification⁶ and productivism⁷; and the strengthening of collective strategies so that such production goes beyond this academic ideal of the fetish-knowledge-commodity⁸.

This objectification of knowledge, ethical-political direction, and professional action is also materially based on the mode of production and reproduction in which it is inserted, as well as on the societal projects⁹ in which professional projects were and are forged.

This terrain of the corporate project is materialized in professional daily life, especially through requests to the profession registered in the socio-technical division of labor. However, the professional projects undermine ethical values and legal frameworks, calling the professionals to political commitment in response to the needs pointed to the profession, thus establishing their goals.

In this sense, the professional project of social work requires, fundamentally, an ethical-political project as a central strategy to walk in the field of objectification of ethics, to grasp the particularities and contradictions of the reality in which this profession is inscribed and, only there to establish concrete actions. In this professional project, there is an ineliminable ethical-political direction, pointing out its principles to join forces with the workers' collective in the process of building a new societal order without domination-exploitation of class, ethnicity, and gender. The effort to consolidate this project implies not only in the awareness of the professional subject but in the understanding that this awareness is built amid socio-historical, economic and political determinations.

The social workers who materialize professional projects are historical subjects and are inscribed in given sociability. Its intrinsically articulated way of acting and thinking is forged from a material basis, from a particular idea. Thus, it is not possible to take off the action of consciousness of these subjects.

The production of knowledge in social service, therefore, must be committed to the movement of reality and the concrete needs of social subjects in their daily lives, because it is only possible to transform what is known.

The articulation of the production of knowledge with the movement of the real, with the critical apprehension of the system of domination-exploitation, requires the apprehension of constitutive elements of the professional ethical-political project, in search of overcoming the conservative and reactionary ideas in the professional category of social workers which, in the current conjuncture, has found possibilities to become even more explicit, and may even perpetuate a pragmatic sense and that denies the ethical-political dimension of the profession in its inseparable articulation with the theoretical-methodological and technical-operative dimensions of Social Work.

Such inseparability reveals the necessary theoretical-practical unity constitutive of the peculiarity of this profession and highlights the importance of knowledge production, especially concerning the demands placed on it by the labor market, as well as, regarding the set of historically constructed answers by the group of the professionals to these demands.

It also reveals that knowledge is only reached in the relationship that theorizes reality and the actions developed by professionals, sustaining itself in a given direction.

Within this relationship, it becomes possible to review and reformulate the theoretical analysis based on elements implicit in reality itself. It is necessary to capture the particularities to overcome the probable theoretical "castings" of the movement of the real, overcoming the theorist tendencies on the one hand and the pragmatic ones on the other.

The production of knowledge as close as possible to reality and the determinations put into professional daily life considering its particularities in the light of the professional ethical-political project of social work contributes directly to this process, given that the real demands of the population are captured by professionals. through a conduit that is mediation. Without this movement, professional actions will not correspond to the movement of reality and will become isolated, fragmented, superficial actions and, at most, will fit into reiterative actions.

The mediation is a fundamental category for the apprehension and knowledge of phenomena that manifest themselves in reality in a fragmented, superficial and apparent way. As a substance of reality itself, it reveals itself as constitutive of the whole, that is, as a set of dialectical connections and articulations, through which it is possible to go from appearance to essence, and then to resume phenomenal manifestations in their structural complexity thus enabling conditions for the apprehension as close as possible to the real in its entirety, as concrete thought, as unity in the diverse. To exemplify it, we resort here to one of the criticisms that Marx (2011, p. 53) makes regarding the results of the works of political economy, "The result we have come to is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they are all members of a totality, differences within a unit."

From this theoretical framework, it is considered that the objectification of critical professional work presupposes the centrality of the mediation category articulated with the movement of the real, whose social meaning of the production of knowledge in the social service is supported by the professional ethical-political¹⁰ project in a direction that is radically committed to the construction of a new ordering of social relations and

corroborates the collective process of a new societal order. It is not for a given professional category alone to transform this reality, which can only be achieved through the collective movement of workers, however, the professions can move in that direction, breaking with the conservative, pragmatic and social perspectives, and based on a critical perspective of reality.

This is the direction in which the ethical-political project of social work is constituted not only by normative elements, as the Profession Regulation Law and the Code of Ethics, but also by adopting a clear position of the professional category in resisting conservative forces “constituting a critical and contesting strategic social direction for the profession” (Guerra, 2015, p. 44). For this, it is necessary that the professionals take ownership with density and criticality of the theoretical matrix and the production of knowledge committed to the radical capture of reality, contributing to the unveiling of the real and, thus, subsidizing them in their professional daily life in light of the professional ethical-political project that is even more current compared to the current historical-political and social Brazilian moment.

Iamamoto (1998, p. 195), concerned with analyzing vocational training in social work, provides essential elements for the critical apprehension of reality. In the direction indicated by the author, we understand that it is fundamental to break the internal walls of the professions and enable the comprehension of the broader social dynamics, taking into consideration the exogenous elements.

The vocational training, as well as the production of knowledge in social work, must go beyond the empty theoretical basis of the concrete base and also the mechanical use of techniques, of the strictly operational dimension and really understand who are the social subjects for whom it is professional action turns around and what are the conditions that are objectified in their daily life given the historical conditions experienced. It is in this direction that the contents necessary for the professional training of the social worker, according to the Curriculum Guidelines for Social Work courses (Associação Brasileira de Ensino e Pesquisa em Serviço Social, 1996), refer us to the set of knowledge organized in three cores of ground, intrinsically linked: theoretical-methodological of social life; particularity of the socio-historical formation of Brazilian society and foundations of professional work. They are cores that have in the production of knowledge one of its fundamental pillars, above all, because they are marked by a:

a conception of teaching and learning [emphasis added] based on the dynamics of social life, which establishes the parameters for the professional insertion in the social institutional reality. . . .The changes verified in the patterns of accumulation and social regulation require a resizing of the ways of thinking/acting of professionals in face of the new demands, possibilities and answers given [emphasis added] (Associação Brasileira de Ensino e Pesquisa em Serviço Social, 1996).

We are, therefore, facing a teaching perspective in which the production of knowledge about social reality becomes a fundamental requirement for the construction of a professional career guided by a political and ethical direction.

Final considerations

In this essay, which is a result of studies and teaching experience, sought to reflect on the production of knowledge and the ethical-political project of social work in the current Brazilian conjuncture. One of the central assumptions to guide the construction of this essay was defined by the production of knowledge as one of the expressions of human activity, as well as social research as a process of approximation to reality seeking the apprehension of its particularities as concrete thought.

The production of knowledge and vocational training at present in Brazil is threatened by the university counter-reform that, along with others, thickens the reformist broth in the current neoliberal model of the state.

In the scope of universities, what happens is the construction of an ideal based on the equalization of the public to the private, attributing the concept of organizational effectiveness to the institutions to which their legitimacy and autonomy should be guaranteed, not only financial but also intellectual as socially right, politically and constitutionally conquered. This mercantilist logic leads to the scrapping of public universities and the precariousness of teaching work. Moreover, given this reality, many researchers succumbed to the productivist logic, understanding it as a possibility of financial survival of research. Real financial implications that, by responding to productivity requirements in light of the accelerating science criteria imposed, also guarantee budget allocation to postgraduate programs.

Given this, what is at stake is the loss of the meaning of the university as a space that germinates thought, which enables the cultivation of critical reason, an epistemological and axiological universe that drives the

production of knowledge, research and the process of construction of a vocational training project based on a critical direction, particularly in the social work, based on its professional ethical-political project.

However, it is essential to point out that history is a process and in its movement, there is a contradictory field in which there are resistances and confrontations. Evidently, resistance strategies in the field of the production of free and autonomous knowledge must be traced and materialized collectively in the struggle against its mercantilization, commodification, its objectification as a fetish-knowledge-commodity, which presuppose its emptying as an essential instrument for change, the distancing from its sense of public good that contributes directly to the space of critical formation. Nevertheless, collective resistance strategies are joined by a central element: the search for the social meaning of knowledge production.

To this end, it is necessary to defend research that in fact commits itself to the approach to the movement of the real and its determinations, capturing its particularities and, provide elements for the radical knowledge of the capitalist system and contribute to the fight against this form of sociability in the fact search for human emancipation.

This assumption belongs to all areas of knowledge and, in particular in this case, to social work, which has the centrality of its social meaning based on material demands of historical subjects and, as one of its constitutive elements, the social research and knowledge production that must be articulated to a direction sustained in its present and radically current ethical-political project.

The production of knowledge, particularly in social work, must grasp the dynamics of wholeness, because of the mediations that unfold in professional daily life. Therefore, it is necessary to be guided by the critical analysis of the historical determinations and the objective conditions that materialize in a given spacetime, considering the professionals and the users of the services as historical subjects.

Evidently, by pointing a social direction and the defense of a dialectical materialist-historical theoretical-methodological matrix, it is intended to contribute to the construction of researches that follow in the path to deepen the production of knowledge that have social significance beyond the academic limits, theorists or purely pragmatic detached from the movement of reality. The materialist-historical-dialectical theoretical-methodological matrix is praised as the one that presupposes the approach to the movement of the real as a concrete thought, its particularities and contradictions, being able to grasp the complex determinations, walking in the critical apprehension of the “individual in totality in the sense of concrete and universal truth” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 116). In this sense, the daily approach of the social subjects, in the field of singularity, requires tirelessly and radically to inquire into each particular case “without any speculation or mystification . . . the connection between social structure, politics and production” (Marx & Engels, 1984, p. 35).

Therefore, it is urgent to produce researches, especially in the social work, in the direction of the ethical-political project, because think the production of knowledge and its social direction presuppose the path of investigation that has as scope the whole of being and their multiple daily relationships and not as a response to market interests or productivism.

This production of knowledge based on a historical-dialectical materialist theoretical-methodological perspective and in the direction of the ethical-political project of social work enables the approximation to the movement of the real, capturing its particularities and contradictions, basing its social meaning on its ineliminable organic relation to the education and training of professionals who are in fact at the service of life and society, contributing to overcoming the dehumanizing logic of capital, which is based on profit-making, individualism, competition, of the extraction of human energy, dehumanizing human. The production of knowledge in social service, therefore, must be committed to the movement of reality and the concrete needs of social subjects in their daily lives, because it is only possible to transform what is known.

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Notes

- 1 About the 2016 Coup in Brazil see Braz (2017)
- 2 About these interests and the university counter-reform see the production of the Revista Universidade e Sociedade (Sindicato Nacional dos Docentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior, 2018).
- 3 Understanding the production of knowledge as an expression of human activity is corroborated in the Brazilian Social Work by several authors, especially the production of Jussara Ayres Bourguignon and Aglair Alencar Setubal.
- 4 On the dialectical historical materialist method sees Karl Marx's work, especially: in the book: *German Ideology* written by Marx and Engels, where they oppose the post-Hegelian philosophical tradition. In *Misery of Philosophy*, where we come across some methodological notes at the opening of the second chapter. Also in the book *The Capital*, with emphasis on some prefaces and afterwords. In Lukács we also find significant contributions to the method, especially in the book *For an Ontology of Social Being I*, chapter 4, about Marx's fundamental ontological principles. Another important indication for this debate is the production of Florestan Fernandes, highlighting the book he organized entitled *K. Marx, F. Engels: History* published in 1989.
- 5 Lukacsian ontology refers to what exists, the "thing itself," where the human being is so as being in relation not only to other human beings but also to nature, that is, being human and his place in the universe
- 6 About the commodification and mercantilization of higher education, see also the World Bank report (2017) entitled "A Fair Fit: Analysis of the Efficiency and Equity of Public Expenditure in Brazil", which disregards the particularities and significance of high-quality and public higher

education it becomes a marker of the deepening of the dismantling of Brazilian public universities. This phenomenon is not unique to Brazil, because it affects so many other countries submitted to education projects dictated not only by the World Bank, but also by other international agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), whose scope is the privatization and the formation of professionals that exclusively attend the requests placed by the market.

- 7 About academic productivism sees Kuhlmann Jr. (2015), Fonseca (2001), Nascimento (2010) and Sguissardi (2010).
- 8 About article production as a fetish-knowledge-commodity read Trein and Rodrigues (2011).
- 9 About corporate and professional projects see Paulo Netto (1999) and Pontes (1997).
- 10 There is a vast production on the Ethical-Political Project of Social Work, highlighting Paulo Netto (1999) and Guerra (2015).

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