

Contemporary Challenges to Social Policy

This issue of *Revista Katálisis* offers readers articles that provide an overview of the current leading questions concerning social policy in Brazil and abroad.

The articles, as you will see, are based on differing perspectives and use a variety of conceptual tools, always mediated, of course, by each author's world view. It must be recalled that, despite the myth of neutrality and scientific objectivity, the issue of social policy in particular has been riddled by strong political tensions, considering that it involves public and social policies that influence the distribution of wealth and concern inequalities and multiple expressions of social issues that result in class struggle.

The social question is thus expressed exponentially in this historic moment of capitalist crisis, and there are strong impacts on the world of labor. This situation redimensions social policy in all quadrants, establishing target specific policies with an assistentialist dynamic – which differs from the view of social assistance as a policy to establish security, which we have been defending in the realm of the ethical-political project constructed by Social Service in Brazil.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are increasingly farther from the European social-democratic experience that followed World War II, and whose airs only reached Brazil with the Constitution of 1988, and soon after became rarified by the impacts of the neoliberal orientations and macroeconomic policy instilled with the Real Plan of 1994.

In reality, there has been a strong bourgeois reaction to the crisis of capital since the 1980s, which has been triggering a triple movement of regressive processes.

First, there was a counter-reform of the State, with the redirection of public funds to assure the general conditions of production and reproduction of capital, a process that has been guided by the needs of interest-bearing capital. With this step, less resources are allocated to the reproduction of the labor force, weakening social policies of a universal character, and forcing a costbenefit logic on social protection and not the logic of rights. This movement

has been accompanied by changes in the tax structure of various countries, with lower rates for private property and large fortunes and greater participation of workers' income in national tax revenue, mortally wounding redistributive efforts of a social-democratic nature. The impressive private appropriation of public funds in the context of the crisis unleashed by so-called "toxic capital" in 2008 and 2009, with the destination of billions of dollars, euros and reals for operations to save companies and contain the spiraling crisis, is a strong indication of this process of counter-reform and redirectioning of the functions of the State. No social policy is capable of redistributing income in the face of strongly regressive tax structures and the tremendous private expropriation of the resources produced by social labor.

A second, and absolutely essential movement is productive restructuring, engendering a return to the generally excellent conditions of exploitation of the labor force. For capital, this means expanding the relative surplus population which lives in barbaric and violent conditions, lacking access to most basic needs, in a generalized recrudescence of social issues. The offensive on the world of labor has a deleterious effect on class consciousness and social struggles, deunionizing workers and weakening the organization of their political initiatives. The enactment of social policy, as a process, is marked by contradiction, and its greater or lesser scope is due to political pressure from workers and affiliated segments. Therefore, the political and material erosion of workers' organizations opened space for a neoliberal reinvention of social policies, as determined by the conditions for investments from multilateral agencies and under the conceptual base of Giddens' "risk society" and Sen's development of "capacities". Thus, the responses to the new expressions of social issues – whose origin is found in the general law of capital accumulation – has come in the form of the criminalization of poverty, with a drastic expansion of the prison population, especially among young men who compose the economically active population, on one hand; and by means of social polici-

es focused on violence management, on the other. One example is income transfer programs that have draconian conditions for access to miniscule payments, ostensibly to assure the work ethic in an environment that does not offer protected jobs for all men and women. These programs are based on the presence and participation of women, who are overburdened with two or three work shifts, because of the programs' demands on recipients.

The third movement is that of the "worldwide" flow of capital, based on strategies to revive corporate profit rates, which is related to the two others, given that capital seeks deregulation to move without barriers and freely and efficiently exploit the labor force. Thus, these are the three related processes that have had strong impact on the social question and social policies.

This volume of the *Revista Katálysis* offers an international panorama in which these trends are expressed, analyzing responses to social issues from social policies and the conditions for their implementation in Colombia, Argentina, Brazil and European countries. There are also articles that analyze the gender and ethnic and racial impacts of these general movements, such as the debate about the so-called "feminization of poverty" and affirmative action policies.

The fact is that in these times, when strong forces destructive to humanity and nature are unleashed – and the nuclear accident in Japan is the most tragic sign of this progressive loss of capacity of the system to reproduce without great human loss – it is very important to reestablish at the center of the debates, the construction of resistance strategies to struggle against the barbarization of social life and for the construction of another form of sociability. These strategies include the defense of broad social policies, of a universal character, which can dispute and generate effective tensions in the allocation of public funds, and which, above all, have larger impacts on the living and working conditions of the majority – as an important agenda for resistance – in times of targeted policies, privatization and closings.

This issue of *Revista Katálysis*, which raises the debate about social policy and the social question by offering critical reflections and important data about Brazil and other countries, contains more than just statistics, analyses, reflections and critical mass. It thus goes beyond the reach of an academic journal to support the struggle of workers in these times of crisis, when fragmentation begins slowly and gives way to a type of reinvention of resistance, especially on the Latin American continent. Good reading to all!

Elaine Rossetti Behring, March 2011.

Elaine Rossetti Behring

elan.rosbeh@uol.com.br

Post-Doctoral Studies at the Universidade de Brasília (UnB)

PhD in Social Service from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)

Adjunct professor of the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), in the Department of Social Policy of the School of Social Service