

## **The Latin American reconceptualisation movement**

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### **Abstract**

This article looks 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 the 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 modernization in the mid-1950s. This brought an emphasis on community development, alongside a questionings 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 is essential to start talking about the socio-political context in the preceding period, during which modernisation ideas and the unfolding of “developmentalism” took place in Our America. This involved political guidelines, technical recommendations and “development” financing, led by agencies created by the North American government to influence our countries.

To understand the international politics strategy of the United States towards our region, Melisa Campana (2011) points out that during the 1940s and 1950s, many Latin American countries had promoted some wealth distribution in favour of working classes. On the other hand, Susana Murillo notes that the consequences of plans drawn up after the Second World War and in the Cold War context “complete the training process of an urban and industrial working class. A massive higher education and alphabetisation generated clear conscience and organisational levels among mid and low classes” (Murillo, 2006:13). From the international perspective, certain growing social resistances are postulated as an object of concern. Among them, the success achieved by

1959's Cuban Revolution and its support to revolutionary movements in the rest of the continent.

One of the most influential development agencies was the Organisation of American States (OAS), created in 1958. During the OAS 1961 meeting in Punta del Este, Uruguay, the North American government, presided by Kennedy, launched the "Alliance for Progress". Its representative document, the Charter of Punta del Este, establishes the region's priorities. The developmentalist strategy involved the technification of state operations, the creation of national planning entities and the application of certain technical recommendations on poverty. These recommendations, determinants of the credits that were being extended, involved planned interventions on populations as it was considered that development needed previous conditions presented as obstacles to be surmounted. "The action on postponed traditional communities favoured a cultural change which would stimulate the national development which sprang from a firm belief that traditional values of the poor were the main limitation to the supposed improvements modernisation would entail" (Campana, 2011:131).

According to Sonia Álvarez Leguizamón (2008:106), these theories assume that an external intervention is needed to modernise traditional attitudes and behaviours, because the conception of marginalisation that lies behind presupposes that the poor not only lack the ability to change, but they also resist change. Therefore, it is necessary to intervene on cultural patterns and "archaic" mind-sets in order to adapt the population to "modern" patterns.

According to Luis Alberto Romero, the approach adopted by the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), where such theories have mainly originated, was the following: "... 'developed' countries could help 'developing' countries to eliminate backwardness factors through adequate investment in key areas. They would be accompanied by 'structural' reforms such as the agricultural reform" (Romero, 1994:134).

Among the intervention proposals facing the diagnosis on poverty and marginality, the *community development* proposal had great influence in the region, and especially in Social Work.

"The 'community development' proposal founds and gives importance to social planification 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 Ana Arias (2012), between 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 being able to influence the low-income sectors' private lives, social workers could be useful to the developmentalist project as long as their professional profiles were "modernised". According to Carina Moljo, developmentalist ideologies involved the growing of professionals to create a more modern and independent society that "without disregarding their individual and group interventions, had also the 'community work mission', or 'Community Development'" (Moljo, 2005:90). These involved a training policy for leaders that, in the case of social workers, would be privileged actors as "agents of change".

For example, in Argentina, the national government requested counseling on Social Work teaching to the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration. There were approximately fifteen institutes that trained social workers in the nation. The Chilean colleague Valentina Maidagán de Ugarte, head of the technical commission, was in charge of evaluating the syllabus and advising headmasters on the academic requirements needed to train social workers according to the developmentalist project. In that way, a modernisation wave emerged in our profession in Argentina.

After a critical appraisal concerning 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 well-being institutions 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 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 *in* Alayón, 2007:178). The definition of "Community development" stated in 1958 by the United Nations reflects the new guidelines for the training of social workers: "Community development is the process by which the people itself gets 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" (*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 the Social Service of Argentina. Its syllabus was in accordance with the UN consultant's recommendations and faced much resistance by many Schools that didn't want to modify their syllabus. According to Campana, "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". (Campana, 2011:133).

This Institute represents a landmark of the academic inflection that Social Work has experienced from the entry of modernising ideas; a similar process exists in other countries of the region, and at the same time, as we shall see below, represents the seed of what will become the Reconceptualisation Movement in Latin American Social Work.

### **Socio-Historical Context and Theoretic 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 reconceptualization. In Vietnam, the US retreat and surrender were "landmarks that had an overall impact on 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, African decolonisation process were facts that created a climate of a period that the "Third World" started to look with enthusiasm. In our region, the Cuban Revolution played an essential role in thinking that the liberation of our people was at arm's length. In Chile, the election of Salvador Allende's socialist government also created great expectations on 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, in Social Work students and young professionals. In Latin America, Third World bishops and lay people among them declared that they were in favour of the real poor -not the poor in spirit- and expressed the need for 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 to the modernisation theory, from the onset of the Marxist tradition and the productions linked to the 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 neither the climate of rebellion, criticism and rejection to what was established nor Marxism interpretations or the dependency theory were overlooked in our 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 the Community Development method which was booming in the mid-1960s.

As the protagonist of these times, Juan Barreix (1971) stated that when students and professionals, who were trained at Schools (created and/or advised by the UN Technical Committees) mainly 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 1971:50-51).

Dialogue between dependency theorist 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, Argentina, in 1959, under the technical guidelines of the United Nations mainly arises from the fact that its students founded the first magazine of Social Service of the country -“Social Service Today”, then “Social Work Today”- whose first number was published in December 1965 and the ECRO editorial. Both of them were in charge of revealing and communicating, in Latin America, the emerging professional ideas. These editorial publications show the effort for the union of Latin American Social Service and for the growth and renovation of the profession. In addition, they represent, with different shades, a clear trend towards a breach of the technocratic and conservative waves, which have not disappeared with the Reconceptualisation Movement.

For that matter, it is worth stressing that the process lived by the profession in this period has been highly complex and contradictory. It has meant advances and setbacks, i.e., it has been a construction which entailed debates, ideological commitments and position reviews. Therefore, it has not been the chronological stages of a professional line substituted or overcome by another one, but different perspectives that lived together and fought to hegemonise the professional field according to fighting corporate projects. In fact, the ECRO Group started its publications with positions that answered developmentist guidelines and the idea of making Social Work a technical profession involved in the process of development. Then it supported the opportunity of taking part in the liberation of the oppressed peoples and the Latin American revolution.

The Reconceptualisation Movements is considered to have started in 1965 due to a series of landmarks that took place that year. In fact, the “1965 Generation” was the name received by the professional group that started strongly rejecting the technocratic model put forward by the developmentalist ideas and supported Social Work Reconceptualisation. According to Juan Barreix, three reasons associate this group of colleagues and the beginning of the Reconceptualisation Movement to this date: it is the year of the First Latin American Social Service Seminar which took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, “becoming the annual mandatory meeting of colleagues enrolled in the

professional re-conceptualisation line” (Barreix 1971:52). On the other hand, it is the year the Syllabus of Social Service Studies at the Republic University of Uruguay was reformed because of the need this generation saw to “start investigating, theorising, teaching and seeking a truly Latin American Social Service” (Barreix 1971:52). Finally, 1965 was the year the first edition of the magazine “Social Service Today” was published by the Argentinean ECRO editorial due to the colleagues’ need for a “permanent communication tool of the new professional ideas” (Barreix 1971:52).

Paraphrasing Diego 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 social Case, Group Social Service and Community Development and Organisation- that emerged in the United States 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 developmentist ideas promoted to become “agents of change”, there was a banned political intention: to suppress populations to the development guidelines imposed by the Alliance for Progress.

The awareness that emerged from the influence of the dependency Theory, set the Community Development and Organisation method in the same “package” with the intervention proposals that started to be rejected in favour of a Latin American social Work identified with the liberation of the peoples and the oppressed sectors, victims of the capitalist system. Inside this Movement, the trend which clearly promoted a breach with the prevailing conservatism in Social Service and 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 undergoing a dead-end path or an unbreakable vicious circle” (Barreix, 1971:54).



Gustavo Parra (2006) suggests that the greatest peak of the Movement could be situated between 1969 and 1972 basically because of two groups of reasons. On the one side, because it is the moment the Movement penetrates the Southern Cone borders (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay) and spreads into most Latin American countries. The author 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 this phenomenon the participation of Latin American colleagues in Regional Seminars, ECRO Editorial publications, the Social Service Selections magazine of Humanitas Editorial, the activities promoted by the ALAESS (Latin American Association of Social Service Schools founded in 1965) and the International Solidarity Institute (ISI). On the other side, the Movement boom between 1969 and 1972 is a consequence of the strength the ideas this professional group acquires which produces the coupling of various professional sectors from the conservative ones to the technocratic modernisers who “resignedly or combatively” accept the need of a renovation in the profession. (Parra, 2006: 12-13).

After this peak period, the Reconceptualisation Movement starts losing strength due to, among other reasons, the cycle of dictatorships opened 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 social assistants training in some Latin American countries during the Social Work professionalisation period (1925-1940). In addition, the label “reconceptualisation” also 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 to the lack of theoretical accuracy the Marxist theory was tackled and its consequences for the professional collective regarding the methodological proposals of intervention. There was also conservative criticism for the 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 socio-historical 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 allowed the effort to think Social Work from a united Latin America perspective. It actively committed to the interests of the social sectors we work with and was in favour of an emancipatory project for Our America. In addition, it made possible a different reading of what is intended to be shown as inexorable fate: poverty, inequality, exploitation, etc. Those who took active part in this professional renovation process bet to prioritise the profession detaching it from the subordinate burden that the dominant sectors would like to impose, and participating with a political position in tune with the most progressive corporate projects. They undertook the task of investigating and making theoretic-methodological contributions for the disciplinary field, transcending the boundaries of national realities to strengthen the Latin American Social Service unity and daring to communicate the ideas sprang from the ideological discussions of the theoretical references that were being incorporated in Social Sciences.

Even though there were theoretic-methodological limitations typical of a critical moment when the social revolution seemed to be within reach and the conceptual loyalty of bibliographical sources was not easy to elucidate, the mentioned conceptual frameworks were incorporated. The legacy of the Reconceptualisation is a great challenge in order to think our contemporary professional reality and the invaluable richness this turning point gave to the profession.

To conclude, we could admit that the training of Latin American Social Workers is marked by a history that is still under construction and academic debate. In the post-reconceptualisation and the current profession the commitments have been updated and other social projects have been thought. Today different trends in our syllabus and professional practice coexist in our profession.

However, Reconceptualisation projects continue posing ourselves questions. To answer them, in a context where neoliberal attacks are violent and leak our everyday practices, is a challenge that involves professional commitment and academic debate. Walter Benjamin's WIV 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 XIV).

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