

EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL INTERVENTION

Contributions from the Argentine Social Work

Silvana Martínezⁱ

Juan Agüeroⁱⁱ

Abstract

In this work we present a general idea about we mean by social intervention from the political-ideological, theoretical-methodological and epistemological perspective that – in that work and in a most recently one – we called *Emancipatory Social Work* (Martínez, S. y Agüero, J., 2014). Firstly, we briefly refer about the meaning of emancipation. In the second part, we refer to this way of thinking and doing Social Work, that we called *Emancipatory Social Work*, offered from Argentina for Latin America and The Caribbean, as a response to the challenges involved in changing times of *Our America*, as the Cuban poet Jose Martí called to the great Latin American nation. In the third part, we analyze the main features of the social intervention, conceived in the way of social work and the implications that have training and the political-professional project.

Key words

Social Intervention, Social Work, Social Emancipation, Latin America, Argentina.

Introduction

In Argentina there is a diversity of ways of thinking and doing social work. Some of them we referred in our book *The Political-Ideological Dimension of Social Work. Keys to an emancipatory social work* (Martínez, S. y Agüero, J., 2008). This heterogeneity has historical, political and cultural roots, but also linked with various modes of institutionalization, orientations and conceptions of social work that were developed in our country and gave birth to a multiplicity of training, qualifications, incumbencies, organization of profession, ways of practice and modes of social intervention.

In this work we present a general idea about we mean by social intervention from the political-ideological, theoretical-methodological and epistemological perspective that – in that work and in a most recently one – we called *Emancipatory Social Work* (Martínez, S. y Agüero, J., 2014). Firstly, we briefly refer about the meaning of emancipation. In the second part, we

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I. The meaning of emancipation

The central category of our approach of Emancipatory Social Work is the emancipation. This term has an old legal meaning related to the power of a master to release a slave. It also referred to the termination of parent's rights exerted on a minor whose emancipation enabled him to adulthood. Historically, it acquired different meanings, but is during the Modernity when it got a foundational sense of breaking with the old regime (the Middle Ages) and an unlimited progress. The idea that history has a progressive sense and goes forward to the final perfection, guided by the human rationality, has been at the core of de Modernity and even can be said that it constitutes its essence (Vattimo, G., 2004:39)..

Ernesto Laclau criticizes this notion of emancipation from Modernity. To this author, this notion has six dimensions that do not constitute a logically organized whole or a coherent logical structure. The first is the *dichotomous* dimension and is given by the absolute censorship or the radical discontinuity between the emancipator moment and the social order that precedes it. The second is the *holistic* dimension because the emancipation covers all areas of the social life and, in turn, these areas have themselves an interdependent relationship. The third is the *transparency* dimension, since if the alienation is totally eradicated; there would be no place to any relationship of power or representation, neither to a distinction of subject/object. The fourth is the *pre-existence* dimension of what must be emancipated with respect to de emancipator act, since there is no emancipation without oppression. The fifth is the *foundation* dimension, which is inherent to any project of radical emancipation as a creator of a new order. The sixth is the *rationalist* dimension which realizes about the centrality of reason instead of de divine revelation (Laclau, E., 1996:11-12).

Meanwhile, Boaventura de Sousa Santos also criticizes the notion of emancipation of Modernity upholding the need to reinvent it from tree dimensions: epistemology, theoretical and political. He proposes the construction of an *epistemology of the south* as a searching of visibility and credibility of cognitive practices of classes, people and social groups which have

been historically exploited and oppressed by global capitalism and colonialism (De Sousa Santos, B., 2009). Also he proposes the need of reinvent the critical theory from multiculturalism, the postcolonialism and a new rationality (De Sousa Santos, B., and 2006:46). He also raises the need to build high intensity democracies, recovering the diversity of democratic forms that existed before the liberal representative democracy imposed by countries that support a hegemonic world order (De Sousa Santos, B., 2006:71).

The notion of emancipation of Modernity is also approached by Karl Marx. The Jewish Question tackles for the first time the problem of the human emancipation in general and its correlation with political emancipation. This early essay does not explain how to achieve the human emancipation, neither who should carry it out and by what means. This is exposed in his later writings. According to Marx, the human emancipation is embodied in historical subjects that in concrete situations strive for it, analyzing the historical reality, deploying strategies and carry out specific actions that involve, in turn, the relationship between theory and practice. The historical subject of human emancipation is the proletariat that, according to Marx, constitutes the singular layer which encapsulates the process of disintegration of capitalist society. This layer concentrates the radical needs that demand a radical revolution. Therefore, to free itself as a class, it can break the chains that bind the rest of the exploited ones. However, capitalism has developed science and technology and has transformed in such way the productive forces and the forms of exploitation that, in the 21th century, the historical subject of human emancipation is not homogeneous as the proletariat from the 19th century, but a social subject whose composition is broad and varied and it is built from the bottom, taking into account the needs and specific tasks in each political and social context.

To Marx the human emancipation is based on the need of overcome alienation. There is a contradiction between the citizen who enjoys of an alleged political equality, but is divided into a material condition as historical subject and a situation of social inequality. In this sense, alienation and human emancipation are themselves two mutually exclusive processes, as the latter only can be achieved when there not is alienation. Marx distinguishes the human emancipation from the political emancipation. While recognizing the progresses that have meant the modernity as political emancipation of the old feudal structures of Middle Ages in terms of the questions such as equality before the law, individual freedom and citizenship, however, conceived human emancipation as a qualitatively superior process and different from the political emancipation because it relates to daily life of individuals and the economic, political, social and cultural conditions that influence it. In this sense, although political emancipation is

necessary and essential for freedom, the effective exercise of this freedom is not possible, unless exists a human emancipation. Now, to create the conditions to the exercise of freedom is not something simple and easy, but a complex process fraught with all kind of contradictions, conflicts, ambitions, wars of interests, progresses and retreats, encounters and disagreements, crisis, struggles and confrontation with those who have the power and the economic and political control of the mean of production.

Over the years and with the course of historical events that happened throughout the 21th Century, the Marx's initial position, which it is known as the *First Marx* or the *Young Marx*, is substantially modified. In Volume 1 of *Capital* (1862) there is a shift towards the economic base, the social relationships of production as an explanatory principle of all social relationships and, particularly, to what he calls superstructure, consisting of political, legal, ideological and cultural issues. In *Circular of Working Classes*, written in 1864 for the 1st International, Marx analyzed the course of labor movement from 1848, marked by major failures, where he recognized the relief that meant the 10 hour work-day Act and the role of the cooperative movement.

The *First Marx* rejected cooperatives and considered them rather an obstacle in the revolutionary struggle. However, in *Circular*, he recognized their achievements and stated that “this movement could triumph over the power of the capital only it is developed in national dimensions”. Further, he argued that “the conquest of the political power had become in a great duty of the working classes” because, as Raúl Zibechi says, “the conquest of the power is the only way to avoid that political economy of the proletariat succumb before the power of the political economy of the bourgeoisie” (Zibechi, R., 2005:18).

Marx turns to politics and State, two entities that in the past he used to reject because he believed in the autonomous power of the proletariat. Previously, he held that “*the emancipation of working class will only be the work of the workers themselves*” (Zibechi, R., 2005:13). The historical subject of the emancipation for the Young Marx was the proletariat, acting as an autonomous organization of the politics and the State. Now he changes his position and recognizes the need to take the power through the political action. He recognizes that the class struggle is a political struggle and the revolution is political as well. This turn deepened after the failure in takeover the Paris Commune (1871). The State thus becomes the new historical subject of the emancipation (Zibechi, R., 2005:20).

At present, emancipation has to do with the political struggles against neoliberal globalization carried out by several groups and social movements all over the world. One of these movements is the *alterglobalism*, called like this because its slogan “*another world is possible*”. One of its most famous manifestations is the organization of the *World Social Forum*, meetings that since 2001 are made in different countries of the world. To the alterglobalism the emancipation is any action that allows to a subject or a social group access to a state of autonomy through extinction of any authority or power. This is a concept that aims to promote fairer societies, free from any domination and oriented towards real equality. It includes political and socioeconomic emancipation, respect for human dignity, the right of recognition and a decent life to all human beings and the environmental preservation.

Another meaning of emancipation have to do with the political struggles conducted by feminist movements in the world, which have deployed several emancipatory processes with a wide range of meanings, feelings, ideas, theoretical, epistemological and political positions, which make them difficult to summarize or condense. These emancipatory processes, although different, have in common the struggle against every form of oppression, inequality and discrimination experienced by women as well as against the order sustained by patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism.

II. Emancipatory Social Work

The Emancipatory Social Work intended to be a response to this deep and existential demand of human history as the emancipation and also a response to the challenges posed by the struggles for emancipation deployed in our America. What do we mean when we talk about Social Work? As with the alterglobalism and feminism, in Social Work there is a connection with political-ideological struggles carried out during 1960 and 1970. By then, nobody talked about emancipation, but liberation. It was proposed a liberator Social Work (Macías Gómez, E. y Lacayo de Macías, R., 1973). Those were times of re conceptualization and were passing through a historical moment of deep social and political changes. It was intended that women workers and social workers fulfilled a strategic role in society, as teachers and popular educators, leaders, activists and protagonist in changes urgently demanded by Latin-American people.

The dilemma was *liberation* or *dependency*. Paulo Freire talked about a liberator education (Freire, P., 1970); Theotonio Dos Santos, from the Theory of Dependency (Dos Santos, Th. 1974); many progressive bishops and priests, from theology of liberation (Gutiérrez Merino, G., 1968; Boff, L., 1978). To the Latin-American Church, liberation has a theological

sense, to Freire and Dos Santos a political and ideological sense that approaches the notion of emancipation.

For a country, emancipation is the capability and a real possibility of political sovereignty or self-determination as people. For a society or social group, or for the social subjects that comprise it, it is the capability and a real possibility of autonomy or self-determination as society. In both cases, it is an instance that goes further from freedom or from liberation and involve two basic conditions: a) have a real capability and b) have the real possibility to decide the own destiny or project of life and can carry it out assuming its consequences.

The two key words that define the meaning of emancipation are the capability and the possibility. It's not just about being free or wants to choose what a subject wants to his life or others, but to make it real and effective. This power involves capability and possibility. Capability refers to social subjects, meanwhile possibility refers to the historical conditions in which these subjects are constituted and perform. There is no capability without subjects, neither the possibility to be them without historical conditions.

In the process of emancipation we distinguish three basic components: liberation, autonomy and historical conditions. The *Liberation* means freedom and Independence. It is an emancipation "of", in the sense of to be free from subjection to something. In the 1960s and 1970s people talked about to be free from imperialism and domination. This is a previous condition to initiate a process of emancipation; it is the termination of captivity, slavery or submission and retrieval of freedom. However, only with freedom and independence is not enough. For a prisoner released from prison is clear that the simple liberation is not enough to survive and develop himself as a human being, but it is an essential step, a *sine qua non* condition for emancipation.

The second component is the *autonomy*. We can define it as the capability and opportunity to make own decisions and set own rules. The maximum degree of autonomy is sovereignty or the self-determination as a people that make it independent of any external subjection of another people. Below this maximum, there is a relative autonomy. In any case, this implies the existence of a subject capable to exercise autonomy. It is the *subject of emancipation*. The process of emancipation involves the existence of subjects that can carry it out. If there is no subject, this process is not viable. For this reason, it is also a *sine qua non* requirement to accomplish a process of emancipation. The construction of autonomy and the constitution of the subject to exercise it are two sides of the same coin. Autonomy is the ability of a subject, but it

is also the possibility to freely exercise this ability. Freedom or liberation is a previous condition to exercise autonomy, but this, in turn, is not possible without subjects. At the same time, the process of emancipation builds subjects, freedom and autonomy in a dialectic way. What does it mean? That the process of emancipation is not linear neither closed; it is not something finished, but something in a constant motion, in a constant construction and reconfiguration. Emancipation builds freedom, autonomy and subjectivity, but these, in turn, allow the process of emancipation to develop.

The third component is the *historical conditions*. In Luis Bonaparte's *The Eighteenth of Brumaire* of, Karl Marx says : "*Men make their own history, but not so at their discretion under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under those circumstances directly found, that exist and have been inherited from the past*" (Marx, K., 2011:12). As mentioned above, the process of emancipation is a dialectic process that does not occur outside the historical condition of the social subjects, that is to say, outside of the circumstances depicted by Marx which were not chosen by the subjects, but that they are there, crossing, conditioning and configuring them. From these conditions or historical circumstances emerge the real possibilities of social emancipation. Only within this historical context the subjects can develop their capabilities, abilities, strategies and projects of life. It is the framework of action that subjects have and from which emerge the limits and the real possibilities as well. In this sense, the emancipation is not a speech, but a historical fact. It means materiality, namely, capability and real possibility of historical performing of the subjects. Emancipation is a fact, is to write history and not only participate in the history that other people write or, even worst, staying away from it. The history that others write is the alienation; it is a denial of the subject. Therefore, our proposal of Emancipatory Social Work has a critical nucleus consisting of: a) the construction of social subjects; b) living worlds; c) identity processes; d) social ties and e) citizenship, as conditions to carry it out.

The social subjects are constituted in a relationship with their living worlds. These micro-social spaces are where daily life goes by and where the macro-social is condensed. Subjectivity comes from the inter-subjectivity and these, in turn, are crossed by the macro-social context. There is not externality between context and subjects' living worlds, but these are configured by them. At the same time, the living world is what we build as social subjects, which has sense for us. It is the web of meanings that we attach to everything that encompasses and constitute us as a subject. We recognize ourselves as subjects in a world that has sense for us. The living world constitutes us as social subjects and, in turn, we configure it as such. That is, we constitute

ourselves as social subjects when building our living worlds in such way that we are a dialectical binomial subject-world that result indivisible. This dialectical relationship occurs in a precise time and in a specific space; it is historical.

Identities are constitutive of the social subjects. We do not have a single identity as individuals, but we are crossed by multiple identities. These are stitches that amalgamate and condensate the diversity, multiplicity and multidimensionality of our subjectivity. Each identity assumes a specific content of gender, race, ethnicity, class or social state. Moreover, we adhere to citizenship as “the right to have rights”, and this implies social bonds, that is to say, links, ties, social scheme, networks of social relationships that are established among members of a specific social formation. These ties have permanence in time, meanings, senses, purposes, namely, intentionality. The concept of citizenship to we adhere involves historicity, social conscience, participation in decision-making, recognition of differences and power relations, but these dimensions presuppose the existence of social ties, as a previous requirement of social cohesion and social project, because citizenship always refers to a social group and not to individual subjects.

This *critical nucleus*, in turn, is crossed by three major systems of oppression that have historically configured the construction of a current social order and continue completely active: Patriarchy, Capitalism and Colonialism. Therefore, our proposal of Emancipatory Social Work is antipatriarcal, anticapitalist and anticolonialist. We reject Patriarchy because:

- a) It constitutes an authoritarian and reactionary system based on an alleged supremacy and superiority of men over women and the supposed rights of those to perpetuate a historically constituted order from, for and by men.
- b) It is functional to capitalism because it justifies the sexual division of work and the supposed inferiority of women based on historically inequalities constituted and replicated by men.
- c) It encourages the oppression and social domination, supporting and justifying by philosophy, science, politics and religion the historical construction and social reproduction of myths, prejudices and stereotypes over the supposed inferiority and congenital weakness of women.
- d) It violates the most basic human rights supporting and replicating a social order that does not allow women to practice fully their rights to freedom, to a dignified life, to be respected as a human being, to equality before the law, to a dignified job, to practice a profession, the full

development of their human capabilities and potentialities, to a free association and to express their ideas, to develop themselves as a political subject, among other rights.

e) It encourages and justifies violence, to sustain and perpetuate an order which justifies the abuse of power and the authoritarianism of men and promotes the obedience, submission and subordination of women.

f) It does not take into account the right to be different, supporting an androcentric system with a unique point of view that does not take into account women's perspective, or what they feel, want or desire.

g) It does not respect the freedom of choice of women, imposing to them an order based on men's preferences, interests and convenience.

h) It is incompatible with a democratic and egalitarian social and familiar order in the exercise of rights, power and real possibilities between men and women.

It rejects capitalism as a system of social organization because is based on exploitation of man by the man and its consequence is the concentration of wealth in few hands while a huge majority of the population lacks the slightest for living. This generates inequality, oppression and social domination and its most serious consequence is the state of helplessness and social injustice for social subjects. The processes of alienation that causes capitalism are incompatibles with the construction of autonomous social subjects. Individualization and commodification in social relationships that provokes capitalism threaten against the construction of social ties, encourages social fragmentation, anomie and neither allows to think about the real and effective practice of citizenship. Likewise, in exploitation condition, the social subjects can hardly think about configuring their living worlds or rebuild projects of life in such conditions.

Finally, it rejects colonialism because it opposes and deeply questions the process of colonialism, colonization and cultural domination of our Latin-American people. On the contrary, the construction of social subjects, social ties and citizenship, in this kind of Social Work is required a process of cultural decolonization that involves the reconfiguring of the individuals' living worlds and the development of the identity processes based on the revaluation of native, in recovering of symbols and local cultural meanings, in popular knowledge, in indigenous languages, in experiences of popular religiosity, among others.

III. Social intervention from the perspective of the Emancipatory Social Work

The social intervention does not occur in a vacuum, but in a specific historical, social and institutional context that crosses it. It denotes *praxis* and has certain constituent features when we name it as *emancipatory praxis*. Among these constituent features, we include the following as most important: meaning, subjectivity, training, multidimensionality, daily routine, interaction, contradiction and conflict, power, awareness, popularization of knowledge, research and acute perception of reality.

In this context, configured by historical conditions, it is not outside of social intervention, but does not only cross this, but also the subjects and their living worlds. The fragility of the institutions is highlighted in this context. These have difficulties to fulfill their original order, since social problems are of such complexity that they go beyond the institutions and, in addition, they are strongly crossed by the political-ideological dimension. The context is present in every situation that women workers and social workers address, because the macro-social is embodied into the micro-social and this constitutes a condensation of that.

The context also generates the objective and subjective conditions of the subjects of the *praxis*. These conditions can create synergy or obstruct the processes of emancipation. However, they condition but do not determine the individuals, since they always keep their processing capacity intact. As Anthony Giddens argues with the Theory of Social Structure: the individuals, in any course of action, they always can choose other courses of action (Giddens, A., 1995). That is, beyond the adversities or obstacles that occur, always remains a possibility of change; otherwise, we would fall into a historical or linear determinism that we expressly rejected.

The *Emancipatory Social Work* requires located and rooted professionals, meanings and signifiers, subjectified and subjectifying. Located in the impression of a time and a specific place, rooted in an origin or project associated to a human group with which I can identify myself in the search of meaning of my existence or my action, signified by the grid of social meanings and, at the same time, significant in terms of capacity to build social significance, subjectified by the web of inter-subject relationships and, in turn, subjectiving in terms of capacity to build the subjectivity of “others” I interact with.

In the emancipatory praxis, the subjectivity of women workers and social workers is configuring into the game of a particular inter-subjectivity that is built sharing the living world to another, the intimacy of everyday life, the emotional experiences, how to be in the world and

relate to others, and the way of being, feeling and acting. The professional practice allows them to build with others social subjects a kind of relationship that is very different from those being built in other professions. This comes about from a symbolic world where things have a specific meaning for the individuals.

Furthermore, our proposal of *Emancipatory Social Work* rescues from popular education several elements in common. Indeed, both have as a field of social practices the popular sectors, where it is found strongly the consequences of the public politics and the action of dominant sectors. Both have also as an intended action, the transformation of reality, seeking to reverse the situation of oppression and social domination.

In both cases, there is also an emphasis on training and education. Education is an instance of theoretical reflection and development of critical awareness in social subjects to understand and interpret reality, while training is an instance of acquisition or development of skills or competencies to the transforming actions of reality. They also share the approach of social reality from the multidimensional perspective, the emphasis in everyday life and interaction with individuals as a basic strategy of the praxis.

An important aspect for *Emancipatory Social Work* is to consider, as popular education does, contradiction and conflict as constitutive elements of social life and not as anomalies and deviations. Here we have to remove a deeply rooted functionalist and systemic approach in Social Work, which upholds the principle of normality, harmony and functionality of social relationships and from social system, considering any conflict or contradiction as anomaly, diversion or dysfunction that should be corrected or adjusted.

Likewise, an *Emancipation Social Work* involves developing the ability of build a critical and organizational awareness and the skills to fight side to side with popular sectors. We cannot proclaim the change from a coffee shop or sit comfortably in the office. Hence, we rescue from popular education the commitment with action, the dialectic view of reality, the practice as a privileged space for reflection and action, an integrated approach of social problems, consistency in the formulation of strategies, the pursuit of real participation and, especially, the construction of popular power.

Moreover, the magnitude and complexity of social problems require social workers strongly prepared, trained and competent from a professional point of view. This implies not only a political-ideological training, but also a solid epistemological, theoretical and methodological education, but also, and primarily, to learn the trade, that is, how to do things in

the territory. Women workers and social workers who are “in the trenches” of social problems, as is usually called, should be the most capable and most competent.

Besides, we are convinced that the construction of a professional group involves participation and occupation of all social, political and institutional spaces of praxis of the women workers and social workers. Such is the case, for example, of professional organizations, which are strategic spaces of struggle and construction of power. The greater is participation and presence of the professional group in society, the greater the recognition of Social Work as profession and the greater the symbolic capital accumulated. The opposite is a process of impoverishment and invisibility of the professional field.

Another important aspect of the praxis of *Emancipatory Social Work* is the research. It is a professional attitude does not to give up and to persist in questioning why, have more doubts than certainties and recognize that there is not enough training to deal with multiplicity and complexity of social problems. It requires, therefore, an attitude of permanent questioning. In this sense, we must link scientific research with real needs and problems of the people, in order to that the social relevance not be just a written statement on a project, but a real look of social reality.

In this sense, the Emancipatory Social Work involves a process of popularization of scientific knowledge. It is necessary to build bridges to connect popular knowledge with scientific knowledge, and vice versa. This is a political task, it is not a technical or technocratic one, since it tries to perceive real needs and problems of the people and to be able to study them and propose a solution.

Similarly, the Emancipatory Social Work means having professional with an acute perception of the reality. This means, social workers as capable of seeing the invisible and hearing the unheard. This perception ability is not innate, but built with education, training and professional practice. It is a part of profession of women workers and social workers. This means to be challenge by reality and, in turn, challenge it in a double dialectic game. It denotes denaturing and deconstruction of reality, find the meaning, discover and interpret the rules of the game of power. It signifies reading between lines the hegemonic speeches, what is not being said.

Conclusions

Social intervention from the perspective of the Emancipatory Social Work denotes not only the criticism and the questioning of the order and the dominant speech, but mainly, to take a

clear commitment of transforming action of reality. This is about implementing specific actions that generate the conditions to the real and effective exercise of the rights. Namely, to carry out praxis for things could be different in everyday life of social subjects through the construction of identities, the redefinition of living worlds, building more democratic and less unequal social ties, the construction of citizenship and, in this way, materialize the right to have rights.

In this daily transformation of the reality, greater social changes are being developed. In these social micro-spaces great projects, political leaderships, social movements, ideologies and social representation are being created. All around these social micro-spaces circulate the power and the knowledge and the grid of social meanings are being built. It is in these social micro-spaces where the social workers can, really and effectively, carry out a transformative praxis that creates the conditions for social emancipation.

In conclusion, we endorse Concepcion Nieves Ayús' words: "*for millions of people in the world: humblest workers, marginalized, discriminated, deprived and oppressed people and progressive forces that struggle for a fairer and better world; the human emancipation is an inspiration that keep it alive*" (Ayús, C. N., 2005). It is a legitimate inspiration that comes from oppression and domination and whose main challenge is overcoming of the capitalist mode of production, patriarchy and neocolonialism. It is not just an aspiration, but a deep demand for social justice and recognition of human beings as social subjects capable of deciding their own destiny and carry out projects of life.

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ⁱ Doctor in Social Science and Master in Social Work at the National University of Entre Rios, Argentina. Bachelor of Social Work at the National University of Misiones, Argentina. President of Latin America and Caribbean Region of the International Federation of Social Workers. President of the Argentine Federation of Professional Association of Social Services. Research professor of the National University of Misiones. Her areas of interest are Social Work, social emancipation, social violence, gender issues in politics and political parties, professional organizations and the construction of collective memories.
Email: silvanamartinezts@gmail.com

ⁱⁱ Doctor in Economics at the University of Buenos Aires. Doctor in Social Work at the National University of La Plata. Master in Social Work at the National University of Entre Rios, Argentina. Bachelor of Business Administration at the National University of Misiones, Argentina. Director of the Social and Human Studies (CONICET-UNaM). Category 1 Research Professor at the National University of Misiones. His areas of interest are social order, financial governmentally, cultural domination, social inequalities, social violence, public politics, social work, living worlds.

Email: juanaguero@arnet.com.ar

