



Neoliberalism and State Counter-Reform in Brazil: impacts on Social Service intervention

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SUMMARY

This article aims to analyze the harmful "legacy" left by neoliberalism in the 1990s for social policies in Brazil and its impact on the daily intervention of Brazilian Social Work, considering the strategies engendered by capital in the process of revitalizing accumulation, forged in the context of economic crises and state counter-reforms. The methodology adopted in preparing this text was essentially based on bibliographical research on the topic, focusing on classic authors considered fundamental to this discussion. Regarding the preliminary results, the research suggests that, in recent years, under the aegis of neoliberal actions, Social Work has faced profound repercussions in its professional practice, resulting from the suppression of working-class rights and the weakening of social policies, orchestrated by the

capital, consequently demanding the defense and protection of the precepts covered by the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the principles defended by the Ethical-Political Project of Social Service, which guide the profession.

Keywords: Social Policies; Neoliberalism; Counter-reforms; Social Service.

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the harmful "legacy" left by neoliberalism in the 1990s for social policies in Brazil and its impact on the daily interventions of Brazilian Social Work, considering the strategies engendered by capital in the process of revitalizing accumulation, forged in the context of economic crises and state counter-reforms. The methodology adopted in preparing this text was essentially based on bibliographic research on the topic, focusing on classical authors considered fundamental to this discussion. Regarding the preliminary results, the research suggests that, in recent years, under the aegis of neoliberal actions, Social Work has faced profound repercussions in its professional practice, resulting from the suppression of working-class rights and the weakening of social policies, orchestrated by capital. Consequently, it requires the defense and protection of the precepts encompassed by the 1988 Federal Constitution and the principles advocated by the Ethical-Political Project of Social Work, which guide the profession.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a certain consensus in the literature of Brazilian Social Service, especially among its main exponents – Marilda Villela Iamamoto (1986), José Paulo Netto (1989), Maria Carmelita Yazbek (2009), among other references – that the profession, institutionalized and of an interventionist nature, falls within the scope of the social and technical division of labor, in view of its primary objective, which is: to intervene in the various expressions of the so-called “social question”.¹

The expressions of the “social question” – whose foundations lie in economics and politics – have been

¹ The concept of a social issue is not univocal. On the contrary, it carries within itself an undeniable polysemy. However, a definition a classic, pertinent and quite lucid article on the subject – in addition to being widely used in Brazilian and Latin American Social Services – can be found in the work *Social Relations and Social Service in Brazil* by Iamamoto & Carvalho, published in 1982.



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often hidden by the immediacy of everyday reality. Consequently,

professional interventions are also inexorably conditioned by structural components of everyday life.

It is also worth mentioning that the relationship between Social Services and the refractions of the “social question” that, apparently, it would be direct and instantaneous, it turns out, in fact, to be mediated by social policies, framework that gives the profession a very specific and defined configuration and contours.

Understanding the expressions of the “social question” involves considering the intensification of contradictions existing between capital and labor. The State must intervene in their manifestations, continuously and systematically, through social policies. It is important to highlight, however, that such intervention It is always embodied in a fragmented, punctual and particularized way in “social problems”.

In this sense, this article aims to analyze the impacts of neoliberalism – implemented in Brazil in the 1990s – in the configuration of social policies and their repercussions on everyday life professional of social workers. For this purpose, the text's argumentation was structured in three axes of analysis.

The first presents some reflections on the deep gap between social rights and social policies – both considered when the 1988 Federal Constitution was drafted – and the trajectory of the 1990s, which inaugurated a period of counter-reforms, making the implementation of constitutional principles.

In the second axis, in turn, neoliberalism and the counter-reform of the Brazilian State are addressed, factors directly responsible for the current process of scrapping public social policies, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. And finally, the third axis analyzes the repercussions of the aforementioned scrapping in the daily activities of Brazilian Social Services.

1. ADVANCES AND SETBACKS IN SOCIAL POLICY CONFIGURES

According to Pereira (2000), the 1980s were marked by a transition from the military regime considered inertial, quite lethargic, dependent on old styles of doing politics and inhibiting true democracy. For the author (*idem*, p. 152), “in other words, with Sarney, changes of government, not of regime.”

Despite many economists calling it the “lost decade”, in the face of numerous crises economic, marked by unprecedented hyperinflation and deep stagnation of growth, the 1980s were also notable for significant political and social advances that gave – due to the struggle and effervescence of social movements – the motto of redemocratization.

Consequently, the great mobilization of the subaltern classes and the emergence of social policies on the agenda of institutional reforms – which culminated in the establishment of the Constituent Assembly in 1987 and



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with the subsequent Federal Constitution in 1988, called "Citizen Constitution" – enhanced

some changes in the understanding of social rights as a duty of the State.

Such changes, however, would not have been sufficient to alter the profile of the social protection pattern Brazilian, who did not break with a welfare state or with the compensatory treatment, fragmented and focused poverty.

It should be noted, however, that the 1988 Federal Constitution laid the foundations for a significant change in the State's social intervention, expanding the scope of social rights and the field of protection social under state responsibility, with fundamental impacts regarding the design of policies and the definition of beneficiaries and benefits (CASTRO; CARDOSO JR., 2005).

In this context, the expansion of social policies, recognized as the object of legal guarantees of protection and subject to state regulation, embodied a significant expansion of public responsibility of the Brazilian State in the face of various social situations, the confrontation of which occurred, partially or entirely, in the private space (CARDOSO JR.; JACCOUD, 2005):

State intervention, regulated by complementary laws that standardized the determinations constitutional, began to refer to a broader area of social life, both with objectives of equalize access to opportunities, such as facing conditions of deprivation of rights, risks social and poverty (CARDOSO JR.; JACCOUD, idem, p. 182).

Therefore, the Constitution expanded and consolidated some social rights, such as: a) the concept expanded social protection system called Social Security – comprising a set integrated initiatives of public authorities and society, aimed at ensuring the rights relating to health, social security and social assistance; b) the irreducibility of the value of benefits and democratic and decentralized nature of administrative management, with community participation, especially workers, business owners and retirees; c) the guarantee of salary adjustments benefits for the minimum wage, among others (BRAZIL, 1988).

However, the events that unfolded in the 1990s clashed with the ideas advocated in the 1988 Constitution, creating a situation of counter-reforms², even before the implementation of constitutional principles and a conservative restructuring that made its tendencies unviable progressives (TEIXEIRA, 2007).

In this sense, the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso put into practice, in Brazil, the macroeconomic project led by international financial agencies, promoting "reforms"³

² For Sara Granemann (2004), the counter-reform can be understood as a set of regressive changes to labor rights, altering certain legal frameworks already achieved through class struggle. Eliane Behring (2008), in turn, points out that the State's counter-reform consists of a set of changes, adjustments, and directions that have not been structured positively from the standpoint of substantial improvements in society's quality and way of life. Quite the contrary, we observe a process of deepening the difficulties and setbacks that have historically plagued the working class. In fact, it is "[...] a conservative and regressive counter-reform, different from what is postulated by those who designed it within the walls of technocratic offices and inspired by the guidelines of multilateral agencies" (BEHRING, idem, p. 171).

³ In the 1980s, reforms were championed by the left and progressive camps, such as Agrarian and Urban Reform, which were prominent on the agenda of social movements. From the 1990s onwards, neoliberalism began to take over in Brazil.



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constitutional, guided by neoliberal ideology and which represented a profound attack on social rights established by the Federal Constitution of 1988.

In this context, given the resurgence of expressions of the “social question”, social workers are then called upon to operationalize social policies. Initially, they were considered their executing agents and, later, they also began to act in the preparation and management of policies.

For Marilda Iamamoto (2009, p. 3) “it is this moving historical ground that gives new contours to professional market”, modifying occupational spaces, which require unprecedented requests and different demands on social workers, as well as new skills, competencies and responsibilities.

Such a situation also requires intellectual qualification, technical, theoretical-methodological competence and ethical-political, which contribute to the professional intervention of social workers, and which are capable “of driving the strengthening of the counter-hegemonic struggle committed to the universe of work” (IAMAMOTO, idem, p. 3).

As a consequence, the defense of the Ethical-Political Project of the profession means, for the assistants social, confront neoliberal policies and their practices that privilege capital and enhance system of commodification of social policies, such as education, health, social security and assistance social.

2. NEOLIBERALISM AND THE COUNTER-REFORM OF THE STATE

For Marilda Iamamoto (2009), in times of globalization or “financialization”⁴ of capital, the neoliberal radicalization reaffirms the market as the highest regulatory body of social relations and primacy of the producing individual, driving competition and individualism, as well as disarticulating forms of struggle and collective negotiation.

In fact, under the hegemony of finance and in the incessant search for the production of super profits, the strategies engendered by capital have radically impacted the world of work and rights. The measures to overcome the numerous crises of capitalism are based on the deepening of exploitation and expropriation of direct producers, with the expansion of labor extraction surplus and the expansion of the monopoly of territorial property, simultaneously compromising natural resources necessary for the preservation of life and the social and human rights of the majority (IAMAMOTO, 2001).

This therefore encourages intense privatization and commodification of the satisfaction of needs.

banner of reforms: pension reform, public administration, labor, tax reform, among others, while the working class, on the defensive, only fought to try to maintain rights that were guaranteed in the Constitution, since the few rights that were enshrined in it began to be, successively and insatiably, attacked by the liberal reformist impetus.

⁴ Further information can be found in François Chesnais, (1996).



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social, favoring the production and circulation of capitalist goods and their realization.

According to Perry Anderson (1995), neoliberalism, as an economic-philosophical doctrine, was born after the Second World War and its main concepts are condensed in the book “The Road to Serfdom”, by Friedrich Hayek, published in 1944.

In Brazil, the implementation of neoliberal measures began in the 1990s, during the very short Fernando Collor de Mello government being exponentially accelerated by Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC). Such measures meant the squandering of public assets, worsening of the country's social vulnerability, almost paltry residual growth rates, high unemployment and a significant increase in informality.

By minimizing state intervention in the social area, neoliberalism uses civil society and the market to face the refractions of the “social question”. The State disclaims responsibility for responsibility for providing social services – especially in the areas of health, education and social security –, transferring it, through tax incentives and other subsidy mechanisms, to companies private and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

In this sense, following international trends, the “reform” of the Brazilian State has been conducted under the baton of fiscal adjustment, through the privatization of public companies and the fraying of the social safety net. The alleged priorities lie in the dynamization of private initiative, controlling inflation and obtaining primary surpluses to pay interest on public debt.

According to Marco Aurélio Nogueira (1998), the “reform” of the State was addressed in the Collor government of empty and unrealistic way. In the FHC government, however, under the intellectual influence of Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, at the time, Minister of Federal Administration and State Reform (MARE), such “reform” gained momentum, essentially, as a result of the implementation of the Master Plan of Reform of the State Apparatus (PDRAE).

The Master Plan, especially, for encouraging the depreciation of the public sector with the aim of reducing the role of the State, represented one of the aspects of this attack. This perverse process intensified the resurgence of expressions of the “social question”. Therefore, when analyzing the Master Plan, Elaine Rossetti Behring (2008) states that this is not just an administrative reform, but true strategy to dismantle the Social State project outlined in the Constitution Federal of 1988.

In this vein, the plan reflected the real tendencies of the FHC government, that is, to privatize the economy national (Vale do Rio Doce, Teles, highway concessions, among others), carry out a “reform” of the State, focused on public servants, restricting pension rights, trying to ease the crisis fiscal of the State and generate internal savings to leverage economic growth (BEHRING, idem).

It is also important to highlight the particular expressions of the Master Plan: flexibility of relations of



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work, privatizations, release of foreign capital flows, weakening of social security

and loss of social rights. As a consequence, from the 1990s onwards, reformist proposals

undermined the possibilities, albeit limited, of the full application of social rights provided for in Magna Carta.

According to Iamamoto (2004), social welfare tends to be transferred to the private sphere of individuals and families, who depend on work and family income to acquire goods and commercial services, leaving the State, preferably, the responsibility for alleviating poverty extreme.

In this scenario, unemployment grows, fueling the expansion of the surplus population, alongside the deregulation and informalization of labor relations, with repercussions on wage struggles and autonomous organization of workers. Social policies gain prominence

aimed at preserving the vital minimums of segments of the growing surplus population, launched to pauperism; and to its political control, preserving the right to survival of immense social contingents and feeding the class consensus necessary for the hegemonic struggle (IAMAMOTO, idem).

Still according to Iamamoto (2001), in this context, the “social question” and its resulting threats take on an essentially political character, the measures to confront which express projects for society. The exponential expansion of class inequalities – dense of gender, ethnic, generational and unequal territorial distribution disparities – radicalizes the “issue social”, in its multiple collective expressions and inscribed in the lives of subjects, loaded with tensions between consent and rebellion, which are certainly at the base of the tendency to expand job market for the Social Work profession.

It is known that the social issue is inseparable from the reconfiguration of political and ideological strategies of legitimization of class power – accompanied by the depoliticization of social needs and struggles –, to which public social policies are not immune. Class consensus has been fueled by the media, by business initiatives, within the framework of productive restructuring and responsibility social, through the broad managerial restructuring of the Brazilian State, condensed in the counter-reform of State and corresponding social policies.

Such policies are organized through the sieve of privatization, targeting and decentralization, field where the work of social workers is predominantly carried out. Thus, a radical reorientation of public spending in favor of big financial capital and to the detriment of political economy of labor.

In this sense, David Harvey (2011) points out that the signs of deterioration in relations are evident work, consumption habits and state practices, as a result of the implementation of this ideology capitalist, according to which production for profit is the basic organizing principle of life



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in society.

In effect, the resurgence of expressions of the social issue – resulting from the consolidation of the neoliberalism and the hegemony of financial capital in the 1990s –, deeply marks the scene contemporary Brazilian.

In the health area, for example, the right guaranteed in theory by the 1988 Constitution, which already faced several obstacles to universalization, it became even more fragile with the expansion of services offered through Social Organizations (OSs), replacing the service provided directly by the Public Authorities.

Furthermore, the counter-reform in the health area was articulated to interrupt the process of implementing the Unified Health System (SUS), through the adoption of measures that – in affront the Federal Constitution and the Organic Health Law of 1990 – made services precarious and privatized public, reinforcing the commodification of health.

Furthermore, given the restructuring of labor management, there was an increase in the exploitation of health workers, including social workers, who were recruited only to “putting out fires” in a system eminently aimed at responding to emergencies.

The same can be said in relation to the pension counter-reform, which represents a crusade of conservative sectors and international financial agencies with the primary objective of reduce public pensions and overvalue supplementary pensions. In fact, by weakening the social security and further segment the three strands of public policies that comprise it (health, social security and social assistance) the “reform”, once again, attacked the social pact.

In relation to education, the scenario is as devastating as the situation with social security, health and social assistance, since by transforming education into a commercial object, the student becomes a client consumer and the university as issuer of banal diplomas, the commodification of **higher education** it empties the emancipatory dimension of education and subtracts the universalist character of the institution university (PEREIRA, 2009). Therefore:

Health, social security and education began to be conceived as “services”, whose objectives were guided by in mercantile logic and have as their ultimate purpose the obtaining of profit. Thus, the figure of the citizen repositions itself as a “citizen-consumer” (if you have the income to consume health plans, social security and school fees) (PEREIRA, idem, p. 269).

The scrapping of the State and the handover of public resources to speculative private capital demonstrate that the social pact established around social solidarity, enshrined in the Constitution Federal of 1988, was never effectively fulfilled.

In this context of counter-reforms, suppression and undermining of social rights, in the name of a forced insertion into the international financial order, the action of movements is essential social, capable of proposing an alternative project of change compatible with the principles of justice



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social.

The repercussions of the State's counter-reform process on social policies are related directly with the fact that the consolidation of such policies takes place in a contradictory space, in which manifest divergent class interests. On the one hand, there is pressure from the State and the demands of the ruling classes; on the other, there are the pressing needs of the classes workers. This dichotomy makes public social policies an arena of permanent tensions and disputes, tributaries of the historical class struggle.

The changes observed in the current configurations of social policies have their roots in the processes above mentioned, historically dated and express both the dynamics of accumulation, under the prevalence of rentier interests, regarding the composition of political power and the correlation of forces within it, capturing the National States, with regressive results in the scope of the conquest and enjoyment of rights for the universe of workers (IAMAMOTO, 2017).

Furthermore, social policies also reflect the particular working conditions and relationships prevalent in Brazilian society in these times of profound change in the technical basis of production with information technology, biotechnology, robotics and other technological and organizational innovations, which enhance productivity and work intensification.

It is also worth highlighting that the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the contradictions of the system capitalist, exposing the wounds and sores of this mode of production that excludes, exterminates and crushes all people who are considered disposable to capitalism.

In that pandemic situation, public health measures to contain the new coronavirus pandemic coronavirus has expanded the ways of working through *home offices*, mobile apps and work modalities via video conferencing. Such elements, as Antunes (2009) points out, are resonances of the extension and deepening of flexibility measures, changes in labor ties, state counter-reforms, dismantling of social protection, but also of a need for the process of capital appreciation in its structural crisis.

According to Pedro Bocayuva (2020), the crisis caused by Covid-19 amplified threats, fears, passions and risks. Its long-lasting systemic effects are linked to a series of magnified morbid phenomena, as symptoms of an immense organic, social, economic crisis and politics, which varies from country to country. The decisive aspect of the neoliberal framework is accelerating, in the form the dynamics of continuous counter-reforms that pave the way for a crisis in democracy.

Consequently (and obviously), the definitive decline of mechanisms of power through hegemony, the ways of expanding the social state through consensus, typical of the geopolitical West and its peripheries on different continents. Domination remains opened by the logic of coercion and collective fear, fruits of financial, climatic and health tension (BOCAYUVA, idem).



3. THE DISMANTLING OF SOCIAL POLICIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON SOCIAL SERVICE IN CONTEMPORARY AGENCIES

In recent decades, one of the pillars of fiscal policy in Brazil has been the Unlinking of Revenues of the Union (DRU), an instrument created, with this name, in 2000, and which allows the use of resources, in principle intended for the social sector, for other purposes. The diverted amounts have been used primarily to obtain primary surpluses, with a view to payment to interest earners on public debt (SALVADOR, 2010).

This is an unprecedented setback in the achievements of the fragile Brazilian Social State, since in practice, primarily, to restore the rate of profit on capital, by lowering the labor costs and the suppression of working class rights.

As is known, the allocation of resources to social policies represented an effective mechanism for confronting the perverse tradition of the Brazilian fiscal budget, which, historically, served the interests of capitalist accumulation, to the detriment of meeting the needs of the class worker. In fact, the 1988 Constitution linked a significant portion of social spending to of the public budget (SALVADOR, idem).

At the Union level, there are several constitutional provisions establishing the budgetary link to social areas. However, according to Evilasio Salvador (ibid.), the allocation mechanisms specific resources ensure minimum spending on health and education policies also within the scope of states and municipalities.

The New Fiscal Regime implies, for example, a substantial reduction in social spending, in addition to reversal of the minimum wage increase policy. In healthcare, the freeze causes difficulties even greater for the financing of the SUS and, consequently, the deterioration of the quality of services provided. The same occurs in social assistance, a sector in which a drastic cut is expected benefits, and in education, an area in which the NRF, in practice, makes the linking of taxes a dead letter to the maintenance and development of education.

Based on data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD), it is observed that, due to the freeze determined by the NRF, total federal government spending will fall from 20% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016 to 14% in 2026, a level seen only in extremely poor countries. And, in Brazil, there is still the aggravating factor of a very regressive tax system, which systematically operates in favor of income concentration, which in the words of Ivanete Boschetti (2012) represents a true "antisocial tornado".

In fact, based on the false premise of a deficit in public accounts, capable of making the system unviable social security in a few years, the objective is to make access to retirement and



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social security benefits. These factors directly affected the Brazilian population, especially the poorest.

All of this reverberates in Social Services, not only directly, but through many mediations. The profession, like the entire working class, has been going through a long process of unprecedented structural precariousness in history, very different, even, from that precariousness of the 1970s, during the period of productive restructuring.

The analyses of Professor Ricardo Antunes (2009) have demonstrated that this new morphology of work has a direct impact on the guarantee of rights, precisely where the assistants are located social.

Therefore, the work of social workers is balanced between trying to implement social and political rights, in line with the defense of citizenship and the limitations imposed by capital. In this context, professional intervention demands theoretical-methodological maturity and ethical-political approach of Social Service, as well as greater technical qualification of its agents.

Final Considerations

Historically, social policies have been analyzed as state mediation in the confrontation between capital and labor, directly impacting the refractions of the “social question”. At a time specific to the development of capital – in the era of monopoly capitalism – and changes in functions of the State, social policy has reached its maturity, responding now to the interests of capital, now to the interests of the working classes, depending on the correlation of forces between both.

In this perverse game, financial and interest-bearing capital is only interested in the most different forms of appropriation of public funds, that is, of the generous amounts of surplus value – produced by the workforce – which sustain the interventions of the capitalist State.

Therefore, at the present stage of social life, loans and privatizations, bidding favors and all the numerous sorts of “services” provided to capital by its “executive committee of the bourgeoisie” (MARX, 2006), that is, the State. Thus, it is an important part of the appropriation of public funds, in their banking-financial form, policy actions “income transfer” to the most impoverished sections of the working class.

In this context, Social Services has faced numerous and profound impacts from the suppression of rights and weakening of social policies, orchestrated by capital, consequently requiring the protection of the principles of the category's Code of Ethics, such as: uncompromising defense of rights humans; refusal of arbitrariness and authoritarianism; expansion and consolidation of citizenship, with a view to guarantee of civil, social and political rights of the working classes; defense of the deepening of democracy and the position in favor of equity and social justice, which ensures universality of access to goods and services related to social programs and policies, as well as their management



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democratic (CFESS, 1993).

Such principles, which underpin professional practice, clearly indicate the need for a firm stance against the ongoing counter-reform of the State in Brazil. In this context, values such as sovereignty, citizenship, human dignity, social justice, democracy, political pluralism, among others – housed among the fundamental principles of the Constitution Federal Law of 1988 – assume paramount importance for professional practice. The profession, therefore, faces the challenge of resisting the neoliberal agenda and attacks on human rights. social and counter-reform of the State and, together with other collective subjects, entrench themselves, without prevarication, in the ranks of the struggles for a more just and supportive society substantially democratic.

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