

## From the Margins to the Center: Challenges to Social Work Presented by the Socio-Environmental Question

The articles presented here offer a broad repertoire of theoretical and practical debates about the relations between the capitalist mode of production, the environmental crisis and sustainability. Using Marxist theory as a reference, they analyze the ideological argument that this economic mode of production can be compatible with sustainability, and they unveil the concrete reality that operates in the production of value in a good for the accumulation of capital. More than providing elements to offer structure to the de-alienation of the foundations and dynamic of social reproduction, these articles represent living testimony to the destructiveness of capital, to the degree to which it always disproportionately affects the same social groups, those that, due to their socio-economic vulnerability, are also required to live routinely with situations of environmental risk, whether in their homes or work environments. The central objective of professional attention of Social Work, these social groups now constitute themselves based on new denominations that overlap those that are already known: once victims of “socio-economic inequality”, they are now also victims of “environmental injustice”. If this social position was once the direct result of the conditions of the accumulation of capital, it is now also the indirect result of these conditions, given that the mechanisms of environmental injustice are processed at the ecological bases of the material dependence of these social groups: they are mediated by a degraded and polluted environment.

The article *Desenho ideológico do BID: modelo de gestão no Promaben em Belém, Pará* [Ideological Design of the Inter-American Development Bank: Administrative Model in Promaben in Belém, Pará], based on an analysis of the Sanitation Program for the Estrada Nova watershed, discusses the administrative model of cities adopted for Latin America and the Caribbean by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). The author explains that in the current process of capital accumulation, cities perform an important role in

capitalist reproduction, and to attract investments, cities must be administered with great efficiency. It is in this context that multilateral agencies such as IADB enter the scene, promoting urban planning based predominantly on technical rationality. The author concludes by warning that, beyond the explicit intentionality of the IADB to guide the realization of housing projects for the working class, behind the politically correct discourse about fighting poverty and environmental problems, which affirm that it is necessary to remove people from places of environmental risk, actually hide the essential determination of this administrative model for Latin American cities: the creation, with support from the State, of physical infrastructure for capitalist investment, which will be consumed by those who have consumption power. Thus, unhealthy locations are substituted for pleasant, pretty and healthy ones, which also have higher value. Thus, the application of the capitalist ideological formula to separate the political and technical dimensions leads to a decrease in the rights of citizens. The result is the weakening of the working classes’ right to the city.

The article *Gestão de desastres e política de assistência social* [Disaster Management and Social Assistance Policy] reflects on the risk management system in the municipality of Blumenau, in the Itajaí Valley of Santa Catarina. Based on the premise that environmental risk is not randomly distributed among different social groups, but obeys the pattern of inequality that shapes society, it finds that the less favored populations, because of their income, schooling, color or gender, who live within areas of environmental risk, find themselves more exposed to these disasters, given that their social vulnerability is combined with exposure to environmental risks. Highlighting that the more vulnerable the population, the greater will be the consequences after a disaster, the author affirms that this reality has been felt particularly in Blumenau, where the occurrences date back to the last century and accompany the region’s development. The author finds that the lack of

integrated planning and participation in risk management resulted in a gap between the actions of the administrators, technicians and those affected. The social assistance policy, absorbed by the militarized and hierarchical intervention of the Army, Fire Department and Civil Defense, is not able to execute actions in keeping with the policy. For this reason, it concludes that the risk of disasters should be managed by a group of public institutions and not only by the Civil Defense department, so that those affected do not wind up being considered as homeless, displaced and abandoned, and in this condition, pass from citizens with rights to beings “dependent on the state” and its controlling and paternalistic practices. The issue goes beyond a lack of security and trust by the population in the emergency agencies, there is a lack of citizenship, and it is in this context that the author understands it is necessary to give a new scope to social assistance policy in the service of individuals in a situation of risk.

The article *A crítica marxista ao desenvolvimento (in)sustentável* [A Marxist Critique of (Un)Sustainable Development] analyzes the environmentalist trend of a conservative character that understands that it is possible to reverse the environmental crisis by adopting sustainable development as the organizational principle of development. The authors emphasize that, from this perspective, ideologically, no relationship is established between the environmental crisis and capitalism, and for this reason, this interpretation neutralizes the negative image of capital before the environmental degradation it provoked. This interpretation of sustainable development represents the perspective of a social pact that seeks to make economic growth compatible with human development and environmental quality, but which does not consider the dimension of classes and does not seek to overcome the hegemonic mode of production, by understanding that capitalism contains within itself the ability to achieve more human and ecological standards. The authors conclude by indicating that sustainability requires the construction of a new mode of production, which overcomes capitalism, and affirms that it is possible to resignify the concept of sustainable development, associating it to another mode of production, which is more ethical and aimed at overcoming human needs and which respects the metabolic symbiosis between humans and nature.

The article *A questão ambiental e a condição da pobreza* [The Environmental Question and the Condition of Poverty] presents an argument that reinforces the inseparability between the environmental and social questions, understanding that the environmental crisis is part of the crisis of capitalism itself, and is now manifest by global warming. For the author, the poor, who contribute less to climate

changes, are contradictorily its greatest victims, because they do not have the resources needed to protect themselves from its impacts. It locates the social and environmental questions at the root of a system that, in its form of production, by commodifying humans, earth and water, produces exclusion and degradation. To the degree that it privately appropriates goods produced by humans or nature, capital generates contradictions that reveal the unsustainability of this model. The author recognizes that an understanding and awareness of this issue are essential to establishing resistance, and thus inscribing in the political agenda a more favorable situation so that humans as well as nature can continue to live. Nevertheless, for the “crisis” to be transformed into an environmental “question”, the author clarifies that it is necessary to strengthen the critical voices.

The article *Estado Educador: uma nova pedagogia da hegemonia nas Reservas Extrativistas* [Educator State: a New Pedagogy of Hegemony in the Extractive Reserves] analyzes the role played by an international cooperation project in the implementation of Extractive Reserves. The authors highlight that the original idea of the rubber tappers, which was to achieve self-management, was substituted by the idea of co-management. Before their living areas were defined as Extractive Reserves, the instance of political representation of the rubber tappers was the union, at the local and regional levels, while the National Council of Rubber Tappers affirms itself as the interlocutor on a national level. Nevertheless, after the implementation of Projeto Resex, a new legal entity began to take a role: the Association of the Reserves. In turn, the unions began to fulfill a political function while the association was dedicated to improving production and sales, establishing a separation between the economic and political spheres that is so important to capitalism. In fact, the association soon came to perform an important role in the supposed organization of the residents and in the interlocution with the agencies that are related to Resex. Despite its declared objective to help community organization, in practice, the weakening of the union debilitated its previous ability to mobilize the population. The “new unionism” of the 1970s and 1980s, which contributed to the formation of the Rubber Tappers Movement, was counter to a “unionism of results” with ties to the State that has now come to define with which interlocutors it will dialog. The Associations of the Reserves, instead of taking a critical position, were created to encourage collaboration, and thus no longer seeks the transformation of existing relations, but their acceptance. Finally, the authors indicate that the absence of policies does not mean an “absence of the State,” to the contrary, it signifies a form of action intentionally aimed at obtaining consensus in favor of neoliberal hegemony. Contrary

to what is affirmed, in the 1990s, the State was not absent, it was present, but in a manner different from that idealized by the rubber tappers.

The article *Vulnerabilidades sociais e juvenis nos mananciais da zona sul da cidade de São Paulo* [Social Vulnerabilities and Youth in the Watersheds in the Southern Zone of São Paulo] is a product of the study “Reflexos da Vulnerabilidade Socioambiental nas Manifestações Musicais dos Jovens Paulistanos da Periferia,” [Reflexes of the Socio-Environmental Vulnerability in the Musical Manifestations of Youth in the São Paulo Periphery] which analyzed the periphery of the Southern Zone of the city of São Paulo, a region that was formed through unorganized occupations of watershed regions, where social vulnerability is aggravated by exposure to environmental risk, given the increased density of the favelas, shaping a process of environmental and urban exclusion. The process of uncontrolled urbanization in the periphery, by means of illegal and predatory occupation of land, causes a large portion of the areas of risk and those zoned for environmental protection, such as the margins of waterways, to remain threatened by precarious low income residences, because of the absolute lack of housing alternatives. The author affirms that the recent pattern of population expansion has placed growing pressure on the areas for nature preservation and watershed protection, mainly in the districts of Parelheiros, Marsilac and Grajaú, in the periphery of the Southern Zone. Finally, the author confirms that environmental risk is not distributed randomly among social groups, but follows the patterns of social inequality and segregation that mark the structure of cities. It is exactly the less favored populations who reside in or use the territories of greater environmental vulnerability, overlapping their social vulnerability.

The essay *La solución técnica a los problemas ambientales* [The Technical Solution of Environmental Problems], argues that the environmental debate has been reduced to a technical question, considering technology as neutral and to be independent of social relations. The authors explain that, by considering nature as something external to humans, the issues development, inequality and poverty, for example, remain outside the environmental debate. A practical problem thus arises, because the “environmental question” does not fit within social policies or is a forced fit, placing limits to certain policies, as is the case of the economic instruments that penalize contamination and degradation or award clean production. Based on this perspective, the fact is that the “environmental question” is always at the margin of economic and social policies. Since the means for transformation of nature by human beings occurs through technology, this perception reduces the entire environmental issue to technical questions

and hides the effect of social relations on nature. When attention is paid to the impact of anthropic activities on the environment, technical factors are emphasized, without questioning human activity itself, only its results. By reducing the environmental issue to technical questions, the environmental debate is limited to the selection of those that have less impact. Nevertheless, the authors recall, technologies are not neutral, and cannot be analyzed separately from the social relations that establish them. Therefore, to affirm the existence of physical limits to development is another way to consider the environmental issue as a technical issue, since it limits stimulus to the search for technologies suitable to this reality. That is, if the problem is technical, the solution should also be technical: clean technologies, renewable energy, geo-engineering. In other words, if the environmental problems are the result of the use of the wrong technologies, the use of other and correct technologies could resolve the environmental crisis. The authors clarify that by reducing the environmental issue to the technical dimension the hegemonic environmental thinking defines the rules of the game. They emphasize that capitalist social relations have an impact on the environment, and that the position adopted to confront the environmental issue attempts to resolve it in isolation. More importantly, they maintain that it is not possible for capitalism to resolve social inequality and the poverty that it generates.

The article *Uma reflexão teórica sobre as relações entre natureza e capitalismo* [A Theoretical Reflection about the Relations Between Nature and Capitalism] offers a reflection on the appropriation of nature through the mechanism of capital accumulation. Nature has a subordinated position in capitalism, which is not by chance, the authors explain. They propose, as an interpretation, a process engendered by the three elements *expropriation-appropriation-commodification* that are at the origin of the environmental crisis. First, *expropriation* establishes the central axis of this production system, without which it would be impossible to create a minimal base of capitalist exploitation. For this reason, we cannot separate the issue of class from the environmental issue, given that it is a process in which environmental degradation has been accompanied by constant aggressions against the living conditions of workers. While *expropriation* separates workers from the conditions of production, *appropriation* is the transformation of what was removed from the non-mercantile sphere to become capitalist property, through the establishment of private property. The final link of the chain of capitalist incorporation of nature is *commodification*, in which salaried work becomes the agent that transforms nature into a qualitatively different object, which carries a social

utility, and above all, exchange value. That is, it is transformed into a commodity. Nevertheless, this process goes even farther, because nature does not have value only for what it can offer to serve human needs, but also by the return it can offer the financial market. After all, the authors affirm, the nature of capitalism is to adapt nature to the objectives of the production of profit. For this reason, the authors affirm it is not viable to imagine the end of the environmental crisis without overcoming the capitalist mode of production. The ecological struggle, they warn, must be based on an anti-capitalist line of interpretation and social transformation. Only with the struggle of the exploited classes and with the establishment of production relations that are free from exploitation, can the way that society dominates nature be radically changed: this would involve the transformation of the structures and social relations of capitalism into another type of social organization that could give rise to a new relationship with nature, according to the authors.

The article “*Consumo consciente*”: *o ecocapitalismo como ideologia* [“Conscious Consumption”: Ecocapitalism as Ideology] affirms that under the prevalence of the market and the productive logic of capital, it is not possible to establish conscious consumption as an application of the principle of sustainability. The authors present the social and economic determinations of consumerism, revealing the ideological character of this formulation, which is inscribed as a cultural phenomenon that should be confronted mainly through changes in attitudes. The alternative present in the environmental debate points to technical and behavioral initiatives: it is a discourse that announces the ability of the system to make economic development compatible with environmental preservation, as long as individuals adopt positions that respect the environment. Under the mantle of socio-environmental responsibility, the media regularly emphasize successful “sustainable” business initiatives, in an ideological offensive that seeks to convince people that it is possible to overcome environmental degradation under capitalism. As a result of this, “conscious consumption” is defended as an alternative to the growing wastefulness of society. It involves converting consumption into a “conscious act”, above all in terms of its impacts on society and nature, or that is, being concerned with something beyond meeting individual needs. Nevertheless, even given the appeal of environmental and consumer organizations, consumption standards continue to grow, because they depend on the dynamic of the expansion of production. Conscious consumption has proved to be ineffective as a strategy to confront the waste of natural resources, because it relates the problem to the individual. Its purpose is to promote a change of behavior, leaving it up to

citizens to “do their part”, or that is, to assume the burden of a process in which, far from being protagonists, they represent the weakest link on the chain, given that conscious consumption and the end of predatory practices is presented as being the responsibility of all of society, indistinctly. Consumers, lacking the minimum information needed to guide their decisions in the act of purchase, when they are not completely deceived, have the power that is attributed to them reduced or completely eliminated. The proposal is thus for a solution based on the behavior of individuals and has a moral appeal, relating the issue to norms of conduct, without addressing the fundamental issues.

The article *Gestão pública da questão ambiental e tessituras das cidades brasileiras: notas preliminares* [Public Administration of the Environmental Issue and the Contexture of Brazilian Cities] reflects on the public administration of the environmental issue in Brazilian cities. The authors affirm that it is impossible for public administration of a corporate nature to effectively contribute to the reversal of the urban environmental crisis in Brazil, given that this form of administration is compelled to favor predatory exploitation of the environment in the context of the determinations of the capitalist mode of production. The authors maintain that the city is the essential condition for the production of space for capital and that this determination is mediated by politics, in which market relations and private class interests influence state action, requiring investments, protection and legal recognition. In the government of Brazilian cities, which today are simultaneously segregated, segmented, violent and polluted, modes of appropriation, control and use of space are confronted through disputes and negotiations, including those which propose the right to a policy for urbanization-and planning and the appropriation of citizenship. Given the laws of competition, government agents are pressured to take command of the decision making process, harmonizing conflicts, conducting negotiations, formulating and developing policies that are removed from the regulatory mark, established in the very area of the administration of the Brazilian environmental issue.

Through its professional experience, and why shouldn't we say militant experience, social worker is living testimony of the unsustainability of this productive model. The texts joined here affirm that Social Work has diagnosed that the lower social classes in the socio-political structure of Brazilian society today are facing a new shock wave that threatens the survival of many Brazilians: “socio-environmental vulnerability”, which conditions daily survival to a permanent struggle for access to food, housing, security, health and education. This indicates the perversity of the system that is established through



social and environmental injustice: they are two different moments, but are part of the same process of production of value, of the same economic model on which the social organization is based. That is, the same reality, which explicitly reveals that the reproduction of capital necessarily implies the simultaneous destruction of society and of nature.

Given this diagnosis about the causes of the environmental crisis on the horizon of the economic production models, social workers can clearly reveal the possible routes for truly confronting the problem. The texts in this Dossier express this programmatic agenda as a professional task to be undertaken by Social Work: it involves the revelation and de-alienation of the perversity of the model that leads to socio-environmental injustice, and involves criticisms of the contradictions of capitalism; it involves the concrete and effective proposal of another model, ecosocialism, which considers that justice must be the main attribute under consideration. The problem is that we are accustomed to seeing the transition towards ecosocialism as a natural, pre-determined socio-historic route, and this perspective is also reflected in the group of reflections presented in this Dossier. The certainty of the finding that unsustainability is an inherent attribute to this model, and that we are immersed in a radical and absolute crisis, shapes a perception that we are not very far from this ideal of the realization of ecosocialism. But what if this is not the case? What if ecosocialism is only an oasis that at best serves as the critical conscious of capitalism? In this case, the task of the social worker is radically expanded, with the mission to amplify the voice of the victims of the socio-environmental and economic injustices, so that Brazilian society can reconsider what the social project for the country.

From the margins to the center: with the indispensable support of Social Work, the marginalization of people, land and residue generated in the capitalist industrial metabolism will have the conditions to become the center of concern. The theme of socio-environmental justice will also be the center of attention for social workers. After all, everything indicates that Social Work is one of the most professional categories with the most promising ability to address these issues, and has excellent conditions to assume a central role in the process of social and political emancipation for a social project, leaving the ethics of neutrality increasingly in the past. The promise is that the social forces committed to socio-environmental justice can find in social worker a powerful ally, with a dense theoretical command and armed by the institutionalities that are particular to its professional exercise.

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