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SUCCESS STORIES

Overview of the Portuguese Context - The History of Social Work in Portugal

The institutionalization of social work

Social work was institutionalized in Portugal in the 1930s and it is usually referred to as social service (*serviço social*) and/or social assistance (*assistência social*). The first academic degree to be granted in the field of social work as thus “Social Service” (1935 in Lisbon; 1937 in Coimbra; and 1956 in Porto), leading to the profession of assistant social worker. This position was legally regulated by particular legal assignments and requirements related to education and training in order to work with underprivileged populations. The Law Decree nº 30/135 de 14/12/1939 states that the goal of these schools was to produce social assistants that were responsible, “conscientious and actively cooperators of the National Revolution”.

As opposed to what happened in other countries, in Portugal the new social and health-related professions were not institutionalized within the framework of the constitution of a Welfare State, but rather in the corporate and charitable model of the Portuguese New State (*Estado Novo*), the authoritarian regime to which Portugal was subject to from 1933 until the revolution of 1974. The institutionalization of the Social Service is considered to have been a master beam in the consolidation of the dictatorship and of the new economic and social order, through the moral inculcation of the traditional roles of the family.

The social service model developed in Portugal, characterized by Christian and reformist guidelines, does not diverge essentially from that prevailing in the countries of advanced capitalism. It was only diminished by the limitations of the paternalist, undemocratic and authoritarian political regime of António Salazar. This contradiction between these characteristics of the *Estado Novo* and the creation of public services common in democratic societies, effectively slowed and even stopped the development of different forms of social protection. Such caused, for example, a stoppage in social work in the decades of 1950 and 1960.

Thus, Portugal never actually became an effective Welfare State, but rather a Welfare Society, as many of the social needs only became satisfied through the solidarity networks built upon kinship or neighbourly connections. Such was the case, for example, of the support of the “returnees” (the Portuguese citizens who returned from the colonies after the 1974 revolution). Also, like in other Southern European countries, family networks were essential to guarantee, for example, the access to a proper home.

Differentiating aspects of the social service in Portugal, as compared to other countries

The field of professional action of Social Work in Portugal, although legally broadened over the years, is restricted by the features of the country's institutional structure. This is a structure defined by family businesses with semi-proletarians and social solidarity organizations, where, once again, kinship and neighbourhood relationships are dominant. Examples include various People's House (Casas do Povo) or various Fisherman's Houses (Casas dos Pescadores); both support spaces for social protection.

On the other hand, in the academia, qualifications are deemed as weak, mostly due to the late institutionalization of social sciences in Portugal, and the fact that the social service curriculum had to pass through the filter of Christian humanism applied to the corporatist model of the Estado Novo. The idea that human nature is submissive to a divine authority is different from the idea of humanity advocated by the apologists of science and technology favouring Progress. This is where the beliefs underlying social service developed in Portugal have moved away radically from the social service curriculum of other countries.

Consequently, these academic qualifications in social service contribute to a moralizing and pathological conception of social problems, which translate into an individualized approach to the correction of deviations. The connotation of the very word "assistance" is converging with an individualized view of understanding social problems that is still very relevant and present in social working practices. The tendency moves towards the selection of limited and short-term treatments, focused on the satisfaction of material needs. The combination of this search for a solid theoretical foundation with a growing process of scientification, led social services to adopt Marxist and neo-Marxist ideologies, from the post-revolutionary period up to the 1990s. As a result, the relative enlargement of the ideological dimension rather than the methodological approach, stood out as an educational weakness. Such weakness caused in Social Service workers a feeling of inferiority, when compared to other more consolidated fields of social sciences.

In 1989, a bachelor's degree certification was finally awarded, followed by the creation of a career of Social Service Senior Technician in the Public Administration in 1991, and the certification of the master's degree in 1995. These were important steps for the legitimation and recognition of this discipline. By 2007, there were 21 academic graduations in social work, a number which has been more or less maintained to this day.

Today, the requalification of the Social Service is based on the break with the premises of the individual-reformist perspective and its moralistic tendencies. A major objective is to link it with the defence of the Human Rights and the promotion of social development. However, despite its exponential multiplication, formation in Social Work has depreciated the academic research. This research should offer fundamental skills, both for the professional practice and for the study of the profession.

The current Social Work in Portugal

In the wider domain of social intervention, trans-disciplinary theories with a strong organizational focus have of late gained greater visibility. These, however, are not, and should not, be restricted to that focus alone. On the contrary, they are oriented towards promoting social change, cohesion and sustainable development, at a systemic level. Even so, there is an essential distinction between such theories and the training areas corresponding to the professional activities relating to social work. First because these theories are autonomous, in a sense that they are not a

disciplinary area per se, not being directly related to the training of any professional group, and hence not directly related the academic and professional careers in existence. Second, because such theories entail a much broad meaning of interdisciplinary than that associated to the training in social work.

The transversal and trans-disciplinary nature of these new theories guiding social intervention have caused the creation of various programs of continuous formation or post graduate courses, in several formats. The terminology most used to the definition of such courses is that of “social entrepreneurship”. Nonetheless, there is a growing tendency for adopting other terms such as “social innovation”, more consensual among lower level training courses in social work and social sciences, less familiar, and even reticent to the notion of “entrepreneurship”. There is however still little research on the degree of acceptance and adoption of concepts of both social innovation and social entrepreneurship in higher education in the domains of social intervention. This literature and methodological gap that needs to be overcome, presents itself as an important point of departure in explaining the importance of such a project as SWAPOL, and in guiding its methodological steps.

Granted that the concepts of social innovation and social entrepreneurship are far from being new. Even so, their development and acceptance, particularly in countries such as Portugal, are relatively new. Furthermore, as many other more or less accepted concepts in social sciences, their boundaries are still undefined. Both are ambiguous concepts, and have been erected around the intersection of a range of different domains of analysis. This vision, in line with the new forms of organization of civil society, has to merge different theoretical and local perspectives and traditions. More and more, genealogical visions that explore the specificities of local cultures rather than relying exclusively on rather static theoretical frameworks are being explored in various forms of territorial and social planning. This is more akin to a concept of “social economy”.

Considering the relevance of social education, the path lies with the consolidation of the multidimensional and trans-disciplinary theories of social intervention, with special emphasis on the guiding lessons for the training and professional activity of social workers. All in all, we should rely on the plural paradigmatic disposition of social work in Portugal. It is still possible to consider that the “assistance” remains the tradition of the social work still in force in social policies today. This can be identified in the professional practice of social workers and in the relational dynamics between them and their publics. However, a broader range of practices can be pursued and defended. The emerging practices of social innovation should and can intersect with the assistance practices.

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