

Critique and resistance: what are the possible trenches?

Crítica y resistencias: ¿cuáles son las trincheras posibles?

Melisa Campana Alabarce¹

CONICET - Universidad Nacional de Rosario, Argentina

Received: 15/07/2020

Accepted: 16/09/2020

12

How to cite

Campana, M. (2021). Critique and resistance: what are the possible trenches?
Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social - Critical Proposals in Social Work 1(1), 12-25.
DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2021.61228

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the theoretical-epistemological, but also ethical-political, discussion of two key categories of critical social work: criticism and resistance. To do this, it analyses three sets of problems from which the three sections of the text are organized, namely: i) subject and subjectivation: the problem of autonomy-guardianship-responsibility; ii) the affections, the alliances: the problem of inventing 'the common'; and iii) de-colonizing pain and joy: the problem of the happiness imperative.

Keywords:
*critique; resistance;
social work;
neoliberalism.*

Resumen

El presente artículo pretende contribuir a la discusión teórico-epistemológica, pero también ético-política de dos categorías clave del Trabajo Social Crítico, como son las de crítica y resistencia. Para ello, analiza tres conjuntos de problemas a partir de los cuales se organizan los tres apartados del texto, a saber: i) sujeto y subjetivación: el problema de la serie autonomía-tutela-responsabilidad; ii) los afectos, las alianzas: el problema de inventar lo común; y iii) des-colonizar el dolor y la alegría: el problema del imperativo de felicidad.

Palabras clave:
*crítica; resistencia;
trabajo social;
neoliberalismo*

Introduction

With pleasure, but knowing that it is an enormous responsibility, I accept the generous invitation to write in the first issue of what will be not only a social work journal, but also an immense commitment to cooperative, respectful and constructive debate. This is crucial especially in these agonizing times or maybe because of them. Just a few months ago we were witnessing an unprecedented popular revolt in Chile, with seismic aftershocks in Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru. At the same time, we received the election results in Uruguay, turning the knob towards neoliberal conservatism, joining the consortium that Brazil undoubtedly leads in our region. And suddenly we experienced 'a stop'. A virus sent us back home and forced us to confine ourselves, forced us to retreat.

The question of criticism and resistance has become urgent. It is urgent because "the day after" (and the first resistance is to refuse to call it a "new normal") the streets are once again the scene of popular struggles and those founding inequalities remain visible.

The question of critique and resistance raises other questions: What are our trenches going to be made of? What politics, what ethics? What societal project will they help to cement? What utopia will guide them? The brand of the premise that Susana Murillo gave us gives me a clue: de-colonizing pain is an emergency. This is my aim here.

In this article I will construct three sets of problems to think about the possibilities of 'the collective' today –because, for me, collective and resistance is the same thing. The sections of this article will be organized on three sets of problems: I. Subject and subjectivation: the problem of autonomy-guardianship-responsibility; II. The affections, the alliances: the problem of inventing the common; III. De-colonizing pain and joy: the problem of the happiness imperative.

Subject and subjectivation: the problem of autonomy-guardianship-responsibility

If we think, from a poststructuralist perspective, that the subject is not an *a priori*, that is, it is not the explanatory principle of the social, we can concentrate on the effects of subjectivation. This leads us to focus on the mechanisms of power, that is, on the subjective effects that politics brings with it. It is important to note that it is not the same as talking about “subjective effects or impacts”: what we want to look at is what type of subject is assumed by the political framework -I emphasize political framework-, and what subject does it produce (a responsible father, an empowered woman, an integrated immigrant, an employable youth, a neglectful mother, and so on). In short, as Matus (2018) says, Social Work does not work with individuals as such; no one comes to a service as a “natural person”; rather, it emerges within a specific analytical category: battered woman, street child, unemployed youth; and if that social categorization is carried out in stigmatizing terms, those subjects will carry that mark persistently. For this reason, among other things, it is central to understand language as a battlefield. A clear example is to observe the epistemological, ideological and political difference between “crime of passion” and “femicide”.

14

So, the problem of recognition is not merely how to include more people within the existing norms, because in addition we have already discovered the colonial dimension that all promise of inclusion holds, but to consider how existing norms assign recognition in a differential way... and how to alter them (Butler, 2009). This is where a historical dilemma is tied to our discipline: the tension between autonomy and guardianship, which is being updated today in the field of social policy in terms of responsibility. This refers to what Matus (2018) calls the paradox of responsibility: the imperative nature of the assigned responsibility grows to the extent that individuals have to take responsibility for circumstances for which they are not *de facto* responsible. This paradox is intensified by the fact that originally the modern conception of self-responsibility had emancipatory characteristics. There is a permanent capture and swallowing of our words by the neoliberal matrix; our words, which are also our flags. In that sense, Wendy Brown (2015) will say that responsabilisation promoted by social policy is the assignment of moral weight to the end of the chain. Social policy assigns you the task of discerning or taking the right self-investment and entrepreneurship strategies to thrive and survive. It is not necessary to notice, for the rest, the dose of perversity that these positions contain. But, fortunately, normative production of the subject is a repeatable process: the norm repeats itself, constantly “breaking” with the contexts that are defined as “production conditions.” For this reason, “the idea of repeatability is crucial to understand why



norms do not act deterministically. And it may also be the reason why performativity is, finally, a more useful term than construction” (Butler, 2009, p.231).

Having said all this, I believe that we can invent effective types of interrogation to challenge political frameworks: What new norms are possible and how are they produced? What could we do to produce a more equal set of conditions of recognition? What could we do to change the very terms of recognition in order to produce more radically democratic results? (Butler, 2009). But, of course, that is not going to happen on its own, one at a time. It is not an act of will or conversion. It is an act of resistance. And resisting is produced with others. As Butler beautifully puts it, it is about an “embodied and pluralistic performativity (...) an embodied claim for a more livable life” (2017, p.31).

Affections, alliances: the problem of inventing the common

Butler's question in *Marcos de Guerra* (2009) really challenges the heart of any political project that we invent and build. The question is central and inescapable: "What is the relationship between affect and a judgment and practice of an ethical and political nature?" (2009, p.29).

Just as a livable life depends on very concrete living conditions, “affection depends on social supports to feel: we come to feel only in relation to a perceivable loss, which depends on social perception structures; and we can only feel affection, and claim it as our own, provided that we are already enrolled in a circuit of social affection” (Butler, 2009, p.80). These social supports are, then, material conditions of life and they are also the ties with others, the alliances.

Butler's hypothesis is that joint action

can be a way of questioning through the body imperfect and powerful aspects of current politics (...) it is this specific body and these other bodies that demand employment, housing, health care and food, as well as a perception of the future that it is not a debt impossible to repay; it is this concrete body, or these bodies, or bodies like this body or those other bodies, which live in conditions in which life is threatened, infrastructures are annihilated and precariousness increases (Butler, 2017, p.17) .

So, when bodies congregate in any public space, “they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, a right that affirms and installs the body in the middle of the political field and that demands economic, social and political conditions for the

body that make the most dignified, more livable life” (Butler, 2017, p.18). If not, let us think of the bodies of immigrants drowned, or almost, in the Mediterranean; the bodies of boys and girls caged along the Yankee borders; also the bodies of millions of women on the streets of Our America every March 8, every June 3, every green tide (although international organizations speak of us as a “vulnerable group”); black citizens who continue to be executed by the police in the United States. The power of this materiality is immense.

One of the ways that Butler points out (also Spivak, also Ahmed, also many feminist thinkers) is to capitalize on one of the most relevant effects of collective actions, namely: to verify that it is a shared situation, and that these bodies are together opposing the individualizing morality that makes economic autonomy the norm precisely in conditions in which self-sufficiency is increasingly unviable (Butler, 2017). Therefore, a key and perfectly acceptable challenge from our professional intervention is to pierce and dismantle that individualizing and exasperating form of responsibility, replacing it with a concept of solidarity that would ratify our mutual dependence and that opens the way to a form of improvisation (Butler, 2017).

If we have the power to work with those populations considered disposable, who collect stigmas, attributes and nomenclatures of the quasi-subject; if every day we attend dozens of "cases"; if we share our institutional spaces with many others who also want to subvert the rules of this violent and unequal order; if we have filled libraries showing the flaws or insufficiencies or even the perversities of social policies (especially those that we consider "good" or "progressive") ... well, if we have our hands in such mud consistently, why not think, as a collective, what alliances can be established between populations, groups, subjects, who are considered disposable subjects? It is the question of Isabell Lorey (2016), on how to organize the unorganisable. Precariousness is a condition, it does, but it is not and cannot be an identity. However, it can operate “as a field where alliances can be established between certain groups that, apart from being considered disposable, do not have much else in common” (Butler, 2017, p.34). We have a problem if we continue to think of social problems in sectoral or autonomous terms: indigenous peoples, women, the unemployed, teachers, young people ... it is there that precariousness can operate as a transversal condition of all those to whom access is denied or withheld to the category of subjects. And it is not that they are outside or on the fringes of our societies, but that they are in its very heart, because they are its residue. So, precariousness cannot be an identity, a new label, a brand, “we, the precarious ones”; but it can be an anchor for broader and more effective political alliances, the substrate for "an egalitarian social and political order in which an interdependence between people can occur that is acceptable for life" (Butler, 2017, p.74).

I said that a first acceptable challenge is the fight against individualization and, therefore, in favour of collectivization. A fruitful clue in this regard has been offered by Dardot and Laval in the book entitled *Común* (2015). They go straight to the point: private property. And the first warning they give is that, like language, law is a strategic and vital battlefield:

the worst thing that can be done is to leave the law in the hands of those whose profession is to dictate it. The system of norms is always a terrain where conflicts are at stake and the law is as such a field of struggle (2015, p.25).

The common term, the authors say, designates the emergence of a new way of opposing capitalism, even of considering its overcoming. Common refers to a regime of practices, struggles, institutions and research that point to a non-capitalist future (Dardot and Laval, 2015, p.21 and 22). You cannot think of the common without demolishing private property. The institution of individual private property, which grants dominion and exclusive enjoyment of the thing, is the decisive piece of the building: "This institution, whose principle consists of removing things from common use, denies cooperation, without which nothing would be possible, and ignores the accumulated common treasure in which all new wealth finds its conditions of possibility" (Dardot and Laval, 2015, p.23). Therefore, and here lies the most interesting aspect of the proposal, the dilemma is not between common property or private property, but between those things that cannot be appropriated and both private and public property (Dardot and Laval, 2017). In other words, the common, which is found in the principle of what makes us live together, refers to those things that cannot be appropriated. Hence the thesis that the authors maintain: if the common must be instituted, "it can only be so as inappropriate, in no case as an object of a property right, whether it be collective or state" (Dardot and Laval, 2015, p. 264); "The common that should be instituted can only be so as unavailable and inappropriate, not as a possible object of a property right" (Dardot and Laval, 2015, p.271).

If we at least give ourselves the possibility of examining the common as an effective political principle of transformation of our institutions, perhaps we can begin to build collective projects of conversion-transformation-subversion of public services into institutions of the common. Perhaps from here we could remove the corset of measuring the more or less high levels of de-commodification of services and give, consequently, another density, another thickness, to the dispute for the public.



I spoke about the common and the collective, about how to think about collective projects in new democratic ways. You don't have to invent everything; many bodies have already been offered in this arena. So, as an example, as a legacy, as a Benjaminian flag to be retaken, I would like to very briefly recover the experience of the queer movement and the feminist movement.

As it is known, the term queer appeared in the United States towards the end of the 1980s, to designate all those sexual practices and identities that deviate from the sexual norm. The word queer, as insult, was reappropriated to make it the place of action and political claim; the abject nomination as a place of identification (as a performative inversion of injury, says Paul B. Preciado); the object of the injury becomes the subject of the enunciation and, therefore, a political agent.

The queer movement's claim is to redefine the democratic horizon; it is to react to the integrationist identity politics of the white Western homosexual world and also to react to the female subject as the sole agent of feminist politics. We could say that the queer question is: Who / what is or are the subjects of contemporary feminism? It is a critical position with respect to the naturalizing effects of all identity; therefore, as we say with respect to precariousness, the queer condition is not an identity, but a political position. Therein lies its potential.

As Paul B. Preciado argues in *La muerte de la Clínica* (2015), the neoliberal, contemporary pharmacopornographic verification apparatus is no longer scientific, but is commercial and mediatic. The verification apparatus of contemporary sexuality is the market and it is the media. And, therefore, we are in a configuration of the production of sexual subjectivity that has little to do with what Foucault described in the birth of the clinic. With these lenses, Preciado shows how HIV-AIDS is the first disease of the neoliberal condition. The activists will focus on the two devices for verifying the production of HIV / AIDS: the critique of the representation of the disease in the media and the drug industry and the way in which that industry is handling patents.

The initial question in this section, reformulated with the queer and feminist experience behind it, could be: What is the place, the possibility, the modalities, the alliances for an anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist, anti-drug-pornographic resistance? How do we link our struggles, how do we de-autonomize them, with what mortar, with what adhesive? Preciado (2015) will fight for the formation of a transverse rebellion and resistance movement, through alliances that are not resolved in identity logics, but in a set of strategies and synthetic affinities, which we will have to collectively invent. This supposes processes of collective assembling, processes of exchange of collective



knowledge, “putting the body” not to immolate oneself but to produce, with other bodies, something else. Without a political horizon that guides and brings together, we will only add frustrations and more bodies thrown to their death. Therefore, a necessary step is the one that Sara Ahmed invites us to take: the challenge of unveiling “(...) all the possible ways in which the emotional incorporation of the unequal occurs” (Cuello, 2019, p.18).

De-colonizing pain and joy: the problem of the happiness imperative

In one of his radio columns, analysing the children's film *Inside Out*, Juan Sklar concludes with his characteristic wit:

Sadness is the way humans have to ask others to come closer. It is the gesture that your animal makes to say that it cannot alone, that it needs to be accompanied. It is a request for help that you do not control. It is the way this species found to face defeat as a group. Sadness is not productive, nor is it successful, nor is it sensual. It is a feeling that cannot be expressed in Instagram stories. Being sad is a respite from your own desires, from your own expectations of success. It is a shared defeat. It is the truce of humans for themselves. A life without sadness is a violent life. If sadness does not express pain, anger, fear or disgust does. Shared defeat becomes a common enemy, a witch hunt, a rejection of the strange. A productive and social media system that forces its participants to always be happy, always independent, always powerful, is a condemnation of isolation. Eliminating sadness implies erasing the bridges of affective tissue. The revolution of joy is the revolution of loneliness (Sklar, 2019).

19

This obligation to be happy, to be joyful, this "turn towards happiness" is not accidental and is not unrelated to the neoliberal onslaught of recent decades, quite the opposite. As Nicolás Cuello points out, “the current reorganization of neoliberal politics supports its expressive languages, affective repertoires and organization policies of the public in discourses based on the spectacularization of trust, creativity, dialogue, will and sacrifice, in a subjectivity mediated by the business matrix of meritocratic verticality and the pacifying consensus” (Cuello, 2019, p.15). And it is that neoliberalism, as an ethos and as a form of emotional government, imposes its order on all aspects of our life ... for this very reason Dardot and Laval (2013) have characterized it as a “new reason for the world”, because it permeates all dimensions of our existence. In this context, happiness, "due to its aspirational nature, works invisibly as a guiding guide to the experience of what exists" (Cuello, 2019, p.16).



This device of happiness organizes and installs, according to Diego Sztulwark (2019), a psychic agenda that purifies the antagonism of psychic and social orders, cauterizing those violent emotions that politics brings. Let's seek consensus, let's compose, let's mediate, and let's find balance. How is it possible to think about politics without conflict? Replacing the conflictive, dynamic nature of politics is a sine qua non of any aspiration of resistance. It is not possible that we all agree on everything. That is why the dispute, the construction of hegemony, the contestation and the counter-argumentation make sense. Pure consensus is narcotic fiction; it is an invitation to apathy. Another thing is to establish tactical agreements, meeting points that backbone those strategic alliances that I was talking about above. But that does not mean peace, order and harmony, but rather organizing a political project around hegemonic positions in permanent movement. And with only one certainty: the adversary is neoliberal capitalism in all its various forms and garments.

As I said at the beginning, I believe that a premise of every other project is to decolonize pain. And now I add: also joy. Here, the power of Ahmed's Benjaminian gesture is enormous. It invites us to rummage through the rubble of the emotional garbage and

make explicit the conditions by which discourses of happiness, enthusiasm, will, improvement and positivity have become disciplinary mechanisms, spiritual governance techniques that support modes of organization based on inequality and exploitation (Cuello, 2019, p.19).

Ahmed characterizes the science of happiness as

a knowledge of a performative type that, when finding happiness in certain places, constitutes them as good places, as what should be promoted to the category of good (...) Insofar as promoting what causes happiness seems to be a duty of everyone, their own happiness becomes a duty (Cuello, 2019, p.29).

So we must be happy for others, not as a right, but as a responsibility. But, in addition, feelings are attributed to objects, in such a way that some things (and not others) become a cause of happiness or unhappiness. Two typical examples of happy objects are family and marriage (heterosexual, of course).

Ahmed makes us a disturbing and, at the same time, vital proposal: remove the rubble, the ruins, the sad, the unhappy, because those unlivable, disposable lives have a history and a materiality. She wonders: "Is it possible to rewrite the history of happiness from the point of view of those who have fallen from grace?" (Ahmed, 2019, p.45). Because, just as we speak of unequal and differential distribution of precariousness, so there is also an unequal and differential distribution of happiness and unhappiness throughout time and space.

What Ahmed manages to reveal is that the promising nature of happiness is the source of its effectiveness, because it implies a resignation, a postponement, a flight forward according to which, if we do the right thing, we will achieve happiness.

The only way to preserve happiness as a social promise is to postpone it, in such a way that we imagine that this promised happiness will arrive at some point, for us or those who come later. Happiness is what makes waiting bearable and desirable"
(Ahmed, 2019, p.78).

What, if not this sacrificial postponement, can explain the rise of neo-liberal and neo-conservative governments waving the flags of joy, hope and light at the end of the tunnel? Happiness works, effectively and efficiently, as the "technology of hope" (Ahmed, 2019, p.366), operationalized to unsuspected limits by neoliberalism in its permanent renewal of the arts of modeling and subjectivation.

Again, learning from the feminist experience is critical to deactivating that machinery. Says Ahmed:

We could describe feminist genealogies as genealogies of women who not only refused to place their wishes for happiness on the right things, but also dared to express their unhappiness with the very obligation that such things should make them happy. The history of feminism thus becomes the history of those women who caused problems, refusing to follow other people's goods or make others happy (2019, p.137-138).

And it is that feminism which implies the development of a political conscience regarding everything that women must renounce in the name of happiness.

Again, politics. When an object embodies the persistence of stories that cannot be erased by happiness, that object becomes an unhappy object. It is imperative to recognize “the impossibility of overcoming certain stories; those stories persist, and we must persist in affirming the unhappiness that their persistence produces in us” (2019, p.313). The first example that comes to my memory is the Chief of Cabinet of the Argentine national government between 2015 and 2019, in a report to the National Congress, saying that the most important thing they had done as a management was to place animal figures on the banknotes, replacing the heroes: “because it is time to leave death behind and think about life, about the future.” The cute little animals were erasing and denying the history of Argentine independence. There is no story, no memory, no politic.

Yes, at one point Ahmed's provocation is heartbreaking, because it shakes us out of indifference:

The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to let ourselves be affected by the unhappy, and to live a life that could affect others in an unhappy way (...) it would also imply the freedom to cause unhappiness to another due to our acts of deviation (...) any policy of justice will necessarily cause some unhappiness, even when this is not the purpose of our action (2019, p.387).

22

I insist there is no politics without conflict, without dispute, without contention.

For this reason, raising the flags of our dead, of the struggles that precede us, is urgent. As Ahmed says, “inheriting feminism is perhaps inheriting sadness. Sadness is the result of becoming aware not only of gender as a limitation of possibilities, but also of the unnecessary nature of said limitation” (2019, p.161). The fight against the obligatory nature of happiness is also a fight waged in the name of happiness as a possibility. De-colonizing pain and also happiness is a prerequisite for any anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal project that aspires to build collectives on foundations other than the market, private property and competition, whether of high or low intensity.

Conclusions. Thinking (with others) is resisting

I certainly do not claim to offer prescriptions or normative models. I am just drawing some possible lines so that we can think together about the possibilities of resistance in a context as hostile as the current one. To do this, I raised three sets of problems, one referring to the processes of subjectivation, another to alliances around the common, and the third to dismantling the imperative of happiness as a device for social discipline or technology of hope. From what has been said so far, I want to highlight some notes to leave the debate open.

The first thing I would highlight is the need to challenge power (not only the obvious or obviously "bad"), what does have force, what does contain transforming capacity, which requires subjecting apparently progressive practices to a deep critical analysis, innovative, emancipatory, rather than adopting a conformist stance or an idealized vision.

The second mark to highlight is for a kind of Foucauldian mantra: it is not so much about solving a problem as about trying out ways of intervening. I think it's a clear legacy: let's ask other questions, change the modes of interrogation, challenge the apparent certainties and get ready to invent other modes of response, other explanations. As far as we are concerned, at least, as teachers, researchers, social workers, let us try to get rid of the canons of "the production of scientific knowledge" and its constraints and rather try to produce serious and socially useful knowledge. Let's not be so tied to definitional and precious claims and rather let's test the critical use of concepts, which are ultimately tools that need to be put to work. And let us not remain unscathed in the face of propositions such as "those who have the least", "the most disadvantaged sectors" and phrases like that, at least let us suspect. Let us not forget that these apparent trifles are not innocent semantic lapses, but deliberate ways of thinking and understanding social relations, which have very concrete material and political consequences.

Finally, I highlight the urgency and the requirement of the theoretical-epistemological work; which is another way of saying that we return, to blow it up, to the problem of disciplinary and professional subordination. If we want, as a professional and disciplinary field, to intervene in a different way, it is essential to think differently. Therefore, theoretical work is a requirement. Matus (2018) has claimed social work is not an "applied" discipline but is based on theoretical-epistemological positions and constitutes a way of seeing and is reflected from her. Only from that place is it possible to dialogue with other social sciences from a non-subordinate threshold.



With the firm conviction that the theory is not "applied", I strive for the production of categories and concepts at the height of the complexity and horror of our present. On that substrate, perhaps, we will make the clay for our trenches.

References

Ahmed, S. (2019). *La promesa de la felicidad. Una crítica cultural al imperativo de la alegría*. Caja Negra.

Brown, W. (2015). *El pueblo sin atributos. La secreta revolución del neoliberalismo*. Malpaso.

Butler, J. (2009). *Marcos de guerra. Las vidas lloradas*. Paidós.

Butler, J. (2017). *Cuerpos aliados y lucha política. Hacia una teoría performativa de la asamblea*. Paidós.

Cuello, N. (2019). El futuro es desilusión. En S. Ahmed, *La promesa de la felicidad. Una crítica cultural al imperativo de la felicidad* (pp.11-20). Caja Negra.

Dardot, P. y Laval, C. (2013). *La nueva razón del mundo. Ensayo sobre la sociedad neoliberal*. Gedisa.

Dardot, P. y Laval, C. (2015). *Común. Ensayo sobre la revolución en el siglo XXI*. Gedisa.

Lorey, I. (2016). *Estado de inseguridad. Gobernar la precariedad*. Traficantes de Sueños.

Matus, T. (2018). *Punto de Fuga. Imágenes dialécticas de la crítica en el Trabajo Social contemporáneo*. Espacio.

Preciado, P. (2015). *La muerte de la clínica. Vivir y resistir en la condición neoliberal*. Vocavulvaria Ediciones.

Sklar, J. (2019, 20 de junio). La rebelión de la tristeza (columna semanal). *En Basta de Todo. Radio Metro*.

<https://www.metro951.com/basta/juan-sklar-analizo-intensamente-la-rebelion-de-la-tristeza/>

Sztulwark, D. (2019). *La ofensiva sensible. Neoliberalismo, populismo y el reverso de lo político*. Caja Negra.

About the author

Melisa Campana Alabarce is Doctor in Social Work, Universidad Nacional de Rosario, Argentina. Associated Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council –CONICET, Argentinian Government. Professor at the School of Social Work Universidad Nacional de Rosario. E-mail: melisacampana@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3988-8273>

