

## Editorial

### Social work intervention in critical times

When Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont published “*Critical Theory in Critical Times*” in 2017, a common sense was already emerging around the notion of “critical times”: a dystopian present-future was taking shape as a result of the global crisis - environmental, economic, demographic, of states and their incapacity to guarantee political rights and social protection; together with the lack of confidence in political action and in the rulers in office to face these overlapping crises on a global scale. Years before, the crisis of the financial system, the bailout of banks and the dismantling of welfare states in Europe, the crisis of social protection in Latin America and the collapse of social services due to the new public management approach, racism and xenophobia in the face of massive waves of migration, unemployment, all manifested themselves forcefully in a generalised malaise that began to turn into indignation. The idea of multiple crises, or a constellation of overlapping, mutually reinforcing crises, emerged from within and with neoliberal capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018).

3

However, the authors also sought to emphasise that there was a more hopeful sense in the notion of “critical times”: they also represent a historical window of opportunity for the emergence of proposals for the transformation and improvement of people’s living conditions; that is, “propitious times for critical theory” (Deutscher and Lafont, 2017, p. xiii). The social movements at that time, for example the occupation of Wall Street in the United States, the Arab Spring, the orange tide in Spain, among other organised political actions of the people, showed that crises were not only danger or risk, but also change, flux and uncertainty, and that therefore, crises harboured the possibility of social transformation.

We know a lot about crises in Latin America: crises of economics, inequality, debt, the state, democracy, development, just to mention the main angles from which this issue can be viewed. At the same time, the peoples of the region have had a historical tradition of resistance in the face of these crises, of creating collective strategies, of advocacy, of survival: in the face of colonisation first, then dictatorships, imperialism, and today stark



neoliberalism. In other words, the crises have put people at the crossroads, allowing them to imagine other possible worlds and to fight for them.

Today, the notion of “critical times” -in this overwhelming and hopeful sense- which is at the heart of what we call “critical theory”, remains an interesting category for exploring the challenges of the present. That is why we wanted to dedicate this third issue of our journal to reflecting on the critical times we are currently living through: the crisis of neoliberalism, the health crisis as a result of the pandemic, the political crisis expressed in the popular uprisings, and the deepening of reactionary neoconservative ideologies in the face of all these crises. Particularly in the Chilean case, the turn to the left with the triumph of Gabriel Boric as president-elect - in the face of an alarming increase in votes for the extreme right - and the possibility of writing a new political constitution as a consequence of the popular revolt that began on 18 October 2019, shows perhaps the most hopeful side of this notion of “critical times” that we have sought to emphasise in this issue.

The question around which the works compiled in this third issue revolve refers to the possibility of thinking about social intervention in these critical times: to think, historically, of social work as a profession and discipline that has emerged and developed through multiple crises: from the opening of the first schools in the midst of the social question, where socio-political and health crises overlapped; to the confrontation of bloody dictatorships and totalitarian regimes that placed at a vital crossroads - literally, by risking one’s life - in the face of dogmatism, censorship, torture, disappearance and death. Thinking about social work intervention today, in the midst of the effects of the pandemic and the popular revolts, observing the turning points in the institutional frameworks and the possibilities of making critical turns in intervention there, asking ourselves about the possibilities of generating knowledge from social intervention, are some of the emphases that the works presented here aim to propose to contribute to the debate that is already taking shape in social work - see for example Iturrieta (2021) or Martí and Pérez (2020) who advance the idea of “convulsed times”, the social work of resistance in times of pandemic proposed by Michael Paul Garrett (2021) and the discussions that took shape in the cycle of seminars “Thinking Social Work in Critical Times” that we at the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Studies in Social Work developed during 2020 in the most desolate moments of the pandemic which inspire much of the work presented here.

## Thinking about social intervention in the midst of pandemics and popular revolts

The recent popular revolts in Chile and Colombia, also called “social outbursts”, the struggles for women’s right to decide over their own bodies in Argentina; or in the face of Bolsonaro’s neoconservative offensive in Brazil, among many other protest and mobilisation actions in the region, continue to deepen. However, the COVID-19 pandemic intercepted these processes of discontent and struggle. They did not disappear, but they changed in their intensity and form. The articles by Professors **Elizabete Mota (Brazil)** and **Ximena Baráibar (Uruguay)** that open this issue show us how the crises once again overlap: the pandemic confines, impoverishes, deteriorates mental health, and above all, reflects the injustice at the base, which manifests itself in the unequal access to vaccines, to financial security, to the basic right to stay at home with an economic income that allows us to satisfy the most basic needs. Both articles analyse the responses of neo-conservative governments in their respective countries to the health crisis, its impact on social policies and the possibilities for critical social interventions in this scenario. The article by Elizabete Mota, entitled “*The context of the Coronavirus pandemic and its implications for the Brazilian Social Service*” shares a reflection on the general dynamics of capitalist production relations and their impact on the social intervention of the state in these times of emergency, where the responses of the Bolsonaro government have gone in the logic of dismantling social protection instead of guaranteeing the right to health. Alluding to the inability of Luis Lacalle Pou’s government to address the results of national and international studies that pointed to the need to strengthen public policies to reduce the impact of the pandemic on the populations most affected by poverty, Ximena Baráibar presents “*I warned you and you didn’t listen to me: poverty and inequality during the pandemic in Uruguay*”. The title could not be more suggestive, in a context in which the government, consistent with its neoliberal approach, has tended to reduce state intervention and shift the responsibility for the health and social consequences of the pandemic onto individuals.

The pandemic brought stark evidence of the cruellest face of neoliberalism: the inequalities about which people had been demonstrating in the streets, demanding radical changes in development models, were abruptly exposed. With the spread of COVID-19, social struggles were hampered. Quarantines and curfews slowed down social mobilisation. However, new channels for participating in resistance actions in the context of the uprisings began to emerge, as presented by **Carolina González**

(Colombia) and **María Soledad García (Argentina)** in this issue - social networks, virtual assemblies, forums, street protests with physical distance and the correct use of masks, material and emotional support at points of resistance, among many other forms of political participation, took shape in this desolate context in which death and government neglect were being felt, as Mota and Baráibar emphasise. Carolina and María Soledad discuss the forms that social intervention can take in times of political and health crisis, reflecting on the professional place - and the professional disputes - that became even more visible during the crisis in Colombia. How do social workers manage to position themselves publicly, generate knowledge from their professional intervention and influence political issues through their intervention? These are some of the questions that guide the conversation between the two.

Closely linked to the above, a second line of exploration in this issue refers to the construction of the professional position by social workers in the institutional spaces from which they face the overlapping crises. The article by **Ana Arias (Argentina)** precisely highlights a central aspect of this discussion in her work entitled “Social Work and Institutions: social control, transformation and escape routes in critical times”. The author proposes to enhance the value of criticism - and of critical approaches in social intervention - in order to make contributions and have an impact on institutional spaces, which in these convulsive times, represent dissonant, uncomfortable and even controversial values for professionals involved in social intervention. Professor Arias’ reading helps us to think of ourselves as “inhabiting the institution” with all of the difficulties and tensions involved in thinking about intervention, in her own words, not from the outside or from above, but from within, in order to find a place and make room for those who have been permanently excluded from the spaces where decisions are made. Problematising the relations between intervention and institution, Cristian Fernández, **Cristián Ceruti, José Miguel Garay and Borja Castro-Serrano (Chile)** propose to identify the potential of other modes of existence, which challenge hegemonic positions on the very notion of intervening. In their article, the authors invite us to a rich philosophical journey that dialogues with the political, aesthetic, historical and practical dimensions entangled in the processes of subjectivation that underpin social intervention and the ways in which it is ‘instituted’ in the social world.

While we look at the relationship between social intervention, professional position and institutional frameworks from the challenges that the current crisis brings to the debate, it is certainly not a new issue in social work. The dark side of the profession or “horror

stories” in social work have been well documented (see for example Ioakimidis (2021)). In the same vein, and recovering a critical notion of history, with the lights and shadows of the professional past in the face of the socio-political crises of the 20th century, Professor **Carola Kuhlmann (Germany)** proposes in her article “*German Social Work in times of totalitarian regimes, a comparison between the ‘Third Reich’ and the German Democratic Republic*” a reading of the past as a gift and a burden that opens the prison of the present. The text introduces readers to an understanding of the history of social work in Germany, and leads us to reflect on the impacts of dictatorships, left-wing populism and new extreme right-wing movements in the world on the shaping of the professional position of social workers. This is an urgent debate in these times when totalising thoughts re-emerge in new forms, for example through the dissemination of conspiracy theories and fake news, political and religious fundamentalisms or the attack on progressive ideas under the discursive terrorism of the so-called “gender ideology”.

A third line of exploration in this issue refers to the possibilities of generating knowledge in these “critical times”. **Belén Ortega-Senet (Chile) and Telmo H. Caria (Portugal)**, in their article “*On the subalternity of Social Work and the theory-practice duality (as the source of all evils)*”, argue that the disconnection between theory and practice, reinforced by the neoliberal onslaught and the depoliticisation of the discipline, has contributed to delegitimise social work as a source of knowledge. Based on their research experience with social workers in Sexual Exploitation of Children (SEC), Belén and Telmo propose critical routes, situated, polyphonic and transformative proposals to generate knowledge from the experience of professional intervention.

From a very different and less explored epistemological perspective in Latin American Social Work, **María Inés Martínez Herrero (England)** proposes a different approach to the problem of generating disciplinary knowledge. In her article “*Employing critical realism in times of crisis. A study on human rights and social justice in social work training in England and Spain*”, the author presents her research, which is developed within the framework of the global economic crisis that began in Europe in 2008, which resulted in countless austerity measures in England, Spain and other countries, and which led to the dismantling of welfare in these countries, with serious effects on the lives of the most vulnerable population groups, as well as on the resources to intervene from public social services. In this context, she develops her study on professional training in both countries, introducing the approach of critical realism by Roy Bashkar and detailing the main epistemic and methodological implications of this perspective.

Finally, this third axis closes with the work of **Gabriela Rubilar (Chile)** who examines the position of researchers in periods marked by processes of political transformation. Her article, entitled “*Critical research in critical times: actors, authorship and authority in the production of knowledge in social work*”, addresses the links between critical qualitative research and critical social work and its debates on the production of knowledge on sensitive issues such as political violence in the wake of the October 2019 uprising and the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasises the relevance of discussing the role of researchers in the process of researching sensitive issues, the creation of strategies to resist the neoliberal imprint of research, and the visibility of the unique contributions of research participants to the production of knowledge.

In our Translations section, this issue includes an article by Professor **Yolanda Guerra (Brazil)** “*Expressions of pragmatism in the Social Service: preliminary reflections*” originally published in Portuguese at the *Katálysis Journal* in 2013, which allows us to identify important nuances when debating what we mean by “critical” in these “critical times”. Elaborating a historical review of the foundations that traverse the trajectory of Social Work, identifying the conservative bases and the intentions of rupture, she analyses the implications of pragmatism in the profession and discipline, arguing that there has been what she calls “a pragmatic invasion of Marxism” - alluding to Consuelo Quiroga’s 1991 reading of the “invisible invasion” of positivism in Marxism. This is undoubtedly a key text for discussing the frontiers and also those liminal spaces between positivism, post-positivism, pragmatism and critical realism, and their points of contact with the critical impulse of the profession and discipline.

Finally, we would like to thank **Paz Valenzuela (Chile) and Patricia Carrasco (Chile)** for their respective book reviews. These are two key works to think historically about social work and in this framework, the limits and possibilities of its intervention. The first book, reviewed by Paz Valenzuela, edited by Paulina Morales and Daniela Aceituno, is “*La resistencia de las memorias: Relatos biográficos de vidas truncadas de estudiantes y profesionales del servicio social desaparecidos y ejecutados durante la Dictadura en Chile (1973-1990)*” [The Resistance of Memories: Biographical accounts of the truncated lives of students and social service professionals who disappeared and were executed during the dictatorship in Chile (1973-1990)], published by RIL in 2020. Patricia Carrasco, meanwhile, invites us to read “*Trabajo Social en Chile: Un siglo de trayectoria*” [Social Work in Chile: a century of trajectory], a book coordinated by Paula Vidal and published by the same publishing house in 2016.

As you will have been able to appreciate, this issue offers tools for analysing the current moment, examining the political interstices of popular revolts, reading the context and the shortcomings of governments in dealing with crises, always from a historical perspective in order to understand social intervention. These “critical times” represent turning points that make it possible to discuss the models of society we want to build, junctures where resistance can emerge (Garrett, 2021). They raise the impossibility of sustaining not only development, but life, under neoliberal capitalism and the expansion of colonial ideology on a global scale. As Deutscher and Lafont said, these are propitious times for critical theory, and here we are, from social work, thinking about the possibilities of reading the context, generating knowledge at this juncture and proposing alternatives for the times to come.

We hope it will be an inspiring read.

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Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social

*Critical Proposals in Social Work*



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