

The New Politics of Social Work

Mel Gray and Stephen Webb (Editors), Santiago de Chile, Edits Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2020, PP. 312. ISBN/ISSN: 978-956-357-243-8. Reference value: CPL\$ 15.000/USD\$ 20,00. Translated by Gianinna Muñoz Arce.

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Translated by Gianinna Muñoz Arce, PhD in Social Work and academic at the University of Chile, this is a book that comes to politically challenge Social Work. It was originally published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013, under the title “The New Politics of Social Work”. Composed of thirteen chapters and divided into three parts, this work was carried forward by academics of Social Work from England, Australia, Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South Africa and Canada who, from different theoretical perspectives, advocate the creation of a left agenda for the discipline and call for political positions, considering that Social Work has a public responsibility to confront injustice.

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The first section, entitled “New Agendas for Social Work”, seeks to lay the foundations of what is understood by critical Social Work, presenting a sort of political and historical cartography of the debates from which this perspective is nourished. The second section, “Politically oriented interventions”, presents an exhaustive analysis of a series of tools that the authors consider fundamental to sustain a left-wing agenda that contributes to the construction of a critical Social Work. The third section, “Transformative Interventions”, dialogues with the proposal through a series of situated examples or scenes of professional intervention.

It is for the militant work of bringing debates that nourish professional practice that we wish to express our gratitude and admiration for the task undertaken by Giannina

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Muñoz, because, first of all, she has been able to capture a reading that we believe not only important but absolutely necessary. First of all, because we consider this book a fundamental contribution to our regional interdisciplinary debates, due to its eminently political dimension, which challenges us in the depths of our profession and discipline.

It is a book that refreshes debates that are often lost in the grays of our daily life as professionals, wherever we practice. Thus, in the first chapter, Mel Gray and Stephen A. Webb argue that this book is based on “the assumption that Social Work has a public responsibility to confront injustice; to take a stand; to discuss what we mean by a ‘just society’ and how injustice manifests itself in everyday institutional relationships and structures” (p.20, 2020).

In this sense, it outlines a horizon of professional practice in the light of the context of the 21st century and opens up questions about what we understand by social justice and solidarity, by emancipation and liberation, by the possible consensuses about the world and the society we want. But, especially, it invites us to ask ourselves about what we are willing to do to build this horizon. This is the secret of the discomfort of this reading, because it takes up notions and positions embedded in the “common sense” of Social Work, which we reproduce on a daily basis without any analysis. Many times, we think that as professionals we escape per se from the logics and commodified practices marked by the neoliberal agenda, however, chapter by chapter this book shows us that we do not.

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In this key, in the second chapter, Bob Pease emphasizes the importance of being aware of the power and privileges that are at stake when we meet with users and other workers, arguing the need for a critical consciousness to deconstruct these privileges and avoid being part of the process of capitalist oppression.

Furthermore, in Chapter III, Paul Garrett argues against the anti-theory culture that pervades Social Work, emphasizing the “practical” nature of the profession, postulating theoretical ignorance as a professional value. And, further on, in an apparent paradox that, however, is not, Harry Ferguson argues in Chapter VII that “(...) despite the enormous literature that exists on social work, practically none of it is based on evaluations of what social workers do or how they intervene when they meet face to face with users” (p.163, 2020). Thus, for the author, it is necessary to generate credibility by building a new political agenda based on critical analyses of what social workers actually do.



These proposals lead us to ask ourselves about the false dichotomies and dilemmas that we continue to drag between theory and practice, between research and intervention; what debates are we still missing to suture this binarism; are we going to replace it with other equally futile ones, or do we want to build new thresholds of understanding about what Social Work does, says, thinks, decides?

A second reason why this book is important and necessary, closely linked to the above, is that it invites us to de-banalize, that is, to fill with meaning and content one of the most expensive categories of Social Work in our America, the idea of criticism. We say de-banalize because, at times, like other powerful words, we have de-hierarchized criticism, turning it from an explanatory category to a qualifying adjective: a critical social work, a critical position, a critical perspective... along the way, at times, we have lost the power of criticism as an exercise.

Chapter V, written by Carolyn Taylor, is very illuminating in this sense, because it makes a distinction between reflective practice and critical reflective practice. The former, supported by a humanist-liberal project of personal growth and self-actualization, is centered on a process of self-scrutiny with no interest in social structures, its only intention being to improve professional standards. For its part, the critical reflective practice, proposed by the author, seeks to put in evidence and tension the innocent knowledge, problematizing notions such as “helping” and “caring”, advocating for a profession committed sociopolitically and not only with itself.

However, in reality, the whole book sounds the alarm bells in this regard, reminding us - and at a very opportune time - that we cannot and should not hand over our categories to neoliberal phagocytization as an offering. As the translator also stresses, the invitation is to think of new political agendas for leftist social work. As Mel Gray and Stephen A. Webb argue: “This is an invitation with a double objective: a renewal of the left political agenda in social work, and an articulation of the role of Social Work that allows it to contribute to the abolition of the regimes of exploitation maintained by the capitalist class and its neoliberal economic order” (p.19, 2020).



The third reason why this book is necessary and perhaps the most fruitful for our future dialogues - shall we say post-pandemic: this book is a translation. This is not a truism, since it does not only imply an idiomatic translation, which in itself is a titanic task for a book of this magnitude. Gianinna's work is enormous, colossal, because she has effectively managed to translate theoretical, political and epistemological debates produced in contexts that are very different from ours. Translation in the sense of making them apprehensible, understandable, intelligible and close so that they really come to enrich our own debates. Generating a feeling of familiarity with respect to the discussions raised in other countries is a complicated undertaking, but one that the translator has managed to solve with great power.

Without this enormous translation work, this book would run the risk of being inaccessible to colleagues outside the academic world, it would run the risk of being more of the same for those of us who do work in that world, in short, it would run the risk of not being an event as it is.

Because it is not the same to say State there and here, it is not the same to say populism, it is not the same to say activism, it is not the same to say criticism. The simple idiomatic transposition would not have recovered those nuances, so Gianinna's merit is to have given us hundreds of winks, of imperceptible marks, of invisible but very clear arrows that allow us not to get lost inside the book and to recognize the richness of the contributions and also -above all- the provocations that its authors throw at us.

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You can review the prologue, table of contents and first pages of the book here:
<https://ediciones.uahurtado.cl/libro/nuevas-agendas-politicas-para-el-trabajo-social/>

