INTERVIEW

Witnesses of an era 2

Interview with Susana Cazzaniga, September 2023, by Katia Marro and Víctor Orellana for the journal Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social, as part of the activities to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état in Chile. .

What are its connections with the Chilean process prior to the coup of '73 and, later, with the coup itself on 11 September of that year?

Chile was a mirror in which we looked at ourselves. Particularly in social work, but also in terms of the people who, through their struggles, managed to think that social projects that proposed social justice, rights, and the place of workers in that project were possible.

Chile was very close and for me it still is.

It was a thing of constant reference, so I find it interesting to start this conversation with that image: every 11 September, every time I talk to a Chilean colleague, I remember where I was at that time.

By '73 I was studying Social Work in the city of Santa Fe and was a militant in the Peronist university youth. We had organised a kind of group and we incorporated comrades who, without being directly linked to it (inscribed in a more partisan political militancy), did have social interests and sensitivities.

From the "Agrupación Azul y Blanca" we had carried out a mass vaccination in the city and the surrounding area; we spread out to different places and it was my turn, with a colleague, to go to a place on an island, right on the coast, which was also quite difficult to access. I remember we were both there, we had the radio in a school and suddenly, around midday, we heard the news.

It was such a blow that we looked at each other, turned off the radio, closed what we were doing and went back to Santa Fe. We were so stunned, thinking "this can't be", that what we needed was to meet with others to see what happened. We closed everything, we hitchhiked to the city and there we met, we had a big assembly; those who had more information brought it and discussed it... it was all very confusing.

What we did know was that we had to be at the side of our Chilean brothers, the Chilean sisters; so, immediately after the assemblies, we held marches, communiqués and so on. And to show our solidarity was not just words, but to offer our houses, to offer our homes so that people who had to leave Chile could arrive directly in Argentina, where we would receive them.

So, that 11 September, which is then linked in some way with another emblematic 11 September (the Twin Towers) and, at the same time, with several Septembers in which there were coups in Argentina, in other times. It is these Septembers that always bring back some reminiscences. These are things that are never forgotten. I always have a bond with Chile based on the situation we lived through.

How did you come to Social Work and can you tell us about your experience as a student of Social Work before the coup in Argentina in 1976 and also as a militant?

I began my career in a small city – called Rafaela – in the province of Santa Fe; a very particular city, because it is a very industrial city (agriculture and livestock) that later grew and diversified, and the issue of *work* and *trade unionism* was always present; in other words, a very interesting issue that also gave rise to a lot of militant movement, both in terms of the workers' movement and the youth movement. We already participated in secondary school, perhaps not so clearly in political-party terms, but with ideological and political clarity in general terms. We took part in work in the neighbourhoods, in the slums. We always had activities of that kind, cultural activities, everything was always very mobilised. And when I came to study in Santa Fe, obviously this quickly turned into a more conscious militancy, not because the other militancy was not conscious, but in Santa Fe it was more organic, more committed, with a different kind of political formation.

At that time, Peronist militancy was organised on three fronts: on the neighbourhood front there was the JP *(Peronist youth)*; the JTP *(Peronist working youth)*, who worked in the industries, in the unions, in the factories; and the JUP *(Peronist university youth)*, who were the ones who worked more on the university front.

Within Social Work, our struggle was about the transition to university, about the reforms of the curricula, and there we had a lot of dialogue with Chile. We followed what was happening in Chile and what was happening in Uruguay with the curricula. We were moving towards the idea of a university open to the people, where participation was

really a political participation, not a formal participation as had been the case. So, within the *universities there was a lot of dispute about what kind of university we wanted and in the context of what kind of society*. That was a constant dispute.

In this context, what was the relationship between Social Work and militancy?

We had a fairly formal militancy; we had training schools. Many of the things I learned or read I didn't read in Social Work, but in the party's training school. There we had a large number of subjects that ranged from international political analysis to reading about the Frankfurt School, Gramsci and everything that had to do with the histories of liberation that were being waged at that time in many parts of the world.

Here I come back to Chile, which was present in that sense.

I remember that one of the great discussions we had within the School of Social Work (*at that time School of Social Service)*, was to decide whether our horizon was a liberated homeland, a socialist homeland, national socialism as Peronist... we put the stamp of the national.

So, we asked ourselves, what place was this national socialism going to have in Social Work? And it was a whole discussion: what place was Social Work going to have in a society where, perhaps very innocently, we thought that the problems derived from inequality and the class struggle would not have the magnitude it had had until then?

We were thinking a lot about Chile, what is Chile doing, what is Chilean social work doing now that they have Salvador Allende? And we had reached a conclusion: *Social Work, in the political projects linked to national socialism or socialism, was going to have the place of planning*. In other words, we were going to plan Social Work in interdisciplinary teams, in public policies, social policies (...) it would deal with issues that faced concrete situations; but we were no longer going to be in that more assistance-based part. Why? Because – in our understanding at that time – that was going to be solved, with the salaries as they corresponded, with another life, etc.

So, all that was the discussion; and I say this with great tenderness, looking at it with great pleasure, *because they were extremely honest discussions, discussions that gave us the tools we had at the time*. That's *why today I look at them and say: "they were naïve"*; but they were the ones we had at the time and we carried them forward.

What were the main changes you achieved in that period of Reconceptualisation?

We managed to make a very important change of study, we consulted with a great many careers in other countries – I return, once again, to Chile as a place we looked at a lot, and Uruguay – with whom we had a very similar process. And we managed to make interesting changes in our studies. Changes that worked and were in force for I think two years, because then came the dictatorship.[1]

On the other hand, there was the issue of practices. *We were in a society, at a time in history when our neighbourhoods were highly politicised*, extremely politicised. And the people in the neighbourhoods saw the university students who arrived as people who used them as guinea pigs; it was very difficult to do the internships, because we told them: *"we want to do the internships, to learn"* and they denied us the possibility. There were even situations in which they threw us out rather violently, because they didn't want university students hanging around, precisely because of the previous experiences they had had.

We had to do a whole round and search with colleagues who were working in the neighbourhood, from another place, so that we could enter and do our internships. But it was always very difficult, because we also rejected those practices that were proposed to us, which were practices in children's homes, those practices that we said *"we don't want those practices, we want other things"*.

That was more or less what we were doing, from the school, from the militant spaces, in a situation that was becoming more and more repressive. But that was the point: an environment where *the whole of society was politically aware, even the conservative sectors had political training*.

Generally, when you argued with someone who didn't agree with *your position, you didn't do it with chicanery or empty slogans, but with arguments*. That also seems to me to be very distinctive of the militancy of that time, the arguments.

The slogans in the street, the arguments in the discussion. That's why we studied so hard, because we had to have the tools to be able to face the debates from the most serious places.

[1] The coup d'état in Argentina took place on 24 March, 1976.

Along with that, we had an ethical position, which we discussed a lot: *if you were on the university front, you had to be the best student or one of the best students; if you were on the workers' front, you had to be the best worker and the most supportive; if you were in the neighbourhood, the same thing, the best neighbour. For us, he was the new man. We knew that we were not the new man, but we knew that from that place we could build the new man.*

In other words, not only from the point of view of training, not only from the point of view of conviction, but also from the point of view of how you present yourself as a person today in these features, which were very demanding features; but features that *required you to be credible in what you were saying*.

How does your history as a militant, as a social worker, go through the dictatorship?

Well, we have a large number of disappeared people; the school where I studied has many... classmates who are no longer here. I am alive because when they went to look for me I wasn't there. Thanks to solidarity I was able to survive. It always mobilises us a lot, and that's why we are so much in these commemorations, because in reality any of us survivors could be in those black and white portraits that remind us of those who didn't survive.

In addition to the disappeared and clandestine, we had a great many colleagues in prison and in exile. Both external and internal exile. We recognise internal exile as repression, not because you were in internal exile you are not a victim, that was very difficult for us to understand. For me personally, it was very difficult to understand.

There was a turning point with the Malvinas war, because the situation changed and colleagues began to leave prison, we began to have a more civilian life and we began to meet.

Except for a few comrades who went out very badly, most of us returned to active militancy, which in that case was a militancy that was more focused on human rights.

The task there was, first of all, to respond to the need to meet each other in order to be able to rebuild ourselves as people: there was a lot of accompaniment between us. Each one of us returned in different conditions, and returning to your house, to your home, was complex... sometimes you wondered, *what is my home? I don't have a home*. Those things were strong, because there were families who did not accept the return of the

comrades to their homes (or did it reluctantly); there were others who accompanied. You had to start your own life again. That was my experience and I know there were others like it. There were others who returned to absolute loneliness.

There we immediately took up the banner of reconstructing, of seeing who was missing, who was not there; there you found out about people who had disappeared, you found out about people who you thought were missing and who were alive. So, all of that was a question of searching, of reaching the relatives, of seeing how they were. That was all rather intra-work, wasn't it? It was like trying to heal each other. But this healing was not a healing outside a political framework. We immediately started to join the military and we tackled all the issues together: human rights, the elections – the '83 elections were coming up – and we discussed what we were going to do, how, who to support... all those discussions continued. We are still very strong in that.

And then, in the first years after the end of the dictatorship?

Democracy arrived, but we knew that it wasn't complete, we knew that they were keeping an eye on us. We knew because we had people, good people who were inside the police, who knew us, because we all went back to our places of origin and in the small places everyone knew each other. So, we were favoured by the fact that some policemen would say *"...not ours (...) not hers, I've known her since she was a little girl"*. There were people who took a gamble and said *look, guys, here so-and-so and so-and-so seem to me to be on to you*. Also the bishop, in our case, had a very important position of protection, but there was no activity that we organised that the security services did not come to watch.

The first tasks were to get together and make lists of those who were missing, that was our search. When the CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) commissions appeared to denounce the comrades, we also participated as social workers, carrying documentation, etc. Of course, we also accompanied the Trial of the Juntas with a lot of mobilisation. Those were the issues there. They were still political activities, but still without much organisation, there was a lot of discussion, where to and how, which were quite complicated issues

For you, in more personal terms, how was your re-encounter with Social Work?

When the coup came and I had to leave, I hadn't finished my thesis, so it was a question of ethics to finish it. When I came to Santa Fe to ask for my file, it was gone. It had been erased, they had taken it out. We had to do a reconstruction, which I always say publicly when I can: I managed to reconstruct my academic record thanks to two colleagues, good people, who started to look for the minutes (of the exams) one by one.

I always recognise them because, when I came back, it's not that everybody hugged you and said *"oh, my dear, what happened to you?*

During the dictatorship, economic neoliberalism, on the one hand, and the terror that was imposed on the other, replaced this solidarity with an attitude of *"well, it must be for a reason, get by as best you can... you decided it, take charge"*.

It was not easy to rebuild our personal lives. *It was easier to rebuild our political lives than our personal lives*. In my case, it was very hard to have to give up my son to be raised by his grandparents for many years. Rebuilding a family relationship, mother and son, was very hard for me.

I can't even tell you how difficult it was, because the first question – beyond the fact that my son is wonderful – that you ask yourself (and that your children ask you) *was why did they have me if they knew that this could happen?* And I can tell you that it is not easy to answer that question, especially for children, because you can discuss it now and you can talk about it at other ages, but at seven years old it is very difficult.

How do you see the challenge of preserving memory in the present time for today's generations?

There is something that is very important and of which we have to be aware: those of us who survived the horrors of the dictatorship sometimes find it hard to understand that, today, we are facing generations that have not experienced anything close to what we did. Imagine that they didn't even live through the 2001 crisis.[2]

[1] In Argentina, in 2001, a series of intense protests took place after years of neoliberal adjustment measures that impoverished the population. The trigger was the "corralito" on 2 December, triggering strikes, a large-scale social explosion, repression by the government (39 people were killed in the protests) and, finally, the resignation and escape by helicopter from the Casa Rosada of the then president Fernando de la Rua.

Those events that for us *are yesterday, are last night in our heads, in our bodies, how do we bring them closer to the new generations who have no idea of similar experiences?* And here there is a question that has always concerned me: *how do we transmit this memory?* Because we all agree that memory has to be kept alive. But *how do we ensure that it doesn't boomerang, that it doesn't freeze?*

Because the accounts of our experiences run the risk of saying "well, they [did it] because they were superheroes" and reproducing this cult of the disappeared. It's one thing to say "fuck, what balls they had", but it's another thing to put them in a place of bronze that installs the idea that you're never going to be able to do it.

I think we have to say the opposite: we were *so common, so human, with our pros and cons, with our darks, with our fears*. Let's say we were afraid... let's say it please! Because that is part of being *"human"* and, moreover, because if we don't say it, we stay in that place where we become impossible to reach.

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