# Social Work in Latin America : a historical view and the impact of Reconceptualization in how the intervention is seen today

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# Social Work in Latin America:
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*"Mr Juan Robles*
*with a charity without comparison*
*made this hospital possible*
*but first he did the poor"*
Traditional spanish verses

It is impossible to think about Social Science and Social Theory without analyzing the particular moment in history that it came about. In Social Work this is even more relevant and this relation is even clearer. The history and social reality are intertwined with construction of the role of a Social Worker.

To see this interrelation, we will look at Social Work in Latin America[1] to see how the socio-political reality affects not only the theory, but how social work is constructed and seen.

To do this we will differentiate three models of Social work: Traditional, Reconceptualization and Alternative.

"Intervene to change reality", has been the core of Social Work as a profession. The word "intervention" implies different steps: evaluating a situation as unwanted, seeing another situation as ideal, and developing a strategy to pass from one to the other. Reality, at the same time, has been generally seen as an "objective" situation that could be subject of change.

At the same time one must have a legitimized presence in order to intervene in the lives of others.

"The place of intervention is transformed in a territory, in other words, a juridical space that talks about legitimacy of the intervention and politicy that marks the "agenda" where different aspect of the social question are constructed" (Carballeda 2007, pg 95)[2]

When we think about moments and models in Social Work we refer to specific ways of looking at intervention. "Intervention" has often been seen as a technical action done through a specific methodology. What I will try to show is that intervention is an ideological action, which has been object of professionalization, but that it is and has always been strongly affected by political and ideological views about the world.

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[1] It is impossible to think that the process in Latin America is homogenous. Eventhough it is a tendency, this paper emphasizes in the change done in the southern cone of Latin America: Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.
[2] El lugar de la intervención se transforma en territorio, es decir, un espacio jurídico que habla de la legitimidad de la intervención y político, que marca la "agenda" donde se construyen diferentes aspectos de la cuestión social.

# A- Models of Social Work Practice

## 1. Traditional Model

The beginning of Social Work in Latin America is very influenced by the process and thinking done in North America and Europe. The origin relates with the capitalism and the need to professionalize the social philanthropy.

In the case of Latin America, philanthropy was strongly influenced by the catholic church and by the "ladies" of society. The interrelation between Social Work and Catholic Church is still very strong.[3] For example, in Argentina the day of the Social Worker is the day that the catholic church remember the "visit of the virgin" Mary to her cousin. So it is the day of the "visiting".

Visiting people's houses was strongly related "Social Visitors" work. And this is the first name Social Workers were given. Some people until today would call them "visitadoras" (visitors).

**Why is Latin America poor?** From this perspective people in Latin America had a different culture with values that do not foster economic growth. From this point of view, it seems necessary to teach work ethics and better values. At the same time it was interpreted as a problem of timing in history. These countries are underdeveloped or in process of being developed. Supporting development activities would permit this process to "en rail" toward the development path.

Poverty at the micro level is the result of cultural values that do not stress the importance of hard work.

**The origin of Social Work** is a process of professionalization of philanthropy. A natural process produced by the new demands of popular sectors.

In this model the **object of intervention was the "social problem"**. A "social problem" is seen as a deviant action, which is easily translated into a "deviant" person or family. The idea was that some families or people were unable to "adapt" to social norms, situation that could put the whole society at risk. So, this situation needed to be controlled by the society through the agency of the social worker.

From this point of view the social worker is responsible for identifying the problem and finding a way to solve it. As a result, the deviant family or person feels obligated to accept the social worker's decision as punishment for breaking a social norm.

The **method of intervention** would be the case or the family in the first moment, and group or community as alternatives.

The **social image** of social workers, was female, very similar to a nun or a lady of high society.

The distance between the social worker and the population attended was social and educational. This superiority would also be assured through the action that was clearly of power. The social worker could have the power of knowing about the private life. Opening the refrigerator to see if the family was feeding the children properly is a clear image of this power. But the social worker could also have power to decide the future of the family. Taking the children away would be an image of that power.

The **theoretical frameworks** that guided the work was positivism and functionalism.

In this model, **research** in social work was limited. The social worker would be seen as a technical work that would absorb the knowledge that came through other professions.

## 2. Reconceptualization

In the sixties a movement within Social Work school arouse. In Latin America it is called the "reconceptualization" process.

"Thirty five years ago, when people began to talk about the reconceptualization of Social Work in Latin America, a process characterized by the conscious analysis of the reality and identity of Latin America was beginning. Philosophy and the theology of liberation, the awakening of the Dependency Theory, in education the arise of Liberalizing Popular Education in Social work the reconceptualization" (Eroles, 2004 pg 99)

The Marxist theory had a strong influence on Social Science and Social Work in Latin America.

**Why is Latin America Poor?** The Dependency Theory (Cardoso, 1969), Furtado, 1964), in change, interpreted the poverty of this part of the world as an structural need for the wealth of other nations. Europe was rich because Latin America was poor. The wealth drained from Latin America made the industrialization in England possible.

From this perspective, poverty within a country can't be seen without understanding the social structure that caused it. The poor are a victim of society. Instead of seeing his poverty as a consequence of his lack of effort or cultural adaptation, his poverty is seen as a consequence of years of exploitation needed in order to make other parts of the society rich.

"If there are sectors marginalized (poor) that implies that we have to recognize that there are sector that marginalize (not poor).   Unless somebody thinks that the poor automarginalize themselves because they are stubborn or autistic." (Alayon, 1989, pg 69) [4]

"Poverty is not a natural phenomenon, nor divine guidance nor individual responsibilities of those affected.  It has a social origin associated with the characteristics of how a society functions, being then imperative to develop if a rigorous and correct analysis is pretended.". [5]

Another theory that influenced this process is "Popular Education" through "Pedagogy of the oppressed" written by Paulo Freire (1992).  This perspective was very strong not only in educational theories but also for Social Work.  Popular education would enforce the idea that education has been used a strategy for social control.  People assume that their place in society is due to "magical" reasons or because it is God's will.  The poor have to adapt to the place in the society that they have inherited.  The "popular" sector of society should pass from a "magical" view of the world to a "critical" view of the world through "consciousness" of reality.  They should understand that they do not deserve poverty and that they have the right to equal treatment, as well as the right to fight for it.  Its methodology puts great emphasis on the reflective processes of awareness and empowerment to enable participants to be subjects of their own development.   Change will only come through a horizontal relationship between the educator (social worker) and the people.   And through a strong commitment with social excluded.

**The origin of social work** is seen as strategy of the oligarchy to assure social control necessary to install a capitalist system.  "There is no doubt in the relationship between the origin of Social Work and the internal faults of the bourgois order, with the necessary consequences of the constitution and development ot capitalism, especially those related with the binomio industrialization/urbanization as it was developed during the century XIX" (Netto, 1992 pg. 5) [6]

The critical view o intervention said that it treated the victims as responsible of their exclusion.  They thought that Social Work, through social assistance was to demobilizing the popular sector in order to avoid real change.  Social Workers were agents of capitalism to assure social control.  Their view of social problems was hegemonic, defining social problems and development from the perspective of those that have the power.  Doing assistencialism was like giving an aspirin to a person with cancer.

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[4] Si hay sectores marginalizados (pobres) ello implica reconocer tambien que hay sectores marginalizantes (no pobres). Excepto que alguien crea que los pobres se automarginan por puro tercos o por autistas.

[5] Los fenómenos de la pobreza no responden a causas naturales, ni a designios divinos ni a responsabilidades individuales de los propios damnificados.  Tienen un origen social ligado a las características que predominan en el funcionamiento de la sociedad, resultando por lo tanto – imprescindible develarlo si se pretende un análisis correcto y riguroso.

[6] "No hay dudas en relacionar el surgimiento del Servicio Social con las carencias propias al orden burgues, con las secuelas necesarias de los procesos que se presentan en la constitución y en el desarrollo del capitalismo, en especial aquellos concernientes al binomio industrialización/urbanizacion, tal como este se revelo en el transcurso del siglo XIX pg. 5

**The Object of intervention** should then be the society as a whole thinking of a more profound social change. It should be assumed that intervention is not neutral or without values (Gagneten 1986, pg. 30)

**Method of intervention.**
The work with cases of families fragments the social problem, demobilizes and sees the person as responsible of his own problems. Giving assistance, or working on an individual level with a family or a person was to oversee the real causes of social problems. The social problems, just as they were seen, were symptoms of deeper social inequality. Unless this was changed, anything done would be absolutely irrelevant.

"The problems that affect the dominated classes are fragmented, abstracted, analyzed, separated, classified in categories that fragment these classes in sectors: enders, children, injured. The technical and professional classifications justify and consolidate political fragmentation". [7] (Faleiros 1986 pg. 12)

Some of the main ideas behind social work from this "reconceptualization" are (Gagneten 1986):
- Social workers should begin from the popular culture and rediscover the needs and problematical situations generated by economical oppression.
- The object of knowledge and of intervention in social work should be based in unfair structures.
- People should be considered as historical and social beings with the capacity to think and transform themselves as main promoters of their welfare, well being and history.

Social work assumes a role of critical practice that should arise from the culture and the needs of popular sectors, accompanying the process generated by them.

So, from this perspective, what is done must work with the popular sectors of the society. The social worker should not be above them but work with them. The main compromise of the Social Worker should be with the popular sectors and not with the hegemony. A Social Worker should be an "agent of change".

The **image** of a social worker here would be that of a "political militant" dressed in handcraft clothes. This "militant" view of social work made it difficult to set the boundaries and divisions with what could be seen as a political activist.

**Research** began to have another perspective. Systematizing the practices of social education would allow recuperation of the experiences in order to spread them.

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[7] "Los problemas que afectan al conjunto de las clases dominadas son parcializados, abstraídos, analizados, separados, clasificados por categorías que fragmentan a estas clases en sectores de ancianos, menores, accidentados. Las clasificaciones técnicas y profesionales justifican y consolidan esta fragmentación política."

"The systematization of the popular practices can allow a cultural rescue of the Latin American identity under a new rationality that is above the science and occidental cultural patterns through the passionate reconstruction and at the same time a meticulous methodology from the action of the people involved"[8] (Gagneten, 1986)

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[8] "La sistematización de la practicas populares puede aportar a un rescate cultural, de la propia identidad americana bajo una nueva racionalidad superadora de la ciencia y matrices culturales occidentales a través de su reconstrucción apasionada y a la vez metodológicamente minuciosa desde la acción misma con los sectores involucrados."

## 3. Alternative Model

The process of reconceptualization was violently stopped by political change. The rise of dictatorships in Latin America affected social science in a specific way.

From a military perspective, the university and especially Social Science was the cradle of Marxism. As a result, Anthropology and Sociology departments were removed from most of the universities. Many of its students or faculty disappeared or were exiled. Those that stayed in the country had to hide.

Social work in Argentina belonged to the Law School, so Social Workers were seen as a lawyer´s assistant. Most of the teachers that promoted reconceptualization were fired or exiled.

The practice of Social Work gradually recovered its control practices in its highest level. The "traditional" model was installed as the only alternative. The Social Worker was seen as a technician that should apply strongly established norms and procedures. The Social Worker became an administrator that applied actions done by others seeking the social order.

When the democracy was recovered, the teaching plan, as well as most of the faculty of Social Work was changed. Those that came back from exile occupied a new role at the Social Work School. The debate was then established specially at the University level. What should a Social Worker do? Where should she/he work? What should the methodology be?

This strong debate about the role of a social worker was installed specially at the university level. The change from a dictatorship to a democracy made it necessary a change of the study plans of social workers and at the same time a profile of what a social worker should look like. Should it be a nun, a militant, a administrative agent?

These different models meant a debate about profound views of the world. It was not only little reforms or methodological perspectives. To see the social worker as a militant meant seeking social disorder, thinking of being a "change agent" toward a new order. Meant working together with social movements and promoting social organization.

This model was close to the political and ideological view that many of the professors that came back from exile had. But, was this model possible to install? Was that what the working places would ask a Social Worker to do? Probably not. The institutions that hired social workers probably expected that they assumed a role closer to the traditional model than to the "reconceptualization" model. The society had changed. Was it possible to make a combination? Don't they come from different perspectives and different paradigms? Teaching students with a critical theory perspective, was going to give them tools to work in the field?

This debate, strong in the first period of rebuilding social work in Latin America is still strong today in many settings.

The critics to the traditional model were the same done during the reconceptualization years. At the same time there were critics to reconceptualization model from different perspectives (Alayon, 2006):
- It had messianic views of the social worker supposing that it could be an "agent of change"
- Denying assistance to the people, would deny legitimate social rights of the poor.
- Seeing only in social mobilization a possible change, would deny the role of the State and the creative strategies that social workers could have
- The vision from historical materialism permitted understanding the macrostructure but not the social micro social daily lives.
- Social Workers should be professionals and not militants.

Still, it is impossible to deny the important role that this process had to critical thinking in Social Work.

"Alternative Social Work" comes from different sectors in the academia (Alayon, 1989)". "It is only an alternative when it is a popular alternative to social order when interests of popular sector become hegemonic" (Alayon, 1989, pg 104)

This work is not "militant" (even though one cannot deny its political dimension) but a professional practice.

This view is important in shaping the legacy and interpretation of social work.

# B - Legacy and differences of the Reconceptualization process.

## 1) What is the object of intervention.

- <u>The definition of a social problem or the object of intervention has strong ideological connotations.</u>

The model that it is applied influences the definition of a social problem. For example: Somebody makes graffiti on the wall.

From a traditional perspective it is a social problem for many reasons. From one point of view, that person is denying the rights of the owner of the wall and the rest of the community to see the city clean. From other perspective, this person is developing a deviant action, so it could be the genesis of new and more dangerous deviant practices. This could encourage more people to do the same, becoming more difficult to control. The Social Worker should find a way of stopping this action.

From a perspective of "reconceptualization", the painting is a form of resistance against hegemony. So, the person is expressing himself his anger due to exclusion. This will help

other that feel as excluded to find a way of changing the system in which they have no voice. Social Worker should support and even promote this.

From an "alternative" perspective, the painting could be a way of expression and identity. It is a peaceful form of expression as opposed to a dangerous or violent one. This type of expression gives them a place and voice in society.  For example, they can organize among themselves, support their expression, see it as a reflection of their anger and frustration and channel it into their art as a form of social inclusion.

As it can be seen, the action is the same.  The interpretation and the intervention vary from which perspective it is seen.

- <u>Social problems have to be seen from a broader perspective</u>

At the same time, let's imagine this situation.  A child does not go to school.  When the Social Worker goes to his house she finds out that he is working with his mother every night looking for paper to sell.  This is the family's only income . He is too tired to study. At the same time he is unable to go to school, because he lacks the adequate materials to study and cloth to wear.  Seven people occupy the house, which makes it impossible to study.  He is undernourished so he has difficulties concentrating and his grades have been going down.  The family thinks it is a problem that "no le da la cabeza" (his head is not good enough).  So, how can we define the problem?  How could we solve it from the school system?

The reconceptualization process gave Social Work "The comprehension of 'social problems' as manifestations of the "social question" and its implications in the professional intervention from a ethical and political perspective, as well as methodological and technical" [9]

"To avoid a comprehension of the common origin of the existence of social problems finds its rationality, coherence and justification.  These differences, discriminations, inequalities are seen as the nature of social classes; without reproducing it can't be reproduced." [10] (Grassi 1988, pg. 6)

From an alternative perspective, thinking of a social problem only from an individual point of view does not permit us to see the responsibility that the whole society has in generating it.  Social inclusion and social exclusion have to be seen as two different forces that act together.  Is social exclusion an option? Or is social exclusion a result of discrimination?  Is the socially deviant person responsible for his or her actions? Or is it a reaction to the social exclusion that society is imposing on him?

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[9] La en la intervención comprensión de las "problemáticas sociales' a las manifestaciones de la cuestión social y su implicancia profesional en términos de direccionalidad ético-político, teórico metodológico y técnico operativo

[10] Impedir la comprensión de la existencia de un origen común de los problemas sociales encuentra su plena racionalidad coherencia y justificación. En que "esas diferencias, esas discriminaciones, esas desigualdades constituyen la naturaleza misma de la sociedad de clases; sin reproducirlas no puede a su vez reproducirse"

Thinking of a social problem as a "social question" permits us to see the problems from a broader and more historical perspective. Slavery did not end with the abolition of slavery. A new type of slavery was installed; more subtle and maybe more dangerous. Race discrimination persisted, but now those responsible for the exclusion are the excluded, and not the system.

Social workers should be critical when analyzing how social problems are constructed by common sense in society.

The reconceptualization process gave the profession a critical view of how and why Social Work was created. The social control aspect of the profession (that is still today a fundamental part of why social workers are hired) should be understood as an inherent part of the work, but also something to fight against.

The social worker should not work just for welfare; he or she should work for welfare from a broader perspective. The idea of a more equalitarian society has to be the horizon that guides their actions.

## 2) How to work.

Social Workers often become an enemy of excluded populations. As an aboriginal women said " I don't want you to give me a hand, I just want you to put your hand out of me" (no quiero que me den una mano, quiero que me saquen las manos de encima) (quoted by Alayon, 1989).

The critical view of Social work tries to find ways of working together with people, and not "toward" people since sometimes this could mean "against".

Following this I will further explain some of the places where this change can be seen.

Distance between social worker and the socially assisted does not generate real change. Rebuilding hegemony in social intervention reinforces the social exclusion one is trying to work against. Making the person an agent of his own change is the only way to assure social change from a broader perspective.

The social worker should not work only for welfare today. Should work for welfare from a broader perspective. The idea of a more equalitarian society has to be at least the horizon toward which develop the actions. From this alternative perspective assistance is seen as a right of the poor. The difference has to be made in the way assistance is given.

"We differentiate the assistance to the assistencialist, remembering that the ideological and political orientation of the social practice is what determines if a practice is assistencialist or not. If we think, for example that the mere

implementation of activities of social welfare will work toward the eradication of profound causes of retard ness, that it is the formula and panacea to solve social problems, we will be immersed in the cretinism of assistencialism. By the contrary, the assistance activity is assumed to be an inalienable right of the people exploited, interpreted as a perspective toward equality and social justice, while it links major reivindicate, we can not talk about assistencialism." (Alayon, 1989) [11]

Participation does not generate change. It could be used by the government as a way of avoiding its responsibility to ensure social rights. It could be used as cheap labor avoiding some expenses.

From an alternative perspective, popular participation should be the "exercise of the organized people and not the mere collaboration of them in the development of activities decided by the dominant class." (Alayon, 1989 pg. 135)[12]
Also development is not seen as a natural process toward an always desirable situation.


# C - Conclusions

Social Work in Latin America has been strongly affected by the social ideas generated in the region and the place that Latin America has in the world economy. Social work was inspired by the professionalization of social philanthropy with a strong influence of the process used in United States. During the sixties there was a movement toward seeking one's own identity in Latin America and assuming a critical perspective toward how intervention was seen and done. This process was called reconceptualization.

This process was stopped by dictatorships. New debates arouse. In this debate some aspects of this process were criticized but most of the social researchers accepted the important impact that it had on the development of social work. This impact can be seen in the definition of what a social problem is and what is the object of intervention in social work has become. The impact can also be seen in how this intervention is made.

These changes help to see social work from a broader perspective not focusing only on the emerging problems but on how these problems are generated. The result is a more participatory relationship where popular sectors are accountable for their own welfare, and the social worker promotes and solutions that they give to their own problems.

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[11] "Diferenciamos la practica asistencial de la practica asistencialista, recordando que la orientación ideológico-política de la práctica social lo que determina si es asistencialista o no. Si creemos que por ejemplo la mera implementación de algunas actividades de bienestar social, sin apuntar a la erradicación de las causas profundas del atraso, es la formula y la panacea para solucionar los problemas sociales, estaremos sin dudas inmersos en el cretinismo del asistencialismo. Si por el contrario, la actividad asistencia es asumida como derecho inalienable del pueblo explotado, interpretada en la perspectiva de la igualdad y la justicia social y a la par se articula con reivindicaciones mayores, obviamente no podrá hablarse de asistencialismo.

[12] Participación popular – "el ejercicio del poder por parte del pueblo organizado y no la mera colaboración del pueblo en el desarrollo de actividades decididas por la clase dominante.

But this process is not simple as it is seems. The traditional perspective of social work is still especially strong in the type of work that institutions demand of the social workers. In some areas of work such as law, social workers are expected to have a role related with social control and social discipline. From a broader perspective, sometimes is impossible because the demand of the people is direct assistance sometime materialized in concrete social help.

It is important to remember that this is a process. Seeking social inclusion and social equality has to be the horizon of each social worker. Seeking ways of giving assistance while developing skills and mobilization has to be a value that guides the work of the social workers. This heritage created by the critical view of social work is something that the dictatorship was unable to kill.

| Dimension | Traditional Model | "Reconceptualization" model | Post reconceptualization |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social problem | Individual - family | Society and its way of functioning | "Cuestion Social" |
| Methodology | Case - family | Community organization | Social Panning |
| Place of work | Charity organizations - government | Government – social organizations | |
| Typical social worker | Women with pearls | Young dressed with artisans clothes | More men |
| Research | Not research needed | Research applied to action – sistematizacion, participative research | Research is needed to develop |
| Theorietical framework | | Dependency theory, Popular education | |
| Objective of Social Worker | adjustment | Critical view of their society | Empowerment |
| Historical moment | Industrialization | 60 – 70s | Post dictatorship |

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