

Social Worker Role in Times of Austerity

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Background: The financial austerity policy imposed to Portugal by Troika - the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund in 2011, led to a tremendously social crisis. Under these dominant trends in Europe, which were felt especially in certain countries, such as Portugal, we feel ourselves forced into an analysis and reflection on the impact of this conjuncture in social workers, especially analyzing the role played by social workers and its critical consciousness relative to this neoliberal model and imposed austerity policies.

Methods: This article results from an analysis of empirical data collected after the entry of Troika in Portugal, during 2013. Were conducted 26 in-depth interviews to front line social workers, with the purpose of obtaining a narrative of their daily work practice and with the concern of encouraging reflection on them.

Results: Analysis shows the predominance of a maintenance role at the expense of more emancipatory approaches and thus, this results point to the relationship of this maintenance role with the sociological paradigm of social regulation and shows also, how social work is still attached to a conservative agenda. Secondly, one finds a weak critical reflection among social workers, being very afraid to speak out against the system, taking on a submissive attitude and subservient to the policies of social cuts imposed. The analysis then raises the challenge for social workers to develop a critical reflexivity

Conclusion: The results highlight several important observations in terms of social worker role and that a critical activity is urgently required to social workers.

Keywords: neoliberalism; social welfare; crisis; maintenance role; critical activity.

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Introduction

The turn to an era of harsh austerity in Portugal, after 2011, was so drastic that has led this country to a profound economic and social crisis and social work with a major challenge: reset its role and develop its emancipatory goals, developing a greater critical activity and commitments to action.

In fact, principles and commitments of equality and social justice were recently strengthened by social work, particularly in the recently agreed definition of the social work profession by the IFSW (2014) and the Global Agenda (2012). Aspirations for social justice and social development and the need to organise around major and relevant social issues that connect within and across social work profession formed the basis for an international commitment towards an engagement Agenda.

The expansionist 'golden era' of the first post-war decades have been succeeded by a more hostile "era of permanent austerity" and "new politics of the welfare state" (Pierson, 2001) with a focus on cost control and resource efficiency. The austerity-driven retrenchment were accelerated in several countries by 'the great recession' and the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis with its associated austerity packages.

In European Union the turning point for an austerity policy was the creation of the Stability and Growth Pact, whose purpose was to maintain and enforce the deficit and debt limits established by the Maastricht Treaty (Resolution of the European Council on the Stability and Growth Pact, 1997)

Portugal was one of the European countries to whom it was imposed an additional austerity policy from 2011, by IMF, European Commission and ECB (the three members of the triumvirate troika) in the context of the European debt crisis, also referred to as the Eurozone crisis. It was then established an Economic Adjustment Programme for Portugal, a Memorandum of understanding on financial assistance that imposes severe and inflexible austerity measures.

A good summary of the history of austerity measures in Portugal can be found in the study by Caldas (2012). According to this author, what is most interesting, and could be taken as rather alarming, is that the austerity measures seem to have rather worsen the economic situation in Portugal: a deepened recession, almost 20% unemployment. In fact, Portugal is one of the countries where austerity measures were more austere and devastating, leading the country to a deep social crisis and even to a situation of 'social emergency'.

The latest data from the survey of living conditions and income realized by the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2014), relative to 2013, showed that the risk of poverty affects almost two million Portuguese (total population of just over 10 million people). According to INE data, 19.5% of people were at risk of poverty in 2013. The risk of poverty increases and covers almost one in five people. The increase occurred in all age groups but reached with greater impact women and was particularly significant among children (up to age 18). The material deprivation rate increased, with 10.9% of the population in severe material deprivation. Portugal regressed in terms of indicators of poverty and social exclusion almost to the beginning of the century.

In countries which have been target of financial rescue programs by IMF, European Commission and ECB, as was the case of Portugal, the austerity ideology took the form of 'reformism' through structural reforms and drastic cuts in the incipient state social expenses, taking into account the specific characteristics of the national welfare and in that, Portugal is part of the so called "Southern European

Model" or "Mediterranean Model" (Ferrera, 1996) that it is characterised by the low level spending on Social Welfare.

It means, in political term, the re-emergency of conservatism and an ideological tide against the welfare state. However, no ideology was openly evoked in public. Instead, "the notion was advanced of austerity as a technical healing process that would have to hurt in order to be effective" (Caldas, 2012, p.2). In fact, there are countries where austerity measures were more severe and with great negative social consequences. Greece, Portugal and Ireland were the three target countries of measures imposed by Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), serving as a test tube of austerity policies, transmitting a neoliberal ideology of sovereignty to financial markets and its legitimacy based on financial capital, which dominates and subdues the political power.

According to Boaventura Sousa Santos, a Portuguese scholar and one of the leading intellectuals of the World Social Forum (WSF), a network of organizations that challenges the current dominant order, the crisis is a "conscious strategy for social demolition" and the entire social-democracy of Europe is being thinned out in name of this crisis (Santos, 2015). This author further states that financial and social crisis is also political and therefore constitutes a threat to States, in particular to the disorganization of States and the destabilisation of democracy. Thus, according to him, "whilst in the past the state has plenty of non-mercantile relations with its citizens, these have been strongly diminished today. Everything gets privatised and needs to adhere to the logic of the markets (...) the pact between democracy and capitalism has been destroyed." (N. pag.).

Another author who has reflected and written on this subject is Alain Touraine, which states that global free-market capitalism has deeply mutated the nature of society and that what was originally believed as "a matter of reconstructing the economy" has indeed determined the entrenchment of values and culture which have changed our society (2014, p. 11).

So we see that the implementation of austerity measures in Portugal and across Europe, with huge negative impact on social welfare, constitutes a challenge to social work, in particular their resilience and coping with this "new" offensive wave of global capitalism, and his commitment to its fundamental principles and values.

One must be aware that social workers see the consequences of this offensive in everyday practice insofar as they work in frontline and, as Fook & Askeland point out, "how social workers relate to this may be considered a political action" (2009, p. 287). Yet, a political action requires a clear definition of social worker's role as professionals connected with their critical activity, and so we were interested in analyzing what kind of role was played by social workers in the austerity context lived in Portugal and find perhaps a critical activity and reflexivity.

Research aim and method

This article results from a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected through semistructured interviews to social workers. Secondary analysis "involves the re-use of pre-existing qualitative data derived from previous research studies. These data include material such as semistructured interviews (...)" (Heaton, 2008, p. 34).

The main objective of this secondary data analysis was **a)** analyze the most commonly used role by social workers and, **b)** find manifestations of a critical activity in the interviewed social workers.

It should be underlined that these objectives were refined in a precise way only after a Focused Coding process (Charmaz, 2006, p.57).

The interviews were carried out after the formal entry of Troika in Portugal on 2011 and were conducted in the framework of a survey serving different purposes but which covered work practices and professional experience of social workers. In fact, the major disadvantage of using secondary data is not answer the researcher's specific objectives or contain specific information that the researcher would like to have. However, data generated in semi-structured interviews are liable to be analyzed by a secondary analysis and get interpretative data.

As a qualitative research design based on an interpretivist approach, it was taken a non-probabilistic sampling method and as such was used a convenience sample. The sample unit was 26 social workers, whose selection was based on two basic criteria: 1) working in different work settings and 2) working for more than 10 years.

The interview structure did not rely on closed-ended or structured questions and it was organized around topics to be covered during the course of the interview by asking open-ended questions.

The data analysis was performed through the Grounded Theory Analysis, in which the central process is coding the data. (Flick, 2009, p.402). Grounded theory coding was the procedure for analyzing data have been collected and it was followed Charmaz's approach to coding (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, coding was performed in two main phases: 1) an Initial Coding involving naming each word, line, or segment of data, followed by 2) a Focused Coding, a selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes, to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data. (Charmaz, 2006, p.46).

When conducted Initial Coding, we created our codes by defining what we saw in the data, because the logic of grounded theory coding differs from quantitative logic that applies *preconceived* categories or codes to the data (Charmaz, 2006, p.46). Thus, initial codes were provisional and grounded in the data. Furthermore, in this whole process, we remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities we could discern in the data (p. 47).

After we have established a strong analytic direction, we begin a Focused Coding (Charmaz, 2006, p.57), the second major phase in coding, to synthesize and explain larger segments of data. Thus, through comparing data to data, we developed the focused codes and then we compared data to these codes, which helps to refine them. Thereby, codes have become more directed, selective, and conceptual. The core categories were designated based on concepts from research literature.

In a secondary analysis of qualitative data there is a latent level of analysis, therefore is more an interpretive analysis that is concerned with the response as well as what may have been inferred. So, by adopting an interpretive approach to analysis we assumed that the responses were interpreted by researchers whereas that analysis of speeches of others is highly subjective, relativistic and even influenced by the researcher's theoretical lens.

Thus, generalisations from the interviewees, especially from a small number of interviewees, to a whole profession is not sought; rather, the intent is to capture plausible trends which can then be used to reflect and discuss.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The need for a critical theory

Some thinkers may argue that critical theory has lost its force and that his last theoretical mark was the publication of Jürgen Habermas' *Theory of communicative Action* (1981), main thinker of the second generation critical theorists.

However, the current social reality calls for a renewed critical theory since the ongoing economic crisis that have intensified since 2008 suggests that some phenomena diagnosed by the first generation critical theorists are far from being resolved or out date and it takes a closer look for what is happening. In fact, according to Schecter (2013), the anti-crisis measures, of austerity, are imposed in an authoritarian manner ignoring other alternatives. Thus, "it is nonetheless doubtful if the notion of authoritarian personality complex developed by first-generation critical theorists provides an adequate explanation to the phenomena involved" (Schecter, 2013, p.6).

At the moment, in Europe, some governments and its citizens are often portrayed as main responsible for the public debt crisis, which actually began with the banks and their credit policies. For Boaventura Sousa Santos, this is a crisis caused by deregulated financial capital that speculates on the misery of the people. The more countries go bankrupt, the richer this system gets. The consequences are not just about numbers, but about people: people are losing their jobs, their homes, their will to live (Santos, 2015). Amid all the catastrophe, the financial markets and private companies "seem somehow to exist in a space insulated from social and political criticism, thus making a renewal of critical theory indispensable" (Schecter, 2013, p.6).

In Europe, we can point out the case of Eurogroup, the grouping of the finance ministers of the Eurozone, that appears as an omnipotent entity imposing an austerity policy based on the conviction that there is no possible alternative, thus showing that the policy is subjugated to the forces of finance capital.

The principles and democratic mechanisms, such as choices of voters, come be placed in question, as well as the foundation of organizations not subject to a public scrutiny like the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the euro area's permanent bailout fund set up in 2012, an international organization that operates behind closed doors. In fact, given the ESM's close links with the IMF and its cooperation with the Commission and ECB (the three members of the Troika triumvirate), plus the fact that it is now the main provider of financial loans for European countries in economic difficulties, one is entitled to ask if this organization is nothing more than a political handling to impose the antidote to the crisis that "generally consists in the single 'acceptable' solution to the problem of 'unproductive' labour: cutting back government spending on health, public housing, education, pensions, legal aid, etc." (Schecter, 2013, p.6)

This raises a number of questions about critical theory but also challenges the potential of individuals as subjects capable of achieving critical activity.

Critical activity of the Subject

Still remains a tension between critical theories and the theories of action over the issue of Subject (an issue which was denied in traditional critical sociology).

Although differently, Alain Touraine (sociology of action) and François Dubet (sociology of individual and the subject), provides inputs to think about a sociology of the social subject, advancing ideas to discuss the active and reflective role of the individual in relation to modern social forms. In his book 'Thinking Differently', Touraine makes a critical incursion into what he called as 'a dominant interpretive discourse' in a 'blind society', which tried throughout the twentieth century to impose the idea of a society without actors that was subject to various kinds of determinism, especially economic determinism. The author manifests against a defeatist view of the subject, "this double vision of the impotence of social actors and the strength of global economic forces has spread and took root deeply in the intellectual life" (2009, p. 11). Touraine argues that "we need to make a unique effort to analyze new ways of thinking, acting and speaking in order to free ourselves from our present feeling of helplessness and emptiness" (2009, p. 22). Thus, according to Touraine, the best way to free ourselves of this amorphousness is through the 'logic of the subject'.

However, for Dubet (1994) this logic only manifests itself through a critical activity. Dubet, in his *Sociology of experience* (1994), argues that social systems are not reducible to a single logic or rationality and that individual and collective forms of behavior can coexist even when they are guided by heterogeneous and divergent principles of action. Such a perspective rejects the two extremes of individual voluntarism and social determinism and allows a gap between individual action and social effect, that provides the opportunity to construct one's subjectivity. Thus, the subject is neither predestined nor programmed.

Dubet defines alienation "as the deprivation of the capacity to be a subject" (1994, p. 131) and the logic of the subject "appears only indirectly in critical activity, one that assumes that the actor cannot be reduced neither to their roles or their interests" (Dubet 1994: 133). Indeed, in the 'logic of the subject', that is, when the actor stands on this perspective, its identity can be defined as a *commitment*. The author uses this term to say that the identity of the subject is defined as "a commitment to cultural models that build the representation of the subject" (Dubet 1994: 131). What matters is the efficiency of this subject to, through their critical activity, take a critical reflection towards himself and society.

At this point, we assumed and incorporated an understanding of critical reflection according to a perspective of critical theory. A reflection that focus on uncovering power dynamics and assumptions about how the world should work. Assumptions that we accept unquestioningly as commonsense just because are based on the credibility of some authority sources. "Some person, institution, or authority that we either trust or fear has told us that 'this is the way things are' and we accept their judgment unquestioningly" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 295). It is the alienation of the individual, overpowered, and it is against this alienation that it builds his capacity to become a subject, strengthened by a critical reflexivity.

Critical reflexivity of social workers

What is happening in current times in Europe that require a strengthened critical reflexivity?

The financial crisis that has plagued Europe concerns all, mostly by the intense attack done to the welfare states in addition to the growth of inequality, oppression of workers and general impoverishment

of population. This offensive austerity brought back to consciousness the need to critically reflect on how social work, as a profession, and social workers, meet these challenges and whether take a passive or critique stance towards this offensive.

Critical reflexivity is one of those terms that is sometimes used in an undifferentiated way, sometimes assorted with other similar, and in social work we see more often the term critical reflection (see the special issue on critical reflection of European Journal of Social Work, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2009).

Critical reflexivity and critical reflection are two associated terms with different conceptual lines and we have chosen to use the term critical reflexivity because that's an approach which emphasise the connection with critical social theory. The term 'critical' is taken from the Frankfurt School who has created critical theory, aimed analysing those structures in society which are oppressive and should be changed.

Reflection is used mainly as a way of "analysis of power relations and how individual experience is unavoidably connected with the preservation of social structures of domination" (Askeland and Fook, 2009, p.290). According to Oterholm (2009) "the reflection focus on power and power relations and how they influence our actions" (p. 364). Thus, we are addressing critical reflexivity more as a general political stance, on the path of a critical theory.

A central concept in critical theory, which really helps us in a critical reflexivity process is the 'ideology critique' that "describes the process by which people learn to recognise how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293). Indeed, one of dominant contemporary ideology – supremacy of markets and sovereignty of financial capitalism – shape beliefs and practices that justify the financial crisis as a result of bad governance of states / governments in public expenditure and irresponsible consumers / families who indebted above their possibilities.

So it is understandable when Schecter (2013) argues that "to date the crisis has been widely accepted as a kind of socio-economic Tsunami or similar natural event (...) It is thus unsurprising that it is met with fear, resignation, and reactions that correspond more to human interest responses to natural catastrophes" (p. 6). This reaction of resignation to a kind of natural disaster reveals the subjugation of a large majority of people to a dominant ideology and such a mechanism can also be explained in the light of the 'concept of hegemony' which "explains how subjugated people are convinced to embrace dominant ideologies as always being in their own best interests" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293). But to challenge ideology we need to be aware of how it lives within us and works against us by furthering the interests of others (Ibid.).

Ideology critique could help people to an awareness process in order to grasp the character of the forces shaping current policy of austerity. The trends and changes accompanying austerity policy, follow from certain ideological and political stances, affect social work policy and practice directly, as they promote values, roles and practices that work against social work principles. Thereby, while a professional trend in social work is to emphasise empowerment and emancipation, there is, currently, a tendency in public policies and administrative powers to reduce social worker to an executive role (Beckett, 2006; Sousa, 2014), reinforcing thus a maintenance approach.

Critical social work and questioning of 'maintenance' role

According to Fook (2003, p. 123) it is possible to design the critical traditions of Social Work from the approaches based on Marxist analyzes (e.g. Corrigan and Leonard, 1978), through the feminist contributions (e.g. Dominelli and McLeod, 1982) and structuralists (e.g. Mullaly, 1993), to the further development of the perspective based on critical theory and postmodern perspectives (e.g. Fook and Pease, 1999). However, “the critical social work as consistent term was only used more explicitly from the 90s, especially in the coming literature of Canada (e.g. Rossiter, 1996) and Australia (e.g. Ife, 1997)” (Fook, 2003, p. 123-124).

The theoretical foundations and key principles of critical social work derive mostly from critical social theory (Healy, 2000; Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 1997) (in Fook, 2003, p. 124), whose key tenets are paraphrased from Agger by Fook (2003, p.124-125). Yet, it is possible to identify two major perspectives in critical social work that can roughly be differentiated as the structural and poststructural (Ife, 1997, in Fook, 2003, p. 125). “In broad terms the former is based on Marxist analysis (e.g. Mullaly, 1997), emphasizing the role of social structure in the determination of class and power differences. The latter approach tends to incorporate more Foucauldian analysis (e.g. Healy, 2000; Leonard, 1997), which involves recognizing more personal, dynamic, and multiple ways in which power differences are created and maintained” (Ibid.).

Therefore, under influence of the critical social theory ideas emerged critical social work, criticizing and denouncing the traditional influence of cognitive, behavioral and psychodynamic approaches on the practices of social work, considering them not only irrelevant but also as constituting part of the problem, since these psychological perspectives contributed to social workers blame or pathologizes users. This meant that social workers divert the gaze of the true causes of people's problems, including unjust social structures and the unequal distribution of power and resources (Howe, 2009: 130). Hence, under the influence of cognitive, behavioral and psychodynamic approaches, social work will be part of an ‘maintenance’ approach (Dominelli, 2002). In fact, for Dominelli (2002, p. 3) the role and design of social work have been categorized in three types: Therapeutic help approaches; ‘Maintenance’ approaches and Emancipatory approaches.

According to Martin Davies, the ‘maintenance’ approach “engage to political issues, particularly those seeking to change the existing social order is out of the mandate of the ‘maintenance’ practitioner, which sees society as basically benign (in Dominelli, 2002, p. 4). In the ‘maintenance’ approach, according to Davies, “The main concern of the social worker is to ensure that people can remedying or deal appropriately with their lives’ (in Dominelli, 2002, p. 4).

Regulation and social order

This maintenance role matches the sociological paradigm of regulation, identified with social order, in which Howe (1987) enlists the theories and practices of functionalist and interpretive social work. Should be recalled that the main objective of functionalism is the system maintaining stability, and that instability is seen as a threat. Howe (1987) puts in this stream of thought the designated ‘psychoanalytic social work’ and the ‘behavioral social work’ (1987, p. 53-59). In the designated interpretivist, we have a

practice oriented by interactionist principles, where it predominates 'client-centered approach', "heir of humanistic psychology, but that also contribute to the strengthening of the dominant order" (Howe, 1987, p. 96-106).

The 'behavioral social work' converge to the justification of the prevalence of the maintenance role. Its attraction for professionals on the field, has to do with the fact that, "behavioral approaches don't say to the practitioner what is happening (theory) but go further and advise him in the what to do exactly, a clearly prescriptive guidance (method). Being told what to do and how to do it emerges as something of common sense to many social workers" (Howe 1987, p. 82). Thus, the practice guided by the behavioral approach often is based on interventions 'focused on the problem', focused on the task and limited in time. Is taken from here a certain agreement between the behavioral social work and the maintaining task, especially by the individualistic view of the problems, the deficits to be overcome and the monitoring and control to be exercised over individuals and groups.

The regulation paradigm is constitutive of social worker role which, according to some authors, is still very rooted to a conservative agenda. To Shardlow, has not been included in the agenda of social work, "questioning the legitimacy of economic, political and social system and the way in which inequality and oppression models systematically put at a disadvantage woman, ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, children and young people, especially when entrenched in poor working-classes" (Shardlow, 2002, p. 44). For this author, social work continues to follow an approach to the social reality of conservative bias, continuing to act as if, "the first cause of client problems is listed in their behavior, morality and dysfunctional family relationships" (Shardlow, 2002, p. 44).

Payne concludes this discussion arguing that social work is a discourse between three aspects of practice that includes: the social order, therapeutic and transformative views (Payne, 2006). However, among social workers, prevails a 'social order view', using the Payne's nomenclature, since they mainly focus on the interaction between the organizations, represented in the working institution, and the needs of the user (Payne, 2006, p. 83). In contrast, the so-called 'transformative views' are part of a more critical thinking framework, hence the relevance of critical theory to think about the transformative and emancipatory practices of social work.

Results and Discussion

As answer to the main objectives of the study, it can be said that after coding the interviews emerged as major categories the *maintenance role* and an *atrophied critical activity*, which we explain below.

As a response to the outlined objective (a), it can be said that from the approaches outlined by Dominelli (2002) we highlight, from speeches of social workers, the 'maintenance' approach in which the social worker remains closely associated with system maintenance and the established social order.

Spends a lot of that the institutions require us; It is requested to be solve and social worker works much in the everyday management, the emerging problems(...), they are concerned to resolve the crisis and make the control. I think we're much more in control and support. (...) The logic is to keep the situation stable, is not it? (I. 7)

The social work is very supportive of the established order. And much, how shall I say..., subservient, «it is to do? That's what to do? So we do it» (I. 8)

The maintenance role relays itself through certain professional practices and we can highlight the ‘social accompanying’, a recurrent term used among Portuguese social workers that shows the importance that is accorded to this work. In the speech of some social workers interviewed, the ‘accompanying’ is viewed as a monitoring task, particularly mentioned for problematic individuals and dysfunctional families, which makes the figure of ‘accompanying’ an act of control, regulator and with a stabilization and maintenance function. The ‘accompanying’ or ‘monitoring’ is thereby mentioned to express a control work on the users.

We do the accompaniment of the family (...) Sometimes the young need a monitoring and the family a radical intervention, because they were educated without habits (I. 6)

It's more to monitor, see if that situation is going well. (I. 10)

From data analysis appears most relevant, in terms of field approaches, the ‘behavioral social work’ and with less emphasis on ‘client-centered approach’, but both are included in the regulation paradigm and thus meeting the maintenance role played by social workers.

Although they (users) do not want to, but it has to be ... and social workers say: “you really have to do”. Here participation can be questionable. His participation is passive, “if force me to do ... I do it...”, but the motivation is not much. (I. 2)

That is his duty (user), and mine is trying to encourage this duty so there is behavior change; this is my job, promote behavior change. (I. 7)

As a response, also, to the outlined objective (b), it can be said that after coding the interviews emerged as major category an *atrophied critical activity*.

In fact, in the interviews it was difficult to find a clear ‘critical activity’ as a concern in everyday practice,

- Critical thinking? We do not have ... no. It is a complete inactivity. People feel comfortable and let be. (I 6)

I think it's complacency, I think people do not really like to bother, because this brings discomfort, is not it? Even just to give opinion, this will bring unease, and people do not want to disturb. (I 23)

We are very polite, in general. Too afraid to take positions, to defend what we believe, honorable exceptions. But in general, especially those younger are very obliging to the system, make obediently what is requested. It is also the issue of employment, precarious employment that does not help anything, right? People feel insecure and do not risk, afraid of losing their jobs. (I 7)

We are ordinary citizens and as all the Portuguese, the social worker has difficulty to mobilization, participation, is not it? We are not much better than they are other people in this aspect. (I 22)

Succinctly, the results suggest firstly the predominance of a maintenance role at the expense of more emancipatory approaches and, thus, this results point to the relationship of this maintenance role with the sociological paradigm of social regulation and shows, also, how social work is still attached to a conservative agenda. Secondly, we find a very weak critical activity among social workers, being very afraid to speak out against the system, taking on a submissive attitude and subservient to the State policies and institutions.

These results led us to a discussion of them, raising two main questions:

- 1) *How to interpret the predominance of the maintenance role played by social workers in an austerity wave imposed in an authoritarian way?*

We consider that it was not the austerity turn who has determined or conditioned the maintenance role, insofar as this was already rooted in the practices of social work in Portugal. In fact, in latest decades, the social work practice has been mostly oriented to social regulation and very rooted to a conservative agenda. As it is seen the social worker is still closely associated with system maintenance role and the established social order, an idea reinforced by Amaro, a Portuguese social work researcher, when classifies the ‘standard paradigm of professional practices as ‘accommodation’ (Amaro, 2008, p. 67). Accommodation means adjust to the social order, accommodate to the social and legally established, without questioning.

The authors of an international study, which included Portugal, reported that “Portuguese social workers (...) recognized the steady transformation of mainstream social work into a parochial and charitable activity. One of the respondents explained that social work under the current crisis: not only has become more bureaucratic, but has also adopted more charitable characteristics that put into question crucial ethical and political principles of our profession: the right to dignity and the development of a fair and just society” (Ioakimidis, Santos, and Herrero, 2014, p. 293).

The maintenance role relays itself through certain professional acts which becoming increasingly routinized and performed in often highly prescriptive ways, as is the case of the so-called ‘accompanying social’. The recurrent using of this term notably among Portuguese social workers shows the importance that is accorded to this work. The ‘accompanying social’ emerges as a practice task widespread in professional practice of social workers, often being invoked as a common practice in the routine work of the social worker. In fact, the term ‘accompanying social’ is commonly used in daily language of social workers, and “this term is used to describe the technical and administrative process that goes from the request of the user to the institutional response” (Vieira, 2009, p. 353).

Furthermore, the interpretation of the interviews suggests that is current, in many social workers, a deterministic thinking that feels powerless by the structure, finding that the objective conditions of the individuals do not allow these great changes. The social worker works so in a contradiction because believes (perhaps too) in the weight of the structure on the individual and does not augur conditions for effective

change in the lives of the individuals. It's like a *control officer* that speaks one speech from the Humanistic Psychology, in a clear reference to the 'person-centered approach' which, according to Howe (1987), despite its humanistic and relational bias, it still fit in the paradigm of social regulation and thus actively contributing to the maintenance of the established order.

Note that the 'maintenance' approach also feeds the *cliché* of a fatalism and powerlessness of actors, and that is denounced by Touraine, stating that "in a world of accelerating change, which globalization is imposed by new information technologies and the channels of banking and economic exchanges, I am impressed with the number of those who think that nothing can change" (Touraine, 2009, p. 11).

In accordance with Beckett (2006), one might even question: "will not social workers part of those who no longer believe and think that nothing can change? Do not are still much attached to 'present-oriented approaches' (Beckett, 2006, p. 56-61) or even to 'past-oriented approaches'?" (p. 47-54).

These approaches focused on the search for causal explanations, either in the past or in the present, and focus too much on the problem, in deficits and disabilities. As emphasizes Beckett, "much of social work is oriented to the identification of problems and weaknesses, needs and risks in place to identify strengths and positive points on which to build" (Beckett, 2006, p. 76).

We find therefore that the 'maintenance role' of social worker is still shaped by the regulation paradigm and stuck to a conservative agenda.

2) *How to interpret the atrophied critical activity among social workers?*

First of all, it should be noted that exists, in a comprehensive way, a lack of knowledge about critical reflection's theoretical basis and that this gives rise to a great diversity of meaning about critical reflection. This led Askland & Fook fostered a special issue on critical reflection saying that hope "European social workers will become interested in critical reflection's theoretical basis and better understand the use and value of critical reflection in practice, education and research" (2009, p. 287). Prevails a diminished critical reflection on the part of social workers, as well as different understandings as to what may constitute a critical reflection, ranging from the reflection on practices, criticism of social policies, passivity, etc.

In Portugal, given the historical circumstances of having lived a totalitarian political regime until the mid-1970s, the social work awakened to a more critical stance only from the 80s, and very 'stuck' to the Latin America Reconceptualization Movement, that took place in the mid-1960s in Latin American social work (Servio, 2014), therefore, more stronger in still nascent and immature academic world of social work in Portugal, but without great support to professionals in the field, "persisting traditional social work in line with the classical methods and without aiming the collective subject" (Santos, 2008, p.113).

Austerity has reinforced oppression and social exclusion of collective subjects, namely unemployed, poor working-classes and families in financial deprivation, among others. However, despite the adverse effects, the advent of austerity has not had repercussions in terms of intense critical activity on the part of social workers. Actually, this may be explained by the lack of preparation on the one hand, and another by the absence of "*habitus*" on critical reflection in professional practice. And above all, the nonexistence of a project or ethical-political agenda, based on critical social work, that defend the values

and principles that promotes an emancipatory role, since the emancipatory approach presupposes an explicit commitment to social justice.

Social workers interviewed seems like have not great concern about emancipatory approaches, a practice oriented to social transformation and development of a critical consciousness. Thus, it can be argued that austerity has not had the merit to trigger, among social workers, a contestation of the neoliberal model and austerity policy and development of a structural approach. In fact, according to a Portuguese social worker researcher, the deep crisis, austerity and decline of the welfare state had an adverse effect on social work practices, namely a return to assistencialism. “Social Work is being pushed into practices characterized by an assistencialist approach, an individualization of the analysis and a blaming bias on the way social phenomena are seen” (Amaro, 2015, N.p).

This reality can be better understood due to the fact that “the knowledge base of the profession systematically ignored and excluded radical currents that developed in society, and remained directed towards the political elites. Until recently, and despite the influence of Latin American critical approaches, in Portugal and Spain radicalism has always been a visible yet sideline current” (Ioakimidis, Santos, and Herrero, 2014, p. 296). Unfortunately, it is current and prevailing the statement of Shardlow (2002) for whom there is still not been “included in the agenda of social work question the legitimacy of economic, political and social system and the way in which inequality and oppression models systematically put at a disadvantage woman, ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, children and young people, especially when posted in poor working-classes” (Shardlow, 2002, p. 44).

We recognized an *atrophied critical activity* among social workers and that these have submitted to a deafening silence but, in general, this attitude was overall for the whole nation and Portuguese people, who was persuaded by this neoliberal ideology. Touraine (2014) criticizes neoliberalism, affirming that “the neoliberals tried to make us believe that we were all subject to the laws of economics, that we would not be able to gain control of the economic situation” (p. 47) and in Portugal were successful. However, as stated Touraine (2014), “financiers and neoliberal economists are not the only ones responsible for the state of current affairs and for the crisis; this situation would not have arisen without the silence of politicians (particularly from Centre-left area who were supposed to challenge politically the neoliberal ideology), trade unionists and intellectuals” (p. 48-51) who have declined their role of defenders of marginalized, poor and subaltern. And we would add, also without the silence of social workers who did not mobilize against this oppressive power. However, some social workers are acutely aware of this looseness and lack of mobilization of social workers, but feel helpless and without support of associative forms with mobilizing projects and actions.

According to Touraine (2014), “we need to identify a principle, strong enough, to mobilize us against the omnipotence of profit” (p. 57). Possibly the greatest challenge for social work, nowadays, is to restore critical social work and its ‘political action’ to fight for a more just and cohesive society. It is important to point out that critical social work mainly promotes an emancipatory role, since the emancipatory approach presupposes an explicit commitment to social justice.

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