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## Social work in the global neoliberal context: solidarity and resistance from a radical perspective

### Trabajo social en el contexto neoliberal global: solidaridad y resistencia desde una perspectiva radical

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#### Abstract

Neoliberal capitalism has had a brutal impact in terms of increasing inequality throughout the world. This is closely related to the mental health problems growing among the general population, including social workers. In this article, I propose that there cannot be critical social work based genuinely on the search for social justice that does not emphasize human relationships; nor can there be social work based on human relationships that does not aspire to the promotion of social justice on a structural level. To argue around this position, discussions about neoliberalism and its impact on human relationships are addressed as a broad framework to think about social work today. The professional past is problematized and the current conditions in which the intervention of social workers takes place are analysed, which lead to reflecting on the possibility of resistance. Based on the analysis of the acts of resistance of social workers in

**Key words:**  
Neoliberalism;  
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human  
relationships;  
resistance.

some European countries, a radical project of social work is proposed, which puts solidarity and care at the centre as a transforming impulse in our societies

## Resumen

El capitalismo neoliberal ha impactado de manera brutal en términos del incremento de la desigualdad en todo el mundo. Esto tiene una estrecha relación con los problemas de salud mental que enfrenta de manera creciente la población en general, incluyendo a las/os trabajadoras sociales. En este artículo planteo que no puede haber un trabajo social crítico, basado genuinamente en la búsqueda de la justicia social, que no ponga énfasis en las relaciones humanas; y que tampoco puede haber un trabajo social basado en las relaciones humanas que no aspire a la promoción de la justicia social en un plano estructural. Para argumentar en torno a esta posición, se abordan discusiones sobre el neoliberalismo y su impacto en las relaciones humanas como un marco amplio para pensar a trabajo social hoy. Se problematiza el pasado profesional y se analizan las condiciones actuales en que se produce la intervención de las/os trabajadoras sociales, para pensar desde allí la posibilidad de la resistencia. En base al análisis de los actos de resistencia del trabajo social en algunos países europeos, se propone un proyecto radical de trabajo social, que pone al centro la solidaridad y el cuidado como impulso transformador en nuestras sociedades.

**Palabras clave:**  
Neoliberalismo;  
trabajo social  
radical;  
relaciones  
humanas;  
resistencia.

## Introduction

In March 2019, our profession celebrated the International Day of Social Work under the motto "promoting the importance of human relationships". This was a very well received topic that rightly generated much discussion about the nature of our profession and the links that exist between the way individuals and their relationships are shaped in different socio-political contexts. This observation leads us to the central question in our discussion here. In a profession historically concentrating most of its activity and energy on working with individuals it has, in many respects, neglected what we might call the "structural level", the "macro level" or the "social work based on social justice".

My answer to those questions is decidedly negative. The thesis that I want to defend in this article is that, on the contrary, there cannot be a critical social work guided by the principle of social justice that does not emphasize human relationships. But neither can there be a social work based on human relations that does not aspire to the promotion of social justice at the structural level. From a radical perspective, these two dimensions are intimately linked and any effort to separate one from the other -the micropolitics of resistance and critical social work on a structural plane- will inevitably reduce social work to a technocratic activity or an abstract pseudo-political activity.

In this article I will address three main and interrelated areas that derive from this thesis, in order to reflect on what it means to think about solidarity and resistance from social work in the global neoliberal context. First, I will present an analysis of how neoliberalism affects human relationships and people's mental health. Second, I will analyze elements of the political economy of social work, discussing the impacts of neoliberalism on the working conditions of social workers based on the results of a study carried out in the United Kingdom by the British Association of Social Workers in 2019. Third, and with the purpose of moving towards a rethinking of social work from a radical perspective, I will critically review some passages of professional history that allow us to problematize and rethink the principles of social justice of social work. Finally, I will present some proposals that are framed in what in the United Kingdom and other European countries is called a radical approach to social work (Ferguson et al., 2018), including a reflection on the relevance of international alliances and the commitment to demands of collectives and social movements as part of the political agenda of the profession and discipline.

## Human relations in neoliberalism

In recent years, our societies, which have been aggressively reshaped as market-oriented economies, have experienced an unprecedented and overwhelming new epidemic: mental suffering.

According to the World Health Organization, WHO (2017), in the countries of the European Union (EU), Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, 27% of the adult population (here defined as 18 to 65 years of age) had experienced at least one of a number of mental health problems in the year prior to the visit (this included substance use problems, psychosis, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders). Rates of distress for women were significantly higher compared to men (33%). The data also showed that these mental health problems affected people from lower-income households, the unemployed, and people receiving state benefits much more significantly.

Mental health problems are not new, of course. They have been observed and experienced since the creation of the first human communities. However, the important question, from a social work perspective, is what really accounts for the huge increase in distress experienced in the Western world today. I am referring to the factors that influence anguish and other mental health problems that are intensified in certain segments of the population, the most impoverished sectors.

Traditional views on distress and mental health issues, which have also greatly influenced social work, have not been able to fully explain this increase (Hart et al.,



2019). This is because attention has focused on individual pathology, trying to explain mental health issues in a similar way to physical illness, often attributing symptoms to chemical or hormonal imbalances or, more recently, prioritizing a neurological understanding of the development of individuals. It is what has traditionally been called the biomedical approach, one of the dominant theoretical bases of disciplinary training in social work. Certainly, the biomedical approach does not always capture the underlying cause of distress.

As Ian Ferguson has mentioned in his recent book "The Politics of the Mind" (2017), the biomedical model individualizes anxiety - in other words, it focuses the understanding of the phenomenon of anxiety on the individual who experiences it. The starting point, from a radical perspective in social work, is to challenge that belief that is still ingrained and that is reproduced daily in professional interventions. Challenging this biomedical, neutral and aseptic matrix implies understanding that the significant increase in levels of distress is closely related to the pressure that neoliberal capitalism exerts on people's lives.

To this I would add social inequality as an additional factor that is fundamental. Researchers Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), in their extensive epidemiological work on inequality, have confirmed what generations of social workers have witnessed in the first line of their professional intervention: it is the material circumstances that mainly shape the lives of the people, not their morality. Their book highlights the horrible effects that inequality has on societies: it erodes trust, increases anxiety and illness, and encourages compulsiveness and binge drinking. With reference to mental health, researchers have suggested that until recently it was difficult to compare the levels of mental health problems between different countries because no one had collected strictly comparable data; but recently the WHO has established global mental health surveys that are beginning to provide data. These show that different societies have very different levels of mental health problems. In some countries, about 5% of the adult population has suffered from a mental health problem in the last year, but in the United States, more than 25% have.

In their research, Wilkinson & Pickett showed a relationship between mental health problems and income inequality in eight developed countries: The United States, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Italy and Japan. The conclusion suggests that mental health problems are much more frequent in more unequal countries. Mental health problems were also found to be more common in the wealthier countries included in the study.



A similar pattern has been observed for different variables such as crime, obesity, physical health, among others. Sheet by sheet and case after case this research shows that the most unequal societies create sicker and more unhappy individuals. Therefore, improving human relations is a collective and not individual matter, which requires structural changes to the way in which the economy of our societies is organized and not merely individual behaviour changes.

The catastrophic impact of inequality has been exacerbated in much of the world by the effects of the "protracted recession" that took place in 2008. To be more precise, social inequality has been specifically exacerbated by ideological decisions driven by political leaders, governments and the International Monetary Fund (Ioakimidis et al., 2014). The holy trinity of neoliberalism (commodification, privatization, and austerity) was again invoked in response to the global crisis. The effects of that "long recession" have, of course, been experienced very differently by different sectors of the world's population.

Austerity policies - maximizing social spending in dismantled European welfare states - has been the short-term economic, ideological, and political strategy that has dominated Europe for most of the last decade. Its appeal to governments is that it seems to provide a clear, simple, and moralistic explanation for the current crisis; for example, the existence of excessive government spending has been argued, especially in social assistance where thousands of lazy or work-shy people are supposedly taking advantage of the State.

The solution to that crisis, as this simplistic analysis suggests, is to cut wages, cut public spending, and raise taxes. In almost all cases, this solution has also involved "structural reform", which means greater market flexibility, pension cuts, privatization of public companies, and so on. A report by the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) published in early 2016 showed that 1% of the world's population currently owns more wealth than the rest of the world combined. Even more starkly, 62 people own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population. "An Economy for the 1%" showed that the wealth of the poorest half of the world's population, 3.6 billion people, has declined by a trillion dollars since 2010. This 38% drop occurred despite the world population increasing by around 400 million people during that period. Meanwhile, the wealth of the 62 richest has increased by more than half a trillion dollars to 1.76 trillion dollars (Oxfam, 2016).

## The working conditions of social workers

In this scenario of dismantling well-being in Europe, the alienation, the intensification of work and the atomization that characterize aggressive commodification are reflected in the deterioration of people's mental health. In relation to the working conditions of social workers, this becomes even more evident as the liberalization of our economies has created insecure, intensive and poorly paid jobs.

This brings us to the second main reason why emphasizing human relationships is a timely and meaningful decision, even more so if we take a radical approach to social work. If we assume that fostering a relationship with the people we work with is a process that involves the active and proactive participation of both sides, and that any aspect of personal or professional life that affects both sides must be considered, we cannot ignore the conditions of specific issues that social workers experience in their jobs. We have already outlined the big picture and identified the mental health and financial pressures many of the people we work with are experiencing.

Obviously these conditions tend to vary from country to country, but the point here is that social workers do not choose their profession because they want to get rich - if they wanted to get rich, then social work would not have been the right career. Most social workers choose their profession primarily because they are committed to social justice and want to achieve transformation in people's lives. However, the form and function of neoliberal economies affect social work experiences in their jobs. While we are a fast-growing profession in terms of numbers and influence, there is still much that needs to be accomplished in terms of working conditions.

In a recent study commissioned by the British Association of Social Workers in 2018 (Ravalier & Boichat, 2018), it was the distress reported by social workers themselves that attracted the most attention. And the results were stark and alarming:

- Compared to the UK average, social workers' working conditions were worse than 95% of other employees working in both the public and private sectors,
- Almost half of the social workers declare they are not satisfied with their jobs,
- Two thirds of them have worked while they were ill. They have done it at least twice in the last year,
- Social workers worked an average of 64 days per year over what they were hired to do (an average of 11 unpaid overtime hours per week),



- 60% of social workers stated that they wanted to leave their current job in the next 15 months, compared to 52% reported last year.
- Almost 40% of those surveyed have sought to leave the profession completely.
- The main stressors identified by the participants were the high administrative burdens and the cases in which they intervene, in addition to the anguish when seeing the lack of resources to provide better care to the users.

The interesting thing here is that, in many respects, social workers face conditions that are not very different from the situations experienced by the users of our services (alienation, anguish, unsafe jobs, etc.).

This observation leads me to the main argument I want to make: if we want to achieve change through the fostering of transformative human relationships, we must rethink social work and develop critical, comprehensive, non-stigmatizing and anti-oppressive models

## **A complex past**

The third reason that highlights the importance of reclaiming and reimagining radical social work in the era of neoliberal capitalism is related to our own history as a profession (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020).

We must remember and celebrate social workers who were pioneers in promoting human rights. From the 19th century settlement movement in North America to the reconceptualization movement in Latin America, from the resistance of indigenous communities to the creation of the Social Work Action Network -SWAN for its acronym in English-, there has been a fascinating history of criticism in social work that, although largely unexplored in the Anglo-American world, has substantially influenced the profession. Many social work pioneers promoted human rights and put their own lives at great risk of being persecuted, imprisoned and killed.

However, we must also explore those parts of our history where social workers have been complicit in some of the most horrifying events humanity has witnessed in the twentieth century. Several historical incidents highlight examples of notable brutality, informed by the unfolding of equally extraordinary political junctures. In Europe, these cases can be linked, above all, with the rise of fascist and Nazi ideologies and their pseudoscientific concern for the creation of a "master race" through eugenics. Some social workers and social pedagogues were directly involved in the process of monitoring the organization of families and the indoctrination of children.

Unfortunately, the instrumentalization of eugenics in the context of social services did not end with World War II. Until roughly the 1970s, social problems in the United States, such as poverty, crime, and unemployment, were largely considered "hereditary" within impoverished social classes and were therefore addressed through targeted practices to prevent these classes from "spawning". Recent research suggests that in some states (especially North Carolina) this practice lasted well into the 1970s and affected more than 7,600 families living in poverty and belonging to ethnic minority groups (Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis, 2020).

Colonial social work also provided fertile ground for human rights violations. For example, in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, First Nations, and First Nation fathers, mothers, and families were deemed "unfit" to educate their children. As a result, between 1971 and 1981 alone, more than 3,400 indigenous children were sent to adoptive parents in other societies, and sometimes in other countries.

We need to be brave and confident as we explore our own history and, in particular, the specific chapters in history demonstrating that relationship-based social work can easily fall into a serious violation of human rights if it does not take into account more broadly the ideological structural context it serves.

### **Social work based on human relationships: a radical perspective**

Part of the current discussion about social work, its meaning and its possibilities in the midst of neoliberal capitalism, is reflected in a crucial question: how do we define what we do? In fact, the different ways in which international social work organizations and social collectives and movements have been involved in this debate reveal the ideological tensions that divide the social work project. This is not simply a theoretical or abstract debate: defining social work has an impact on what happens in professional intervention. When they emphasize individualistic and moralistic interpretations of social work, they tend to reduce social work to a merely formal technical activity.

It is for this reason that we have to radically rethink social work, in a way that encompasses human relationships but at the same time appreciates the importance of the larger social and political structure. Social workers must understand and address not only the symptoms of distress, but primarily the public causes of pain and misery.

Despite recent deviations and misinterpretations of the term, the concept "radical" has historically referred to a political theory and practice that aims to understand and target the structural causes of social problems (Ferguson et al., 2018). In the context of social welfare, it is not uncommon for state policies to promote values exactly opposite to this





perspective and to ignore the structural causes of the difficulties experienced by users of social services. For example, it is still possible to hear that the poor are poor because they are lazy, that women get pregnant because they want to receive benefits from the state, or that refugees are excluded because they do not want to accept our culture. We can still see that people with mental health problems are ridiculed.

In radical social work, based on social justice, the use of various methods and techniques (such as work with collectives, interventions based on art, promotion, awareness-raising, working with cases from critical perspectives and social action with communities, among many others) is aimed at supporting the victims of an unequal system, but also at creating the conditions for emancipation and resistance to the apparently natural order of our societies. That would lead to the creation of socially just societies.

As I mentioned earlier, neoliberal economics and oppressive practices have not been sufficiently challenged. But despite the politics of fear that has spread to the different corners of the world, many countries have seen extraordinary resistance from social workers. This shapes what we can call a "politics of hope," in which solidarity constitutes a form of resistance within a system that strives for competition and individualism in all domains of life.

On many occasions, social workers have led these initiatives, offering wonderful examples of what an inclusive, participatory and democratic welfare state should look like. For example, in Spain, during the financial crisis and the draconian neoliberal reforms that followed, social workers were very active in the La Marea Naranja movement (Ioakimidis et al., 2014). This movement emphasized resistance in the face of cuts and the demand for more resources for social services and brought together a wide range of groups and institutions related to welfare.

In Greece, during the same period, social workers committed acts of "civil disobedience" (Ioakimidis & Teloni, 2013). When the government imposed a regressive, horizontal main tax payable through electricity bills, social workers disobeyed instructions to work with tax collectors to identify households that would have difficulty paying. By disobeying the law, they made sure that they protected the dignity and rights of the poorest in society and were not involved in this dishonest, unpopular and oppressive policy. On the contrary: they delegitimized politics and joined the social movement that opposed the funding cuts.

Last but not least, social workers in Britain knew very well that the austerity measures and the privatization of social services implemented by the conservative government of Cameron in 2010 would lead to social catastrophe and therefore they lobbied members



of parliament extensively, but also mobilized at the grassroots level. An admirable and inspiring movement, the anti-austerity movement, supported by the British Association of Social Workers, brought together a group of social work colleagues, users and academics - all who have experienced first-hand the impact of cuts in public spending and welfare reform -, to march 100 miles from Birmingham to Liverpool, protesting against austerity policies under the slogan *Boot Out Austerity*. It was an excellent example of political organization of social work from the bottom up, aimed at the defence of social services.

Opposition to market fundamentalism in social policy is rooted in two factors: first, the certainty that social policy and the welfare state should be primarily concerned with meeting human needs rather than driving competition, efficiency, and profit from the market; and, second, the awareness that neoliberal forms of social work, including their domination by meaningless evaluation and recording processes, which are stored in a computer without regard to substance, have seriously undermined the possibilities for critical professional action.

As I have already mentioned, one of the victims of this neoliberal rationality has been human relations in the provision of social services. Another victim has been the work with collectives and with communities. It was once a key part of political responses to poverty in Britain and elsewhere. Community-based social work approaches, particularly those that promote community "self-help" can, of course, be at least as conservative as individual-based approaches. However, a radical approach to working with communities, as well as with social movements, offers clear possibilities to address structural inequalities and to highlight the link between private and public problems.

As part of this process, social workers must use the evidence that comes from their own intervention and research, to emphasize and claim the need for an inclusive, redistributive and universal state (Ioakimidis, 2013).

This formidable body of evidence that social workers can gather from their interventions and research forms a knowledge base that reaffirms the value of universalism and solidarity in social policy. This means claiming the need to guarantee the wide range of social rights and services that cover the entire population in the different stages of life, where there are criteria to prioritize children, people with disabilities, the elderly, etc., but always from a universal logic of provision of social services, inspired by the principles of redistribution, recognition and unconditional defence of democracy.

## Conclusions

Against those who deny that social workers play a role in the fight against oppression and for a more egalitarian society, I argue that we do have the capacity and potential to do so. However, given the brutality of the forces against all of us who seek to build a better world or simply defend the universal character of rights, we must not be under any illusions about the contribution the profession, sometimes weak and disorganized, can make.

That is why it is extremely important that professionals form alliances with social organizations, unions, with professional social work associations, with organizations of service users, to promote alternatives.

As an example, in the UK, the Social Work Action Network -SWAN- (Ferguson et al, 2018) has linked up with the British Association of Social Workers, the Disabled People's Association Against Social Spending Cuts, Disabled People Against Cuts, and the organization of users of social services Shaping Our Lives, to publicly denounce the adjustments of austerity policies, and to campaign more effectively against their effects.

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Strengthening these networks and learning from the experience of professionals, academics, students, service users and campaign activists in different countries is a priority. However, this is not just about sharing information, it is also about showing solidarity. We all benefit from developing solidarity.

We must claim solidarity as a core value. Reaffirming our common humanity is not only the most effective way to challenge the fundamentalists, racists and xenophobes in the market, it also challenges the narrow and selfish individualism that we reproduce in our day-to-day behaviours.

Finally, and to close and open these reflections at the same time, I would like to recall that our global definition states that “social work promotes social change and the empowerment and liberation of people” (International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW, 2014). Have confidence in the capacity that people and societies have to change. Radical social work, when it is democratic and empathetic, does not lose humanity or care for human relationships and can have a transformative impact on individuals and societies. And this alone is a great reason to be proud of our profession throughout the world.

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