



“POLITICISING PROFESSIONAL MALAISE: WHAT CAN SOCIAL WORK LEARN FROM THE PRO-HOUSING PLATFORM?”

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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates politicising professional social work in view of the social emergency situation triggered by the huge rise in social inequality, and specifically owing to housing exclusion. Politicisation does not merely refer to the political influence on social reforms; rather, it is deemed a process whereby professional work becomes a driver for transformation by re-examining the roles and the establishment of alliances as horizontally as possible with the individuals directly affected by social problems and organised groups in order to clarify the structural conflict that triggers these problems. Even though housing has been the key social issue in recent decades in Spain, it is also behind the foremost collective empowerment initiatives that have taken place in our neighbourhoods and cities. Learning from these processes from the standpoint of the profession and cooperating on the methods for action from within the institution may solve the potential deadlock in the current social care model in place.

Key words: Social work, politicisation, social transformation, rights, debt, housing, evictions

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1. CONDITIONS FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

It is quite common for those of us who have practised social work to echo a general discontentment. A symptom of this discontentment is frustration when faced with the realisation that the lives of the people we work with are not going as we planned with our interventions, which often leads to placing the blame on these lives for not conforming to our expectations. Another symptom is the fear of making mistakes we occasionally feel when faced with a crucial decision for a family or service user, or directly the fear we feel when faced with some of these individuals who we are theoretically helping. Guilt often appears due to the feeling of doing a job which explicitly distances itself from helping these unfortunate people, or simply a feeling of being accountable for doing a mundane, bureaucratic job that steers away from the creative, rebellious and relational spirit that we once idealised the profession to consist of. What all these feelings of discontentment (frustration, fear and guilt) share in common when projected on the service users or ourselves is solitude, in other words, self-accountability for problems which have collective causes and ways of manifesting themselves.

As someone said at a meeting organised by the Madrid ServSocial Forum, “As social workers, we are what we do”, meaning that what we are meant to be doing does not define who we are (FOROSERVSOCIAL MADRID, 2018). What we do and what defines us—which causes us such frustration, fear and guilt—reveals a loss of the sense of importance in our work, a loss of connection with some of the ultimate social objectives of the profession (namely, the improvement of material and social living conditions with the goal of reducing, if not ending, social inequalities). Our cries of pain from that loss of meaning, from that disenchantment with the profession, are often remedied by a cynical stance (disengagement with the other and his suffering), but situations also arise where those cries come together to create a sounding board. This occurs when professional discontentment finds a platform to be heard and shared.

The change in climate brought about by the 15-M Movement (FERNÁNDEZ-SAVATER, 2012) was not limited to the foremost squares of our cities: it spread to the neighbourhoods and indeed to the professional groups punished by the cuts. One of the most important things that can be acknowledged from 15-M was the dismantling of barriers and prior political and professional identities, as well as the coming together of conditions of relative equality between people of diverse classes, genders, ages and origins. This coming together produced alliances between health professionals and service users whose health card had been withdrawn or who had suffered from cuts to their hospitals and health centres. All of them were subject to a common impact (although to different extents). Unlike education or health, experiences of affinity in social intervention have barely crystallised in light of a common, although differentiating, impact (maybe perhaps some actions among those affected by the cuts in minimum income and those indirectly affected, such as professionals). Only outside of institutional and professional social work, the work of Baladre (GARCÍA, MUÑOZ and SÁEZ, 2017) or Invisibles de Tetuán (HERRERA and PEREDA, 2017) have pursued these alliances from the perspective of emancipatory social work, assimilating other activist networks which are trying to create spaces for integration (such as the Interlavapiés Network in Madrid). In institutional social intervention, these alliances between service users and social workers have been much more limited, due to —among other reasons— the structural difficulties being faced by people subject to social services to be able to mobilise themselves (the necessary financial, cultural, social and time resources in order to sustain an assembly), although perhaps also due to the sociocentric boundaries that prevail in the practice of social work and prevent us from identifying ourselves politically and socially (beyond psycho-individual empathy) with service users. However, different experiences in Spain (such as Manifestaos por los Servicios Sociales in Cantabria or ForoServSocial in Madrid), as well as various individual voices on social networks (such as Belén Navarro, Pedro Celiméndiz, etc.), started to go beyond the aforementioned cries of pain (frustration, fear and guilt) and build new narratives relating to the profession, and above all social services, which connected the discontentment of the professionals with that of those in the community who are subject to interventions under the common rubric of austerity policies. The most notable feature of these scattered voices, disjointed and incoherent with each other, and contrasting with the professional associations (which have also been highly active in the anti-austerity message, as would be expected), is that we find

a discourse —albeit precarious and under construction— that reconnects with a transcendent sense of social work. To describe one's own work as “a stopgap”, the professional figure as “social riot police” or experiencing daily situations such as evictions where there is a need to “put out fires”, with the feeling that “we should hang our heads in shame”, entails ceasing to provide a blank cheque for social work which will never be subject to public scrutiny because it is per se a “profession of help”. Greater boldness of these groups vis-à-vis the professional associations in formulating important political proposals, such as basic income support or the reinvention of social work in relational work and care, in line with authors such as Fernando Fantova (2015), opens the way for fully introducing social work into public debates on inequality, individualisation or the care crisis.

Perhaps most importantly, however, is that from these voices, even though they are firmly attached to corporate identity issues, the beginning of the renouncement of certain professional privileges emerges, and thus an alliance with those who directly suffer the most from marginalisation, structural violence and inequality. This process of reflexivity, of including the professional figure in the analysis of power relations, is an essential step for the politicisation of discontentment. As demonstrated by Beatrice Bossé and Jordi Solé Blanch (2017) in the Analysis of Professional Practice groups conducted among social workers in France, a range of individual examples of suffering emerged in recent years —with very similar characteristics to those we can deduce in Spain and Catalonia— which, thanks to group work, they managed to codify as collective and structural issues. The solitude of working in areas abandoned by the state, the obligation to objectify in reports —as if we were social notaries—, important decisions for children and families, the fear of placing oneself at the heart of social tensions, the outsourcing of intervention that interrupts processes and fragments reality, the growing logical security or management centred on statistics and ignorant of processes, are only some of the measures of the individual discontentment inherent to the strictly specialist role. Without a political perspective, the specialist arena is incapable of managing this torrent of stress-inducing situations. Only a political vision of social work is capable of sending individual pain to the transformative power of collective spaces. What we find in these Analysis of Institutional Practice groups, which function like mutual support groups, is a profound politicisation of discontentment.

This political dimension of social work goes much further than the mere political involvement of social workers in policy (in the form of lobbying administrations and political parties, or directly becoming activists in political organisations, trade unions and social movements). This way of conducting politics has clear precedents in Spain, when renowned female social workers participated in the definition of social services at a state, autonomous regional and local level in the 1980s, mainly through their entry into the PSOE. Today, we also see how many professionals have joined the ranks of new parties such as Podemos or taken up local nominations. From these positions we can visualise the social and professional reality, as well as pushing to drive reforms in social policies, albeit almost always from a subordinate position within political organisations and the state, which coincides with the subordination of social affairs to the economy in capitalism. We also observe how some social workers have participated in social and neighbourhood movements for decades, finding greater opportunities in these spaces to approach community work and the real struggle for social justice.

However, what we are talking about is not so much the possibility of conducting politics as social workers, but rather another political dimension of social work; namely, the politicisation of professional environments and situations. This is perhaps a more neglected dimension, less explored in our country in recent decades, although throughout the history of professional practice there have been many instances of politicisation in psychiatric institutions, in poor neighbourhoods, etc. It is a broadening of the idea of politics to take it beyond formal politics and its parliaments, professional politicians and organisations. It is the politics of any (anywhere, anytime, by anyone). It is not an alternative that excludes the other political dimension —social workers engaged in politics—; instead, it is complementary and has other implications that are more focused on the construction of subjectivity.

The exercise of naming everyday ills in another way, from reflecting on the practice to which we have referred above is already a form of politicisation in this sense of subjectivism: it is politicisation that implies another way of analysing situations, another way of understanding ourselves within them. A fundamental starting point for these processes of subjectivism is the experiences of struggle, which redraw the map of identities and previous representations (GARCÉS, 2018). Jacques Rancière establishes a crucial difference between policing and politics: policing classifies and orders bodies

in space and time and assigns identities and functions to each; whereas, politics arise when someone develops different perceptions from what is assigned. There is only politics in dissent, where the subjects are declassified and the anybodies, the uninformed, take part, participate (RANCIÈRE, 2010). It is in this dissent that a new us arises from the shared experience that disrupts predefined identities: it arises from action; it is not given (RANCIÈRE, 2014). This “politicisation of the function” implies “ceasing to be” (in light of corporatist identity messages) to “politicise what one is” (or as someone said in the ForoServSocial, “what we do”).

All politicisation involves going beyond what is known and specialist illusion (specific knowledge), permanently recognising that there is no stable, true knowledge (EMA, 2013). It is not a question of applying chosen specialist knowledge in the knowledge market, but rather of creating it from a co-production of a specific place and time. It is not about knowing more, but going further than knowledge: thinking. The discovery of the precariousness of specialist knowledge—which does not mean that it is useless, but insufficient—opens the door to the politicisation of professional discontentment. Rather than challenging power within institutions (accessing offices, influencing commissions), this politicisation seeks to flood them and hack them to render sovereign power useless. It challenges what the rules and offices establish from below, and it does so by establishing ties, links between professionals and links between service users; ties that are the different strands of a common whole.

There are not many experiences of politicisation in the history of social work. It seems as if the professional vocation and the primordial interest for social reform themselves replace the need to take sides to face reality. However, there are some interesting processes that, in certain historic moments, crossed the discipline and created situations of alliance between social workers and subordinates. During the second half of the 20th century, and particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, diverse experiences of subversion and reversal of social order and the role assigned to professionals were developed. Most notable is the radical social work carried out by community organisers such as Saul Alinsky (2013), whose objective was to organise conflict engaging residents of deprived areas of North American cities and groups discriminated against based on ethnicity and class with the powers that be (political, business, etc.). Through a sense of humour and tactical analysis, it was understood that social work was weak if

it did not specify structural conflict and, at the same time, did not act in a pragmatic way: it was not about participating as a way to generate consensus, but as a way to kick-start rights and overcome discrimination. The origin of the concept of empowerment has explicit links to some of these experiences of self-organisation, and develops particularly in black and women's communities. Indeed, in Latin America the reconceptualisation of social work movement (ALAYÓN, 2005), as it was called, challenged the functions assigned to professionals as being moral adapters to the socio-economic system. A multitude of popular educational experiences across the length and breadth of the Latin American continent explicitly sought collective empowerment to confront oppression, which was echoed in the grassroots Christian and neighbourhood movement in Spain during the transition to democracy. Moreover, a critique of psychiatric and care institutions developed in Europe which resulted in many professionals understanding that their alliances should be forged with those who had been categorised, diagnosed and institutionalised, and not with the institution itself (GARCÍA and RENDUELES, 2017).

What all these processes of politicisation share in common in social intervention is the dismantling of the order of previously assigned roles and functions and the de-individualisation of problems, promoting an exonerative and collective confrontation. None of them can be understood without the thrust of social and political movements which in every historic context contributed to the construction of new narratives, in most cases in conflict with the hegemony.

We could establish a relationship with the idea of the "moral economy" of E.P. Thompson (TARROW, 2012) applied to social work professionals, which claims that people rebel not simply because grievances exist but rather because these grievances cross the line of what is "acceptable". It is not an exaggeration to determine that due to the politics of austerity and the cutbacks, and the systematic infringement of rights (such as the right to housing, which is a fundamental right in order to build any life project worth living), the aforementioned line has been crossed in our neoliberal context.

2. THE PROBLEM OF HOUSING: LAYING BARE OUR PROFESSIONAL POWERLESSNESS

Both the experiences of community organisation and empowerment on the part of oppressed individuals (indigenous people, blacks, women, etc.) and the politicisation that some institutions experienced in the 1960s and 1970s entailed a practical democratisation of relationships in social work, as well as a certain hegemony of a radical egalitarianism. The most significant part of the current professional political culture is perhaps the disappearance beyond the horizon of that egalitarianism as a goal to reach and an ethical precondition from which to organise professional relationships. Naturally, it is not a phenomenon that only affects social work. The disappearance of the egalitarian horizon in our political consciousness correlates with a material process of spectacular growth in social inequalities, both globally and at a state and local level (PEREDA, 2016).

From the 1970s onwards, and taking advantage of the crisis of the welfare state, a new doctrine which had been brewing since the 1930s —neoliberalism— was taking over the soul of public institutions and political parties, from the centre-right to social democrats, who had lent stability to parliamentary democracies after the Second World War. The welfare state was accused of suffocating the entrepreneurial spirit of workers and generating dependents of the “nanny state”, so a change in the direction of public policy was necessary in order to generate and spread the idea of competition to all levels (LAVAL and DARDOT, 2013). Importing business management methodologies, public institutions were gradually creating the conditions for the commercialisation of their own public services, natural and common assets, and professional and social relationships. The wave of privatisation experienced by all of the countries affected by the neoliberal doctrine was followed by the extension of numerous bureaucratic mechanisms geared towards generalising competition at the heart of the working class and the citizens themselves: quality measurement systems, continuous work assessments, deregulation of working conditions and the loss of universal rights are the main governmental techniques through which the egalitarian cultural horizon was being dismantled, and individual and hyper-competitive subjectivities extended.

In the field of social work in our country, we were able to discern these changes from the increase in outsourcing many social services and competitive tendering to drive down costs in contested programmes. The most obvious result can be found in highly unequal working conditions within social services, the devastation of a community fabric that had to become a business to do a job that now betrayed its principles or, in other words, entailed the continuity of welfare and control as the primary means of social care. Competition between public, private and membership-based associations; competition between professionals; competition between service users for scant resources, and so on. The greatest feat of neoliberalism involved transferring responsibility to the people for their own destiny, “activating” their energy in a continual “social innovation” which results in a sterile productivism as an end in itself, completely stripped of content associated with structural social change.

Housing is a crucial area where neoliberal politics and the spread of commercial relationships and competition come together. Of the mechanisms of social care, housing is perhaps the problem that has created the most instability in the lives of service users in recent years. Housing has been the great social problem in Spain since Francoism: mass rural migration occurring between the 1950s and 1970s triggered the surge of shanty towns on the outskirts of major cities. Faced with the problems of social order that the shanty towns began to pose, the regime was forced to launch the first National Housing Plan of 1955 and the Social Emergency Plan of 1957 (CARABANCHELEANDO, 2017). In addition to building a multitude of settlements aimed at replacing the self-built substandard housing, an ideological shift in the policies of the Ministry of Housing under José Luis Arrese consisted of the famous technocratic premise of replacing the country of proletarians that Spain was, for a country of owners. Nevertheless, the subsidy to access private housing, which transformed Spain into the country with the highest index of home ownership in the region, failed to address the continuous development of shanty towns in a country with large impoverished social strata.

It was not until the arrival of democracy that it was possible to eradicate the problem of self-built housing to the point where it became a minor issue, sufficiently hidden from citizens in the first place and tourists in the second place. The re-housing plans implemented by the town councils and the autonomous communities in the 1980s and

1990s managed to evict the settlements and concentrate their inhabitants in resettlement buildings in the poorest city neighbourhoods. Given the nature of this housing policy, focused on the poorest, with insufficient investment (only housing complexes concentrated in the cheapest neighbourhoods) and with an emphasis on control (design of functional spaces for police work and social segregation), far from producing instances of social cohesion, a distrust proliferated between ethnicised and non-ethnicised individuals and competition between the poor to secure housing resources that were scarce in relation to needs. Coinciding with the issues caused by unemployment and heroin, this re-housing shattered the precarious communities of life of the towns while placing a time bomb under coexistence in what had been designated as the ghettoised peripheries (CARABANCHELEANDO, 2017). Therefore, a starting pistol was triggered on the contemporary competitive relationships that characterise a large proportion of daily life in impoverished neighbourhoods.

However, the development of the housing bubble in the late 1990s and 2000s was when the current housing problems started to take shape. The liberalisation of the housing market in 1997, with the recent arrival of José María Aznar in the presidency of the Spanish government, as well as the favouring of bricks and mortar as the driving force behind the economy, triggered the mortgage market on all levels of the social strata, including the most precarious (mainly comprised of migrants who arrived to cover this very construction and other services at very low labour costs). With runaway housing prices due to no government intervention in the market (added to a lack of price regulation or significant housing policies), the mortgages signed by the precarious population (which nonetheless had attained a minimum level of stability in order to purchase a dwelling) became the source of the collapse of hundreds of thousands of vital and family projects once the bubble burst in 2008.

Evictions became the most urgent social problem of the Spanish financial crisis, with banks dispossessing inhabitants of their houses, erecting fences, metal sheeting, and turning the communities of the humblest neighbourhoods into ghost areas. The population displacement caused by the evictions, not only those with mortgages but also those renting public and private housing, meant that families pushed out of other areas of the cities were concentrated into the neighbourhoods most afflicted by the crisis and institutionally abandoned, generating a new mass phenomenon which has

destabilised fragile neighbourhood relations in contexts of extreme precariousness: illegal occupations. Despite the fact that the majority of them do not cause any coexistence issues, the occupations have become a symbol of the war between the poor that right wing and far right wing parties and organisations are trying to exploit for political gain. They are also the perverse mechanism that vulture funds and large housing investors use to create impossible living conditions in many buildings and streets via a tolerance of occupations for drug trafficking purposes, seeking to expel the original occupants to find more profitable clients (with tourist apartments in the centres or resale of cheap housing in the outskirts).

As it is plain to see, those of us who work or have worked in direct care, community work or management of intervention projects, the social problem of housing crosses our path in the most precarious life situations that we encounter (in the form of the threat of eviction, subsequent homelessness, precarious illegal occupation, cuts in power supplies or utilities, neo-slums, etc.). We see traces of neoliberalism in each of its manifestations. On the one hand, we see how a basic need—one even recognised as a constitutional right—is left to the fate of the market, with public institutions in breach of the assurance of one of the most basic human rights. This commercialisation of a basic need heightens competitive relationships not only between owners and speculators, but also between those who only want to implement its value in use, be it for access (public tender or purchase and rental of private housing) or usage (relationships of neighbourhood distrust generated by re-homing or illegal occupations). We also see how a social problem of a structural scale (the backbone of the economy of a country) is metabolised in the hegemonic discourse as an individual problem that passes responsibility to the family or person for the failure or success of the fulfilment of this basic need. Rather than a mechanism of commercial exchange, the debt is a mechanism for taming the spirit. We also observe how evictions demonstrate the solitude we are condemned to in a society that has undermined social and community protection: the solitude of a family that suffers an eviction, but also the solitude of neighbours who see a family replaced by a fence or by new tenants at sufferance.

However, neoliberalism not only takes on the form of competition and subjectivism of individual responsibility, it is also active in institutional responses to the housing problem in question. A management based on the handling of situations of risk and emergency (ÁVILA and GARCÍA, 2013) solely works on the symptoms of problems, activating extraordinary resources for extreme situations, never the exercising of rights, and also on the condition that the aforementioned resources will be temporary. Emergency subsidies to stop an eviction or a cut in utility supplies, resources for people on the street, re-housing programmes managed by social services provided by the same banks that are evicting or intercultural coexistence projects in poor neighbourhoods —exactly where the boarded up and occupied housing is found which one day will have to be put on the market— operate under this logic of not intervening in the causes of the problem, but rather on the potential adverse effects (for the market itself, for the image of the city brand or for social order). This actuarial risk management constitutes the continuation via other unscrupulous means of the old liberal care system, dispossessing the service users or recipients of the intervention of their knowledge and power: alone, blamed, indebted and threatened. Families suffering from housing precariousness can expect no more from social workers than, at best, being listened to, emergency assistance, management of a minimum income or intervention in family relations and with children subjected to the stress of the extreme precariousness. It is nothing like a preventative intervention against discontentment, which in the case we are concerned with is nothing other than the avoidance of the eviction itself and the threat of it (SALES, 2016).

At this point in the story, many readers will get the impression that this crude portrait is missing happier brushstrokes that surround the problem of housing. These brushstrokes, at times the main support in the intervention by some social workers who are also subjected to extreme solitude in managing highly complex personal and family situations, come from social movements (organisations) and from a society on the move (informal relations of reciprocity). Although housing has been the major difficulty in the social problem in Spain over the past 60 years, it has also been the trigger behind the greatest social movements in the same era: neighbourhood movement in the 1970s and the anti-eviction movement at the end of the last decade. These movements have operated in a way that is immeasurably more effective than institutional social work on two levels. Firstly, lending coverage to the whole host of

individual needs through collective struggle, managing to stop evictions or activate more protective policies through direct action and vindication; and secondly, managing to generate new communities, links of solidarity and mutual support where previously only exploitation and solitude existed. This is one of the few historic examples of a process of empowerment: the sense of belonging and identity in the fight and self-organisation of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) not only generates mutual support, it also involves socio-political empowerment that will result in community action towards three possible strategies that must enable communities to improve their conditions and take control of their lives: advocacy, resistance and dissidence.

What can we learn, from the perspective of professional social work, from the way organisations such as the PAH operate?

3. LEARNING FROM THE MOVEMENT FOR HOUSING: THE PAH

In this final section we wish to focus on the analysis of the PAH as one of the most powerful social movements of recent years, and at the same time as one of the examples of non-institutional social work that can serve as a reference in institutional social work. We are not seeking to draw from a dichotomous relationship between these two areas, but rather the potential for cooperation and mutual learning.

Many female social work professionals have lived in extreme solitude and great helplessness when faced with the brutal mortgage and rental crisis that has left hundreds of thousands of families in the street, with more than 600,000 evictions since 2007. In many cases, this solitude and helplessness has implied an obstruction and incapacity to form alliances with these people and the social movements that have organised around this problem to find joint solutions, to stimulate the community fabric, to de-individualise the problem and approach it collectively, ultimately to reverse neoliberal relationships that increase competition in areas of life which should be socially assured and convert a structural problem into an individual problem.

The beginning of the PAH, championed by some of its key players as the passage of the affected people “from Prozac to empowerment” (COLAU and ALEMANY, 2012), can be characterised as the creation of a shared diagnosis of the housing situation that redefined concepts such as debt, crisis or citizens’ rights. It is no longer a question of people threatened with eviction for involuntary non-payment being irresponsible, ignorant or crazy, but rather that they are victims of a scam organised by bankers and politicians who have been promoting debt and spending for decades to maximise profit (MANGOT, 2013).

This redefinition of the crisis meant that many people went from feeling ashamed, dejected or even choosing suicide, to many of them organising themselves and demanding their rights. Socialising the concept of debt avoided the burden from falling completely on individual responsibility, making it a collective, structural problem.

There are certain key elements in the social work of the PAH that can be the starting point of professional reflection. The first is the creation of spaces of shared experience, where people see for themselves that their problems are not individual issues but collective ones. Secondly, a rights-based approach which allows for the interpretation of these experiences as the violation of social guarantees for all of us, in the face of which the government systematically fails to meet its commitments and obligations. Thirdly, the creation of empowerment via tools which empower people, so that they can defend themselves, without having to delegate to anybody. Fourthly, the direct practice of solidarity and mutual support, so that no-one else ever feels alone.

Each one of these elements is addressed using different tools. One of them is weekly group advice sessions, where people attending for the first time are welcomed and given an explanation of what the PAH is and how it works, the stages in a mortgage foreclosure, what can be done at each stage, and the opening of a forum for anyone who wants to explain their personal situation or clarify any doubts. In this first welcome group session the philosophy of the PAH is made clear and the need for involvement of each person to solve their case, as well as the need to help others to solve theirs, or the involvement in necessary legislative changes to guarantee the right to housing: no work is done or no case is taken on if the person does not adhere to these principles. This initial welcome session is also carried out in social services when a service user comes to them for the first time, but it is always done individually, without any collective space to address that demand. Collective counselling applied to primary care social services could be a first step towards a social work that creates bonds.

The PAH mechanism is simple and easy to replicate, with very few prerequisites: representative, non-partisan, independent, free and peaceful. A commitment to horizontal communication in the broadest sense. It strives to be a genuine instrument for the social majority affected by the mortgage scam, so it speaks the language of the people and employs any possible means to communicate, whether traditional or alternative, as well as new social networks. And it adopts a complex strategy, which articulates short, medium and long-term objectives, as well as multiple levels: challenging administrations, legal actions, international advocacy, direct action and civil disobedience as a mechanism for self-protection of violated rights.

When a family comes to the PAH after completing the journey through social services and being told there is no housing and they can do nothing to guarantee them this fundamental right, in the PAH they are met with the message “Yes we can”. This message has a twofold meaning: firstly, it neutralises the hegemonic discourse that determines the “impossibility” of change in this matter, as if it were a law of nature—the law of the market—, and, secondly, it conveys an empowering message in a performative fashion, opposing learned helplessness. The PAH defends the right to housing via Stop Evictions, stopping the evictions of families who are going to be evicted through the call for demonstrations on housing doorsteps to peacefully resist when the judicial delegation arrives and, at the same time, display the barbarity involved in evicting a family and leaving them in the street, with children in the vast majority of cases. And if it has proven impossible to stop the eviction, re-housing the family via the Social Work Initiative of the PAH, which recovers flats from banks bailed out by the State (60 billion euros written off), to later open negotiations to secure a social rent that provides stability and guarantees the right to housing. However, in addition to mutual support in individual situations, as with the original social work that tried to influence important social reforms another of the key elements of the PAH is the search for long-term changes, mobilising and pressing to change the Spanish Mortgage Law (an anomalous law that does not exist in any other country worldwide). This political advocacy work is summarised in the “5 proposals of the PAH”: 1) Giving back the property mortgaged to the lender in exchange for the discharge of a mortgage debt retroactively and elimination and compensation for abusive stipulations; 2) Affordable rent to guarantee stability and appropriate prices; 3) Stop evictions, so that there is not one more; 4) Social housing to re-home families in vacant apartments owned by banks; 5) Guaranteed basic supplies and utilities so that every family has access to water, electricity and gas. It is about the self-protection of rights and the realisation of the right to housing as set out in our current legislation.

4. FINAL NOTES

The social work of the PAH reminds us in many ways of the critical and self-organising work that lays out the defence of communities deprived of basic rights through the community organisation proposed by Saul Alinsky. Antonio Gramsci said that, in situations of economic and political crisis, the subordinate classes activate a host of their own mechanisms of defence and collective action, intended to deal with the losses or damages caused by such a crisis, at the same time as questioning the legitimacy of the capitalist system (GRAMSCI, 1971). Therefore, the mechanisms designed to construct an anti-hegemony that casts doubt over the narrative of the ruling classes are activated. Civil society organisations are one of the agents that can bolster these counter-hegemonic processes (AGUILAR, 2013).

Understanding the right to housing as a human right involves breaking with any neutrality. Working seriously on the housing problem implies recognising that it is absolutely necessary and essential in the lives of people: a lack of it, and therefore an absence of the right to housing, means the person remains excluded from other rights that are articulated through this.

As we have already mentioned, we can confirm that social exclusion in our time is an integral part of the element of housing: unaffordable mortgages, evictions and lifelong debts lead us to situations of substandard housing, overcrowded apartments, entire families living together, overcrowding, tenants at sufferance, etc. This problem is not just affecting the most disadvantaged, who are viewed as the usual clients of social services, it is also crossing into the mainstream and spreading to young people and families, older people (who are mostly guarantors of the former), skilled and unskilled workers comprised of both immigrants and the native population. It is rare to find a person who does not have a relative or friend who is affected by this effect of social impoverishment that residential exclusion entails.

Faced with this situation, we must ask ourselves at least some questions: are we capable of understanding these new problems from a social work perspective? Are we acting in any way other than imprisoning ourselves in bureaucracy and the need-resource dichotomy? Faced with these new problems that affect large sectors of the population and for which there is no individual solution, has the time not arrived to

leave the office and nurture the value and power of transformation, education and empowerment that community work possesses, not only in its territorial dimension, but in its capacity to mobilise affected communities? Are we capable of valuing other lesser wisdoms (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 1997) and other ways of doing things that, outside of institutional social work, are trying to respond to these new problems?

From the profession of social work we need a step change, to get out of the impasse that the crisis, austerity and lack of resources has led us to. This comes to pass by accepting that individual work offers very weak answers when facing structural problems. In a hyper-complex society, in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to decipher its key functional areas and in which security has transformed into permanent uncertainty, we must also experiment, change and modify (ourselves) if we want to champion the egalitarian objectives and values of the profession. At the same time, we must renounce the centrality that until now was held by us as experts in social intervention; we must assume that we should always work more in networks, lending our technical and methodological knowledge to collective processes and leave the prison that is the office; and we must constantly ask ourselves if we are not using old tools to respond to new problems (ZAMANILLO, 2011). It is vital to recognise once and for all that the social processes that are constructed autonomously, without counting on the “specialists” of social intervention, may be better placed to create common bonds, forge links, build networks and find collective solutions to individual problems and visualise them. As social workers we must start to accept these changes and start to change ourselves to adapt to the new reality and be familiar with just how much we can contribute to the changes; otherwise, we will remain stuck in a state of permanent grievance due to a lack of resources, facing service users who will demand more and more from us and with a feeling of helplessness and emptiness that is difficult to manage.

Those of us who write this text agree with other members of activist associations dedicated professionally to social intervention in a retrospective and comparative assessment: we feel that we have done more social work in the PAH and other groups than working in units such as social services. The question is: how can the professional space be made into a space of politicisation that allows us to feel that we are carrying out significant social work?

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