Different facets, problems and potentialities for critical psychology in dealing with the everyday life of the Brazilian working class

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Abstract

This article aims to present some facets of Brazilian everyday life of workers and poor people regarding to Education, Healthy and Social Assistance from the critical psychology perspective. The purpose is to highlight problems and potentialities for psychology agenda in those practical interventions and to problematize the needs of new theoretical construction, which could sustain effective social movements in direction of social and political emancipation.

Key Words: Public polices, Brazilian Public Services, Critical Psychology, Liberation Psychology

Introduction

Knowing and understanding concrete reality is one of the most important tasks in planning and intervening in different areas of work for social change. What is required is conscious movement in a known direction, but this is always conditioned by one's ideology regarding what constitutes the real versus the "not real". To understand the real, a historical analysis is required which provides a perspective on the apparent contradictions in what is real and in what changes are still possible.

This article tries to make visible part of the real, the inaccessible, in relation to social policy for health, social care and education in Brazil, a country where the official discourse, although full of rhetoric of innovation and progress, in fact promotes a kind of social paralysis or sclerosis, inhibiting effective social change.

Human affairs, according to Freitas (2005), are not the product of spontaneous self-organization in the context of a probabilistic game: there is intentionality in this process. Abandoning a determinist position and substituting a probabilistic one, is still to maintain a positivistic understanding of human action in the world. In *A Liberation Post-Modernity*, Freitas (2005) argues for our responsibility to build a new socialist approach and to define, better than Marx has done, the contours of the social order for removing capitalism. To liberate ourselves from capitalism, we have to overcome postmodernity and thereby overcome the exploitation of women and children, injustice, inequality, competitiveness and wars. For

Freitas it is not relevant that we can define how long capitalism will last, but only how long we will still condone it: "We do not need escape routes – when the system collapses there will be nowhere to run. We need to confront, combat and face the reality now" (p. 107).

It is with this objective that we reflect here on the difficulties and limitations faced by professionals who have to deal with the reality of working in public health, education and social assistance, in direct contact with poverty, exclusion, oppression and violence. Many people depend directly on public services in order to live. If the nature of people's suffering is determined by the way they live, we need a comprehensive and detailed analysis of real life: life under capitalism. Getting to the root of the problem, as argued by Bauman (2009), is not an instantaneous solution, but it is still the only one, which can point to the possibility of facing the crises of capitalism as they impact on everyday life.

Late capitalism, characteristic of a bourgeois underdeveloped society, has remained resistant and able to adapt itself dynamically to different crises without essential changes. For Netto (1981), responding to this condition is a central task for those who wish to explain, at the same time, the maintenance of capitalism's functions and the evidence of effective indicators of rupture within the limits of its periphery – the "weakest link in the chain" (p. 16). An answer to this question is only possible if theoretical research is organically linked to practical social action. As Netto (1981) rightly argues, we must understand the relationship between capitalism and the reification of social relations (the problem of alienation and fetishism), which enables the historical resilience of this system, despite theoretical criticism and continued denouncement of its bankruptcy.

If removed from actual practice, important elements for this analysis slip away and compromise its outcome. At the same time, without theory practice becomes a meaningless action and causes suffering and despair for the working class. In this scenario, social policies can assume a special role in mitigating alienation, while feeding the hope that some things can change. We must be very clear in our discussion of social policies' role, especially considering that they are limited by and act together with decisive economic policies - under capitalism policies do not exist for the purpose of social change.

Social and economic policies, social production and reproduction: the basis for this reflection

Social policies are proclaimed as mechanisms for the state to mediate between different social classes, providing escape routes from economic domination, which foster unequal and unfair daily life, and to exhaust any possibility of change, even through committed and competent professional practice. It is necessary, at this point, to make clear what we consider to be social and public policies and their differences. Public policies are state planned interventions to solve social relevant situations. According to Höfling (2001) and Augusto (1989) those interventions are determined by the relations between states and by the social policies established in a specific society and historic period. Public policies are therefore programs implemented by a specific government project. Social policies, on the other hand, are usually related to dimensions of social life such as education, health, housing, security, social assistance, and so on, which all governments must be prepared to deal with within a specific model of governance. These dimensions (social policies) are referred to the actions (public policies) implemented by the state in order to redistribute social benefits and diminishing the structural inequalities produced by economic development. Nevertheless, it is unfounded to distinguish, in a rigid way, between the economic and social aspects of governmental action.

It is necessary to revise this division by pointing out the controversial aspect of social policies.

Government actions reflect the contradiction between state and society, creating a tension between the social needs and the different forms of imprisonment present in a capitalist system. It is therefore a good basis for our reflections.

First, we need to invoke the Marxist concept of *praxis*, as systematized by Janousek (1972). We believe that human civilization is a historic human production and it can therefore be changed by human action. Nevertheless, the complexity of the change depends upon the complexity of the action that requires suitable objective conditions in order to be implemented. The concept of praxis, then, refers to human action that *aims to transform the world and its own development*. To do this, it must be clearly understood that the horizon of change must be directed at every action, which entails anticipating the kind of world we wish to create, as well as the kinds of human being who will live in it.

Human beings are not passive products facing external influences, but rather, through their activities in the world, they forge the conditions of their own existence. Without being reductionist, it is important to affirm that world transformation does not happen only through human activity, but it also includes the transformation of consciousness and the forms of thinking that preceded the activity – the intentionality.

Second, human activity flows from what has previously been imagined. It is important to recall here that human activity can be described as the conversion of a natural activity to an activity that is a configuration of an objective order previously established or previously idealized. By reviewing what Lukacs called *causality, Vaisman and Fortes (2010) emphasized* a final work set in motion by mediating an objective that has been humanly set. In the prologue to the Brazilian edition of Lukacs' *Ontology of social being*, Vaisman and Fortes (2010) highlighted that, for him, when intervention has the consciousness of another person as its object, it becomes a form of advanced sociability, as characterized by *intentionality*, and it assumes a leading role in the dynamic of the social process. There are therefore no more immediate natural process demands, but rather the intention is to change and improve others. These higher steps give rise to ethical and ideological dimensions, through which one can glimpse the genesis of political action.

This assumption, which is based on theoretical and methodological elements of a critical approach, is what we understand to describe the importance of an analysis of the reality, from which it is possible to grasp human needs. This justifies the tension between the everyday life and the objective world, between the dependence of people and the development of their activities. With this perspective, we discuss, briefly, social policies in Brazil, focusing on some social indicators that could make visible what has been achieved with these policies, and, finally, presenting current difficulties in the professional practices of those who work in public services.

That said, we intend to situate how we stand in relation to social policies with special focus on the actions of the professional involved. For that, we need to clarify our position on social and public policies. Behring and Boschetti (2008) pointed out some limits of social policies in a discussion of their importance within the Brazilian historical context, the nature of capitalism thereby implemented, its degree of development and prevalent accumulation strategies, as well as the state's role in their implementation and regulation, political economy and the role of social classes in the class struggle in the current conjuncture.

After these considerations on the current state of economic and social policy, Behring and Boschetti (2008) also pointed out the limitations for the analysis of social policy intended to separate production from social reproduction. These processes intend to redistribute income regardless of the nature of capitalism. In other words, the process – the social democratic "welfare state" in Brazil – tactically (although limited in its neoliberal version) does make some reference to the main social conflict. However, through the regulation of this conflict there will be a reduction in the oppressed subjects' political will, by searching for legitimacy and consensus. This is a politics that reduces social policy to a kind of trophy; it underestimates economic determination and disregards the value of active citizenship. Social policy also falls victim to the false debate about the role of the state – the right to be fulfilled by the state but improved by public and private institutions enrolled on behalf of particular class and factional interests.

Social policies cannot be seen as isolated facts in their immediate expression. They need to be "situated as contradictory expressions of reality – the dialectical unity of the phenomenon and its essence" (Behring & Boschetti, 2008, p. 39). Each phenomenon can be understood as a moment of totality. Therefore, the goal of social policy should be considered as a stimulant for the realization of surplus value inserted into the core of social life, inseparable from the reproduction process. Again, to analyze social policies, it is necessary to characterize the nature and the degree of capitalism's development.

A policy for income distribution, for example, without taking into account the nature of capitalism, the dynamic of production in the present and the weakness of popular movements, presents the idea of scarcity that, paradoxically, installs itself in a society marked by abundance. Even as a political tactic in peripheral capitalism, this policy points to the conflict opposing it. It reduces the political will of the subject to the regulation of the conflict and search for legitimacy and consensus, ignoring the value and classification of the term citizenship (Behring & Boschetti, 2008). Given this situation, social policy is claimed as a right to be fulfilled by the state, demanding higher precision of the concept of state in mature capitalism, relative autonomy and political leadership with class-consciousness. We must better understand the relationship between public and private in order to express the potential of the Marxist tradition for the implementation of social policy for confronting the limitations mentioned above.

This article does not examine social policies in any depth; its intention is to highlight certain elements that could support the debate on the practice in the field of health, education and social assistance for the strengthening and empowerment of the working class. We will present an attempt to qualify the debate around the concept of citizenship and the important character of tactical radicalization of social policies, as well as the role of state policy with relative autonomy and political class consciousness (extended state with bourgeois hegemony), for a better understanding of public/private and state/civil society.

Social indicators and the context in which public services occur

One way of knowing reality is to look carefully for indicators that are presented from time to time to characterize what has been done by public services in a country, and to relate them to social economic and political submission.

In 2007, Brazil created an indicator for measuring basic educational development (IDEB). It is calculated on a scale from zero to ten, involving two concepts: the enrollment and average performance of students in primary and secondary education in Portuguese and mathematics, and cooperation of states, cities and regions to formulate educational policies. This index is produced every two years and despite a change from 2007 and 2009 (3.5 and 4.9[1], respectively, for the final year of elementary and middle school), it does not reveal what daily work consists of in Brazilian public schools in terms of the general conditions, violence, illness and absenteeism of teachers, the difficulties, learning problems, and so on.

Internationally, the PISA (Program for International Assessment) developed and coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD), produces indicators for international comparison on the quality of education provided in the participating countries; curiously, in order to verify to what extent schools in each country prepare their youth for citizenship in our society today, it focuses on the evaluation of science, mathematics and reading. Brazil is below street level 1b in reading ability when compared internationally. The best countries assessed by this scale, approaching the maximum range, number just six (OECD, 2010).

As regards welfare, the policy has more impact on poor people's lives because it seeks to redistribute income through special programs of financial transfers under conditions confirming the poverty, the number of small children in a family and other factors. As stated by Yamamoto (2007), however, the impact of the neoliberal agenda emphasizes grassroots inequalities and deepens the picture of misery. Despite holding first place for attention to the poor with an economic support program for families, some cities are in a worse position in terms of the number of assaults and robberies, in contrast with the impact of this policy.
Montaño (2006) notes that these policies are privatized (transferred to the market or civil society institutions), targeted (directed at sectors with specific needs) and decentralized (poor regions manage insufficient resources). Therefore, they do not serve to change the situation of poverty and misery; more than that, they cause professional suffering (Guzzo & Lacerda, 2007) and individual coping strategies unable to break through, articulate or change political and social conditions for professionals (Senra, 2008).

According to the Human Development Report from 2010 (UNDP, 2010) Brazil ranks seventy-third among 169 countries assessed in that year and eleventh among Latin American countries. These indicators show the country has a per capita annual income of US$10 607; a life expectancy of 72.9 years, 7.2 years of general education and a school life expectancy of 13.8 years.

These indicators, however, do not accurately reveal the daily life of those working in social and political contexts of current policy development, the inequalities and social injustices, the precariousness of work, housing, education, and so on. The state of São Paulo, for an example, is the third state in the country with the highest HDI (0.833), surpassed only by the Federal District (0.874) and by Santa Catarina (0.840, revealing a regional difference between the north/northeast and south/southeast. Alagoas, at 0.677, is the state with the lowest HDI.

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[1] This index represents median scores on language and mathematic student performance in specific tests that vary on a scale from 0 to 10.

Brief notes on the historical development of social policies from 1988 to the present

The social security system has emerged historically in the capitalist mode of production, as the state's response to "social issues" generated by the contradiction of capital-labor ratio. According to Mota (2006), social security is an expression of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society, being permanently tensioned by the pressure of the working class in meeting their needs on the one hand and the interest of capital in social policy (basically maintaining the strength of work and the appeasement of conflict generated by the exploitation of labor) on the other.

A historical and dialectical analysis of the Brazilian social security system consisting of policies for health, social services and welfare, must consider the advance of neoliberal policies, internationally. This will make visible the essential contradiction of the neoliberal "administrative reform" implemented by the Brazilian ruling classes, since 1990.

This "double odds" explains the historical development of social policy in Brazil and reveals different aspects of the restoration of the capitalistic accumulation process, which occurred in the last two decades. In the 1970s, as a strategy for overcoming the crisis, that caused a shift in the patterns of capital accumulation post-World War II, the bourgeoisie had to make transformations in the sphere of economics and politics which directly impact the international flow of capital, organization of work and workers, social policies and the relationship between state, society and market (Mota, 2006). In this period there was a redefinition of social security to suit the new needs of big business.

In Brazil, from 1964 to 1984, there was a dictatorial period consequent to a military coup. This period, denominated as "bourgeois autocracy" by Fernandes (1973) created a model of social protection made up of their own service companies and social insurance for private and public services (targeted at employees in categories subject to less pressure), ignoring most of the population (Smith, 2000). The fiscal crisis from 1970 to 1980 and the decomposition of the power bloc, which supported the military regime, unleashed an organic state crisis, giving rise to various reform projects. Under the political conditions of "democratization", after 1984, the social movements turned back in the direction of self-organization to fight against the state reform in progress.

Health reform

Among the various movements, we highlight those active in health reform, which are composed of professionals, intellectuals, and users of the health system according to the proposal of the Universal Health System (SUS). The construction of the SUS was enabled with the participation of various representatives of different political and institutional projects. The version approved by the Constituent Assembly (the congress which was designated with reforming the Brazilian Constitution, in 1988) reflected the balance of social forces at that historic moment. On the one hand, it enshrined the national system in public policy, a system that was free, subject to social control and guided by the principles of universality, comprehensiveness and fairness. The chapter on Health in the Brazilian Constitution begins with the following words: "Health is everyone's right and the duty of the state" (no small feat for a state with a tradition of privatization). Moreover, the SUS provided profitable lines of business (such as hospitals and highly technological sectors) but remained in the hands of the private sector, whereas areas of little economic interest (such as primary care, disease surveillance and preventative actions) were the responsibility of the state.

Social assistance and welfare

The 1988 constitution was named the "Citizen Constitution" because it incorporated certain rights claimed by social movements, especially in the area of social security. Mota (2006), however, criticized it as follows:

> Although the architecture of the social security system in post-1988 Brazil has the direction and content of those that make up the welfare state in developed countries, the excluding characteristics of the labor market, the degree of impoverishment of the population, the level of income concentration and inefficiencies in the process of democratization of the state have revealed that, in Brazil, the adoption of the concept of social security has not translated objectively to universal access to social benefits. (p. 1)

In our view, the social security system not only could not fully develop itself in Brazil, because of its economic and political shortcomings, as pointed out by Mota, but it was also a neoliberal project. Over the past two decades, successive governments have been building what Montaño (2002) called a triple response mode to the social question – state, philanthropic and commercial. This process started in an organized manner and moved to the "administrative reform" of the state, carried out by two successive governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2002). It was, in fact, political reform, subject to economic issues and prescriptions by international organizations such as the World Bank (Rizzotto, 2000).

Overall, this reform was about the transformation of social policies, intended as universalist, with equal access, based on solidarity and social responsibility, into fragmented services offered in three modes, in line with the profitability of activities and the social class to which they are targeted. A schematic analysis (Montaño, 2002), is given below:

> (a)　　Services held at the state level may be unprofitable and/or be directed at a proportion of the population unable to purchase their own market. These government services are characterized by uncertainty, lack of focus and fragmentation.
> (b)　　Services are commoditized, provided by the logic of business, and quality varies according to purchasing power.
> (c)　　Philanthropic services provided by the "third sector" are often financed by public funds. This method has the important function of minimizing the impact of opposition to neoliberal reforms. It reduces loss of rights, presenting a "partnership between state and civil society", supposedly more democratic, participatory and efficient.

We refer to the focus of public policy (item (a) above) in the sense of being directed, exclusively, at the very poor segments of the population, as consisting of the basic demands requiring immediate response. The focus has both an economic aspect – the reduction of spending on "social areas" – and an ideological one legitimating the privatization of these services. The fragmentation of social policies resulting from this process leads to a fragmentation of the service users themselves, sometimes turning them into "consumer citizens" or "poor people" deserving of social assistance. This fragmentation weakens the struggle for a universal social security system, which is public and fair to the extent that the more organized a sector is (with more power of pressure in the working class), the more it tends to defend the "right" of access to private health plans and pensions.

A clear example of this phenomenon in Brazil is the attitude adopted by the union movement. The main driving force of intense social and political mobilization in 1980, which formally supported the proposal of the SUS, actually claimed for private health plans to be offered by the companies as main strategy in their struggle for the right to health assistance. Even the former union leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, said in his inaugural presidential speech in 2002 that in his administration every worker would have health insurance.

The two forms of privatization (commercialization and philanthropy) are well explained by Montaño (2002):

> This selective process of privatization depends crucially on the following conditions: that it exists or create a demand for private services (which only occurs when state services are insufficient or poor) and that this demand is derived from segments of sufficient income, there are tax incentives or transfer of public funds to companies "citizens" who take social activities, or even that the State sub-contract (on an outsourced basis) private services. (p. 2)

This profound change in the very concept of social security, which the Lula government, and currently Dilma's administration, continue to support, serves to justify the ideology in two ways: (a) it identifies bureaucracy, inefficiency and corruption, as causes of the fragile situation and lack of existing public services; (b) it supports the assertion of social welfare as belonging to the private sphere, and the family, community and private services, as "natural" sources which are supposedly more democratic, participatory and efficient. So, the accountability of the state responses to the problems related to the social question, the foundation of the state of social welfare, gives rise to a culture of individual responsibility for meeting personal needs. The bourgeois ideology imposes itself, turning its social project to a project of *all* social classes. If we look at the reality without the bourgeois ideology lens, however, the evidence plainly touches the conscience, making clear the possibilities for overcoming this fragmentation of work and everyday life.

Professional activities and social policies

The difference between work and reproductive activity is a key point in the debate about the professionals working with social policy, in order that the pitfalls that arise in daily life, the dilemmas faced and also the potential for improvement can be analyzed. For this, we must consider the distinction between human work and its social function. For Marx (2004), what distinguishes work from other human activities is its social function, i.e., mediating the relationship between humans and nature for producing the essential material basis for society to reproduce. It is an activity immanent to human sociability in a capitalistic society subordinated to the capital. From this interaction derive all process of human formation and also social relations.

Thus, reproductive activity is a necessary social practice in order to prepare and create the indispensable conditions for social work to become effective, as has been historically necessary for every society. Material reproduction is always related to human beings, responding to their needs. The professions governed by social policies, especially psychology, have gained a new impetus in the structure of society, joining medicine, which previously already occupied an important position. These professions are formed from a supposed political commitment – the construction and production of an emancipated subject. That is, they consolidate the effect of modulations of capitalism – separating production from the product, thereby aiding the process of subjectivation of the subject.

Here, two questions arise: Who is the professional who currently faces this reality? And what is the object of his/her activity? Social policies boil down to confronting the "social issue", as affirmed by Yamamoto (2007):

> In a very broad sense social issues mean the set of political, social and economic positions formed by the emergence of the working class in the process of constitution of a capitalist society. Social issues can therefore be translated as the manifestation in everyday social life of the capital-labor contradiction. (p. 31)

Behring and Boschetti (2008) criticize this, contextualizing this discussion within the field of Social Services. For them, expressions such as "social issue", "social situation" and "social problem" derive from traditional philanthropic and welfare-based ideas and capture reality in a particular way. Rather than being taken for granted, the concept of "social issues" should be understood as built form and capable of analysis. Thus, professional performance, without this critical position, reproduces the corporate form as it is, with adjustments and covering up the contradictions and disputes, essentially maintaining the status quo.

A professional practice committed to social change should focus on the circuit of repetition, in which the symptoms are produced as natural. It is necessary also to understand the limitations of the "game" in which particular issues are placed in social action through professional specialization. Social policies are not, but seem to be, a way of overcoming social inequalities; they simply keep repeating the cycle of capital-labour contradictions, diminishing the impact of the class struggle.

Today, professional performance within social policies covers the fragmentation of the working class. This can be sustained as an argument by the debate about social control in health, but is also present in other fields such as social assistance or education. This situation divides workers and service users, putting them on opposite sides. These sides can easily be unmasked in the precariousness of work time when the same worker, for the same practice, is under different condition of employment, whether in relation to salary or job stability, i.e. with different rights and different unions representing their interests.

Another point concerns intersectorial social policies, which suggest that integration would occur, only if there was interest from the public at whom the services are targeted and also to the extent of economic provisions made by government. These policies put forward partnership with the private sector with the clear and unambiguous intention of minimum state investment, targeted at the most needy with a discourse of income redistribution. The justification for the privatization is the higher quality and flexibility of private services compared with public ones. In Campinas, for example, education emphasizes the status of a private pre-school institution (Naves-Mãe) that greatly reduces the state budget for teaching children in a city in a very bad condition. According to the Reference Center for Occupational Health the number of worker-related illnesses among professionals in those services is increasing; the same is true of those in primary care up to those in highly complex health services. Professionals hired by NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) earn less; they do not have health care, or vacations, unlike teachers, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and physicians.

How do these issues (higher salaries, better working conditions and adequate resources) impact the everyday worker's education and health care? In order to bring the specifics of professional working experience together in a social policy of health, the representative bodies for psychology criticized the direction of the profession within the framework of

national mobilization for democracy, social justice and citizenship, since the country suffered a long period of military dictatorship. Yamamoto (2007), however, argues that what dictated the course of the profession was less the regime than the incipient profession itself. For this author, the expansion of higher education in Brazil institutionalized the ideology of national security and contributed to that situation. The downfall of the regime, and the decay of the economic miracle, meant that academia and its professionals became politicized and abandoned the pseudo neutrality of science.

As a consequence of the market the number of psychologists working on social policies has increased. In the late 1970s and 1980s, psychologists occupied union and board systems (organizations that regulate and supervise the professional class), and worked in the anti-asylum movement or national health conference.

Historically, psychology has been used for control, segmentation and differentiation, thereby contributing to maintaining and increasing necessary profits for capital reproduction (Yamamoto & Oliveira, 2010). But even so, it is possible to question this position in the field of social policies. The medical model of mental health is the target of intense criticism by the health reform and the anti-asylum movements. Psychotherapy and counseling were the prevailing models for the coordination of mental health, in the Health Secretariat of São Paulo State in the mid-1980s, however.

Despite attempts to diversify the activity of professional psychologists, as it is not exclusively limited to the mental health field, there was a structure for the work done in this context. Psychotherapy for the poor was treated in the context of individualization and psychologization of the social question.

The lack of academic debate about the social relevance of the profession caused professionals to push for new spaces to absorb their manpower, without offering a working model for a new possibility of practice (Yamamoto & Oliveira, 2010).

In the case of psychology, vocational integration in the social policy area of social assistance took place at the beginning, with poverty as a psychological subject. Professional practice was limited and was based more on trust than on competence or philanthropy, without any commitment to the transformation of how relations are structured in our corporate form of capitalism.

The instability of employment relations still persists today, contrary to what is to be expected from the universal social assistance system, resulting in high professional turnover, deprofessionalization, and casual and unsystematic practice. Between 1980 and 1990, some groups achieved legal status for the subject (for instance, children being subject to protection not to punishment) and the role of NGOs expanded, thus increasing the job opportunities for a large number of professionals (Yamamoto & Oliveira, 2010).

This development was delayed, compared to the more rapid development of public health policy, but even in the midst of the struggle for human rights, the fight for equality and better life conditions culminated in expanded possibilities for psychologists and social workers in the 1980s.

In his book *Revolution in Psychology,* Parker (2007) details how psychology functions as an apparatus of social control with immense power in capitalist society. Nevertheless, from a

critical perspective, he considered alternatives to put social change on the agenda of psychological practice, framing them as "transitional demands": To take seriously human social nature constructed alongside, and in contrast to, what can be understood, in the capitalistic society, as alienation.

Without losing the view of social relations and the role of psychology and other professions related to the health, education and welfare of the masses, we must find solutions, as we face the reality, to understanding the social class outline to insure committed and critical professional practice. Without this, we will be building a science and a practice committed to economic and social order, even though the analysis of the reality shows ways to overcome them.

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