

Towards an International Critical Social Work

Aldo Beretta*

Abstract.

This article explores the relevance of a critical perspective in international social work. The arguments provided defend the importance of a theoretical and practical refocusing of international social work practice in order to answer the challenges of the multiple crises derived from the predominance of capital accumulation over democracy and socio-environmental reproduction. Such critical-turn argues in favor of reclaiming the motives developed by Max Horkheimer and the Critical Theory tradition and consolidate an interdisciplinary framework that enables international critical social work to recognize macro and micro-level interdependencies between phenomena of oppression, exploitation, exclusion and current emancipatory struggles.

Keywords.

Critical social work, Critical Theory, multiple crises, Horkheimer, accumulation by dispossession, Environmental Injustice, Green Social Work

Resumen.

Este artículo explora la relevancia de una perspectiva crítica en el trabajo social internacional. Los argumentos aportados defienden la importancia de un reenfoque teórico y práctico de la práctica del trabajo social internacional para responder a los desafíos de las múltiples crisis derivadas del predominio de la acumulación de capital sobre la democracia y la reproducción socioambiental. Tal giro crítico aboga por recuperar los motivos desarrollados por Max Horkheimer y la tradición de la Teoría Crítica y consolida un marco interdisciplinario que permite al trabajo social crítico internacional reconocer las interdependencias a nivel macro y micro entre los fenómenos de opresión, explotación, exclusión y luchas emancipadoras actuales.

Palabras clave.

Trabajo social crítico, Teoría Crítica, crisis múltiples, Horkheimer, acumulación por desposesión, Injusticia Ambiental, Trabajo Social Verde

Introduction

The following article inscribes in the *critical-turn* within international social work. Two claims compose the argument: *a)* there is a need to refocus international social work towards a critical perspective if the discipline aims to provide an answer to the ongoing challenges posed to society and nature around the globe; and *b)* a critical-turn in international social work should reclaim the notions developed by Max Horkheimer and the Critical Theory tradition, in order to provide the practice-based profession an interdisciplinary framework that reveals the interdependencies between macro and micro-level oppressions, exploitation and exclusion, as well as the fundamental struggles for a current emancipatory praxis.

* Gastprofessor an der [Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin](https://www.alice-salomon.de/).



... so wird jeder sich selbst gestehen müssen,
daß er keine exakte Anschauung von dem hat,
was werden soll. Indessen ist das gerade
wieder der Vorzug der neuen Richtung, daß
wir nicht dogmatisch die Welt antizipieren,
sondern erst aus der Kritik der alten Welt
die neue finden wollen.¹
(Marx, 1976: 345)

For this purpose, the paper is structured in two sections titled: *a)* refocusing international social work and *b)* categories and strategies for an international critical social work. In the first section significant global tendencies of our times are briefly characterized, as well as the challenges they present for international social work. Following Habermas and Brand, the tendency of economical primacy over democracy and the concept of multiples crises are addressed. With this problematic at hand, an emphasis on certain aspects of social work's international definition is formulated and a conceptual outline based on some of Horkheimer's notions on critical theory is proposed as an interdisciplinary basis for an international critical social work.

The second section of this article concentrates on the second claim and follows Lutz's appeal to act beyond the individual, make visible social oppressions and situate social work interventions on emancipatory resistance and social movements. Correspondingly, such reorientation towards an international critical social work shows the importance of overcoming methodological nationalism and approaching macro and micro-level interdependencies regarding accumulation by dispossession, environmental injustice, global solidarity and emancipatory struggles as fields of action for international critical social work.

1. Refocusing international social work

1.1. Economical primacy over democracy

To get an adequate idea of the challenges of international social work, we should identify the multiple crises of our time. The dominance of global economic forces has reconfigured the functional coupling of political and economic spheres and their relationship to the lifeworld throughout the globe. This has led to a *de facto* primacy of the principle of economic accumulation over democratic processes and institutions (Cf. Habermas, 2013).

¹ "... but everyone will have to admit to himself that he has no exact idea what the future ought to be. On the other hand, it is precisely the advantage of the new trend that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but want to find the new world through the critique of the old one."



Already, in the final years of the past century, when Albrecht Wellmer introduced the concept of democratic ethical life, he explained the growing crisis between democratic processes and a global finance-driven economy that excludes the population from political decisions that directly affect them. (Wellmer, 1998:39-61) Years later, in one of his final conference papers, *On the Critique of Critical Theory*, Wellmer again reviewed the extent of the crisis and asserted the revival of a practical contradiction between contemporary capitalism and democracy, yet this time, on a global scale. According to Wellmer, this contradiction tends to fragmentize social reproduction, erode political legitimacy and trigger socio-ecological conflicts (Wellmer, 2012:9).

Rahel Jaeggi, on the other hand, has recently traced an accentuated phenomenon of this contradiction, in which certain economic practices -within the financial and trade markets- have developed a dynamic that limits the processes of democratic transformation. “Economic relations seem not only to have taken control of certain aspects of social life, but also to have developed a dynamic of their own that goes beyond the subjective goals and democratic control of their participants” (Jaeggi, 2017:176). As an observable global trend, we therefore witness incremented social exclusion and authoritarian tendencies that attempt to reclaim control of political institutions world wide.

1.2 Multiple crises

In relation to this debate, Brand formulated the concept of multiple crises in his analysis of the global crisis in 2008. He used this term to describe the “historically specific constellation of various mutually influencing and interrelated crises processes in neoliberal financial market capitalism.” (Brand, 2009:13). The term encompasses four crises complexes: “(1) the crisis of financially dominated

accumulation, (2) the socio-ecological crisis, (3) the permanent crisis of reproduction, and (4) the crisis of democracy and the spread of authoritarian forms of government and domination” (Brand, 2009:13).

Refocusing towards an international critical social work perspective requires to keep in mind both the multiple crises and the processes that have brought us to the present situation in recent years, for example: the spread of fossil capitalism and the reshaping of political institutions in National Competition States (Hirsch, 1995) with differentially constrained democracies, specially in the global south. As Ulrich Brand formulates in his basic thesis: “The inner context of the manifold crisis lies in the fossilist-capitalist mode of production and life, which has been transformed in the last thirty years under neoliberal and imperial auspices. With this, the political and social institutions have also been changed to secure the neoliberal-imperial order. The state of ‘financial market capitalism’ today is a ‘national competitive state’ whose main orientation -despite all differences in the individual policy fields- is the establishment of international competitiveness” (Brand, 2009:2).

1.3 Emphasis within social work’s definition

In this sense, the definition of critical social work in its international dimension must respond to the challenges of the current multiple crises. What do we mean by critical international social work? In the official definition of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) we find three elements that, if emphasized, can offer the coordinates for a critical and transformative international social work.

The definition adopted at the IFSW General Assembly in Melbourne in July 2014 is: “Social work is a practice-based profession and an



academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (DBSH, 2014).

Social change, empowerment and liberation of people correspond to the fundamental aspects of an international critical social work in view of the current multiple crises. Following Ronald Lutz and Alexander Stauss, international critical social work should conduct a reorientation “that takes [international] social work far beyond looking at the individual [and the nation-state] and mirrors its social location, exposing how dislocations, exploitation, oppression, land grabbing, and social structures minimize opportunities. [...] A social work that feeds [...] on resistance, movements, liberation, and utopia finds its most public and radical expression here. [And thereby] [...] learns a new ‘radicality’ oriented to social movements” (Lutz *et al.*, 2018:271).

1.4 Critical theory and social work

Together with the learning process constituted through the interaction with social movements, critical social work simultaneously should reclaim the motives that Max Horkheimer formulated in his thesis regarding *Traditional and Critical Theory*. Wherein critical theory aims to develop a new material interdisciplinary social science that unifies, both individual and social relations, as well as theory and praxis through a fundamental emancipatory intention. (cfr. Horkheimer, 1998 and Rush, 2004) Based on Horkheimer’s essay on the critical-turn of theory, critical international social

work should also recover the relativization of a naturalized separation between subjects, society and institutions as restriction for transformative praxis. “The separation of individual and society, by virtue of which the individual accepts as natural the predefined limits of his activity, is relativized in critical theory” (Horkheimer, 1988:180).

Regarding the separation of theory and practice, implicit in the appeal for applicability of methods and concepts within social work, critical theory provides an approach that reconfigures the external relation between both elements particular to a conventional conception of social practice. “To the conventional theoretical thinking, as explained, both the genesis of the determined circumstances and the practical use of the conceptual systems in which one handles with them, and its role in practice, are regarded as external.” (Horkheimer, 1988:182) This externality, creates the conditions for understanding socio-economical and ecological conflicts as isolated phenomena that can apparently be solved by responding to their mere effects, since their genesis and correlation to other socio-economical problems remains disregarded. “In the neoliberal world view, social problems are perceived as individual problems rather than as problems created within and by socio-economic, political and cultural systems. Within the increasingly orthodox neoliberal paradigm, state intervention in social life is narrowly justified to protect the law-abiding from the dangerous ‘other’.” (Kamali and Jönsson, 2019:302).

In this line of thought, “a project of the *critical* in social work [requires] ‘the recognition of the historical course of the whole as the driving motive’ (Horkheimer) and the foundation of the critique” (Anhorn *et al.*, 2012:13). This is why, as Theunissen has explained, the relation between theory and praxis conceived by Horkheimer goes beyond the mere applicability of concepts



2. Categories and strategies for an international critical social work

2.1 *Beyond methodological nationalism*

and is embedded -through its object of knowledge- within a historical transformation process. “Critical theory forms a unity with practice, firstly, insofar as it simultaneously participates in the process of history that it reflects upon; it is in itself praxis as a moment of history, which it drives forward through its reflection. And critical theory is one with praxis, secondly, in that it is interested in praxis as a future outcome of world history” (Theunissen, 1981:7). This approach therefore provides a framework for critical social work that enables a notion of praxis that surmounts a mere techno-scientific application of knowledge and takes into consideration the socio-economical contradictions as causes that should be addressed by emancipatory practice.

Such emancipatory intention of critical theory reflects on the naturalized restrictions upon praxis and knowledge, thus includes forces of domination as part of its object of study. *Critical theory* therefore, envisages in its own conception “an account of the social forces of domination that [makes] its theoretical activity to be practically connected to the object of its study. In other words, Critical Theory is not merely descriptive, it is a way to instigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality)” (Rush, 2004:9). Therefore, critical international social work as socio-political intervention “concerns a common struggle against an unsustainable neoliberal and post-colonial world that has resulted in increasing inequalities, conflicts and social and ecological problems” (Kamali and Jönsson, 2019:293).

In this respect, critical international social work should conceptually adapt its analytical framework and focus on global relations of exploitation, oppression and exclusion in a macro and micro level. For this purpose, the World-Systems Analysis still offers an important reference point concerning the unit of analysis for a better characterization of actual domination processes. Based on Immanuel Wallerstein’s explanation, one can underline that “world-systems analysis meant first of all the substitution of a unit of analysis called the ‘world-system’ for the standard unit of analysis, which was the national state. On the whole, historians had been analyzing national histories, economists national economies, political scientists national political structures, and sociologists national societies [and social workers national programs of welfare services]. World-systems analysts raised a skeptical eyebrow, questioning whether [...] they were the most useful loci of analysis (Wallerstein, 2004:16).

Therefore, a critical conception of international social work should not stop at national borders in its analysis. Methodological nationalism must be overcome, otherwise social dynamics of domination and their relational configuration will not be grasped and understood in their fullness and state-restricted interventions will exclude fundamental correlations that create, explain and could transform current socio-economic and ecological conflicts.

For international critical social work such relational configuration, “is a key initial concept to grasp. It says that with ‘world-systems’ we are dealing with a spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units, one



that represents an integrated zone of activity and institutions which obey certain systemic rules” (Wallerstein, 2004:17). This area of interaction is constituted by power forces that create a hierarchically constituted geographic space. The concepts used by the World-Systems Analysis to explain this hierarchical structure are core, semi-periphery and periphery and they operate as a functional relational unit of analysis. “In world-systems analysis, core-periphery is a relational concept, not a pair of terms that are reified, that is, [do not] have separate essential meanings” (Wallerstein, 2004:17).

Going beyond the notion of developed and developing nation-states, socio-economic processes within capitalist world-economy are the constituting elements of multiples social fields of interaction affected by exploitation, oppression and exclusion dynamics. “The axial division of labor of a capitalist world-economy divides production into core-like products and peripheral products. Core-periphery is a relational concept. What we mean by core-periphery is the degree of profit ability of the production processes. [...] As a result, there is a constant flow of surplus-value from the producers of peripheral products to the producers of core-like products. This has been called unequal exchange” (Wallerstein, 2004:28). International critical social work should be able to recognize the causalities and functionalities of current global dynamics of exclusion, exploitation and oppression through various mechanisms, including unequal exchange, through which much of the value of labour and nature is transferred from peripheral areas to the center.

2.2 Accumulation by dispossession

Although for years the unequal division of labor has been a central feature for world-system analysis, David Harvey and Silvia Federici, among others,

have updated this thesis with the notion of accumulation by dispossession in order to “conceive the ‘separation of the producer from the means of production’—for Marx the essence of primitive accumulation—as something that has to be continuously reenacted, especially in times of capitalist crisis” (Federici, 2019:16). It is a mode of accumulation of current capitalism that has become increasingly dominant in the neoliberal phase, leading to a global expropriation economy where poor communities, small-scale producers and wage laborers are being dispossessed of their material means of social reproduction.

The notion of accumulation by dispossession includes: “the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; conversion of various forms of property rights –common, collective, state, etc.– into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative, indigenous, forms of production and consumption [...]” (Harvey, 2004:74). By means of the global unequal division of labor and the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession, an international critical social work can better understand the formation and interplay of core, semi-periphery and periphery as central concepts for explaining global domination, exploitation and exclusion processes, as well as situating potential efforts for a transformative praxis.

Additional to unequal exchange and dispossession, critical international social work needs to engage in global environmental injustice, not as an independent issue of current social conflicts, but as an aspect of our current multiple crises (Cfr. Dominelli, 2018:75). Within the World-Systems Analysis tradition, the category of ecologically unequal exchange has enabled the analysis of an asymmetrical distribution of environmental



burdens and benefits caused by global exchange between core and periphery regions. “Ecologically unequal exchange has documented that energy and materials disproportionately flow from the Global South to the Global North” (Roberts and Parks, 2009:387).

2.3 Environmental justice and green social work

Accordingly, ecologically unequal exchange and accumulation by dispossession dynamics have appropriated labour and nature from the periphery into the economical processes of the core regions accompanied by a disproportionate concentration of environmental damage in the periphery. Far from being simply side-effects, this environmental damage is a basic condition of accumulation processes. This means that the unequal distribution of wealth is linked to the unequal distribution of ecological risks and consequential damages. (Schaffartzik and Kusche, 2020). “The core’s productive economy consumes commodities directly and indirectly through manufactures, but also effectively consumes the extractive economy, draining it of its energy and matter and damaging the local ecology, social organization, and infrastructure. In effect, the core relies on the periphery as both a source and sink (for high entropic by-products and waste)” (Roberts and Parks, 2009:390).

In this sense, international critical social work may benefit from the debate regarding green social work as “perspective that seeks to secure the well-being of people and the planet through reforming socio-political power structures” (Dominelli, 2018: 74). Including the categories of asymmetrical power relations: core, semi-periphery and periphery critical international social work praxis should access an environmental dimension through ecological unequal exchange and

environmental injustice and their correlation at global and local levels. “Environmental injustice occurs at the macro-level as global economic and political inequalities unjustly shift environmental hazards and burdens away from wealthier countries and onto poorer countries. Environmental injustice also occurs at the micro-level, particularly within developing countries, as poor people bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation. These injustices exist because of global systems of inequality, and global collaboration is necessary to confront them” (Dominelli, 2018:74).

2.4 Local and global transformative interventions

A world in which many worlds fit has been the Zapatistas’ response to the challenges of globalization. As Kleibl (Kleibl *et al.*, 2020) and Lutz (Lutz *et al.*, 2021) have pointed out, international social work is called to reorient itself theoretically and practically because of the conflicts and questions that arise in the global south. Emphasizing the transformative dimension of international social work based on the conflicts and struggles of and from the global south would mean to make visible the exploitation and exclusion caused by neoliberal and post-colonial processes. As well as the correlated “political claim to transformation by movements, organizations, governments or people in their social relations” (Lutz *et al.*, 2018:258).

There is no question about the plausibility of this thesis, especially in light of the strategic tasks of an international critical social work approach to the problems of the periphery or global south. However, part of the practical approach that a critical conception requires is not to lose sight of the centrality of the relationship between the global south and the global north. Classically formulated, one might speak of a certain dialectic in which neither social space can be explained, analyzed,



or even transformed without considering and understanding its relationship to the other.

Many of the crises currently observed in the global south, be it the crisis of financially dominated accumulation through dispossession, the socio-ecological crisis, the crisis of material reproduction or the crisis of democracy, with their respective intersectional dimensions in the fields of race, gender and class, not only have a historical origin in the global north, but are the precondition of its reproduction. At the same time, solidarity from the global north can be also a condition of possibility for emancipatory processes in the global south. The practice of critical international social work should be aware that emancipatory strategies and transformative interventions always take place within such frame of correlations and functionalities. It is a relation of interdependency that accompanies us between Chenalhó, Saint-Denis, Cochabamba, Kreuzberg, Boyle Heights or Lampedusa.

Therefore, an international critical social work as an acting profession should be inspired by Gramsci and problematize the opposition between economy as objective structure and lifeworld as multifaceted activity. So that the gap between structure and practice, between global and local processes can be overcome (Cfr. Novy, 2007:39). This perspective would be then compatible with the efforts of a “local de-globalization and solidarity-based globalization, rather than the current opposition of globalization versus return to the nation-state, which only reproduces the antagonism of neoliberals and the right” (Kanzleiter, 2020:10).

2.5 Global solidarity and social struggles

In order to meet the challenges mentioned above, it is necessary to embed international critical social work in the paradigm of global solidarity

and unconditional solidarity (Elam, 1994). As Lea Susemichel puts it: “solidarity has to be struggled for, it is mostly constituted conflictively. It is only in this process that a solidarity collective is formed, which does not necessarily emerge on the basis of shared experience. Unconditional solidarity is thus based on differences (and not on uniformity), it requires conflicts (and not conformity) [...]. Unconditional solidarity is a ‘solidarity of struggle’, not only in the sense of a ‘solidarity against’, which is united outwardly against inhumanity and inequality, but which also fights within its own ranks for more justice where necessary. Unconditional solidarity is a reciprocal process of building new relationships, a practice of solidarity that at the same time can (and should) take institutionalized forms to create social conditions that perpetuate solidarity” (Susemichel, Kastner, 2021:14).

Under this concept of solidarity, critical international social work could be able to focus on the internationalization of emancipation movements as well as the linking of local initiatives and organizations with global networks in order to act against socio-political fragmentation. Following Boris Kanzleiter’s essay on *Global Solidarity* such strategy requires that critical international social work accompanies and supports social struggles in the following fields of action:

- a) Climate justice and socio-ecological transformation strategies,
- b) Social and labor rights, e.g.: promotion and protection of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN Civil Covenant, ILO Core Labor Standards, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, UN Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Land Rights, Free and Prior Informed Consent, Consultation Rights, etc.,



- c) Migrants' rights, especially to housing, health and work,
- d) Regulation of transnational corporations, promotion of binding UN international agreement on transnational corporations and human rights,
- e) Local struggles against extractivism of transnational corporations, workers' and trade union struggles along production and supply chains,
- f) Food sovereignty to strengthen agroecological forms of production and exchange, and local struggles against privatization of common goods,
- g) Feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements. Feminist struggles against the link between extractivism, violence against women, femicide and labor exploitation. (Kanzleiter, 2020: 9-20).

On a final note

The debate on critical social work within the social work tradition in the German speaking world has acquired, in the past 18 years, a stronger impulse inscribed in what ten years ago Roland Anhorn, Frank Bettinger, Cornelis Horlacher and Kerstin Rathgeb characterized in their work as 'crystallization points' of critical social work (Anhorn *et al.*, 2012:13). Efforts and debates like the 'Social Work of the South' (*Sozialarbeit des Süden*) have contributed since 2007 to recognize the reality of the global south as a normative critical reflexion in relation to social work practice in the global north (Lutz *et al.*, 2021). The publication on 2020 of the *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* edited by Tanja Kleibl *et al.* (2020) and on

2023 of the *Routledge Handbook of International Critical Social Work* edited by Stephen A. Webb (2023) should also be considered as relevant accomplishments in the expansion of this critical-turn, particularly regarding international social work.

As stated above, this article is conceived as a modest contribution to the debate on international critical social work. The argument addressed this issue through two basic claims. The first claim indicated that the historical conditions the planet is facing through the multiple crises, clearly challenge the conception and praxis of international social work. The way global forces have reconfigured national institutions and their articulation with the life-world has created novel interdependencies between the macro and the micro-level of social interaction and social space.

Accordingly, the Habermasian thesis of an unsolvable tension between capitalism and democracy has developed into a possible contradiction, in the form of authoritarian tendencies both in the economical as in the political realms deeply affecting the configuration of the life-world everywhere. All this interrelated with the four crises complexes previously addressed: accumulation crisis, socio-ecological crisis, material reproduction crisis, legitimization crisis of democracy. It is in face of these interdependent crises that international social work is called to reconsider its challenges as a profession that aims to contribute to social change, empowerment and liberation. The kind of reorientation of international social work suggested in this article, therefore, followed Lutz's appeal to act beyond the individual, make visible social oppressions and feed on emancipatory resistance and social movements.

Correspondingly, the second claim of this article stated that such reorientation towards an international critical social work should be based on



the fundamental motives elaborated by Marx Horkheimer and the Critical Theory tradition. Namely, a) the intention of a material interdisciplinary social science with a unified conception of theory and praxis, b) the overcome of the dualism between individual and society through the relational character of the social, c) a historical reconstruction of social forms of life and social forces, through their mutually configuring interactions, in order to overcome a fragmented conception and reveal the interdependencies of socio-economical and ecological conflicts on a macro and micro-level.

As indicated, such interdependencies already show the limitations of 'methodological nationalism' or 'container-nationstate' perspectives, for which the World-Systems Analysis tradition, as well as the reformulations of the Latin-American Dependency Theory, offer an alternative. The relational concept of core-semiperiphery-periphery enables international critical social work analyses and socio-political interventions to take into consideration economical and ecological interactions based on global and local actors and networks, whether within a dynamic that favors accumulation by dispossession or within potential dynamics of solidarity. Whereby, complemented with the developments in intersectional social research on race, gender and class, international critical social work has the possibility of recognizing a common struggle against post-colonial and capitalist oppressions, exploitation and exclusions, and accompany the emancipatory struggles conducted by communities, collectives and organizations throughout the globe with local strategies and transnational network articulation.

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