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Notes from the Field:

It's Not About Love: Brazilian Social Work Celebrates 80 Years in the Fight for Social Rights

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, Brazilian social work celebrated 80 years of existence. This writer, a U.S. social worker, traveled south to participate in the celebrations, and to observe—and reflect upon—the role of human rights activism in the practice of our shared profession. This article will discuss both Brazil's history and its social work profession as they relate to human rights, and highlight ways that Brazilian social workers speak about human rights that challenge the author to become a better social worker and educator.

Keywords: Brazil, Social Work, Social Work Education, Human Rights, Activism, Social Rights, U.S. Exceptionalism

Introduction

In May 2016, I sat with a colleague in her university office in Recife, Brazil, and she showed me an image on her phone. The image—celebrating Brazilian Social Work Day on May 15th—had been sent to her by a student and it had made her furious. The image—showing a cartoon red heart—presented a multiple-choice test on the definition of social work. The options were: (1) love for humanity; (2) a mission in life; (3) service to the world; or (4) all of the above. In this celebratory image, “all of the above” was checked as the correct answer. My friend was indignant. As a U.S. social worker, I found this image very familiar. It struck me as a bit trite, but as an educator in the US, I come across similar reductions of my professional role on a regular basis and—up until now—they had not made me furious. Unlike, my Brazilian friend, I was quite numb to the political implications of what she called “the little heart of social work.”

My Brazilian friend persisted. She said, “Social Work is NOT about love!” I laughed at her outrage. “If it's not about love, what is it?” I challenged, pressing her for a better definition. Here, she was absolutely clear, asserting, “Social work is about the defense of social rights, and the defense of human rights; it's about our commitment to justice for the working class.” Furthermore, she pointed out how the “little heart”—*a coraçõzinho*—undermines the whole notion of a social work profession. If it's all about love, she reasoned, why would it not be a volunteer activity? Why should anyone be paid for it?

I had come to Brazil seeking exactly this sort of conversation. Talking about my profession with my Brazilian colleagues is the great pleasure of Brazil for me. For some people, Brazil is samba and beaches; I like those things too, but I travel to Brazil to immerse myself in politics and human rights at the forefront of social work identity. A trip to Brazil, for me, is a bit like a visit to the Korean spa near my home in Athens, Georgia. I get some layers of dead skin scoured from my thinking and the little hearts fall from my eyes. Brazil helps me to focus on human rights and to see what social work is—or should be—all about.

As a social worker, I became interested in Brazil as I was pursuing my doctorate in social work and human rights. I wanted to see what a human rights-based approach to social work might actually look like in practice, and I reasoned—based on what I knew about Brazil’s human rights history and commitments—that Brazil might be a good place to find out. Also, I had some previous history in Brazil. I had been a university student there for a semester in 1986, and I thought that with a little practice I might still be able to speak the language.

So, in 2011, I returned to Brazil to study rights-based approaches to social work practice. As I had hoped, I was able to interview and learn from several Brazilian social workers who conceptualized their social work practice as human rights work. Also, in the process of locating these rights-based social workers, I also met a huge number of people: I visited 11 universities, 15 agencies, and met with almost 100 social workers and their colleagues in public health, law, and psychology. Consequently, it was this 2011 trip and the resulting article (McPherson 2015) that led to my being invited back to participate in the São Paulo celebrations of social work’s 80th birthday in May 2016. Before discussing my impressions of the role that human rights play in Brazilian social workers’ celebration of their professional identity, I want to provide a bit of context.

Human Rights & Brazil

In 1964, democratic rule in Brazil was disrupted for more than two decades by a military coup. The dictatorship that followed suspended the constitution, dissolved Congress, imposed censorship, and brutally repressed political opposition (Rohter 2010). Still, left-wing guerrilla and trade union movements developed, and even elements of the Roman Catholic Church joined in the effort to resist government control (Lima 2012). Emancipatory ideologies, including, Marxism, liberation theology, and Paulo Freire’s consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) spread (Freire 1972). Many social workers were members of guerrilla groups and illegal parties; many were imprisoned, and some even killed during their resistance to dictatorship. Their stories are archived online among the more than 7,000 stories of political prisoners tried before Brazil’s Military Supreme Court during the dictatorship years (Brasil Nunca Mais Digital 2016).

The dictatorship ended in 1985, and, in its wake, Brazil was quick to embrace ideals of democracy, social justice, and human rights (Rohter 2010). Brazil quickly ratified a series of international human rights treaties. They ratified the Convention on the Prevention & Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention to Eliminate all forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention against Torture—the four international human rights treaties that have been ratified by the US—and went on to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and more recently, the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Beyond ratification, Brazil has enacted national laws to reinforce these international human rights commitments.

Brazil’s record on treaty ratification supports social work values, and suggests a national attitude towards human rights that might be less ambivalent than the “exceptionalism” for which the US is infamous (Ignatieff 2005). Brazil’s post-dictatorship Constitution (1988) enshrines all the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights enumerated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It is particularly important to emphasize that, in contrast to the United States, Brazil constitutionally guarantees access to social rights—including education, health,

work, leisure, protection of motherhood and childhood, and assistance to the destitute.

Before I paint too pretty a picture of Brazil's human rights status, I want to stop and clarify a few things. First, Brazil—as a nation—has an excellent record on ratifying human rights treaties, but ratifying a treaty and even including those rights in the constitution and national law does not immediately provide poor and disenfranchised populations with access to those rights. On more than one occasion, I have heard a Brazilian service provider lament that her clients' rights “*não saem do papel*,” that is, only exist on paper. Similarly, I have heard several privileged Brazilians dismiss human rights altogether saying, “*direitos humanos são direitos de bandidos*,” implying that efforts to expand human rights help only thugs and murderers, and thereby put good people at risk. Though I've heard distress about working people's access to their human rights from Brazilian social workers, I've never heard a social worker disparage the centrality of human rights to democracy in Brazil.

Human Rights, Social Work, & Brazil

Contemporary Brazilian social work proudly trumpets the values of the popular democratic movements that overthrew the dictatorship (Behring 2013; Lima 2012; Parada 2007). Many social workers were part of these movements and lived through those years, which ultimately refocused Brazilian social work away from personal concerns and towards political problems.

After the dictatorship, Brazilian social work rejected the conservative models of practice that they associated with the US, and instead (like many of their colleagues in South America) embraced a process of reconceptualization or *renovação*, which rejected practices that sought to change the values and behaviors of the poor (Ferguson & Lavalette 2013; Pereyra 2008). Reconceptualization called on social workers to adopt an understanding of poverty as produced by structural forces, especially by the global capitalist economy (Lima 2012; Parada 2007). This new understanding called for political and collectivist responses to social problems.

Thus, even as they work with individuals, families and communities, Brazilian social workers seem to understand themselves to be solving political and structural problems. Reflecting these larger social goals, they often take collectivist and political approaches to problems like child abuse, maternal-child health, domestic violence that we tend to see as individual concerns in the United States (McPherson 2015).

Brazilian social work now defines itself as a radical and critical profession with roots in Marxism, liberation theology, and Freirian community education (Lima 2012). Human rights are fully embraced, “turning the workspace of every social worker into a battlefield in defence of rights, progress, respect, democracy, and reason” (Behring 2013:92).

Official voices of Brazilian social work call for action ‘in defence of the working class in the construction of an anti-capitalist society’ (CFESS 2011:14). The Code of Ethics (adopted in 1993) charges social workers to be knowledgeable about human rights, to educate their service users about those rights, and to work alongside those *usuários* (service users or clients) in the pursuit of those rights (CFESS 2011). Brazilian social work is attentive to structural forces, collectivist, and community-focused in its values (Mota 2006). Brazilian social work puts human rights front and center.

Brazilian Social Work's 80th Birthday

Having presented some context about human rights in Brazil and the social work profession—and having situated myself in relation to this story—I now turn to the anniversary celebrations.

During my visit in May 2016, I attended three formal celebrations of Social Work Day in the State of São Paulo, and I also visited colleagues at several other universities in the States of Minas Gerais and Pernambuco. The first formal event I attended was a full day celebration at the Regional Council Social Work in São Paulo (CRESS-SP) on Saturday, May 14th. It was very well attended. I didn't count, but when I look at the photos the auditorium is packed with professionals—several hundred adults giving up their weekend to learn more about the profession and to get fired up. (In contrast, three months before, I had been a speaker at Atlanta Social Work Day, and the Thursday-morning audience consisted almost entirely of students; few professionals were present, and no one was giving up a Saturday.) In São Paulo, CRESS-SP had a table where they were selling copies of the Code of Ethics (I bought one) and a few books on critical social work themes including human rights, Marxism, and mass movements (I bought some of those, too).

The second event was another full day sponsored by a major social work publisher, *Cortez Editora*, which featured an appreciation of several eminent social work scholars—all women—and a panel session during which they spoke about the history of social work in Brazil and their thoughts on the way forward. The third event was held on the campus of the Federal University of the State of São Paulo in the coastal city of Santos. This one, organized by students, focused on social work's "history of struggles and victories."

Before I proceed with my observations, I also need to situate this 80th birthday celebration in the middle of what is understood by many social workers as a coup. On May 12th, 2016, Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first female President, who represents the left-wing *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party), was voted out of office. Dilma, who herself had been imprisoned and tortured by Brazil's dictators, led a government made up of men and women, gays and straights, blacks and whites, workers and elite. Michel Temer, who quickly took her place as Acting President, appointed a cabinet made up exclusively of rich, white men—a government described as having "a lot of testosterone and little pigment" (Watts 2016a). Temer's initial government was the first to be all-male since the dictatorship, and this in a country where more than fifty percent of the population is female and a similar percentage identifies as black, indigenous, or mixed race (Watts 2016a). In the first days of Temer's government, cuts were announced or contemplated for programs and ministries that, in the eyes of many social workers, had the potential to violate social rights and weaken Brazilian democracy. Affected programs included Brazil's successful anti-poverty program (*bolsa familia*), university scholarships (*cotas*) for Afro-Brazilian students, public housing, and government employment; also, the Ministry of Government was subsumed into the Ministry of Education (Watts 2016b). The vote to oust Dilma happened just two days before the social work anniversary celebrations began in São Paulo.

As I reflect on human rights attitudes among Brazilian social workers, I don't want to walk you through each of the 80th anniversary events hour by hour. Instead, I want to tell you about a few of the moments that made me stop and listen. The moments where I knew I was not in the United States. The moments that shocked me or made me laugh or made me uncomfortable. Here are my reflections based on those many moments:

REFLECTION 1: *Fora Temer!*

Fora Temer! means “Out with Temer!” During my days in Brazil following the coup, it was a slogan I heard regularly as part of scholarly discourse. For example, during the *Cortez Editora* panel, one panelist actually grabbed the microphone from another who was then mid-statement, and roused the crowd in a chant to overthrow the new government. Over the course of these social work reunions, I heard at least two dozen official speakers, and virtually all of them called for the overthrow of the provisional government and a return of the elected government. Many times, in the audience, we were brought to our feet, to chant along, “*Fora Temer! Fora Temer!*”

As a U.S. social worker accustomed to professional distance, I felt invigorated by this full-throated outrage that is understood to be both personal and professionally mandated. Human rights are at risk and social workers must not be silent. As one Brazilian social worker wrote to me the morning of the ouster, “I feel violated in my democratic rights that were hard won. Yes, the fight continues and we social workers are ready to fight” (Meraldina Oliveira, personal communication, May 12, 2016).

In Brazil, social workers are not politically, personally, or professionally neutral. Social workers do not sit on the sidelines of political battles when rights are at risk; they understand themselves as combatants. Brazilian social work describes its purpose as “ethical-political”—meaning that social workers are ethically bound to fight for an egalitarian society and the expansion of social rights, political rights, and human rights for all (Behring 2013).

REFLECTION 2: *Viva a Revolução Russa!*

There are also times when I realize I’m just not Brazilian. For example, when one elderly social work professor raised her fist and shouted, “Long Live the Russian Revolution!” I had to stifle a laugh. Initially, in fact, I thought she was joking, but then the crowd around me rose up and joined her in the call. For these Brazilian social workers, invoking the Russian Revolution was a call to egalitarianism and across-class alliance; to my U.S. ears, the Russian Revolution evokes the years of repression that followed the initial idealism.

REFLECTION 3: *Brazilian social work is comfortable with conflict.*

In the US, the NASW is strong in its support for human rights and its assertion that social workers are human rights advocates:

Social workers know that civil and political rights must be supplemented by economic, social, and cultural rights. . . . Social workers, on whatever level they practice, advocate for people’s rights to have paid employment, adequate food, education, shelter, health care, as well as the right to freedom from violence and freedom to pursue their dreams (NASW 2015).

But the verb American social work chooses is *to advocate*, not *to act* or, as in Brazil, *to fight*. Advocacy is important, but it is not generally dangerous. It doesn’t require us to put our own bodies on the line. Brazilians understand that the arena of human rights is a conflictual space. They know that rights are linked to political power, and realize that expanding access to human

rights for people living in poverty is not a politically neutral act. Education and full access to the goods and services in society—which come with meaningful access to social rights—give people the tools they need to access their political rights, as well. As the eminent professor Maria Carmelita Yazbek said in her address to CRESS-SP, “*Ação social é ação política! Não é assistência!*”—or, in English, “Social work is political action. It is not assistance” (Yazbek 2016). For Professor Yazbek and so many other Brazilian social workers, the work they do in communities serves political ends.

Social work, in its work to increase access to social rights for all people, inevitably creates conflict. Thus, the language of human rights is strategically deployed in Brazil. There are rights-holders, who are citizens, and there is a duty-bearer, which is the State. Brazilian social workers understand that their work puts them in conflict with the State. (This is true even though, as in the US, the majority of social workers are employed by the State.)

Brazilian social work understands itself to arise from and be fueled by people’s movements fighting for human rights. Indeed, the movement that successfully overthrew the dictatorship in 1985 is a touchstone for Brazilian social workers; the social workers who participated in the resistance during those years are iconic, almost like Jane Addams in the US, with one key difference: many of those people are still alive and teaching social work.

I would like to see U.S. social work embrace its linkage to the empowering social movements of our recent past—the Civil Rights movement and the Women’s Rights movement, to name just two. I feel sure that there are civil rights and women’s rights social work heroes and heroines out there to inspire us.

I heard social workers talking about being engaged in popular movements for sexual rights, the right to water, sanitation rights, the right to the city, the right to work, etc. For a visitor from the US, it’s notable that these rights already belong to Brazilians by law; the *right* to these services is not up for debate, the key issue is access. One of my favorite rights that Brazilian social workers and citizens invoke to support their activism is the Right to the City (Estatuto da Cidade of 2001). This right provides a right to a sustainable city, and includes within it the rights to open space, to housing, to sanitation, to urban infrastructure, to public services, and to work and leisure for current residents and for future generations. In the city of Recife, social workers have partnered with disenfranchised communities to assert their rights to public transportation and to land use using this law.

REFLECTION 4: *Social workers are members of the working class.*

Brazilian social workers define themselves as part of the working class. This identification collapses much of the distance between social workers and their service users (Brazilians use “service users” to describe those whom, in the US, we call “clients”). Collapsing the distance between professionals and service users increases social workers’ identification with their clients. They are all citizens together, and, as one social worker explained to me, “We all work for a living, and we all live from our work” (Yolanda Guerra, personal communication, May 12, 2016). Thus, Brazilian social workers don’t speak much about advocating for the rights of others; they see themselves as fighting for their own rights, the rights of citizens, the rights of workers, the rights of children, the rights of the poor. Rights are not something that we earn or deserve; rights are inherent, and belong to all (Yazbek 2016).

REFLECTION 5: *It is about language.*

Social workers in Brazil are very concerned about language, especially about how potentially stigmatizing or hierarchical language may violate the human rights principle of nondiscrimination (McPherson 2015). This concern explains why a person who seeks assistance from a social worker is usually called a “service user” or a “participant.” According to Behring, this emphasis on participation is the “valuable contribution that Brazilian social workers can make to the growth of democracy” (2013:93). There is an avoidance of essentializing, labeling language. For example, the kids whom U.S. social workers may label “juvenile delinquents” are referred to as *adolescents in conflict with the law*; people in prison are understood to be *in a state of incarceration*; women may *experience violence* in the home. These conceptualizations may sound awkward to an American ear, but to Brazilians, they express respect for fellow citizens. This manner of describing people in need also emphasizes that time passes; that individuals may live through difficult times, but that they will emerge from those times. The language promotes human rights by treating all people with dignity.

And the language changes. For example, on this trip, I learned that *favela* is no longer a preferred term for urban, poor neighborhoods. In Recife, residents of some of these neighborhoods had banded together to discard the name *favela* in favor of *comunidade* or community. Residents reportedly felt reduced by the media image of *favelas* as rife with crime and drugs; they want people to understand that, even when crime is present, families also live and thrive on their streets. My social worker colleagues corrected my word choice and encouraged me to adopt the new, more respectful term. I have done as they suggested.

Conclusion

I began this piece with the “little heart,” and I want to go back to it now. In Brazil, I see a social work profession that is animated by an enormous amount of heart. The passion, however, is not tame. It is fierce, and it is focused on human rights and justice.

In the US, my students often arrive to study social work with a desire to do charity and help others. This is the little heart. Charity is kindness, and it can help a person in pain, but it rarely solves the underlying problem. It preserves the class structure and other structural inequalities that give rise to poverty and other injustices. As an educator, one of my goals is to inspire my students to become fierce fighters for human rights and justice. Traveling to Brazil, breathing their air, and engaging in their debates helps me do a better job of being fierce.

I didn't count the number of poems and lyrics I heard quoted during my trip, but they were many. Formal speakers frequently opened and closed their talks with a poem, a stanza, or a quotation—and some actually broke into song. In informal meetings, similarly, poems and lyrics were not separated from academic and scientific discourse. Thus, in homage to so many of my dear Brazilian colleagues and friends, I will end this piece with a quotation:

"I am human, and nothing of that which is human is alien to me."

--Terence, Roman playwright, 2nd century BCE

There is something very human about social work in Brazil. When professional neutrality and professional distance are discarded or cast aside, we are left with our humanity. We are all humans together—social workers, service users, and the working class—and we all have human

rights. There are no rights we do not deserve, and no rights to which we are not entitled. The fight goes on.

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