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# **Radical experiences of Portuguese social workers in the vanguard of the 1974 Revolution**

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the contribution of social workers to the Portuguese democratic transition in the 1970s. Their involvement in urban social mobilizations and in the cooperative movement will offer a perspective on the participation of social workers alongside the Revolutionary process and how they, through engaging with social mobilisation, grass-roots initiatives and socio-political activism, deployed practices consistent with radical social work frames. It is argued that the Revolution provided the structural conditions for social workers to engage with radical practice and that their intervention constituted a form of agency for socio-political transformation, while influencing professional self-representations and professional agency.

**Keywords:** Revolution, Radical social work, social movements, agrarian reform, Portugal

## **1. Introduction**

The present paper focuses on the participation of social workers and social work students in some of the most representative epiphenomena of the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974 Portuguese Revolution: the housing Programme SAAL (Local Ambulatory Backup Service) and creation of the *Torre Bela* Cooperative, following the occupation of the homonymous estate. Both cases offer a good angle to observe the participation of social workers in what can be portrayed as vanguard movements of the post-Revolutionary process, closely knit to social mobilization and grass-roots initiatives.

The Portuguese Revolution of 1974 did not represent just a simple change of power and regime. It set the scenery for the expression of radical political action following the demise of the half-century-old conservative authoritarian rule.<sup>1</sup> In the two years that followed the military coup, Portugal lived through a period of political and social turmoil, as grassroots social movements, party politics activity

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<sup>1</sup> By seizing power in the dawn of April 25<sup>th</sup>, mid-rank military officers ended one of the longest lasting dictatorships of Western Europe, instated in 1926.

and left wing vs. right wing confrontation swept the country. In a context where the emerging powers fought their way through a frantic socio-political arena, the opportunities to lay the foundations for ground-breaking interventions and programmes multiplied. Here, progressive movements found the ideal environment to disseminate projects based on direct democracy and citizen's participation. These movements and projects often found in the highest levels of post-Revolutionary power (the provisional governments, the Revolution Council and the Armed Forces Movement) the resources needed to be put in place and, foremost, the necessary political protection. The Revolutionary course reached its quintessence between March and November 1975, in what was to be known as the PREC (the Portuguese acronym for Revolutionary Process Under Way).

Social workers were not parted from this process, nor was Portuguese social work unaffected by the 1974-1976 Revolutionary spiral. A wide variety of sources points to the involvement of social workers in nearly all the fronts of revolutionary action (urban residents' movements, adult education programmes, labour unions' organisation, progressive housing programmes, direct democracy initiatives, organisation of cooperatives, workers' control, etc...), and to the impact of the Revolution in the academic curricula, in the supervision of internship practice, and in the theoretical as well as praxeological edifice of Portuguese social work (Fernandes, 1985; Negreiros, Andrade, & Queirós, 1992; Santos & Martins, 2016; Silva, 2016).

The eminently urban SAAL Programme and the rural *Torre Bela* cooperative, the cases that will be the subject of this paper's attention, offer a clear view of how Portuguese social work took the above-mentioned radical turn in the face of the existing structural setting. They also provide a lens to observe how practitioners and the academy became engaged – and, simultaneously, sought that engagement – with the Revolutionary socialist path, often in collision with what had been, so far, the canonical views of professional practice and identity.

Though both cases presented an opportunity for social work to engage with radical forms of practice by participating in grassroots social movements in the city and in the countryside, they held distinctive features and induced a different awareness of professional self-fulfilment, as we will try to unveil in the following pages.

## **2. A note on the sources**

The empirical data used in this text results from an on-going larger study on the participation of social workers in the Portuguese transition to democracy in the 1970s. Considering the above-mentioned cases, the analysis draws from the testimony of five social workers, all women, collected in a series of in-depth interviews that rendered 21 hours of recorded interview time from July 2016 to March 2017. For the case of the SAAL Programme, we relied on four interviewees, mostly on the testimony of a professional, born in 1942, then working for the Housing Development Fund, whose duties involved the coordination of a series of intervention teams. Another informant was a practitioner, born in 1948, who, while working for IFAS (Institute of Family and Social Action) in the city of Setúbal,<sup>2</sup> got enthusiastically involved with the SAAL's activities in that city. Another informant was a practitioner, born in 1943, placed in Lisbon's municipal housing office (GTH), and the fourth informant was a social work professor, born in 1945, who supervised internship students' activities in the SAAL Programme. Our work on the case of the *Torre Bela* cooperative is largely based on the interview of an informant, born in 1955, who participated in it since the earliest days, first as part of an academic assignment, then as an fully immersed activist. Each of the cases were contextualized in the historical process of political and social change that was taking place and the oral testimony was accompanied by data provided by published studies and, in the case of the *Torre Bela's* experience, the primary oral source was complemented with personal documentation such as an internship report and field and study notes taken by the student. Though having collected in-depth biographical information on these subjects, the present paper is primarily based on data concerning the 1974-1976 period, focusing specifically on their participation in the Revolutionary process. Albeit interesting, neither the space nor the aim of this paper allows extending the analysis to larger professional and personal itineraries, as Wagner (1990) did.

## **3. Portuguese social work: from the kernel to the Revolution**

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<sup>2</sup> This was the State's organism responsible for administering social protection services and general welfare policies (Cardoso, 2013) assuming later to designation of Social Security.

The dictatorship saw the light of day in the late 1920s, as part of the wave of nationalist and fascist-like regimes that swept Europe at that time. It gained full vigour after Salazar took hold of the country's destiny, formally instating what was to be labelled as the *Estado Novo* (New State) in 1933. Civil liberties were curtailed, the multiparty system was cast away, free labour unionism was outlawed and overridden by a corporative system centrally controlled by the State, and public administration offices were occupied by individuals trusted by Salazar and his associates, creating an expanded clientele network, under the surveillance of a repressive political police branch. Furthermore, under Salazar, an alliance with the Catholic Church strengthened the regime's influence throughout the country. Rather than directly mandating the universities to create the first social work educational offer, the regime deliberately awarded that responsibility to Catholic Church bodies, which, in 1935, in Lisbon, and in 1937, in Coimbra, founded the first schools, involving a mostly female elite that was already in support of the *Estado Novo's* political and social project, as well as actively engaged with the conservative Catholic movements (Pimentel, 2001; Martins, 1995), an historical aspect that holds many commonalities with other authoritarian fascist prone regimes of the time (Lorenz, 1994).

In spite of the initial conservative trend, the 1960s paved the way to a renovation within Portuguese social work (Martins, 2002, 2003, 2009). This subtle renovation was felt, either in the field of practice and education, with the integration of community organization methods and the reinforcing of Social Sciences in the curricula, or in academic life, when the progressive Catholic movement stirred the political and civic participation of students and faculty.

Hence, as we claimed elsewhere (Silva, 2016), the 1974 Revolution did not represent an absolute rupture for Portuguese social work, since critical insights had already started to permeate the academy and the professional realm. From the second half of the 1960s onwards, early interchanges with Brazilian universities brought to Portugal social workers with curricula, among other specializations, in community methods and experience in community organization (Martins & Carrara, 2014). In connection with these international collaborations, the dictatorial government promoted a series of development projects that implicated social work students and professionals, inviting them to deploy

territorial interventions, deemed as an alternative to palliative, curative and assistance-focused social work. In Latin America, the late 1960s saw the growth of an intense critical debate within social work, reclaiming the political facet of professional action and the refusal of socio-psychological adaptive intervention, building up a process that was to be known as the Reconceptualization Movement (Ferguson, Ioakimidis, & Lavalette, 2018; Martins & Tomé, 2016)<sup>3</sup>.

If the Revolution did not represent an absolute and definite rupture for Portuguese social work, it left the door wide open for social workers eager to embrace activist forms of practice and radical structural interventions. In the midst of steadfast political transition, the revolutionary period awarded the conditions for social movements to emerge. From its earliest hours, the Revolution was taken to and by the streets, becoming a process vibrantly lived by the people, whether in the countryside, or in the urban areas (Silva, 2013). Following the military coup, a chain of uprisings stormed the country. Large estate farms were occupied by thousands of wage labourers and unemployed construction workers, recently built housing projects were occupied by families that crowded the shantytowns and the wrecked inner-city buildings, workers took control of private companies, State and private buildings were occupied by collective movements, using them as facilities for varied ends. The revolutionary process, backed by a series of progressive left-wing provisional governments and a radical faction of the Armed Forces, at least until November 1975, provided the political opportunities, to use Tarrow's (1994) concept, for collective mobilization to occur and granted the resources and political backup for it to endure (Rezola, 2008). Social movements were not merely tolerated or sustained by the higher revolutionary power-holders, they, themselves, acted as socio-political agents throughout the country, contributing to sustain and consubstantiate the whole revolutionary project (Cerezales, 2003; Silva, 2014).

Social work, through the participation of some of its practitioners and students, virtually intervened in all these fronts of the revolutionary process. Just like the Revolution was providing social movements and left-wing progressive organizations the needed political opportunities to operate their agendas of

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<sup>3</sup> According to Pereira (2016), the Latin-American Reconceptualization Movement can be seen as an expression of the radicalization trend that was starting to take form in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

social change, the context of the Revolution offered social workers the opportunity to foster their own radical agency. The Marxist, or, rather say anti-functionalist imprint of the Latin-American Reconceptualization Movement was suddenly brought to the field of practice, trading charity based intervention for a social work framed from below, working alongside grassroots mobilization, focused in empowering communities (Pereira, 2016; Saracostti et al., 2012) and promoting democratization (Ammann, 1988). Thus, the Revolution granted Portuguese social workers not just the necessary political opportunity, but also the institutional backup and social frames to deploy what can be identified as a radical form of intervention, at times referred in literature as *alternative* (Amaro, 2015). More bound to the theoretical stand of Latin American critical thinking, Portuguese social workers were not directly influenced by the radical movement that was sprouting in the United States and in the United Kingdom, though the practices developed during the Revolutionary process coincided largely with the recipe handed out by Anglo-Saxon radical social work. So far, there is no evidence of the inclusion of radical social work literature in the curricula during this phase and, at least in the case of the interview panel, these books were not read.

#### **4. Social workers in the urban struggles<sup>4</sup> – the case of the SAAL program**

The SAAL<sup>5</sup> Programme represented an innovative form of housing policy that lasted from July 1974 until October 1976. It sought to implement what were then considered unconventional solutions to build and rehabilitate housing, joining State, municipal and residential resources, based in the creation of local collective structures in the form of residents' associations and commissions as well as cooperatives. The initiative sprang from the Housing Development Fund (HDF), a State service instated in 1969 to organize the national housing policy. Embroiled in its own bureaucratic yarn and tied by centrally driven processes, this organization was never able to act efficiently (Pereira, 2014; Portas, 1986), at least considering the most compelling issue: the estimated need for 600,000 housing units (Andrade, 1992). Within it, a group of architects and other professionals had been, since the late

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<sup>4</sup> *Urban struggles* was the term Downs (1980) used to coin the massive social mobilizations and urban uprisings around the housing question in Portugal.

<sup>5</sup> SAAL, the Portuguese acronym that stands for Mobile Local Support Service

1960s, discussing alternatives to the existing policy regarding housing and urban planning that could elude the influence of construction lobbies and would not depend on State administrative procedures (Portas, 1986). Among the group was a social worker, Maria Proença, a high-profile member of the HDF's Studies Office, who later became the national coordinator of the SAAL Programme (Andrade, 1992).

Suddenly, the 25<sup>th</sup> April coup opened the opportunity for that group to rehearse the desired alternative approach to the housing problem. In the ensuing days, meetings at the HDF took place, gathering a cluster of left-wing qualified staff (Andrade, 1992). As one of our interviewees points out, "in the HDF, the people who promoted the SAAL were the progressive ones, who saw themselves as far more leftist than those of the Communist Party. And that was how we were later seen, as the extremists, the agitators"<sup>6</sup>. Soon afterwards, this social worker, hired by the HDF in 1971, joined the working group that was about to launch the SAAL Program and was bestowed with coordination responsibilities. Considering that the HDF had amongst its personnel individuals with a more conservative profile<sup>7</sup>, the team that was committed to initiate the SAAL was handpicking volunteers amid the progressive leftist staff. This represented a clear indication of the proneness of that inner circle of technicians to proceed with the Programme's radical intent. "Those who took part were on their own will and for the cause," stated the above-mentioned social worker.

Two key triggering facts precipitated the Programme's implementation. First, the reception, by the Secretary of State of Housing and Urbanism, of a manifest originated from the residents of Lisbon's shantytowns where they declared their willingness to cooperate in the improvement of their quarters (Andrade, 1992). Secondly, a wave of housing occupations had been taking place since April 29<sup>th</sup><sup>8</sup>. The SAAL was formally launched based on a dispatch of July 31<sup>st</sup> 1974 by the Minister of Internal Administration and the Secretary of State of Housing and Urbanism, Nuno Portas, an architect already

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<sup>6</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>7</sup> As recalled by the main coordinator, Maria Proença, in an earlier study (Andrade, 1992) and acknowledged by one of our interviewees (interview social worker, HDF/SAAL).

<sup>8</sup> In the following two weeks, 2000 homes were occupied (Andrade, 1992; Downs, 1980).



involved with the HDF's progressive group. We say formally, because the HDF's team was already in the field, contacting the neighbourhoods, mapping the occupations and identifying the emerging residents' base organizations. The HDF's social worker recalls those days of initial uprising:

Maria Proença was already part of that elite group that was meeting often with Nuno Portas and with other people from the HDF's technical and intellectual elite when Margarida Coelho [architect], from Porto, joined us. I clearly remember in one of those first meetings Teotonio Pereira saying 'in several neighbourhoods there are people calling for support and lots of people from the shantytowns is knocking on the HDF's door asking to be helped and we need to answer this immediately, so the best thing to do is to create teams to take care of different zones'. And that was how I ended up, from the start, coordinating SAAL teams in three municipalities.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup>

Moving from the HDF's offices to the *bairros*, as the technical staff often referred to the neighbourhoods, whether shanty towns or inner city degraded quarters, was swift:

after the 25th April we saw huge movement in the neighbourhoods and we [HDF SAAL team] hit the street right away, as soon as the first occupations took place, between the 25<sup>th</sup> of April and the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. So we went straightaway to meet the people, to seek the movements.<sup>11</sup>

Directly addressing the population and meeting its base organizations or movements set the tone of what was to be the SAAL Programme and the line of intervention of its professionals. In this sense, the SAAL was not just *another* housing programme set to respond to structural housing problems, especially those affecting the least solvent groups (Andrade, 1992; Portas, 1979; Russinho & Ferreira, 1970). It represented, instead, a whole new concept of housing policy, bound to replace the discretionary, plundering (Andrade, 1992), ineffective (Portas, 1979, 1986) and oppressive (Coelho, 1986) traits of the existing policies and procedures. Besides its inefficiency and sluggishness, the

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<sup>9</sup> Teotonio Pereira was a distinguished architect involved with the progressive catholic movement in the opposition to the dictatorship.

<sup>10</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>11</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

housing policies of the prior decades have been promoting the seclusion of the poorest in consigned urban perimeters, thus aggravating and legitimizing processes of social disintegration and exclusion.

By counteracting this process, the SAAL was opening a window for a new rights perspective, in line with the principles of Marshallian citizenship. It was not just the right to decent accommodations, or a house, it was also the right to the city, the right to remain in the place where people were already installed, where people wanted to stay. "We stood for what we thought was the legitimate right of the population to housing, but not any kind of housing," stated the interviewed HDF social worker, shedding light on how practitioners and architects understood the housing provision services and the participatory dimension of the process. As such, the SAAL technical interveners were concerned with the centrifugal processes of urban displacement of the poor often generated by housing social policies. Besides, the social workers integrated in the SAAL programme were pivotal agents in this process of rights promotion, especially through their involvement with the residents' commissions and associations, coupling their connection to the grassroots urban social movements that were, then, sprouting, something to be addressed later.

The compromise towards a new housing policy was clearly stated in SAAL's legal dispatch, when considering the appropriation of valuable places by the population (Pereira, 2014) as one of the objectives, evidencing the Programme's underlying radical and socialist character. Virtually at the same time, Cloward and Piven (1975) were denouncing in Bailey & Brake's (1975) landmark book the pernicious effect that the construction and real estate industries have had on the quality of housing and the fair delivery of services in the United States. Likewise, the SAAL Programme was set to diverge from the prevailing system heavily reliant on private construction companies and on a rather lethargic State initiative (Portas, 1979). Counteracting the idea that housing policy was supposed to be carried out from within the State administration (Portas, 1986), the SAAL placed people and their participative base-organisations in the centre of the whole process, from early planning to construction and subsequent management of the spaces.

Though the "content" – provide a decent housing solution – was an important aspect of the Programme, its focus went beyond that, "it was about a process, a philosophy that put people in the

centre. The house could be consequence, but the essence was the resolve to make people participate, partaking of the whole process."<sup>12</sup> This social workers' discourse unveils the structural feature of the enterprise. After all, it was not just about building or rehabilitating houses, it was the whole process of participation and empowerment that counted and, here, the SAAL meets the social movements that emerged around the housing issue during the Revolutionary period.

The initiative of the residents was a requirement and commitment of the SAAL Programme (Portas, 1986) and, here, the role of social workers was elemental in promoting that initiative. "If I can presume that my intervention as a social worker may have had a distinctive aspect it was in promoting communal activities, trying to bring people together, to organise them, to form [residents'] commissions," asserted this social worker.<sup>13</sup> Though some *bairros* had their residents' commissions or associations already organized, others did not, and social workers took a great deal of responsibility of assisting in the creation of new popular organisations.<sup>14</sup> This social worker, placed in Setúbal, recalls that priority:

I had been working in a study in one of those *bairros* and [...] [Nuno] Portas creates the SAAL brigades, and I, who had that study stuck in my throat, because I knew that it was made to evict all those people, I went immediately to that *bairro* and said to the people over there: 'What if we organise here an association and start an auto-construction process?' That's how I became involved in the SAAL.<sup>15</sup>

Social workers also took part in integrating the growing number of residents' organisations in networks, called inter-commissions.<sup>16</sup> The planning and coordination tasks were fundamental for the SAAL Programme to work, especially considering the articulation of the professionals that bore a "more technical" profile, such as the architects or the engineers, with their new "client." This brought

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<sup>12</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>13</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>14</sup> Other *bairros* had social workers involved in the organisation of residents' associations since the late 1960s, like in some Porto neighbourhoods (Queirós, 2015; Sancho, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Interview social worker, IFAS, Setúbal.

<sup>16</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

a difficulty, blatantly described by a social worker (then a professor and supervisor of social work internships in one of SAAL's projects in a Lisbon suburb): "because the client was collective, not an individual one, for the architects, it was a serious problem. They just weren't able to work with a collective client."<sup>17</sup> As said earlier, if the SAAL was framing a new housing policy and an alternative process for contracting, negotiating and developing construction that involved the people, collectively, in the process, it was imperative to have a scheme and the resources to interact with that collective/client, which the architects did not have on their own. Therefore, social workers played a relevant role in filling this gap, as later acknowledged by some of SAAL's architects.<sup>18</sup>

The political background of the Revolutionary period turned the urban housing social movements and the SAAL into natural associates, a partnership in part strengthened by the militant action of its professional staff. Indeed, more than just a technical intervention, the SAAL's brigades and its coordinating bodies became activists. Empowering the social movements was vital to keep the Programme on its course, especially when, by the end of 1975, the initial alignment of political forces changed and top-level State backup was disrupted. In certain situations, the SAAL's teams went to the streets alongside the residents' movements in protest against a series of political blockages that were affecting the Programme. In the process, the teams militantly assumed the advocacy of the residents' movements in the face of higher powers and institutions: "I went once to the Oeiras city hall with a bunch of people and the mayor comes shouting 'Call the police!' At times, I went with them [residents] to discuss with municipal services, like in Sintra, where we even had direct confrontation."<sup>19</sup> Such activism can be also perceived in the intervention process in the neighbourhoods:

We [SAAL staff] were considered terrorists. [...] We took part in housing occupations. What I recall is that we would go to a *bairro* and decide, "Let's occupy that empty house." It was done in large groups.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview social worker, professor/internship supervisor.

<sup>18</sup> The role of social workers in support of the architects' communication with their "clients" under the SAAL initiative was clearly explained by Gonçalo Byrne (2014), Andrade (1992) and Queirós (2015).

<sup>19</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

[...] Back then we had arguments about the role of the technician: was he there as a representative of the power [State] or was he there, just like as any other resident, to put pressure on the State? I guess that, for me, I felt like I was part of... that we were there with the people.<sup>20</sup>

The role of social workers in the SAAL's local brigades ranged from data collection about the residents' expectations, socio-graphic elements, to supporting community organizations. They were set to work on the "identification of what people wished for their houses, how they wanted the projects to be," because the social worker "passed more time in the *bairro*, more than the architects."<sup>21</sup> As a complex social process, the SAAL generated a dynamic that pushed forward a series of initiatives, allowing seeing another angle of its structural aptitude, as in this case:

I worked [...] in the creation of social facilities alongside the SAAL teams. We've created a kindergarten, a sports group. [...] I worked with the mothers in order to know what kind of facility we should build. [...] The residents constructed a sports pavilion because there wasn't enough money. Then I gave formation to the people so that the facilities could be used for several activities. Then we replied the process in other neighbourhoods of the city. To have an idea: before, we didn't have any facilities [in the neighbourhoods], we didn't have nothing.<sup>22</sup>

Community social work and community organization are immediate methodological frames recognized by the interviewed SAAL's social workers. According to them, these stood among the most prolific instruments used, something that draws us back to the renewal of Portuguese social work mentioned in the beginning.<sup>23</sup> The political experience of those who were militating in left-wing parties was also an important factor that added to their community organization skills, as one of our informants recalls: "some knew how to organize and conduct assemblies. Why? Because they were

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<sup>20</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>21</sup> Interview social worker, professor/internship supervisor.

<sup>22</sup> Interview social worker, IFAS, Setúbal.

<sup>23</sup> The connection between radical social work and community work has been extensively reported in literature (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Jones & Mayo, 1974; Mayo, 1975; Turbett, 2014).

party affiliated. [...] By that time, in [Lisbon's Higher] Institute [of Social Work], there were students that knew very well how to conduct assemblies. The students held assemblies there."<sup>24</sup>

Other than technical expertise or political militancy, such participation also took social workers' and social work students' constant responsiveness and availability:

I remember, in the beginning, a meeting in one of those *bairros* that looked like an open sewer. A few days before, they [group of residents] had visited the HDF, requesting a SAAL project. So, one evening, we went there for a meeting. It was in a house in ruins [...]. The house only had the facade and a balcony, and we were up there, facing the crowd, discussing with the people, lit by a searchlight borrowed from the nearby military barracks. That's the way our meetings and assemblies were made in the shantytowns: when people could, either in the evening or in the weekends.<sup>25</sup>

Then it's like this: you work with the people until you reach a point when... when it's broiling, and you really need to be there, otherwise, you risk losing three months of work. That was work that only a person with a revolutionary mentality could do.<sup>26</sup>

If the revolutionary attitude of SAAL's social workers eased the way to the then hectic *bairros*, the social workers placed in municipal housing services could sense some hostility:

I wasn't the type of fearing going anywhere. I never was. I never needed to go walking in pairs to... anywhere. But there was a time, in the summer of '75, that I remember going to the *bairro* [in the Chelas area, Lisbon] and some guys came running and screaming at me: "I'm gonna kill you. I'll do this and do that!" and I remember that, there were these guys from the UDP [progressive left-wing party] around... and it was said that the Revolutionary Brigades were hanging around and... We started to be driven by the municipal chauffeurs and they always kept the doors locked while circulating around the quarters.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview social worker, professor/internship supervisor.

<sup>25</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>26</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>27</sup> Interview social worker, GTH. Regarding the acrimony between SAAL's social workers and the municipality's see Alves (2001).

Since the start, a bare legal foundation was one of SAAL's Achilles' heels, and, when the political context changed and the representative democratic system overpowered the direct democracy trend, the Programme fought to hold its feet. The SAAL, like many other Revolutionary programmes, experiences and intents, was precipitated by the revolutionary socio-political context and, in that sense, was a product of the structural power alignments and the emergence of grassroots mobilization. In the words of our informant, "the SAAL was strictly connected to the PREC, to its philosophy, to its functioning... and then, the 25<sup>th</sup> November<sup>28</sup> and the Constitution [1976] took care of it, put it in order."<sup>29</sup> To some of the social workers involved, that riveting immersion in the urban struggles during the revolutionary period gave way, later, to disappointment:

it was very traumatic... the ambiance at the HDF was always frantic, right after the 25th April. It was an explosion. It must have been one of the places where the mobilization was more intense (besides the Ministry of Agriculture). [...] When the SAAL was over, it was traumatic. Not that we weren't waiting for it to happen, but it was daunting.<sup>30</sup>

The fears of this HDF's social worker were confirmed in October 1976, when a legal dispatch transferred the competences of the SAAL teams and projects to the municipalities and set a new strategy based in the promotion of cooperatives instead of residents' commissions and associations, a process that would lead to a more institutionalized governance scheme and an organic dependence on the State and on the local administration. This process accompanied the fading of the social movements. At this point, about 40,000 families were being served by SAAL projects, 14 housing

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<sup>28</sup> Counter-revolutionary coup occurred in 1975 that put an end to the radical left-wing trend of the Revolution. It represented the victory of the moderate and right-wing political forces and the start of the political normalization process (Rezola, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

<sup>30</sup> Interview social worker, HDF/SAAL.

cooperatives, 16 residents' commissions and 128 associations were organised by 118 technical brigades that were ready to deliver 2259 new homes and another 5741 were planned for 1977.<sup>31</sup>

### **5. A social work student in the Agrarian Reform - the case of the *Torre Bela* Cooperative**

In the aftermath of the revolutionary coup, the discussion of the agrarian question entered progressively in the political agenda. In short, discussions grew around the problem of the large uncultivated areas (mainly in the south of the country), belonging to the rural bourgeoisie, in part, absent landowners (Bermeo, 1986). This question overlapped another: the precariousness and low revenue of rural wage labourers and the rise of unemployment in the urban centres as a result of a crisis in the construction industry (Barreto, 1987). Political and social pressure over the control of agrarian property increased, and, in January 1975, a massive movement of land occupations started, mostly, in the southern region of Alentejo. Like in the SAAL Programme, the State's tutelary organizations, in this case, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, politically backed these movements, with the complicity or even the active intervention of the Armed Forces. Until June 1976, as a result of this popular land seizure, one million hectares of property were occupied and about 500 rural cooperatives (or Collective Units of Production, as some were called) were founded (Barreto, 1987).

The agrarian reform, entangled with the broad rural social uprisings, offered an opportunity for social work schools to place their students' internships, considering the newly defined educational and intervention objectives. Indeed, the process of collectivisation of private property and the transferring of production means and assets into the hands of the population through base organisations was a tantalizing opening for social work students to achieve, directly in the context of social action and together with its social actors, their own *class option* via a more critical and transformational professional practice, as acknowledged in the Restructuring Project of Lisbon's Higher Institute of Social Work (Negreiros et al., 1992). Accordingly, students were, then, oriented to develop their

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<sup>31</sup> Figures compiled by Pereira (2014). The overall number of social workers involved is difficult to determine, since the reports and documental information does not discriminate the specific professional background of all the team elements.



internship observation and practices, among other venues, in grassroots organisations, factories and cooperatives, in the city or in the countryside. At the service of grassroots organisations, students were expected to support the necessities of collective mobilization and workers' movements (Negreiros et al., 1992). Likewise, in Coimbra, in the 1974/75 academic year, the local Institute elected the agrarian reform as the dominant field of internship practice for fourth year students (ISSSC, 1985).

The intent to break with mainstream social work by changing the internship placements, practice supervision and faculty, drawing students farther away from traditional institutional work settings, seen as alienating and numbing, was evident (Negreiros et al., 1992). This rupture is fully acknowledged by our interviewee, as she recalls her study of the rural cooperatives as part of an academic assignment as a first year student, before entering the *Torre Bela* cooperative:

we were stranded in those contexts, in a sense that we were parted from social workers. In fact, in those units, there was no social worker, there was not nor had ever existed, social work. Therefore, there was some kind of pioneering and a search for other paths.<sup>32</sup>

This informant also perceives the idea that social work was getting into an unconventional and new realm of intervention stemming from the structural political changes:

the field of agrarian cooperatives was totally new to social work. There was no experience, not even theory, of the integration of social work. After all, the SAAL had practitioners working there. In the cooperatives, there weren't. That was really a BASE experiment, you see? And that makes all the difference.<sup>33</sup>

If, in general, the rural cooperatives' movement presented a new setting for social work to extend its intervention, the *Torre Bela* held particular features that distinguished it from the rest of the cooperatives. Located less than 70 km from Lisbon, this large estate owned by members of the Portuguese aristocracy had been serving as a hunting domain until its occupation by a group of local activists in April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1975. Unlike most of the occupations of that time, more or less steered by

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<sup>32</sup> Interview social worker, *Torre Bela* cooperative.

<sup>33</sup> Interview social worker, *Torre Bela* cooperative.

political organisations, especially the Communist Party, the *Torre Bela* project advertised its political party independence and attracted dozens of students from varied disciplines, artists and all sorts of progressive activists that converged to the locale.<sup>34</sup>

Our interviewee was among the students that yielded to the *Torre Bela's* revolutionary magnet, starting to take part in it from the first days. Along with her internship peers, she had been doing, since the beginning of 1975, work on the agrarian reform movement and cooperatives and that was what took her to the *Torre Bela* in the first place. With the approval of her academic supervisors, she selected the *Torre Bela* as part of her observation internship and, immediately, moved to the estate, where she lived until she graduated, in 1977. While living on the premises, she had a double status as a student and as a cooperative worker:

I got to the *Torre Bela* to do a social work internship and became a cooperating member. Most of the time I was, in fact, a student. [...] But the livelihood we had inside was so... intense. [...] I, who arrived there for a [participant] observation internship, ended up working with the people, connecting with them, doing the same work they did. Well, if you ask whether I did organisational work, yes, I also did that. I was involved in alphabetising, organising the kindergarten, the canteen. [...] One of the discussions we had in the *Torre Bela* was, precisely, about work, and, what counted, as real work, was the one you did with a hoe in hands. That was work! Taking a day off to prepare a space for some kind of activity, that wasn't considered as productive work. [...] Everything that wouldn't comply with "hoeing" was seen with mistrust. That's why I was so welcome, because I was willing to do the same as the rest. That's why I got lots of blisters in my hands.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, what began as a student assignment soon turned into an experience of full personal immersion in a grassroots initiative that would lead her to achieve her very own process of class rupture, thus fulfilling the designated internship aims worlds apart from the institutional range of mainstream social

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<sup>34</sup> Another major factor that contributed to turn the *Torre Bela* occupation into a symbol of the Revolution was the homonymous film shot by German director Thomas Harlan. This cinematic documentary recorded the whole process, exposing the complexity and tensions surrounding the social and political relations, the forging of political alliances, and the paradoxes that dominated the revolutionary process.

<sup>35</sup> Interview social worker, *Torre Bela* cooperative.

work. A circumstance clearly pointed out by our informant: "when I was doing my internship, the whole institutional social work was highly questioned. The intervention done in the institutions was seen with discredit and there was this hyper-valorisation of social movements, grassroots organisations and the livelihood of workers".<sup>36</sup>

Besides promoting a withdrawal from the mainstream institutional settings where social work traditionally operated and from its eldest and presumed conservative practitioners, the new approach taken by the schools favoured a certain distancing from the classical methodological apparatus, mainly casework (Negreiros et al., 1992). It was not just about inducing students to achieve their *class option*, moreover, this radical turn implied a "demetodologisation" and "deinstitutionalisation" of social work, a process that was bound to have consequences on the representations of this social workers' professional endeavour and identity.

That crisis is disclosed by a major symbolic and conceptual turn: the exchange of the traditional term of *social assistant* used to identify the professionals by the expression *social worker*. This change became a distinct mark of the radical turn taken during the revolutionary period. A change that implied questioning the whole political and praexiological project of social work and, as our interviewee puts it, the profession itself:

back then, we questioned the profession of the "social assistant" [sic]. Instead of it, we thought that what really existed was "social work" and that "social worker" translated better that position. The term "social assistance" didn't conform to our view about participation in processes of social change and the alliances it implied. I, myself, reflected about whether it should really exist a profession whose objective was to produce social change without a deep compromise and direct involvement in those very same processes. Well, by doing this, we were questioning the profession.

This internship experience produced a labyrinth where the student wandered while wondering about the possibilities and the dead ends of social work as it was being set along that radical path. Systematic doubts and ensuing discussions on what kind of social work could or should exist, if its existence was, indeed, feasible, under the on-going structural change, marked this students' experience

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<sup>36</sup> Interview social worker, *Torre Bela* cooperative.

in the cooperative movement. The compatibility between social work professionalism and activist participation in grassroots movements was, thus, challenged:

For a long time I thought that it wasn't possible to exercise the profession from the outside. So, in order for me to be the ally of a change, I needed to be inside, I had to partake from the inside, I had to live within. [...] And I asked myself: how can I be a social worker by participating in a movement such as this, or in a village, willing to partake in processes of change from the base? Who's my employer? Who's paying me? [...] Because the legitimacy of the intervention comes from the "I, being part of", "I, being there", "I, being an ally". (...) If the movement doesn't take me as a social worker, what am I, then?<sup>37</sup>

In the 1970s, critics of radical social work were flashing the idea that activism and communalism, among other features attributed to radical thinking, were compromising social work's professional project (Specht, 1972). In that sense the participation of this student in the *Torre Bela* cooperative was contributing to push her away from the traditional social work professional standards, a process that she claims to have happened with others:

I met a foreigner at *Torre Bela* that had been a social work student, I don't remember where from, and he gave up completing the degree. And then I had similar uncertainties. I even doubted if it was worth finishing a degree that, firstly, implied practicing a profession that looked pretty much like what you were, then, contesting.

This radical experience evolved into what looked like a paradoxical situation. If, on the one hand, the radical turn, by withdrawing from the ordinary professional and institutional stances, allowed the pursuing of alternative approaches via grassroots movements, on the other hand, the radical integration within these movements prompted a distancing from social work that brought along the risk of professional abrogation. The personal commitment to a grassroots initiative confronted this student with the prospective dissolution of the professional guise that took her there in the first place:

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<sup>37</sup> Interview social worker, *Torre Bela* cooperative.

"in the end, its the annulment of the profession, meaning that, if you want to work in processes of social change, you have to be inside, you must be part of those movements".<sup>38</sup>

In spite of her uncertainties, the student ended up finishing her degree in social work in 1977, withdrawing afterwards from the *Torre Bela* cooperative to pursue a career in the area of local development, cooperative organisation and environmental project consultancy, settling, in the late 1980s, in a State institutional social work placement. In the interviews, this informant did not relinquish her experience, years before, in the occupation of *Torre Bela*, though signalling the frailties of that and other radical experiences during the revolutionary process. By this, she is referring, particularly, to the lack of a proper systematisation and the absence of a theoretical frame that would better articulate the different experiences in revolutionary settings with a more demanding academic and methodological frame. A process that, according to our interviewee, would be difficult to implement, due to the instability that was affecting, internally, the social work schools by that time.

## 6. Conclusion

The *Torre Bela* Cooperative and the SAAL Programme were flagship experiences of the revolutionary period. Each, in its own terms, symbolized revolutionary commitment and fed, while feeding on it, grassroots social mobilization. Together, they represented a form of counter-institutional action, participatory democracy and a radical fracture with conservative policy framing and centrally defined governance.

As said in the beginning, although both cases offered an opportunity for social work to perform radical forms of practice in close connection with grassroots social movements, they held distinctive features and induced a different conception of professional self-fulfilment. Against the SAAL Programme's formal configuration, the *Torre Bela's* cooperative stood as a highly unstable structure, especially in the earliest days, evidencing its grassroots nature and the associated susceptibility to internal divergences and external grievances. The latter's hastiness and near absence of planned organisation contrasts with the formers' thorough planning process. The SAAL, as an initiative

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<sup>38</sup> Interview social worker, *Torre Bela* cooperative.

originating from a State service, sustained by professional expertise, contrasted with the *Torre Bela* cooperative's non-technical grassroots origins. As such, the SAAL benefited from a multi-professional, multi-disciplinary task force and made of this trait an important asset to pursue the Programmes' aims and bolster its social, political and technical legitimacy. In contrast, at *Torre Bela*, socio-professional distinction was relinquished and stigmatized, reducing the chances of professional assertion of its partakers.<sup>39</sup>

Both prompted social workers to work *with*, not just *for*, the people, both fall into the realm of radical social work intervention, denoting a posture consistent with radical professional agency.<sup>40</sup> This was an approach that, according to critics of radical social work in the 1970s (Reisch & Andrews, 2002), would lead to the deprofessionalization of social work (Specht, 1972). Nevertheless, the radical experiences of Portuguese social workers in the Revolution tend to refute such judgment. Based on the testimonies of our interviewees we could see that, out of the same urge, resulted different outcomes. Though the case of the *Torre Bela* cooperative reveals how that process of deprofessionalisation and professional identity dilution occurred (and in part why), on the contrary, the SAAL experience brought about professional esteem and full professional self-reconnaissance *as* social workers, or, at least it was not sensed as an imperilling factor of the professional project. We would add that, indeed, the participation of social workers in the SAAL Programme contributed to affirming the professional position of social workers. Here, two major factors were decisive: first, the social workers engaged in SAAL held considerable professional experience, namely, in community organisation, carrying a know-how that could be promptly deployed to support transformational intervention without questioning the professional project and identity; secondly, besides working in

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<sup>39</sup> Healy (2001, p. 76) states that critical and radical social work literature have been signalling what looks like to be an apparent incompatibility between class and professional statuses and the process of radical social intervention, based on the concept that "the vested interest of professional social workers in the maintenance of the status quo compromises their capacity to commit to social transformation".

<sup>40</sup> Drawing from De Maria's (1992, p. 146) conception of radical social work as a process that elapses the discovery of the problems' structural causes, and moves onto a practice aimed at overturning them.

multidisciplinary teams, they often interacted with professional peers in the Programme, thus contributing to develop a sense of shared professional endeavour.<sup>41</sup> Two of the interviewed social workers that were directly involved in the SAAL Programme still acknowledge their participation during the revolutionary period as a self and professionally empowering experience that contributed to forming their future action and expertise throughout their careers.<sup>42</sup>

The process of professional demise we see in the students' trajectory should not be understood as a result of the radical engagement *per se*, but, rather, of the conditions that accompanied the whole process of internship placement. As she recognises, a feeling of certain disorientation marked her passage through the cooperative, aggravated by the absence of a clear methodological orientation and theoretical frame – a process thought to embrace structural change, though deprived of formal and functional content. In that case, unlike the SAAL experience and other structural interventions during that period,<sup>43</sup> the social movement itself became the centrepiece and hegemonic dictating instance of the social work students' action, hardly intermediated or filtered by critical assessment and procedural devices. For this young student, the radical experience at the *Torre Bela* cooperative worked as a centrifugal force, pushing her away from a professional core that was, then, under critical scrutiny in the academy; at the same time, the social movement functioned as a centripetal force, pulling her to the heart of that communitarian project, by nature non-institutional and non-statutory.

This experience is paradigmatic of the critical assessment that was to be developed later in social work of some of the early postulates and agendas of radical social work. Drawing from the Latin-

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<sup>41</sup> We should also keep in mind that, from the first years of the decade, social work trade unionism was vivid (Ferreira, Couto & Fernandes, 1992). Two of the interviewees whose testimony was used in this paper held executive functions in the social workers' union at least until 1975.

<sup>42</sup> Paradoxically, in their discourse, the feeling of professional degrading emerged later, in the mid 1990s, as more technically bureaucratic practice limited their capacity to propose and participate in structural intervention.

<sup>43</sup> See the case of the CERCI cooperatives, created to provide services for the disabled (Negreiros et al., 1992; Silva, 2016).

American context, Iamamoto (2004) denounced a social work, driven by a messianic disposition, that naively embraced revolutionary practice as means to transform society, and Netto (2005) called attention to the forging of a simplistic theoretical base reliant on dogmatic appropriations of Marxist thought and an extreme empiricist approach to practice.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, the SAAL shows how social work professional agency and structurally bound social intervention are not incompatible and that, in order to engage with activist transformational action, social workers are not required to abdicate their professional status nor does it become eroded in the process of politically committed intervention with grassroots social movements.

The uniqueness of the period allowed exceptional practice experiences and projects to take place. The cases we reviewed here portray just a part of the Portuguese social work that took place after the Revolution and we believe that the continuity of this study will provide insightful contributions, not just to the history of Portuguese social work, but for contemporary research and debate around the possibilities and constraints facing the radical social work agenda.

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<sup>44</sup> Note that Statham (1978) already claimed that the radical agenda did not benefit from acts of casuistic rebel heroism detached from the Social Service institutional settings and networks.



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