# Public social services: where do they come from, where are they now, where are they headed, and where do we want them to go?

**Teresa García Giráldez**[1]
ORCID: 0000-0001-9116-821X
**Luis Nogués Sáez**[2]
ORCID: 0009-0005-9186-5695
**Mercedes Muriel Saiz**[3]
ORCID: 0000-0001-8871-9666

Received: 08/07/25. Reviewed: 23/09/25. Accepted: 21/10/25

**For citation**: García Giráldez, Teresa; Nogués Sáez, Luis and Muriel Saiz, Mercedes. (2025). Public social services: where do they come from, where are they now, where are they headed, and where do we want them to go? *Revista de Treball Social*, 229, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.32061/RTS2025.229.04

## Abstract

Social services have ceased to be a social domain set apart from the broader economy, gradually becoming instead a dynamic economic sector financed through public funds. The methodology of this essay combines documentary analysis with critical reflection drawn from practical, academic and professional experience, and it advances alternative proposals grounded in epistemological pluralism. It seeks to recognise the forces at work and the main actors behind them; namely, the elites and power networks associated with today's clientelist and often neo-philanthropic corporatist model. The article identifies three dominant approaches within Spanish social services: the social-democratic, the Christian-democratic and the neoliberal-populist. It calls for awareness and the development of alternative strategies in response to the increasing alignment of social work with society's mechanisms of soft control. Democracy and participation require limits on the expansion of market relations and the creation of spaces that foster cooperative activities based on reciprocity. The proposals

1 Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid. matgarci@ucm.es
2 Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid. lnogues@ucm.es
3 Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid. mm.muriel@ucm.es

aim to position themselves within what may be defined as a reformist critical social work perspective.

**Keywords:** Reformist-critical social work, clientelist-neo-philanthropic-corporate capitalism, democratisation, trade unionism.

# 1. Methodology

The methodology adopted in order to draw up this essay stems from the review of a number of classic texts (Balibar, 2023; Casado, 1984; Hugman, 2009; Naredo, 2022) and additional documents examining our own professional, academic and social intervention practice within the social services in which we have worked throughout our professional careers as mid-level professionals (Spanish General Council of Social Work, 2023b; Vicente et al., 2022). It adopts a critical stance, interrogating hegemonic assumptions in order to understand the nature of the structural problems that determine the future of the sector. It advances alternative proposals from the standpoint of epistemological pluralism –a plurality of approaches within social services and social work– which does not shy away from incorporating elements of Marxist materialism (the economic interpretation of history, the value of social production and reproduction, class struggle, and the current scientific-technical revolution).

# 2. The present–past: where do they come from?

To understand where social services come from, we refer to Demetrio Casado (1984), who noted some of the limitations of the PSOE government, pointing out that in the 1980s Spanish social democracy adopted a particular standpoint: as a point of departure it laid out the contours of a new system of social protection and heralded the start of the modernisation process of social services. Avoiding any explicit reference –in the first social-services laws– to the central role of the Catholic Church in social assistance and to the emerging role of the market would not change the reality of which they formed part; nor would the system have evolved without the participation of those actors.

The consequences of adopting this starting point were not long in coming, and significant difficulties soon emerged in attempting to develop a social-democratic model of social services. Reality proved stubborn. Neither adequate economic resources nor sufficient administrative structures were allocated to achieving the stated goals. The Administration found itself compelled to open the system to an unregulated market and to rely on private organisations such as ONCE, the Red Cross and Cáritas, instead of developing its own institutional capacity. This situation did not favour democratic debate on the role that each of the actors present in social services –the market, the third sector and, of course, the State– should or could play. It was not until the introduction of third-generation legislation that this reality was formally acknowledged.

In this context, public social services operated with a significant gap between their declarative principles and their recognition as subjective rights. Universal public healthcare served as a benchmark model, yet in practice social services functioned as a poor service for the poor and, in part, as a justification for other social protection systems to shy away

from their responsibilities with regard to poverty and exclusion. The new "system" perpetuated previous charitable-assistance functions, continuing to serve as the last safety net addressing the needs of excluded sectors in terms of welfare when other social protection systems failed; and in doing so it gradually emerged as a new economic sector and, consequently, as an important business arena.

## 3. The present–present: where are they now?

There is a large body of research of great interest on the situation of social services. However, for the purposes of this analysis we begin with the research carried out by the Spanish General Council of Social Work –we encourage readers to consult it– and, in particular, with several points worth highlighting from the first part of the *4th Report on Social Services in Spain and the Social Work Profession* (Vicente et al., 2022). We emphasise the accelerated transformation of the social sphere into a business arena, its influence on the commodification of benefits and services –with the consequent processes of outsourcing, increasingly precarious working conditions and deprofessionalisation– and the consolidation of the feminisation of frontline professionals alongside the progressive masculinisation of management. At the same time, we highlight the increase in social control functions, especially within directly managed public social services, as well as the heterogeneous approaches to social services across the different regions of Spain, a topic we address later on.

In recent years, in several articles (García et al., 2014; Nogués, 2021; Nogués and Martín, 2022; Nogués and García, 2023) we analysed what seemed to be unfolding within social services. To some degree, we sensed that the intolerable circumstances surrounding social policies in the Community of Madrid –a genuine laboratory of populist neoliberalism– might have been shaping the way we analysed social services. Emotional factors may have been influencing our perspectives, coupled with a certain explanatory monism and a pessimistic, overly simplified reading of a complex reality.

Through more recent publications and our day-to-day teaching, we have been able to closely revisit some of the positions held in recent years. In doing so, we noticed aspects that went beyond the use of the concept of neoliberalism; and by stepping back, we became aware that the expression "neoliberal capitalism" applied to social services, while useful, did not necessarily enhance understanding, and could in fact hinder a full appreciation of their complexity.

Some of the vocabulary we had used to critically analyse the trajectory of social services was counterproductive and risked fostering a curious passivity among those advocating for rights-based social services. A linear vision –the idea that all countries, and even all autonomous regions, inevitably follow a sequence of steps leading to social cutbacks– could encourage an unwarranted pessimism. In actual fact, there is no general

(let alone unavoidable) transition towards neoliberalism, and indeed we are not witnessing the definitive advance of social welfare policies. If we assume that social policies follow a linear and practically inevitable path towards assistentialism, we will not develop an adequate reflection on possible ways to promote universal social services. To do that, we need careful analysis of specific cases, rather than relying solely on broad assumptions about "global trends".

These issues mentioned are illustrated by a claim we made in 2023 regarding the metamorphosis of social services in Spain. Although correctly drawing attention to the emergence of financial capitalism within the production of social services, we argued that neoliberal drift was steering social services towards a single, homogeneous model, thereby denying the multitude of other social services models and actors with differing approaches. We now recognise that portraying social services as a system guided by a neoliberalism governed by the tyranny of markets did not help in understanding the complexity of the different interests at stake and the conflicting measures adopted. It obscured the real protagonists behind what is happening: the elites and power networks associated with today's corporatist, clientelist and often neo-philanthropic regime.

It is unquestionable that social services are seeing the steady ingress of large companies linked to the real estate and financial sectors, as well as investment funds[4] and NGOs that we might consider to be –let us call them this– major corporations. Their scope of activity is not limited to services such as home care or telecare; it also extends to residential care for older people, child-protection services, mental-health provision, residential alternatives for people experiencing homelessness, and the progressive digitalisation and automation of the sector.

When it comes to working conditions, it is impossible to understand the increasing precarious nature of service provision, the standardisation of social intervention, the fragmentation of practice and the loss of professional autonomy without acknowledging the fact that these developments are inherent to commodity production and to capital's core objective of maximising profit, not to mention the present interweaving of patriarchy with the over-exploitation of women, especially in care roles.

Consequently, it is important to examine the extent to which this economic rationality has become the predominant logic shaping social policy, reshaping and realigning the State while also governing individuals and the multiple institutions involved –foundations, associations, NGOs and so on– as well as users themselves, who in some cases become the raw material of commodity production and in others the end consumer.

Social services are no longer a social domain set apart from the broader economy, a residual sector; they have gradually become a growing economic field financed with public funds; specific in their characteristics, indeed, but like the rest of the capitalist economy, shrouded in common

4 ACS, through its business division CLECE, Grupo 5, Ballesol, Domus Vi, Orpea, Korian Copfin, QUAVITAE, CAIXA, Techo Hogar, etc.

dynamics. To understand what is happening on the surface, it is essential to recognise this underlying current.

In this context, it is necessary for our analyses to incorporate concepts and categories that help us grasp the forces shaping the development of social services. At the time, we opted for the characterisation of "neoliberal capitalism", a decision which, while useful for placing us within a critical perspective, we soon realised did not allow us to understand social services in all their complex scope.

On this matter, in his most recent book (2022) José Manuel Naredo poses the following question:

> Assuming that what we generally call capitalism prevails in the world, the following question arises: do we live under a neoliberal capitalism governed by the tyranny of markets, or under a clientelist capitalism governed by the elites and power networks associated with a corporatist tyranny? (p. 185).

The answer he provides,[5] to our mind, is compelling for understanding the processes permeating social services:

> Rather than interpreting history as the succession of modes of production, it would be better understood as the evolution of modes of domination or of wealth acquisition which, far from succeeding one another, have shifted and overlapped. This raises doubts as to whether we can accurately define contemporary society with such a simple term as neoliberal capitalism, when in fact several modes of domination and exploitation overlap (p. 129).

> After living for forty years in the "little houses" of social services, we identify with the description we outlined in an editorial in *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social* (Nogués and Cabrera, 2017) about what was taking place in social services. In essence, it suggested the following: far from being concentrated and located in a handful of offices, power extends across the entire social body constituted by the market, the State and the third sector. It operates through networks and relationships not only of class, but also of clientelism, patriarchy, race and diverse forms of economic and disciplinary dependency which overlap to sustain the familiar voluntary servitude that shifts and adapts to change.

As a consequence, we find a pyramid of domination in which strategic calculation operates, and clientelist (and even caciquist) relations permeate the entire social fabric and take root in various organisations: public and private universities, professional bodies, the third sector and the public administration, for instance. These relations, embedded in dependent labour structures, generate imbalanced power dynamics that exert varying degrees of pressure on people and, to a greater or lesser extent, constrain their freedom.

5 This response brings to mind an old article by Manuel Aguilar entitled "The imprint of charity on Social Services" (2010).

This perspective makes it possible to move beyond the conventional critical discourse that generally opposes the public and private spheres as though they were mutually exclusive, obscuring the interpenetration between economic power and political management, as well as the current entanglement between public and private actors, between politicians and business leaders, or indeed between NGOs and companies.

Such a complex reading of the underlying dynamics also helps us to understand the commonalities that exist across different political organisations located on the left and the right, without denying the differences in social policy orientations, while also enabling us to recognise how these orientations impart a distinct character to the central administration, to regional and local governments and, indeed, to the contradictory European Union.

At the time, we ventured to identify three dominant approaches within Spanish social services: the social-democratic, the Christian-democratic and the neoliberal populist.

- A social-democratic approach, which proposes universal public social services and seeks to decommodify certain benefits and services and exclude them from the market in order to forge a distinct social arena.
- A Christian-democratic approach, which assumes a vision of harmonious class coexistence and social cohesion that drives economic development, with a public sector that shares responsibility with private social initiatives and, to a lesser extent, with the market.
- A neoliberal approach, which favours residualist proposals in which needs are commodified and benefits and services become commodities that are bought and sold. Accordingly, social services are placed within the broader field of capitalist economic relations, where private provision plays an increasingly important role and the State adopts a charity and care-based approach to supporting the poor.

Fernando Fantova (2023) sets out a formalisation of the two main opposing options that, in his view, social services currently face – options that, to some extent, clearly embody the approaches discussed above:

- To step back, taking on in a generalised way those situations and problems that do not fit within dominant social frameworks and ways of life in society, and attempting to help them fit (for instance, situations of disability, inasmuch as they are deemed to account for or generate exclusion).
- To move forward, wholly becoming services for all people – a universal system that provides and organises everyday care and community support, which anyone (indeed, everyone) may need at different points in their lives, and which is responsible for the associated preventive interventions.

In our view, it is important to pause and consider these structural reflections because, from the socially assigned positions in which social work operates, it is not easy to discern the dominant trends. Yet acknowledging their existence, and their influence, is essential both in the more immediate, day-to-day issues and in those that have a more strategic dimension.

If this situational framing is accurate, public social services face a significant challenge: they must become a robust system with considerable financial resources and with public sector management structures commensurate with that scale. Otherwise, their role risks being reduced to facilitating the interests of the market and the third sector, and serving as a form of soft policing over those "surplus" social groups that might otherwise disrupt the prevailing economic, social and cultural processes.

## 4. Where are they headed?

At this juncture in our analysis, one aspect is vital for assessing the future of social protection systems, the survival –or not– of welfare states, and therefore their form of social integration: namely, how we understand the current crisis of the capitalist system.

Some predict capitalism in terminal decline, with ecological collapse as the immediate backdrop for social action. This diagnosis leads them to conclude that we cannot expect welfare states to act in delivering significant contributions for transforming social relations, values, forms of production, patterns of consumption, gender relations or our relationship with nature. On this basis, certain progressive sectors promote a kind of anti-statism in favour of community-oriented approaches and the creation of independent forms of organisation, mobilising the means necessary for the production of well-being and fostering an ideal reproduction of community (Zamora, 2016).

Such a view could lead to the weakening of redistributive policies, with the risk of re-privatising public responsibility and reinforcing neoliberal paternalism.

Against this position we adopt Balibar's analysis (2023):

> Contemporary, globalised and financialised capitalism is not merely another "stage" in the historical development of capitalism or another cycle of accumulation and hegemony in the history of the capitalist world system. But neither is it the "end" of capitalism, at least not qualitatively, in the sense that it would rest on forces and norms that render it more or less immediately "impossible" (p. 381).

Thus, this financialisation and globalisation of the economy represents a qualitative leap, a civilisational change, but it does not signify the end of capitalism.

Market relations expand continuously in two distinct directions: on the one hand, they seize new territories, erase borders, merge or mix populations and incorporate new activities and services that either "com-

modify" pre-existing needs and desires or create entirely new ones linked to the use of technologies and the acquisition of commodities. The global financial market (GFM) enshrines the extension and intensification of capitalism.

It is necessary to acknowledge this general tendency, while identifying the limits of this expansion, which are at once crucial and difficult to pinpoint, as they emerge from complex dynamics or from power relations concealed within market relations themselves or in fact within the consequences of such relations. Forms of resistance to globalisation include deterritorialisation, community defences of traditional collective identities, and the stubborn continuities within our everyday ways of life.

Consequently, when we delve into a phenomenology of this new globalised and financialised world, we discover that it is no less complex than the one that preceded it, despite –or rather, precisely because of– the overwhelming simplification driven by financial globalisation.

Another important idea of Balibar, relevant for steering ourselves towards the future of social services, is the complexity of the social-democratic welfare state:

> On the one hand, neoliberalism systematically *destroys* the commons or abolishes the limits of commodification that "socialism", the Welfare State, the Keynesian (New Deal) social contract, and developmental national policies had instituted in the form of protections or institutional solidarities with greater or lesser inequalities and loopholes. [But, on the other hand,] neoliberals realise they still need to conceive and make use of something that comes from socialism. […] It remains to be seen how far one can go in cutting social services while maintaining fiscal resources. Thus, the *appearance* is a monolinear trend towards the Minimal State, but the *reality* is a far more contradictory situation in which absolute capitalism needs to draw on the very public structures and social functions it seeks to delegitimise and undermine. It must keep alive (even if starved) what it continually destroys (p. 386).

This perspective –as opposed to a simple logic of succession in which ideologies are treated as fixed stages within the history of capitalism– allows us to imagine that, although neoliberalism is now dominant, socialism persists as a latent or repressed element of internal contradiction (pp. 386–387). Absolute capitalism would therefore not constitute a stable social and economic system.

The question unavoidably emerges: which path will take precedence? There is no easy answer. Moreover, it cannot be answered solely from the standpoint of Spain or any single autonomous community. In any response, it is worth considering that a significant portion of the path taken will be shaped by Europe at large. One clear example is the various consequences of the austerity-based approach following the 2008 financial crisis and the hugely different responses to the crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Palestine.

We are witnessing a moment of uncertainty in which social services are affected in the short term by the political weight attained by different forces –social democrats, Christian democrats, liberals and far-right– in the formation of local, autonomous regional and central governments, and indeed by the pathways adopted by the European Union in the face of huge sociopolitical changes. Spain cannot, on its own, foster universal community-based social services for care; it lacks the political and economic autonomy needed to pursue progressive social policies in isolation.

## 5. Where do we want them to go?

Unquestionably, today's society is deeply unfair, naturally driving us to desire sweeping changes. However, this should not allow social workers to be misled, placing ourselves within a critical stance believing that we are on the brink of witnessing the fall of the capitalist system, as we noted earlier. In any event, we do not see the forces or strategies capable of reversing its course in the near future.

Understanding the complex web of relationships and forms of production present in social services can help us untangle the present moment when attempting to chart new ways of engaging and intervening.

The authors of this article have participated in research in both its quantitative dimension –*the 4th Report on Social Services in Spain and the Social Work Profession* (Vicente et al., 2022)– and its qualitative dimension – *Approach to the Discourses of Social Workers: Contexts, Debates and Ideologies* (General Council of Social Work, 2023a). These are both works that provide an overview of social work seeking to set out a general framework through which each social worker may reflect on their own individual position and, even more importantly, may understand the positions of other professionals. The various maps, debates and discourses highlight the relativity of these positions without attempting to reify them in order to reveal, understand and acknowledge diversity.

An initial discursive grouping has been prepared, linking types of diagnosis, expectations and aspirations regarding what social work is or ought to be. Three main groups emerge: in crisis, adaptive and utopian.

We set out three maps that range from general (discourses) to particular (discursive fragments) and then, once again, a synthesis of those fragments.

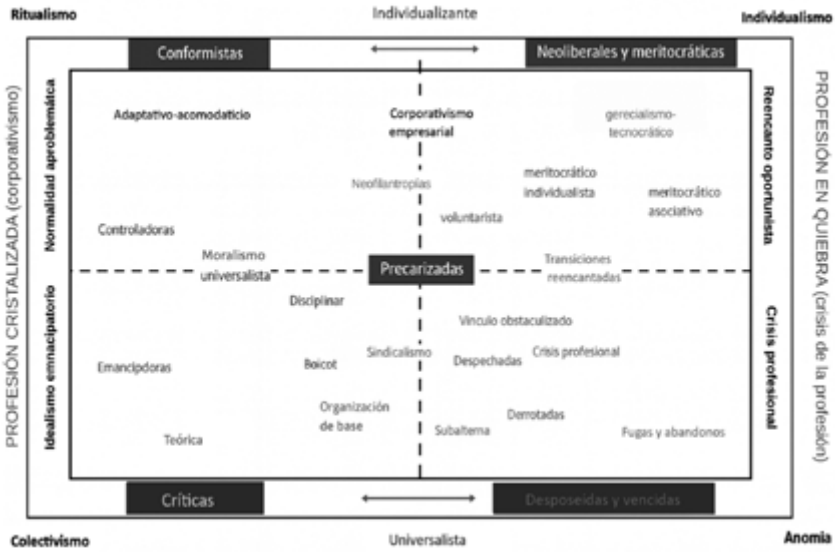
The research represented in the first figure focuses on analysing the main debates concerning the relationship between social work and social services, yielding five primary discourses or stances: neoliberal-meritocratic, dispossessed-defeated, critical, conformist and precarious. Certain positions that may be numerically more representative are not perceived as such because they lack a unifying element making it possible to conceive a shared future for the profession.

**Figure 1.** Main discourses


Source: Vicente et al. (2023), p. 113.

The second figure sets out the 22 discursive fragments relating to the five discourses.

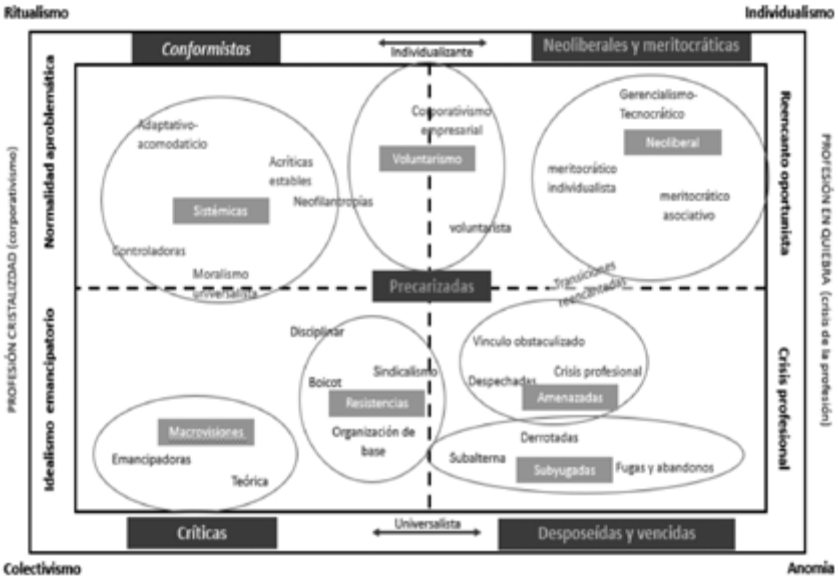
**Figure 2.** Discursive fragments




Source: Vicente, et al. (2023), p. 114.

The third figure includes the synthesis between discourses and discursive fragments.

**Figure 3.** Synthesis of discourses/discursive fragments




Source: Vicente, et. al. (2023), p. 115.

Some discourses are more consolidated than others. The diagnosis of the professional crisis and of neoliberal frameworks does not fully encompass the diversity of discourses within the profession, and new openings emerge in different directions that highlight the importance of breaking with the "modernising" vision of social change that seems to move in a single direction. Several issues may be highlighted that help explain why it is so difficult to build a coherent response:

- The failure to recognise the ideological nature of the different visions or models of social work.
- The assumption, within certain discourses, that one particular model is the only possible one.
- The lack of incorporation of broader social contexts into most diagnoses.
- The lack of minimum common ground despite there being broad agreement on a central principle, such as the defence of the public sphere.
- The absence of critical frameworks capable of generating alternative programmes or solutions. And all of this ultimately reflects a single underlying problem:

- The inability of each discursive position to understand and engage with the others.

Based on this standpoint, it is pertinent to lay out the necessary collective discussion on what we intend to do to build what we strive to become, taking into consideration the historically and socially situated framework we share.

Below we set out several elements that may help stimulate a virtuous cycle and counteract some aspects of the current vicious cycle affecting both social services and social work.

# 6. Proposals

### 6.1. What kind of economic growth should social services pursue?

The first point we wish to stress directly relates to the need to rethink our concepts and narratives regarding the role of the State: to stop seeing it as a mere croupier,[6] the dealer who keeps the game running for private actors while taking on the thankless tasks of social control; instead, we should recognise it as a crucial economic agent. The social services economy will not, on its own, evolve in a socially desirable direction. From this perspective, the State must take on a significant "entrepreneurial" role.

To take democracy and participation seriously, we must start from a basic premise: the need for a regulatory framework that imposes limits on the expansionary drive of commercial relations in their current form, rooted in the economic imperative of commodity production[7]; a framework that opens up social spaces for the development of cooperative activities based on reciprocal recognition among real individuals (free community cooperation). In other words, a framework capable of curbing the monopolistic drive to extend the monetary/commercial model in ways that are both improper and destructive.

To this end, governments must invest in strengthening their own capacities, tools and institutions. The continued outsourcing of core functions within ministries, regional departments and municipal offices responsible for social policy simply weakens their ability to respond to changing needs and demands. Ultimately, it diminishes their potential to generate intentional public value and growth on an ongoing basis. Worse still, as the skills and expertise of the public sector have been hollowed out from within, it has become increasingly at risk of falling under the sway of vested interests.

6 Croupier: "this is the person assigned to a gaming table to assist in running the game […] their work is mechanical, without any capacity for initiative or interest in the outcome of the game" (Wikipedia (Spanish version), 2025, paras. 1-2).

7 A commercial relationship is not the only form of service exchange; reciprocity and redistribution may also play an important role.

It is indispensable to restore the notion of a shared purpose within the public sector and to limit the costly and unnecessary intermediation of the external consultancy sector. Reliance on these firms weakens and undermines public social services.[8] The issue is not about questioning the qualities of any particular consultancy firm; rather, the problem lies in the underlying logic of their business model. Governments may sometimes hire consultancy firms to fill specific gaps in their own capacities, but unfortunately it has become standard practice to award them wide-ranging and lucrative contracts, even in areas where civil servants are repeatedly denied opportunities to work on some of the most challenging, complex and meaningful matters.

When everything is outsourced, public agencies are unable to develop for themselves the skills and knowledge they need to confront new challenges. Increasing dependence on major consultancy firms stifles innovation and state capacity, weakens democratic accountability and makes it harder to discern the effects of political and corporate decisions.

For this reason, it would be advisable to establish internal consultancy bodies within the public sector, policy laboratories and local public procurement programmes in coordination with public universities.

### 6.2. The democratisation of social services

This is an issue that appears in many of the dilemmas faced by the social work profession and in its quest for legitimacy. It concerns the tension between control and social transformation; the ethical and professional autonomy of social workers within their various institutions and organisations; the democratic oversight of those institutions and organisations; and the participation of other social actors in defining the purpose and methods of social services and other social policies, among other matters.

Democratisation requires restoring the dignity of service users and, therefore, recognising their central role in the process of autonomy and development.

We should not forget that the precarious working conditions and highly feminised nature of the social services workforce is itself an obstacle to participation.

Reflection on concepts, needs, exclusion, vulnerability, inequality, poverty, the social divide and community must be part of a debate that the profession cannot undertake alone, but rather together with citizens, whether or not they use its services and benefits. Only in this way can social work strengthen its social and political influence and build alliances that reinforce and transform its role.

Democratisation also consists of shared responsibility between public administrations and citizens in order to strengthen public and universal social services. Democracy as an institution and as a form of society –as

8 It is significant that specific structures for research, planning and evaluation have been dismantled within the municipal social services of Madrid and within the region itself.

Mary Richmond observed– "is a way of life", and its renewal and sustenance are essential aims of social work.

To foster participation and enable societal oversight of government decisions, to give real weight to the protection of community bonds and to allow social cohesion and the enjoyment of life to flourish, it is necessary to lay out institutional frameworks that curb the authoritarian impulses that may crop up in both political parties and in various associations and social movements, particularly in their leadership bodies.

A sound participation policy should advance two general lines of action: first, to support and give momentum to bottom-up initiatives, establishing spaces for participation and mechanisms that encourage it; and second, to ensure that decisions are not made from positions of power without consulting citizens, and that mechanisms for reporting and participation are implemented across all areas, alongside appropriate use of existing decision-making and oversight bodies.

Participation does not take place in a vacuum. It occurs within a specific historical context marked by growing social inequality, in which there is a real risk that group and community interventions may be used to channel discontent, limiting the possibility of developing an independent form of power capable of confronting problems at their roots.

### 6.3. The building of relative autonomy in professional practice

We are witnessing a profound shift in how service users and the public at large perceive social workers, particularly in those social services delivered directly by civil-service staff (a trend that concerns us deeply because of its impact on the delegitimisation of public social services). Images of social work that we once associated with the United States or England are beginning to feel familiar. We used to think that the portrayal offered by Jacques Donzelot in *The Policing of Families* (2023), or by Ivan Illich in *The Right to Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies* (2015) – describing social work as an incapacitating (or paralysing) profession– did not reflect the reality of social work in Spain. Perhaps in rural areas the social worker is still perceived as a caring, resourceful and approachable professional, but we fear that in large cities things are changing.[9]

It is not yet too late to reverse this worrying trend, although the direction that social policies take is out of our hands. What we can do, however, is cultivate a measure of relative professional autonomy.

Autonomy is a dynamic category that expands or contracts depending, above all, on organisational culture, on relationships with service users, on ties with community activists and social movements, and on the strength of workplace trade-union organisation, among other factors.

In their relationships with service users and social movements, practitioners tasked with social intervention must begin by recognising the

9 Perhaps the numerous defections of social workers who decide to change occupation have something to do with this.

ambiguous position they occupy in relation to the institution, to power: *I must simultaneously be under its authority and act independently; I must challenge it and obey it.*

To understand this ambiguity, it is essential to acknowledge the subalternity[10] experienced both by the various professionals who carry out individual or collective social interventions, and by the community groups with whom these social interventions take place. It is important to acknowledge the coexistence of subalternity and the construction of autonomy, and to uncover the deeply contradictory intention embedded in the very mandate assigned to us:

> Subalternity is reversed through the emancipation of subaltern subjects; it is reversed through the struggle for individual, social and political autonomy; it is reversed through the mental and ideological break with dependence and submission to obsolete structures (Casaús, 2020, p. 134).

Through a sort of double bond, practitioners must experience the contradiction propping up the institution that commissions their work and the function it officially assigns: promoting the autonomy of individuals and communities, revitalising neighbourhood life, and encouraging residents' participation in local governance. These slogans are often little more than words; self-justifying fictions through which technocracy seeks to legitimise itself. The changes demanded of the professional do not depend on them, while the matters that are within their remit often cannot produce meaningful change.

Accordingly, it is vital to firmly establish the ideological and theoretical framework within which professionals in the practice position themselves and to set out a methodology with theoretical and ideological perspectives. The experience gained in the field must also be integrated, with users-as-citizens participating in every stage of the process, since this allows for a richer dialogue between theory and practice in relation to reality. Equally important is having a clear understanding of the object of social intervention with groups and communities: to accompany them –individually and collectively– so that they can become autonomous, make sound decisions, and access the support and care they need at specific points in their lives or throughout them.

What matters is that our everyday goals, however modest, aim to strengthen a new paradigm rather than shore up the old one. It is essential to distinguish between measures that preserve the status quo and those

10 To confront these challenges, professionals must reclaim a theoretical category whose recognition must precede another –the notion of autonomy– both being essential, complementary and coined by Gramsci. In this regard, it is necessary to recognise that professionals engaged in collective, group or community intervention encounter epistemological constraints related to subalternity, which limit their autonomy when constructing the object of their work –laws, policy guidelines, actions they must or must not undertake– and which delimit the professional action of the social worker. Subalternity is, at the same time, a condition, an experience and a practice.

that gesture towards a new paradigm and recognise the value of small everyday actions.

### 6.4. The unionisation of social workers

Finally, we turn to the unionisation of social workers, a crucial and unavoidable component in ensuring dignified working conditions and high-quality social work delivered to service users. Unionisation takes on particular importance in the current adverse political climate, and in the one that appears to be emerging in the medium term, given the trend observed in a significant part of professional associations, which often soften their positions in the face of abuses suffered by practitioners themselves and by the most vulnerable sectors of society.

The unionisation of social workers and other social intervention professionals is essential to counter the common processes of deprofessionalisation and spread of precarious working conditions. This will not be feasible unless there is a transformation of the culture of a profession whose political consciousness has largely excluded issues such as labour rights, class solidarities and trade union activism. It is a profession scarcely accustomed to applying its own expertise in encouraging service-user participation to advance its own collective demands.

Unionisation within social work constitutes an outstanding assignment, hindered by a tendency towards demobilisation when it comes to asserting and improving working conditions; a tendency that characterises social workers, especially in contrast with teachers for example, as they are known for their strong strike-based organisation (Karger, 2020). And although as far back as the 1980s authors such as Alexander et al. (1980) highlighted the importance of unionisation for social workers –for those whose role is to defend the rights of others– the defence of professional interests still seems to struggle to take root within social work, even though dignified working conditions can translate into greater professional recognition at a time when deprofessionalisation (and its effects) is spreading unchecked within the field of social intervention.

Accordingly, for Healy and Meagher (2004), the unionisation of social workers represents a collaborative strategy capable of improving working conditions, securing pay rises in a sector marked by wage devaluation and, above all, guaranteeing job security. This is essential to overcome the fear that prevents the formulation of bold policy proposals in order to champion what the authors term political unionism. Such an approach would facilitate the long-awaited professional recognition of those working in social services.

In the specific context of Spain, unionisation poses a challenge due to the country's tradition of reinforcing social work through the lens of the Anglo-Saxon liberal model of professionalism, described by Hugman (2009). Moreover, professional advocacy in Spain has tended to focus more on technical demands rather than on political ones, and social workers have commonly refrained from identifying as working class (Lorente, 2015)

due to the strong civil-service orientation of the profession at a particular time. This is in addition to the fact that many social workers have aligned themselves with broad, general trade-union demands rather than specific ones, thus weakening the particular issues affecting them.

This dynamic has meant that, by focusing on building strong professional association structures with an organised, exemplary network of professional associations, social workers have become less able to recognise that creating trade unions specific to social work is fully compatible with strengthening professional associations. Indeed, the pursuit of professional legitimacy based on expert knowledge should not be at odds with achieving better working conditions, nor with acknowledging that labour conflicts do indeed arise within social work and must be addressed (Lorenz, 2006).

The privatisation of needs and of public goods and services; social cutbacks; the free international movement of capital and companies, but not of people; wage restraint, but not profit restraint; and competitiveness built on precarious, poorly paid labour are not tendencies that can be rolled back spontaneously.

Ultimately, as one writer aptly puts it: "Trade unionism is one of those outdated, fashion-resistant tools that can best defend us against the harshness of the present, and perhaps of the future" (Muñoz, 2023).

## Conclusions

Social services constitute an emerging economic sector that forms part of the capitalist system. The social sphere has also become a setting for business activity, marked by a progressive commodification of services and by the associated processes of outsourcing, the spread of precarious working conditions and deprofessionalisation.

The fragmentation of social intervention within social services, together with increasing care pressure and bureaucratisation, pushes frontline social workers into acting as processors for other public welfare systems (healthcare, income-support programmes, and so on).

The consolidation of a highly feminised frontline workforce and the progressive masculinisation of managerial roles are viewed as dominant trends in social services (Vicente et al., 2022).

Linking the development of social services with neoliberalism should not lead to simplifications that portray social services as a system governed by the "tyranny" of markets, nor should it obscure the complexity of the different interests at stake and the conflicting measures being adopted. Such simplification can render invisible the real actors driving current developments: the elites and power networks associated with diverse and heterogeneous corporatist, clientelist and often neo-philanthropic sectors.

If this assessment is accurate, public social services currently lack the strength to halt these trends, but they can adopt measures that, in the medium term, help shift the balance of forces.

It is important to promote measures that strengthen a virtuous cycle and curb the elements of the current vicious cycle, such as:

- Limiting the expansionary drive of commercial relations and opening up spaces for the development of cooperative activities grounded in reciprocity.
- Building relative professional autonomy through an organisational culture more closely connected to service users and to sociocommunity activism.
- Developing forms of trade union organisation capable of addressing the political demands of social intervention professionals in order to counter ongoing processes of deprofessionalisation and increasingly precarious working arrangements, and to champion dignified working conditions and high-quality practice with service users.
- Restricting the continual reliance on consultancy firms, as increasing dependence on large consultancy bodies stifles innovation and state capacity, weakens democratic accountability and hinders the ability to discern the effects of political and corporate actions.
- Ensuring that the development of self-help initiatives is not used to justify anti-state positions that could lead to a weakening of public policies aimed at social redistribution.

Understanding these proposals requires reflecting on the various "wheres": where social services come from, where they are now, where they are headed, and where we want them to go in our country.

## Bibliography

Aguilar Hendrickson, Manuel. (2010). La huella de la beneficencia en los Servicios Sociales. *Zerbitzuan. Gizarte zerbitzuetarako aldizkaria = Revista de Servicios Sociales*, 48, 9-16.

Alexander, Leslie B.; Lichtenberg, Philip and Brunn, Dennis. (1980). Social workers in unions: a survey. *Social Work, 25*(3), 216-223. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/25.3.216

Balibar, Etienne. (2023). Chapter 10. Absolute Capitalism. In William Callison and Zachary Manfredi (Eds.), *Mutant Neoliberalism* (pp. 359-389). Lengua de trapo.

Casado, Demetrio. (1984). *Por una acción social y cultural alternativa*. Marsiega.

Casaús Arzú, Marta Elena. (2020). De subalternos y subalternidades: cuando las identidades subalternas han de llevar a cabo la acción

política. *Cuadernos de Trabajo social, 33*(1), 173-175. https://doi.org/10.5209/cuts.66238

Spanish General Council of Social Work. (2023a). *Aproximación a los discursos de las trabajadoras sociales: contextos, debates e ideologías*. CGTS. https://www.cgtrabajosocial.es/publicaciones/aproximacion-a-los-discursos-de-las-trabajadoras-sociales-contextos-debates-e-ideologias-digital/153/view

Spanish General Council of Social Work. (2023b). Trabajo Social Crítico: una nueva dimensión política. *Revista de Servicios Sociales y Política Social, XL*(129).

Donzelot, Jacques. (2023). *La policía de las familias*. Traficantes de sueños.

Fantova, Fernando. (25 September 2023). El tercer sector en la construcción de unos servicios públicos, universales y comunitarios [blog entry]. Retrieved on 31 October 2025 from https://www.fantova.net/2023/09/25/el-tercer-sector-en-la-construccion-de-unos-servicios-sociales-publicos-universales-y-comunitarios/

García Giráldez, Teresa; Nogués Sáez, Luis; Martín Estalayo, Maribel and Roldán García, Elena. (2014). El Trabajo Social reformista en tiempos de cambio. *Azarbe: Revista Internacional de Trabajo Social y Bienestar* (3), 77-82.

Healy, Karen and Meagher, Gabrielle. (2004). The Reprofessionalization of Social Work: Collaborative Approaches for Achieving Professional Recognition. *The British Journal of Social Work, 34*(2), 243-260. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch024

Hugman, Richard. (2009). *Social Work: A Reappraisal*. Polity Press.

Illich, Iván. (2015). *El derecho al desempleo útil y sus enemigos profesionales*. Díaz & Pons.

Karger, Howard. (2020). Unions. *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.405

Lorente Arenas, Pilar. (2015). La construcción de la identidad profesional del trabajo social en España. *Revista de Treball Social*, 205, 61-78.

Lorenz, Walter. (2006). *Perspectives on European Social Work: From the Birth of the Nation State to the Impact of Globalisation*. Barbara Budrich Publishers.

Muñoz Molina, Antonio. (30 September 2023). Nuevas batallas sindicales. *El País*. Retrieved on 31 October 2025 from https://elpais.com/opinion/2023-09-30/nuevas-batallas-sindicales.html

Naredo, José Manuel. (2022). *La crítica agotada. Claves para el cambio de civilización*. Siglo XXI.

Nogués Sáez, Luis. (2021). La mercantilización de las Necesidades Sociales y el desgobierno de lo Público [remark in an online forum]. Foro de Servicios Sociales. Retrieved on 31 October 2025 from https://foroserviciossociales.es/la-mercantilizacion-de-las-necesidades-sociales-y-el-desgobierno-de-lo-publico/

Nogués Sáez, Luis and Cabrera, Pedro. (2017). Editorial. El escorpión y la rana. La sutil gestación de un nuevo modelo hegemónico para los Servicios Sociales. *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social*, 2, 237-241.

Nogués Sáez, Luis and García Giráldez, Teresa. (2023). Metamorfosis de los servicios sociales en España. In Rosario Ovejas Lara, Magdalena Epelde-Juaristi, Ainhoa Berasaluze Correa and Miren Ariño Altuna (Eds.), *Supervisión: hacia un modelo colaborativo y transdisciplinar* (pp. 233-246), Aranzadi Thomson Reuters.

Nogués Sáez, Luis and Martín Estalayo, Maribel. (2022). La (des) profesionalización del trabajo social: posmodernidad y mercado. *Miscelánea Comillas. Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales, 80*(156), 111-126.

Vicente González, Emiliana; Nogués Sáez, Luis and Orgaz Alonso, Christian (Eds.). (2022). *IV Informe sobre los servicios sociales en España y la profesión del trabajo social*. Consejo General del Trabajo Social. Retrieved on 31 October 2025 from https://www.cgtrabajosocial.es/files/62a847340c469/IVInformeServiciosSocialesEspaa.pdf

Wikipedia. (17 October 2025). *Crupier*. Retrieved on 31 October 2025 from https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crupier

Zamora Zaragoza, José Antonio. (2016). Expulsión Social y Recuperación de Económica. En José Antonio Zamora Zaragoza, *La crisis del Estado social: ¿disolución del vínculo social?* (pp. 36-44). FOESSA.