

Expressions of the “social issue” among children and adolescents: contributions to the debate

Expressões da “questão social” junto às Crianças e Adolescentes: aportes ao debate

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In 2025, Brazil celebrates the 35th anniversary of the Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA), celebrated on July 13th. This date marks a crucial moment for us to reflect on the legislation that establishes the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents in Brazil, promoting progress and highlighting the ongoing challenges to guarantee these rights, as well as current experiences focused on this topic. In this context, the journal *Em Pauta: teoria social e realidade contemporânea* is pleased to present its 60th issue, dedicated to a historical field of study and intervention in social work: children and adolescents. More than three decades after the approval of the ECA, the rights of these groups remain without full guarantees, especially given the recent scenario of increasing social inequalities and weakening social protection.

This issue aims to update national and international approaches to the “social issue” that affects children and adolescents, considering its implications for policy implementation and the work of various professionals with this population. Research and critical analyses on topics relevant to the dossier are presented in this issue, revealing that concern for these segments of the population remains alive and well, demonstrating that despite numerous setbacks, “we are still here.”

The reason for organizing this dossier is to encourage the challenge society will have to face to revert the perverse living conditions that afflict portions of its child and youth population.

In 2024, the synthesis of social indicators from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) indicated that 42.7% of households in this age group received benefits from social programs. For the IBGE (2024), approximately 11% of the population up to 14 years of age is extremely poor, and 41% is poor. In addition to

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the insecurity, this socioeconomic profile places them at greater risk of environmental disasters, confirming that children and adolescents are the population most affected by poverty in the country. The main deprivations of children and adolescents also include access to basic sanitation, income, housing, and water. There is a strong regional disparity, with the majority of poor children concentrated in the North and Northeast regions, and there are marked ethnic and geographic inequalities. Although the expansion of programs such as *Bolsa Família* (Family Grant) has contributed to an improvement, the lack of access to fundamental rights can have long-term consequences for child development and the economy. Data from the Child and Adolescent Observatory (Abrinq, 2023) recently pointed out that there are around 68 million people aged zero to 19 living in Brazil.

At the end of 2022, during the week that world leaders gathered for the 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued a warning: children and adolescents are the most impacted by climate change and need to be prioritized. In Brazil, 40 million girls and boys are exposed to more than one climate or environmental risk (60% of the total), and climate change compromises the guarantee of fundamental rights. This was revealed by the report *Children, Adolescents and Climate Change in Brazil*, launched by UNICEF in November 2022. This scenario leads to the forced displacement of these groups, which ends up affecting their mental health and interfering with their physical, cognitive, and emotional development.

According to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), “the breakdown of family and emotional ties; the lack of shelter or housing; difficulties in accessing basic services, such as drinking water and sanitation, education, health, and culture, as well as exposure to situations of violence” are determining factors in this process.

Different documents highlighted the importance of investing in research in this sector: “Data must be sensitive, as far as possible, to age, gender, disability, race, and ethnicity, and capture information on migrant and refugee groups.” This information serves to inform public policies, which should prioritize children and adolescents in climate and environmental issues. The UNICEF report (2022) also points out that this population is virtually absent from legislation, plans, and programs related to climate change in Brazil. In addition to including them as central subjects in public policies, children and adolescents must be incorporated into all stages, from design to implementation and evaluation. Other measures include promoting and encouraging the transition to a green economy, “opening up opportunities for the socio-productive inclusion of adolescents and young people, and inhibiting the financing of polluting or environmentally harmful activities.”

By highlighting the countless situations of expropriation to which the poor, socially and culturally marginalized child and youth population is subjected, we can understand

the great contradictions that Brazil is facing: a rich country where the poor and destitute predominate, a country with large food production where so many still go hungry; and, yet, a country that presents a great paradox in relation to childhood and adolescence: Brazil stands out for its important political and social advances in the field of legislation aimed at children and adolescents, and, at the same time, displays lamentable global rates of low education, malnutrition, school dropout, child prostitution, violence against children and adolescents, in addition to high rates of extermination of young Black people in peripheral areas.

The broad debate and mobilization that took place in the 1980s, which led to immense advances in legislation, established Brazil as an example, especially in Latin America, of a country that cares about defending the dignity of these rights-bearers. However, as Carlos Drummond de Andrade mentioned in the phrase, “laws are not enough, lilies are not born of the law,” a verse from the poem *Our Time*, laws alone are not enough to achieve true justice or equality of rights; the creation of a better world, like lilies that grow naturally, requires more than mere rules, demanding a process of achievements, dialogue, human values, and objective conditions far removed from the extreme inequalities that currently prevail.

Hiding the historical determination of knowledge, the social division of classes, economic exploitation, and political domination, laws are becoming abstract representations, reaching a point where we can consider them epistemically and ethically paralyzing.

The withdrawal of engagement or the silence of intellectuals is, here, a sign of a deeper absence: the lack of critical thinking, capable of uncovering and analyzing the contradictions that drive the present.

Given this, it is not surprising the stage of paralysis from which critical knowledge and Marxist theories have been suffering. We often see that the belief that the ECA (Child and Adolescent Statute) can guarantee rights in isolation from reality, without struggle, and ignoring the abysmal inequalities present in the society in which it operates, is the result of a loss of the complex totality of the issue. As we’ve mentioned elsewhere, despite the crisis, postmodernists (true Siamese twins of neoconservatives/neofascists) still maintain a significant percentage of supporters of fragmented analyses, whose objectives seek to criminalize poor children and adolescents through the “myth of dangerous classes” whose confrontation deserves only punishment. This stance has achieved high levels of civil society engagement, elucidating that truly overcoming it will require intellectual and moral reform, reaffirming the cultural battle inherent in every struggle.

It is no exaggeration to say that neoconservatism has been the tone of Brazilian politics in the last years of the 21st century. The reason for this is the social significance,

the instrumentality that conservative thought and *praxis* represent in contemporary times (Freire, 2018).

As Souza (2016, p. 360) observed, in “a country with a peripheral, dependent, and heteronomous insertion in the circuit of the international division of labor, such as Brazil, conservative ideologies in general, and conservatism in particular, tend to resonate and have intense repercussions on culture, the economy, and politics.” However, this phenomenon is not simply an expression of a “conservative wave” or a “new right,” as those who are alarmed would have us believe. We understand that the debate on the topic cannot be simplistic and accept that it was merely an atypical moment in a government that ended along with the 2022 elections and the overcoming of the coup attempt of January 8, 2023.

Our intention with this brief editorial is to remind us that it is necessary to refine historical and theoretical analysis so that it permeates political action. The world does not appear to us as it is. Otherwise, according to Marx, we would have no need for science, for theoretical reflection, to grasp its meanings. We cannot make synonyms of expressions like conservatism, neoconservatism, neoliberalism, and fascism, as if they were intertwined constellations, but rather we must reveal within them the fissures and contradictions that erupt between them and in this relationship.

Recent years have seen setbacks in addressing the expressions of the “social issue” among children and adolescents. For example, it took a young influencer (Felca) to denounce relevant issues regarding the media exposure of children and adolescents on social media. Society’s lack of responsibility in reporting the abuses suffered by these segments of the population is growing increasingly widespread. It is no coincidence that the absurd exterminations of young Black people reveal the trivialization of the issue.

In this sense, it is important to clarify that the full implementation of the ECA is associated with other struggles that we must expand and implement. It is necessary to ensure absolute priority for the rights of children and youth and resist setbacks, defending quality public policies and the strengthening of protection mechanisms.

It is of utmost importance that we denounce socioeconomic inequalities and unequal access to fundamental rights. Ensuring universal, quality access to healthcare, education, food, housing, leisure, and culture is crucial for the full development of these individuals. Fighting structural violence, exploitation, and neglect, which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable children and adolescents, is a priority that cannot be treated as a mere possibility.

In this direction, this dossier had the participation of intellectuals, researchers, teachers, students, and different collaborators who shared the results of their studies and

research, bringing to the public fruitful and thought-provoking reflections on the issues that make up this issue of *Em Pauta*. It is worth noting that in the process of building No. 60 we had the support of Professors Dr. Fabiana Schmidt (UFRRJ) and Dr. Mônica de Jesus Cesar (UERJ) in different activities.

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