

Aging and social inequalities in Brazil: an intricate paradox

O envelhecimento e as desigualdades sociais brasileiras: um intrincado paradoxo

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The journal *Em Pauta: social theory and contemporary reality*, in its 62nd issue, presents the dossier **Social Work, Aging and Rights**. The objective of this issue is to foster debate on aging from the perspective of social totality, considering its interface with social work and the defense of the rights of older persons. As it is a highly complex field of study and social practice, efforts were made to include the thematic and regional diversity of productions, with articles capable of critical reflections and propositions to confront the expressions of the social issue affecting the aging process.

Population aging configures itself as one of the most significant demographic, epidemiological, cultural, social, economic, and political phenomena of the 20th century. Being an undeniable reality occurring globally, human aging has received increasing attention in studies and research, elevating old age to the level of a social category, evidencing different interpretive trends and ideopolitical references.

As Faleiros (2017, p. 7) reminds us,

Several theories or reflections deal with quality of life in old age, some emphasizing personal lifestyle and inter-individual relationships, valuing personal decisions such as quitting smoking and sedentary habits, with regular physical activities and adequate nutrition. Which is not unimportant, but only a minority has the means to follow a Mediterranean diet, have a glass of red wine a day, go to gyms, take ocean cruises, take care of aesthetics, participate in choirs [...], trailing the neoliberal policy of the Temer government to demand 49 years of contribution to social security, recommending that one work until death, citing Mick Jagger as an icon, alongside businessmen and professionals. The report can be seen as a mockery of the situation of older Brazilian men and women.

EDITORIAL

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Among the most compromising, not to say intriguing, discourses is the association of demographic indicators of population aging as harbingers of an announced crisis and threats to social protection systems, becoming a vigorous argument to impose counter-reforms and reduce rights in a neoliberal context. Another prevailing statement conceives aging increasingly as a result of progressive individual effort, independent of public policies (Bernardo, 2019).

These and other discourses are part of the collection produced in the area and need to be examined in light of their epistemological bases. Trying not to succumb to the vice of dichotomies, it is imperative to think about the field in question taking into account the active social forces, the projects in dispute, and what social values they defend.

Based on a reading supported by historical-dialectical materialism, we have emphasized that human aging corresponds to an important civilizational conquest—with the increase in life expectancy and longevity—while, contradictorily, revealing deep structural inequalities, announcing that living longer and with quality, respect, dignity, and rights may not be accessible to everyone. In other words, population aging consists of an intricate paradox: it expresses advances in certain social and health indicators that should be celebrated and desired, yet, in the same way, it expands challenges, especially in contexts of dependent and peripheral capitalism like Brazil (Bernardo, 2019; Lobato, 2018).

We know that social policies in capitalist societies constitute responses to the manifestations of the social issue, demonstrating the contradictions between the reproduction of the labor force and the partial fulfillment of human needs. And, despite the limits and the dismantling of social protection in contemporary capitalism, longevity is undoubtedly the result of social achievements and struggles waged over the last decades of the 20th century, whose attained rights are being systematically threatened and underfunded by the current ultra-neoliberal, conservative, and familist conjuncture.

Among the main policies directed at the elderly segment in Brazil, the Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988) stands out as a regulatory milestone that already announced old age in its plurality and as a right to be defended by the whole society. Since the 1990s, specific policies have been promulgated: the National Policy for the Elderly (Brazil, 1994/96), the Statute of the Older Person (Brazil, 2013; 2022), the National Health Policy for the Older Person (Brazil, 2006), and transversal policies that dialogue (directly or indirectly) with population aging, such as SUS and SUAS legislation, the recent National Care Policy, etc. However, a caveat is necessary. Despite the relevance of these policies in guaranteeing rights, the neoliberal reconfiguration increasingly imposes the transfer of responsibilities for social provision and care to individuals, families (namely women), and the private sector. This conjuncture restricts rights and broadens social inequalities

and poverty in Brazilian society, representing an even more dramatic scenario for aging individuals facing accumulated rights violations throughout their lives.

To critically understand this process, it is essential to problematize it based on its most general determinations, articulating them with the particularities that imprint differentiated experiences marked by class, gender, race, generation, territory, sexualities, and other dimensions. We reinforce that such dimensions are not separated or hierarchized. On the contrary, besides being intertwined, they consist of central elements to give visibility to the aging of historically neglected population segments: older women, caregivers, mental health service users, black people, the LGBTQIAPN+ population, people experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities, the prison population, quilombolas, indigenous people, and older people with dependency, among others.

It is not fortuitous to remember, based on Beauvoir (1990) and Haddad (2017), that old age acquires its most tragic form in capitalist society, where the older person is deprived of their very existence due to the loss of productive capacity. That is, understanding the position of aging experiences in the order of capital contributes to deepening reflection, building new mediations in the face of transformations in the world of work and the specificities of Brazilian social formation. It also makes it possible to perceive how depreciation manifests itself in other moments of life (cultural, family, educational, etc.), placing old age in the position of burden, social onus, abandonment, poverty, illness, disuse, and segregation.

This historical mark of denial and disdain for old age, although still present today, was (and continues to be) criticized by researchers, professionals, and activists who invested in theoretical, practical, and political formulations to overcome such stereotypes. Even though it is a quite heterogeneous theoretical and methodological field, it is possible to admit that old age has transitioned from its denial to its valorization, resulting in another extreme: the idealization of human aging, decontextualized and stripped of its concrete living conditions.

That said, unveiling aging in Brazil implies the deconstruction both of negative stereotypes that view old age as a burden for societies and younger generations, and of the stereotypes of a “positive” and homogeneous old age, which tend to ignore the diversity and plurality of aging experiences, serving as a strategy to commodify this phase of the life cycle, transforming old age into a consumption niche and a source of advantages for capital (Bernardo, 2019).

In times of extreme individualism, conservatism, and reduced ethics in social relations, differences and inequalities between classes, generations, and population segments tend to be interpreted as moral aspects. Distorted and biased ideas multiply, reinforcing stereotypes, prejudices, and violence. Given this scenario, it becomes essential to confront

the varied types of oppression affecting the elderly population and reproducing generational inequities, among which is ageism, which is expressed in countless mechanisms of discrimination based on age and in different forms of contempt for older people (PAHO, 2020). Furthermore, engagement in social struggles, knowledge production, professional training at various educational levels, the formulation of public policies, and the implementation of collective actions capable of offering more concrete responses to the numerous and complex demands of human aging are elementary.

We reiterate the counter-hegemony in the field by driving broader debates that take into account the Brazilian reality and the challenges of the working class that ages and cares. In the same way, it is crucial to question tendencies exclusively aligned with the biomedical emphasis, which do not recognize old age in its cultural, objective, and subjective complexity. Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the limits of governmental and/or institutional proposals that do not link their actions to the concrete conditions of population aging in capitalist societies, and which surrender to the dictates of the order of capital to the detriment of satisfying human needs, especially those of older people.

For social work, the theme is pertinent and timely, given its pioneering role in the first formulations of public policies for older people and its protagonism in professional work. Furthermore, social work cannot abstain from critical appreciation of the Brazilian population aging process, collaborating with a more accurate knowledge of the contextual inferences of this phenomenon and evidencing the expressions of the “social issue” affecting multiple aging experiences, as one of the commitments highlighted in the ethical-political project of the category (Bernardo, 2019; Lobato, 2018). Since the 2000s, social work has intensified knowledge production in the area based on historical-dialectical materialism, contributing to the strengthening of the proposal of critical social gerontology.

For the School of Social Work at the Rio de Janeiro State University (FSS-UERJ), it is gratifying to share with the community content so relevant to the whole of society, reaffirming the potency of the aging field for professional work, studies, and/or research in the area. For us, as guest editors organizing this dossier, there is special satisfaction, as FSS is one of the pioneer academic units in creating a specific internship discipline on the theme back in the 1990s, through Prof. Alzira Lobato. Since then, there has been a progressive increase in interest in the subject from undergraduate and graduate students, culminating in the creation of the Center for Studies, Extension, and Research on Aging (NEEPENV-FSS-UERJ), constituting a reference academic/extension space on aging and social work.

Therefore, we present to the readers of this issue carefully organized material attuned to the reflections signaled throughout this editorial. These are articles originating from research, systematizations, and experience reports that add to the perspectives with

the greatest critical potential and contest the appropriation of old age as a manipulable object of sciences and policies, whether through its denial or its idealized positivation. These analyses are situated in the broader struggles for a dignified and rights-based aging for all segments, groups, and social classes, but ethically committed to those historically expropriated of their vital energy and deprived of rights, giving visibility to them. We fervently hope that this dossier contributes to academic and professional debate.

The opening article gifts us with one of the field's core themes—care. Authored by Maria Paula Lehner, the article — *Debates sobre los cuidados en América Latina: envejecimiento, desigualdades y políticas públicas* — analyzes the emergence of this debate in the context of population aging, considering the social organization of care and the familist emphasis present in neoliberal social policies. It presents an excellent panorama of care policies in Latin America, as well as the tensions and challenges permeating feminist struggles to guarantee rights. The author draws our attention to the progress in certain countries in drafting public care policies, but notes that these measures may face setbacks, especially given the growth of the extreme right in various South American countries, demanding greater social mobilization around the right to care.

The problematization of human longevity as a historical-social phenomenon and a right threatened by neoliberal counter-reforms is developed by Solange Maria Teixeira in her brilliant article — *Aging and old age in the social relations of capital: a threatened achievement*. The author invites us to reflect on the reach of social policies to guarantee social justice and equity in population aging within such an adverse conjuncture. She highlights that in the current cycle of capital, with exacerbated rights expropriation and environmental disasters, human longevity, especially for the working class and its fractions, will certainly suffer substantial impacts.

The third article by Vicente de Paula Faleiros — *Security and rights in aging policies in Brazil* — follows up on the conjuncture reflections, emphasizing the scope of social policies. It investigates social-democratic and neoliberal proposals in the complex relationship between state, economy, and society, developing the concepts of insurance, security, and social security, as well as their respective coverages in terms of guaranteeing rights. It questions the conditions of citizen aging, qualified by the author as one that favors the majority of the population, with quality of life and relational autonomy, but which depends on retirement conditions, public health, and income transfers in an effectively democratic state.

Monica de Jesus Cesar, together with Amanda Beatriz Martins Rangel, produced the fourth article — *Defense of the rights of older persons: social control in the city of Rio de Janeiro* — which investigates the participatory dynamics of a social control space located in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro - Municipal Council for the Defense of the Rights of Older

Persons of the City of Rio de Janeiro (Comdepi-Rio). The study situates the council regarding its importance for fulfilling the rights of older people, besides the democratic management of policies aimed at aging and society's monitoring of state action. However, the authors verify that low participation and conflicts of interest establish obstacles to the council's autonomy, compromising its capacity to represent the interests of older people.

The contradiction between formal legal protection and the material reality of exploiting the aging working class in capitalist society is the main focus of the fifth article — *Dialectics of Aging: class struggle and the social production of old age* — by Carlos Eduardo da Silva Santos and Simone da Cunha Tourino Barros. For the authors, in a society governed by value and the commodification of life, population aging must be problematized based on class struggles and radical critique of a system that appropriates labor time and discards the human being. Likewise, social work, imbued with this understanding, can contribute to unveiling blaming ideologies and combating ageism.

The sixth article, *Multiple aging experiences and intersectional inequalities: challenges of an aged Brazil*, by Lucélia Luiz Pereira, Kenia Costa de Lima, Alexandre da Silva, and Paula Érica Batista de Oliveira, explores how the social markers of race/color, gender, class, and territory intersect and determine population aging, producing highly unequal experiences. Supported by official demographic data, the article maps different pictures of the Brazilian reality, including data on the quilombola population and residents in favelas and urban communities, demonstrating, with the support of intersectionality, how the most vulnerable older people live. This is another study revealing the contradictions of Brazilian aging, the conclusion of which points to the importance of a public policy configuration capable of incorporating intersectional and territorialized approaches.

The incarceration of older people is the subject of study in the seventh article — *Older People in Prison: portrait of rights violation in Brazil* — authored by Elisangela Maia Pessoa, Emilli Lago Martins, Janine de Matos Paulus, and Emanuele Dalbosco. This is bibliographic and documentary research that delves into the social reality of older people deprived of liberty in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The authors emphasize the existence of various expressions of rights violations suffered by this population segment, ranging from those experienced in the institutional environment to conditions previously experienced through itineraries of poverty and low education. The rights provided for by legislation are not guaranteed in the researched prison system, worsening the conditions of older people living in private incarceration. The study defends the urgent need to formulate integrated and intersectoral public policies that take into account the particularities of aging in deprivation of liberty.

Aging in the rural environment is the content examined by André de Menezes Gonçalves and Maria Fernanda de Sousa Menezes in the article *Questions put to the debate*

on aging in rural areas. The authors expose the particularities of aging in the countryside, highlighting the challenges faced by the elderly population in regions farthest from urban centers, especially in the Northeast, in contexts of limited access to public policies, early and exhausting labor, poverty, and low education. Reflecting on the numerous contradictions of this process, the authors emphasize not only the inequalities that determine this experience but fundamentally the potential of memory and orality as forms of preserving community knowledge, meaning-making, and collective resistance mechanisms, recognizing the value of rural aging experiences and the necessary struggles for a dignified and rights-based aging.

The ninth article, *Care for Older Adults in Brazil's Unified Health System: organization and tensions in the hospital context*, by Débora Peixoto de Azevedo, discusses the healthcare provided to hospitalized elderly individuals, problematizing the limits between institutional care conceived as a right in the normative framework and its implementation in the routine of the investigated unit. This is a qualitative research study conducted in a highly complex public facility in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The study indicates that the organizational structure tends to reproduce the familism of transferring responsibilities, even within a hospital setting, as a device sustained by health counter-reforms and conservative thought. The author concludes by highlighting care as a constitutive dimension of social protection, which demands the centrality of the State and public policies in the provision of care, contesting its naturalization as the exclusive responsibility of families. The theme of long-term care is the focus of the tenth article, *Aging with long-term care: so many challenges to face!*, collectively authored by Mabel Mascarenhas Torres, Thiago Lopes, and Regina Mendes Lone. The authors point out that the heterogeneity of working-class aging, the feminization of old age and care, longevity, and functional degeneration consist of basic elements to guide the construction of long-term care policies—understood as transversal actions directed at the elderly population with dependency, on a prolonged basis. Despite Brazil's progress regarding the validation of care as a right and a duty of the state, expressed through the regulation of the National Care Policy (PNC), there is still much to be done for its materiality, stressing limits such as: reinforcing the centrality of the family in care responsibility, insufficient facilities capable of ensuring due attention, and the lack of budgetary allocation for the policy.

The article by Neide Gomes Oliveira Miguel and Marise Nogueira Ramos, *The critique of training in the residency modality in older person health*, the result of a doctoral thesis, proposes an analysis of the foundations supporting health training programs in the residency modality, focusing on a specific program in the area of older person health. The study explores educational elements that directly impact health care provided to older people, particularly those with advanced degrees of dependency requiring continuous and comprehensive care. The authors indicate that the trend in a neoliberal context is

for training based on the pedagogy of competencies that meets the new demands of the flexible labor market. This pedagogy dialogues with the geriatric-gerontological field of positivist inspiration that naturalizes processes related to aging, manifesting itself in the health sector and in residency programs.

The **free theme** section is composed of the international article by Letícia Arancibia entitled *La biopolítica afirmativa y la reconfiguración de la práctica del trabajo social desde las ONG's durante la dictadura en Chile*. The article revives the dark period of the military dictatorship in Chile (1973-1990) and its impact on the country's social mobilization and on the movement to reconceptualize social work—which had its peak in the popular unity government—reconfiguring the professional practice of social workers and limiting critical knowledge production. Non-governmental organizations, according to the author, were a focus of resistance to repression and a locus of investment in popular education practices and articulation with social movements, enhancing the recognition of social work. In the post-dictatorship scenario, NGOs are recomposed and institutionalized with new relationships between state, society, and market, tensioning the resistance capacity and autonomy of these spaces. Reading the text promotes a simple journey to this important South American country and brings us a little closer to the battles waged on the continent for democratic reconstruction. A very recent memory for us Brazilian men and women.

The **interview** of this dossier was conducted by Carla Virginia Urich Lobato, a doctoral student from the FSS-UERJ Graduate Program, with social worker Sandra Rabello de Frias, from the Center for Human Aging – NUCEH/UERJ, formerly the Open University for the Third Age of the Rio de Janeiro State University – UnATI/UERJ, one of the first public third-age universities in Brazil. Carla's sensitive text reconstitutes the path of a social work professional with a consolidated trajectory in defending the rights of older persons, whether as Extension Coordinator of NUCEH or in other professional spaces where she worked. Besides carrying out several extension actions aimed at the program's elderly, Sandra Rabello assumes strategic leadership in activism within social control spaces, contributing to strengthening public policies and the human rights agenda aimed at the elderly population. She also acts as a field supervisor, developing partnerships with FSS professors since the 1990s and collaborating in the professional training of social workers.

The **reviews** by Rogério Nascimento Silva and Luana Franceschi express the authors' investment in their aging research within the FSS-UERJ Graduate Program and present excellent quality material with meticulous and creative interpretations of the reviewed works, instigating their respective readings. Rogério focuses on the book by Líbia Mafra Benvindo de Miranda, entitled *Aging and care policies in Brazil and Spain: a comparative analysis of home care services for dependent older people*, published in 2024 by EdUFPI; and

Luana dedicates herself to the book by Solange Maria Teixeira, *Aging from the perspective of Critical Social Gerontology*, published in 2024 by Editora Terra sem Amos (Teresina).

The **lifetime tribute** section recovers the fruitful trajectory of Prof. Eneida Gonçalves de Macedo Haddad in her studies on aging. Through the inspiring and poetic text by Sálvea Campelo and Nanci Soares, we have the opportunity to get closer to the professor and her productions. Eneida is one of the first Brazilian intellectuals to unveil the ideology of aging in capitalist society, confronting the dominant logic of concealing the living and working conditions of the aging population, unveiling, in her own words, “tragic old age.”

Concluding the dossier, the **Photographic Exhibition** section presents the work of photographer Rah BXD, a visual artist and rapper whose work focuses primarily on the population living in the peripheries, capturing the daily lives of children, adults, and the elderly as an art of resistance. His essay, featuring ten photos, deals with the aging of the working class, who lose the value of their labor power, but contradictorily age while working and, when they manage to retire on minimum wage, cannot guarantee the satisfaction of their basic needs. Through the lens sensitive to the reality of the elderly residents in Rah’s own neighborhood, Belfort Roxo, a municipality in the Baixada Fluminense of Rio de Janeiro, we can draw closer to the daily lives of an elderly man and woman, both black, in what gives meaning to their lives, which is the everyday work that, as Milton Nascimento sings in *Canção do Sal* (1965), is the work “for the life of people to carry on!”. The dossier’s cover photo delicately portrays the aged hands of the woman in her craft as a seamstress, a legacy from the family women of older generations.

Enjoy your reading!

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