

Review Essay

‘From Italy to Europe’: a review of recent Italian literature on social policy

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A. Ardigo’

Crisi di governabilità e mondi vitali

Bologna: Cappelli, 1980

L. Balbo

Stato di famiglia. Bisogni privato collettivo

Milano: Etas Libri, 1976

M. Baldini, P. Bosi and P. Silvestri (eds)

La ricchezza dell’equità. Distribuzione del reddito e condizioni di vita in un’area a elevato benessere

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004, €25.00, ISBN 88 15 10185 3

O. Castellino

Il labirinto delle pensioni

Bologna: Il Mulino, 1976

M. Ferrera

Modelli di Solidarietà

Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993, €22.00, ISBN 88 15 04044 7

M. Ferrera

‘Il Modello sud-europeo di welfare state’, *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 96 (1): 67–101. 1996

P. Graziano

Europeizzazione e politiche pubbliche italiane. Coesione e lavoro a confronto

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004, €20.00, ISBN 88 15 1018 96

N. Negri

Saggi sull’esclusione sociale. Povertà, malattie, cattivi lavori e questione etnica

Torino: Il Segnalibro, 1990

M. Paci

‘Onde lunghe nello sviluppo dei sistemi di welfare’, *Stato e Mercato* 6: 345–400. 1982

E. Pavolini

Le Nuove Politiche Sociali. I sistemi di welfare fra istituzioni e società civile

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003, €29.00, ISBN 88 15 0903 20

C. Ranci

Politica Sociale. Bisogni sociali e politiche di welfare

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004, €15.00, ISBN 88 15 1012 17

C. Saraceno

Sociologia della famiglia e politiche sociali in Italia
Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988

Introduction

This review analyses contemporary Italian social welfare literature, providing insights into the key theoretical and empirical developments, as well as their linkage with broader welfare state research and Europeanization. The review, targeted at the non-Italian reader, first sheds light on the main traits of Italian social policy analysis. Second, it

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reveals the close linkage between the academic and the political and public opinion debates.

Key steps in the development of social policy analysis in Italy

Authors such as Ferrera, Paci and Saraceno have provided theoretical insights into welfare policies and politics in the Italian case, which have been integrated into the broader body of European welfare state literature. Nevertheless, there are notable shortcomings to Italian welfare state research, which have been progressively overcome during the last three decades, as will be shown in this review. These limitations included, until recently, a lack of literature able to reinforce the dialogue between disciplines (sociology, economy, political science, etc.) and theoretical perspectives (e.g. functionalism, neo-institutionalism, political economy, etc.). This is clearly demonstrated in the recent study by Ranci (2004: 8–9), which provides a comprehensive analysis of the Italian literature on welfare. In addition, the literature has been characterized by an ideologically driven normative if not prescriptive bias. This was due to the explicit or implicit policy recommendations in which the social scientists were engaged. The lack of usable empirical data has been a further limitation contributing to the lack of exchange between theoretically oriented and more empirically based efforts. Nevertheless, through theoretical, methodological and empirical innovations, Italian social policy analysis is confronting these weak points and making interesting theoretical and conceptual contributions to the broader body of welfare literature. The book by Ranci (2004) summarizes the key findings during the last three decades: the first scholars analysed Italy as a late-comer to the statist model of welfare; in the second decade accounts entered into more dynamic analysis of the Italian welfare mix through comparison of different territorial entities; the third wave integrates the themes of gender and family into welfare state analysis. These three phases are described below, revealing the close linkage between research and political developments in welfare provision and debate in Italy.

The first social policy studies in the 1970s mainly adopted an ‘evolutionary’ perspective on welfare development. Different authors shared the idea that Italy was a ‘latecomer’ in European terms, with its

social programmes less developed than those of other west European countries. That delay was the result of a number of ‘peculiar’ factors: institutional and administrative fragmentation, the bureaucratic approach to social issues, the proliferation of corporatist interests and demands from different social groups and occupational categories (the so called *particolarismo*) (Castellino, 1976). Local privileges, reinforced by the weakness of central and local bureaucracy, and ‘clientelistic’ electoral markets characterized Italian politics and favoured the above-mentioned development of ineffective welfare institutions in both social protection and social assistance. With mounting criticism of the distance of the Italian welfare state from a Beveridge-inspired universalistic ideal-type, political momentum developed to address this gap.¹ The left-of-centre governments of the 1960s and 1970s introduced a vast range of measures directed at increasing state protection against social risks. The introduction of social pensions and a more homogeneous national health-care system were the key reforms, making for an extension of the welfare state in terms of both generosity and coverage). The academic debate made a substantial contribution to the reform effort (Ranci, 2004: 30–1).

In subsequent decades, with the ‘crisis’ of the welfare reforms, academic interest shifted towards the need to (re)consider the weight of civil society and societal actors in the provision of benefits and services. In this second wave of research, the ‘communitarian’ school – related to the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church – started in the 1970s to enlarge the research focus to the interaction (and competition) between societal forces and public institutions (see Ardigo, 1980). The theoretical effort (related to the so-called ‘political economy’ approach) sought to change the evolutionary perspective and to include the role of non-public actors in the analysis. Paci (1982) proposed the concept of ‘long waves’ characterizing the evolution of social policies: rather than a process of ongoing growth in the role of the state, welfare policies are characterized by different phases, where the logic and weight of its intervention changes. This approach led these authors to adopt the term ‘welfare mix’ to define the interaction of public and non-public institutions (state, market, family, and civil society). Thereafter, authors such as Ascoli and Ferrera opened a new phase focused on the comparative analysis of Italy in the European

context. As stressed by Ranci (2004: 83–6), this effort contributed to move ‘Italy to Europe’. Italian *exceptionalism* was replaced by study of the similarities between Italy and other European countries. Ferrera (1993; 1996) contributed significantly to the revision of the seminal taxonomy proposed by Esping-Andersen through the introduction of a fourth model, typical of the ‘Latin Rim’.

The third wave of research involved studies of gender issues (usually related to the role of women in the family) and analysis of welfare services (and their underdevelopment in Italy). The attention given to the role of women came as a result of the growing feminist movement in the 1970s. The first contributions highlighted the condition of women in Italy and their ‘double presence’ (or double role): both as part of the labour market, and as providers of social services within the family. Various contributions emphasized the key, rather than residual, role of the family in Italian welfare capitalism (Saraceno, 1988). Families had played the role of intermediary between public and private spheres, informally redistributing resources. The *welfare mix* became a *welfare patchwork*, where different sub-systems, consistent with different (and even conflicting) paradigms, interacted with each other (Balbo, 1976). This concept proved particularly interesting for describing the path of transfer-based welfare systems such as the Italian one. It was precisely on welfare services and their low level of development in Italy that further work focused. From the 1980s, the residual role of social inclusion and family policies became one of the core issues of research, highlighting their inability to address new forms of poverty. Poverty was increasingly defined as a multi-dimensional risk, where traditional and more subtle forms of social exclusion coexist (Negri, 1990). In addition, attention to the local dimension of social risks and policies favoured the growth of micro-level studies.

Some more recent accounts: a step beyond

In recent years, new efforts have contributed to the evolution of social policy analysis. In what follows, we present the most promising analyses of the Italian ‘welfare societies’, the ‘novel welfare mixes’ through the governance approach, and the Europeanization of Italian employment policy.

The description of social policies at local level has led to better understanding of the mix of public and

non-public actors in providing services and transfers. The recent work on living conditions in the province of Modena involves analysis in this vein (Baldini et al., 2004). The study sought to create a new database on socio-economic conditions, based on a large survey, ICESmo. The authors have produced reliable information for an original analysis of the interaction between local social and tax policy, with a description of economic and labour market dynamics, and living conditions in the territory under scrutiny. This micro-level study contributes to the identification of a peculiar local welfare capitalism implemented in the central province of Modena. It is characterized by a particularly low level of inequality across the population and within the labour force (as shown by data concerning individual and family income and capital distribution). This is then related to local concertation between social partners, an active ‘third sector’ (mainly represented by non-profit associations and cooperatives active in the social field), and an efficient bureaucracy (especially if compared to the average standard in Italy). In this context, equality and economic development go hand in hand and lead to a particularly inclusive society. Data about family revenues show that the higher level of wealth in the territory does not depend on higher individual salaries but on the higher number of ‘revenue-makers’ per family. High activity rates (especially for women) are thus a key aspect of this ‘success story’.² Furthermore, this (inclusive) local society is characterized by high ‘social capital’: education, cultural inheritance, family networking, production of (and access to) cultural goods, and so on. It is a hybrid model: employment rates and inter-occupational equality are high, while the family structure (and the labour market as far as male–female salary differentials are concerned) is still gender-biased (Baldini et al., 2004: 17).

This study is innovative in several respects. First, it is based on the production of reliable data (one of the traditional limitations of Italian social policy analysis). It also allows for a more in-depth assessment of the factors which distinguish territorial entities. This puts in question the relevance of traditional taxonomies of welfare regimes (like that of Esping-Andersen). Italy has a variety of welfare systems (or societies), at regional and local levels. Taking data about income distribution into account, the authors stress that while Italy has a profile close

to that of the UK, the province of Modena shows a 'Nordic-like' model.

Other recent accounts confront the challenge of cross-fertilization among different disciplines through a complex theoretical framework. Pavolini's (2003) analysis on recent trends of social assistance policies in Italy focuses on local welfare, combining different theoretical perspectives (political economy and economic sociology above all) and research objectives (administrative institutions, welfare regulation, etc.). To study the policy-making and implementation processes in the territory, the author has based his research on the concept of *governance*.³ It assesses the role of formal institutions, political parties, local bureaucracies, but also non-profit associations, cooperatives and the whole 'third sector' in the regulation of social assistance policies. The analysis is centred on the impact of the recent political and social dynamics of governance at municipal level. Based on interviews and secondary literature, the work provides a rich summary of the key changes affecting social policy administration at the local level. A particular focus is on the crisis of traditional political parties, as a consequence of judicial investigations into the illegal practices of party financing and corruption (*Tangentopoli*). This forced a change in political personnel at the local level, and opened unexpected access to government for non-professional politicians and 'technocratic' decisionmakers with a solid background in social assistance ('social' councillors, Pavolini, 2003: 97–9). This political 'earthquake' contributed to important institutional innovations: in particular, the introduction of majoritarian electoral rules and the direct election of the mayor. The author then refers to the changing role of local bureaucracies. While under the First Republic they lacked autonomy in relation to the political and partisan spheres, new ideas and logics started to be implemented during the 1990s. The 'logic of effectiveness', already introduced in the debate of the 1980s, and derived from private management, explicitly aimed to increase the autonomy of administrative bodies and servants (Pavolini, 2003: 121–5). As far as the 'third sector' is concerned, the number of organizations and the services provided have increased during the 1990s. Non-profit organizations have participated in experiments in new forms of social assistance, of management and of interaction with public authorities, while promoting the interests of civil society (an *advocacy* role).

The study analyses how these changes have affected the governance of local welfare structures, through three alternative models of interaction between public and non-public actors in different geographical areas of the country. Here the role of territorial cleavages is combined with the political orientation of municipalities. The first model, predominant in the 1980s, is that of 'mutual adaptation' between public and non-public players. It consists of an exchange between financial resources (from municipalities to the third sector) and the provision of welfare services by non-profit organizations. The weakness of mechanisms of competition between, selection of, and control over societal actors, and the exclusion of civil society from policy making are further features of the model. Political decisionmakers in this case do not create a vast community of players (or local partnerships), while cooperation between non-profit actors limits the effectiveness of mechanisms for their competition for funds. The second model is the 'vendor' (particularly widespread in the first part of the 1990s). Here, the main goal of local policymakers is to reduce the financial burden represented by welfare policies through their increased privatization. Non-public actors are weak and are made subject to the logic of competition, while they are excluded from the decision-making process. This governance has been introduced by right-of-centre municipalities in both the North and South of Italy. The third model is that of 'negotiation'. Here the interaction between municipalities and the third sector is more developed, in both the regulation and implementation of welfare policies. Representatives of civil society participate in the elaboration of local policies (through consultative bodies) and are part of a mutual learning process, based on their concrete experience as service providers. Relationships between non-profit actors are then oriented towards collaboration rather than competition. This model has been implemented by left-of-centre local governments, not only in central Italy but also in part of the northern and southern regions, traditionally ruled by Christian Democrats under the First Republic. To sum up, Pavolini (2003: 398–400) describes a process of transition for local governance with multiple variations within Italy. That process is far from having been stabilized, and the risk of opaque methods of selection and allocation of financial resources from public authorities is still present, while the role of social councillors is decreasing. What

is more, all the transformations have been introduced in a context characterized (both at national and regional levels) by the lack of a common strategy to define the role and tasks of each actor.

Last but not least, an important step in 'opening' Italian social policy analysis has consisted of the assessment of the impact of European integration on national public social policies. The recent book by Graziano (2004) on the Europeanization of cohesion and employment policies clearly represents a more explicit attempt to delineate the interaction of national, subnational, and supranational spheres. The theoretical approach uses key elements of Europeanization, adapted to the Italian case, and due to its multi-level and multi-dimensional approach also contributes to the cross-fertilization of different disciplines and theoretical perspectives. This study combines the concept of 'goodness of fit' (to explain the degree of adaptation of national and subnational policies to the EU pressures) with a neo-institutionalist perspective (Graziano, 2004: 17–24). Europeanization is thus considered a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for innovation. Endogenous variables are assumed to facilitate or impede changes. The study focuses on the role of formal institutions, politicians, bureaucrats, and experts. It then adopts a broader perspective based on the analysis of possible outcomes of the process of adaptation (in terms of absorption, transformation, and retrenchment), related to the more or less binding nature of rules. The research is diachronic, carefully tracing national policies in the second part of the 20th century, and with a particular focus on their Europeanization in the 1990s. In line with other works in the European literature, the author concentrates on a single-country study to maximize empirical resources and information, and to distinguish between endogenous and exogenous factors. The comparison thus concerns policy sectors, national and local levels of decision making, and time (Graziano, 2004: 29–30).

With regard to employment policies, the first key insight is that national policy structures were adapted to the EU in some cases through complete transformation (training policies and the development of employment services) and in others through lighter processes of absorption (policies on flexibility, employability and activation). The different dynamics are explained by reference to the less binding and structured intervention of the EU in the latter policy subfields. While

professional training and employment services have been at the centre of directives, rules and numerous interventions by the European Court of Justice, policies related to the concept of employability and activation have been at the centre of softer modes of governance (the European Employment Strategy, EES). The diachronic approach reveals that the beginning of the 1990s represented a turning point in the adaptation of Italian employment policies to European influences. At that time, a policy community favourable to the modernization of employment policy (part of the political elite of national bureaucracies and social partners) gained room for intervention in the policy-making arena. This happened in parallel with a decreasing role for political parties, and the growing weight of national government (and especially of the Ministry of Labour) as compared to the parliament, and of the epistemic community of experts that influenced the government agenda. In terms of centre/periphery relations, moreover, Europeanization has complemented regionalization.

At the regional level, comparison of four regions belonging to the southern part of the country (Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia and Molise) reveals similarities, which the author relates to the incongruence between policy structures at that level and the stimulus from the EU. Nevertheless, important differences in the timing of their adaptation partly contradict the 'goodness of fit' argument. In particular, regions where the institutional architecture and the decision-making process were more effective and consistent with the objectives and procedures proposed by Europe (as was the case of Basilicata) were quicker to transform their policy structures (Graziano, 2004: 190). The delay of some of the regions under scrutiny is explained as a consequence of the weakness of the coalition in favour of adaptation (in particular, local social partners) and of the strength of opponents (the political elite, and electoral constituencies such as trainers being part of regional offices) and the limited intervention of central actors to rationalize and monitor the implementation of the European employment strategy.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed in these pages represent a further step towards the creation of a more integrated and coherent literature on the Italian welfare

state. They represent an important advance for social policy analysis, contributing to the dialogue between disciplines, theoretical approaches and research across different fields of policy. They have a well-defined empirical base. In all these respects, they overcome two long-established shortcomings of Italian social scientific accounts. They also provide promising insights for broader academic debates well beyond the Italian frontiers. The emphasis on the regional and local dimension of welfare policies contributes to a more precise understanding of Italy, and gives new insights into the need for a critical approach to traditional taxonomies of welfare regimes that underestimate variations within single countries. The interaction between public transfers and social services from the family had for a long time ensured the sustainability of the complex architecture of social policies, but their future viability is increasingly brought into question by the excessive welfare burden placed on women. In the last decade the increasing role of the regional and local authorities has added more complexity to the Italian welfare system, with a patchwork of institutions, regulations and decision-making processes.⁴ More than just a process of deregulation and privatization of social programmes, the country is witnessing a trend towards a more complex and integrated governance between public and societal players. The books under review here show a

country 'in transition' which represents an interesting laboratory on welfare for the present and the future.

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Notes

- 1 The key reference was in fact to the seminal work of Titmuss and his taxonomy of welfare models. The concept of institutional welfare was taken as the 'natural' point of arrival of the long-term evolution of welfare programmes (Ranci, 2004).
- 2 The average level is about 71% of the population, against an average national level of 62%. The female activity rate is above 64%, 17% above the national average (Baldini et al., 2004: 32).
- 3 The author makes reference to the seminal works in the European literature on policy networks.
- 4 This complements the growing European literature on federalism and the welfare state (see e.g. Obinger et al., 2005).

References

- Obinger, H., Leibfried, S. and Castles, F. G. (eds) (2005) *Federalism and the Welfare State: New World and European Experiences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.