

# Perspectives on social Welfare: The Italian case

*Carmela Davì, Messina (Italy)*

The call to the social professionals today changes on the basis of the incredible transformations of national welfare systems that kept communities in all ages. Changes of wide extent, coming mainly from the drawing economic sector (even if we should consider the recent crisis and the fall of GDP- Gross Domestic Product in occidental countries), generated the rise of a U-turn in interests moving the important social politics, creating a strong disorientation in the field of social justice, that, in our perspective of analysis, represents the first engine that works in the circuit of those professionalisms.

The long history of occidental Welfare States has always been scenery of intense ideological competitions between opposed views of “good society”, conservative, liberal, catholic, social-democratic. The variety of typologies of welfare governance today in Europe in an overview is, as a lot of people think, in short, the result of those strong and historical oppositions. The different kinds of welfare structures developed until now in Europe, in fact, reflect generally the evolution of the pluralistic traditions of occidental governments that contributed to create interpretation methods, still pluralistic, of the social citizenship notion.

This introduction permits us to analyze shortly the consequences of a transformation process that has strong effects on the social service system. Actually, just the organizations that offer public services will feel the effects of changes in act. The disorienting economic difference that opens with the globalization of markets is determining, into the government policies of European countries, anomalous effects coming not only from the neoliberal policies. Italy, for example, is combining neoliberal views and (so called) “federalist” policies, to justify authoritarian and penalizing economic measures that leave an impression on the most delicate parts of welfare system, including social services. The Italian case represents a way for interpreting the end of Italian welfare and the beginning of an anomalous governance, supported by government policies that make many sectors of social justice and solidarity weak.

The evolution of the Italian system followed, generally, the same route we can observe in other European States: in the view of the decentralization, principles of responsibility and social solidarity suffered a strong re-definition, starting from a citizenship concept that loses progressively its link with the constitutional pact.

Shortly we mention that the first scheme of obligatory insurance was introduced between 1898 and 1919 (completed then between the 1950's and 1960's), changing a kind of assistance that before was offered only on a local level, by charitable organizations, religious and not religious.

From the 1970's started a growing process of regionalization that had more and more effects on the social policy sphere. But, protagonists of this new reform were the northern regions of Italy, able to use fruitfully this political program.

The 1980's were important because the National government started to involve regions still more directly in the control of costs. But the concrete turn happened with the 1992 and 1993 reforms. These reforms decentralized to regions both the financial responsibility of own government funds and the determination of the managerial model to adopt. This process activated a strong policy of differentiation that was translated in strong oppositions, for example, between municipalities and regional government, also for the competition that developed with the welfare private structures.

A national reform, in 1999, encouraging the cooperation, tried to write “the end” on the page of these competitive dynamics. But the reform was successful only partially, mainly when, in 2001, with a policy of costs limitation, the Berlusconi government tended to both the regional autonomy and a market oriented management.

The effects were immediate, because in a context of growing competition, the matter of interregional solidarity became central.

It was with the “federalist” reform, made between 1990 and 2000, that a financial system was introduced based on three resources: the shared income, that brings every region to decide how much from the own budget will be used to finance the public assistance; the regional taxes, including the users contributions; the transfers from the rich regions to the poor regions through a central solidarity fund.

It is obvious that, in this context, the tension increases, between the northern region, generally self-sufficient, and the southern regions, that often cover the 80-90% of costs thanks to the external transfers.

But, the actual government, under the pressure of the “Lega Nord” Party, faction of federalist mark, submitted to the Parliament analysis a new constitutional reform project, that provides for the passage of the public health care from a shared level, to the exclusive responsibility of regions. In this perspective of devolution, with a strongly “secessionist” political advice (that means a productive North that cuts off the inefficient South), single regions will not take part anymore in a national health care service, creating an own management of systems, with the consequences that this measure will have, mainly for the poorest territories.

So, the 1990’s testified the presence, on the National territory, of numerous so called “mixed welfare”, that included different kind of not institutionalized solutions, as, for example, social cooperatives. Also in this sector, measures of decentralization still made worse the difference between North and South Italy. The faced challenge in different regions, has surely different importance and nature and so asks for different management strategies of relations between social actors, in particular by the political-administrative élites. This testifies the value of the link between the political and social participation, in all sectors of welfare.

As asserted in 2006 by Walter Lorenz in the book “Perspectives on European Social Work”, “without a fundamental change in the relationship between citizens and the state tinkering with administrative structures does not suffice. [...] The Italian experience with decentralization always played into the hands of the old patronage system (clientelismo) which is deeply engrained as a pattern of dependence.” The approval of the bill 1117-B in matter of Fiscal Federalism, which happened the 29th of April 2009, will accentuate those anomalies. This decree, putting into effect the art. 119 of the Italian Constitution that wants that “Municipalities, provinces, metropolitan cities and regions have financial autonomy of earnings and expenses”, will deprive southern Italian regions of instruments for facing the challenge of an own economy, starting from a heavy deficit, already existent, compared with northern regions: the distribution of funding for social services does not happen anymore thanks to the central government, but it is given up exclusively to local institutions and authorities, that obtain a total autonomy in resources managing.

Obviously, in areas where the richness does not get to adequate levels for guaranteeing sufficient fiscal earnings, local authorities would be forced to adopt alternative policies in facing the emergency.

They would increase the fiscal pressure on the local population or make cuts in goods and staff, lowering the quality level of provided services and making worse the scourge of unemployment in territories where local authorities still represents one of the most significant resources.

Besides, in distribution of funding, the principle of “historical expense”, that allocates funds on the basis of expense levels got in the past year and so of the needs of the territorial context where the authority works, is replaced with the principle of “standard expense”, that makes equal all the local realities, giving them the same fund, to the detriment, obviously, of the ones more needy.

It can be added, then, the introduction of sanctioning mechanisms, by the central government, against the less “virtuous” authorities, that consists in the ban of making employment and of organizing the expenses for discretionary activities.

It is easily predictable, at this point, the destiny of total collapse which the southern regions are subjected to, even still strangled by the scourge of the organized criminality and the irregular, and so not taxed, job.

The general look just outlined reveals a clear dynamic of regional decentralization in important political areas: health, social services and job policies relapse more and more in local governments competences, generating significant consequences in living choices of persons.

To justify those tendencies to change in neo-liberal perspective, on the basis of a presumed desirableness of the reduction of the individual dependence from the policies of Social State, that would give him freedom of action and decisional autonomy, the welfare state has been often interpreted as mortifying and weakening for the individual himself, hindering the achievement of his total emancipation. But the welfare state, in my point of view, will not have valuable perspectives if in European countries (and the Italian case testifies it) will prevail regionalist governmental policies that appear to move in the viewpoint of the decisional autonomy and instead contribute to take off moral value from the solidarity engagement, the base of the welfare system.

Thus, two positions concerning the reframing of welfare shall be proposed in conclusion of this contribution.

The first one comes from the work of prestigious thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, that have widely revealed the weakness of that perspective, testifying as the effective freedom and autonomy of the individual are possible only through the achievement of those fundamental conditions that permit to obtain means and instruments for being able to self-realize.

The second one concerns, instead, the processes of changing in governmental functions and that corresponds, in my opinion, to what the Marxist philosopher Etienne Balibar defines “privatization of the State”. It means that it is gradually disappearing that kind of State that represents the centrality of power, having political responsibility and the task of mediating between interests of social forces.

In general, what arises from these processes of reframing the welfare state, on the basis of neo-liberal principles, is a deep transformation of the concept of Social State, traditionally guided by the principle of “equality in need that ignores the inequality in the capacity to contribute”. With this transformation it is outlined the passage from a logic of public welfare, that measures the interventions on the basis of the needs of citizens, to a privatized logic, that rather measures the interventions on the basis of paid contributions.

The result of this tendency is that the access to a good quality of service is guaranteed only to people that are able to pay the private offer and, so, want to grow apart from a “common life” that imposes to contribute for financing public services that they do not use.

Who lives in poverty lives in that condition of dependence that the liberal tradition identifies as “degrading”, in front of a self-sufficiency that denotes the achievement of the full maturity.

To consider the individual in his personal condition is, so, the emergency of a theoretical fundament for a valuable criterion of social justice, that doesn't think of welfare only in terms of resources and goods, but starts from the attribution of a worth to a human being in self.

It is fundamental the recognition and the common adhesion to a social justice criterion that can be at the same time universal and subjective, because founded on the prime principle of the goodness of the personal ethic choice, looking at the achievement of a "good life" and a spread wellness.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Alber J., 1983, L'espansione del welfare state nell'Europa occidentale, in Rivista italiana di Scienza politica, n. 2, Bologna: Il Mulino;
- Balibar E., 1992, Les frontières de la démocratie, Paris: la Découverte;
- Bauman Z., 2004, Lavoro, consumismo, nuove povertà, Troina: Città Aperta;
- Esping-Andersen G., 1996, After the golden age? Welfare state dilemmas in a global economy, in G. Esping-Andersen, Welfare state in transition. National adaptations in global economies, Londra: Sage;
- Ferrera M., 1993, Modelli di solidarietà, politica e riforme sociali nelle democrazie, Bologna: Il Mulino;
- Ferrera M., 2005, The Boundaries of Welfare: European Integration and the New Spatial Politics of Social Protection, Oxford: Oxford University Press;
- Flora P., Heidenheimer A. J., 1981, The development of welfare state in Europe and America, New Brunswick;
- Lorenz W., Perspectives on European Social Work – From the Birth of the Nation State to the Impact of Globalisation, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen 2006;
- Nussbaum M. C., Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education, 1997;
- Nussbaum M. C., Frontiers of Justice: disability, nationality, species membership, The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2006;
- Sen A., Commodities and Capabilities, North Holland, Amsterdam 1985;
- Sen A., Equality of what?, in Choice Welfare and Measurement, Basil Blackwell-Mit Press, Oxford-Cambridge 1982;
- Sen A., On Ethics and Economics, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1987;
- Sen A., Gender Inequality and Theory of Justice, in M. Nussbaum J. Glover (eds.), Women Culture and Development, Calderon Press, Oxford 1995;
- Sen A., Inequality Reexamined, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1992;
- Sen A., La libertà individuale come impegno sociale, Laterza, Bari 2007;
- Sen A., Resources, Values and Development, Basil Blackwell-Mit Press, Oxford-Cambridge 1984;
- Sen A., Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom. The Dewey Lectures 1984, in The Journal of Philosophy, 82, 1985.

*Picture: [www.pixelio.de](http://www.pixelio.de) (Photographer: Verena Münch)*

Tags: [economy](#), [Italy](#), [policy](#), [social policy](#), [social welfare](#)