

Studying the *Social*, through Social Policies and Public Action*

사회정책과 공공행위를 통한 사회질서 연구

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This book has a very ambitious idea of the way a sociological analysis should be conducted and, jumping immediately to one of the conclusions of our review, it results to be a very important book as it is fully up to that ambition. Its ambitious nature lies in an approach that aims at avoiding the trap of assuming the definition of the research object already made by other agencies (policy makers, practitioners, administrations, social workers, etc.), which is often the limit of many sociological approaches to different matters and themes. Too often, in fact, such analyses remain hostage to the already-packed gaze with which different actors of the field analysed determine what is relevant and what is not, what is important and what can be overlooked. At the contrary, Lavinia Bifulco assumes that gaze itself – incorporated in concepts, definitions, technical devices, social and organizational practices – as a precious entry point for addressing what should always be the real object of any sociological analysis, independently from the particular field explored, that is the *social*. The social, the ways it is defined, produced and organized through the public action and the social policies, in different social spheres and experiences, is the real subject of this book.

In order to reach this aim, Bifulco had to structure her analysis continuously going back and forth between two different terrains, doing a relevant effort for

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defining a sociological gaze (as she avoids to use gazes packed in advance, for different reasons and aims), on the one hand, and inquiring the empirical reality that gaze frames, on the other hand. The author is particularly effective in addressing a specific purpose for respectively each of these two terrains. The construction of a sociological toolbox (but strongly open to contributions coming from different disciplines) enables her to thin out the fogs of the ambiguous and ambivalent vocabulary with which the social is defined and treated in the European and national social and public policies. This is particularly important, if we agree that a sociological effort of analysis should always perform a critical task, which would be cancelled by the assumption of the dominant language and concepts as mere neutral and objective factors. At the same time, Lavinia Bifulco leads us to test this toolbox in different fabrics of the social: analysing the ways of concrete interventions (via policies, measures, programs, institutional and social practices) for and on the social, she always enlightens both contradictions and risks of the current practices and discourses, and the potentialities and the possibilities anyway inscribed in them. This is (also) the result of an approach that pays as much attention to *how* as to *what* these interventions are realized.

We can clearly grasp these aspects going through the book's structure. The *Introduction* already gives us a precise idea of the aim of the book, as we identified it above. The social is the object, which can effectively be studied analysing social policies and public action. In this sense, social policies are considered not "as answers to the social needs and risks (...), but as devices that contribute to organizing social life and are themselves moulded and redefined by it"(5). At the same time, public action is addressed in order to understand how its transformations "affect the social realm, i.e. the realm that the welfare state has 'invented' (...) by means of a broad and shifting range of devices"(6).

The first step in the logics of the book is focused on the framework of social policies and public action transformation, introducing how it works the perspective here deployed for dealing with its object, connecting ideas, institutions and agency. Considering policies as "ideas in action", this approach is oriented to inquiring a reality in which "the cognitive and normative dimensions are inextricably connected" (p. 14). Ideas, with their own ambivalences and contradictions, nourish social policies both directly, providing them the frameworks for structuring their

action, and indirectly, as the tools of public action incorporate representations, values, interpretations of what is at stake. Coherently with this conception of the role of ideas, the institutional dimension is addressed as culture, as this latter “does not only influence the strategic calculations of actors but also shapes their preferences”(17); and as the result of a cognitive process in which are fixed the “informational basis” that, according to Amartya Sen’s words, “determines the factual territory over which considerations of justice would directly applied”. This approach clearly leads to important research directions. As the author stresses, first of all “the relationship between ideas and practice (...) is not at all linear”(19) and it needs to be empirically addressed. Moreover, assuming the cognitive and normative dimensions as key factors of policies, “the perspectives that tend to pre-constitute decisions and implementation” are scrutinized and pushed out of the black box. This approach, stressing the role of ideas and of the relationship between knowledge and policies, enables the scholars to take seriously into account the role of individual agency. In Sen’s capability approach and in its concepts of capabilities, functionings and conversions factors, it is possible to find a very effective and promising toolbox for exploring the real freedom individuals have of actively contributing to the public process of setting the normative and cognitive basis of social policies. As Bifulco states, the capability approach allows us to investigate social policies and public action emphasizing (a) the role of the actors’ freedom of choice (instead of limiting the analysis to quantitative considerations on resources in itself); (b) the connection between the idea of freedom and (asymmetries of) power and (c) that one between freedom and actors’ voice exercise in the arenas in which social issues are defined and become matters of public and social policies.

Then the author circumscribes more precisely the socio-spatial coordination of the social she focuses on, which is the social in Europe. The interpretive toolbox we summarized above is already put to work here: the social in the EU context and history is addressed according to some ideas and principles (universalism, equality, rights, social justice and democracy) in the specific way the social is (has been) framed in so called European social model. Particularly helpful is also the final part of this Chapter (n. 2), in which the tool of the Open Method of Coordination and the effects of the dominant interpretation of it are discussed, at the light of the different aspects of the current crisis, concerning social solidarity, economic

integration, democracy and politics.

The second section of the book is entitled “Public action and social policies: Dynamics”. Here the author addresses the main features of transformations of organizing the social through social policies and public action. The context of these transformations is sketched in the Chapter that opens this section. The architecture of the social organization has been profoundly reconfigured, under socio-demographic (population ageing, family diversification and increasing instability, migrations) and economic (growing female entering labour markets, unemployment, atypical employment, working poors) pressures. The directions of this restructuring can be summarized in a general reformulation according to which the mode of organizing the social shifts from a role of command and control to “a role of enabling, enhancing the potential for social self-organization”(42). This shift takes two concrete forms: the reorganization of the public sector assuming regulatory market mechanisms (New Public Management) as the way for obtaining accountability, reducing costs, realizing devolution and freedom of citizens’ (/clients’) choice; the passage from a government centered on a uniform and standard action of a single actor (the State), to the governance as the mode of ‘governing with and through networks’. Directly connected to these changes is another important factor of restructuring public action and social policies, which is territorialization. Territorialization means the intertwining of “the territorial reorganization of public powers and the tendency to take the territory as the reference point for policies and interventions”(45), resulting in a twofold perspective of territory redefinition, as a stake of political reorganization and as an action system.

The following Chapters of this section are dedicated to crucial aspects of the new architecture of social policies and public action: the Social Investment (SI) perspective, the issue of participation, the theme of the relationship between public and private realms and actions. As far as the first aspect (SI) is concerned, some of the dimensions more directly linked to the definition and the organization of the social discussed as they are strongly reframed in the SI vocabulary. At the base of the SI approach there is the idea that social policies are themselves essential levers for social and economic development (and not only costs, as they are considered in the neoliberal perspective). However, the way social policies should be re-conceived in order to become effective levers for socioeconomic development (and

for what kind of development) is subject to a very large and diverse range of interpretations. Individualization and agency play here a crucial role: contrary to the prevalent tendency to conceive social policies as tools for constraining and controlling that individuals and agency are matching needs and logics of the “new spirit of capitalism”, the author shows how agency and individual autonomy request “voice” (capability for voice) and powers in order to fully exercise citizenship. Social policies and public action are to be planned as fundamental tools for providing social and cultural conditions and material resources for such a social investment. Coherently with this framework, participation plays itself a decisive role. In the contemporary context, participation “is marked prevalently by aggregation of individuals and individual instances” and cannot be considered “an automatic solution to the deficit of democracy that governance frequently suffer from” (p. 64 and 66). However, it is stressed, participation should be taken seriously and issues of inclusivity (who participate?), of quality of interaction (how do people participate?), of institutionalization (where does this participation take place?) and of effectiveness (what are the consequences and the effects of this participation) are raised and discussed, together with the temporal, the political-institutional and the social/cooperative dimensions of the participative practices and experiences. For dealing with these issues, the author emphasizes the relevance of the perspective in which the connection between voice and participation is underlined. In particular, she spends some pages for exploring the promising potential of the concept of “capacity to aspire”, through which Sen’s capability approach is interpreted by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in order to reconceive the dimension of culture and the role this latter has in strengthening or weakening individuals’ capability to project and to pursue a better future.

Finally, the relationship between public and private (profit and non-profit) is deepened. Two terrains of this theme are here discussed. The first one is the contractualization of social policies, which takes substantially three forms(77): contracts as buy-sell transactions (market-type), contracts as policy-making agreements (hybrid form between state and market), contracts as responsabilization. The second terrain is about EU growing emphasis on the social economy and the connection between the social and the economy. It is a very articulated and tricky terrain, in which the risk of shifting from a market as instrument for sustaining and

strengthening the social to a social as object of marketization is particularly evident. The Chapter ends by addressing what is at the heart of the problem in question, namely the nature of publicness, as a process and a (possible) result (instead of a substantial property of State), and the role of public administration, as a necessary third part for dealing with collective issues, in the context of these transformations. Extending also to other aspects of the changing architecture of public action and social policies what Lavinia Bifulco writes about the processes of territorialization, too much hope has been placed in these transformations as opportunities and solutions “to generate innovations for citizenship; but while we need to moderate that hope, we should not abandon it”(50).

In the third section of the book the author focuses on three different empirical fields through which the themes and issues dealt with extensively in the previous pages are explored in closer detail. Young school-to-work transitions is the first one. At this regard the author, concluding a Chapter based on comprehensive international research projects and case studies, considers that “the disproportion between structural problems and individual prerogatives is now so great and affects young people so brutally that it has become crystal clear that talking about activation (...) by appealing exclusively to personal responsibilities is, at the very best, an underestimation”(107). The second field is about the relationship between care and choice. The borders between publicness and privatisation already discussed in previous parts of the book and the organizational fields of care are here addressed in greater detail, paying particular attention to the role of the recipients as a key aspect in order to understand these issues, (also) through a research conducted in different Italian regions. The section is closed by a Chapter about an actor that is becoming more and more important regarding European social policies, as much as in other realms of socioeconomic policies. This actor is the city, analyzed as a social fact shaped into space, in which social inclusion can be concretely pursued (or hindered). Issues of diversity (are mixed-neighborhood policies really a solution?), participation (how it can combine a redistribution of powers with a redistribution of resources?) and social innovation (when and how innovation is really socially inclusive and does not reinforce already existing social inequalities?).

The final fourth section is a Chapter entitled, not by chance, “Back to the ‘social?’” Here she shortly reminds the main fields of tension the book has explored

and deepened, as fields in which potentialities of the social, with a persisting key role of public action for effectively flourishing them, coexist with many and different processes and pressures with de-socializing effects. Individualization, social economy and community self-organization and diverse mechanisms of depoliticisation, in terms of “the displacement of an issue from the public (not necessarily the State) sphere to the private”(144) are the key concepts used by the author for this summarizing these fields of tension. In this perspective, the possibilities for avoiding these risks of de-socialization has anyway to do with a combination of “social protection with investment in social resources and capabilities, at the same time tackling individual frailties and ruptures in social bonds”(147). She rightly calls for analyzing welfare systems and social policies always in relationship to the growing pressures by the economy to transform the social itself as an object of marketization. In this sense, also reminding Burawoy’s appeal to a “public sociology”, she underlines that social sciences have a responsibility and an important opportunity, in order to contribute to a knowledge-making process whose emancipatory value is strengthened. A “public sociology”, in fact, it should be conceived as a reciprocal process of learning and transformation, between the social researcher and her/his public, in which social forms of life are studied both as something already done, reproduced and as something that human beings *do* and therefore *could do otherwise*. Bifulco’s book should be strongly recommended, as a very helpful instrument for understanding the most relevant processes of reframing the social, through the transformation of the devices (social policies; public action) of its organization; as well as a strong support to look for strategies through which the social is substantially empowered.