The restructuring of social services in Europe and its impact on social and territorial cohesion

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ABSTRACT

Since Esping-Andersen's characterisation of the 'Three Worlds of Welfare' (1991), social services – a major component of the ‘welfare state’ – have experienced important restructuring processes, throughout Europe, starting from different points of departure and with different intensities, although with somewhat converging strategies. These include cuts in public funding, devolution (from central to local governments), liberalization (entry of new providers) and outsourcing (from public to private providers). Among the reasons for such changes have been stressed the fiscal crisis of the State (on the supply side) and the need to ensure greater efficiency, wider consumer choice and more democratic governance (on the demand side).

On this restructuring relevant scientific research has been carried out in the 1990s and 2000s, tackling different aspects. Among the main outcomes can be mentioned: the enrichment and further articulation of the 3 ‘Worlds of Welfare’ into at least 5 ‘models’; a better understanding of path-dependency mechanisms, i.e. the persistence of territorial specificities in change processes; the recognition of ‘social’ innovation processes; a new awareness of the problematics attached to the notion of universalism.

The recent global financial crisis and the awareness that, among services of general interest, social services are a major vehicle of social and territorial cohesion have brought social services back on the EU agenda, as further cuts in government expenditures are severely threatening the sheer existence of public services in many countries, together with the very notion of social rights.

In this lecture, first the role of social services in the reproduction of capitalist socioeconomic systems will be reviewed. Then, the main transformative pressures and restructuring processes at work in Europe over the last twenty years will be highlighted. Subsequently, five perspectives will be proposed to assess the impacts of such changes: a) efficiency/quality of services; b) democratic governance; c) social and territorial cohesion; d) the labour market of social services; e) gender and equal opportunities. Particular attention will be devoted to two aspects: on the one hand the ambiguities of the current mainstream interpretation of the notion of ‘social innovation’ in social services as a surrogate for retrenching public services; on the other hand the dangers of administrative devolution for territorial cohesion in the absence of central redistribution and regulation, with specific reference to the Italian case.

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