

International Sociological Debates at the Universitat de Barcelona (ISDUB)

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

Prof. Flavia Martinelli, Università Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria, Italy

Flavia Martinelli graduated at the School of Architecture of the University of Florence and obtained a Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley in 1986. She is currently Full Professor of Analysis of Territorial Systems at the School of Architecture of the Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria. Her work focuses on the territorial dimension of socioeconomic development and on regional disparities – at the local, regional, international scale – as well as on public policies geared to support the development of depressed areas and govern territorial transformations. Within this general framework, her main analytical fields are: industrial models and producer services; social services, reproduction and cohesion; tourism and local development; development policies; territorial planning tools (integrated, negotiated, strategic). The approach to territorial analysis is multi-disciplinary: spatial systems and their differences are considered as the territorially embedded historical outcome of complex interactions between accumulation and institutions (economy, society, politics and culture), within specific regions and areas, as well as between these and the broader national and international context.

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.

More at: <http://www.cost-is1102-cohesion.unirc.it/>

http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions/isch/Actions/IS1102;