<1> Social Workers' Collective Policy Practice in Times of Austerity. Italy and Spain Compared* <1>

Riccardo Guidi

Abstract:

Although political responsibility lays at the core of social professions, until recently it has only been weakly exerted. Effectively acting for social justice in a context shaped by neomanagerialism, economic crisis and (permanent) austerity has become crucial for the profession, the users and democracy but is particularly difficult. Based on a critical policy theoretical framework, this chapter illustrates and interprets the features of social workers' policy practice in Italy and Spain in the austerity age. Against deactivation hypotheses, social workers' potential in affecting welfare politics is enriched in both countries through the action of collective bodies from within the profession. Beyond flat visions of social workers' policy practice, the analysis also shows that different mobilisation paths exist. The peculiar interactions between the political opportunities' structure and the characteristics of professional bodies (political culture, resources, skills) in the medium term can account for the divergence. These interactions seem to be pushing social workers' policy practice towards particularistic/professional or universal/political achievements.

Keywords: Policy practice, social workers, austerity, Italy, Spain.

<2> Situating social workers' political responsibility <2>

Although professional history and ethical codes clearly assign social workers to a political responsibility, putting it into effective practice appears all but obvious in contemporary contexts for at least two intertwined reasons. *First*, the orientation towards the so-called "policy practice" (Gal, Weiss-Gal 2013) may clash with micro-level routine professional activities. Although the fight for social justice can be significantly embedded into the daily work with single users (Dominelli 2002),

social and political change in contemporary complex societies is not realistically achievable through the sum of individual, episodical actions alone; rather it requires some form of upscaling and coordination. To be effective political actors, social workers seem called to develop a non-occasional multi-faceted collective agency intertwining the professional and the political. *Second*, the contexts of professional social work in Europe have changed so much in the last 25 years that social workers' political acting faces an unprecedented challenge today. Social services organisations have been called to tackle a growing, changing and more complex social demand (Taylor-Gooby 2004) under the pressure of new-managerialism (Clarke, Gewirtz, McLaughlin 2000) and 'permanent austerity' (Pierson 2001). This institutional context has been proven to have a 'corrosive' (Healy 2009) and 'deforming' (Rogowski 2011) effect on professional social work (Kessl, 2009; Stark, 2010; Branco, Amaro, 2011) and has reduced social workers' possibility to empower users and act on social structures (Rogowski, 2011; Jordan, 2012). Critics have also observed that in this scenario social professions seem to have sought an institutional legitimation by developing 'both a distancing from 'politics' and an emphasis on clinical approaches' (Ferguson, Lavalette, 2013: 106). Nevertheless, neoliberalism is supposed to have 'opened up such disillusionment and discontent within the profession that it has created the space for the rebirth of radicalism in social work' (Lavalette 2011: 7), mainly viable through a new collective agency of practitioners (Ferguson, Lavalette 2013: 107).

While literature has robustly focused on how crucial aspects of professional social work have been hit by neoliberal and austerity politics (e.g. Jordan, Drakeford, 2012), recently increasing attention has been to paid to the *agency side* of the coin, namely social workers' collective action facing this adverse context and affecting the political processes of austerity (so far on this issue: Harlow et al., 2012; Ioakimidis et al., 2014; Pentaraki, 2013/2015; Roman, Perez 2015). To move further, the study of social workers' collective policy practice in a (permanent) austerity age can benefit from a theoretical frame shaped by the literature on policy-making and political mobilisation as well as comparative analysis. Accordingly, these are here used to shed light on the peculiar features of collective social workers' policy practice in Italy and Spain and interpret differences and similiarities.

<2> Framing social workers' collective policy practice <2>

Social workers exert their own political responsibility mainly against public policies. They are currently multi-dimensional, multi-level, multi-actorial 'ongoing processes whereby social and political problems are defined, public decisions are taken and attempts made to implement them, and the outcome and the impact on the real world are perceived and assessed' (Capano, Howlett

2009: 1). The policy process is conflictual and highly institutionalised (Capano 2009) and conventionally develops along an ideal-type model, the *policy-cycle*, connecting the different stages of policy-making (Howlett, Ramesh 1995; see also the introduction to this volume).

Considering public policies in terms of conflictual and institutional processes urges framing professional social workers' policy practice within the actors/institutions interplay analysis (Hay 2002). Two well-known perspectives of actors/institutions interplay in contemporary policy-making can help to interpret the different kinds of social workers' policy practice. These perspectives can be conceived as two poles in a continuum, with many hybrid logics mixing elements from both perspectives.

The first perspective (*institutionalised political exchange - PE*) comes from the 1960s/70s neocorporatist trends of European policy-making (Schmitter 1974), later evolved and more recently reinterpreted by Molina and Rhodes (2002), according to whom neocorporatism is currently a typical form of policy-making based on political exchanges between state agencies and interest organisations that structure policy networks. In these networks, as Pizzorno (1978) originally wrote, state agencies exchange goods against the political consensus that another collective actor can give (or give back). This form of networked governance can have more or less high levels of integration providing social partners only with access to information or a real influence on policy design (Molina, Rhodes 2002: 323). Within this perspective, social workers are supposed to act as an organised group promoting and defending professional interests in the institutionalised negotiations and outside, namely acting in a 'self-interested' way and generating 'categoric goods' (Streeck, Schmitter 1985: 128-29). The latter may be 'compatible or identical to collective goods', depending on 'the way on which group interests are organised into associative structures and processes' as well as the characteristics of the bargaining process between the interest organisations and between these and the state (Streeck, Schmitter 1985: 129). For social profession, the fight for strengthening itself may overlap the fight for social justice in so far as increasing the quantity of social workers and the quality of their work (education, workloads, remuneration…) may give users more real chances to be empowered. Moreover, given their own ethical mandate, organised social workers are supposed to conciliate the socio-political and the professional claims within the negotiations. However, the overlapping between the particular/professional and the universal/political is all but obvious.

On the opposite pole, social workers' policy practice can be framed into a *social movement perspective (SM)*. Social movements can be conceived as a form of non-institutional collective action

aimed at promoting or resisting change against an authority (Snow et al. 2004). They operate non-episodically with some degree of organisation and by networking between different actors (organisations, groups and individuals) based on a shared identity (della Porta and Diani 1999). Unlike interest groups, social movements are neither defined in relation to the government nor embedded in the political arena. They 'bring ordinary people' – not the elites – 'into confrontation with opponents, elites or authorities' (Tarrow 2011: 8). Literature has shown that social movements' action and success are influenced by many factors, such as the overall political opportunities structure (Tarrow 2011), cultural changes (Touraine, 1977; della Porta, Diani, 1999; Melucci, 1996), the entity and quality of resources (skills, organisation, money, etc.) owned by the protesters (McCarthy, Zald 1977), the ways of legitimising their collective action (Snow et al. 1986) and the network of actors (activists, groups and organisations) (Diani 2000). Within the SM perspective, professional social workers are supposed to act as political advocates for the rights of disadvantaged people and/or as enablers of users' participation. This political-professional action can be very important: users often experience a politically-detrimental condition of weakness because they have fewer resources to mobilise compared with other social groups (Milbrath, 1965). Moreover, since social services users often hold little standardisable needs and are currently assisted by local agencies with a high level of self-government, they have a peculiar difficulty in both coordinating and legitimating their collective action, with the result to have greater problems in successfully representing their own interests in the conventional political arena (Trumbull 2012).

The aforementioned perspectives clarify that social workers' collective policy practice can have a high (PE) or low (SM) institutionalisation level and be more particularly/professionally (PE) or universally/politically (SM) oriented. A common problem concerns the relations between social services users and social workers: within the PE logics, public advantages risk being a by-product of the political exchanges between self-interested social workers' organisations and the state, while within the SM logics the professionals have to face the dilemmas of a spurious representation because they are not legitimated to represent users.

Social workers' collective policy practice in the austerity age. A comparative analysis

European social workers' policy practice has appeared to be weak thus far. Although differentiated by country, the most recent comparative study concludes that 'the involvement of social workers tends to be marginal and there is a wide discrepancy between discourse and practice' (Weiss-Gal, Gal 2013: 194). The interplay of four factors can explain this situation: the social-political context,

the profession, the work setting and individual characteristics and perceptions (Weiss-Gal, Gal 2013: 199-204).

Starting from this evidence, one can wonder whether something has changed in the recent critical juncture and which directions social workers' policy practice has taken. The economic crisis and austerity politics – which have significantly affected social rights, policies and services – can be conceived as a dramatic test for the political responsibility of social workers as well as their endurance. In addressing this question as part of a wider ongoing comparative project, I will focus on two national cases – Italy and Spain – based on document analysis, in-depth interviews with the leaders of social workers' organisations and a qualitative/quantitative analysis of news releases of the most active and representative Italian organisation.

Italy and Spain present some common points as well as differences. A late transition to democracy (later in Spain), a large family model and regional differences are some structural traits that differentiate them from Central and Northern Europe. Both belong to the so-called 'Southern Model' of welfare (Ferrera 1996) and since the 1980s/90s professional social workers (about 43,000 in Italy and 40,000 in Spain) have experienced a similar organisational structure: *the trabajadores sociales* in Spain and the *assistenti sociali* in Italy are represented at two levels, namely the regional (36 *Colegios Profesionales* in Spain; 20 *Consigli regionali* in Italy) and national (through *Consejo General del Trabajo Social* – CGTS and *Consiglio Nazionale Ordine Assistenti Sociali* – CNOAS). The boards of regional and national organisations are elected by social workers.

Italy and Spain have been severely hit by the economic crisis and austerity politics. Both have experienced a dramatic increase in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion and they have significantly reformed their own welfare policies and retrenched social budgets under the pressure of the so-called 'Troika' (European Commission, European Central Bank, IMF) without any real negotiation with domestic social partners (Pavolini et al. 2015). Nevertheless, austerity politics has been more shocking in Spain overall. Unlike in Italy, in 2012 Spain requested external financial assistance, which implied a higher intrusiveness of the EU into domestic policies (Pavolini et al. 2015: 9-10). Moreover, the austerity measures in Spain have interrupted a decade of welfare state recalibration, whereas in Italy they have followed the usual reform path started in the 1990s (Pavolini et al. 2015: 18).

Spain and Italy clearly also differ in terms of contentious politics against austerity. While in Italy social movement organisations have only developed intermittent and not very original

mobilisations, an innovative and widespread protest dealing with welfare retrenchment and democracy has distinguished Spain (Alberich Nistal 2016). The emerging new social movement organisations (the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*, *Plataforma Democracia Real Ya*, *Juventud sin Futuro* and the most general and known *Movimiento 15-M*) have expressed the voice of the excluded and vulnerable people better than other collective actors through a radical and innovative action repertoire (e.g. the *Acampadas,* the *Cumbre Social*, the *Mareas*).

Similarities and differences between Spain and Italy also exist regarding the collective policy practice that social workers have developed. According to the former President, Italian CNOAS has always acted on social policies since its establishment, albeit with different orientations:

> 'sometimes it has been more centred on the profession, sometimes had a more general attention. (…) historically CNOAS has worked more in first direction and it has then got gradually opened to the second. It has been partially physiological because CNOAS had to start with the professional 'ABC' at the beginning'.

The path towards the 'professional empowerment' (Current CNOAS President) seems still unfinished and it significantly intersects the policy practice path. According to the current President, recent CNOAS activities (2014-2018) have been mainly oriented to:

> 'promote a cultural movement (...) building a wider professional culture than the limited daily work context (...) making the profession more aware about its mandate and acting under the assumption that how the profession is exerted in a context makes a difference on the efficacy, efficiency and equity of a social policy'.

The dissatisfaction with the slow and laborious development of social profession in Italy and the (self-)representation of the latter as technically weak, with public services embedded, unable to link casework and societal trends clearly shape this strategic priority. It has implied working towards strengthening the professional community (internal side) and making it publicly count (external side), sometimes through specific activities for each side, sometimes by using the same instruments in both directions. However, the two sides are considered 'inseparable from each other' (Current CNOAS President).

Digital communication – beyond training and education – has recently been the most effective new activity line for 'professional empowerment'. In 2013-14, a new CNOAS website and a bi-monthly newsletter were launched; in 2016, CNOAS opened its own Facebook page (9,500 followers), and more recently it has produced a television series displayed on its WebTv. 'Creating a common feeling among our members', 'giving the public the idea about what our profession actually is' and

'developing the relationships with the institutional stakeholders' (Current CNOAS Communication Manager) are the interconnected priorities of CNOAS communication.

Digital communication instruments have also supported the efforts to position the profession in the public arena, namely through public official stances. CNOAS website analysis reveals that the number of news releases (2004-16) has exponentially increased since 2013. Both professionally- (i.e. CNOAS positioning on the profession) and socially/politically-oriented (i.e. CNOAS positioning on social/political issues) news releases have grown in number, although claims are clearly more present in the latter. Professional claims are low and stable in the period (with only a minor peak in 2013), whereas social/political claims have grown significantly from 2013 onwards. Migration policies have been the most frequent topic, followed by childhood and child policies, social policies, poverty and social rights, whereas the most frequent professionally-oriented news releases are about internal communications, training and social workers' media representation.

Official stances are often preceded by documents' elaboration and coalition-building and followed by political pressure activities. This has happened especially for social policies about which CNOAS has written the most articulated documents (e.g. CNOAS 2013) and has repeatedly pressed governments and political parties through public expression of dissent on measures, open letters and public exchanges with candidates on their electoral programmes (e.g. CNOAS 2014). In 2016, CNOAS also promoted the constitution of a working group comprising sixteen social workers' organisations, whose 'Manifesto for Welfare' (CNOAS 2016) has accused the last national governments, suggested reforms and announced future mobilisations.

Among the policy practice, CNOAS' participation in institutional policy-making processes (e.g. justice system reform, professions' reform, minimum income measure design, etc.) has been important, growing and all but obvious. Taking part in and influencing these processes confirms that CNOAS has successfully developed its own political capability, although it also poses questions about the social workers' representation.

> 'Firstly we have looked for being recognised by institutions through an informal lobbying. (...) Now institutions look for us because they need to know what happens in the social field. We don't protest only but propose too. (...) We have positioned ourselves where we had to stay' (Current CNOAS President).

> 'Participating to the institutional tables has been an achievement. For a long time institutions did not consider us a political actor. Now nobody forgets us. In the last years, *assistenti sociali* collective agency on policies has increased and now it is systematically exerted. We learned to act in a political way, before we were not able to do it. CNOAS exertion is not on

the public positioning but on the profession for avoiding it gets behind compared to where its spokespeople are' (Former CNOAS President).

Economic crisis and austerity politics have affected CNOAS in so far as 'they have made raised our voice further up' (Former CNOAS President) but they do not drive the design of any extraordinary initiatives. Conversely, a large, original and articulated professional mobilisation against austerity has been carried out in Spain. Similar to a social movement organisation, Spanish CGTS has mainly mobilised through campaigns, each characterised by an issue, a network, a tactic and some initiatives. An example is *The Alliance for the Defense of Public System of Social Services,* a network of Spanish organisations (professional actors, trade unions, associations, universities) asking to place social dignity and social rights centre stage in policy-making and acting through producing public analyses and proposals for social service reforms.

However, the most-known, original and widely-participated campaign has been the *Marea Naranja* (Orange Tide), launched at the national level in September 2012. Although the loss of jobs and budgets in the social assistance field and the worsening of *trabajadores sociales* work conditions significantly urged professional mobilisation, the campaign has rejected a strict neocorporative matrix. It has been defined as:

> 'the citizen's movement that defends the public and qualified system of social services in Spain (...) a way to reject the losing of social rights and the reconversion of the social system into a charity one'. (www.cgtrabajosocial.es/marea_naranja)

Marea Naranja has had a peculiar unifying and innovative value. CGTS has coordinated individual discontents and local mobilisations against austerity (first in Valencia and Aragona) under a common 'action frame' (CGTS Current President) in a effort to make the protest clearly visible at the national level and beyond. *Marea Naranja* has joined the other 'professional tides' (white for health realm, green for education, etc.) and the wider Spanish movement against austerity. It has involved social workers, educators and users. The engagement of the latter is considered crucial – albeit very difficult in practice – and clarifies how the political and the professional are specifically intertwined:

> 'we were going to participate to the social movements (...) the principle is 'we don't want it is a CGTS initiative' (...) Marea Naranja must not be elitist. It has been a very dispersed movement (...) It has been clearly identified with social work but not only (...) We wanted to go with citizens and not to be their voice... Trying to involve the users, other organisations, other professionals has been fundamental for us. (...) Mobilising social services users have been difficult because most don't see a social right under the intervention and many feel ashamed to be recognised as users.' (CGTS Current President)

Marea Naranja uses tactics for dramatising the protest and making it as visible as possible. The mobilisation systematically has a scenography (logos, placards, posters), a dress code (the orange and an orange t-shirt with an evocative picture) and a choreography in the streets (the *batucada* dance), all mainly brought in non-institutional local and national initiatives.

CGTS and *Marea Naranja* have especially protested against the Spanish National Law about the 'rationalisation and sustainability of local administration' (Ley 27/2013). The protest reached the European Parliament, where a delegation was received by seven parliamentary groups and European media. As the CGTS President stated: 'We wanted to show how the cuts in social services were violating the human rights'. The international echo of Marea Naranjia has been strong, contributing to inspire other professional mobilisations in Europe, namely the Social Work Action Network and British Association of Social Workers. The CGTS President who promoted it was awarded for outstanding services to social work by IFSW in 2014 and was elected as President of IFSW Europe in 2016.

According to data recollected by CGTS in 2014, Spanish social workers have massively participated. About 80% agreed with the mobilisation claims and 47% participated in more or less engaging ways (e.g. wearing badges on shirts, posters on the bureau wall, demonstrations, etc.) (Lima 2014: 110-34). The campaign has mainly mobilised practitioners working in municipal social services in both urban and peripheral areas:

> 'They lived social cuts and injustices in first person (…) the anguish was so strong that rebelling was the only path (…) They could canalize their own indignation in a protest through the professional structure. We built a space' (Current CGTS President).

According to the CGTS President, Marea Naranjia has obtained three main results at the national level: first, the mobilisation has made social services system and social professions publicly visible and social workers unite (professional empowerment result); second, it has contributed to slowing down Spanish social cuts (institutional result); and thirdly, it has prompted the regional colleges to co-design all of the political parties' electoral programmes, except the Popular Party. After the elections, several social workers have also been assigned high administrative appointments (political result).

Although the Spanish CGTS and the regional colleges have been placed at centre stage, further professional entities have developed a significant policy practice against austerity, including the Association of Directors and Managers of Social Services (ADGSS). Established at the national level by different expert professionals in 1994 with the aim of contributing to develop Spanish social

services, ADGSS has progressively developed an iterative policy practice based on official data and performance indicators about users, social services and policies. From 2008 onwards, the regional-based bi-annual analyses have had a massive impact on mass media, with more than 200 articles in *El Pais*, a systematic presence on TV programmes and a consequent 'terrific influence' on the regional and national political and public agenda (Current AGDSS President). All of this is carried out with a very light organisational structure: ADGSS has never had paid staff nor public fund and it acts based on a few highly-committed people:

> 'researchers, practitioners and anti-austerity activists at the same time. (…) We are committed to social services, we defend the public system but our main characteristic is that people are our *raison d'etre*.' (Current AGDSS President)

Another telling case at the local level is Foro Servicios Sociales de Madrid. Established in 2014 based on a manifesto and a dossier, it is an association of professionals and citizens aimed at defending and developing social rights against austerity politics. The re-politicisation of social professions is one of the objectives of Foro.

<2> Discussion. Paths of social workers' collective policy practice <2>

The political responsibility lays at the core of social professions. Exerting it in a context shaped by neomanagerialism, economic crisis and (permanent) austerity is crucial for the profession, the users and democracy, albeit it is particularly difficult. Against deactivation hypotheses, since 2008 social workers' policy practice has significantly developed in both Italy and Spain through the action of collective entities coming from within the profession. Comparative analysis also shows that policy practice in the shadow of austerity can follow different paths, even in allegedly similar countries.

Italy seems to follow an institutional and professional mobilisation path, close to the PE model. In this context, the most representative social workers' organisation (CNOAS) has increasingly acted as a conventional professional body by intertwining efforts on the internal (professional community) and the external (institutions, political forces, public opinion) side. Italian policy practice appears to be centred on the need to defend and strengthen professional social work into the institutional and public settings (see also Campanini 2015: 106). Empowering the profession seems considered to be the best – albeit an indirect – way to promote social justice. Despite being well-grounded and realistic, this approach risks getting public advancements as by-products of professional interests' representation activity. Moreover, it seems to encourage an elitist policy practice mainly exerted by

delegates. These risks are at least partially compensated by the official standing activity and the work on the internal side that CNOAS has developed in recent years.

By contrast, the Spanish policy practice scenario contains many elements of the SM perspective. Here, multiple social workers' organisations have carried out massive mobilisation through different political-professional activities and campaigns. Spanish CGTS has promoted the most visible one (*Marea Naranja*), which has involved a huge number of social workers, tried to engage social services users, joined the wider anti-austerity movement, placed social rights at centre stage, acted through a multi-scale, plural, non-institutional repertoire and inspired further social workers' mobilisations in Europe. Here again, policy practice has been used to empower the profession, albeit conversely by further developing social rights and public services first. Although 'rights', 'users' and 'justice' are the key terms in Spanish protest vocabulary, the difficulty in actually involving social services users confirms the risk that social workers are representing them in a spurious way.

Coherently with the arguments of Weiss-Gal and Gal (2013), comparative analysis also invites considering national long-medium term policy models, the political opportunities structure and professional features as key factors to understand the differences of social workers' policy practice. In Spain, austerity politics has been shocking and pushed a popular and original protest, while in Italy austerity has followed the late-1990s welfare policy path and mobilisations have been weak. Spanish social workers have thus found a more favourable political opportunities structure to develop an innovative collective policy practice. They have particularly followed the professional mobilisation of the education and health sectors by adapting their form of protest (the *Mareas*) to the social services realm. Nevertheless, beyond the structural conditions, the mobilisation has been possible because Spanish professional organisations have played the role of 'political/professional entrepreneur' of outraged social workers acting for social justice. Collective policy practice paths can thus also diverge because social workers' professional bodies express a peculiar professional political culture, interpret the role of political entrepreneurs differently and use diverse strategies and tactics.

Conclusion

Social workers' potential in affecting welfare politics emerges as confirmed and enriched in hard times through the mobilisation of collective actors. The consolidation of social work organisations in Southern Europe allows social professions' public and institutional legitimation stepping forward and social justice to have a further chance.

Beyond flat visions on social workers' policy practice, this study clearly shows the existence of different mobilisation paths in countries belonging to the same welfare model (Ferrera, 1996). The divergence can be explained by the peculiar interactions between the political opportunities structure and the characteristics of professional bodies (political culture, resources, skills) in the medium term. These dynamics can push policy practice towards particularistic/professional (PE model) or universal/political (SM model) achievements. With the austerity age being such a critical juncture for democracy, SM-oriented strategies seem to have more chances to actually promote social justice, whereas PE-oriented strategies may better work in ordinary times.

Future research on the topic should extend comparative analysis, better consider the intertwinings between policy practice and the battle for professional empowerment as well as addressing the crucial question of social services users' involvement in the social workers' policy practice.

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