Welfare state and ecological crisis: action-research perspectives towards sustainable social policies

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ABSTRACT. – The paper discusses the challenges of welfare environmental sustainability in social policy analysis and a methodological contribution on the matter. The concept of welfare sustainability arises from the growing awareness that welfare systems are an important driver of a unsustainable model of development. The emergence of this problem is linked to the increasing demands of social protection and the fiscal crisis of welfare states, giving rise to a sort of triple sustainability crisis. The paper briefly presents the main points discussed in the current debate, some criticisms about the latter, and few aspects of our research direction. Criticisms particularly point out a sort of reductionist trap in social policy analysis that makes it difficult to observe and deal with the kinds of social risks emerging from the climate crisis, their trans-contextual dynamics, the implications of transition processes, and the role of social contexts and organizational processes in making the welfare systems more or less ecologically sustainable or parasitical. The action-research approach is then briefly presented as a way promoted by our research group to contribute in the debate, supporting integrated experiences and research paths, as well as taking part in international programs and networks on the topic.

INTRODUCTION. – According to the Social policy literature, western welfare systems are entrapped in a sort of double crisis. On the one hand, there are the increasing demands of social protection due to the changing configuration of the classical or old social risks and the emerging of new ones. On the other one, there is the fiscal crisis of the welfare state resulting from the States' responses to the economic downturn in the wake of the austerity doctrine. The twos are in many ways connected fostering one another and imposing complicated dilemmas for political choices. They are also differently interpreted and tackled through poli-

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tics of expansion or, more frequently, recalibration and retrenchment. Moreover, all these strategies are at least partly biased and entrapped into-the-box of the ways *keynesian* and *neoliberal* paradigms have shaped in the past decades dynamics and design of capitalist accumulation and social protection, hence creating a further massive dilemma. Indeed, while cutbacks risk to increase inequality and deprivation, particularly for weaker people, groups and communities, possible additional state expenditures risk to further boost an environmentally unsustainable growth, and both risk to enhance the emergence of new social risks.

The current environmental crisis has brought additional types of social risks, connected to the diversified impacts of climate change, destruction of habitats and biodiversity, impoverishment of soils and natural resources. Climate change for instance, in the short run "mainly works as an aggravator of existing social risks such as health, poverty, inequality and human security" (Johansson 2016), mainly hitting vulnerable communities and territories as well as further boosting displacement and migration processes. But in the long run, particularly in case of weak anticipation, mitigation and conservation policies, climate change could become the main driver of social risks, with sever effects on the conditions for livelihood for many people and communities, the natural and artificial resources on which they depend (food, energy, infrastructures), their economies and, hence, the same employment-insurance regime on which their welfare system is designed. Ian Gough (2017) identifies four categories of implications for social policy: first, the direct risks to well-being through destructive events and changing and adverse environmental conditions which pose new challenges for social programs ("for example, new housing and settlement patterns, new insurance costs, health demands of extreme climatic events, the management of natural disasters and their dislocations and traumas"). Second, the indirect risks to well-being, for instance connected to climate migration from the unsafe areas mainly located in the developing world. Third, the implications of climate adaptation policies which could create "fiscal competition between welfare and environmental demands, unless synergies are exploited". Fourth, the implications for 'traditional' social policy of climate mitigation policies, for instance related to the potential regressive effects of fiscal measures to reduce carbon emissions. Moreover, both direct and indirect environmental-based social risks have tricky distributional implications, between individuals and populations, between social classes and between geographical contexts.

These are among the reasons why "climate change is essentially political" (Ruser 2018), and why the current one may be defined a triple

sustainability crisis of welfare state: *economic*, *social* and *environmental*. As a consequence, this crisis could and should probably be seen as a complex non-linear systemic process of interconnected loops of causation (Bateson 1972; Room 2011), while aspects and variables referring to the three fields of investigation are little and only recently analyzed together in both the social policy and sustainability literatures (Gough 2017). Moreover, the possible strategies to face the climate crisis – such as mitigation, adaptation, geo-engineering and conservation – should involve not only technical solutions, but also, and probably above all, political choices at many levels, complex institutional processes of implementation and more or less deep changes in patterns of behavior, lifestyles and organization of consumption, production, redistribution, investment, use natural resource, as well as criteria of legitimacy of them all.

Unfortunately, there are still limited although increasing contributions which try to figure out ongoing dynamics and scenarios, experiments and experiences, and that start to link up hitherto separate research traditions. Particularly in Italy the topic is still very little discussed. In this context is placed the work started in Pisa about "welfare sustainability" aimed at developing a specific research approach, contributing in the debate, supporting integrated experiences and research paths, as well as taking part in international programs and networks[1]. Few points about the current debate and our research direction are briefly outlined below.

ASPECTS OF THE DEBATE. – *TOWARDS AN ECO-SOCIAL STATE?* – Some scholars assert that only strong states and robust public welfare have the capacity to facilitate/promote de-carbonization strategies, enhance notions of public and common good, and design both monetarily and ecologically efficient public welfare services (Bailey 2015). The controlling idea is that, to improve the conditions for future generations sorts of Eco-Investment State strategies are needed. Under this perspective, the emergence of the Social Investment Welfare State paradigm (SI, *henceforth*) is regarded as an opportunity for integrating climate mitigation/adaptation efforts and socio-economic transformative strategies, as the social-democratic countries experience seems to display (Gough 2017). However, the SI paradigm has to date seen only limited applications, while the link between environmental performances and kinds of welfare systems cannot yet be supported by empirical findings

[1] The work is developed by a small group of researchers named *Opss (Organizations, Policies and Socio-ecological Systems)*, including Marta Bonetti, Giulia Colombini, Irene Masoni.

and needs to be further investigated. Also, SI strategies are deemed controversial with regard to the triple sustainability crisis: the emphases on activation and human capital development risk to enhance the possible creaming-out effects for marginalized and hardly employable people, while the work-first policy approaches risk to further boost and legitimize competitiveness and productivism, stressing the mere economistic side of employment, the steady primacy of the individual chain (unlimited) preferences/wants/aspirations–production–redistribution–satisfaction (*ibid.*), the commodification of social policies and reproductive work, and the unvarying dependence on, as well as reproduction of, growth. Finally, these strategies are called into question by the increasing ambivalence of the economic growth/employment relationship.

Post-growth transition strategies. – On the other side, the are some indications that retrenchment politics, whether they are the corollary of neoliberal or post-growth transition strategies, can have even worst counter-productive effects on both equality and sustainability (Abrahamson 2017). Indeed, they can contribute to many kinds of self-reinforcing feedback-loops and schismogenic processes, as well as to unpredictable leaps in the level of risks for poor and fragile individuals and communities. Also, weaker social welfare makes it more difficult for the poor to satisfy their basic needs. Furthermore, the combination of fading public policies and growing inequalities makes it difficult the implementation of carbon taxation systems and more sustainable housing, transportation and energy policies, for the limited capacity of public investment and the likely regressive effects ('Weitzman paradox'). Another concern is that commodification, privatization and familization of service provision may weaken the State capability to promote more sustainable forms of service, consumption and work organization and governance, and to guarantee conditions of equal accessibility. Finally, while interesting experiences of informal and self-organized local innovative socio-economic experiments are growing, it seems hard to rely on the future development of an improbable self-service society and community-based welfare system as a viable alternative to an albeit multi-level and variously organized institutional welfare (Reyneri 2017; Williams 2007).

More context-based policies. – Some works acknowledge the idea of partly reconsidering the role of social policy with regard to the individual/social context/environment relationship, putting specific attention

to the spatial dimension, the processes of rescaling and embeddedment of welfare operation, and the potentials of bottom-up non-institutional resources. That means, for instance: challenging the classical "business as usual" short-term-national modes of welfare implementation and evaluation based upon national GDP and budget indicators per year, highlighting the need for more medium- and long-term and contextual arrangements and a more robust set of valuation techniques (Kulig *et al.* 2010). Second, addressing the problem of territorial divide and risks distribution. Third, promoting new equilibria between centralized universalistic frameworks and decentralized bottom-up processes of civic associations, policy community and cooperative governance. Fourth, enhancing the processes of informalization and decommodification of work and the reduction of working time while valorizing and supporting the reproductive work and promoting new forms of work-sharing.

Accordingly to these hypotheses, welfare institutions should search for new balance between investment, compensation and ecological limits, promoting more interdependent views of personal achievement and wellbeing of collective and community-based investments, and, of organization of production and consumption in social policy goals.

Criticisms to the current debate. – As a matter of fact, a lot of work is still needed to develop/ameliorate theories, methods and practices to help these hypotheses work. In particular, there are some reasons of dissatisfaction about analysis and practice related to the ecological problem and the role of welfare systems. In particular, ongoing works on the topic and the related ideas, approaches and practices of innovation still reveal a certain separation between the social policy and sustainability writings, or they are discussed through lenses and ideas "which evolved in a previous age" (Espinosa & Walker 2011). Some limits and criticisms may be identified as follows.

Growth, green growth, degrowth. – The concept of welfare sustainability arises from the growing awareness of the contradictory role of welfare systems in a model of development that is proving ecologically incompatible. Hence, scholars observe that making sustainable and effective a Socio-Eco-Investment State strategy, a move beyond the current political economy strategies and the strict logic of SI is required, addressing the satisfaction of human needs within ecological limits (Koch & Mont 2016). Contributions, for instance, claim the "need to

go beyond Keynesian and neo-classical economic theories and anchor the SI approach in a new economic model" (Morel *et al*. 2012), giving-up the emphasis on employment-first policies, market competition and consumer sovereignty and the compulsion to increase competitiveness and productivity.

Unfortunately, there are still few social policy works that are addressing this issue while for the big part the researches still move within a paradigm that does not conceive, for example, any idea of limit in availability of resources and growth of work, production, reproduction, redistribution, or any understanding of the environmental unsustainability and the dissipative properties of the same welfare organization. On the other hand, the literature on sustainability and degrowth has only to a limited extent addressed the issue of welfare and its possible role in the awaited transitions towards more sustainable systems (*e.g.*, a steady state economy).

The different types of social risks that the environmental crisis and the contrasting strategies put in place, constitute an important example of how a paradigm shift is needed. Apart the distributional effects, as Johansson *et al.* (2016: 98ss.) underline, social risks emerging from the environmental crisis "are far less observable, are much more complex and have a much more ambiguous effect on the 'population'". Furthermore, they are different also because "the time is running out", while a central authority to address the problem appears weak if not entirely missing. Finally, while social policy mainly regards the management of social risks that are usually *individually unpredictable but collectively predictable*, climate change is a "systemic risk", global and long-term, unprecedented and uncertain in its dynamics and overall effects, and therefore *collectively unpredictable* (Gough 2017). In brief, they are very different from the risks associated with industrial and post-industrial welfare systems, but strongly overlap and intertwine with them and the current policies.

Hence, the current discussion about possible models of *green-growth*, *a-growth*, *de-growth* and the most recent political emphasis on the so-called *green new deal*, risks to end up being excessively abstract and decontextualized, compared to the current modes of welfare organization and governance, while research on the latter risks to become more and more outdated compared to the ongoing transformations.

Context-and organization-based issues. – Social policy analysis seems to struggle in grasping the contextual and organizational variables and dynamics, the interactions that involve feedback loops and cumulative change (Room 2011), and how these may concur both to create sustainability issues and to promote transformative opportunities. Indeed, there is little discussion on potentials – and limits – of more *context-based and organization-change social policies* (Villa 2016), as well as a little shared knowledge on what it is possible to learn from practices of this kind.

At the same time, practicability of such models is far from obvious, owing to many problems of costs/investments, complexity, timing, indeterminable outcomes and possible biases in targeting and involving people and territories. First, they hardly can be seen as alternatives to the universalistic- or category-based social policy system, without the risk of further enhancing inequalities and undermining the legitimacy and enforceability of both universal basic needs and/or equal social rights for all. Second, in the short run they probably require further social and economic investments that risk to boost the tensions at the base of the mentioned dilemmas. Third, they certainly involve high levels of methodological complexity and require high management skills for supporting very complex governance and metagovernance processes and changes, while experimenting differentiated forms of power distribution, modes of inclusion and economic exchange, resource ownership (*ibid.*) As such, increased research investment at this level is desirable.

The problem of transition. – Sustainability – and above all the social policy – literatures, still deploys a limited involvement and little shared knowledge about the modes of *transition* towards the possible new scenarios. Grand narratives such as those mentioned above (*e.g.*, degrowth, steady state economy) state important principles and many economic and political insights. Unfortunately, the ways in which behavioral and organizational patterns and learning and co-evolutionary processes give form to transitions, probably counts more than any theoretical design and representation of future scenarios (Room 2011; Tsoukas 2005). The latter easily risk losing their strengths if they are strictly interpreted in normative, static, sector-specific and purely dimensional terms and cease to be thought as *stories*, namely thinking in terms of *changing patterns through time*, where complexity, non-linearity and recursion are probably the key properties to be considered (Bateson 1979; Harries-

Jones 1995). Therefore, social policy and sustainability research should invest more effort in understanding what it means to deal with these properties, crossing analyses and methods with different literatures related to governance and organization processes, knowledge and action, collaborative problem solving and transformative change, communication, learning and evolution science.

Anthropocentrism. – Finally, social policy research follows different perspectives but share a very little interest for the understanding of the living. It rarely claims inquiries in the world of things that in nature live, that is, grow, learn, evolve: the creaturely world of mental processes (Bateson 1979). Human nature is commonly distilled in separate, disembodied and disembedded parts (variables, individuals, restricted spatial-temporal sequences of lineal actions) that even if helpful, equate life to abstract mechanisms (Thompson 2007). Hence social policy research hardly includes any consideration of the ecological properties and implications of the relationships man-nature, body-mind-environment and reason-emotion, of life forms and trajectories, of the learning and evolution processes on which welfare measures and organizations produce huge impacts of many kinds. Rather, there is a steady commitment to simplification/reductionism in the operations of distinctions, mapping, comprehension and management of cognitive and social processes and environmental feedbacks, still based on a dualistic-Cartesian view of the relationship with nature as domination. The risk is keep making the policy analysis unable to identify limits to the current mechanisms of development and protection of social rights, well-being and forms of livelihood, as well as viable alternatives in a scenario of dramatic change.

Taking a step forward. – To take a step forward, we try to move between the folds of some of the above mentioned grand narratives with the aim of identifying some specific processes that make welfare systems more or less ecologically parasitical or, on the contrary, more or less capable of promoting better conditions for sustainability. The idea is to argue around the dynamic, organizational and contextual configurations of welfare systems, their changing strategies and their precarious equilibria in turbulent contexts. While taking the policy instruments into account, our research mainly focuses on how they contribute to the ecological properties of the citizens-institutions-environment interactions,

looking at the modes of self-organization and sense-making, the structures of interdependence, embodiment and embeddedness, the types of learning, the non-linear dynamics of adaptation and co-evolution.

In particular, we try to explore the bottom-up and top-down dynamics that affect/create specific socio-ecological conditions, and their modes of dissipating/preserving/increasing the systems' economics of flexibility, that is their social, cognitive, informational and bio-energetic uncommitted potentialities for change, learning, adaptation and development (Bateson 1972; Room 2011). First, with regard to the modes of welfare organization, we critically analyze the prevailing economistic and administrative rationales of managerial *modus operandi* (Bonetti & Villa 2014) and their attitudes to rigidly program the policy implementation upon a few over-simplified assumptions. Second, with regard to the modes of social policy implementation, we examine some counter-intuitive effects of individualized and pre-structured – universalistic or category-based – policy measures (Sabatinelli & Villa 2015; Villa & Johansen 2019), particularly in relation to the poor/fragile contexts and communities and among the people "who would benefit the greatest" (Villa 2015, 2016).

To this aim, we try to outline and test an *ecological perspective* and *style* (Tsoukas 2005) in social policy analysis which primarily adopts some non-reductionist basic assumptions drawing inspiration from cybernetics, economic and formal sociology, mind science, ecological psychology, ecological economics. While disregarding both anthropocentric and biocentric positions on the matter, this perspective looks at a better and integrated understanding of interaction, organization, institutional and co-evolutionary processes at the basis of welfare systems operation and its main outcomes.

The methodology is mainly based on *action-research* (AR). The latter is an approach that fits well with the aim of promoting both research- and action-driven fieldworks based on the collaboration between researchers and social and political actors. It is actualized by blending *pragmatist* observations, learning and change instruments with *systemic* analysis, with a particular regard for the role of *abduction* as a legitimate part of the investigation processes and a useful analytical and change strategy to deal with emergent properties of organizations, policies and social systems (Lewin 1951; Harries-Jones 1995; Swedberg 2014). Abduction reflects the process of forming/selecting analytical and explanatory hypotheses in situations in which the previous ones

fail, appear obsolete or are simply lacking, enabling recognizing, reconstructing and comparing patterns of interactions, rules and regularities in complex systems.

This approach also helps to build-up comparative (national and international) investigation processes overcoming the supposed limited usability of case-studies findings to the research field, and to move between the extremes of the widespread (in social policy analysis) universalistic totally context-free methods and the less common strictly contextually-bounded ones (Villa & Johansen 2019; Bonetti *et al.* 2019). First, by producing multiple descriptions; second identifying hypotheses on regularities that can lead to the formation of plausible patterns; third comparing similarities and differences in series of fieldworks.

We also collaborate since many years in education, training and consulting activities in the field of social and ecological welfare, work and social exclusion policies, organization, participation and governance processes, community development and sustainability. Research and change/innovation of socio-economic and organizational processes are in some cases integrated thanks to the adoption of the AR and its ability to accompany field experiments aimed at promoting sustainable transitions. Activities are mainly developed in collaboration with public and non-profit institutions, social enterprises and local social actors. One important goal is to develop more interdisciplinary collaborations.

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