

Book Review

Chiara Saraceno, David Benassi and Enrica Morlicchio (2020), *Poverty in Italy: Features and Drivers in a European Perspective*, Bristol: Policy Press, £75.00, pp. 206, hbk.

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Whilst the political debate, not only in Italy, is still imbued with a moralising vision of poverty as resulting from inadequate individual behaviour (laziness, ignorance, ineptitude, etc.) or in the best of cases from personal misfortune, this book adopts a radically different approach by outlining the structural origins of poverty. The functioning of the economy and of the labour market, the social protection system, family arrangements giving rise to distinct gender regimes, as well as the role, resources, and local extent of the third sector (NGOs and charities): all these factors have clear effects on individual life chances, and contribute to making it dramatically easier for individuals belonging to some social groups to find themselves in a situation of need.

Building on this refreshing perspective, in the first part of the book Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio introduce an analytical framework evidencing that the interaction among four areas of social regulation – the market, the state, the family, and the community – has generated distinct ‘poverty regimes’ in Europe. As always in these cases, questions could be raised about the choice of indicators to operationalise these regulative institutions; and not always does it seem that all the elements that make up the very rich analytical framework have been taken into equal consideration. Nevertheless, the results significantly enhance our knowledge regarding different models of social regulation in Europe, and how effective they are in reducing poverty. The resulting typology reflects the diversified ‘geography’ of social models in Europe, as the five ideal-types could be named the Nordic, the Continental, the Anglo-Saxon, the Southern, and the Eastern models – ranging from the most to the least effective in preventing poverty. But with two important differences. On the one hand, the francophone continental European countries (and Slovenia) are approaching the Nordic countries because they are effective in preventing the processes of impoverishment and make less recourse to ‘expected family solidarity’ than do the other Continental countries (Austria, Germany and Luxembourg), which are nevertheless able to contain the spread and intensity of poverty. On the other hand, Greece, which was severely damaged by the Great Recession, has moved considerably closer to Eastern European countries, thus becoming even less effective in preventing poverty formation than its Mediterranean neighbours.

The book then focuses on how the economic crisis impacted on the different poverty regimes. Consistently with the previous section, this one shows that the Mediterranean and most of the Eastern European countries proved unable to prevent the impact of the Great Recession from being particularly pronounced on lower-income groups. Interestingly, we learn that this is not due solely to path dependent dynamics and social policy setting at the onset of the crisis, nor to the adoption of harsh austerity measures in those countries. Rather – and originally – Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio emphasize that also the austerity measures might have had less (or no) regressive effects in these countries if the policy choices made

during the Great Recession had aimed at distributing the burden of adjustment more in favour of the poor than the better off.

The second part of the book introduces the international audience to the many distinctive features of the Italian poverty regime. Its defining characteristics are: a) a highly segmented labour market characterized by strong territorial differences between regions in the Centre-North and in the South; b) a similar differentiation in welfare provisions due to an unbalanced system of social insurance combined with patchy, categorical and ineffective public safety nets; c) the pivotal role of extended family solidarity in fighting poverty, with formal and informal rules contributing to a gender division of labour; d) a crucial subsidiary role of charities and NGOs, which exacerbate the territorial character of Italian poverty because they tend to be stronger where poverty is less common and severe, in Central and Northern Italy.

The book is at its best when tracing the historical roots of this regime. We learn that it has constantly been a harbinger of comparatively high levels of destitution, even in periods of economic growth, and we grasp differences and similarities among the social groups most at risk of poverty in Italy. Furthermore, we are reminded that labour market dualisms are anything but a novelty in Italy. Rather, being trapped in a precarious labour market position – along with living in the South and/or in a large household – is a constant feature of the poverty risk in Italy. Over time, however, underemployment and in-work poverty, as the results of a chronic scarcity of labour demand particularly evident in the South, have modified their core traits. In the immediate post-war period, their incidence was particularly high among peasants, small artisans or occasional industrial workers. In the years of the ‘economic miracle’ precariousness and underemployment gradually ceased to be associated with economic backwardness and the prevalence of a rural society. But they did not disappear; rather, they started to be increasingly concentrated in urban areas among construction and seasonal industrial workers, and street sellers. In the 1990s, labour market reforms resulted in growing numbers of low-wage precarious workers in the formal economy besides those in the traditionally insecure informal economy. Importantly, most of these ‘new’ temporary and precarious jobs were concentrated among young people. The onset of the Great Recession exacerbated these long-term phenomena, but did not drastically change them, with one significant exception: in the past decade, the number of migrant families experiencing poverty has grown rapidly. Today, poverty in Italy continues to be particularly severe in the South, to be widespread among working people – especially if young and/or migrants – and large families, thus affecting a comparatively dramatically high number of children. In the book, this vivid in-depth characterisation of Italian poverty is complemented by a much-needed focus on its local, urban, dimension.

The strength of this book – the richness of its analytical framework and its ability to convey the multiple factors favouring processes of impoverishment contextualizing them in time and space – is at times also a shortcoming because it comes at the cost of parsimony. Nevertheless, this is good news for academics in this field of study, because this book opens many promising avenues for research. On a very general level, the question of why this poverty regime emerged and persisted over time remains unanswered, although the authors leave many ‘clues’ in different parts of the book. Furthermore, the in-depth description of the evolution of poverty in Italy urges scholars to investigate the impact of these structural changes on political competition dynamics. Indeed, since we know that the politics of anti-poverty policies was (also) shaped by one of the main structural features of Italian poverty – its concentration in the South – it seems very likely that the ‘new’ generational and natives/migrants divides identified in the book will affect political dynamics in this policy field. Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio suggest that some recent policy choices – such as the very strict eligibility conditions for access to the Citizenship Income that clearly penalize migrants – can be viewed through these lenses, but further work is needed in this regard.

The book also contains stimulating policy suggestions to improve the ability of the Italian poverty regime to support children and precarious workers, two of the main groups most at risk of poverty in Italy today. Similar proposals are much needed in regard to designing an effective model able to provide uniform social rights while considering the many territorial specificities of poverty in Italy. This would require opening the 'Pandora's box' of multi-level governance of social assistance in Italy, an issue that warrants attention also in light of the overall negative assessment in the book of the consequences of the 2001 constitutional reforms assigning new competences in this policy field to sub-national authorities.

Finally, the book concludes by emphasizing that recent initiatives in the area of income protection – and, in particular, the adoption of the Citizenship Income – despite some limitations are steps forward for the Italian poverty regime. Conversely, developments in the other dimensions of the regime are less encouraging: labour market segmentation, precariousness, and in-work poverty are rising; many crucial social policies (and in particular child-linked income transfers and care services) remain fragmented and underdeveloped; gender inequalities persist; families and NGOs continue to be as crucial as they are inadequately supported. Where does this trajectory leave the Italian poverty regime? Is it growing closer to those of Continental countries or does it remain comparatively underdeveloped? Will the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic only exasperate poverty and inequalities, or could it be the shock required to overcome the weaknesses of the system? *Poverty in Italy* is the necessary starting point for providing empirically grounded answers to these questions. It is consequently highly recommended reading for all scholars concerned with how economic and social mechanisms contribute to poverty formation in Italy and elsewhere.

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