

# THE QUEST FOR THE “NEW WELFARE STATE”

**PIERPAOLO DONATI, LUCA MARTIGNANI (EDS.),  
TOWARDS A NEW LOCAL WELFARE: BEST PRACTICES  
AND NETWORKS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION**

Slawomir Mandes  
University of Warsaw

The book under review is a collection of texts that are the outgrowth of a conference held in June 2014 in Bologna. The collection was presented to readers a year after the conference and contains texts which vary in style and are loosely related thematically, ranging from considerations of theory to case studies. I will begin my review with a discussion of individual chapters to familiarize readers with the subject matter and help them in selecting those topics of interest to them. I concentrate, however, on the text by Donati in order to consider whether and to what degree the perspectives he proposes can be called innovative, and what are the consequences.

After a brief introduction the book opens with a text by Adelbert Evers and Benjamin Ewert, *Social Innovations on the Local Level: Approaches, Instruments, and Different Ways of Dealing with Them*. This is a synthesized summary of the results of the EU WILCO project. From the text we learn that the aim of the project was to investigate whether and in what way social micro-innovations can contribute to social inclusion and support local social policy. Without going into details or giving too large a number of examples, the authors discuss five dimensions of innovation that were identified thanks to the project. The article is undoubtedly a competent synthesis of the findings of a large study, but it is devoid of any discussion of the broader question of social innovations implemented by NGOs.

The text by Pete Alcock, *Reconstructing Poverty and Social Exclusion: Agency or Structure? The Implications for Policy and Practice in the UK*, contains a deftly written synthesis of the changes that have occurred in UK social policy. The account is divided into a consideration of structure—that is, the elements conditioning social exclusion—and agency, that is, individuals’ ability to pull themselves out of poverty by their own efforts. Alcock shows that British social policy has alternated between placing greater emphasis on the removal of structural barriers and wanting to help individuals to increase their agency. He does refer marginally to the connection between ongoing changes and NGOs, but this theme plays a secondary role in his text. Anglo-Saxon literature is already rich in analyses of the historical evolution of social policy in the UK, but Alcock’s text might be of use to someone looking for a synthesis.

Isabel Vidal called her text *The Role of the Third Sector in Local Welfare*, but the title is quite misleading because she addresses the question of the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on NGOs. Her answer to this question is based on fragmentary data and limited to Italy, Spain, and England. After a brief and rather superficial discussion of selected examples of NGO activity, the author arrives at the fairly obvious conclusion that in a time of austerity the significance of cooperation between various entities increases.

The next text brings another change of subject. Victor A. Pestoff considers the question of co-production in the text *Co-Production as Social Innovation in Public Services*. The article is largely theoretical in nature; the author considers various definitions and ways of conceptualizing the issue of co-production, seeking answers to the question of whether co-production is an “individual act” or “collective action,” or both. Incidentally, he also addresses the question of the durability of co-production. The article is undoubtedly worthy of recommendation to persons interested in this subject.

In *Shifting Ideas of Subsidiarity in the Netherlands: Old and New Private Initiatives in the Social Domain*, Paul Dekker focuses on Holland and analyses its policy in regard to initiatives that encourage citizens to act together for their neighbourhood or public facilities, or to care for their elderly relatives. In an interesting and organized manner, Dekker describes the evolution of Dutch social policy after World War II. In particular, he analyses the slow process of departing from a model based on religious “pillars.” In Holland, the institutions of the welfare state rested on “traditional subsidiarity.” Simply stated, this means they functioned under the auspices of religious institutions and to a large degree depended on the engagement of religiously motivated citizens. I will devote some extra space to this case

as it is particularly interesting in the context of Donati's arguments in the final part of the book.

The classic diagnosis of the crisis of the welfare state consists in pointing out its excessive wastefulness and ineffectiveness in fulfilling its tasks (compare Pierson 1998). Such a diagnosis leads directly to criticism of the national or local administration of which the welfare state is a part. Holland is one of the examples, besides Switzerland, which does not fit the description. Civil society, rather than the government, was the basis for the welfare state built there. The crisis resulted from secularization and individualization: the Dutch increasingly failed to identify with their faith group and were not prepared to devote time and money to supporting it. As Dekker writes, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of seeking "new subsidiarity," when the state unwillingly took upon itself the tasks previously performed by citizens. The role of NGOs also changed, with a shift from a substitutive role toward a complementary role. Based on research, Dekker shows that citizens want greater freedom and criticize bureaucracy for "interfering in their lives," but when it comes to a specific problem to be resolved—such as, for instance, looking after the elderly—they expect a competent national or local institution to take over. Even the best prepared programmes do not change this fact and therefore, in the opinion of the Dutch sociologist, the expectation that people can be forced into long-term engagement on behalf of others is naive.

In the next text, *Italian Local Welfare: Between Fragmentation and Social Innovation*, Luca Martignani analyses the organization of the Italian welfare state. The text is unclear in several places, which is partially due to a faulty translation and partly to the lack of clear definitions of the categories Martignani uses in his analysis.

The following text is on a different topic. In *New Social Risks and the Re-configuration of Local and National Welfare*, Giuliano Bonoli addresses the question of the influence of federalism on the development of the welfare state, showing that this form of government does not foster the development of welfare but leads to the various parts of the federation avoiding responsibility by shifting it from one to another. The analysis uses the examples of Germany and Switzerland. The question is undoubtedly interesting. In analyses of the welfare state, attention is usually focused on internal legal regulations and institutional actors, while the issue of a country's political system is rarely considered.

In *Personalization and Innovation in the Social Services in a Cold Financial Climate*, Nadia Brookes considers the issue—which has been much investi-

gated recently—of the personalization of social services. The range of her analysis is limited to examples collected in the UK. A major problem in fitting individual social services to the needs of specific small groups, or even individual people, is that it increases the cost of services, and Brookes questions what fate awaits personalized programmes in a period of economic crisis. The conclusions are not encouraging: the author expects that with tighter finances, there will be restrictions on innovative, personalized services, and this will lead to lowered effectiveness and a deepening of the crisis.

The final text of the book is a long essay by the co-editor, Pierpaolo Donati, entitled *Prospects: Are We Witnessing the Emergence of a New 'Relational Welfare State'?* Donati's text clearly differs from the others. We do not find in it any descriptions of innovation or analyses of changes in specific social policies. Donati has selected for himself a much more ambitious goal: on the basis of his sociological theory he wants to plan a radically new system of social policy. In part, his text offers a general diagnosis of contemporary Western societies, and in part a utopian description of what model of welfare state is most desirable, or even necessary, if these societies are to survive. The attempt to realize such an ambitious aim within a single article understandably forces Donati to considerable brevity and generalization, but as a result it is sometimes hard to tell what he is trying to say. Nevertheless, I will try to reconstruct the main lines of his argument and to consider whether he is in fact bringing something new to the numerous analyses of crises in the welfare state and whether he is truly proposing a new model.

The crisis of the welfare state is only one of the symptoms of a deeper crisis in Western societies. Thus to understand its genesis, according to Donati, we have to look from a broader perspective, because the essence of the problems troubling these societies is neither political nor economic in nature. For Donati, the crisis is above all a moral crisis, manifested in weak interpersonal relations and the disappearance of social responsibility in every sphere of life. This view is not new: Tony Judt, for instance, saw morality as the source of the crisis in the welfare state (2011). But while the American historian saw a prescription for the crisis in reforms, Donati doubts the efficacy of reform activities because they do not take the complexity of the situation into account.

To escape from the crisis is difficult, if at all possible, because it requires the resolution of six dilemmas:

increase individual freedom, while increasing the citizen's responsibility for the consequences of private behaviour, increase autonomy (self-management) for intermediate social spheres, while directing them to the common good, increase social security, while avoiding the bureaucratization of society, increase social equality, while respecting differences (for example, cultural or gender differences), respond to the needs of individuals, while promoting solidarity among persons, aspire to globalization, while responding to local needs (Donati 2015: 216).

On first glance, Donati appears to be one of these pessimists, who, like for example Alasdair MacIntyre, consider that Western societies have stumbled into a blind alley and are trying to come to terms with values that are mutually exclusive. However, Donati does not believe, like the Scottish philosopher, that salvation lies in a return to tradition. He does not reject modernity and its achievements, but he thinks that in order to preserve them, much must be changed.

Later in the text, his diagnosis of the crisis is simplified and slightly modified. In referring to Luhmann, Donati claims that the state of contemporary society is defined by an unsolvable contradiction between the state and the market. As he writes,

modernised systems are a mix of lib and lab, that is, lib/lab systems. Whenever the market (lib) is insolvent, one resorts to the state (lab), whenever the state (lab) is insolvent, one resorts to the market (lib). This is the game of modern economy, which attained its most accomplished model in the second half of the twentieth century. Our societies are still working on the basis of this framework, looking to stabilise economic cycles and a fairer resource distribution through lib/lab regulations (Donati 2015: 232).

The existing lib/lab system can not be reformed. A change in the proportions by which the state is linked to the market will not help; correcting individual market or state institutions will not avail. The problem lies in the values guiding the members of society, and therefore what is needed is “a radical change of the ethical principles,” to bring about a “new society” (Donati 2015: 217). The key to the “new society” is supposed to be “after-modern citizenship,” in which a connection “between *homme* and *citoyen*”

will occur (ibid.: 222). Who or what is to form the new citizen? It would seem—I write “seem” because it is not clear—that this is the task of “new welfare.”

We learn that “new welfare” is to be distinguished by two traits. First, it is to support “culture centred around quality of life” (Donati 2015: 225), instead of the “poverty or riches of industrialization” (ibid.). Second, “social policies are no longer limited to the state-market binomial, but demonstrate precise differentiated dynamics in other spheres” (ibid.). Emphasizing the significance of “quality of life” in the activities of welfare-state institutions is nothing specific. How is the welfare state, centred on quality of life, to operate? This we do not discover. On the other hand, in explaining the second trait of “new welfare,” Donati refers to the example of NGOs, whose activities contravene both the logic of the market and of the state, going beyond the lib/lab system.

Such new enterprises as low profit limited liability companies and community interest companies, as well as new financial markets, can produce a different response to the world economic crisis, not merely by adapting themselves but by giving moral standards priority in economic and social action and by being able to modify life, work and consumption styles. Compared with traditional capitalist enterprises, such enterprises have a number of peculiar features: for instance, they produce relational goods (and more generally intangible goods), they show greater flexibility and value lateral social mobility rather than upward or downward job mobility (Donati 2015: 241).

I have quoted a longer passage here, because it is one of the rare instances where Donati more precisely defines what he means by “new welfare.” However, it is difficult to learn from this passage, or in the rest of the text, how such an NGO-ization of society is to occur.

Donati also appears to adopt an idealized image of NGOs. It is to be regretted that he did not refer to Paul Dekker’s text, which contains a penetrating analysis of the failure of a welfare-state model in which NGOs played a key role. Donati might reply that the Dutch are an example of the moral crisis destroying Western societies. In order for the postulated model to work, the above-mentioned “after-modern citizenship” is necessary. Yet Donati writes about NGOs as a kind of school for shaping that “after-modern citizenship,” while Dekker has convincingly shown that NGOs

can mobilize certain people to act for a certain period, but that such energy is quickly exhausted and then either the state must intervene again or the market reappears.

To this point in Donati's reflections the idea of a "relational welfare state" is entirely absent; it is only mentioned at the end of the text. Unfortunately, Donati focuses on describing the idea of a "relational state"—which is familiar from earlier texts (Donati 2002/3, 2004b)—and what we learn about the "relational welfare state" is limited to a single paragraph, from which it follows, first, that the local welfare state is responsible for the creation and support of "the complex citizenship" mentioned above, and second, "at the local level, the welfare state is no longer the centre and vertex of society; it does not 'produce' the latter, but becomes a subsystem that has to act in a subsidiary way towards all other subsystems providing welfare (market, third sector, families and informal networks) by adopting forms of social governance working through social networks" (Donati 2015: 251). Of what are these relations to consist and how do they differ from what scholars discuss under the heading of "new governance"? It is not clear.

Donati is trying, in a brief text, simultaneously to promote the "new society" model and to present a diagnosis of the crisis. He touches on many themes, involving the economy, the family, and the state. The question of the welfare state is only a pretext for these reflections and it is hard to say whether what he has written opens new perspectives for the study of the welfare state. Claims that the welfare state is in crisis are as old as the welfare state itself. Many volumes have been written on the subject, and many more will doubtless appear. No institutional solutions are perfect, or permanent, and faced with new challenges the welfare state will fall into crisis, which must be diagnosed as a point of departure. Donati does not add anything new to the existing analyses of the crisis of the modern welfare state. His ambitions do not lie in reforming specific institutions, but in the moral regeneration of all society. Here, however, we are moving onto more uncertain ground, as judgment depends on viewpoint—the general philosophical premises and values guiding the author. Donati is not a typical conservative fixed on the models of the past. He rather follows in the traces of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in seeing modernity as a Gordian knot of untieable paradoxes and contradictions and in hoping for some kind of "new society." And, like many others, he follows in the path of the French philosopher by demanding a revolution—although it is supposed to be a spiritual revolution, an ethical change that will enable people to combine



the contradictions of our modernity in a new fashion. Donati does not give a specific prescription for how the revolution is to be conducted. This seems to be the proper strategy, because when he does come down to the level of the concrete—as in the case of NGOs—his postulates are fairly artless.

Is *Towards a New Local Welfare*... worth reading? That depends. The book is a typical post-conference collection of works. It is a selection of more or less interesting texts on various questions which do not form a coherent whole. This is not a fault in itself: readers can find the texts that will interest them in such a variety. However, it is certain that the promise contained in the title is not fulfilled and that aside from Donati no one deliberates on the question of “new local welfare.” It is thus difficult to state whether relational sociology has expanded our knowledge about the welfare state. And is this the proper perspective from which to make philosophical reflections on the subject of a possible “new society”? Readers will have to judge for themselves.

transl. Michelle Granas

#### Bibliography:

/// Donati P. 2002/2003. *Welche soziale Inklusion? “Lib/lab’sches Neo-Panopticon” und sozietale Staatsbürgerschaft: zwei verschiedene sozialpolitische Strategien*, “Soziologisches Jahrbuch”, vol. 16, pp. 392–426.

/// Donati P. 2004. *Nuevas políticas sociales y Estado social relacional*, “Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas”, vol. 108(1), pp. 9–47.

/// Donati P. 2015. *Prospects: Are We Witnessing the Emergence of a New ‘Relational Welfare State’?*, [in:] *Towards a New Local Welfare: Best Practices and Networks of Social Inclusion*, eds. P. Donati, L. Martignani, Bononia University Press, pp. 207–255.

/// Donati P., Martignani L., eds. 2015. *Towards a New Local Welfare: Best Practices and Networks of Social Inclusion*, Bononia Univeristy Press.

/// Judt T. 2011. *Ill Fares the Land*, Penguin Books.

/// Pierson Ch. 1998. *Beyond the Welfare State? The New Political Economy of Welfare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Pennsylvania State University Press.



**/// Sławomir Mandes**—assistant professor in the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw. He worked as participant or coordinator of many national and international research projects concerning social policy and religion. Currently he is engaged in the newest edition of “European Values Study.” He is the author of books, many reports and articles related directly to problems of religion and the relation of religion to other spheres of social systems: social policy, national and personal identity.

E-mail: [slawomir.mandes@gmail.com](mailto:slawomir.mandes@gmail.com)

