

THE SOUTHERN EUROPEAN WELFARE MODEL AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

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Summary

Southern Europe is here seen as a relatively homogeneous macro-region (including Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece) where similar social and historical factors delimit similar processes of change, social tensions, and policies. The southern European welfare model is based on a weak and inefficient but interventionist state, strong regionalism and localism, the persistent diffusion of small family businesses, and a relatively high level of family responsibility for welfare services (coupled with persistent economic inequalities affecting women).

The characteristics of the model are reflected both in the specific forms assumed by poverty and social exclusion and in the policies for dealing with these problems. New forms of urban poverty involve fewer minorities and individuals isolated from family and community, typical of other European countries, and more large families and the local youth discriminated against in the access to the labor market. The territorial syndrome is different from that of the ghetto and the *banlieu*. Family and communities remain responsive but themselves suffer the effects of the new poverty syndromes. Public policies reflect the persisting high level of subsidiarity and concomitant family responsibility, community and voluntary, traditional and innovative initiatives, and a high level of informal activities.

1. Introduction

The question of poverty, as it is today, emerges with the full development of industrial societies, characterized by the spread of urbanization and increasingly heightened forms of individualism. It was already pointed out by Adam Smith and Alexis de Tocqueville that industrial transformation undermines traditional community protection and exposes

individuals to market competition (commodification). Those who for various reasons (age, illness or disability, inability to communicate or be informed, job skills deficit, and so on) do not manage to procure in the market the resources needed to live end up being economically dependent, since survival and social integration depend on help from family, kin, friends and neighbors, charity and welfare associations and, more and more, the state. Beyond these forms of support, households and individuals are in a condition of poverty if they do not have sufficient resources to satisfy needs considered as socially necessary. The various phases of industrial development have given rise to new risks of pauperization (and hence different ways of combating them), starting with the dramatic poverty in the Victorian cities and the indigence extending throughout the peasantry on the continent of Europe up to the more recent forms of urban poverty and the alarm over the risk of social exclusion.

The whole question is complicated by the fact that modern poverty is not a static problem but, rather, a dynamic process within which persistent difficulties turn into social marginalization that over time becomes worse and may be passed on to future generations. Continuing poverty not only imposes life conditions that undermine integration into the community of belonging and individual self-confidence; it also inhibits investment of resources in activities essential for fostering social reinsertion, such as health care, basic education, and job skills updating. In this sense, poverty is a social question of great importance whenever it is not just a temporary setback but turns into a malign circuit from which it is increasingly difficult to exit. From this derive the rationales underlying the modern social policies to combat poverty that have arisen in various ways in different historical and sociocultural contexts.

In the first part of this article, the historical process in which pauperization is grounded will be taken into account so as to make clear what the present-day conditions are that bring about malign circuits of poverty; the problem of sociocultural diversity is then addressed to bring into focus the specific features of the southern European model.

2. Problem and Context

The historical transition from agricultural to industrial societies brought about, not one, but three different modern forms of poverty, which reached their peak during the nineteenth century. In England, following a precocious and complete deruralization, poverty affected vast numbers of the urbanized population. They were exposed to a poorly regulated labor market in which the surplus supply kept wages down and the living conditions in the cities and high degree of mobility meant it was practically impossible to seek help from kin, friends, and the local community. The parliamentary investigations (the Blue Books) in the second half of the century revealed widespread destitution in all the industrial cities. This alarming situation was confirmed towards the end of the century by the first studies of urban poverty by Booth (1889) in London and Rowntree (1901) in York. The latter brought to light a recurrent and generalized link between poverty and workers' biographies in which the peaks of greatest hardship coincided with the birth and early childhood of progeny, especially in large families, and with old age, when workers were no longer competitive on the market and not protected by a pension system or help from their offspring; these often lived far away and were, in any case, at the difficult stage of setting up their own families.

During the same period, in the countries of continental Europe (but also in Ireland and Japan) urban poverty was limited by the fact that the newly urbanized working class maintained close ties of solidarity with their kin and community of origin in the countryside. In these contexts peasant-workers and other forms of solidarity and exchange within the kinship network were very common. They allowed workers to go on enjoying the resources and support of peasant kin, above all in the crucial phases of new family formation and old age, while peasants with worker relatives could count on small-scale financial help from the outside to soften the impact of competition and indebtedness. This was a process of modernization with the persistence and adaptation of rural community traditions that involved both the modes of industrial development in the above-mentioned countries and the culture of many emigrant communities. It was above all the peasants exposed to the global competition of mechanized agriculture who underwent an impoverishment that forced millions of families to emigrate. In some of the late-developer countries, especially in southern Europe, rural poverty and emigration has persisted over a much longer period right up to the present day.

In the countries of immigration, mainly the United States but also Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, poverty had a selective effect on immigrant life and integration experiences. For many of them, the difficulties were concentrated in the early stages, but for the groups most discriminated against which were unable to organize stable community solidarity (like the relationship in continental Europe between new workers and their rural communities of origin), the difficulties persisted and were handed down from one generation to the next, causing migratory projects to fail. Chinese workers engaged in building the coast-to-coast railway in the United States are one example: whereas later Chinese immigrants were able to set up protective communities (Chinatown), in this first phase both mortality and the number of repatriations and deportations were very high.

These three forms assumed by poverty in the first stage of industrialization are relevant for two reasons. First, this division clearly illustrates that exposure to a similar process of change can have different repercussions. As shown below, the mechanisms of differentiation are important even today in a context of globalization and flexibilization. In southern European countries, the typical ways of managing poverty inside the family and the peasant kinship group still help to explain the present pauperization syndromes and the social policies to combat urban poverty.

In the thirty glorious years after the Second World War, continuous strong economic growth, expansion of adult male employment in high-productivity big industry, consumerism, the general spread of standardized and stable nuclear families and, more than anything, the development of state welfare programs helped to challenge everywhere the idea that the typical association between industrialization and impoverishment would endure. The combination of economic growth and increasing state intervention seemed to reduce poverty to temporary or incidental episodes that could be kept under control through social policies. It was only after the oil crises of the 1970s, the onset of drastic de-industrialization and economic restructuring, and the fiscal crisis of the state that malign circuits of impoverishment (in varied and at least partly new forms compared with the past) attracted once again the attention of academics, politicians, and the general public.

Contemporary changes are affecting all three areas which have provided a basis for the equilibrium of the various regimes of welfare capitalism: employment and labor market; family and demographic systems; regulatory capacity of the state and state welfare intervention. With regard to the first, the combination of de-industrialization and tertiarization, together with the very large numbers of married women entering paid non-agricultural jobs, is tending to make working careers more unstable and heterogeneous to the detriment of low-skilled adult males in particular. As to population, increased life span, unstable marriages, the spread of *de facto* families and extramarital births are impairing the regulatory and micro-redistributive capacity of the postwar standard nuclear family. Lastly, the capacity for and legitimacy of public expenditure and regulatory intervention by the nation-state is becoming increasingly problematic in concomitance with an increase in and growing diversity of needs.

The new poverty and the risks of social exclusion stand at the intersection of these processes of change. Isolated individuals, single-parent or large families, the elderly living alone, immigrants and minorities show a high support deficit if the work they find is unstable, precarious, part-time or, in any case, poorly paid (the income is low in the case of many pensioners) and, at the same time, unprotected by a modernized network of totally or partially public services (for instance, home care). In a climate in which educational and occupational credentials and communication and literacy skills are important for social inclusion, poverty once again assumes the full significance of a malign circuit of social exclusion. Being poor over a long period, even when receiving benefit or partial assistance, is a form of social “disinsertion” that sets subjects adrift with little possibility of return. This is all the more so if poverty is concentrated in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods or groups where the normal difficulties of the malign circuit are aggravated by conditions of institutional discrimination.

As mentioned above, these processes of change have features and repercussions that vary according to the context. Before returning to the question of present-day poverty in southern European countries and of how social policies are being geared to tackle it, we need to reconstruct the parameters for distinguishing the different welfare models and pinpoint the specific historical characteristics of the southern European one.

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Biographical Sketch

Enzo Mingione was born in 1947 in Milan, Italy. His main fields of interest are poverty, social exclusion, informal sector, unemployment, and economic sociology. From 1991 to 1999 he was professor of sociology at the University of Padua. He is now professor of sociology (Advanced Course) at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Recent activities include: (1977–1998) member of the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Blackwell: Oxford; (1984–present) president of the Fondazione Bignaschi, Milan (Foundation for the assistance and study of the aged); (1990–present) member of the Editorial Executive Board of the Journal *Inchiesta*; (1995–1997) vice-president of the Italian Sociological Association; (1995–1996) coordinator of the subproject on Social Exclusion of the Project of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) “Governance and Economic Development”; (1996–1998) coordinator of the Italian part of the EU Project ESOP (The Evaluation of Social Policies against Social Exclusion at the Local Urban Level); (1996–1998) member of the EU Experts Group on Future of Work and Perspectives of Labour Law in the context of Social Regulation. His books include: *Urban Poverty and the Underclass: A Reader* (1996, Oxford: Blackwell); *Sociologia della vita economica* (1998, Rome: Carocci Editore); *Le sfide dell’esclusione: metodi, luoghi, soggetti* (1999 (editor), Bologna: Il Mulino).