



[Giovanni Perazzoli](#) □

***Contro la miseria. Viaggio nell'Europa del nuovo welfare*, Editori Laterza, 2014. □□**

Tutti i disoccupati avranno l'alloggio pagato e un assegno minimo vitale a condizione di frequentare dei corsi di formazione e di accettare il lavoro proposto dal centro dell'impiego. Se sui giornali leggessimo di una proposta del genere fatta dal governo italiano, rimarremmo sbalorditi. Eppure, per un tassista di Parigi, per un operaio di Berlino o per un giovane di Londra il reddito garantito è una realtà di tutti i giorni. Da decenni, la disoccupazione in Europa viene affrontata con potenti strumenti di welfare che prevedono, oltre a un sussidio vitale, assegni per le coppie, per i figli, per chi avvia un'impresa, corsi di formazione, trasporti, riscaldamento e molto altro. In Italia tutto questo non esiste. Siamo una gigantesca anomalia e ne rendiamo conto.

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da

[Giovanni Perazzoli](#)

A call for harmonisation of the unemployment benefits

Claus Offe, the German philosopher and sociologist, is right in identifying the harmonisation of the different unemployment benefit systems of European Countries as one of the necessary

measures to counter right and left wing populism, as well as the EU consensus crisis.

Despite recommendations from the EU, Italy and Greece have never adopted the protections for unemployment that characterise the European social model.

In Italy, a national welfare system appears as the only one possible, but remains well below the European standard.

While throughout almost all of Europe it seems rather obvious that a person looking for a job, say, a young man of sixteen or eighteen (twenty-five in France), should enjoy a range of benefits – a monthly income for as long as it takes him to find a job, housing, allowances for children, health insurance – not only none of this exist in Italy, but it appears to the public as unfeasible, unworkable. So there is a part of Europe which considers normal what the other part considers utopia. It is not something of little significance.

Let's take [Ireland](#), for example. Despite having a far from oppressive taxation system, each unemployed person can count on €806 a month; a childless couple €1347; a couple with a child about €1476; a couple with two children will get €1605 and €1734 with three children.

The total amounts are not taxable. It should be emphasised that these subsidies, in Ireland as in other countries, last as long as the state of unemployment: that is, they have no time limit. To these, a possible housing benefit is added.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ireland, unlike Mediterranean countries, is already out of the crisis. Greece and Italy have no form of benefits for the unemployed, while Spain and Portugal don't have benefits as uniform and generous as those in northern Europe.

The issue is not only relevant to the contrasting levels of misery: the benefit of these subsidies is above all in increasing the availability to business risk, while reducing the role of intermediaries, who play a central role in the forms of welfare oriented towards aid and patronage.

The universal model of welfare for the unemployed is similar in all Northern European countries. In Germany, every unemployed individual can count on €382 per month plus allowances for rent, heating and healthcare, together with reductions on public transport. For each child under five years €224 are added every month; from five years up to thirteen years, €255; thirteen to seventeen years old, €289.

From an [official German website](#): a single parent with an eight-year-old-son, in addition to the basic subsidy, receives another €255, to which €46 should be added, always for the child, up to a total of €683.

Another example: a family with a fifteen-year-old-son, where both parents are unemployed, receives €979 per month. The figure is the sum of the €690 the two parents receive (€345 for each parent) and the €289 for the child. If the son were seventeen, then they would be entitled to another €287, up to a total of €1,266 per month.

In France, one acquires the right to the Revenu de solidarité active at the age of twenty-five, a condition which does not apply for those who have a child or children to take care of: in this case, one is entitled to the subsidy earlier.

§The amounts are as follows: €467 for a single person; €799 for a single parent family with one child; €980 for a couple with two children; €1,167 for a couple with three children.

The condition is, as for other forms of guaranteed minimum income, the willingness to look for work, or even the willingness to start one's own business.

Now, the fact that in Italy what is normal in most of Europe is considered utopian is significant not only on a social level (i.e. the lack of redistributive measures that are considered necessary and essential in other countries) but on the political level as well.

A poor knowledge of European welfare policies promotes a grim depiction of Europe as surly and antisocial, and fuels anti-European populism.

This occurs especially when the demand for reform from 'Europe' clashes with national welfare. Among influential Italian journalists and non-fiction authors prevails the story, between catastrophic and smug, of the end of the welfare state. Europe is presented as a danger, not as an opportunity.

The context is missing. It might be true that, compared to the standards of the past, quite a few things have changed in the European social model.

However, compared to Italy, the current standards of European welfare remain in Utopia. And as long as they remain in Utopia, they cannot be a model for improving (and reforming) the welfare system.

In Britain, the proposal to reform the welfare system, which the BBC has defined of historical value, met with a very strong reaction.

Prime Minister David Cameron announced that young people between eighteen and twenty-four years old will no longer be allowed to 'leave school, sign up for welfare, find an apartment (flat), request that it be paid for by the Housing Benefit and opt for a life in welfare'.

According to Cameron, in fact, 'The time has come for a change' ("The Guardian", October 2, 2013). If young people want to keep the benefits that allow them to live alone, they must agree to go to school or attend an apprenticeship course.

Is this the end of welfare? It depends. In Italy it seems hardly possible to imagine a set of reforms which would allow unemployed young people to live alone, on the condition that they take an apprenticeship course or go to school.

It escapes the Italian public opinion entirely that the restrictive welfare reforms in other European countries were motivated (rightly or wrongly) by the idea that unemployment benefits encourage unemployment, or produce a 'welfare trap'.

In short, why should I work if I can live on benefits? An attempt was made then, more or less all over Europe, to reduce the ability of the unemployed to refuse work offered by Job Centres.

Those who refuse jobs risk losing their subsidies. The Job Centres themselves have been reformed, to make them more efficient in finding a job for their 'clients' (as they say now).

The back to work policy begun by Tony Blair is found in the Hartz reforms in Germany, which are also motivated by the need to bring people back into work, reducing, though not by much, the subsidies and introducing labour contracts (mini-jobs) which the unemployed can access without losing their benefits.

This type of reform has the (far from secondary) effect of reducing labour costs by reducing the reservation wage. These reforms have not necessarily resulted in a reduction of social expenditure: in France, for example, the RSA, which has replaced the RMI, stipulates that the unemployed can maintain some subsidies if their work income does reach minimum wage.

There is certainly an ideological component in the idea that social welfare is responsible for unemployment. But the issue here is not to evaluate this aspect, but rather to contextualise the meaning of reforms which, taken out of context, are entirely biased in Italy.

An example is the reception of mini-jobs, which were presented as underemployment, with employment contracts as low as €450 per month, basically China in Europe.

In reality, mini-jobs are part-time contracts that include benefits for the unemployed: housing, allowances for each child, health insurance and part of the unemployment cheque. They are so unlike a job that they imply unemployment benefits.

In Germany there are those who defended those who criticised them. About a year ago, in

France, the General Secretary of a historical trade union, Thierry Lepaon, declared that in Germany more than seven million people were under-employed, earning less than €460 per month.

Similar statements were made in Italy. [Thierry Lepaon](#), however, was proven wrong by the French-German television ARTE, in a programme developed in collaboration with "Libération". The title of ARTE's program is showing: [Dossier Désintox. La parole des politiques soumise à contre-enquête](#), (Dossier detoxification. Speeches of politicians subjected to counter-investigation).

It's not true – says the detox pill – that seven million Germans earn €450 per month. It is true that 2.6 million workers in Germany combine their mini-job with a full-time job, while the remaining 4 million or so mini-job workers are students or mothers who split their time between house and children.

And then there are the unemployed, people who, in addition to their mini-job, are entitled to a subsidy, with all the accompanying benefits.

The criticisms that have been made in many European countries about the reform of the labour market and welfare for the unemployed cannot be transposed to Italy. There is not a common platform. If you looked at the contents, you would discover the sharp differences, even of an ideological nature.

For example: the Italian left is strongly 'labourist,' while many protest movements – notably in Germany, where a strong argument is made for Basic Income, of which one of the most prominent supporters is Claus Offe – are critical of the centrality of traditional work expressed by the back to work programme.

The Italian situation is completely different. Though the welfare systems of the European social model were born with Beveridge, combining full employment and benefits for the unemployed, forms of 'guaranteed minimum income' (benefits for the unemployed) are seen in Italy as related to the destruction of the value of regular work, the counterpart of flexibility, the end of a society of full employment.

In reality, however, in Italy – as the European Union's 2006 Report on Work certifies – one finds the same flexibility as that available in an Anglo-Saxon country, though without the protections of welfare.

The distrust for European welfare has deep roots in Italy. It is no coincidence that of the many theories on the origin of the welfare state, the one which is taken almost as a cliché in Italy, is the so-called Conspiratorial Theory.

According to this view, welfare would have arisen within a plan to contrast Soviet communism, to then decline with the decline of the Soviet Union.

Now, aside from not explaining why Italy, which had the strongest communist party in the West, remained well behind the rest of Europe in the development of a welfare state – the conspiracy thesis reveals that, after all, Italian political culture does not recognise an independent European social policy, with its own autonomous social thought.

The European social model is seen only as reflection of a tactic: thus something specific to Europe, a social model capable of attracting American liberals like Paul Krugman, is nothing more than the product of a conservative tactic.

Harmonising the systems of protection of the unemployed is therefore much more than a social measure to combat poverty: it is the opportunity to overcome a very deep difference in political culture.

Contro la miseria - A call for harmonisation of the unemployment benefits

Scritto da Giovanni Perazzoli

Translation by Julian Siravo