

Collectivising the responsibility for welfare provision from below: the case of social movements during the pandemic

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Since the end of the 80s, welfare state retrenchment signalled a retreat of the State from its regulatory function of market inequalities. This has come with a shift in responsibility for social risks protection from the State to the individual towards a workfare paradigm. While its nature as a distinctive model is still debated, literature has stressed that the importance of individual responsibility has only been overemphasized by the Social Investment Approach. As a consequence, the welfare state, originally envisaged as the institution in charge of making social rights enjoyable, is now more focused on ensuring the economic efficiency of the system. In this context, streamlining the public spending and pushing recipients back into the labour market have become pressing concerns of welfare policies. Moreover, the turn towards welfare conditionality since the mid-1990s problematically hinted to a distinction between deserving and undeserving citizens, with the risk of a decrease in the social safeguards, particularly for the worse-off members of society.

Against these changes at institutional level, non-institutional agents have been putting forward a different vision of the notion of responsibility in welfare provision. This has been particularly evident during the Covid-19 emergency. While the outbreak of the global pandemic worsened already aggrieved individual socioeconomic conditions, it prompted a proliferation of non-institutional agents in social rights provision. Among them, many social movement organisations have been engaged in alternative and self-managed forms of welfare delivery from below as a way to respond to the material needs exacerbated by the crises and by the cuts in public spending. However, we have little clues about the notion of responsibility that their practices entail. On the one hand, indeed, welfare studies have focused on the historical role civil society actors had in the development of welfare systems. They have emphasized their heterogeneity, shedding light on their possibility of performing different roles and functions, including exerting pressure on the State, demanding an enlargement of social rights or challenging the principles of public intervention. On the other hand, social movement scholarship has showed that agents from the social movement milieu turn to answer to citizens' needs as response to welfare retrenchment in the context of economic crisis - with specific reference to the 2008 economic crisis in Italy. But which social risks are they tackling? what kind of visions and principles are embedded in alternative welfare practices? What are their

normative grounds and how do these grounds relate with the emerging Social Investment paradigm?

This paper aims to answer these questions on social movements organisations providing welfare from below during and beyond the pandemic by unpacking the normative underpinnings embedded in their actions. Our argument is that they provided a counterhegemonic vision of responsibility, whereby social risks and the solutions to them are framed in collective rather than in individual terms. To this end, by advancing a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews, this paper analyses two of these experiences, one in Milan and one in Senigallia (AN), in order to show the different perspective on responsibility engrained in these practices. We suggest that, while helping those most in need through mutual aid during the pandemic, these social movement organisations have also fostered a collective conception of responsibility, opposite to the one promoted by the welfare conditionality. In doing so, the paper brings together two debates that have lived a relatively separate life so far. While, indeed, responsibility in welfare provision has predominantly been at the centre of welfare sociology studies, grassroots political experiences engaged in direct social actions have mainly attracted the attention of social movement scholarship. The notion of responsibility is therefore proposed as a suitable conceptual tool to bridge these literatures. In this way, the paper aims to shed light on the potential of welfare from below as normative baseline for social policy.