

Poverty regimes: a new analytical approach to the study of poverty

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In this paper, we propose a new approach for the comparative study of poverty based on the analysis of the structural factors that determine its dimensions and characteristics in different countries. Comparative analysis of poverty at the European level has mainly focused on groups particularly at risk (children, in-work poverty, single parents), methodological aspects, and the role of welfare policies (e.g. Cantillon and Vandenbroucke, 2014; Marx and Nolan, 2014; Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Nolan and Whelan, 2011; Caminada and Goudswaard, 2012; Halvorsen and Hvinden, 2016). In contrast, little attention has been paid to the conceptualisation of poverty as a consequence of the patterns of social regulation characteristic of different countries. In this paper we therefore propose an original approach, partly already developed in Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio (2020, 2022), starting from a Polanyian perspective. Poverty is conceptualised as a structural phenomenon produced by the specific institutional arrangements that assumed by the forms of distribution of resources (reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange), and by their interaction. The size (fraction of the population affected), the characteristics (social groups and types of households most at risk) and the dynamics of poverty thus depend on the general arrangements that regulate the way families are formed and function (as providers of care and incomes and other resources, as well as the place where choices of labour market participation are made); the economic organisation and in particular the labour market and the system of industrial relations; the characteristics of the public welfare system and its interactions with no profit organisations.

By the term 'poverty regime' we mean that poverty is not an unpredictable condition or simply attributable to misbehaviour, but a structural component of society, which therefore requires structural interventions to be contrasted. Although long-term exposure to poverty can affect the behaviour and attitudes of those affected, for example by inhibiting 'the ability to aspire' (Appadurai 2004), what we intend to show is that it is the concomitance of various structural processes that leads to this result.

Although our interpretative analytical model can apply to all countries, our analysis focuses on European countries. Starting from a series of Eurostat indicators that can be traced back to the three mentioned spheres (reciprocity-family, redistribution-welfare, exchange-labour market) and to the characteristics of poverty, an analysis is carried out to characterise the 27 EU countries and to construct a typology that brings

them together in a limited number of poverty regimes. Using a descriptive method of analysis, five regimes are identified: Continental-Nordic, Germanic, Mediterranean, Eastern and Eastern deprived. Statistical checks confirm the internal consistency of the regimes and their mutual exclusivity. Further analyses on a specific type of poverty (in-work poverty), conducted on EU-SILC micro data, confirm the usefulness of the poverty regimes approach in predicting the risk of impoverishment.

The paper aims to contribute from a theoretical perspective to understanding the origin of poverty in developed societies, showing its structural and systematic nature and how regimes tend to aggregate at the European level. This perspective can be useful from several points of view. Firstly, it allows us to characterise poverty as an overall phenomenon and not just by reference to some of its manifestations. Secondly, it clearly shows how merely culturalist or behaviourist readings of poverty are incapable of explaining poverty as a phenomenon with systematic characteristics. Finally, we believe it could stimulate further research in at least two directions. The first concerns the possibility of giving complex keys to explain specific dimensions of poverty, in areas such as disability, old age, migrants. The second, on the other hand, refers to the possibility of using the regimes approach also at the sub-national level in order to verify the possible existence of different territorial regimes (city vs. countryside, metropolitan centre vs. sub-urban areas, economically more developed vs. depressed areas).

Last but not least, we think that the regimes approach, by making the structural and institutional origin of poverty clearer, can contribute to more effective policies against poverty.