

Reviews

Donati, P. (2012). *Family policy: A relational Approach*. Milano: Franco Angeli, pp. 143.

It is a provocative essay in relation to the dominant culture and therefore deserves special attention. There are two concepts around which develops the reflection in which the author forwards any specific proposals: the concept of family and the concept of family policy. Both are analyzed and defined by contrast: “not this but that.”

About the concept of family, the author criticizes the use of the term to indicate the plurality of forms of housing recorded today, as it appears, for example, in population surveys.

I define the family as a social relation, and not simply as an aggregate of people. From the viewpoint of relational realism, the family is an emergent effect, with its powers and qualities. I realize that many scholars do not share these views. They hold that the position taken here could be discriminatory against different forms of families, in particular one parent families and homosexual families. This criticism, I believe, misunderstands my position. I do not intend to support any form of discrimination. I recognize the dignity of any human person irrespective of his/her sexual orientation, and I share the need for the implementation of human rights, in particular the social equality between men and women. What I wish to avoid is the conflation between the logic of distinction and the logic of discrimination and oppression. Discrimination is to treat unequally what/whom is equal. But in case social relations are different in their qualities and powers, then they have to be treated differently (logic of distinction). The logic of distinction is progressive, the logic of discrimination is regressive. That is why I assume the former and refuse the latter. (pp. 9-10)

I have in mind dozens of recent monographs that lack of clarity on this point and that put every phenomenon in the same plane, ignoring the scientific consistency, the one that Abbot called “Scientifically correct” in his review of the book a few years ago edited by Hofferth and Casper (2007). He wrote: “What happens when measurement is theory-free? As

shown in this volume, there are voluminous and disparate results and conclusions without a unifying whole. If one were to conceive of a theory as a coat-hanger, where conclusions are connected by a major holding core, in this volume conclusions lacks that holding core. If this is not the case, what is the long term outcome of theory-free emphasis on measurement? At best there may exist the creation of various and separate models to account for findings and conclusion about a particular topic. Once this outcome is accepted as practice, how is one to link all these disparate findings, conclusions, and models? Here is where the importance of conceptual development comes into being, when “theory” is conceptualized as a speculative framework linking together various models deriving either from empirically-based findings and conclusions or that lend themselves to empirical verification” (personal communication, September, 2012).

In our correspondence of these days, I would reply: “I agree with your observation that scientific development must be consistent between theory, research and application”. I find confirmation in a “lesson” by Giovanni Sartori (2008), a political scientist who wonders why most scientific theories are contradicted by the facts and he answers that are missing in connection with the actual facts. I find confirmation in a “lesson” by Giovanni Sartori, a political scientist who wonders why most scientific theories are contradicted by the facts and he answers that are missing in connection with the actual facts: “scholars have focused in matching theory and research forgetting to test your applications” (p. 94). I press then my interlocutor: the situation that you detect is reversed, but the conclusion is the same: theory, research and applied science must go forward together. And that’s what you sees as deficient.

And I keep: In the case of family studies examined, you talk about “American family”, I am referring to the “European family”: we can refer to families in Western culture? For some years now, you prefer to use the term “Intimate relationships” instead of “Family relationships” because you note that intact families are up to 25% of the population and we must also look to the 75% that remains outside (and probably most in need of intervention). However, it was also only 25% of couples who choose a common project of long perspective are selffull and only 5% of these couples experience intimacy with continuity, perhaps then that the concept selffull or intimacy will no longer be considered as founding a successful relationship? I do not think so, although it is possible that the quality “selfful” or “intimacy” may be higher in some homosexual couple or single partner. From the point of view of Relational Competence Theory (on which we are working together for years), this possible but it should be probed empirically. Donati thinks at socio-relational area and takes a stand

for a consistent definition of family ... and here comes the concept mentioned above.

From his definition of family, Donati develops his reflection establishing a “new citizenship of the family” (chapter 1), the fundamental principles of family policy (chapter 2), the Necessary conditions for the family to be a real social entity (chapter 3), the guidelines of a family policy founded on subsidiarity and intergenerational solidarity (chapter 4).

Then he deserves some emphasis on the second concept, that of family policy. Again a contrast between a political lib-lab (Type A Policies) and a societal policy (Type B Policies).

There are Type A policies, the: distributive model, based on the provision of State-run services and interventions, integrated by third sector agencies. These third sector organizations would mostly carry in operational roles, although they might share in some phases of the planning of services and interventions at the local level. This is an easier model to follow, both because it fits into the respective logics of the State and the market and thus does not question their dominance. Additionally it reduces the need to empower families with freedom and responsibility and thus does not involve the effort demanded by producing a relational good.

Type B policies comprise a promotional model, which maximizes the value of the family relation and of exchanges among families. These would be promoted and rewarded by public and private institutions, in accordance with a principle of complex subsidiarity. This is a more difficult model to plan and implement than the previous one, because it relies on the creation and support of relatively autonomous, mostly private social service providers pursuing the production of primary and secondary relational goods.¹³ The crisis of the distributive model would then be addressed through the inclusion of measures typical of the promotional model. But this still does not properly and adequately establish the social subjectivity of the family (p. 103)

All Western democracies work according the Type A and – Donati says – family policies are diluted into the more general social ones and more particularly into those against poverty, so that family is lost as a social subject. On the other hand, societal policies rejects the concept of family burden and opposes one-sided, charitable assistance. Instead it would promote the family as the subject of social policy choices. Through those choices the family exercises its freedom and assumes its responsibilities in its capacity of bearer of a system of rights and duties. Here he takes the concepts of subsidiarity and nonprofit sector to indicate how are conjugated inside the Type B policies, even if the boundary between lib/lab and societal policies is not always easily identifiable. His conclusion is: a new

step is required because social policies in Europe have failed and there is every reason to say that societal policies are desirable and possible. I reply: desirable o.k., but possible? Two observations come to mind to me.

First, however interesting and logically motivated the perspective advanced by Donati, however a sufficient test of the viability of its alternative is missing. He has served for many years as Scientific Director of the National Observatory on the Family of the Italian Government and he is the drafter of the National Plan for the Family approved by the Council of Ministers on 7 June 2012. Even at a first reading, the congruence between the plan and the proposals inside the book is obvious. For example, the guiding principles are: (a) social citizenship of the family, meaning the family as the subject to invest in for the future of the country, enhancing its function for social cohesion and for an equitable relationship between the generations; (b) explicit policies on the family: so far in our country interventions for families or were dictated by the emergency and therefore necessarily fragmented and disorganized, or indirect, that is reflected sometimes unaware of other policies. Instead, it's time to outline a comprehensive framework of interventions that have the family as a specific target; (c) subsidiarity and the development of human and social capital, in the sense that interventions must be implemented so as not to replace but to support and strengthen the functions and independent families. A logic of empowerment and therefore not a mere welfare of families and their members, that draws on their ability to social and economic initiative; (d) solidarity, understood as a reinforcement of associative networks of families, especially in the case of associations not only provide services to people, but they are a support and protection from loneliness, a place of encounter and exchange (2012). There is one point to be noted by me, that the plan for now is to keep silent because there are no resources to begin implementation. The federalist ambitions of these years confirm the effective no-feasibility!

Is still worthwhile to reflect on Donati's assertion that "Europe has put in place policies lib/lab and failed". But Rampini (2012) says in his recent essay: "It is not true! In Northern Europe, for example in Finland, the welfare state works fine." And here the circle closes with the reference to Sartori's reflection: "Social sciences have taken a wrong turn. The road to focus not on the question of the applicability of a theory, but rather on the relationship between theory and research"(p. 95). The provocative Donati's proposal convinces us halfway.

References

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