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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE DE-POLITICIZATION OF SOCIAL POLICY AT THE TIME OF SOCIAL INVESTMENT.

## Mechanisms and distinctive features

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**ABSTRACT:** Social policy has undergone a major process of de-politicization all over Europe in the last twenty years, that was fostered by the paradigm shift towards the so-called Social Investment Welfare State. Though similar processes are taking place in many policy areas, social policy can be considered one of the most promising fields of observation of de-politicization. The downgrading of the political character of decision making, indeed, is in sharp contrast with the relevance of the debate about values and justice and with the conflicts that accompanied the establishment of welfare systems. The paper argues that de-politicization is the result of the interaction between three different mechanisms: the shift of emphasis from justice to effectiveness and the model of "governance by numbers"; the process of individualization of social intervention that marginalized collective responsibilities; the inclusive model of governance that co-opt civil society organizations reducing their role as conflicting actors. The three mechanisms give way to a model of de-politicization distinguished by the narrowing of the political debate about solutions, models of intervention and principles, based on inclusion rather than delegation and in which political actors do not disappear. The process of de-politicization is relatively independent from the trend of re-trenchment that begins with the political success of neoliberalism. However, as we will see, it is essential to the survival of its principles.

**KEYWORDS:** De-politicization, Social Policy, Social Investment, Neoliberalism, Third Sector, Individualization, effectiveness

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## 1. Introduction

Social policy has undergone a major process of de-politicization all over Europe in the last twenty years. The complexity and multidimensionality of this process reflect the many ramifications of the concept of de-politicization itself that have grown out of its success as an analytical tool over the last two decades (Flinders, Wood 2014). The theoretical framework developed during these years can thus help in understanding the recent evolution of the field of social policy, and in exploring the political rationality underlying the paradigm shift and its outcomes. In this process, de-politicization acts as a particular “technology of government” that is crucial to neoliberal governance (Foster *et al.* 2014), underpinning many of its key transformations.

However, analyzing the distinctive features of this process, and the mechanisms through which it has been enacted, can also offer useful insights for a broader understanding of the phenomenon of de-politicization and of its many different forms. Though similar processes are taking place in many policy areas, social policy can, in fact, be considered one of the most promising fields of observation of de-politicization. The downgrading of the political character of decision making, indeed, is in sharp contrast with the very nature of these kinds of policies and with the discourse that accompanied their origins and rise for at least two reasons. First, early efforts to guarantee social rights used to be based on a moral and ethical foundation rather than on instrumental rationality: social policies involve the dimensions of justice and values (Powers, Faden 2006) and are therefore intrinsically political objects. Second, class mobilization theories emphasized that the structures of welfare states took shape throughout the last century according to the “varying capacities of collective political actors (labour movements, interest groups, political parties) to articulate, politicise and implement welfare demands” (Van Kersbergen 1995, p. 7; see also Saraceno 2013). Social policy has traditionally been a contested policy field, in which, in addition to institutions, social movements and civil society actors played a significant political role.

The de-politicization of social policy targets both these “pillars” of its political nature, and consists in a progressive hollowing out of the discourse on principles and values, accompanied by a significant reduction in political conflicts inside and outside institutions. This transformation is the result of the complex interaction between three different – though deeply intertwined – mechanisms, which will be at the core of the analysis carried out in this paper.

The first mechanism is the shift of emphasis from justice to effectiveness, that led to a transition toward the technical model of “governance by numbers”. The second mechanism is the process of individualization of social intervention that marginalized

collective responsibilities by emphasizing individual ones. The third mechanism is linked to the transformation of governance towards a model that includes civil society organizations in decision-making and service provision, reducing their role as conflicting actors and political subjects.

The three mechanisms echo the well-known distinction between governmental, societal and discursive de-politicization (Hay 2007, Wood and Flinders 2014)<sup>1</sup>, but actually cut across this typology, since each shows the many different “faces” of de-politicization. Moreover, the way in which the categories apply to the case suggests the existence of some interesting variations that will be presented in the conclusions of the article.

Lastly, it is important to position the transformation within the broader political discourse around social policy, in order to highlight the relation between de-politicization and neoliberalism. Although rooted in neoliberal ideology, these mechanisms gained momentum right at the end of its political climax, and are thus more a part of the paradigm shift that took place at the end of the Nineties, when the so-called Social Investment Welfare State model became hegemonic<sup>2</sup>.

The de-politicization of social policy, therefore, is relatively independent from the trend of retrenchment that begins with the end of the glorious thirty and with the political success of neoliberalism. However, as we will see, it is essential to the survival of its principles. As will be argued in the conclusions of the paper, a double-faced relation links the current model of de-politicized social policy to neoliberalism. On the one hand, the new framework keeps welfare systems safe from the calls for dismantling typical of the ideal of the lean state, granting them new legitimacy. On the other hand, however, this legitimacy seems to derive precisely from its potential for promoting neoliberal ideals far from the attention the public debate, avoiding potentially dangerous conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup> The models derive from Hay, who distinguished between three different concentric spheres, the governmental, the public, and the private, surrounded by what he defined “the realm of necessity”, where no alternatives are allowed. The process of de-politicization is described in his work in terms of a shift of power away from one sphere to another. More specifically, the first model (later labelled as governmental) is defined as demotion from the governmental to the public sphere; the second (societal) as demotion from the public to the private sphere; while the third (discursive) as demotion from the private sphere to the realm of necessity (Hay 2007, p. 80).

<sup>2</sup> Many major steps in the transition have origins in the UK’s political transformation. Since their effect goes far beyond the national dimension, partly as a consequence of EU policy, the analysis will not deal only with the British case. Nonetheless, it remains central in the selection of documents and cases presented throughout the article.

## **2. Social policy as a politicized issue: from the glorious thirty to neoliberalism**

Throughout the XIX century, the politicization of social policy came along with two of its foundational features, namely the importance of the moral dimension and the significance of the interests involved.

The first element lay in the central role played by the debate on values and moral issues during the expansive phase of the “glorious thirty”. The struggle against the Five Giant Evils that was at the basis of the Beveridge Report was inspired by the idea of rebuilding the social fabric after the damages of World War II. Later, from the time of T.H. Marshall’s (1950) work, the development of social policies was almost inevitably linked to matters of citizenship and to the demand for rights, justice, solidarity and equality. As Titmuss stated in the mid-Seventies, whatever the answer we arrive at when asking what social policy is and how it should be governed, “we cannot fail to become heavily involved in the issues of moral and political values” (1974, p. 138).

The moral dimension of welfare had clear political implications, since the idea of justice itself was connoted in political terms. Returning to his famous conception of “justice as fairness”, Rawls explained that it should have been “understood as political and not metaphysical” (1985, p. 224), defining it as “a moral conception worked out for a specific kind of subject, namely, for political, social, and economic institutions” (ibid.).

The debate about the founding moral principles of social policy is central to understanding the latter’s politicization. Principles and values, indeed, bring the dimension of ambiguity into play rather than that of uncertainty. While uncertainty can be resolved within a framework of instrumental rationality based on information gathering, ambiguity entails choices between alternatives that do not suit such a comparison (Bobbio 1996). Ambiguity does not involve the selection of means, but rather the definition of ends, and therefore should be seen as *intrinsically* political (Stone 2002, Best 2008).

A second element fostering the politicization of social policy in the XIX century was the intensity and explicitness of conflicts between different actors that went along with the development of the welfare state. Social policy, indeed, embodied the tensions and conflicts that accompanied the modernization process, which were clearly visible in the political discourse that developed around it. As stated by Baldwin:

approached from the right angle, the nuts and bolts of social policy testify to the heated struggles of classes and interests. The battles behind the welfare state lay bare the structure and conflicts of modern society. Ongoing disputes among groups for redistributive advantage, contests over solidarity, force a constant renegotiation of the social contract (1990, p.1).

The idea that social policy can be seen as a battlefield where different interest groups compete is well established in the literature (among others, Baumgartner, Leech 1998; Palier, Thelen 2010), and of course survives the de-politicization process we are about to analyse. Despite the halo of altruism and solidarity, the high stakes involved made it clear from the outset that “What is 'welfare' for some groups may be 'illfare' for others” (Titmuss 1974, p. 143). What is distinctive of the second half of the last century, however, is the degree of contentiousness between civil society actors and institutions and within institutions themselves.

The demand for social rights has a long-standing tradition in Western societies and especially in Europe, and can be traced back to the first mutualism movements in the XVIII and XIX centuries (Evers, Laville 2004). While providing various kinds of services to their members, mutual associations were a powerful force in promoting political participation and in putting pressure on political institutions. Since these early experiments, the so-called civil society actors have played a pivotal role in demanding the expansion of the welfare systems and in boosting the political relevance of social rights. This role peaked during the Seventies, when the intertwining between third sector associations and social movements was at its maximum. Those years saw many “poor people’s movements” (Piven, Cloward 1979), and even welfare recipients organized politically in many countries (West 1981). As Marcon (2004) noted about Italy, until 1977 there was a clear trend toward “politicization of every sphere of social action” (p. 156), based on demands that targeted the moral foundations of the state and on a strong preference for militancy rather than volunteering.

The two decades that followed this season of political ferment have – as is well known – very different features. The rise of political neoliberalism, inaugurated in Europe by Margaret Thatcher’s first term in 1979, brought trends in the development of social rights to a halt, and completely subverted the dominant discourse about the welfare state. The move towards privatization and a lean state, and the blaming of the welfare state that went along with it, led to a radical shift of paradigm in social policy (Hall 1993, Palier, Morel and Palme 2012). However, “the commodification of everything” (Harvey 2007) that took place during these years did not mark an end to the politicization of welfare systems and to the issue of the public role in granting social rights. Neoliberals themselves, in the first place, did not avoid moral issues and values, but rather put them at the center of their political discourse. An ideological and moral critique of social policy was raised together with an economic discourse that emphasized the negative macro-economic consequences of public expenditure and the disincentive to entrepreneurship that went along with income support. Social policies were not only castigated as economically inefficient, but as immoral (Ferrera 2013): they in-

creased dependency and laziness, and favoured opportunistic behaviours of “parasites”, undermining the moral fibre of society. The battle for the retrenchment of social policy thus also became a fight for social justice. The latter was, in this view, achieved through equality of opportunity rather than of outcomes and living conditions, promoting merit and favouring deservingness (Atkinson 2015). During the neoliberal decades, therefore, though the dominant paradigm in social policy was reversed, the issue maintained its political relevance and degree of politicization, continuing to involve matters of ambiguity and values and to raise conflicts.

As regards the latter dimension, two contrasting transformations took place during the Eighties. On the one hand, the expansion of social rights promoted opportunities to increase political participation and to broaden mobilization in defence of welfare systems. On the other hand, the growth of the middle class and the fading of a class-based model of social mobilization ended in a multiplication, and therefore fragmentation, of demands (Della Porta, Diani 2006).

In addition to the conflicts between civil society actors and governments, an intense confrontation occurred within the institutions and political debate. One of the most contested topics in the neoliberal phase was that of inequalities, which later became less prominent in the public discourse when the focus shifted to the less controversial issue of poverty. Indeed, while reducing poverty can be seen as a more or less agreed goal of all governments – at least in the rhetoric – during the neoliberal phase, the growth of inequality sparked a debate characterized by explicit and polarized positions and therefore deeply politicized. Unlike their more or less “left wing” oppositions, neoliberal governments considered the presence of inequalities as instrumental, if not essential, to a development model centered on the trickle-down economy, where the success of the few would create wealth and well-being which in the long run would benefit everyone.

A very well-known debate involving Margaret Thatcher provides a perfect illustration of the terms of the dispute and the distance between the political positions. During her last speech as Prime Minister at the House of Commons<sup>3</sup>, in November 1990, an MP noted that “during her 11 years as Prime Minister, the gap between the richest 10% and the poorest 10% in this country has widened substantially” and remarked that “at the end of her chapter of British politics” this was not “a record that she or any Prime Minister can be proud of”. The answer provided by Mrs Thatcher sounds like a manifesto of neoliberal politics on inequalities:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=108256>

“People on all levels of income are better off than they were in 1979. The hon. Gentleman is saying that he would rather that the poor were poorer, provided that the rich were less rich. That way one will never create the wealth for better social services, as we have. What a policy! Yes, he would rather have the poor poorer, provided that the rich were less rich”

Such a plea for inequalities captures the essence of the politicization of the discourse about social policy that lasted until the end of the neoliberal period. It entailed hard confrontation on ideological positions, within a context of ambiguity that implied “a broader framework of reasoned argument and judgement involving normative considerations” (Sanderson 2002, p. 71).

During these years, however, some of the groundwork for the subsequent de-politicization process was laid. In spite of the oppositions, the principle of individual responsibility for poverty and exclusion came to replace that of collective responsibility. Moreover, cuts in public expenditure favoured the inclusion of private and non-profit organizations, fostering the well-known transition from government to governance.

### **3. Towards de-politicization: the managerial and post-ideological turn**

The neoliberal phase set the stage for the process of de-politicization of social policy that burst onto the scene in the late Nineties. The last five years of the century can be considered a crucial turning point. This is by no means surprising, since many of the transformations that gave momentum to the process, above all the electoral success of Tony Blair’s New Labour, are a common factor in many policy fields and have thus been widely explored by leading scholars (Burnham 2001). However, some of the changes that occurred in these years are specific to social policy, even though they are deeply intertwined with the overall political transformations.

The two major elements supporting politicization, the debate on principles and values and the intensity of conflicts, were rapidly overcome by the success of a new policy paradigm: the Social Investment Welfare State.

To better understand the transformation, however, it is necessary to start by analysing the wider change of perspective on the role of public action that took place in the Nineties. Two elements in particular deserve attention: the New Public Management Model (NPM) and the so-called post-ideological approach introduced by New Labour’s “Third Way”.

The principles of the NPM were formulated in the late 1980s in the United States, and spread first to Great Britain and then throughout Europe in the following decade.

As is well known, NPM establishes a new style in running the public administration, taking a managerial approach rather than a traditional bureaucratic one (Osborne Gaebler 1992). In Hood's words, the transformation entailed:

a shift in emphasis from policy making to management skills, from a stress on process to a stress on output, from orderly hierarchies to an intendedly more competitive basis for providing public services (Hood 1995, 95)

In this new model, the strong focus on outcomes, effectiveness and efficiency played a crucial role. These principles are also among the cornerstones of the so-called post-ideological approach introduced by Britain's New Labour. However, the theorization of the Third Way (Giddens 1999) also takes a fundamental step forward: the principle of effectiveness and the pragmatic and managerial approach go far beyond the borders of bureaucracy, assuming an openly political dimension and becoming the inspiring principle of all governmental action. Their centrality in the new political proposal is clearly stated in the party's manifesto for the 1997 elections: "New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works. The objectives are radical. The means will be modern"<sup>4</sup>.

Even though the pragmatic, results-oriented approach is not intended to replace "ideas," the attention to "what works" becomes the means for disrupting "outdated" ideologies (Davies et al., 1999). The transformation has strong political implications: the outputs of the process, rather than the principles orienting it, become the basis for strengthening the political pact with citizens (Giddens 1999). The legitimacy of governmental action, therefore, is no longer founded in the legal-rational principle – since institutions themselves are depicted as de-legitimized – nor in popular consensus (Martin and Davis 2001). As noted by Sanderson (2003), this model focuses on the right choice of means rather than the appropriateness of the ends, and an instrumental rationality in a strict sense is applied. Values become secondary, and politics turns into an exercise of "social technology" (ibid.).

The value-oriented approach is further weakened by the fact that in a framework deeply oriented towards economic rationality, the principle of effectiveness is always accompanied by that of efficiency. As Hood and Peters suggest (2004), the well-known "what works" slogan would be better reformulated as "works better, costs less".

As we will see in the next sections, this approach relegates matters of ambiguity to a secondary role, thus weakening the political dimension.

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<sup>4</sup> New Labour Manifesto, London, 1997



Parallel to this dynamic, the explicit goal of eschewing the ideologies of the twentieth century and moving to "the middle" of the political offer consistently lowered the level of conflict. Mair notices a populist attitude in such a strategy, based on a "catch all" message that wipes out the concept of partisanship, overcoming contrasts and promoting a model of "partyless" and hence de-politicized democracy:

Partisanship in this sense is a thing of the past – both electorally and ideologically... The relationship of this sense of democracy to the ideology of the Third Way is clear. Just as New Labour sees its programme as the only alternative, and hence without partisan purpose, so too the style of government is deliberately advertised as non-partisan (Mair 2000, 24).

Within this broader political framework distinguished by a hollowing out of principles, ideology and conflict, a major paradigm shift took place in the field of social policy. Changes in national politics in many EU countries helped overcome the neoliberal rhetoric, which for several decades had represented the welfare state only as a cost to be reduced. The electoral success of center-left coalitions in other countries opened a window of opportunity for renewed attention to social policies (Ferrera 2013). The founding assumptions are nevertheless very different from those of the Glorious Thirty (Palier 2013). The new paradigm is generally defined as the "Social Investment Welfare State" and is to some extent a synthesis of the Keynesian and neoliberal approaches, even if it claims to be original (Vandenbroucke, Vleminck 2011). In this sense, social investment shares the Third Way's concern with innovation and going beyond "old" paradigms. It is therefore no coincidence that one of the first references to the concept of the social investment state can be found in Giddens' *The Third Way* (1999).

The main distinctive feature of the new model is that it aims to promote and reinforce the human capital of young people and the adult population through active policies (Surender 2004, Morel Palier and Palme 2012). Hence its "investment" character, effectively summarized by the slogan that accompanied it, at least in its early stages: "prepare rather than repair". Practices such as monetary transfers become the symbol of a model to overcome redistributing, carrying on the neoliberal tradition, "opportunities rather than just ... income" (Commission on Social Justice 1994, p. 95 in Lister 2004).

Central to the transformation introduced by the Social Investment approach is the redefinition of the welfare state as an entity that should not only "spend" public money, but should be able to "produce" (Palier 2013) and invest in its future. This transition was encouraged by international institutions and transnational organizations such as the OECD, World Bank and UNICEF, as well as the European Union (Morel 2013).

The productive dimension of social policy was intended to create benefits for the whole economic system. In particular, in the development model envisaged by the Lisbon Strategy, "the European social model, with its developed systems of social protection, must support the transformation to the knowledge economy" (Palier 2013). The ability of welfare systems to generate growth is not in itself a controversial principle, and is not even an exclusive feature of Social Investment, since the Keynesian paradigm was also based on similar principles. However, critics pointed out that the role assigned to social policies saw them in terms of "subjection" to the economic system, within a "utilitarian" (Daly 2004, 147) or "instrumental" (Lister 2004, 157) conception. Legitimizing welfare systems through their economic outcomes, however, has significant consequences in term of de-politicization. As Davies puts it, it replaced "political judgement with economic evaluation". Such an attitude is evident in one of the first speeches Tony Blair made as Prime Minister, where he stated that the construction of human capital through social policies:

... isn't just about compassion. It's also about self-interest. If we can shift resources from picking up the costs of problems to preventing them, there will be a dividend for everyone<sup>5</sup>.

The emphasis on productivity and investment in social policies is behind the importance assigned to effectiveness and efficiency. Explicit indications in this direction were intensified at the European level with the Social Investment Package enacted in 2013<sup>6</sup>. The principle of effectiveness was presented with a twofold objective: to improve the impact of measures on individual beneficiaries, and to avoid wasting scarce resources. In the European rhetoric, therefore, the modernization of social policies "requires systematic introduction of ex-ante result orientation" (ibid.).

The absence of radical changes and the apparent continuity favoured a non-conflicting transition to the new paradigm. Moreover, the EU's endorsement encouraged agreement, further contributing to de-politicization with its technical rhetoric.

While the fear of dismantling that accompanied the neoliberal governments started to vanish, a silent transformation took place far from public notice and with little or no opposition in the political debate. Even the neo-liberal features that distinguish the model were less contested in the new dominant discourse.

This overall trend towards de-politicization rests on different specific mechanisms that will be further analyzed in the following sections:

<sup>5</sup> Tony Blair – Bringing Britain Together, London 1997 (<http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=320>)

<sup>6</sup> *Investing in Social Europe*, Brussels, European Commission, (<http://campus2.eipa.eu/courses/SOCINCL1428500/document/madrid/InvestinginSocialEuropeEN.pdf>)

- 1) The discursive shift from principles and “good intentions” to outcomes and policy effectiveness, that led to growing consensus around evidence-based policies relying on quantitative information: the rise of the so-called governance by numbers.
- 2) The process of individualization that went along with a responsabilization of welfare recipients and of the poor in general, which marginalized the idea of welfare as a collective – and therefore political – matter.
- 3) The establishment of an inclusive model of governance that co-opted civil society actors, reducing the potential for conflict, distributing responsibilities and not assigning blame.

#### **4. From justice to effectiveness: evidence-based policies and governance by numbers**

The emphasis on effectiveness inevitably links the rhetoric of Social Investment to another emerging paradigm, namely Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), developed in the medical field in response to severe criticism levelled against the (alleged) lack of rationality on the part of practitioners, driven by routines and ideological behaviour. The origin of EBP is conventionally traced back to Sackett and colleagues, who define it as the “conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients” (Sackett et al., 1996, 71). The literal use of the term “evidence” is crucial to understanding the essence of the model, according to which policies and interventions should demonstrate their effectiveness in order to be considered an acceptable alternative.

The attempt to transfer this approach from medicine to social policy has given rise to a harsh debate and a number of criticisms. However, the convergence on the principles of effectiveness and efficiency has made the evidence-based approach particularly appealing to supporters of the Third Way and of the Social Investment Welfare State. The rhetoric of evidence is thus pivotal in the international discourse on effectiveness, as shown by many planning and guideline documents for the development of social policies of the European Union<sup>7</sup>, the World Bank<sup>8</sup> and the OECD<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion – including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020*, Brussels, European Commission (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9761&langId=en>)

<sup>8</sup> *Closing the Circle for Results-Based Management in Social Policy*, World Bank, *The Nuts & Bolts of M&E Systems*, World Bank.

<sup>9</sup> *New Investment Approaches for Addressing Social and Economic Challenges*, OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers, 15, Paris, OECD Publishing.

Among the consequences of the rise of the evidence-based model is the importance acquired by quantification and measures, developed within a public discourse where the evaluation of outcomes mostly relies on an accounting approach. It is no coincidence, then, that the European Commission approaches the topic of the communication of outcomes by explicitly stating that "the more quantification you can provide, the more convincing the analysis will generally be" (European Commission 2009, 32). Further corroboration of the importance attributed by the European institutions to impact measurement is the explicit commitment to develop a specific methodology by setting up a special commission<sup>10</sup>.

The significance of quantitative information is certainly not a novelty in the debate on social policies, and the general (though often neglected) link between transformation of state intervention and statistical apparatus is well known. However, the new scenario implies a transformation of the nature of information bases and of their role. In fact, the production of data relates mainly to the reconstruction of results and outcomes, rather than of the context or the phenomena involved. Within the transformation of quantification practices, two instruments become particularly relevant: counter-factual evaluation and the so-called systematic reviews.

Counter-factual evaluation follows the principle of experimental logic, which is based on the comparison between those who have benefited from intervention and a "control group" made up of individuals who did not receive any treatment. The key to success is low heterogeneity between the groups, which minimizes the influence of other variables on performance.

Systematic reviews are secondary analyses of samples of metadata from different studies carried out in various parts of the world. The principle is explicit in the guidelines developed by The Cochrane Collaboration, one of the most important organizations operating in this field on the international scene<sup>11</sup>:

Many systematic reviews contain meta-analyses. Meta-analysis is the use of statistical methods to summarize the results of independent studies. By combining information from all relevant studies, meta-analyses can provide more precise estimates of the effects (Higgins and Green 2008)

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<sup>10</sup> See the Single Market Act II of 2012 ([http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/smact/docs/single-market-act2\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/smact/docs/single-market-act2_en.pdf)), and the report "Proposed approach to social impact measurement" (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Further examples of these agencies are the Campbell Collaboration, the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, the Social Work Institute, and the Social Care Institute for Excellence. Most of the organizations are based in the United Kingdom or the United States, but have strong international networks for studies carried out all over the world.

Among its key elements, a systematic review presents results in clear, synthetic terms, essentially consisting of propositions such as "there is evidence of a general effect of the intervention", or "the impact is not supported by adequate empirical evidence" (Busso 2015).

The analysis of the reviews shows an extreme simplification and reduction of complexity. Thus, a number of methodological doubts have been raised about systematic reviews and the practice of counter-factual evaluation, mainly dealing with the impossibility of measuring the net effect of interventions. As suggested by Weiss, indeed:

Given the astronomical variety of implementations of even one basic program model, the variety of staffs, clients, organizational contexts, social and political environments, and funding levels, any hope for deriving generalizable findings is romantic (Weiss 2000, p.44).

Aside from the technical matters, what is distinctive of the transformation we are analyzing is that the use of information progressively moves to the final steps of the policy cycle. This concentration on effectiveness measurements goes hand in hand with the loss of relevance of principles and of the moral and value issues involved in policies that is typical of a post-ideological approach. Quantitative data are not *per se* a de-politicizing instrument. According to Lippman (1922), for example, statistics would draw attention to the human drama of infant mortality, urging politics to take charge of the problem and thus making it responsible for a solution. With the new model, however, information is less instrumental to what Sen called "judgments on justice" and becomes the basis for considerations of economic impact.

Such a use of information triggers a de-politicization process with "subtle and perverse" consequences (Sanderson 2002). The underlying logic of instrumental rationality, which revolves around a cost-benefit calculation, is one of the key elements. As noted by Sanderson:

The problem with instrumental rationality, then, is that it reduces questions of ambiguity to those of uncertainty, thus obscuring or neglecting important political, social and moral judgements (2002, 70).

Moreover, the growing de-ideologization of policies makes the evidence of effectiveness the main (if not the only) basis for legitimizing any social action (Plewis 2000). On the contrary, the policies that Webb (2001) defined as "value laden" could (at least in theory) leave aside information and measurements, since their legitimacy was based on the sharing of objectives.

The relation between evidence-based policies and de-politicization, however, needs further analysis to be fully understood. Indeed, such an approach is not in principle irreconcilable with values. Quite the opposite: the focus on means could give policy ample leeway to identify goals. However, it must be recognized that the impact assessment retroacts powerfully on the definition of goals. The Social Investment paradigm calls for interventions to be chosen "by testing new policy approaches and selecting the most effective ones"<sup>12</sup>. In this perspective, measures of effectiveness dramatically reduce the complexity of policy goals by defining a limited "menu" of acceptable policies based on the outcomes. In doing so, they act as a discursive device of de-politicization, since their function is to narrow the range of possibilities. Such an approach is opposite to that invoked by Pielke, according to whom "we desperately need [...] to expand the range of options available to policy makers by serving as Honest Brokers of Policy Alternatives" (2007, 141). Elaborating on similar arguments, Webb (2001) also notes that the value and ideological approach used to be one of the major factors of innovation, since it pushed actors to implement new strategies without worrying about possible failures.

On the contrary, net judgments on effectiveness make quantification even more normative than it was in Knowledge Based or Research Minded (Fisher 1997) policy approaches. One of the consequences of the de-politicization processes based on the claim of data objectivity, and of the model of the "governance by numbers" (de Leonardis 2009) is the reshaping of the relationship between experts and politicians. The symbolic and political value attributed to experts drops significantly, since their role as "external legitimators" (Beetham 2013) is replaced by the principle of "mechanical" and "impersonal" objectivity that characterizes quantitative information. The tendency to favour impersonal relationships, in turn, is inherent in the very nature of quantitative practice, which "substitutes trust in people with trust in numbers" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 420). This feature can be particularly appealing for politicians when the expert, or worse, the "technocrat", is held in low public esteem. An impersonal relationship with data offers the opportunity to strengthen the bond that joins knowledge and politics, without calling into question the credibility of external actors. The relationship with quantification can be interpreted as specific form (or maybe an evolution) of governmental de-politicization. It shares the premises of the process of arena-shifting towards non-political and expert authorities (Flinders and Buller 2006),

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<sup>12</sup> *Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion – including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020*, Brussels, European Commission  
(<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9761&langId=en>)

but it differs from early interpretations in that there are no actual organizations or actors embodying the role of the experts.

Finally, the performative nature of quantification has a strong impact on the selection of beneficiaries. Numbers, it has been argued (De Leonardis, Neresini 2015), have the power to “produce reality” and to generate feedback on individual actions. In the social investment model, one of the perverse effects of the emphasis on measures of effectiveness is the growing tendency to exclude from the services those with less potential for autonomy. Those who cannot be reabsorbed by the labour market, for instance, can be seen as a potential waste of resources, and a cause of unsatisfactory performance. In this sense, governance by numbers aims at the self-regulation of human societies (Supiot 2010), making politics a marginal actor according to a societal model of de-politicization (Wood and Flinders 2014).

## **5. From collective to individual: responsabilization and governmentality in active policies**

A second element that fosters the de-politicization process is the importance of the so-called active social policies in the Social Investment model, and the specific way in which they are conceived. Even though it came into being long before the Nineties, the idea of active policies gained momentum within the new paradigm, and was clearly identified as a founding principle of the European Social Model with the Lisbon Strategy (Barbier Mayerhofer 2004). However, the impact of the Social Investment rhetoric is not limited to boosting the importance of activation: it also deeply affects the way it is conceived. As stated above, one of the main goals of the new model is to endow people with a level of human capital that meets the needs of the knowledge economy. This objective entails a shift from a *systemic* view of activation – which targets the labour market in order to increase demand – to an *individual* one, centered on the empowerment of beneficiaries (ibid.). Individualized active policies have been reshaped by one of the rising principles of the new welfare state model, namely that of individual responsibility. Once again, the rhetoric of the Third Way is crucial to understanding this approach: according to Giddens (1999, p 65), for instance, “One might suggest as a prime motto for the new politics, no rights without responsibilities”. In line with this principle, the whole system should leave aside matters of compassion, while focusing on the primary goal of avoiding dependency:

It should be a compassionate society. But it is compassion with a hard edge. A strong society cannot be built on soft choices. It means fundamental reform of our welfare state, of the deal between citizen and society. [...] The new welfare state must encourage work, not dependency<sup>13</sup>.

The principle of responsibility and of "compassion with a hard edge" was translated at the policy level into the emphasis on conditional access to all social benefits. The conditions are of course different, but in most cases consist in beneficiaries' active effort to re-enter the labour market. This approach has a major impact, since "[the idea] of citizenship moves from 'dutiless rights' towards 'conditional welfare'" (Powell 199, 19). As shown later on in this section, this movement is essential in the process of de-politicization. However, there is another implication of conditional activation that should be taken into account.

One of the critical points concerning individual activation policies is the difference between their representations as a tool of emancipation for welfare recipients and conceptions that underline their "disciplinary" nature. At the level of public discourse, in fact, the definition of activation seems to maximize the aspect of freeing people from need and helping them achieve autonomy. While so-called passive policies meet an immediate need but increase beneficiaries' dependence on welfare, activation helps them to be able to provide for themselves in the long run, emancipating them from the public actor. However, an opposite reading is possible at two different levels.

First, active policies can limit individuals' autonomy when they are included in a framework of conditionality that requires that users comply with a contract in order to access any other benefit. Participation in activation programs has thus been referred to evocatively as "an offer you can't refuse" (Lödemel, I & H. Trickey 2001).

Second, even active policies can fall within what Soss, Fording and Schram (2011) call "disciplining the poor", namely that set of activities and rules underpinned by welfare systems that have no other function but to "restructure" the lives of the poor according to the rules of the capitalist system.

The perspective of Soss and colleagues offers useful insights for understanding the changes in the way power is exercised in de-politicized systems. In their analysis, this model of intervention is interpreted in terms of governmentality, and is defined as the product of neoliberal thought on the one hand (aimed at transforming the poor into market actors) and of the paternalist approach on the other hand. This latter approach, in particular, needs further analysis. A paternalistic relationship is intrinsically asymmetrical, since it is founded on the assumption that one of the two parties does not

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<sup>13</sup> Tony Blair – 1997 – Address speech at the Labour Party conference



have the capacity to know what is best for himself, or the discipline needed to act according to these principles (Mead 1997). For this reason, the "stronger party" in the relationship is allowed to shape the behaviour of the weaker one, in order to avoid negative consequences on the life of those who are unable to recognize what is good for them.

Outside of dyadic relationships, the model of paternalistic governance widens the scope of disciplinary action: the behaviour of the poor does not only threaten the poor themselves, but is seen as a risk for society as a whole and, in Soss and colleagues' view, for the dominant neoliberal model. It should be noted that "neopaternalism" does not deny individual freedom, at least in principle. On the contrary, it is based on the idea that freedom is "a practice that requires inner discipline" and that "those who fail to acquire their liberty should be educated to it" (Segal 2006, p. 327 in Soss, Fording and Schram 2011). Coercion, where necessary, is justified by the premise that "obligation is the precondition of freedom. Those who would be free must first be bound" (Mead 1997 p. 23). Regarding the type of freedom considered, the influence of neoliberalism leaves no room for misunderstanding: emancipation necessarily hinges on entering the market.

The shift towards an individualized, disciplinary and responsibility based model of activation policies favours the process of de-politicization in various ways.

A first possible perspective frames the de-politicization process as a product of the individualization of society. In this sense, the focus on individuals and the disappearance of a collective interest relieves collective actors and politics from responsibility for ensuring well-being. According to Rivest and Moreau, this mechanism brought about a "shift from politically oriented and collective models of intervention to depoliticised and individualised courses of action" (Rivest Moreau 2015).

Such a mechanism is triggered by the principle of individual responsibility. In this connection, the persistence of neoliberal principles is clearly visible in today's policy:

Of course, depoliticizing socially produced harms by framing them as personal matters is nothing new. Under neoliberalism, however, this old dynamic is set in motion and given greater reach through the broad application of a market frame. The default assumption is that the problems of the person are products of individual choice, best resolved through individual efforts to seek solutions (Soss, Fording and Schram 2011, p. 23)

Alongside individualization, the disciplinary nature of conditional social policies can be seen as a second element that fosters de-politicization. If individualization reduces the importance of collective action, disciplinary policies tend to soften conflicts and to diminish the centrality of politics in the exercise of power. This perspective on pater-

nalism is based on a Foucauldian approach to social policies, that frames them as a field in which citizen-subjects are produced through culture rather than controlled, in a way that is instrumental to the economic system (Finlayson 2003). Active policies fit the goal perfectly, since following the approach of governmentality theorists: “Personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations” (Rose and Miller 1992, p. 174).

In this model, moreover, the exercise of power is a widespread function at all social levels, and does not belong exclusively to the political sphere (Rose 2000). The activation of the community through the principle of subsidiarity becomes the instrument through which the exercise of power moves to society at large. In this sense, Leggett notes in his analysis of the Third Way’s rhetoric:

The ‘community’ invoked as part of this discourse is not some given entity which government can act upon. Instead, government actively constructs community as a site upon which citizens can be controlled: ‘government through community’. [...] By ostensibly empowering citizens to help themselves, the Third Way strategy is in fact one of displacing problems of government from the level of the state to that of the individual: governance becomes fully internalised (Leggett 2005, 86).

Leggett’s perspective clearly overlaps with the model of societal de-politicization. However, the emphasis on the community also involves the public, though non-governmental, sphere in Hay’s terms (2007). In fact, the self-organization of communities is one of the processes fostering the growth of third sector organizations, which become important public collective actors in the planning of social policies.

## **6. From conflict to co-optation: the reshaping of civil society and the growth of the third sector**

The third mechanism whereby social policies are de-politicized pertains to the importance gained by the third sector and to its changes within the model of governance that developed during the ‘90s and became predominant in the Social Investment paradigm.

Two major changes underpin this transformation. The first is rooted in the neoliberal phase and concerns the development of a market of social services. Along with for-profit enterprises, third sector actors also benefited from this window of opportunity, growing rapidly in number and in resources. The “rise of the non-profit sector” (Sala-

mon 1994) was thus a huge, fast-paced movement that reached its peak at the end of the Nineties. The Social Investment paradigm, indeed, gave momentum to the transformation as a result of its commitment to community enabling and a “productive” welfare state model (Palier 2013). Managing public outsourced services or acting as private actors, the third sector became the major employer in the field, attracting resources from both the state and private individuals in the so-called “quasi market” model (Le Grand 1991). By doing so, non-profit organizations quickly turned into pivotal economic actors.

The second element that lies at the basis of the de-politicization process is the change of perspective in the preferred model of governance. As Morel, Palier and Palme (2012) explain, the Social Investment paradigm’s perspective on the governance dimension centers on networking and partnerships involving market and civil society actors. The idea of a joined-up model of governance became prevalent after the hierarchical/Weberian approach that distinguished the Keynesian welfare state, and the push towards privatization in the Eighties (ibid.). This transformation not only reshaped the map of service provision, but also that of decision making processes. Since participation became the dominant discourse during the Nineties (Moini 2011), public actors involved civil society in planning processes, partly as a way to democratize decision making, partly to reward the third sector’s economic contribution with political voice.

The non-profit organizations that emerge from the paradigm shift thus have very different features from the world of volunteer associations and charities that had been flanking welfare systems for centuries. Their acquired economic and political importance is a key element of the de-politicizing effect of the Social Investment approach, which ultimately lowers the level of conflict and the antagonistic potential of civil society.

The notions of “third sector” and “non-profit sector” are themselves revelatory of this trend. Despite the longstanding role of civil society actors, they can be considered relatively recent. The process that brought them to their current level of success involved two stages. The first stage took place between the late 1970s and the 1980s, when the two notions began to spread in public and scientific debate, where the terms were used to designate a set of emerging economic activities midway between state and market. However, the terms’ initial success was not accompanied by a precise definition of their empirical referents. An effort to define and classify which types of actors can be included in the sector was made in the second stage, which began in the 1990s and was profoundly influenced by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project.

The impact of the construction – or rather the “invention” (Moro 2014) – of the category is far from being limited to the discursive level, since it has a strong performative nature. As a matter of fact, that of third sector is essentially a synthesis rather than an alternative category, whose greatest potential is in overcoming the conflicts deriving from opposing views of public intervention. For this reason, it plays a pivotal role in the rhetoric of the Third Way (Lewis, Surender 2004): the fact that it is intermediate between the state and the market favours “bipartisan” consensus between political positions and divergent conceptions of the state (Ascoli 1999). The development of the non-profit sector is welcomed by liberal-liberal traditions which call for “liberating” the market and society from the pressure of public authority and its paternalism. At the same time, it is welcomed by those who stand in open opposition to the process of commodification which the liberal model favours. Opposite traditions thus converge on the need to promote spheres of action focused on volunteering, altruism, and on non-commodified production of relationships and social fabric. Accordingly, governments of different stamps have promoted and stimulated the development of the non-profit sector in the last few decades.

The catch-all category of the third sector is thus non-conflicted and deeply de-politicized, since is seen as producing positive effects without being alternative to the regulatory role of the state or of the market (Busso Gargiulo 2016).

Moreover, the new categories increasingly overlap with that of “civil society”, which thus gradually becomes less of a Gramscian field of confrontation and struggle for the construction of hegemony, and moves toward a Tocquevillian ideal-type, brought up to date through the use of concepts such as those of social cohesion and social capital.

Aside from these aspects pertaining to the perception of the category, the process of “marketization” of the third sector can be considered as a practical risk to the political role of civil society (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). This process is a consequence of the longstanding trade-off between political advocacy and service provision that accompanied the development of mutualism and social movements (Della Porta Diani 2006). Transformed into economic actors in a market model, third sector organizations give up their role as challengers. This transition is fueled by the market structure and by financing through projects, which encourages a shift towards mainstream issues and model of intervention that affords major chances to gain resources.

The Social Investment model further de-politicizes the third sector by co-opting it in decision making processes. This was originally highlighted in studies on transnational politics and democratization, where NGOs and the so-called “global civil society” were blamed for their tendency to “depoliticize global governance, that is, to remove issues

from fundamental political contention through participation in and functional contributions to global governance” (Jaeger 2007 p. 258).

A similar mechanism distinguishes the national and local dimension of social policies, where the evolution towards the model of participatory governance and co-design of policies distributes responsibility for managing welfare to all parties involved, resulting in the non-profit sector’s *de facto* inclusion in defining goals and strategies of public interest. This inclusion leads to a sharing of responsibilities: mere presence, even without active participation, tends to legitimize decisions as shared rather than imposed, regardless of the voice that third sector actors are able to express (Colombo and Gargiulo 2016). This is an extremely relevant point, since the actual conflicting potential of non-profit organizations in these processes is lessened by their economic dependence on their outcome. Due to its prominent role in service management, non-profit can rarely afford radical conflicts that can result in a risk of exclusion from subsequent outsourcing procedures.

Lastly, participatory programming is also a field of cultural production and reproduction. As Gaynor (2011) notes in connection with Ireland, one of the possible outcomes in the long run is the narrowing of the discursive space, the promotion of conformism and the absence of radical solutions.

As a result of the interaction of different mechanisms, therefore, the transformation of civil society brought about by Social Investment blurs the boundary between the power and counter-power spheres, “taming” oppositions and removing conflicts. Even though private organizations’ participation in decision making processes can be seen as a process of governmental de-politicization, the discursive element plays a significant, if not preeminent, role.

## 7. Conclusions

The de-politicization of social policy takes place through different, though interacting, mechanisms, whose result is to lessen political conflicts and hollow out values and questions of justice. This transformation, triggered by the success of the Social Investment model, does not, however, introduce major breaks with neoliberal principles. Rather, reducing political confrontation appears to strengthen and to a certain extent “naturalize” these principles, which is consistent with the claims of those who consider de-politicization as one the main strategies that neoliberalism employs to survive socio-economic and political changes (Moini 2015, Caselli 2016). The increase in the social legitimacy of welfare systems, therefore, should not be misunderstood. This legiti-

macy is deeply connected with the subjection to market needs, the principles of autonomy and activation, and with the view of social policy as a means of promoting adherence to capitalist values.

Aside from considerations on its outcomes, one final issue concerns the specificity of this model of de-politicization.

The mechanisms analysed in the last three sections of the paper ultimately result in a de-politicization model that is to some extent consistent with the theoretical debate of the last decade, and particularly with the models of governmental, societal and discursive de-politicization. However, they show specific features that can contribute to enriching the debate around them.

The governmental type of de-politicization is clearly visible in all the elements of the transition we have analyzed. The shift of emphasis from justice to effectiveness propelled a transition towards technical modes of governance, while the call for civil society's self organization through associations that followed the individualization process led to the entry of public collective actors to the policy making arena. However, the case of social policy shows a significant break in continuity: powers are shifted towards public but non-governmental organizations through inclusion rather than delegation, as the theoretical formalization of the model implies (Wood and Flinders 2014).

The constant shift of decision-making to technical bodies can pose a threat to the legitimacy of politicians, who risk being accused of inconsistency and lack of responsibility. This risk is often cited in the debate about the European Union, whose "political invisibility" has long sparked accusations of poor accountability and technocratic drift (Meyer 1999). Moreover, the scepticism regarding technocrats and economists that followed the economic crisis pushed politicians towards renewed claims of centrality for political institutions that incorporate technical modes of exercising power through governance by numbers.

Likewise, the shift of powers towards third sector organizations is effected through co-optation in decision making rather than privatization of services, without explicit delegation.

This model of de-politicization through inclusion is made possible by the interaction with its discursive dimension. As for the latter, however, we see no explicit reference to what Hay (2007) calls the "realm of necessity". Rather, the discourse is distinguished by widespread agreement and lack of conflict among the possible alternatives, which once again derives from inclusive mechanisms.

In the scenario surrounding the de-politicization of social policy, then, there is no explicit denial of its political nature, nor do politicians disappear from the debate. So-

cial policy still has strong electoral appeal, and can even now be a major element of propaganda.

The very essence of the de-politicization of social policy lies in the narrowing of the political debate about solutions, models of intervention and principles. Within this restrained and controlled political discourse, politicians can play a leading role again, at the same time avoiding calls for radical change or strongly contested, and therefore dangerous, issues. In this sense, the consequences of de-politicization are in some ways even more extreme and long-lasting: in the absence of confrontation between opposing visions, a return to the primacy of politics without a restructuring of politics itself cannot be a solution.

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