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The “Dark Side” of Community Social Work: An Instrument of Control or a Promoter of Citizen Participation? Reflections on the Results of a Research Project

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Abstract

This article discusses the ideas expressed by a group of social workers of the local authorities in a region of north-eastern Italy (Friuli Venezia Giulia) about community social work. Since renewed scientific and operational interest on the part of the social work in community intervention has coincided with the emergence of neoliberal policies to contain spending on welfare systems, this article seeks to understand whether social workers view community social work as a tool to compensate for cuts in social spending or, rather, as a strategy to promote an independent social and political awareness on the part of citizens.

Keywords: community social work, neoliberalism, social control, critical social work.

1. Introduction

Since the early '80s of the twentieth century, even in societies with mature welfare systems, there has been a revival of interest in community social work, especially following the conclusions contained in the Barclay Report (1982), in which the British professional social work community proposed a thoroughgoing overhaul of the role and functions of social work in contemporary societies by introducing community social work. Numerous scientific publications have investigated, from different points of view, the individual and social benefits of introducing interventions within communities

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(see Folgheraiter and Donati, 1991; Folgheraiter, 1990). What we know today is that fostering cooperation among citizens, pursuing common goals, leads to the emergence of a wide range of positive psychological and social results, including: improvement in self-image and in the ability to meet and communicate; a decrease in the feeling of social isolation and the perception of living in insecure conditions; an increase in the breadth and density of social networks; improvement in the general conditions of physical and psychological health (see Giarelli, Nigris, Spina, 2012). On the other hand, on the social side, the growth of social networks of community solidarity encourages a strengthening of social capital (see Putnam, 1997, 2004) with an improvement in the capacity for cooperation between citizens, the strengthening of their willingness to take care of collective spaces and to participate in social and political life, a reduction in deviance and an improvement in the performance of local institutions (see Fukuyama, 1996; Mutti, 1998; Tronca, 2007). All this seems all the more important the more contemporary social processes tend to weaken interpersonal relationships of the primary and secondary types by increasing people's spaces of existential loneliness.

However, the debate on community social work goes far beyond the observation that community solidarity is an important dimension which should be fostered in order to increase the well-being of citizens. In reality, the problem is the relationship that is being established between this form of informal care and the public welfare system. This issue first emerged in Britain during the 1980s following the political reforms introduced by Conservative governments by which they tried to limit the growth of social protection spending by introducing interventions that were supposed to involve informal community solidarity (Bulmer, 1992). The operational tool by which it would be sought to create new configurations of local social protection systems, within which the importance of public protection would decrease and that of community solidarity would increase, was Community Social Work (CSW) (Rhodes and Broad, 2011). As we will try to explain below, in actual fact CSW represents not only one of the historical roots of social service (see Dellavalle, 2015) but also a professional approach that has always fought to strengthen social rights and to increase institutional responses to groups in need. The paradox, therefore, that emerged in the 1980s in the Anglo-Saxon world with the neoliberal programme of reducing spending on social protection is that CSW began to be interpreted very differently from how community social workers historically perceived their professional role. With the 1980s, therefore, a contrast began to manifest itself within CSW between those who have always seen the community as the place in which to contribute to organizing processes of participation and empowerment of citizens, with the

aim of strengthening the capacity of the population to self-care and self-organize to counter the structural factors of social injustice, and those who instead see community solidarity as a dimension to be promoted because of its ability to generate types of care with a high level of solidarity and emotional effectiveness that are, moreover, low cost and easily reproducible.

In summary, the question that is debated, within the social services and elsewhere, is whether community care should be regarded as supplementary or even alternative to public social protection or whether, rather, community interventions should be interpreted as a strategy to strengthen a mindset of informal solidarity, a mindset that certainly has connections with public welfare systems among other things, but not in the sense of compensating or substituting for those systems. Should the community be considered a resource to compensate for the shortcomings of welfare systems, or should it be valued for its potential to trigger participatory processes from below, including supporting citizens in defending and strengthening public welfare systems?

As we shall see in the continuation of this contribution, social work still seems to be stuck in the middle of this difference of interpretation of community social work, caught between the growing need of local authority administrators to involve the local area as a tool for increasing the welfare responses to be offered to the population – without increased investment of institutional resources – but also to improve the image of local politics and legitimize it in the eyes of the electorate. On the other hand, it seems that some social workers are aware that using community solidarity as a tool can contribute to weakening the centrality of public welfare systems and of the logic of the right to benefits, which represented a gain for the most disadvantaged social classes. These professional operators appear to recognise themselves in a “political”¹ conception of CSW, in which the community is the place where the population should be supported in building networks of self-organization capable of increasing the power of people to address both common problems and the underlying causes. Since one of the causes of the worsening living conditions of large segments of the population is precisely the weakening of public welfare systems, the “political” conception of

¹ Since the instrumental conception of community social work develops a well-defined model of the relationship between informal solidarity and welfare systems (a model that no longer necessarily places public care systems at the centre), we can say that, in reality, this conception is also “political”. For this reason, as will be seen in section 1 below, the instrumental conception will be referred to as “functionalist” while the political one will be renamed as the “critical conception”.

community social work excludes the possibility of using informal solidarity as a stopgap to compensate for the shortages caused by cuts in social policies.

With the aim of investigating the ideas expressed by the social services on community interventions, in this essay the contents of interviews carried out in 6 focus groups with about 70 social workers employed by the town councils in Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) will be analysed. The interviews took place during 2019 and focused on discussing the results of a previous quantitative survey, carried out through self-administered questionnaires, of a group of 246 social workers. All respondents were professionals working for local authorities in FVG and the sample involved in the quantitative research covered about 75% of the total number of social workers working in local authority social services in FVG in 2019.² Each interview in the focus groups was recorded in an audio file and then, once transcribed, analysed according to the nature, frequency and scale of the contents that emerged (see Cataldi, 2009).

In section 1 the two different conceptions of CSW will be analysed in more detail, including their ideological roots and the operational objectives that follow from them. In particular, this section will introduce the theme of the professional activities of social workers either as activities promoting the participation of citizens and strengthening their social awareness or as a tool for controlling and using the community with a view to legitimizing local political power. Finally, in section 2 some extracts of the discussions on community work held in the six focus groups will be analysed. The object is to try to understand what interpretation the social workers interviewed adhere to and what perception they have of the potential of this method of social work.

2. What community social work?

The contemporary debate on the role that CSW should play in increasing the levels of social protection of populations focuses on the comparison between three ideal-typical interpretations of CSW which we could place along a continuum of ideas:

“Functionalist” conception – “technical-operational” conception – “critical” conception.

- 1) The “functionalist” vision of CSW interprets community social service interventions as a tool to compensate for the consequences of the reduced funding of welfare systems.

² The results of the research are shown in the text: S. Cecchi, *Il welfare in Comune. Una indagine sul Servizio Sociale municipale*, Erickson, Trento, 2019.

- 2) The “technical-operational” interpretation of CSW regards community interventions as a tool to bring out those relational dimensions and those performances that are characteristic of informal solidarity (see Folgheraiter, 2011) and that cannot be provided by public interventions but are indispensable for improving people’s psycho-social well-being (Santinello, Dallago, Vieno, 2009), lessening their sense of individual isolation (Prezza and Pacilli, 2002) and strengthening social cohesion (Etzioni, 2004).
- 3) Finally, the “critical-political” conception understands CSW as an instrument that should contribute to strengthening the political awareness of citizens in defending their social rights, especially in a historical period of reduction of expenditure on welfare systems and limitation of the social rights of citizens (see Collins, 2009; Fook, 2003; Forde and Lynch, 2014).

While the middle position, the “technical-operational” one, represents the scientific justification of the validity of plans to promote community solidarity, the other two conceptions clash with each other from the ideological point of view, each representing a different vision of the dynamics affecting both the public welfare systems and the role that the civic and solidarity community organizations organized through CSW should play in them. The “technical-operational” concept therefore represents the starting point both for those who support a functional and instrumental vision of CSW and for those who interpret it in a “critical” and “political” sense. Once the scientific justification of the value of the community approach has been accepted, the “functionalist” and “critical-political” interpretations diverge sharply from each other in their different ways of regarding CSW.³

But why should CSW be interpreted ideologically? Would it not be sufficient to accept the results of research establishing the individual and collective benefits conferred by community approaches? Why should it be necessary for the social services to line up under one or other of these positions?

We could try to answer these questions by saying that, in reality, all the disciplines that have contributed to demonstrating the benefits afforded by community interventions propose a social and, therefore, “political”

³ It must be said that this ideal-typical distinction between the different conceptions of CSW can be more or less marked and the positions can be more or less close to each other. In addition, these positions represent conceptual syntheses and trends that are present not only in social work but also in other social disciplines, such as political theory, sociology or social philosophy.

interpretation of human problems.⁴ Whether we are talking about community psychology, epidemiology and psychiatry, or political theory, sociology and anthropology, what unites studies on the community is the assumption that the community dimension (with its economic, political, legal, cultural, scientific, religious etc. systems) represents a system of relationships that strongly influences the quality of life of the people involved in it. Thus, the levels of health of citizens, their willingness to cooperate, the sense of interpersonal trust and the trust expressed towards public institutions, the levels of social and political commitment, but also the very quality of political systems, public institutions and the market are some dimensions that, in community approaches, are related to structural social components, which are also the product of political processes.

Turning to the field of social work, the problem of the political interpretation of community work becomes even more marked, since this discipline is also characterized by a clear ethical and political mandate committing it to contributing to the pursuit of the ideals of equality, social justice and the fight against discrimination (Baines, 2007). Moreover, within the social services CSW is rooted in the critical and political interpretation of community intervention. That is, historically speaking, CSW was born in the United Kingdom and developed in the USA at the end of the nineteenth century, within a very well defined social and cultural context, that of the Settlement House Movement (Axinn, Levin, 1997). The reformers who created this social movement were members of the British and American educated bourgeoisie animated by a genuine spirit of religion and solidarity towards the urban proletariat and by a critical vision of the social consequences of the development of the capitalist system of the late nineteenth century (Scheuer, 1985). The idea behind the organization of the Settlement House Movement was that it was not enough to help the poor by providing them with the necessary forms of assistance to meet their most

⁴ For example, in the field of community psychology we start from the assumption that “the quality of life and therefore the well-being / malaise of an individual is also, and above all, the result of the relationships that he establishes with the social structures and physical environments that constitute and give meaning to his life” (Santiniello, 2002: 17). Not only that, but also the objectives of the projects of community psychology itself are clearly of a “political” type, that is: 1) “to help people become aware of the role that the conditions in which they live have in determining their health and well-being; 2) to help them to unite so that they activate and become protagonists of the processes of change in their living conditions” (Lenzi, 2009: 16). Sociological studies of the community also have a long tradition of analysing the effects of social organization on individual behaviours, both deviant and conforming (see Tomasi, 2000).

urgent needs, but that it was necessary to promote their all-round growth, which would allow the proletariat decisively to free itself from its conditions of need. The central idea was that this process of promoting the capacity for self-determination should take place by creating stable interpersonal relationships between members of the proletariat and members of the bourgeoisie. This class interrelationship, in which the poor would participate in the material resources, education, culture and moral, political and religious values of the better-off classes, would take place in buildings built in the working-class neighbourhoods in which the earliest social workers would operate. The urban areas in which the proletariat lived at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century thus became the place in which to inaugurate an ambitious programme of social interventions that also had political aims. In fact, especially observing what happened in the USA, the Settlement House Movement encouraged the putting forward of proposals for social reform in the field of child labour and women's labour legislation and the development of social services in many areas, such as childcare services, public toilets, children's play areas and neighbourhood bookshops (Carson, 1990). The movement that developed in the USA dealt above all with the living conditions of immigrants in large American cities, such as Chicago, a place where the nascent discipline of sociology also developed a cultural and ecological orientation to the study of the processes of deviance and conformity (Tomasi, 2000). All this contributed to fuelling in the Settlement House Movement a critical attitude towards social injustices and a focus on the promotion of social and civil rights, with a strong interest in the involvement and organization of the population. This political spirit of the nascent Community Social Work was later reinforced, starting from the 1960s, by contributions from the American civil rights movements and those elaborated by feminist thought and, subsequently, by the experiences born in the struggles for the defence of migrants and other ethnic minorities and for the defence of the environment (Twelvetrees, 2006). Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, the theoretical basis of CSW has certainly been expanded, among other reasons, because of the contributions of theories with a critical approach, so much so as to identify CSW as one of the instruments of choice by which Social Work tries to pursue its objectives of social change (Fook, 2003). These ethical-political aims (Allegri, 2015) of community social work are pursued both in highly modernized contexts with weak public welfare systems, such as the USA, and in economically underdeveloped areas with no social protection. For example, in economically poor areas without public social protection systems, CSW may take on the task of strengthening the skills of the population in addressing specific problems by helping to build community networks for mutual protection (see O'Neil, 2020). Alternatively,

it may seek to facilitate the emergence of local systems of production and exchange of food and basic necessities in such a way as to give a population the possibility of meeting its basic needs (see Stout, Love, 2019). Of course, the more pressing the necessity of responding to essential human needs, in a setting lacking systems of public protection, the greater the degree of rapprochement between the political and technical-operational conceptions of CSW. However, from a critical point of view, CSW will always seek to strengthen the population's ability to read critically the social factors that contribute to causing the problems experienced by them, fuelling a demand for greater social justice.

We will now try to explain briefly what are the main conceptual elements that distinguish the functionalist from the critical interpretation of CSW. Next, we will analyse the contents of the interviews with social workers, so as to try to understand what image of CSW emerges.

2.1 Two ideological interpretations compared: CSW between change and control

The critical-political conception of CSW has devoted particular attention to analysing the consequences of neoliberal reforms on the environment, on the social dimension and on public welfare systems (Forde, Lynch, 2014; Pyles, 2016; Stout, Love, 2019). We could say that on this view the community approach is conceived as a strategy for radicalizing the public space politically by organizing citizens in alliances, committees and associations which can voice the demands of local communities and defend their interests in the face of the processes of exploitation put in place by the capitalist economic system or organize new forms of mutuality and collective social protection. The community becomes the place where it is possible to build new forms of micro-power which can nevertheless enter into relations with larger configurations, such as those acting in local (including social service) or national institutions. From this point of view, CSW in a political perspective carries with it an expectation of social change that always expresses a “democratic radicality”, that is, the search for a real, profound change in the social mechanisms that produce the conditions of need. It is not enough to give an answer to a manifest problem and solve a problem present in one community; CSW seeks to go further, by showing the social nature of these problems and the conservative and repressive function performed by all those professional and institutional activities that respond to needs without addressing their social causes.

The issue of the politicization of the social dimension is also felt as urgent because one of the peculiar characteristics of neoliberal culture is to have

imposed a model of professional operation and management of welfare systems (Glyn, 2006; Pierson, 1994) and corporate social services (Strier, 2019). This model is built around the idea that the intervention of social work must take place within a technical framework of neutrality, to be guided and assessed by standardized operational protocols (Strier, 2019). Technical neutrality, however, deprives social work of that ethical and political dimension which forms one of its constituent components and which is recognised by the world's leading social work organizations as indispensable to ensure that this profession can contribute to pursuing the ideals of social justice and the fight against inequalities and discrimination (IFSW, 2014). Deprived of its framework of values, social work would be reduced to a purely piecemeal welfare activity, since it would not contribute to modifying the structural factors involved in the genesis of human problems (Lorenz, 2017). This is why it is not enough, in social work, to stop at enhancing community resources, taking them into account only for their intrinsic value, for their relational, emotional and symbolic dimensions that certainly make them a precious resource for professional intervention. We could even say that, without a "political" assessment of these resources, that is, without reflecting on the relationship between the community dimension and other social systems, which are always linked to the rise or resolution of the problems targeted by professional intervention, it would not be possible for the social services to put in place community interventions, since these interventions could contribute to perpetuating situations of social injustice, such as when that very same community approach is proposed to justify or compensate for the policies of cuts to the Welfare State.

Starting from the mid-70s of the twentieth century, in close connection with the emergence of the neoliberal economic model, the strengthening of community social work officially appears as a strategic point to be pursued in the reform programmes of the Welfare State in Great Britain (Bulmer, 1992). In these documents, community social work is described according to a functionalist perspective, as an indispensable resource for broadening the range of institutional responses to situations of need, taking into account both the need to contain expenses for the welfare system and to favour a greater humanization of interventions. What is taken for granted is that social protection expenditure must be contained, if not actually reduced, and that the future of welfare systems will depend on an increase in the scope for action of private solidarity, both market and community. In this context, the community is treated once more as an effective and low-cost alternative to the expansion of professional services and CSW is again theorized as an activity that aims to seek resources outside the institutional context: "(...) there are objective limits to the amount of care that public services can provide, which

can be found in the fairly strict criteria both for the allocation of economic subsidies to various categories of non-self-supporting persons and for the provision of formal services (for example, home care). Since the aid provided by public bodies is generally free of charge, it is necessary to use more or less explicit ‘rationing’ systems” (Bulmer, 1992: 265).

Bulmer’s intention is to defend the system of professional services against attempts at complete dismantling supported by some sectors of British Conservative politics, while still accepting the assumption that the fate of public solidarity systems would be played out in a dynamic restricting the resources and benefits of the Welfare State together with an implementation of market interventions. Moreover, Bulmer’s “Community Care” is completely devoid of political depth, critical capacity and self-organization, never expressing any mindset of its own other than that of creating a new intertwining of care systems with the public sector. For example, there does not seem to be any provision for organizing citizens in forms of association for the purpose of defending and expanding public care systems. And it is precisely on this point that a considerable distance emerges between the radical and functionalist conceptions of CSW, a distance that we shall also find in the contents of the interviews in the focus groups, which we will shortly analyse, between social workers’ expectations from community work and those of local authority administrators.

In this connection, it should be emphasized that the conception of community social work and the role that the social work should play in it also depend on the social and cultural context in which it is situated and on the way in which welfare systems are configured. As concerns the Italian situation, in which social services are organized and managed at the municipal level and in which the resources to meet a range of needs of the population are also a tool for legitimizing the municipal political class, it seems inevitable that community social work may sometimes be envisaged as an opportunity to pursue goals of political consensus or social control. As we shall see shortly, all this sometimes seems to emerge in the professional experiences of the social workers involved in the research project, for whom a discrepancy has really manifested itself between their expectations of the renewal of professional practices and promotion of new opportunities for the users of municipal social services, to be pursued through community social work, and the requests (implicit and explicit) made to those social workers, by some local authority administrators, to “be the ear” of the administration in the local authority area. In this problematic dynamic between promotion and control, the eventual loser seems to be CSW, which, in the experience investigated by us, in fact turns out to be hardly at all put into practice.

3. Community social work in the accounts of the social workers of the local authorities in FVG: between control and promotion of autonomy

The first datum that emerged in the research on the social work of the local authorities in FVG, which we must take as our starting point, is that in all six focus groups the conception of CSW expressed is that which we have referred to as “instrumental” and “functionalist”, interpreting the work of the community as a strategy to cope with the lack of institutional responses. Rarer (although not entirely absent) was any reference to the “political-radical” conception of community work, understood as an instrument for collectively organizing citizens’ demands. Furthermore, these two conceptions were expressed by different segments of respondents: younger social workers, those with less than 15 years of work employment, tend to favour a technical and instrumental vision of community social work, while it was social workers with at least 15 years of work who discussed CSW as a tool for promoting an independent political awareness in the community and conceived it as a way of working by which to counter the bureaucratic and corporate models imposed on social workers. While the younger operators ask for more training to improve the quality of the technical intervention with particular segments of users (e.g. for families with high conflict and for the protection of minors), the longer-serving social workers experience an inability to work with local authorities and associations in pursuing political, cultural, solidarity and promotional goals.

It should be emphasized that all the interviewees explained that professional intervention by the social services takes place in a very complex institutional framework. For example, it has been repeatedly observed that the number of care functions of local authorities is very high (ranging from the condition of the elderly to the protection of minors, from services for the non-self-supporting to economic poverty) and exists within an organizational and management framework which is highly fragmented as between different local authorities, on which levels of funding also depend. In this context, what seems to emerge is a consistent lack of resources and a professional operation focused on the short term resolution of users’ problems, with little or no possibility of planning promotional interventions or community organization. The social workers told us that the social fabric of the communities is rich in initiatives and forms of association for solidarity purposes and that it would be an advantage for the entire community for institutional responses to be integrated with those of private citizens. This sectional and functional conception of community solidarity is well described in these passages from the interviews:

“In some areas of work, such as the condition of the elderly, it is clear that we do not have a sufficient number of institutional resources at our disposal. We are talking about problems that affect many people and that require an investment of personnel and tools that should be far greater than what we provide. Working with the community allows you to offer more than what you have available as a local authority”.

“There is a clear shrinkage of welfare resources and there is a need to integrate institutional resources. The work we do together with the associations and cooperatives of the area also has the purpose of cooperating to give services that we are not able to provide”.

“We are very interested in community work because there are many resources in the area that would be useful for providing the services that we should be able to guarantee but have not managed to do. We have too many care responsibilities and the level of resources at our disposal has certainly not grown, indeed in recent years it has fallen. Working with the local community allows us to integrate our responses with those of the voluntary sector”.

The problem that emerges from the group discussions is not only an instrumental use of social solidarity, but also the fact that this activity of compensation seems to hide a broader structural situation of the profound organizational and managerial inadequacy of municipal welfare systems increasingly characterised by a high level of bureaucratic control of the work of social workers and by the requirement to carry out mainly remedial interventions, as evidenced in these three interview passages:

“From the '80s onwards, since I started working for local authorities, the world of Social Work has really changed. In these decades everything has changed, both in the skills required and in the daily operation, our way of working. Today there are high levels of fragmentation of functions and also of interventions, which we never used to see. There is also a great deal of bureaucratic control over what we do.”

“We are too busy with our daily work in the office, with a logic of performance, and we neglect taking care of our communities. We give too much attention to case management, which occupies all our working time, and we would feel the need to change, to recover the relationship with our local areas, to break free of this operation entirely dedicated to trying to respond to a problem”.

“20 or 30 years ago it was possible to slow down, think, plan innovative interventions. Today this is impossible. We have ever more new and

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complicated responsibilities and we have to interface with a much larger network of services. The operational reality is much more complex than it used to be and the users are also different. Today people come to us whom once you would never have seen, such as the unemployed worker who cannot find work. The pressure we are under to respond to individual needs is very high, even if we do not have the resources to cope with all these problems in a truly effective way. So, you try to make do with what you have and you don't have time to do anything else”.

A high volume of care responsibilities, low spending capacity, organizational inadequacy and fragmentation of the municipal welfare system do not favour a broad and adequate plan to meet the needs of citizens, even from a preventive point of view. CSW thus becomes, for actors in the local assistance system, a strategy for compensating for institutional shortcomings. As mentioned, this supplementary and instrumental vision of community solidarity, as a resource available to the local public system of social work, does not grasp the full potential for innovation and change stemming from the possible creation of integrated local systems of care, between public and private sectors. On the contrary, this conception assigns to the community the task of concealing the shortcomings of public assistance, thus helping to legitimize the very political choices that underlie these problems.⁵ CSW accordingly becomes an instrument for weakening the potential for social conflict that could manifest itself through the organization of a collective demand for greater and better social protections, or by supporting citizens in the construction of independent systems of mutual support and self-management. These forms of civic organization should not have as their objective that of relieving local authority social services from the burden of having to face a spectrum of needs for which sufficient resources are not available but also through which, by promising to take charge of them, the

⁵ In Italy, in 2000, the central government passed Act no. 328 which aimed to reduce this fragmentation of the municipal welfare system through the involvement of community solidarity in local assistance systems. The purpose of this law was to create integrated care systems, through which community solidarity could be involved not only in the provision phase of services but also in the planning and oversight of interventions. Act no. 328/2000 thus had a political vision of the community, which was regarded as a resource in which to plan together with citizens their care systems. In reality, the great variability in the social composition of Italian communities and also the different qualities of the local political classes have had a considerable weight in making Act no. 328/2000 a dead letter in many respects (Baker and Centemers, 2008), especially in the parts in which it prefigured the construction of local community welfare systems with an equal role as between public and private sectors in the planning and oversight of social interventions.

local political classes can obtain electoral consensus. Therefore, weakening the possibilities of promoting a debate among the citizens and a normal and democratic social conflict that could be triggered by awareness of the inadequacy of local welfare systems is a way of using CSW as an instrument for legitimization of local politics, including that shade of politics that has not been able (or willing) to commit itself to strengthening local public systems of social protection.

It must be said that social policy interventions always have, among other things, a function of legitimizing the political system because, as a result of the recognition of rights that are due, it is normal for groups benefiting from protections to consider political representatives as a point of reference to look to in case of need. Liberal democracy itself has been able to use social rights as an integrative system that has been able to reduce the distances between social classes and strengthen the loyalty of the most economically disadvantaged groups to the democratic political system. Marshall elaborated the evocative image of a “transversal social class” (Marshall, 2002) to describe the integrative function of social rights, which would exert a centripetal economic and social dynamic by contrast with the centrifugal thrusts of widening inequalities naturally produced by capitalism. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that, even in the interviews we have collected, social workers have highlighted how a section of the municipal political class in FVG expects the social work – including through CSW – to exercise a function of representation and support for the image and political activity of the local authority. In a democratic system, however, this activity of legitimation should be the result of the ability of social policies to produce inclusion and protection for ever wider groups of the population. Here, by contrast, we have the delineation of a different picture, which seems to be situated more in a framework characterized by the need to monitor the “moods” of the local area and give an impression of closeness to the population, even if the overall volume of institutional social benefits cannot be increased, as reported in the following passage:

“We can say that it is also a question of control by local officials (...). The social service is seen as a sort of monitor to inform administrators about the problems of the local area, but also to reassure citizens and reduce their anxiety, especially now that people are increasingly alone and isolated. In short, we exercise a control function for the politicians.”

In social policy systems with a welfare and municipal character, such as the Italian one, it is of course much easier to create personal, direct links between those who manage the local welfare resources (the administrators and

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the technical and bureaucratic apparatus) and the beneficiaries of the interventions (see Esping-Andersen, 1990). This sometimes also facilitates the creation of mechanisms of patronage between the needy and the providers of benefits, since the welfare system confirms the asymmetrical power relationship between those who ask and those who *can* give:

“To us too it sometimes happened that the councillor tried to put pressure not to be too generous with someone who asked for assistance and was not well viewed by local politicians. If you are dealing with immigrants or other members of minorities, it may happen that some administrators are not very happy that you decide to support these people.”

“Sometimes administrators push hard to involve associations and communities. Their goal is above all to show that the town council is close to the needs of citizens, that the administrators are attentive and ready to intervene. Many proposals in the electoral campaign promised greater closeness of social services to the local area and its citizens, in such a way as to give reassurance, to show that no one will be left on his own, and this is important especially for the most fragile people, those who have less support, such as the elderly living alone or people who are not self-supporting.”

It is very interesting and significant that some of the social workers interviewed in the focus groups correlated the quest for legitimacy of local politicians with an activity of containment of the fears and anxieties of the population and – sometimes – limiting the welfare benefits of people who did not belong to the community, either because they were “foreigners” or because they belonged to ethnic minorities. The feelings of insecurity of the population are interpreted by social workers as the product of the structural situation of loneliness and need in which some social groups find themselves, and this seems to have also been understood by local politicians, who respond by trying to gain approval through the distribution of local welfare resources (including those underpinned by community solidarity) but also through messages of limiting (or excluding) the benefits assistance given to those who “do not belong to the community”. Therefore, the action of containing existential uncertainty does not take place through an enlargement of institutional resources, but rather by strengthening a direct relationship between the different actors in the community and the social services and marking the distance between those who are “inside” and those who are “outside” the community in question. All this can give rise, at most, to an integration between public interventions and social solidarity, but it does not have the purpose – in the account given by the social workers – of

strengthening the resources of the social services and the capacity for action of the community, especially in the direction of social change:

“The administrators feel they have to bring the institution closer to the local area, to show that the town council is present, that it does not leave citizens on their own. This is also useful for becoming aware of the problems of the population and keeping the local situation under control. However, if we are only the “sentries” of order we can have little effect in really changing things”.

The political dimension of CSW emerges above all in those experiences of social work carried out in local communities in which there is a significant immigrant presence and in which local administrators express a conflictual and non-inclusive attitude towards immigrants:

“In our city we had succeeded in doing a very fine job with the population on accepting immigrants. Here in our area there are a lot of shipyards where many foreigners work and the situation is always very difficult vis-à-vis the local population. Community work had allowed us to bring immigrants’ associations together with the local population and to make their culture known. This cost us many years of work and a lot of effort. Then, however, there was a political change in the administration and the management of social services, and the way we worked in our services also changed and we lost most of the links we had with the local area (...) because the administrators no longer allowed us to continue with our projects”.

As mentioned earlier, in the group interviews it emerged that it was above all the social workers who had been trained during the ’70s and ’80s, in a highly politicized historical period with a considerable development of welfare systems, who felt the lack of possibility of working in the community. It was these social workers who highlighted how, since the 1990s, in local authority social services it has become much more difficult to plan and implement CSW interventions. The increase in the care responsibilities of local authorities, but also the affirmation of a corporate, “managerialist” management culture, have progressively reduced the scope for CSW. Not even the passing of Act no. 328/2000 seems to have been able significantly to change this situation, and CSW is perceived even today as one of the most suitable tools for recovering a social, participatory and promotional dimension of the local social work:

“(…) We constantly risk being completely absorbed in administrative work: we should rebel against this and not accept such an expectation of us. But if

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the administrations expect you to do your work in the office and no more and the most important thing is that you respect the bureaucratic procedures, then you lose community work’s potential for change and reduce the resources available”.

We have here confirmation that a municipal configuration of the social services system makes the action of social workers very exposed to the pressures of local politics while, on the other hand, the possibility of involving community social actors in the construction of integrated local care systems – as required by Act no. 328/2000 – has not emerged, in the interviews carried out, as a process that has taken root in daily operations. In this way, CSW seems to lose its capacity for innovation, while an ancillary vision of “normal” community social work continues to prevail, which is understood, by some local authority administrators, as an activity that typically must take place within an institutional and bureaucratic framework.

4. Conclusions

The reflections of the local authority social workers in FVG on the difficulty of implementing community interventions highlight the complex situation in which local social services operate. The scarcity of institutional resources available to deal with problems arising from structural social factors is accompanied by a modification of the management models of local social services, which are increasingly subject to strict controls on budgets and on the services provided. The shortcomings of the Italian social protection system are dumped onto a local welfare scheme that seems excessively fragmented and, sometimes, even tainted by political pressure on professional staff. Community interventions are thus interpreted either as a tool to fill institutional gaps or as a strategy of local politics to gain credit with the population. In this quest for political legitimacy, community work sometimes appears as a strategy for marking the differences between those “inside” and those “outside” the community. The construction of boundaries of identity between “us and them” is sometimes also played out through the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion from welfare benefits in small-scale social contexts, in which it is easy to use their discretion in deciding who will be supported by the local authority as a tool to gain credit in the eyes of a population in need which does not have a genuine package of social rights to claim. In all this, social workers seem to be aware that what is being sacrificed in community social work is its potential for innovation, its ability to question traditional models of intervention and to amplify the critical voice of citizens. It might seem normal that in a country where a significant proportion of social

assistance benefits is provided by private social organizations – organizations that also provide high levels of quality in interventions and organizational models – community work is valued by local authorities mainly for its ability to compensate for the shortcomings of the public social protection system. However, it must also be said that many of these organizations already perform functions that are not only remedial but also promotional, some even taking the form of advocacy. That is, if we think of the immigration issue, or the fight against economic inequality and poverty, or the struggles for the right to housing or the protection of the environment, or the struggles for the rights of ethnic minorities and LGBT people, we have before us examples of how organizing private citizens has managed to fill a void in public interventions, not only from the point of view of the services provided but also from that of the organization of public debate, the promotion of scientific research and the implementation of innovative models of partnership between the different actors involved in the local area. Community work therefore expresses a political awareness that should also be enhanced by the system of local social services which, moreover, would have at their disposal a conceptually very advanced law on the theme of integrated approaches, such as Act no. 328/2000. The fact is that, judging from the interviews conducted, community social service seems to be felt as a heritage to be valued especially by social workers trained during the 1970s and 1980s, while the younger professionals, who have undergone basic training in university courses, seem less sensitive to community approaches. Perhaps here it is possible to see a sign that the incorporation of social service into university education may have sacrificed something of its political component in favour, probably, of an emphasis on its technical-operational content (Lorenz, 2017). In any case, the fact that social service seems to be loosening its links with local communities, closing itself more and more in a bureaucratized operation centred on the management of emergencies, can only represent a cause for concern, not only for the quality of professional interventions but also for the ability of social workers to contribute to counteracting the structural social factors that are involved in the genesis of welfare problems. From this point of view, the near absence of participatory community plans which we noted in the operational context investigated in our research, and the drive to use community solidarity as a crutch to shore up local welfare systems increasingly characterized by the lack of resources and promotional projects, seem to confirm that community work is perceived above all in a functional and instrumental key, thus stripping it of its potential for innovation.

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