«LOCAL WELFARE» AND SOCIAL PROFESSIONS’ MISSIONS: 
RESCALING PUBLIC «SOCIAL QUESTION» GOVERNANCE

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION: WORK, LABOUR, AND WELFARE ARE DIFFERENT THAN THEY WERE...

Work, labour, and welfare have greatly evolved following the great transformation of economies and societies over the last forty years. These relevant social issues have been differently considered in a global research agenda regarding their specificity within various regional, national, and institutional North/South contexts. Their linkages have not always been fully appreciated from the viewpoint of social cohesion and public governance, nor have they taken into account the role that «normative frames of reference» (as a composite conceptualisation embracing a whole of ideas, norms and values, proceeding from a global vision of reality) informing public policy design (Jobert 1985) could play in order to ensure or undermine their social bases and foundations.

However, they crucially interact within societies where industrial workers’ employment and social security systems have been challenged by a large service-based economy. On the one hand, redefining work and employment conditions, as well as labour and professions’ status; and, on the other hand, reshaping the Welfare system (Castel et al. 2013): the scope and management of its policies – remaking the social intervention scale and the social professions’ missions and practices (Galtier 2011).

Moreover, in different countries, disregarding the specific configurations of national Welfare systems, social policies are undergoing significant rescaling processes. Following the crises of social welfare policy since the 1990s, the European research and literature are extremely rich on this topic (Kazepov 2010). At a first glance, the scalar reorganisation of social policy management might be seen as an ambivalent outcome of complex welfare reforms aimed, on the one side, at contrasting the spread of urban poverty and rising economic and social inequalities; and, on the other side, at cutting costs and devolving the burden of cuts to the local level – facing to new social demands within neoliberal strategies.

This article aims to contribute to the debate concerning public regulation, governance and visions in terms of «models of professionalism» emerging in Western European societies by recalling the evolution of «emergent» Latin American countries,
and by putting their «social development» experience since the structural adjustment into analytical perspective with these topics and concerns. Focusing these processes – with their historical specificity – might help in highlighting the significance of the call for «local Welfare» and the switch towards «care» (Georges 2015) in the framework of current rescaling policy trends. Reforms had and still have a dissimilar impact according to the institutional, socio-economic and socio-demographic features of contexts. These contextual differences and specificities, as well as their interplay, need certainly to be considered and understood, to conceive these issues in a comparative perspective and analyse them from a relational approach (Merrien 2014).

Against the background of previous research on Latin American and, in particular, recent Argentinean experience, we seek to critically reflect on the institutional impact of these «referentials» («normative frames of reference») and transnational ideas beyond the «post-neoliberal» regimes of social organisation disseminated in this area. On the one hand, by regarding the frame of reference underlying the reforms of national public sector and – in several cases – the injunctions for a policy rescaling which involves the emerging dynamics towards a «multilevel management» of specific fields of public policies (economics, urban, employment, health etc.). On the other hand, by questioning their impact on social professions (i.e. «hybridisation» social work/care and social professions), at the forefront of «targeted» social policy strategies addressing «the social question» (Castel 1995) (i.e. «monitoring» social assistance devices and beneficiaries), and – namely at the local level – the constraining expressions of its current metamorphoses, as well as the transformation of its public ways of management (Arias 2012b; Castronovo 2012; Lo Vuolo 2001).

The main institutional impact of structural adjustment within Latin American semi-industrialised economies (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile) was related to the implantation of a model of State withdrawal involving a drastic redefinition of its economic and social functions – as well as re-prioritising the public and social expenditure allocation criteria, under the remote monitoring of international financial institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). The regional adjustment directives were disseminated throughout the 1980s, as part of the «financial therapy» for economies with high levels of foreign debt; they represented thus a major change of development paradigm, questioning the role of national regulation, increasing inequalities, expanding poverty, and weakening social cohesion.

Their social consequences strongly impacted on employment situation, on income distribution, on ways of life and social reproduction of large categories of population in these countries. In some cases, where the wage labour nexus and a related social protection system were historically developed on the basis of social insurance (Argentina), the outcome of such regression was the rapid rise in unemployment and job insecurity – associated with the growth of the financial sphere –, and the
expansion of «informal» or «atypical» forms of employment, characterised by flexibility, instability and uncertainty. The notions of «precariousness» and «vulnerability» became main drivers for understanding the dynamics of some major transformations within contemporary societies, according to the semantic register that they introduced in the field of work and social intervention sociology after the criticised «social exclusion» approach.

Indeed, as a consequence of the changes produced in the social structure by adjustment policies and neoliberal financial crisis recovery, a new social order has emphasized the divide in an increasingly polarised society. In the case of Argentina, this includes the increasing marginalisation of large segments of the population that various social sciences contributions characterised in the 1990s using the notion of «social exclusion», which was widespread and locally labelled in its variants, in terms of «excluded» groups and «excluding model» – from the beginning of that decade. In this context, trends of disaggregation and social de-structuring appeared, alongside signs of deep deterioration, if not decay, of institutions and social safety nets which – in relationship to an ideological climate of «naturalising» inequalities – did not fail to point out the new forms of insecurity associated with the dynamics of «disaffiliation» as well as the impact of such risks on social cohesion (Castel 2009).

The political consequences of the rising mass vulnerability could certainly be analysed in terms of the «social question» rethinking – which engages the crucial question of linkages between work, labour and social protection, including the welfare services» provision and the public»s access to them. This also refers to the ways in which governments but also other public actors are addressing it, since international and supranational organisations currently play a significant role in restructuring and shaping social policies. In quite different contexts, this involves the implementation of new strategies for social policy, as we try to demonstrate putting into a relational perspective the genesis (the «switch towards»…) and – to some extent – the evolution of some emblematic contemporary public social intervention patterns.

As a matter of fact, such complex dynamics and their controversial effects in the context of Latin American countries, contribute to explain the «social compensatory» approach which arose as a public reaction, still under the neoliberal influence, regarding the «social costs» of adjustment and searching to restore, through «emergency» or «development and social investment» funds, the accessibility to public goods and basic social services. Otherwise, over the last ten years, by and throughout the wide influence of transnational ideas, the issue of «care» has been introduced in the field of social policy development in a large range of (mainly, but not only, developed) societies. The concern of care provision, involving new forms of professional governance and changes in the care workforce – as care labour feminisation – and their implications for professional development, tended to raise many questions. That contributed to put the «care» issue in the focus of different social fields and disciplines: from social policy and sociology (sociology of social policies and Welfare, as well as sociology of work and professions), to gender analyses – which approach it, often critically, from their specific focal and their distinct disciplinary perspectives (Arias 2012a; Georges 2015).
The progressive deterioration of the social situation which the majority of Latin-American countries have dealt with following the recessive environment of the 1980s was in fact the result of increasingly restricted access to goods and services for basic social needs, accentuated by the limits of the «classic» social policy system – within a framework of restrictions and budget cuts that have notably affected resources as well as modes of operation. The structural adjustment model, once put in place, became widespread and was accompanied by the increasing presence at the international level of a set of ideas and proposals which aimed to redefine the nature and scope of State intervention.

Governmental implementation of methods and special measures which were intended to mitigate the «social costs» of economic policies in place since the 1980s, reflected the underlying «social compensation» ideology. From the beginning of the second half of the decade this led some countries in the region, then almost all of them, to implement emergency or social assistance mechanisms which aimed to bring the quality of life back to the same level as before the financial crisis.

The emergency social compensation or social investment programmes (...) were generally conceived as temporary stop-gap measures, with short and medium-term effects, intended to restore essential accessibility (to basic goods and social services) to the most heavily affected population (Rodríguez Noboa 1991: 85, our translation, emphasis in original).

According to this analysis (somewhat prescriptive oriented, like most of the assessment «grey literature» related to the multilateral financial organisms produced by the consultancy milieu), given how much significance that such mechanisms had gained, between the last 1980s and the early 1990s, «they have managed to build a necessary component for the conception and application of stabilisation and adjustment programmes» (Rodríguez Noboa 1991: 85, our emphasis). In general, these were the guiding principles and the stated aim of these «social compensation» programmes. They mainly focused on basic social needs, such as food assistance and («emergency») employment, and were intended to partially alleviate the most tangible regressive effects of the economic crisis and the fiscal adjustment on the working class population, working poor, and underclass.

Due primarily to the effects of rising poverty, economic insecurity, and marginalisation, the structural adjustment policies have not only involved a reversal of the social modernisation which took place over several decades, but have called into question the possibility (in the present and future) of maintaining social inclusion thresholds. And this particularly applies to the most affected, regarding their weak access to the labour market and the handicap of precariousness to ensure their social reproduction.

Even assuming that the economic adjustment model aimed to promote further modernisation – as was postulated by its proponents –, with regard to regressive char-
acteristics and «excluding» structural transformations that its reform policies generated, this other «modernisation» has not resulted in spreading the benefits of economic growth to the whole of society – quite the contrary... Its application promoted the concentration of resources in favour of certain categories and privileged groups – which had partially consolidated at this time – especially in terms of their socio-economic situation, due precisely to the lack of fairness that characterised the distribution of recessive adjustment costs and the burden that this has heaped upon the working class and the sacrifice that has been requested of them. This happened not only because of their decreased income level, but also – sometimes substantially – through various forms of job loss (restructuring, downsizing etc.), which caused expulsion from the labour market, reducing the social rights and protections previously won and acquired by the working class.

Without going so far as to be a real threat to the stability of the democratic regime, the developments described have nevertheless represented a kind of «stigma» and were a factor in the corrosion of its legitimacy. That is why, in the context of the social integration crisis that the adjustment deepened, questions about the type of governance strategies (explicit or not) that governments tended to adopt, questioning their systemic or progressive nature, have emerged in various places. In this sense, for many, the focus was on the type of resources that democratic governments were allocating for this purpose. And particularly the role that so-called targeted «social compensation» policies would come to play vis-à-vis these issues that could be interpreted as being related to a «new social question», to be treated and «regulated» in a different manner from the «classical» methods of the previous period.

In the case of Argentina, the aforementioned new policies and programmes, essentially stop-gap measures, arose in parallel with the retraction of the mechanisms and dynamics of economic regulation and in front of the reversion of the process of redistributing the fruits of development, in which the intervention of the «social-protector» State and its public goods and services policies played a crucial role, despite the limitations described (Peñalva 2013). Then, the implementation, and even the dissemination, of «focused» programmes would not be able to – or only with great difficulty – overcome the limits due to their palliative character. In particular, in response to the new social risks arising in the context of structural reduction in opportunities for labour market integration as well as job insecurity and deteriorating quality of employment, income levels fell and access to essential goods and services became increasingly difficult – even impossible – for large sectors of the population.

Analyses linking these research concerns to social policy formulation, highlighted the institutional and financial challenges of a possible «universalisation» of «targeted» programmes. Particularly in Argentina, this issue has received increasing attention since the 2000s, due to rising unemployment and massive impoverishment, which certainly embody the most dramatic evolution of the contemporary period, while being the result of a much longer process – going on for more than thirty years and surely not so «glorious» as the preceding «Glorious Thirty» (the 30-year post war boom). This seems to justify the relevance of a retrospective critical look at the methods of intervention which, from the late 1980s (Peñalva 2010), and under new formats over the
last decade (Clemente 2012), have been developed for the purpose of treating the far-reaching effects of these social phenomena (Arias 2012b; Repetto 2014).

IV - RESCALING POLICY: «LOCAL WELFARE» IN LATIN AMERICA – THE «NEW SOCIAL QUESTION» GOVERNANCE?

The appreciable dissemination of the «social compensation» ideology which has spread widely throughout Latin America asks us to consider the political significance of this approach, which has greatly influenced paradoxical reformist thought. For if it has become «the State», it has been through the pervasiveness of ideas and visions of reality promoted by agents and organisations who – according to their «pro-market frame of reference» – often, in fact, want «less public action and State regulation» (Coraggio 1996). This was reflected in particular by the emergence of «programmes against poverty», which since the 1980s, have played a major role among the social intervention modalities implemented after the «urban revolts»: the various forms of protest emerging among the poorest, even impoverished, segments of the population – the stakeholders» resistance to the costs of austerity representing an obstacle for the implementation of adjustment programmes to overcome.

One might suppose that the «compensatory» approach, whose adoption was promoted by multilateral agencies, has itself conveyed «cost-benefit» type reasoning according to logic similar to that of the assessment of transaction costs. This logic seems to embrace so many issues related to the political legitimacy of governments – which has often been eroded by the effects of economic policies –, as a demobilisation of the sectors most affected by the consequences of their management (Bustelo et al. 1995). In several cases, such as Chile and Bolivia, these policies were implemented within a framework of a perfected bureaucratic rationality and with resources from international agencies.

At the time of adjustment, some analysts argued that the situation would encourage trends and leanings to the «municipalisation» or «localisation» of the welfare crisis, according to the principle of subsidiarity, widely disseminated. The local level tended to be presented as the space in which tensions between modernity and exclusion could be resolved. «The idea that the Nation-State is no longer adequate to fight against poverty, and unemployment seems to accompany the crisis of the Welfare State» (Prévôt-Schapira 1996: 86, our translation, our emphasis).

In the case of Argentina, which is a federal State, the last two decades have been marked, in fact, by processes of decentralisation and transfer of services and competencies to the intermediate and local levels of government: provinces and municipalities. According to some analyses, it has complicated the background and the foundations of social policy public management, even more, which has become a field of tension between the different territorial levels – hence the importance of challenges in terms of multi-level structures and the role of the local scale in social intervention and management (Alonso 2012).

In a similar perspective, other authors have recently described this trend towards local integration in the context of a territorial anchorage of social public intervention:
The State was forced to overhaul its social action to deal with the adverse effects of the process of economic globalisation and neoliberal policies on society as a whole. Previously the exclusive jurisdiction of the national government, the responsibility for the implementation of social policies was transferred to local authorities as part of the decentralisation process. This has resulted, paradoxically in relationship to the globalisation process, in a revaluation of the role of local governments in the design and implementation of public policies, particularly social policies (Ziccardi 2006: 12, our translation, our emphasis).

In the Latin American context, «social compensation programmes» commonly call also for beneficiary population participation, often seen as a resource for their implementation. Based on organisational procedures and local representation, these new kind of social policies were then presented, by decentralisation proponents, as a means to involve citizens in the local responses to lack of welfare and social needs, attributing the potential power behind local or «community» democracy to these «territorialised» forms of intervention. For others, these strategies in the «fight against poverty» would lead, however, to organised vote-catching and political patronage, which relegate the poorest within a territory, reinforcing political clientelism. That meant: dependency vis-à-vis local networks and leaders, as much as social control practices from authorities and practices, beyond the cooperative virtues of experimentation with some innovative intervention forms of multi-level institutions, promoting shared management, which locally emerged as well (Castro 2015; Peñalva 2010; Zarazaga 2014).

V · RESTRUCTURING SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL PROFESSIONS PRACTICES – FIGHTING DAMAGE WITH «CARE»

Most of national (and local) changing thought on social policies and related approaches of social professions is currently internationally embedded – and open to the influence of transnational ideas. However, the professional governance and development of social professions – that the social policies emergent in contexts of austerity have certainly modified – continue to be, to a large extent, dependent on the regional specificities and the national traditions. Not only in terms of regimes of welfare provision services, but also regarding the academic recognition of different social professions, as well as the tasks and missions professionally assigned to them in the framework of public social intervention. This seems to be particularly truth in the field of «care» sector professions.

Focusing on a new type of intervention logic, which keep some similarities with the neoliberal approach dominant since the 1980s all across Latin America, new social policies were presented as playing an effective role in the preservation of – and even in improving – the living conditions of the population groups faced with poverty and difficulty meeting basic social needs within quite different countries. Regarding these «new social policies» – that followed and prolonged the neoliberal experience –, and searching to characterise their abovementioned goals and methods, we can identify two simplified variants of widespread strategies all over the region. One of them would be content to mitigate the negative effects of «excluding» modernisation; the other, on the
contrary, would aim to «redirect» the base model to reach a progressive operation, in the hypothetical sense of being more socially «inclusive».

However, these goals eventually run into limits ultimately imposed by the prevailing global economic model. The factors and circumstances guiding their application are logically linked to the political situations in each country, resulting from national trajectories. They have determined the modalities and rhythms of the implementation of «poverty fighting» programmes, which in the mid-1980s (the «lost decade» in terms of «social development») prospered in different forms across the region. But in general – although there have been exceptions – it is at the heart of such high socio-political tension that compensatory-type policies have gained momentum through the application of specific programmes which aimed to support – or at least manage – the most critical emergencies associated with the adjustment or its subsequent «costs» in terms of social reproduction and urban living conditions.

In the case of Argentina, significant changes in the approaches regarding social policy design and to the organisation of the social protection system happened, that came into effect starting in the mid-1980s. They contributed to a framework in which the socio-economic crisis – largely related to the restructuring of the first adjustment – had led to a kind of breakdown point in the logic of everyday life (Feijóo 1988) which for a long time had proved quite effective in terms of organisation of the working class way of life and social reproduction, particularly in urban areas. Thus, while decentralisation was being applied in different core areas of welfare policies (education, health, and housing), the State as well as a set of actors at the edge of public and private entities – many of whom had forged an opposition to the last dictatorship – contributed to the revitalisation of the local scene. The Church, NGOs, and neighbourhood or territorially-based organisations, have implemented various programmes and social actions: various forms of assistance intended help to address the basic social needs (for food, housing, health etc.) among the most vulnerable groups – in case of a protracted emergency situation.

As noted by studies that have reviewed the political analysis of this issue, the local sphere now outlined as the favoured focused treatment of these «social problems» related to basic needs, the territorial boundaries allowed them to manage a large population «in difficulty» or socially disadvantaged. These diagnostics, as well as the adopted measures, then seemed to politically centre around a long-neglected «social definition» (and not «individual») of the «poor» – which must promptly be revisited. «Thus, what makes one poor is not the lack of means. The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means» (Simmel 1965: 140, our emphasis). In the conceptual definition due to one of the founders of German sociology – in one of the three components of the typology of social relationships he constructed in 1908 (Schermer et al. 2013)1 –, some academic representatives reflecting

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on the social intervention models and the recent evolutions reshaping the social work practices seem to find the «cornerstone» of the «work on the others» which currently redefines the core of this social profession and its scope as discipline (Arias 2012b: 22).

VI - APPROACHING SOCIAL PROTECTION BY NORMATIVE FRAMES OF REFERENCE: THE SWITCH TOWARDS «CARE»

As a result of this journey, we can now globally examine the evolution that the formulation of social policy strategies and the implementation of new social protection methods and public policy instruments have known simultaneously in most of Latin American countries, throughout the last quarter century. We have specified the characteristic features of the substantial modification in the State’s role which – according to our assumptions – corresponds to that which foreshadowed the emergence, at the dawn of the 2000s, of a new paradigm of public social intervention. In relationship to the prioritised contextual elements, this change can be understood through various dimensions which, in their complementarity, allow us to sketch the salient profile of a «minimalist», even social restrained, protection model (Lautier 2004). This seems to embody the paradigm of «focalising» and of «social compensation», whose genesis we traced to the adjustment, noting the outlines that it adopted later, under the major transformation that has come to redefine the concepts and instruments of social protection in relationship to a significant evolution in global and sectorial public policy frames of reference at the Latin American level (Ferrer et al. 2005).

In relation to the social transformations linked to the characterised macro-economic processes, the contemporary Argentine experience seems to validate the hypothesis of a crisis plus a restructuring; essentially compromising the central institutions (wage labour nexus and State intervention) of a mode of regulation initiated and remained in effect for several decades in the second post-war period. The existing questionings and restrictions – often not perceived together or put into relationship – weighed on the organisation of the social State and its entity itself, were combined to this major swing (a kind of great tipping point). This is an institutional paradigm whose characteristics and evolution within Argentine society, even with the limitations that could be attributed to a «peripheral» version of the Welfare State, have situated the country among the most developed – and least unequal – in Latin America.

The questioning of this model extends to the range of political, technical and institutional instruments through which the State played a major role as resource allocator, and a development driving force in charge of facilitating the redistribution of income within society. The economic liberalisation and labour flexibility which shaped adjustment policies, especially in their «second generation» version, have become the main axes of the changes in the role of the State and its methods of economic and social intervention. This is what seems to confirm the dominant orientations of the «market-oriented» reforms of the 1990s: from the denationalisation of the economy and massive privatisation, to reforms to the employment system and the successive changes to the retirement and pension system – we analysed the institutional components and the political dynamics of their implementation in other works.
Following the genealogical approach we have adopted in order to trace the historical process of the formation and consolidation of the Latin American «Estado de Bienestar» (Tironi 1990; Peñalva 2013) and characterise the fundamental traits’ dynamics leading to its weakening, it refers to the observation of the major transformations experienced in this context by the additional functions of economic development that the State had to assume for purposes of protection and social integration. Devices and instruments through which, following similar modalities of intervention and differentiated depending on the case, at first the State played a role in expanding, and then ensuring access to social protection coverage to the majority of the population. The lesson of the Argentine case, which seemed for a long time to have met the challenge of social inclusion within development, is without doubt, that of a hybrid figure case of the «wage society» under the constraints of «structural» adjustment: we have seen these methods undergo transformation following the dictates of liberalisation, privatisation and flexibility associated with the neoliberal model established over two long decades. It is this upheaval in terms of public action frames of reference (global and sectorial), which results in a redefinition the paradigm of State intervention vis-à-vis the «social question» – and which seems to have politically embraced the switch towards «social care».

CONCLUSION: MANAGING «CONDITIONAL TRANSFERS» – A NEW MISSION FOR THE SOCIAL PROFESSIONS?

In the Latin American context, the Welfare State was essentially a reference model which, in different ways, inspired the State intervention methods in the economy and society within semi-industrialised countries in the post-WWII. These included Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, and to some extent Chile; the other countries in the region were not comparable in terms of level and rhythm of industrialisation and, by extension, of the wage-earning labour force. Public intervention was necessary, and became indeed responsible, for the most advanced construction of an insurance-based social protection system («corporatist» or «Bismarckian»), like that established in Argentina in the middle 1940s. To a variable extent, according to social coverage levels, risks covered and lacks in social security protection, those countries follow this model, according to their economic structure, institutional configuration and national political traditions.

For the «modernising» elites of Latin America this «regime» of economic and social organisation was an ideal of modernisation and a globally shared benchmark for their development project. Such a «global normative frame of reference» reached a radical tipping point when the «neoliberal shift» came up, in the early 1980s. Thus, the financial institutions monitoring the indebtedness crisis widely disseminated – through-out quite complex tradeoffs and arrangement with new domestic elites – management principles of governance and reform visions at the opposite of the former public policy, and jeopardizing the future of a model and an ideal of economic development with social integration.
The reforms advocated in the name of the «market» frame of reference, which broadly inspired policies of structural adjustment, have resulted in the complete overhaul of social security systems. This happened on the one hand, through the establishment, in the early 1990s, of «orthodox» structural reforms to privatise pensions and retirement plans, according to various system combinations («public distribution» and «private capitalisation»). The «systemic» reforms were exclusive or accompanied by «parameter» reforms designed to «regulate» the conditions of access to benefits (age, number of years of social security contributions etc.), and often seeking to restrict access (Lo Vuolo 2001). The basic institutional arrangements differ from country to country; beyond the relatively common constraints of this «new pension system orthodoxy», the results of the reforms do not – logically – translate into a «unique model» of pension system (Merrien 2014).

Hence, after two decades of neoliberal structural adjustment policies (1980s-1990s), Latin American countries were confronted with the violent emergence of various expressions arising from the «new social question»: mass unemployment, precariousness, employment insecurity, loss and insufficiency of income, new poverty, intergenerational poverty, and persistent poverty. Further, in the framework of strategies in the fight against poverty, which gave birth, in the 1980s, to programmes of «social compensation», there emerged new formulation of targeted policies «for social inclusion» or «extension of social protection» – for the vulnerable groups: the poor, deprived of a minimum income and access to basic social services. As a public response to main expressions of the «new social question» that so-called «emerging» countries have experienced since the late 1990s, and especially in the last decade, the Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes (CCTP) represent a tipping point in terms of «sector normative frame of reference» inspiring social intervention forms. Various flagship programmes implemented in Latin America embody these new strategic methods in the fight against poverty whose underlying spirit seems compliant with the conditional «care» frame of reference. Oportunidades (former Progresa, and becoming Prospera) is a pioneer in its type, structuring in Mexico the targeted policy system since 1997 (Merrien 2014; Yaschine Arroyo, 2014); Bolsa Familia, created in Brazil in 2003, in the context of Lula government strategy «Zero Fame» (Georges 2015; Merrien 2014; Veras Soares 2015), and the Universal Allowance per Child for Social Protection (AUH) put into law in 2009 in Argentina by the Cristina Kirchner government (Arias 2012b; Roca 2013; Zarazaga 2014), are indeed, on the State return, major public initiatives which target poor families per millions...

A comparative analysis of these emblematic «target» or «quasi-universal» programmes is beyond the scope of this article. We find it plausible, though, to characterise these temporary instruments targeting the most vulnerable groups by taking into account the pattern of social policies that the CCTP seem to share to some extent. As part of a «last generation» social policy strategy to fight emerging poverty in the late 1990s, they seek to extend the social protection coverage via «non contributory» cash transfers mechanisms, whose the «conditional clause», aiming at children health and education attendance, intends to incentivise their human capital development (Castilla 2014). We may recall the heuristic value of the French socio-political notion of public
policy «referential», as the interest of making use of its «global» and «sector» variations, in order to analyse the «normative frame of reference» (Muller et al. 2005) underlying these welfare concerns. Against the background of the neoliberal retrenchment and some progressive expansion that co-exist as contrasting trends, this approach allows us to discuss the role of the ideas and values in action regarding the building of a «social protection floor», as the institutional basis of a regulation scheme for the «new social question» emerging governance pattern.

Strong recent works contribute to critically approach the policy-making processes of policies emphasizing the importance and interest of a comparative look at what we believe about these crucial issues and their political dynamics (Bossert et al. 2012; Mazzuca 2013). Based on the context renewal since the 2000s, this calls for a transformation of the institutional scope of regulation forms, under the influence of the ideological climate which – unambiguously associated with contradictory meanings and controversial effects of the policies implemented – would seem to foreshadow a «post-neoliberal» era (Castronovo 2012). An era where persistent poverty doubled with complexity, and innovative ways of management tend to mix «residual models» with «conditional guarantees», in an horizon of «institutionalisation of the précaire» (Pérez Sosto 2010) which could become consubstantial with social protection systems segmented in targeted beneficiaries and based on non-contributory social benefits (Roca 2013).

Even the Argentine present situation, refers to its cumulative and intergenerational effects using a notion which has become commonplace in the disciplinary field of social work, and certainly in the vision of realities familiar to social workers: that of «irreparable damage» (Clemente 2012). There is also the difficulty to foresee effective regulation and appropriate progressive policy responses to the «emerging social question» – which between «care» and «conditionality» persist in redefining the social professions» missions and challenging their professionalism. Namely within national and local contexts where the relative weakness of social policy institutions, devices and instruments (Repetto 2014), contribute to reproducing «rentier» practices of dealing with the «social problems» related to poor increasing «social needs» according to street level polity agents» interests and/or governments» «political needs» (Zarazaga 2014).

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