

Ecological Economics in Action: Building a Reflective and Inclusive Community

Paper proposal for the theme:

1. Ecological Economics as Transformative Science

1.1. Philosophical and methodological reflections: epistemology, theory and praxis integrated, action research and action learning, arts-based research on sustainability, indigenous perspectives, activism

Title

Action-research and welfare sustainability: the abductive approach for ecological researches and practices in social policy

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the potential role of the abductive approach in social policy research for promoting transformative change towards sustainability.

The sustainability of western welfare systems is going through a deep crisis of three kinds: ecological, occupational, managerial (Fitzpatrick 2011; Koch and Mont 2016; Lawn 2009; Starke *et al* 2013). These are connected to the modes and speed of technological development and of production, consumption and exchange transformations, and are related to way the keynesian and neoliberal paradigms have shaped the role of the states in the capitalist accumulation and the social protection (Jessop 2008). Current political answers to the crisis appear biased and entrapped into-the-box of the enduring neo-liberal thinking and the “tide of pre-emptive austerity” (Hemerijck *et al.* 2013; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013), and incapable to overcome the apparently unsolvable dilemmas between further vicious cycles of deprivation or unsustainable growth (Gough and Meadowcroft 2011; O’Riordan 2014; van den Bergh and Kallis 2012).

In this scenario social policy research has provided both an analysis on the different countries' capabilities to adapt to the new challenges, and a new paradigm for policy making: the Social Investment Welfare State (SI, Esping-Andersen 2002, Hemerijck 2013). However, the central idea of SI to move 'from compensation to production by investing in human capital and its efficient use' has been critically debated precisely in respect of the sustainability issue (Boström 2012; Gough *et al.* 2008): for the persistent primacy of the individual chain (*unlimited*) preferences/wants – production – (*limited*) redistribution – satisfaction (Gough 2014), the eroding capacity of the employment-work-insurance-based social protection system (Gnesutta 2014; Janoski *et al.* 2014), the further risk of creaming-out effects for people hardly employable, as well as the protracted role of welfare as part of a *business as usual* (BAU) mode of development (Bailey 2015; Lawn 2011).

Less debated issues are the economic and administrative rationales of managerial approaches (Clarke and Newman 1997) which tend to rigidly program the policy implementation upon a few over-simplified assumptions, and the limits of universalistic and category-based policy measures in dealing with the territorial differences (Fitzpatrick 2011). On these bases, institutional processes easily tend to be ecologically parasitical, boosting monotone values, fostering schismogenic mechanisms of growth and deprivation and flattening the contextual diversity and multiple determination, hence dissipating the ecosystems *flexibility*, the social and bioenergetic uncommitted potentialities for change, learning, adaptation, preservation and development (Bateson 1972; Georgescu-Roegen 2003; Krall and Klitgaard 2011).

Here, while large-scale social policy researches have brought a wider knowledge on policy and welfare regimes, they seem less effective in understanding how such mechanisms produce specific changes and outcomes, to whose benefit and expense, particularly in the poor/fragile contexts and communities at risk of

being hit harder by the combined effects of socio-economic and environmental degradation and among the people “who would benefit the greatest” (Esping-Andersen 2009). In particular, it seems difficult to grasp the rooted characteristics that partly concur to the problems and partly can be sources for possible answers (Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan 2012), and to include the actors experiences, their ways of dealing with ongoing issues and creating solutions, their theories on why they work or fail, as well as the ways in which these processes are embedded, translated and contested (Avelino and Wittmayer 2015; Clarke *et al.* 2015). On the other hand, case studies commonly can help on the matter, but the immediate usability of the data is often limited to the research field. Hence, there is a need to move between the extremes of universalistic totally context-free approaches and strictly contextually-bounded ones, and between the risks of over-simplification and excessive complexification of the object of analysis (Hantrais 2006; Kennet 2006; Mabbet and Bolderson 1999, Saraceno 1999, Øyen 2006).

To this aim, the paper discusses a possible application of the abductive approach in social policy research. *Abduction* is the process of forming/selecting hypotheses in situations in which the previous ones fail, appear disconnected or biased (Nubiola 2005; Swedberg 2014). It is based on the plausible reasoning that involves extending beyond what is directly observed or consensual to form ideas and visions that give some confidence (Isemberg 1986, Plutynski 2011). It may be seen as a double or multiple description that enables recognizing, reconstructing and comparing patterns, regularities and variations in complex systems (Bateson 1979). It is not merely concerned with testing or confirmation but rather with the extended strategic process of investigation (Minnameier 2010): while abduction introduces/selects new or not-established hypotheses and conceptions, subsequently, deduction can help to form testable abstract tautologies based, e.g., upon ideal types, and induction allows verifying them through testing. Hence, it opens up the possibility to use context-based, open-ended and participatory researches for the purpose of trans-contextual investigation and comparison (Mangen 2006), blending pragmatist observations with systemic analysis (Lewin 1951).

In this framework, *action-research* (AR, Reason and Bradbury 2007) works well for the purpose of including unrecognized resources, engaging social actors as active subjects, enhancing actionable knowledges, creating out-of-the-box modes of comprehension and transformative action (Bartels and Wittmayer 2014). Indeed, with AR, outcomes originates from the interaction between observer and observed in the environment, on the bases of one or more cycles of informational exchange through action and reflection, where theory and practice become a source for one another and the inquiry becomes a learning process for those who partake in it (Marshall 2011). Therefore, case studies can be used to identify hypotheses and contribute to the formation of abstract tautologies, not for merely classifying objects, but observing and capturing characteristics of the processes that generate the differences we can summarize and compare through the tautologies (Bateson 1979).

The paper analyzes this perspective introducing few methodological premises and critically discussing practical examples of action-research and community organization processes, in urban and rural areas, employed also for comparison between local welfare systems. In particular, the case studies explore the bottom-up and top-down dynamics that create specific socio-ecological conditions as well as opportunities for transformative changes towards sustainability. On the one hand, some bureaucratic and dissipative modes of action, some pros and cons of the universalistic- or category-based policy system, and some effects of the cost cuts are discussed to analyze the limits of the policy systems in dealing with the ongoing transformations. On the other hand, case studies are used to identify few practices and methods that can work through both context-based peculiarities and systemic regularities, in particular to avoid the extreme exploitation of the residual local and trans-local resources and the dissipation of the public ones, to better preserve or even enhance some uncommitted potentiality for change, as well as shifting the welfare system goals from mere compensation or production to *sustainable compensation and production* (Bonetti and Villa 2014; Villa 2016).

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