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**Welfare sustainability in a double bind? The possible contribution of the
abductive logic for the innovation of social policy research and design**

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Note: the present paper is part of an author's long-term research path where a series of presentations, seminars and discussions on similar or connected topics, have been already, and still will be, produced and organized.

Abstract:

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

According to the Social policy literatures, western welfare systems are entrapped in a sort of double crisis that originates from combination of the emerging of new social risks (Taylor-Gooby 2004) and a the fiscal crisis resulting from the States' responses to the economic downturn in the wake of the austerity doctrine (Farnsworth and Irving 2011). The twos foster one another, imposing complicated dilemmas in the policy decision-making and giving birth to different interpretations and partly diverging politics of expansion or, more frequently, recalibration and retrenchment (Bonoli and Natali 2012; Emmenegger et al. 2012; Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes 2000; Häusermann 2012; Palier 2010; Taylor-Gooby 2013). However, all these strategies are at least partly biased and entrapped into-the-box of the ways keynesian and neoliberal paradigms have shaped in the past decades dynamics and design of capitalist accumulation and social protection (Jessop 2008; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013), hence creating conditions of *double bind* (Bateson 1972; Eriksen 2016). Indeed, while cutbacks risk to increase inequality and deprivation, possible additional state expenditures risk to further boost an environmentally unsustainable growth, and both risk to enhance the emergence of new social risks (Bailey 2015; Gough and Meadowcroft 2011; Koch 2013; O'Riordan 2014; van den Bergh and Kallis 2012).

As a matter of fact, these dynamics take the form of a triple sustainability crisis of welfare state, that is economic, social and environmental. The latter could probably be seen as a complex non-linear systemic process of interconnected loops of causation (Bateson 1972 Byrne 1998, Eriksen 2016, Prigogine 1996; Room 2011), but mechanisms referring to the three concepts are little and only recently analyzed in terms of patterns of manifold orders of interaction, in both the social policy and sustainability literatures. Indeed, while there is an important growing attention on the matter, some reasons of dissatisfaction are still there (Room 2011).

Regarding the *growing attention*, various contributions of the last decade put some important arguments on the table that are here very briefly identified in three points (see e.g. Bohnenberger 2016; Fitzpatrick 2011 and 2014; Gough 2010, 2014a and 2014b; Hirvilammi and Helne 2014; Koch and Mont 2016; Sommestad 2012).

1. Some scholars assert that only strong states and robust public welfare have the capacity to facilitate/promote eco-investment and de-carbonisation strategies, enhancing notions of public and common good, and designing both monetarily and ecologically efficient welfare services (Bailey 2015; Gough and Meadowcroft 2011). Under this perspective, the emergence of the Social Investment Welfare State paradigm (SI, henceforth. Esping-Andersen 2002; Hemerijck 2017; Morel et al 2012) is regarded as an opportunity for integrating climate mitigation/adaptation efforts and socio-economic transformative strategies, as the social-democratic countries experience seems to display. However, the SI paradigm has to date seen only limited applications (Lundvall and Lorenz 2012; Sabato 2016), while the link between environmental performances and kinds of welfare systems cannot yet be supported by empirical findings (Jakobson et al. 2017; Koch and Fritz 2014). Also, SI strategies are deemed controversial precisely with regard to the sustainability issue: e.g., for the persistent primacy of the individual chain (unlimited) preferences/wants – production – redistribution – satisfaction (Gough 2014); the eroding capacity of the employment-work-insurance system to provide enough wage opportunities and social protection (Beblavý et al. 2014; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; de S. Cameron 2017; Dolphin 2015; Gnesutta 2014; Hughes 2014; Janoski et al. 2014); the further risk of creaming-out effects for people hardly employable; the unwavering attitude of social welfare to be a motor of a business as usual (BAU) mode of development (Costanza *et al.* 2011; Espinosa and Porter 2011; Jarris 2008; Jordan 2006; Lawn 2011; Victor 2008).

2. There are some indications that retrenchment politics, whether they are the corollary of neo-liberal or post-growth transition strategies, can have even worst counter-productive effects on both equality and sustainability (Abrahamson 2017). On the one hand, neoliberal retrenchment strategies can contribute to many kinds of self-reinforcing feedback-loops and schismogenic processes and to unpredictable leaps in the level of risks for poor and fragile individuals and communities (Bateson 1979; Doppelt 2003; Maruyama 1963; Room 2016). For instance, by further encouraging competition for positional goods and unsustainable lifestyles (Jackson 2005; Lorek and Spangenberg 2014), making more difficult to implement carbon taxation systems and more sustainable housing, transportation and energy policies (see the ‘Weitzman paradox’, Weitzman 1977), and finally weakening the State’s capability to promote more sustainable and accessible forms of service, consumption and work organization (Angelov and Johansson 2011; Bailey 2015; de Graaf and Sirovátka 2012; Jessop 2007; Sommestad 2012). On the other hand, the growing experiments of self-organized local sustainable economies, produce very interesting insights but hardly can be seen as first steps of a sort of self-service society (Accornero 2013; Reyneri 2017; Williams 2007; Jordan 2006) and as viable alternatives to the universalistic- or category-based social policy system. Even in this case there are risks to further enhancing inequalities while undermining the legitimacy and enforceability of both universal basic needs and/or equal social rights for all (Gough 2014; Koch and Buch-Hansen 2016).

3. Other works, partly taking inspiration from the latter experiences, underline the need of partly reconsidering the strict logic of SI, putting specific attention to the spatial-environmental dimension, the processes of rescaling and contextualization of welfare operation, and the potentials of bottom-up non-institutional resources (Byrne 1998; Fitzpatrick 2011; Gough et al. 2008; Koch 2013; Villa 2016). Accordingly, welfare institutions should search for new balance between investment, compensation and ecological limits, addressing the problem of territorial divide, promoting bottom-up processes of civic associations and cooperative governance, enhancing processes of informalization and decommodification of work, reduction of working time, new forms of work-sharing, and support of reproductive work (e.g. Catney and Doyle 2011; Jordan 2006; Asara et al. 2015; Bauhardt 2014; Bergh and Kallis 2012; Pullinger 2014; Williams 2007). However, practicability of such hypotheses is far from obvious, owing to many problems of costs/investments, complexity, needs of very high methodological and governing skills, timing, indeterminable outcomes and possible biases in targeting and involving people and territories (e.g. Bertoncin

and Pase 2006; Duquenne and Hadjou 2013; Esping-Andersen 2009; Governa and Saccomanni 2004; Jessop 2002 and 2007; Lewin 1951; Rei 2001; Ripamonti 2011; Villa 2016).

As a matter of fact, in the social policy and sustainability literature there is still little understanding and shared knowledge on many of the issues mentioned above and at least three reasons of *dissatisfaction* that are pointed out as follows.

1. Social policy research seems to struggle in grasping the contextual and organizational variables and dynamics, the interactions that involve feedback loops and cumulative change (Room 2011), and how these may concur both to create sustainability issues and to promote transformative opportunities.
2. Current perspectives in social policy research share a very little interest for the understanding of the living. They rarely investigate in the world of things that in nature live, that is, grow, learn, evolve: the creaturely world of mental processes (Bateson, 1979). Rather, there is a steady commitment to simplification/reductionism in the operations of distinctions, mapping, comprehension of human nature, that is commonly distilled in separate, disembodied and disembedded parts and within restricted spatial-temporal sequences of lineal actions that equate life to abstract mechanisms (Thompson, 2007).
3. There is little discussion on potentials and limits of more context-based social policies, practices and experiments, their (in)equality implications and the possible balancing mechanisms, and there is a very little shared knowledge on what it is possible to learn from past and present practical experiences.

Hence, the paper tries to take a step forward on these points moving between the folds of the above mentioned grand narratives. It makes reference to a series of realized fieldworks mainly targeted to social cohesion, inclusion and activation policies, and community organization projects with the aim of identifying some specific processes that make welfare systems more or less ecologically parasitical or, on the contrary, more or less capable of promoting better conditions for sustainability.

First, with regard to the modes of welfare organization, it critically discusses the prevailing economic and administrative rationales of managerial *modus operandi* (e.g. Capano 2003; Clarke and Newman 1997; Ferlie 1992; Newman and Clarke 2013) and their tendency to rigidly program the policy implementation upon a few over-simplified assumptions.

Second, with regard to the modes of social policy implementation, it examines some counter-intuitive effects of individualized and pre-structured - universalistic or category-based - policy measures, particularly in relation to the poor/fragile contexts and among the people “who would benefit the greatest” (Esping-Andersen 2009).

Third, it discusses the transformative potentials towards sustainability emerging from the same case-studies, discussing how specific bottom-up attempts of innovation may interact with top-down context-free policy mechanisms and give rise to some positive sustainability effects (Avelino and Wittmayer 2015; Villa 2016).

To this aim, on the one hand the paper briefly mentions the ecological perspective in social policy analysis adopted by the author, which primarily refers to the socio-economic thinking springing from Karl Polanyi’s works, the complex-systems approach (particularly focusing on Gregory Bateson’s works) combined with the Russel’s theory of logical types, and some applications in the organization science (e.g. AA.VV 2000; Allen, Maguire, McKelvey 2011; Espinosa and Walker 2011; Morgan 1982 and 2006; Tsoukas 2005). It also briefly mentions the importance to include some non-reductionist basic assumptions on human nature and rationality drawing inspiration from cybernetics, formal sociology, sociology of emotion, mind science, ecological psychology (e.g. Bateson 1972; Damasio 2010; Hochschild 2012; Hoffmeyer 2008; Ingold 2011; Lewin 1951; Simmel 1908; Thompson 2007; Varela 1984, Von Foerster 2003, Winn 2002).

Above all, the paper discusses a possible application of the abductive approach in social policy research to opens up the possibility to use context-based, open-ended and participatory researches for the purpose of trans-contextual investigation and comparison (Hantrais 1999; Mangen 2006; Øyen 2006), blending pragmatist observations (See Peirce 1958 and Dewey 1938; see also e.g. Bateson 1979; Buchler 1939; Cooke

2006; Gallie 1965; Paavola 2015) with systemic analysis (e.g. Bateson 1979; Byrne 1998; Hoffmayer 2008; Kauffman 2001; and the invaluable contribution of Kurt Lewin, 1951 – See e.g. Burnes 2004; Adelman 1993).

Indeed, *abduction* is the process of forming/selecting hypotheses in situations in which the previous ones fail, appear disconnected or biased. 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 and enables recognizing, reconstructing and comparing patterns, regularities and variations in complex systems, and/or promoting experiments on the field for purposes of knowledge and transformation (Adelman 1993; Bateson 1979; Burnes 2004; Isemberg 1986; Lewin, 1951; Minnameier 2010; Nubiola 2005; Plutynski 2011; Reichertz 2004; Swedberg 2014). For this reason, supported by adequate action-research methods, can be a source for innovation with regard to approaches and paradigms that still continue to bound social policy research and design within *de facto* BAU ways of thinking,

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