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THE WELFARE STATE CRISIS
A CASE STUDY - ITALY

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Abstract

The welfare state is a current topic because its components directly affect the standard of living of every citizen. Severe economic crisis that started in 2008 embarrass governments that are called to maintain or even develop the welfare state. Research hypothesis underlying the analysis of this study is that the Italian welfare state development in the last three decades disregarded domestic, objective economic realities. In the first part of the study, the author undertakes a theoretical analysis of Italian welfare state model. In the second part, based on empirical data collected from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in Italy, were analyzed three independent variables: health care, social assistance and social benefits systems; and, respectively, a dependent variable – level of indebtedness of the Italian State. Following the analysis of these variables were found several conclusions: the welfare state has received significant financial resources during this period, but the growth rate of these investments was not correlated with that of GDP development and massive capital allocations in this area had a major and negative impact on the country's indebtedness. The corollary of this conclusion is that it must identify a new paradigm of welfare state that does not endanger the personal security of individuals, but allowing at the same time the sustainability of the system.

Keywords: Italian welfare state, public debt, gross domestic product

1. Introduction

Already installed among the main themes of the public space, the issue of 'welfare state' – in its established Anglo-Saxon significance – is not a late-date phrase anymore. Nevertheless, in case one might need a precise definition for it, the expression shows enough waywardness. Once the obsession of proper definitions discarded, it is easier to point at the fact that 'welfare' indicates a set of various means provided by the State, in order to ensure its citizens a decent life standard. Consequently, this is accomplished through free access to mass-education, through a system of medical insurances and social protection

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programmes, i.e. invalidity pensions, holidays, days off on medical grounds, compensative salaries, unemployment aids, etc. [1].

Since the inception of global crisis (2008), the theme of 'welfare state' has come first to the list of public debates not only in the theories on political economy as such, but also in economists' and politicians' practical minds. Ensuing to that, a related question arises. Why the specialists' theoretical assumptions have penetrated the public sphere and attained the status of headline political themes? The answer comes straight away, pointing at globalisation, which actually caused the modification of economical realities in all the states of the world.

Mass media came to be one of the main means of delivering and spreading ideas in general. Within this overcharged information environment, one can notice an intriguing phenomenon: gradually, instead of the classical 'welfare state', the press was prone to use a brand new wording, that is, 'the assisting state' (related to 'social state', 'state assistance programmes', 'state-aid', and so on). This terminological change bears some significance for the way Conservatism did its duty. More precisely, the conservative space managed to enforce and fix a phrase that not only reduces substantially the conceptual meaning of the former 'welfare', but also adds on a strong pejorative nuance.

2. A few theoretical and methodological elements

In 1903, Amilcare Puviani, one of the great personalities of the Italian public finances, published his seminal work *Teoria della ilusione finanziaria* (*Theory of Financial Illusion*), which grounded – as mentioned by the title – the theory of fiscal illusion, which later on was adopted and developed by the so-called '*Public Choice School*'. Mentionable in this case is the fact that the Italian theorist introduced the theme of 'fiscal illusion' within the larger picture of 'political illusion'. From the very beginning, we notice that, at the turn of the 20th century, the humankind acknowledged the irrefragable connection between political and economical factors. Moreover, the economical illusion proves to be a component of the political illusion. By 'illusion', Puviani defines "a deceiving representation that our own mind has on a set of phenomena, which is caused by a various set of circumstances" [2]. Literally, 'the fiscal illusion' represents that precise cognitive phenomenon, which induces an erroneous perception of reality into the taxpayer's mind. The fallacy builds on the feeling that the level of global taxation really deflates when the public expense grows. When arriving at a proper explanation of the equation, Puviani works on his theory by using the expression 'positive fiscal illusion' (*illusione positiva*). This shows that, matter of factually, the expense on public goods increases at once with both the public deficit and the monetary mass. In the first case, the deficit growth translates into a time prolongation for public taxation. In the second case, a monetary mass growth generates inflationary spirals, which put pressure onto the fiscal revenues [2, p. 8-10]. These influential ideas arrested James M. Buchanan' and Richard E. Wagner's attention when they set their analysis on the North-American taxation system. According to their opinion, the phenomenon of fiscal illusion relates directly to the public expense augmentation. Still, unless every taxpayer becomes aware in detail of all government costs that he has assented to, these fallacies could not possibly be drawn back [3]. Coming back to Puviani's theory, let us summarise its main lines by drawing a standard portrait of the taxpayer.

a) He ignores the types of pays allowed by the public budget;
b) He does not know the way public expenditure is made;
c) He ignores the public expenditure quantum and does not check pay dues;
d) He ignores the timetable of money allotment, be it for a short or for a long term;
e) He is not aware of the moment when the allotment of public money ceases;
f) He ignores the goal set by the State when public expenditure is projected and executed;
g) He ignores the immediate effects of public expenditure;
h) He ignores the motivation brought in for public expenditure [2, p. 23-26].

Since the second half of the past century, the theoretical minds who framed the thesis of 'public choice' have approached the relationship between public debt and the welfare state in terms of fiscal illusion. In point of fact, the governs indebt themselves and spend money easily, almost carelessly, on social assistance. This way, the citizens – also, the virtual voters – are supplied with a makeshift and transitory welfare; on a long-term basis, the public debts appease society and, instead of increasing, they backlash the general welfare [4].

It is nonetheless relevant that all welfare states from the Western Europe (not only Italy) have experienced lately a dramatic and consequential change. We mention here *the demographic ageing*, which determined these states to transfer substantial amounts of money from the active and productive population to the category of retired people, most influential and numerous during the last decades. The solvency depends thus on the balance between the two age categories. If population grows – whether naturally or on immigration grounds – the payment of pensions might be afforded on a long-term basis. If, on the contrary, the population decreases or gets older, the actual levels of pensions and other social allowances cannot be availed.

Another major component of present day welfare states relates to the financial support needed by medical services. The amazing technological and scientific progress in this field leads, in the public quarters, to a very demanding attitude: no level of investment and no matter what amount of public money is at stake could satisfy either the citizens or the politicians, including the representatives of medical services and pharmaceutics providers [5].

Yet, even though some of the society members 'can spend whatsoever on their health', on the national scale, this possibility resumes to the way states can administer and collect fiscal resources (taxes and fees) from the actual taxpayers and income producers; contrariwise, the issue turns on the state's 'ability' to make loans, spending at present the money of *future* taxpayers. Here seems to lie the troublesome issue, equally economical and ethical, that nowadays states must comply with and give (or at least present with) a long-standing solution [6].

Long time ago, using the same severe terms, another great economist would warn humanity about the approaching disaster. "If the will of the people demands higher and higher public expenditures, if more and more means are used for purposes for which private individuals have not produced them, if more and more power stands behind this will", then, wrote Joseph A. Schumpeter, "without doubt, the tax state *can* collapse" [7].

3. The characteristics of the Italian welfare state

When dealing with the theme of the welfare state, the Italian case requires a detailed analysis. It evinces extended implications not only on the socio-economical level, but also within the juridical and institutional space [8]. The Constitution is – let us admit – illustrative enough for the way the founding fathers of the Italian Republic envisaged the typical 'welfare state'. For instance, let us take the first four articles, which read as follows: Art. 1. "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour. Sovereignty belongs to the people and is exercised by the people in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution." Art. 2. "The Republic recognises and guarantees the inviolable rights of the person, both as an individual and in the social groups where human personality is expressed. The Republic expects that the fundamental duties of political, economic and social solidarity be fulfilled." Art. 3. "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country." Art. 4. "The Republic recognises the right of all citizens to work and promotes those conditions which render this right effective. Every citizen has the duty, according to personal potential and individual choice, to perform an activity or a function that contributes to the material or spiritual progress of society." [http://www.quirinale.it/qrnw/statico/costituzione/costituzione.htm, accessed on 9.03.2013]

A skimming of the quoted articles underlines that the main features of the Italian state are covered by a set of key words and expressions encompassing largely the concept of 'welfare state': … 'democratic Republic'…'founded on labour' (according to Art. 1); 'political, economic and social solidarity' (according to Art. 2); 'social dignity' … 'the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature' (according to Art. 3); 'The Republic recognises the right of all citizens to work and promotes those conditions which render this right effective' (according to Art. 4).

It goes without saying that the development of a proper 'welfare state' conception has started its theoretical career in Italy since the 19th century. As already proven by the sources on the topic [9-14], in 1948, when the founding fathers of the Italian state passed them, the principles of social solidarity had already flourished in the space of ideas. Furthermore, the traumas produced by World War II had lead to a change of paradigm in the former structure of the ante-bellum liberal state. Therefore, this plain reality, expressed officially in a document such as ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, is ratified by the General Assembly of U.N.O. in the 10th of December 1948. For instance, Article 22 asserts the following: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality”. Then, Article 23 proclaims following guidelines: “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. (Paragraph 1)”; “Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work (Paragraph 2).”; “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection (Paragraph 3)”. Article 25 reads that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (Paragraph 1)”. The next article (Paragraph 1) provides the following: “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.” [http://www.onuinfo.ro/documente_fundamentale/declaratia_drepturilor_omului/, accessed on 9.03.2013]

The inspection of all these elements bear witness to the fact that the Constitution Assembly, which, on the 22nd of December 1947, passed ‘The Constitution of the Italian Republic’, actually anticipated many of the principles that afterwards have found proper voice within ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’.

4. The evolution and the characteristics of the Italian welfare state

Once World War II was over, the welfare state developed and lived its glory during the 60ies and the 70ies of the last century. It was a time of great economic recoup for the Western European states ravished by war, and this allowed them to enforce social policies, which would demand now a more equitable and fair re-distribution of resources. For instance, Keynes’ and Ford’s vision on the expected level of economic growth led to an expansion of industrial production and to a post-bellum social organisation that eventually brought the betterment of life standards for many social categories, first of all by raising the employment rates [15].

However, Keynes' theoretical model earned some respect among the European elites not only for its practical ends, but also because everybody yearend for 'social peace'. Gøsta Esping-Andersen believes that "after World War II, the welfare state got the support of governs and, up to a point, it actually depended on it [*my translation, S.D.*]" [16]. Later on, when the Cold War broke, many of the European governs would chose to involve their resources in economy in order to set back the unemployment and to maintain the inner stability. Moreover, the Democratic Left, represented by Social-Democratic parties, would embrace Keynes' views, as they concurred to better life standards for the working classes. Beginning with the 30[ies], the debate on Keynes' economical conception has stayed within public attention, as it bet on a feasible alternative to the Soviet economic model [17].

The evolution carried through by the Italian welfare state might get to a deeper understanding when one examines the way the Italians have always decided to spend their public funds. The analysis will take into consideration three independent variables and a dependent variable. The dependent variable shows the debt level, whereas the independent variables arise from the scrutiny of the three pillars that sustain the Italian welfare state: the healthcare system, the social assistance system, and the social aids.

Particularly, every pillar consists of the following elements:

a. The healthcare system (including drug compensations, general medical assistance, special medical assistance, assistance within private hospitals and clinics, free-of-charge facilities for those who need prostheses and spa cures);
b. Social Assistance (including the state-pension system, allowances, remunerations for closing working reports, illness allowances, child benefits, family income supplements, occupational injury benefits, unemployment benefits, jobseeker benefits, other types of allowances remunerations and benefits);
c. Social aids (including the social pension, veteran's pensions, disability benefits, care benefits).

During the last two decades (1990-2010), the amounts of public money thrown in welfare activities have been pretty substantial. For the period between 1990 and 2010, the data was provided by ISTAT sources [*100 statistiche per capire*, edizione 2012 (viz. www.istat.it)]. The computing of welfare costs (for social protection) was made according to the rules of SESPROS96 (*Il Sistema europeo delle statistiche integrate della protezione sociale*), in conformity with SEC95 (The European System of Accounts)

The statistical data gathered during 1990-1999 period shows the progressive growth of public allotments for healthcare, social assistance and social aids (Table 1). In figures, if in 1990 the Italian state settled a welfare budget of 161,249 million Euros, in 1999 the cipher amounts to 271,127 million Euros. The subtraction issues a significant result, that is, 109,878 million Euros. Onwards, every budget year, the welfare allotments grew bigger, outranking the level of economic growth. Both the figures and the percents drive us to the conclusion that the money allocations did not rely on the current situation of economic growth. Additionally, the differences comport great fluctuations from one year to another.

Table 1. Budgetary allocations for social protection 1990-1999 (in millions of euros).

YEAR (€, million)	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Healthcare	38,927	43,748	45,179	44,974	44,778	44,283	47,861	51,885	53,840	56,377
Social Assistance	107,750	120,322	135,883	141,634	150,391	159,526	169,534	183,213	187,776	195,585
Social Aids	14,572	14,601	14,973	16,581	17,152	17,434	18,199	18,213	18,309	19,165
TOTAL	**161,249**	**178,681**	**196,035**	**203,189**	**212,321**	**221,243**	**235,594**	**253,311**	**259,925**	**271,127**
Growth Rates		**>10.81%**	**>9.71%**	**>3.65%**	**>4.5%**	**>4.2%**	**>6.48%**	**>7.52%**	**>2.61%**	**>4.3%**
GDP Growth Level (%)							+2.1%	+1.9%	+1.4%	+1.7%
Welfare Allotments (%)							+6.48%	+7.52%	+2.61%	+4.3%
PIB/Welfare Ratio							**+4.38**	**+5.62**	**+1.21**	**+2.60**
Public Debt (€, million)	271,127	755,011	849,290	959,713	1,069,415	1,151,489	1,213,508	1,238,172	1,254,388	**1,281,550**

With respect to welfare allotments from public money, the decade 2000-2010 witnessed the same sustained strategy. The figures represent the second part of the statistical account, for the time between 2000 and 2010; for 2010, viz. Suppl. Boll. n°23 del 12/05/2010, for 2009, viz. Suppl. Boll. n°23 del 13/05/2009, for 2006 and 2001 visit http://it.wikinews.org/wiki/Conclusione_della_legislatura_italiana_2001-2006. http://www.okpedia.it/debito-pubblico-in-italia.

Under a closer scrutiny, the evolution of welfare allotments registered during the second decade (2000-2010) indicates constant leapfrogs (Table 2). In 2000 the ratio between GDP and welfare allotments scores to +0.53, while in the following years the percentage outlines a spectacular increasing curve: in 2001 (+3.89%), in 2002 (+5.36%), in 2003 (+5.00%), in 2004 (+4.08%), in 2005 (+3.29%), in 2008 (+6.76%), and in 2009 (+9.05%). It took only three years – 2006 (+2.91%), 2007 (+2.17%), and 2010 (+1.21%) – to boost up the welfare allotments, while the overall picture showed that, between 2000 and 2010, the percentage went to 56.63 %. As compared to 1990, this means that, at the beginning of the second decade, the Italian state spent more 282,389 million Euros. Besides, for the period 1990-2000, we can notice that the welfare allotments registered an increase of 174.50%. The difference is huge and the figures bear enough significance.

Table 2. Budgetary allocations for social protection 2000-2010 (in millions of euros).

YEAR (€, million)	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**
Healthcare	63,443	70,196	74,022	76,336	84,088	89,606	94,422	94,283	100,680	102,390	105,451
Social Assistance	199,358	206,410	216,276	228,206	236,105	243,381	253,648	265,759	278,759	290,089	299,111
Social Aids	19,816	22,343	25,587	27,455	29,003	29,806	32,182	34,215	35,946	39,324	38,076
TOTAL	**282,617**	**298,949**	**315,885**	**331,997**	**349,196**	**362,793**	**380,252**	**394,227**	**415,385**	**431,803**	**442,638**
Growth Rates (percentage)	**>4.23%**	**>5.77%**	**>5.66%**	**>5.10%**	**>5.18%**	**>3.89%**	**>4.81%**	**>3.67%**	**>5.36%**	**>3.95%**	**>2.51%**
GDP Growth Level %	+3.7%	+1.8%	+0.3%	+0.1%	+1.1%	+0.6%	+1.9%	+1.5%	- 1.4%	-5.1%	+1.3%
Welfare Allotments %	+4.23%	+5.77%	+5.66%	+5.10%	+5.18%	+3.89%	+4.81%	+3.67%	+5.36%	+3.95%	+2.51%
PIB/Welfare Ratio	**+0.53**	**+3.89**	**+5.36**	**+5.00**	**+4.08**	**+3.29**	**+2.91**	**+2.17**	**+6.76**	**+9.05**	**+1.21**
Public Debt (€, million)	**1,300,269**	**1,358,351**	**1,368,897**	**1,394,339**	**1,445,826**	**1,514,408**	**1,584,093**	**1,598,934**	**1,665,705**	**1,762,724**	**1,841,912**

The statistical data for the interval 1996-2010 reveals a moderate economic growth, which generally does not exceed 2% per year. The only instance when an important percentage growth appeared was year 2000 (3.7%). During 2002 and, respectively, 2003, there was a percentage stasis, similar to the situation of other two years, namely 2008 and 2009, which brought economic recession. It was in 2000 that the minimum difference between the GDP growth and welfare allotment ratio occurred (we speak here about 0.53 percentage points), whereas the maximum difference registered in 2009 (9.05 percentage points). However, as we have proved, the budget allotments, both in figures as in percents, covered a greater amount of money. Consequently, the following question turns up. Leaving aside the subjective and political factors, are there any objective causes to this?

During the last decades, it was reported that the population underwent a process of rapid ageing, due to natality decrease and life expectancy increase [ISTAT, *Rapporto annuale 2012,* 62]. The average life expectancy grew bigger. According to the last data provided by ISTAT for year 2011, the life expectancy for male Italians is 79.4 years, while female Italians get to 84.5 years. One has to notice that in the Mediterranean part of Italy the average age is slightly smaller, that is, 78.8 years for male, and 83.9 for female gender. Among the European countries, only Sweden maintains an average of life expectancy higher than Italy, that is, 79.6 years for men, while in France and Spain female life expectancy beats the figures registered in Italy, arriving at 85.3 years old [ISTAT, *Rapporto annuale 2012,* 59-60]. All these elements have had and still have a harmful effect, raising the costs for healthcare assistance and pensions [18].

However, it is somehow interesting that, for the whole period brought under analysis, none of these years produced equal or lower percentages than the annual development rhythm of Italian economy. Moreover, one can perceive that it was the political decision makers' the blame for lacking instant reaction to the signals flashed by the real economy. In 2009, when the crisis hit to the full the stem of the Italian economy, the deficit touched an alarming 5.1%, while the welfare allotments would go on with their progression; compared to 2008, the State spent more 3.95%. Here we might enlarge the analysis, and speak about the politicians' unresponsiveness to the crisis stimuli. While the GDP was gradually deflating, the amounts of money injected annually in the welfare system kept on raising. This situation got a partial solution only in 2010, when the difference tended downwards to +1.21%. How was it possible to reduce public spending with 7.84 percentage points? First, it seems that Italy reset on the trend of economic growth, which got to +1.3%, while the welfare allotments kept that year within a decent +2.51%. Due to its growing difficulties in tackling with the public deficit, the Italian state really made a readjustment of payments. Additionally, the lack of external financing laid down an even grosser readjustment of expenditure; nevertheless, the great economical deadlock did not establish the evenness of incomes and expenses.

5. Conclusions

For decades, researchers found that the Italian welfare state "is characterised by numerous imbalances, including an uneven distribution of protection and costs, and a chronic deficit between contributions and outlays. There is also a widespread abuse of the rules governing contributions and benefits and a persisting inefficiency in public services" [19]. The aforementioned data demonstrates the way in which the three independent variables of the Italian welfare state succeeded to influence the dependent variable of public debt. This assertion maintains itself as long as, within a globalized world, the reality of the present day tax-state differs from the reality of former tax-states, occurred in the aftermath of World War II. The example of Italy appears to be eloquent. Year 1948 represented a crux of post-bellum history. Consequently, the welfare system foundations transgressed into the discourse of the republican constitution in order to guarantee and preserve social peace. In all case, the statistics proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that, for 1990-2010 decades, the procrastination of such model (in its post-bellum 'understanding') is not only unsustainable from a financial point of view, but also obsolete as a form of political action. After the dramatic backlash of public debts (over 2,000 billion Euros), the political sphere should brace up and gather the strength to explain the Italian people why they should need a change of paradigm. Let us bear in mind that, during 2000-2010, the state borrowed over 550 billion Euros only to cover the welfare needs and to pay the interests for the loans contracted in the previous years. (According to ISTAT, *Rapporto annuale 2012*, March 2012; the data shows that the Italian public debt got to 1,946,083 million Euros.) As mentioned before in Puviani's phrasing, 'the fiscal illusion' actually feeds on a 'political illusion'. Italy has to change to the marrow; otherwise, it shall confront financial insolvency. Over a century passed by and Puviani's theory has not failed to prove its validity. Considering the general crisis and the youth unemployment rates, both the hopes for the better and the social peace established after World War II shake fearfully. Nonetheless, the suppression and eventual dissolution of the welfare model cannot be taken for granted because it is a cultural acquisition from the common set. Still, a wiser management of the system could afford an expenditure reduction. This can also bring a fiscal release for the Italians and a virtual change of the 'social contract' established in 1948.

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