

Andrea Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal. Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*,
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The Moral Neoliberal explores the erosion of the twentieth-century ethos of re-distributional reciprocity and the rise of another in its wake. Western Society has institutionalised a concept of social citizenship by the development of national systems of welfare state. As Western economies grew through Fordist organization of industrial production, more and more complex, articulate mechanisms of wealth redistribution were put in place. Social citizenship was seen as an organically conceived system of obligations among societal collectivities, wherein the state emerged as but one of several constituencies. Rooted features of gift, such as freedom, obligation and reciprocity had been compounded in bureaucratic structures of state administrations. From understanding welfare state as an expression of gift, it descends a working principle of solidarity revolving around some long-term system of re-distributional reciprocity. However, the spirit of gift does not disappear under neoliberal conditions, but it starts to be performed differently compared with the past.

Among European Countries, only in Italy there has been launched a national law on volunteering activities. Third sector organizations engaged in social welfare provision rose in number and in coverage of a more and more conspicuous share of elderly people in need for assistance. Voluntary organizations – either affiliated to Catholic Church or to the Left parties' politics – perform their social functions through a moral authoritarianism which characterizes a new ethical kind of citizenship.

One can think that catholic non-profit organizations and parishes would be the obvious ethnographical location for a research on this kind of ethical attitude. On the contrary, Muehlebach chose to delve in deep an organization that grew out of Left trade unionism background: The AUSER or Voluntary Association for the self management of Services and Solidarity, founded in 1992 by Spi-CGIL, in Sesto San Giovanni AUSER local branch.

It is worth to mention that Sesto San Giovanni is a working-class town located in the urban peripheral 'red belt' where the Left dominate politics for most of the postwar period; throughout the 1980s this whole area suffered a massive de-industrialization. Muehlebach unfolds a new Lombardian landscape of welfare in the making. Right-wing political parties in Lombardy (namely *Popolo della Libertà* and *Lega Nord*) have had a role in formulating a distinct model of welfare governance, by blending in a particular type of neoliberalism together with element of Catholic social doctrine. Roberto Formigoni, Governor of Lombardy since 1995 (and long-time member of *Comunione e Liberazione*, a Catholic social movement), attempted to generate a cultural and anthropological shift in citizens' conception of man and society. That amounted to a huge privatization wave of public services, particularly social welfare care services, which had drawn on the growth of voluntary and non-profit organizations in the region. More generally, Italian state withdrawal from welfare provision has occurred very swiftly compared to Western Europe, also because the state has always been rather alien to its citizens. Voluntarism is undergoing a growth almost everywhere in western world. Italy is the first country to treat such activities with a distinct body of law. More than this, no other country in Europe relies as extensively on volunteer labour as Italy.

In Muehlebach's opinion, these and other features describe a socio-political-economic context that is attuned to and which seems to anticipate neoliberalization. As for the analytical object, Muehlebach is interested in studying caring individuals that perform a free work of care, a *relational work*. It is not a productive work in the sense of accumulation of economic capital, in as much it accumulates valued relations among compassionate individuals. That kind of neoliberalization which Muehlebach calls Moral Neoliberal, has influenced the appearance of those volunteers performing a sometimes crucial work of care in the social arena. Italian State and other collective actors within it have shown a will for exploitation of this *valuable relational work*, and also to see volunteers as to be animated by affect rather than intellect, by feel and act upon these feelings rather than rational deliberation. Muehlebach stresses the dimension of action for others instead of the care for the self. That is, she wants to show

Italian way to neoliberalism to be supportive of a compassionate and empathetic self as the centre of subjects' social universe. Hence the research main focus revolves around the process of moralization inherent to post-industrial forms of citizenship. That begs the question as to why unwaged work can become desirable to people in everyday life. Moral neoliberal has the capacity to appear not as a charity but as a form of emancipation, that is why ethical citizenship has become so persuasive.

Through the vehicle of morality subjects get involved into processes and activities they might not be in agreement with, documenting a shift in social conventions of moral responsibility shared across the political spectrum. Leftist volunteers are however aware of the shifting institutional structures of which state's mobilization of their unwaged labour is part. Sure enough, historic political cultures like Socialism and Catholicism of Italy, provide subjects with useful instruments to elaborate ethical citizenship in their own terms. There is an *opulence of virtue* in that people have to exhibit the capacity to remain valued member of society. For that matter, public recognition is crucial, as voluntarism grants citizens to appear in public as more than private and dependent figures.

But the general acknowledging accorded to certain forms of non-remunerated work, goes hand in hand with the neglecting, or worse, denigration of others (i.e. women performing household work have never been awarded of such a public recognition as volunteers')¹.

Ethical citizenship is a racial and cultural thing too: It is best practiced by those who are culturally predisposed to reconstitute broken social ties. Ethics is thus located in practice and action, or rather in histories, social life and meanings. Generally speaking Muehlebach traces the ways in which welfarist and post-welfarist forms of collective good are complexly interwoven. This kind of neoliberalism differs significantly from the one depicted in Dardot and Laval (2013) *New Way of the World* in that neoliberalism is not thought as a dynamic of global market forces dissolving any previous form of social relation other than governed by utilitarianism and rational calculation. On the contrary to the market neoliberal, the moral neoliberal is a form of ethical living which presents itself as a negation of market ideology and yet, it is integral to neoliberalism more broadly conceived.

To give a theoretically grounded explanation Muehlebach takes Adam Smith's work as the clearest examples of the intimate connection between market and morals, economics and ethics.

The suggested compatibility of *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as for the coherence between economies of self-interest (or what Smith's called self-love) and economies of fellow feelings, stands for that market transactions are evacuated of benevolent feelings but they are not emancipated from passions. Smith's equation interest-passion is often misrecognized by scholars who have interpreted the concept of interest in all too rationalist and instrumentalist terms. However, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* appears not in contrast to *The Wealth of Nations* but as another variation on a general theme: A universe of human (economic, political and moral) action animated by affective disposition and actions.

In Chapter two the Author sets out to define this ethical citizenship in the context of the ethnographic study. The outset of the chapter is titled: "A crisis of loneliness". Here, some chronicles of current events at a time when the Author was arranging her fieldwork are given. The reader is kept abreast of many relevant facts about the city of Milan in 2003 when she arrived in Milan. The account starts with some characterization of the local government, its political affiliation, and the links to national politics. At the time of observation, the city of Milan and its people were experiencing a tough situation, for economic hardships due to the loss of work and insufficient income.

Labour market inefficiencies produced a latent economic crisis (later on, the sudden economic crisis globally burst in 2007-2008 elicited, if possible, even worse effects) that was sublimated in an existential crisis. Loneliness was identified as the first among new needs by social politics, what the Author takes as instance of resignification of a "welfarist" category, including relational rather than material poverty. Then ethical citizenship is addressed after a social citizenship based reconstruction of welfarist twentieth-century Italy. By the 1970s Italy's public expenditure in pensions and health care system, the latter based on universalistic principles, reached its peak. Nonetheless social services had never seen a dominant state in mediation of social solidarity, a huge labour of care that has since its inception been performed by the family (households) and the church.

The presence of the state in the social services has ever been tenuous at best. In this realm social citizenship is being rivalled by a form of citizenship that is taking shape under neoliberal conditions: Ethical citizenship. Ethical

citizenship institutionalises moral and affective, rather than social and political ties, primarily duties rather than rights; private obligations rather than social rights and a shift from socially granted provision to discretionary bestowed generosity.

This conceptual setting represents the fertile ground where Muehlebach's research takes inception. Standing at the centre of this unremunerated labour regime of care, a subject derives great pleasure from unwaged work, in very post-modern terms. Work has become the central locus of psychic and emotional investment or, as cited by Muehlebach, puts it, "as a good in itself: a means towards self-realization rather than as an opportunity for self-transcendence".

Particularly interesting is both the persuasiveness of ethical citizenship and its 'integralism'. As to the former is a social form that destabilizes social citizenship as a mode of collective living for it generates new modes of belonging and participation. For native Italians is a means to acquire some sort of belonging by producing and thereby partaking in the collective good. As to the latter, ethical citizenship has a real fundamentalist character, being that is it hardly traceable onto either leftist or rightist commitment. Moreover ethical citizenship is based on a new set of exclusions whereby immigrant caretakers labour in the shadows of the domestic sphere of private Italian homes.

"You cannot simply start volunteering *just like that!*" (original emphasis). Thus begins Chapter Three. Title itself - *Consecrations: From Welfare State to Welfare Community* - is typifying about role models and expectations loaded on volunteers in social welfare services of care in Lombardy.

At the course on volunteering provided by Ciessevi (Centro servizi per il volontariato per la provincia di Milano) a class of aged women, mainly between fifty and seventy, was kept conscious about the need for proper training, motivations and goals concerning volunteering.

Volunteering is institutionalised by an oath (signing a registration sheet) which has deep symbolic importance as a practice and pedagogical moment in which a highly moralized, indeed sacralized, social contract come into being (Muehlebach 2012).

Here the author introduces the reader to the innermost features of volunteering and the moral neoliberal, as the amalgamation between legal and theological at the basis of a moral order of a privatizing service economy. The making of a moral neoliberal welfare community, where the production of ethical citizens relies on the sacralization of the social realm and the figure of freely labouring citizen at its centre, has the capacity to encompass – better than the state and the market – social particularism and a fractured citizenry. Here there is in other words a welfare utopia put into effect, as a combined output both of a history of a welfare-state building ever infused of a catholic repertoire, and of a more recently replacement of liberal welfarism and state-mediated social citizenship, by a sacralized society led by third sector.

So we have had a withdrawal of the state from public services provision in the realm of care, followed by a sacred social where the figure of volunteer is epitomized with heroic traits of altruism in a kingdom of gift, that is the third sector. Muehlebach refers to an off-modern project of welfare-state building in Italy to signify that modernity, rather than being evacuated of the sacred, in fact deployed it as a necessary moment of any institutional practice with aspirations to public efficacy (Muehlebach 2012). In a retracing of Italian nation state building, wherein the state appropriates of the church's right to administer charity, the Author states that the new nation attempted to replace the ecclesiastic system of charity with modern social assistance. The goal was to have the nation state as a community of welfare, promoting secular and rational government as necessary condition of modernity.

In this section, an extremely interesting reconstruction of Italian nation state building is given, where the steps and stages of welfare state are retraced from national unification in 1861, up to the second postwar period and to the present days. All this reconstruction hinges on an account of the relationship between sacred and secular, state and church, from the first compulsory national insurances for the old age, and against injury risk on the job, to postwar layout of national welfare state.

Then the last twenty years have seen a fundamental switch of the tendency to expand welfare state that characterized Italian political landscape from World War II.

In Lombardy has been enforced a public-private welfare economy, as elsewhere in central and northern Italy.

However this privatization must not be seen as a brute shift away from public provisioning toward the private market.

In conclusion, the Author is interested in the ways in which practices and institutions associated with the public, get transformed into appearing as private. In other words this revolves around the question of how the existing public-private mix, on which the state had always relied, has being re-signified and re-codified in a particular location (Lombardy) and historical moment (the present days).

The last section of the book (Part Three) debates on the actual production of compassion. The Author answers the question as to how does love become a form of labour explicitly distinguished from other activities. Italian State, in Muehlebach reasoning has created a legal framework that provides for the delivery of a standardized account of the volunteer, her motivations and goals. Moreover it has been put in place a sort of normative management system, aptly directed to make of both individual volunteers and volunteering work itself, a normative moral subject targeted in policy texts and law inscriptions.

So a form of private virtue has been equated with the larger public good.

If asked what different have volunteers to offer in respect to professional nursing and doctoral staff to the unfortunate, the old-aged, the poor and dropped out people, there is just one unanimous answer: Love! This ability to get involved in specific acts of other recognition however is not at all spontaneous. The spirit of gifting is achieved through a legal regime and dedicated institutions aimed at providing symbolic and material infrastructures. Citizens are marshalled in such a way that volunteering might be resembling some sort of industry. An industry of a particular kind is true, but nonetheless a gathering of pedagogical methodologies handed out to classes of aspirant volunteers every year. Techniques of moralization rely on Christian hermeneutics of listening and witnessing. What is more, these notions have to be put in practice translating affect into pragmatic action. So Muehlebach aims to delve deeper in a detailed anthropological description of these classes of volunteers that produce a citizenship *lived with the heart* with the outcome of a “humanitarianized” public sphere that makes individual compassion and private empathy primary public virtues.

Muehlebach then gives a very suggestive account of the production of dispassion rooted in the entire system of monetary distribution of social welfare provisions in Milan. Public social welfare and local government, has proven here incapable of any kind of actual help and support for problems, no matter they are big or small, experienced by the huge variety of needy people. It is precisely amid dispassionate places and drop-outs that, on the contrary, Muehlebach’s volunteers have proven great patience and heroic spirit of gifting.

Age has become a concrete principle of identification and mobilization, performing a role in reification of social distinction. Chapter Five is about the topic of active elderly and events and practices associated with an Age Full of Virtue. It is not surprising how, given the extension of our life span, could have changed the role of senior people cohorts in demographic structure for age of western societies, and Italian demographics in particular.

It is a striking point made by Muehlebach, when she reminds a TV programme numbered among broadcast shows on Italian public television (RAI) in 2003. It was a reality show called *Super Seniors*, which brought together an even number of men and women between the ages of sixty and seventy-seven in a location on the hills surrounding Rome.

The programme did not attain success in ratings, which is not the point in question, however. Point in question was actually to represent elderly as protagonists and not as passive onlookers. It rendered apparent a *Gemeinschaft* of morally productive action coupled against the lost sense of community in capitalist modernity. More than this they emerged as key redemptive actors in a world experiencing post-modern social dysfunctions, such as anomie and atomization, vanity and selfishness and so on.

The latter example instantiates a more general phenomenon of *activation* of elderly citizens. The Sixth Chapter, inasmuch dealt with elderly participation into the burgeoning moral economy set out to be potentially valuable to Italian society, accounts for delayed outcomes occurring somewhere after the inception of utopian practices, that is the above mentioned moral neoliberal spirit of gifting and care for others.

There is a kind of paradox in the way neoliberalism present itself, or as a social force sometimes interpreted as an occasion to rescue old-establishment norms and values. Leftist pensioners volunteering for AUSER, for instance, try to reinvigorate an actively oppositional, militant culture which they learn during their working life in

postwar period. Ethical citizenship seems have little relevance with freedom, as it binds together stranger people to each other through sense of duty and compassion. Nonetheless morality could be also represented as decidedly liberating, if seen from the perspective of Left traditional solidarity programme. Again, working-class solidarity expressed in leftist terms hinges on the crucial distinction between work and commitment.

Even though a personal commitment is also to be found in the waged labour market, those who practice volunteering activities, experience a strictly moral call of duty.

Smith's suggested compatibility of *The Wealth of Nations* and of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as for the coherence between economies of self-interest (or what Smith's called self-love) and economies of fellow feelings, seems to be also present in this growing economy of unwaged labour.

In particular, relational work of leftist volunteers appears to be deeply rooted in their personal and collective histories of political activist. Their past is drawn on to elaborate their current commitments, in an active recuperation of past practices and meaning, that allowed them to feel like protagonists in the Lombardian welfare utopia (Muehlebach 2012: 180).

Lastly, Chapter Seven questions the fact that the general acknowledging accorded to certain forms of non-remunerated work, goes hand in hand with the neglecting, or worse, denigration of others. It is the Private Face of Privatization of care.

The author explores the perception of Italians on the immigrants work of care in private homes, suggesting that there is a tension between the feeling of "have the enemy into the house" as for immigrant effort in looking after the old, and what immigrants themselves think of natives, depicted as egotistical, hypocritical and spoiled.

Muehlebach is interested in everyday discursive processes through which volunteers distinguish their free *relational work*, from immigrants' material (waged) work, denying the latter a social recognition and capacity of these women to produce social relations whatsoever. The moral neoliberal order emerges this way, as a highly segregated one, in a narrative of materiality versus relationality which includes the distinction between remunerated work of immigrants and un-remunerated work of volunteers.

The key of this distinction revolves around the emotional expenditure of volunteers that others (including immigrants) would not be prepared to bear. Strikingly Muehlebach argues, on the immigrant caretaker phenomenon, that one moment she found these women to be positioned as blatant signs of the nation's crumbling family values. The next they were completely erased as public figures and rendered invisible through acts of forgetting (Muehlebach 2012: 209).

Volunteering in today's Lombardy instantiates an ethical citizenship which institutionalises a private moral duty of care, a moral authoritarianism. The former welfare state built on social citizenship, granting social rights by public provisioning of a range of services, seems to leave space to an age full of virtue, where catholic social doctrine and leftist class solidarity again merge together. Nonetheless this age is also one of renewed forms of social exclusion and non-recognition, as for the immigrant caretakers, which is the private face of privatization of care. As I tried to argue in this review, Muehlebach's *The Moral Neoliberal*, clearly shows, by an acute ethnographical analysis, some of the innermost features of social welfare provision in Lombardy, where many historic characteristics of Italian social security system have sublimated self interest and fellow feelings at the individual level, and in a particular institutional public-private mix open to a variety of social actors and constituencies.

(Alberto Nucciotti)

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