

they render the idea of the safety net, itself a relatively minimal approach to welfare, a misnomer (p. 208). Many of the other contributions document the increasing fragmentation of the geography of the welfare state under 'austerity' localism. In doing so, they repeatedly expose the contradictions between policy rhetoric which frames 'austerity' with innovation and local empowerment, and the distress and despondency of service users and service providers in so many sectors and welfare spaces, which are financially and spatially stretched. It might be said that fiscal policy responses to the pandemic seem to have over-taken 'austerity' since the time this edited collection was produced. However, the findings here, building on so much existing 'austerity' research, are also a starting point for grappling with the unequal impact of the pandemic and the human costs which Covid-19 has heaped upon those of the 'austerity' years.

## Reference

Davies W (2016) The new neoliberalism. *New Left Review* 101: 121–34.

Chiara Saraceno, David Benassi and Enrica Morlicchio  
*Poverty in Italy: Features and Drivers in a European Perspective*  
 Bristol: Policy Press, 2020. 260 pp. £75.00 (hbk)  
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*Poverty in Italy* explores the detrimental effects of the most recent economic crisis on poverty levels in Italy. More precisely, the study unveils the impact of the crisis as well as the long-term structural features of the Italian economy and its social 'safety net' which made 'recovery' difficult.

As opposed to other European countries that also suffered from the economic 'downturn', but demonstrated quick capacity of recovery, Italy is described by the authors as a 'case' which departs from this trend. Levels of inequality, deprivation and risk of poverty have, in fact, climbed and reached concerning levels. These trends question the Italian state's capacity to now deal with another economic crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

With a specific focus on in-work poverty, child poverty, youth unemployment and poverty among foreign migrants, the book sheds much-needed light on the continuity and change in poverty levels in a country that, it is claimed, has insufficient, if not outdated, policy frameworks to deal with such trends. In doing so, the authors tap into relevant debates in critical social policy exploring the long-term effects of neoliberal 'reforms', job market flexibility and 'austerity' on poverty and welfare. However, *Poverty in Italy* also

speaks to a more recent body of scholarship interested in the links between migration and social policy. In particular, the book interrogates welfare chauvinism in the Italian political rhetoric and assesses its damaging consequences for the effectiveness of anti-poverty measures. Finally, this contribution study should be of interest to policy analysts thanks to a detailed evaluation of past and recent social policy and labour market reforms; particularly the contested minimum income scheme (*reddito di cittadinanza*) introduced by the Yellow-Green coalition in 2019.

In analysing the features of 'post-crisis' poverty, Chiara Saraceno and her colleagues treat the 2008 financial 'crash' as a focussing event which, with its implications, exposed the weaknesses of Italy's social policy, its labour market and stagnant economy, without however fostering tailored policy responses. In analysing the determinants of 'post-crisis' poverty, the book departs from the typical social policy framework tending to evoke Italy as 'Mediterranean welfare regime' and offer, instead, an encompassing analysis of the key features of Italy's poverty regime. In this context, the Italian social policy framework associated to this poverty regime is portrayed as skewed in favour of pensions and income maintenance for male blue-collar 'breadwinners'. Most importantly, it is unfit to deal with contemporary poverty dynamics, which are complex and geographically fragmented.

Poverty assistance is left almost entirely in the hands of local administrations and the voluntary sector which implement highly fragmented and differentially effective programmes. This is exposed and traced back to the historically uneven socio-economic evolution between North and South and to the more recent decentralisation of political power. While the geographical dimension is key in the analysis, this is not explored in detail. Chapter 6, presenting data on 'disadvantaged' areas in the ten largest Italian cities, is only tentative in exploring the highly complex geographical dimension of Italy's poverty regime. While it shows certainly interesting variation within urban areas, the book neglects poverty in so-called 'remote' areas – a facet the authors themselves stress as important. Indeed, this dimension warrants exploring in more depth, given the impact of, for example, natural catastrophes (such as earthquakes and floods) on deprivation levels in several areas of rural Italy during the period analysed by the authors. In addition, the geographical analysis in urban areas is mostly descriptive and is, perhaps, insufficiently tied to the focal questions posed at the book's outset. Hence, the effects of the crisis in relation to each city and its socio-economic environment remain somewhat underexplored. This is not necessarily a major criticism: rather, my point illuminates the sheer complexities that characterise the Italian 'poverty regime'. Another layer of this 'regime' meriting more attention concerns the role of the voluntary sector. While the authors underline the importance of voluntary organisations in Italy's fragmented social policy framework, their roles remain empirically unexplored in the study. However, it could be argued that an

exploration of this issue is vital. Since 2016, *Lega Nord*, the right-wing party led by Matteo Salvini, has deployed a good deal of anti-NGO rhetoric. This appeared to peak in 2018 when the party, 'rebranded' as *La Lega*, participated in government. More generally, in light of the polarisation in the public's perception of the role of civil society organisations, one might question to what extent NGOs and their role of 'welfare providers' is now threatened with, for example, cuts in public funding. Moreover, what are the implications of this process on social inequalities in Italy?

With this in mind, Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio's analysis answers many relevant questions pertaining to social policy; at the same time it signals new avenues for critical research. At present, the most important one certainly concerns the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. Providing an early reflection on the government's policies to tackle the detrimental effects of the pandemic, the authors invite future scholars to build on their work to try to anticipate the short and long-term effects of this new crisis on poverty in Italy. Indeed, in the context of this current crisis, this book may become especially significant if it contributes to our better understanding of the considerable challenges that lie ahead.