



Europeanization Process in Italian Social Work Education

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Abstract

The article shows the process of Europeanization of the Italian social work education. After a brief excursus of the development of social work education in Italy, the paper presents the experiences made in the context of Socrates Erasmus project. Considering the results of the Thematic Network in Social Work organised by Parma University, some reflections are presented on the effects of Europeanization both respect the teachers and the students.

The Establishment of Social Work Education in Italy

Italian social work is younger in than that of other European countries. It emerged immediately after the end of the Second World War, with the return of democracy and in a climate of reconstruction. Many organisations, both lay and Catholic, set up training schools for social workers under private initiatives.

In Italy we had no other experience except for the charitable one, mainly run by women's organisations and by religious associations, or the role of the "addetta all'aiuto" (one assigned to helping people) which was introduced under the Fascist regime. This figure, usually a female, worked to help labourers and their families on a charitable basis, and this bore no relation to post-war social work (Campanini 1999; Neve 2000).

In the post-war years, the influence and help of international social work was of great significance. An important contribution was made by the AAI (Administration of International Help) who organised seminars to prepare new Italian teachers. Thanks to this support, they discovered methodologies and techniques like social work, group work and community work; some fundamental books were translated (Friedlander, Perlman, Ross, etc.); didactic materials coming from abroad were used; and many teachers also utilised the Fulbright grants to study in the USA. The influence of British and American social work was very strong in this period.

These years, from 1950-1962, are known as the "technique diffusion period", and were characterised by an effort to develop a specific way in which to teach social work. Teachers were involved in a process of integration of information, collected through the international seminars, with personal reflections, intuitions and common sense, very often without having the opportunity to practice what they were teaching to the students.

We can say that step by step, Italian social work, trying to find a proper way, was affected by an unfolding process. The 1970s were marked by a level of conflict with society, and so featured strong social and political movements which expressed more policy-directed intervention, mainly inspired by Marxist-based conflict theories. As a consequence, professionals rejected the technical components of the role, and there was much criticism of the Freudian- and post-Freudian-inspired case work which had characterised the initial period.

With regard to teaching, there was a change of focus, and attention moved from the technical content of the relevant methodologies to the function and identification of social work as a profession. Traditional methodologies went through a period of critical analysis and found a new direction. This was more pertinent to the new role which had been generated by the reflections following the crisis in social work (AA.VV. 1973).

The 1980s were characterised by the process in which education and training were amalgamated into the university system. There was also a re-elaboration of disciplinary content (Dal Pra 1985a, 1985b, 1987; Ferrario and Gottardi 1987). Thanks to the publications edited by Maria Dal Pra Ponticelli, the curtains of the international social work panorama were opened again. Some chapters by relevant authors in social work theory were translated and collected in two books: one focusing on describing different approaches and the other more related to methodological issues. Lia Sanicola's translation of a French book "Methodologie de l'intervention social", written by Christine De Robertis, also signalled a new period in the debate about Italian social work theory. Nevertheless, we can say that the contact with the experiences of other European countries was in general very poor and was linked to the personal relations of some teachers.

The written production in social work was quite small too and it was difficult for many teachers and professionals to become acquainted with what was going on in Europe, also because of the low level of knowledge of languages. Anna Maria Cavallone has, for several years, been the Italian representative in many international contexts, one of the very few connections with European and international social work debate.

During the last decades, a very important contribution towards developing European knowledge has been made by the publisher Erickson, which translates many books on social work and also presents many foreign articles through a new review, "Lavoro Sociale".

Socrates Erasmus Opportunities

After the first period, the social work education system was covered by many institutional changes (Campanini and Frost 2004) Thanks to the fact that some schools, like the School with Special Aims, were promoted within the Universities curricula - the first institution was the University of Siena in 1956, followed by Rome in 1966 (Statale and St. Maria Assunta), Parma and Florence in 1969, and Pisa and Perugia in the 70s - on the 10th March 1982, the DPR (Decree of the President of the Republic) n.162 was issued (*Riordino delle Scuole dirette a fini speciali, delle Scuole di Specializzazione e dei Corsi di Perfezionamento*). The decree defined the rules concerning the organisation, management and functioning of the *Scuole Dirette a fini speciali* (Schools with Special Professional Aims).

The legalisation of social work education slowly developed through a series of decrees stating that the only real training path for the profession would be the one offered by the university system (D.M. 30.05.1985). Some years later, a decree approved the accreditation of the University Diploma in Social Work (D.M. 23.07.1993). Since 2000, social work education has been defined in the context of the general university reform. At the moment, it presents the three-year degree course in "Sciences of Social Work" (BA), the second level degree in "Planning and Management of Politics and of Social Services" (MA) and some doctoral degree courses. Thanks to these changes, social work education was able to profit from the Socrates Erasmus opportunities.

One of the needs which moved the European Union to enhance an intercultural dimension of learning for the students has been the need to prepare younger generations to live in a society more and more characterised by a cultural and linguistic diversity and to identify concrete actions to fight racism and xenophobia.

Among the various measures, we can identify:

- Student mobility,
- The enhancement of ECTS system,
- The development of joint programmes for the encouragement of academic acknowledgment and contribution towards the exchange of experiences and innovation process for the enhancement of teaching quality,
- Teaching staff exchange,
- Intensive programmes.

The EU mobility programmes, without a doubt, had and still have a great impact on the creation of a European identity that may develop a greater understanding of the problems and a more commonly shared knowledge. For these reasons, at the beginning of this action (1987-1994), some courses decided to open new relations with European schools of social work, activating Inter-university Programmes of Cooperation (IPC).

Research done in 1998 on the state of the European cooperation¹ revealed that only 56% of the Diploma in Social Work courses activated the Socrates Erasmus Programme. In addition, of this 56%, only 44% realised the exchanges. In fact, in 12% of the universities, the programme has been only formally instituted but no activities have been carried out.²

The more active courses were the ones who had previous experience in the universities, like schools for special purposes. This situation is not difficult to understand, because the “new entry diplomas” were hardly involved in the transformation process from private schools to university courses, so they gave priority to the organisation of the new structures and to looking inside the local context, instead of opening new boundaries.

Another interesting aspect concerns the type of actions developed. The most common was the student’s mobility, and less used were the teacher exchange and the intensive program. This has to be connected with the precarious situation affecting the teaching staff involved in professional subjects. It cannot be hidden that teachers working part-time, often with poor salaries, cannot dedicate all the time necessary, not only for learning and elaborating professional knowledge but also for opening exchanges and debates within the European context. In many cases, moreover, the teachers could change if their contracts were not

¹ A. Rolli, Il programma Socrates Erasmus nella formazione al servizio sociale, Università di Parma, a.a. 1997-1998, relatore Annamaria Campanini

² The Universities who realised activities were Catania, Firenze, Milano Cattolica, Milano Statale, Palermo LUMSA, Parma, Perugia, Roma La Sapienza, Roma LUMSA, Roma Tre, Siena, Torino, Trento and Verona. Only formal contracts were made by Asti, Campobasso, L’Aquila e Trieste. Universities without active programmes: Ancona, Bari, Bologna, Cagliari, Cassino, Chieti, Genova, Lecce, Messina, Napoli; Palermo, Pisa, Urbino and Venezia

confirmed, and such alternation renders the maintenance of international contacts arduous. Another obstacle to teacher mobility was often created by the indispensability of a good understanding of foreign languages and of knowledge of specific professional terms, requirements that still seem to arouse some fears.

With regard to the intensive programs, their insufficient activation denotes a real difficulty, on the part of the D.U.S.S., to also participate in an international dialogue in a context of short duration, more or less for the same reasons as already mentioned. Where such mobility has been activated, the teachers involved were mainly those from social work disciplines. That demonstrates, in any case, a huge interest in this kind of initiative and, consequently, a greater benefit for many fields: comparisons of the didactic methodologies and content, input to a continuous education, and the acquisition of stronger professional competence.

In the present situation we can say, from my point of view, as a representative of the AIDOSS (Italian Association of Teachers in Social Work), that almost every degree course is involved in some Socrates Erasmus activities. There has been no research carried out to understand either the development of the initiatives or their impact on social work education, and also the National Socrates Agency doesn't have information relating to specific degree courses.

Looking at the different denomination of the courses, it is interesting to note that on the 39 BA in social work, Roma Tre (Discipline del Servizio sociale ad indirizzo formativo europeo) and Sassari (Servizio Sociale a indirizzo europeo) present a European orientation in the title of the degree, whereas with the 38 MA, only Roma Tre called the course "Management del servizio sociale ad indirizzo formativo europeo" (www.off.miur.it). It seems that the idea of preparing social workers to be able to use their title in Europe should begin to be an important aim, at least when it comes to the intentions.

In fact, this statement does not always correspond to a strong investment in the curriculum path in this sense. Looking at the programme, it is not possible to find a robust European knowledge being offered to the students. On the other hand, universities such as Milano Bicocca and Parma present European courses (comparing welfare systems, or covering European social work or European and international law) even if the European dimension is not mentioned in the title of the degree.

Social Work Education in Parma University – A Paradigmatic Experience Towards a European Involvement

In the Italian context, it is also possible to find special experiences like the European Thematic Network, coordinated by the University of Parma (Campanini and Frost 2004).

The participation of the Diploma in Social Work in an inter-university programme of cooperation (ICP), held in 1993 and managed by the Goteborg University, was very important in preparing this initiative. At the beginning, the University of the West of England in Bristol, Swansea in Wales and Mannheim in Germany were also part of the network and, later on, Bergen in Norway (in 1994) and Athens (in 1996) were included. The purpose of the network was essentially to provide placement and learning opportunities for social work students. However, the ongoing links of the network itself also provided a stable and consistent basis for all future developments.

The first two network meetings produced considerable energy and enthusiasm, not just for staff and student exchanges, but also for other kinds of co-operation. In 1995, curriculum

development work was funded by Brussels and a joint module called 'Ethnic Diversity and European Welfare Practice' was planned.

Parma University incorporated aspects of the diversity module into the normal curriculum, by organising seminars on multi-ethnicity and drawing on contributions offered by university teachers and guest lecturers coming from institutions which were members of the network. In Parma, in May 1998, a congress on "Social work in a multi-ethnic society" was also organised, the proceedings of which have already been published (Campanini ed. 2001).

Through these experiences, several modifications were made to the syllabi. New content was included in social work education, which aimed to develop both theoretical and operational educational paths in relation to the new challenges and opportunities that the presence of foreign immigrants may pose for the profession.

By 1996, then, when the notion of an Erasmus ICP was dismantled by Brussels and individual Socrates bilateral agreements were introduced instead, firm relationships between the seven social work programmes mentioned above had been established, some staff and student exchange had productively developed and an inter-European module had been established.

The benefits of this work were clear. But because of all this dynamic change, some countries had a sense that students and staff were missing opportunities to develop a truly European outlook on social work and to focus on comparative approaches to the work. It was as a response to this that the grouping of countries began to generate ideas and stimulate initiatives in relation to a different aspect of the Socrates/Erasmus scheme: the 'Intensive Programme'. Briefly, an Intensive Programme is a course of study which includes staff and students from several partner institutions, with an emphasis on pan-European perspectives and shared learning opportunities. Unlike student exchange programmes, they can be of limited duration, for example 10 days or so. This in itself opened up the range of students able to participate. For example, mature students could attend with far less likelihood of disruption to family life than 3 month exchanges caused. The IP system seemed to be able to allow for the development of the European dimension of the curriculum, with guaranteed student participation.

At a 'network' meeting in the summer of 1996, a comprehensive programme of IPs was agreed. This was based on the interest and subject specialism of each programme, and the belief of the other programme representatives that their students and staff would find the particular theme relevant and useful. Content and presentation of bids was worked on collectively, although the responsibility of each programme remained specific. By the academic year of 1997-8, the network had successfully acquired EU-funding for two IPs, each involving between five and seven of the European social work programmes.

Between 1997 and 2000, Parma University, actively participated in an IP entitled 'European Mental Health Social Work', co-ordinated by the University of West England, and in 'Professional Social Work in Europe' which was co-ordinated by partners from Gothenburg University in Sweden. In 2000, Parma University also co-ordinated a third IP on 'Supervision in Social Work', and co-operated in a fourth one on 'Service User Involvement in Social Work', which was funded from 2002-2004.

These experiences, much more accessible for Italian teachers and students, had made a strong impact on the opportunities offered during training in social work in Parma. Teachers from

abroad became a quite normal feature of the courses. Involvement of students in preparing the intensive programmes, when they were hosted by Parma, has always been present. Also, the participation of Italian teachers in these initiatives allowed them to enrich their lectures with European theoretical suggestions and examples of practice.

Nevertheless, Parma University still had a sense that there was considerable potential within the Socrates scheme to further develop their knowledge and understanding of pan-European social work, and to help other European countries' lecturers, practitioners and students to participate in the development of, and give access to, such knowledge. This idea was shared with the other partners in a discussion at a group meeting in 2001, in which the initial proposal for the Thematic Network was developed. The hypothesis formulated by the group was discussed together with the staff of the International Relations Office of the University of Parma and then submitted for the approval of academic organs, which recognised the importance of and welcomed the idea that the University of Parma would be the voice to express a need commonly shared by the group that had been cooperating together for so many years.

A short analysis on previously approved Thematic Networks pointed out that a project coordinated by the Fachhochschule Koblenz (DE) had just finished: this project, however, was more addressed to the study of social professions in Europe and therefore there were no previous experiences of initiatives dedicated to social work education.

The pre-proposal, prepared on the basis of the agreements taken with the original group, was sent to Brussels in November 2001. The final approval arrived in July 2003 and the activities started with the first annual meeting in Parma from 30 October to 2 November 2003. This experience has been very important in helping to open new possibilities for a Europeanization process in Italian social work education.

Two events have been organised by Parma University involving all the Presidents and teachers of the Italian degrees in social work: "La formazione al servizio sociale in Europa: verso un "European Quality System" (Education for social work in Europe: towards a "European Quality System"), 2-2-2004 and "Il servizio sociale in Europa sfide e potenzialità" (Social work in Europe: challenges and opportunities), 8-10-2004.

We have to mention that during that period, the Italian Parliament was discussing a law to reorganise the structures of all degrees, and the social work curriculum was really in danger. The conflict with the sociological area, in a situation in which social work is not yet considered to be an autonomous discipline, was leading to a total disownment of specificity of social work education. We asked for support from Christine Labonté, President of EASSW, who produced a document for the Parliament, and also through these conferences, aimed to show the European situation - that it was possible to make the importance of social work education more visible and also that there was a need to share some common principles on it.

Some of the output of EUSW Thematic Network has also been very important in helping Italian students and teachers to become better acquainted with the fact that we are sharing challenges and opportunities with the rest of Europe. We can mention a few of these "products" that have been made available to every university.

An Italian publisher, Carocci, agreed to publish a new series of books in English to host work produced by the EUSW Thematic Network. Even though the books have not been translated

into Italian, this made it easier for the Italian audience to find them in the bookshops, or through a website that is very well known for the publications in social work, and this fact has helped to provide access to European knowledge.

The Virclass project gave some Italian students the possibility of participating in a distance learning programme, to share ideas and knowledge with teachers and students from different countries. It constituted a very interesting example of discussing topics and analysing in-depth content and meanings. An added value was the innovation of providing material and case studies in distance learning programmes.

At the end of this project, Parma University hosted a residential experience for 40 students and 20 teachers. The summer school was a very important occasion for teachers to work together and has also involved social services from the Municipality of Parma. PhD students from other Italian universities, together with MA students from Parma, took part in this initiative with great interest and enjoyed the experience.

Thanks to these works, Parma University also presented a proposal funded by the Italian Government to establish an international masters programme on social policies and social services for families, together with Goteborg, Bodo and Palma de Mallorca.

Some Reflections

“The social work profession promotes change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work” (IASW, IFSW 2001)

Social work has a special mission to fulfil this definition and reach these aims. At the beginning of 21st century, we are facing challenges which are more demanding. As we can learn from many studies, but also from the overview we have been given through our thematic network in social work, all of Europe is affected by old and new problems: poverty, ageing, multiculturalism, globalization, neo-liberalism and managerialism, just to mention some of them.

Within this context, we have to face a series of challenges and demands, some of them new, addressed to the social work profession (and thus, also related to the educational context) from the new European policy scenario, which allows and foresees the free circulation of workers, but also migration phenomena that are affecting our country in a significant way. This situation requires social workers who are able to invest in the development of the resources of individuals and of local communities, involving all the major participants in elaborating and verifying processes and the means of construction of actions, able to work with people in a holistic way, and not through user categories, to capture their points of view.

How can we teach students to face this complexity? How can they improve their own consciousnesses and abilities to respond to the social work mission to enhance human rights and social justice? How can we train students to face the complexity of our society? How can we help students to acquire a non-bureaucratic attitude, to develop a political role in the deepest meaning?

As Morin states, the problem lies in “transforming the discovery of complexity into a method of complexity” (Morin 1977). Also, our Thematic Network experience, which has in itself been one action oriented towards sharing experiences and knowledge, reflecting qualitative and innovative aspects, aims to improve pedagogical methodologies and develop common curricula.

What kind of consequences can the opening of intercultural perspectives in the different education systems have for social work? From my discussions with teachers and students who participated in this experience and also from my own reflections, I want to put forward some suggestions.

Concerning the teacher figure, the possibility to meet colleagues, to come in contact with different systems of education, both for institutional belongings and for organizational modalities, are of considerable importance. The exchanges that can be undertaken stimulate the teachers to become acquainted with theoretical approaches different from the ones typical of their home country, to compare their knowledge with new didactic methodologies, but also to consolidate those common bases that have a trans-national value and can constitute a corpus of scientifically validated and shared knowledge. Moreover, the difference of the contexts and of the social policies, allows a close understanding of specific elaborations, regarding new problems and that developed understanding of ways of working in specific countries in order to prepare new teaching content to allow the future social workers to face new challenges and competencies.

To end the isolation of merely operating on a national level, to feel part of an international community, facilitates the “curiosity” attitude, as well as a mental receptiveness to change and innovation. Therefore, the concrete possibility of activating networks and understanding comparative analysis of theories, formative methodologies, problems and interventions is established as well as experimentations that lead to the development of theory for social work.

The students are involved at two levels in the exchange process: the content and self improvement. It can be asserted that for the student, staying in a foreign country offers important objectives; not only because of learning new content, but also in relation to the processes of acquisition of the same knowledge. Steeped in a new situation, the student is encouraged to test his/her ability to orient him/herself in a new context, to collect information, to ask questions in order to understand a different reality from the one he/she is accustomed to and of which they have no existing orientation.

Moreover, this experience facilitates the process of correlation and comparison between different situations, characterising the common aspects and the specific elements of each situation; it speeds up the abandonment of rigid premises, pre-constituted certainties and stereotypes, opening the mind towards possible diversified hypothesis of solutions and participation; it helps the student to understand the links between the theoretical frames of reference and concrete actions, between the constraints of social policies and the choices of organization of the services.

A further, and no less important, element is the possibility offered by the extended stay in another nation to learn and/or to consolidate the knowledge of a different language from the mother tongue. At the level of personal education, the experience carried out in a foreign country introduces many particularly meaningful triggers.

The first necessary step is to cut off the umbilical cord that is sometimes still very much present in Italian students. Compared with other contexts, in Italy, for example, the average of the age of the students enrolled into the degree course in social work is quite low: generally, students who have concluded advanced education, have not had experience of work and the majority of them still live with their parents. We know that in Italy the phenomenon of the so-called "long adolescence of the young adult" (Scabini and Cigoli 2000) is formative and that the autonomy and the differentiation from the parents is something problematic.

This aspect is not negligible; there is resistance from the students to receiving the idea of a period in a foreign country. If we can assume that whoever takes up this opportunity is already walking in the road of autonomy, we can also consider that even at its most simple, this experience offers a student a possibility to reflect on his/her personal orientation and problems. The decision to take part in this experience forces the student to detach him/herself from certainties and from comforts, to face a change, to experience the unknown; it puts him/her in the situation of having to make decisions, to face daily problems without the support of family, friends, the group of reference. It confronts him/her with another culture that even opens up different models of living, other rules and habits, new adaptations and calls for the qualities of initiative and mediation ability. The student is placed in a position of reorganizing his/her own points of reference, to interrogate him/herself on the adequacy of their own systems of meanings and respect for a new world that introduces elements and characteristics not automatically referable to the mental maps of the observing subject. The ability to understand the differences, to apply them to a wider context for giving a sense of alternative parameters referred to in another culture, is an extremely useful exercise. It prepares the student concerned with fundamental abilities for his/her future profession. The experience lived of 'diversity' can render the reflection deeper and active on possible discriminatory attitudes to several types of diversity: of race, sex, age, social condition, physical or psychical handicap. Other important aspects include functioning in a different language and hence losing the "power" embedded in a language well known and interiorised. Experiencing the difficulty of listening and decoding, the frustration regarding the restriction of the ability to express him/herself, can help the student to better understand and to identify the difficulties of others that he/she will meet; for example, users coming from other cultures. The problems deriving from the use of technical languages – specialised and sometimes misused - in the social work field, within the professional relations are also made obvious.

Within the European context, this kind of experience needs to be improved and structured in a more regular way in our curricula in order to enhance the level of social work, helping both teachers and students to realise the intercultural attitude so necessary in this new century.

Concluding Remarks

At the end of this paper I can affirm that the Europeanization of Italian social work education is going through a slow process of improvement. We still have some problems connected with the structure of the education. Italy has been one of the first countries to adopt the Bologna process recommendations, and social work curricula were in a better position than other degree courses. In fact, the education was previously organised into a three year diploma so, in one way, the only need was to create the curriculum for the new two years.

In this transformation process, the academy once more prevailed, marginalizing the social work disciplines. In comparison with other European curricula, we can observe that many Italian paths did not respond as well to the requirements of a good preparation for a professional role. The social work disciplines are not in the core of the curricula, but very

often represent a marginalised content in education. Also the field placement has been reduced in numbers of hours from the initial experience and is not always run in a correct way with good supervision accompanied by a reflexive process. The social work discipline doesn't have an autonomous status, but is included under "general sociology". At the moment, very few chairs in social work are occupied by teachers with specific training: in the whole of Italy we have four professors and five researchers available within the social work disciplinary areas. Many teachers coming into the field are contracted year by year, for few hours and risible salaries. All this renders it much more difficult for them to be engaged in research and to be involved like teachers in European activities.

Other difficulties that our education system is still facing are connected with language skills. The knowledge of teachers and students in this field is still very poor and this creates problems when trying to create a stronger sensitivity towards the European context.

In this situation of lights and shadows, we can, in any case, underline the positive role played by the Association of Italian Teachers in Social Work, which aims to realize the European conference in Social Change and Social Professions in Parma in March 2007.

We also hope that this strong input, and the visibility given to the European dimension of social work, will enhance the commitment in Italy to a Europeanization process in social work.

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