Prepared to Care?
Knowledge and Welfare in a Time of Emergency

Davide Caselli [a]   Barbara Giullari [*] [b]   Carlotta Mozzana [a]

[a]   Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy)
[b]   Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna (Italy)

Abstract

The article aims at developing a dialogue between the sociology of disasters and the sociology of public action, with particular regards to the role of knowledge in welfare policy. In particular, we argue that — in an era increasingly characterised by the importance of quantitative knowledge, categorization and standardization — the studies on the "informational bases of public action" has greatly contributed to the understanding of the social dimension of the processes through which such numbers and categories are produced, incorporating extant inequalities and power relations. Through the reference to the social crises that followed Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, we show how this focus on the processes of knowledge-making can be enriched by a specific approach to disaster prevention and management such as "preparedness", especially in its cynegetic and transformative form purposes. We conclude by outlining avenues for future research on welfare policies in a time of structural uncertainty and emergency.

Keywords: Preparedness; welfare knowledge; publicness; public action; care; pandemic.

*   ✉ barbara.giullari@unibo.it

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge — unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable. (Benjamin, 2006, p. 392)

1. March 2020. Several neighborhoods across the city of Milan saw the spontaneous emergence of mutual aid groups — some of them named *Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza* (hereafter Brigades) — aimed at collecting food and basic necessities and distributing them to poor households and individuals who had been hard hit by the lockdown measures enforced suddenly following the Covid-19 outbreak. The Brigades were self-organized, sometimes working with existing local squats, associations or political collectives. They attracted a large number of activists and volunteers with no previous experience of political and social engagement. They quickly mobilized about 1,400 young volunteers and handled about 12,000 requests for assistance, supporting thousands of families and individuals during the initial public health emergency (Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza, 2020). Over time, they also set up a Central Coordination Unit, whose functions were to facilitate communications, harmonize practices, and propose new projects, including cooperation with international NGOs and local government. The Brigades are still in operation; they have produced a series of reports with data and analysis concerning their activity and the social conditions they have encountered and helped to address.

2. March 2020. In late 2019, the municipal social welfare office in Carpi — a small city in Central Italy — created a database mapping the over-75s population, by integrating data held by the town's social services with information provided by its elderly care services and network of general practitioners. When the pandemic struck in Spring 2020, all members of the over-75s demographic were contacted by city social workers, with the help of educators employed at local schools and temporarily without duties given that the schools were closed, to check their health status and potential need for economic, social, and logistic support, and accordingly to define appropriate responses to be implemented by the City Council and the community (ANCI, 2021). The integrated database remains as a resource for future projects such as mutual-aid groups, support schemes for caregivers, and various types of support for disabled elderly.

3. April 2020. The dramatic impact of the global public health emergency on Italian society, with the related lockdown and curtailing/suspension of many economic activities, confronted both national and local government with unprecedented social and economic demands from citizens without access to food, basic necessities, or any form of income. These were mainly working poor who had lost their insecure, low-paid jobs, unemployed individuals, or black-market workers. Such working conditions have become increasingly widespread in Italy since the late 1990s, with major consequences in terms of social insecurity. Yet, despite the long-term nature of the phenomenon and the availability of data on categories of workers and occupational status, no comprehensive national databases or programmes have been developed in preparation for social and economic emergencies. Thus, to date, responses to crises have been highly uneven with respect to different conditions of work and work trajectories. While

at the outset of the Covid-19 emergency, the central government activated and extended existing tools for income support (temporary lay-off scheme [*cassa integrazione*], basic income), as the crisis continued to cause serious economic and social fallout, extraordinary income support schemes — such as once-off payments for the self-employed, shopping vouchers, emergency income, etc. — were designed and implemented for categories that had not been covered by the previously existing instruments.

1 Introduction

These three vignettes are set in Italy during the current Covid-19 pandemic, a scenario in which — due to the confinement measures enforced — the health emergency has also become a social emergency. During the lockdown and in the following period, the economic and social impact of the crisis has been threatening to push Italy into another recession, while an important share of the population — whose conditions of employment were previously insecure and/or informal — lost their job without any protection against the risk of poverty (Caritas, 2020; Neri & Zanichelli, 2020). Rooted in this situation, the vignettes are fit for introducing the main aim of our article, namely to reflect and set a program for future research on the interactions between welfare and emergencies, as observed from the perspective of welfare state and social policy scholars. As we will clarify, our point is that a pivotal — although not exclusive — role in allowing a welfare system to be able to recognize vulnerability and to be prepared to respond to it is played by knowledge.

Welfare is indeed a complex field where social rights are recognized and practiced, but a precondition for this to happen is that the people experimenting conditions of vulnerability and precarity are enabled to voice their situation and to be heard by the institutional context. This is because welfare systems define the targets of public social protection policies on the bases of the public and administrative recognition of specific social groups. In this process, the classifications that organize data and information (e.g., statistical information on the different professional and social categories) play a major role, defining a *regime of visibility* that makes some actors and issues visible while leaving others in the shadows. This tension does not yield simple and automatic equivalence between social visibility, recognition and power but the analysis of how these three elements interact can contribute to the critical discussion on disaster management and disaster risk reduction.

As we have sought to exemplify through the three vignettes, the existing regimes of visibility have been challenged by the emergency following the Covid-19 pandemic: its exceptional impact resulted in a process of visibilization of diverse forms of precarity and of social injustice that are structurally inscribed in the Italian social fabric and that are not actually tackled by our current welfare system. Each of the three vignettes highlights a specific aspect of the issue of visibility/invisibility or — more precisely — of the process of visibilization/invisibilization. The *first* concerns the emergence of "invisible" categories and their recognition by self-organized groups. Such recognition is at present an opportunity whose outcome is uncertain: will the visibilization of marginalized groups, which has challenged the conventional system of categorization, be transformed into institutional recognition and inclusion in the system of protection, fostering their exit from the marginalized system of care? Or will it slowly be turned into a new form of invisibility? In the *second* vignette, we observe a novel use of existing data and knowledge to identify, make visible, and support a specific social group, whose care is ordinarily parcelled out among different social and healthcare practitioners, with the added benefit of creating a more comprehensive and potentially more useful body of data on which to base fu-

ture action. In contrast, the *third* vignette illustrates the failure to visibilize a large social group made up of unemployed, working poor, and unreported, undocumented, or "simply" temporary workers. This lack of recognition is simultaneously both the outcome and the driver of these groups' uncertain working conditions, suggesting that, far from being a simple matter of effective and accurate accounting, the process of visibilization is entangled with moral and political issues and is one of the key places where knowledge and power intersect. This is where what Benjamin in the opening quote of the article termed the "tradition of the oppressed", those for whom a state of emergency "is not the exception but the rule" speaks to our present (2006, p. 392).

The cases presented above bring to light how previously existing tensions at the intersection between knowledge and power in the welfare domain have been fuelled by the Covid-19, leading the visibilization of certain forms of vulnerability and precariousness. This points to several issues about how to make welfare systems more prepared to disastrous situations and how to respond to social emergencies such as those that have followed the Covid-19 outbreak.

In this contribution, we attempt to address these issues by exploring the connections between welfare, knowledge and the visibilization process of social inequalities that emergencies produce. We will try to develop a dialogue between the sociology of disasters — where welfare policies are considered in terms of prevention, as they reduce the vulnerability of people facing disasters, and in terms of repairing, as they contribute to post-disaster recovery (Veichselgartner, 2001; Tselios & Tompkins, 2019; Centemeri et al., 2021) — and the sociology of public action — especially its strands looking at welfare from the perspective of its informational bases (IB). In Sen's words, informational bases are "the information on which the judgment is directly dependent [that] determines the factual territory to which justice considerations are directly applied" (1990, p. 111): they comprise those items of information and knowledge that are viewed as salient to the policy-making process and which have to do with the value judgments inherent to the public action.

Starting from this perspective on the role of knowledge in the processes of visibilization/invisibilization of social groups in need for social protection, the article is structured as follows. In paragraph 2 we will discuss the main features that the relation between knowledge and public action has acquired in the field of welfare during the long era of neoliberal hegemony (Mirowski & Plehwe 2009; Brenner et al., 2010; Moini, 2016). We devote particular attention to how certain economic categories and values have become dominant and naturalized, obscuring violent social and cultural processes, and thereby contributing to reproduce extant inequalities rather than to remove them. In paragraph 3 we will return to the social emergency resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and we will discuss the welfare unpreparedness as a problem about informational basis of welfare policies construction and recognition. We will tackle the issue against some indications emerging from the debate developed in the field of sociology of disasters, referring especially to the debate on *preparedness* (Lakoff, 2015, 2017; Keck, 2020; Pellizzoni, 2020) and to the notion of slow emergency (Anderson et al., 2020). In doing so, we will highlight the deep social roots of vulnerability and the necessity of a solid knowledge infrastructure for observing and recognizing the information arising from the territory. In this respect the analysis will point out some similarities between the informational basis approach and the cynegetic approach of preparedness (Keck, 2020), based on the possibility to question existing assumptions and the taken-for-granted knowledge and causal relations in the analysis of complex phenomena.

In conclusion, we will try to highlight few research perspectives which can emerge from the dialogue between sociology of disasters and sociology of public action and welfare. In par-

ticular, we will focus on the risks, the opportunities and the threats of thinking about the role of welfare in front of emergency situations. In this respect, a certain take on preparedness can reinvigorate the democratic and inclusive nature of welfare, helping it to abandon the current neoliberal hegemony based on separating individuals from their socio-economic and ecological context, in favor of a perspective based on care ethics (Tronto, 2015).

2   Informational Bases and Public Action: Welfare and the Neoliberal Turn

In this section we will develop an argument about the role of knowledge in the welfare domain by illustrating how and in what forms the various processes of neoliberalism impacted on knowledge production in support of welfare policies.

Beginning in the 1970s, the neoliberal hegemonic ideological project (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Brenner et al., 2010; Moini, 2016) has profoundly altered the material and cultural bases of public action, introducing market-driven values, styles of reasoning, vocabularies and tools into virtually all the spheres of social life. These have come to provide the main justificative frame for intervention in collective issues by public authorities: in the sphere of public administration, the adoption of the New Public Management model (NPM) (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2002) has contributed to the spread of an audit and management culture (Power, 1997; Clarke & Newman, 1997). As state form, the neoliberal turn, especially during its "roll-out" phase (Ward & England, 2007; Brenner et al., 2010) has promoted different forms of devolution, privatization and deregulation in the name of a general reform of state action.

Welfare policies have not remained unaffected by this long season of transformation, under the sign of hyper-individualization and over-responsibilization of citizens, especially of welfare recipients (D'Albergo & Moini, 2016). Social services and benefits went through a drastic reduction in public spending especially in some sectors (as social assistance), a reduction that pushed decision-makers to introduce or reinforce a system of constraints and conditions to be applied to welfare benefits. This pushed towards a reconfiguration of social rights as needs and means of satisfying them (Doyal & Gough, 1991), via a process of moralization of the recipients' deservingness, with the goal of balancing public expenditure taking precedence over that of ensuring basic social rights, processes exacerbated by the 2008 socio-economic crisis.

Crucial to this transformation has been the emergence of two specific paradigms in the welfare domain: on the one hand that of activation and on the other that of social investment. "Activation" is a paradigm that combines the access to social rights with certain conditions, first and foremost that of timely re-entry into the labour market. It implies a shift in the discourse of social inclusion: from inclusion through the provision of a decent income to inclusion through work. It is based on a representation of the individual as an autonomous and desocialized person, unique responsible for his/her own socio-economic conditions. Activation can be declined in a neoliberal perspective, where individuals need to be brought back to work as soon as possible, making their access to social rights increasingly conditional upon acceptance of a job offer of any kind. This policy orientation relies on market values and vocabularies that further individualize risks and responsibilities in the name of self-organization and social entrepreneurship. But activation also has a universalistic version, where recipients are considered as citizens with rights and capacities and policies have a promotional and enabling conception of public intervention, aimed at favouring a greater responsibility of all the actors involved in the process (Barbier, 2005; Lødemel & Moreira, 2014). Within this same framework, Social Investment perspective has emerged (Morel et al., 2012): based on the call for a new "pact among generations", it is an umbrella-term that embraces different concepts and traditions, in which

empowerment for the market and activation are differently combined with social protection, redistribution and compensatory tools. There is a social democratic version of it (Morel et al., 2012), in which the relationship between protection and activation plays a crucial role through the shift towards "preparing rather than repairing" because social policy should be considered as a "trampoline" instead of a "safety net" (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013), and also a more neoliberal version of social investment, that shares the Third Way's concerns about going beyond old paradigms in the welfare domain, through an investment on young and adults human capital that subordinates social policies to the economic system objectives (Busso, 2017).

Activation and social investment paradigms emphasize individual responsibility and develop interventions and tools mainly based on prevention: conditionality for access to social benefits and measures and the strong investment on youth and children in social policies and interventions make the objective of these policies not being a compensation of the damage caused by the market, but the equipment of citizens with skills that allow everyone to adapt to the labor market (Laruffa, 2016; Bifulco, 2019), generating forms of individual prevention in the face of vulnerability.

In this transformation of the socio-political balance of power between capital and labor, neoliberalization has also operated an important shift in the informational bases of public action. These reforms and changes in policy direction, have indeed been justified on grounds of 'evidence' (Bonvin & Rosenstein, 2009) and the "evidence-based" approaches to public policies have consequently gained increasing importance. If the formats of knowledge used for sustaining and developing forms of public action are historically and socially differentiated, numbers are nowadays the dominant format even in the welfare realm (Giullari & De Angelis, 2019; Mozzana, 2019), legitimized by their apparently non-problematic capacity to translate quality into quantity (Desrosières, 1993; Porter, 1996) and to simplify complex social realities into standardized and formalized systems of relations (Desrosières, 2011). These bases (regarding occupational status, employability, willingness to enter the job market, etc.) are therefore used to identify "at risk" social and behavioural attitudes among the population and act upon them to prevent anti-economic behaviours (Rottenburg et al., 2015). Here, the use of knowledge in public action is no longer aimed at building a more just and inclusive community, but rather at building up and implementing forms of discipline, with the ultimate objective of maintaining a form of control over the population's behaviors and the state financial capacity (Mozzana, 2019).

Critical research has nonetheless shown a number of problems of quantified and evidence-based approaches to the use of knowledge for public action (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Rottenburg et al., 2015). First, by emphasizing the role of evidence and results, they tend to conceal the processes through which the categories and numbers upon which these are based are produced. All public choices incorporate norms and ideals — implying, in a word, that they are value judgments — which in turn are linked to the type of information viewed as salient to formulating them (Sen, 1990): it is the knowledge in which the problems addressed by public choices and the potential beneficiaries of welfare measures are grounded (based on the identification of given causes and effects). This has important implications with the broader theme of democracy in the ideational process that precedes decision-making on public issues. On the one hand, the tensions inherent in the relationship between mechanisms of categorization as a vehicle for social recognition and inclusiveness in public space play a fundamental role: "who is counted"; who is able to claim "statistical recognition" and how; how social groups are transformed into subjects/objects of classification. In actual fact, the beneficiaries of policies do not exist prior to classifying action by a public institu-

tion which legitimizes them: they are created through this action (Hacking, 1985; Desrosières, 1993). On the other hand, also of critical importance are key issues concerning processes of "rising in generality" whereby aspects of the concrete life experience of individuals — and their personal spheres — are transformed into matters of public responsibility (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). This is linked to a further question: whether and how the representations/definitions of a social group may emerge from collective dimensions of different life experiences, generating processes of recognition in the public space that are inaccessible at the individual level. Second, categories and numbers not only describe reality, but they also prescribe a specific way of thinking about it and acting upon it (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010, p. 71); in the welfare domain, this works by reinforcing the neoliberal imperatives of efficiency and effectiveness, and major critiques concern the looping effect of informational infrastructures/quantified forms of description/measurement (Hacking, 1985; Rottenburg et al., 2015). Third, they tend to reduce the construction and management of information systems to a mere performance management tool (Salais, 2013), based on a reductionist, desocialized and depoliticized understanding of knowledge. On the contrary, in the welfare realm they have to deal with the transformation of data and information about social problems into collective knowledge, a process that takes place when people believe that specific knowledge, legitimized by a given institution, correctly describes a situation, identify with this description and adopt it as a framework of reference for social coordination (Salais, 2014). The "artificial" nature of the construction of knowledge in support of public action decision-making thus concerns its own publicness. An emergent condition rather than an intrinsic property of processes, publicness stems from the dynamics of institutionalization of the social that play out in the various policy domains (Salais, 2010). At stake here is the representations of social reality considered legitimate, representations that are based on how populations are classified, and which affect both the recognition of differential conditions and the material consequences of this recognition — e.g., the allocation of resources, etc. (Dubois, 2009, p. 323).

To conclude, knowledge is nowadays mobilized for public action (and in welfare policies specifically) as a function of different and mixed governmental logics in response to vulnerability and social risks. First, the logic of discipline, that is reflected in the implementation of probabilistic models aimed at prediction and control, calculating the likelihood of certain behaviors: examples include the case profiling and data mining used to discriminate between deserving and undeserving welfare recipients (O'Neil, 2016; Masiero & Das, 2019). Second, the logic of prevention, that is predicated upon a reductionist economic approach, as for example in the case of activation paradigm: it is reflected in profiling and targeting practices aimed at identifying the "more employable" — and therefore potentially more productive — fractions of the population in need. Both these logics raise many questions about the de-powering of the democratic character of public knowledge construction and how conditions of risk and vulnerability are, in these perspectives, obscured. The risk here is that of reproducing the inequalities that the Covid-19 pandemic brought out in all their severity, along with the equally serious unpreparedness of social protection infrastructures.

Nonetheless, beside this hegemonic approach, a third and different perspective has developed. In the same years in which political, social, and juridical institutions from the Keynesian era have been dismantled by neoliberal policies, de-centralized, bottom-up participation has become a key discursive and institutional dimension of local welfare. Looking at Italy in particular, the reform of social welfare introduced by Law 328/00 was based on a pluralistic and open model of governance, in which public and private actors as well as community networks and organizations could all contribute to the design and implementation of public policy, relying

on democratic participation in the construction of informational bases of local welfare policies (Andreotti et al., 2012; Bifulco, 2017).

Notwithstanding its ambiguities and links to the neoliberal governance (Moini, 2013), we think that a different logic — alternative to the abstract and disciplining neoliberal one — can be recognized in this case. It is a territorial logic in which reference to the specific contexts is the key to recalibrating policies in the direction of making services and intervention to fit the specific needs and resources of a collective, recognizing the active role of the recipients and citizens in these policies, and making use of the potential of local collective actors, such as co-operatives (Bifulco, 2017). Here, the ability to rethink in more inclusive terms, starting from the involvement of actors in the construction of knowledge, plays a leading role. While in the last two decades, the above-mentioned pattern of increasing individualization, privatization and outsourcing has undermined these democratic spaces at their very base, we think that this bottom-up approach to the production of knowledge for public action maintains an important potential to be developed.

3 Enduring, Cynegetic, and Networked Sentinels: Which Actors of Knowledge Production in Emergencies?

Let us go back to the initial vignettes. We are in a situation of emergency, where uncertainty is dominant and several social groups claim for the access to food, basic necessities and some forms of income. Standard welfare policies being in place, national and local governments were faced with unprecedented social and economic demands from citizens due to the fact that the government of the extraordinary emergency (Covid-19 pandemic) did not consider the daily, ordinary, emergencies caused by and rooted in the precarious economic and social conditions of a large part of population. Despite the long-term nature of job insecurity and precariousness and the availability of tools to build knowledge about the employment conditions of the different professional categories and social groups, these latter (among which we can find working poor and unreported, undocumented, or casual workers) remained invisible for several months: a visibilization failure that is entangled with moral and political considerations about who deserves to be protected. The governance of the pandemic, combined with the extant, structured precariousness and inequalities, thus worsened the life conditions of the population that was living just above the poverty line thanks to precarious and undocumented jobs that were rapidly lost after the pandemic outbreak (Neri & Zanichelli, 2020).

But even if Covid-19 pandemic arose abruptly, its consequences and actions did not culminate only in a major and speedy event. Time factor is here key to highlight the relationship between knowledge and power and how these two dimensions interact the one with the other in the governance of the emergency and its consequences (Pellizzoni, 2020). In particular, the concept of slow emergency (Anderson et al., 2020) is here central. Developed in the field of disaster studies, it points to the fact that while Emergencies (with capital E) are once-off happenings inducing an immediate response, slow emergencies also encompass the different landscapes of exposure associated with the event (Mitman et al., 2004) and the potential different time-frames. Specifically, Anderson and colleagues use this term to highlight the ordinariness of the physical and psychic deterioration that can be linked to a spectacular event, such as an Emergency, but endures beyond the event itself. When considered from a time perspective, emergencies can be seen to have lasting consequences and to interact with people's existing, unequal conditions, sometimes coming to define their overall life conditions. More radically, the

authors suggest that all Emergencies evolve into emergencies and the two cannot be separated also because the government and management of the former have a strong impact on the latter, either because they ignore them and leave them ungoverned or because they actively intervene in them.

In the case of the social emergency following the Covid-19 outbreak, despite the long-term nature of the phenomenon such as the increasing number of *working poor* and of the precarity of working conditions, no information systems (e.g., grounded on statistical data on categories of workers and their occupational status) had been set up to support the preparation to social and economic emergencies. The lack of recognition of the precarious lives by the welfare system ended up reproducing the existing inequalities during the emergency, in this way delimiting "what lives can and should be exposed to banal forms of exceptional violence" and what lives deserve to be secured (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 625). In this respect, what emerged was the lack of a proper infrastructure able to promptly recognize the vulnerable conditions already present in the population and consequently defining some measures for sustaining them during the lockdown.

But if statistic knowledge about some categories of workers was available, even though not considered, another issue is at stake here: what other kind of knowledge is suited to pointing up the slow dimension of the emergency, its long-term consequences, to highlight the prior conditions that interact with the emergency, but also with the government techniques and strategies being deployed? Is statistical knowledge sufficient in order to develop a proper response?

In this respect, the case of the Brigades proves the importance of the type of knowledge in dealing with emergencies: on one side of the emergency there is the local authority, who is unable to find out who is suffering precarious circumstance unless they have been taken into the care of the social services; on the other side, there are local, self-organized groups who are able to care for the marginalized and insecure, thanks to specific understanding about people and territories. Brigades knowledge and presence allowed the Municipality to identify peripheral neighborhoods and social housing estates characterized by greater fragility and marginality, as well as the local resources that could be mobilized, and to act upon these data and information in order to sustain them during the lockdown. However, visibilization of these situations is not enough if it remains only an emergency issue. The question here is how to harness this knowledge and make it a recognized informational basis for defining new welfare boundaries and publicly legitimized tools of inclusion (Giullari & De Angelis, 2019; Caselli, 2020).

A second concept coming from disaster studies can be usefully recalled here, namely that of "sentinel" as developed in the literature on preparedness and its techniques (Lakoff, 2015; Keck, 2020). As a matter of fact, sentinels are a tool for vigilance, a modality for governing infectious disease acting in a precautionary mode and interrupting the onset of a potential catastrophic event rather than pointing towards a cost-benefit calculus to guide decisions on intervention (Lakoff, 2015). Their aim is to provide early warning of an encroaching danger and their peculiarity is that they do not rely on the power of big numbers (as in statistics) but on the collection of pieces of information in conditions of uncertainty (and not against them), via dialogue and collaboration with a plurality of actors and combining a plurality of registers. Sentinels are part of a logic of vigilance, which means being able to detect the early signs of potential catastrophic transformations directly on the territory and in the interconnections that are established among local actors. This specificity is particularly consonant with the discourse about informational bases: the involvement of a plurality of actors as knowledge producers at the local level, and particularly of the people that are in vulnerable conditions, is central in welfare issues. In this respect, the chance and the right for every one of them to voice their concerns and expectations

and make them count (de Leonardis et al., 2012; Giullari & De Angelis, 2019) is particularly relevant in order to tackle the determinants of vulnerability, since it is where the conditions of oppression take place that it is possible to understand how dynamics and mechanisms of exclusion and inequality shape people's daily life.

Moreover, the relevance of vigilance approaches is that sentinels do not operate on their own but are integrated into a broader system of alert-and-response. In this respect, Keck develops an understanding of preparedness as a specific way of considering the co-existence of humans and non-humans, and the constant quest for a socio-ecological balance through an extraordinary capacity to build relationships and alliances between them. This capacity has been identified by Keck in "cynegetic practices of virus hunters to anticipate an unpredictable future by communicating with birds through databases in which their signs become meaningful" (2020, p. 178) and "[...] rather than calculating risks through statistics and culling potentially sick animals, virus hunters and bird-watchers, imagine the movements of birds through artefacts such as viral samples, computer software, databanks, tags, dummies, decoys" (2020, p. 173). In welfare policies this is a solid point, even if the field is strongly crowded by humans: institutional assets and their capacity to developing mechanisms of learning and "rising in generality" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991) through which information about the concrete life experience of individuals are made visible and feed public action, is fundamental. In this respect what was missing during Covid-19 pandemic was an ecological approach to vulnerabilities, aimed at integrating and collecting information and voices where they are produced, i.e., at the local level, and make them count through institutional mechanisms. This was something that partially happened in the second vignette: making novel use of existing data and knowledge and revisiting the professional roles of practitioners involved in emergency governance at the local level, made it possible to support one of the most fragile groups during the pandemic, namely elderly and disabled people.

The potential for critical thinking and knowledge based on the causal relationships among phenomena are an integral part of Keck's preparedness perspective, as reflected in a "shift in the reflection on preparedness from the short temporality of emergencies to the long temporality of ecologies" (2020, p. 177). This socio-ecological take on preparedness enriches its dominant understanding. Considered as an approach to disaster management mainly based on technical tools and strategies as simulations (designed to identify existing vulnerabilities), stockpiling and the use of sentinels. It aims at preserving the status quo without questioning the fact that defending the existing system as something that needs to be protected is not neutral, because it means reproducing the extant conditions that provoked the emergency (Collier, 2008; Lakoff, 2017). On the contrary, a cynegetic and vigilant approach to risk and disaster management, rooted in a "slow emergency" perspective, seems to have a strong transformative potential and might contribute to a democratic renovation of welfare systems, as we will articulate in next section.

4   What Kind of Preparedness Is Needed for Welfare?

We have until now attempted to bring together literatures and research traditions from different backgrounds to explore what knowledge is needed to support welfare policies in emergency situations. In this respect, the vignettes at the beginning of the paper laid the ground for our inquiry through the exemplification of the connections between welfare, knowledge and the visibilisation of social inequalities and vulnerabilities that emergencies usually produce and that, more specifically, Covid-19 emergency produced in Italy.

We highlighted that the knowledge infrastructure that supports welfare policies is less and less functional in recognizing, describing and making the phenomena at the origin of the social vulnerability of large groups of the population visible; this contributes to reproducing extant inequalities rather than eliminating them, due to a vicious circle between, on the one hand, the weakening of knowledge-building processes to support a preventive logic and the transformation of the determinants that lead to situations of social vulnerability; on the other hand the use of standardized informational bases, which provide abstract social actors, considered as individuals separated from their socio-economic and ecological contexts of life, that legitimize residual, sectorial and reparative social policies. The major consequences of this informational short-circuit strongly emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in the form of the unpreparedness of the welfare system, and large portions of the population found themselves at risk of survival not only because of the health risk, but also for the lack of welfare supports.

We reckon that the social emergency provided a strong point for developing a general rethinking of the welfare logics of action, and that we can consider it not for what it destroyed but rather for what it made visible and the form of social recomposition it can bring about (Revet & Langumier, 2015). With this in mind, we addressed some concepts developed in the sociology of disasters, that represent a fertile ground for addressing the link between knowledge and welfare system preparedness for emergencies and that can constitute some indications for future analysis and research about these issues.

First of all, the notion of "slow emergencies" is helpful in the attempt to overcome the short-term emergency logic that is encouraged by informative techno-structures oriented to fight uncertainty and complexity through standardization and managerial efficiency. In other words, we argue that it is necessary to go beyond the "humanitarian relief" approach (Fassin, 2010) according to which Emergency (with capital E) must be faced mainly through the availability and distribution of "emergency kits" (even in the form of extraordinary targeted policies). As Hudson puts it, this approach is paradoxical since "the values of the unsafe society displace those of the unequal society" (Hudson, 2003, p. 43). On the contrary, a slow emergency approach is aimed at building safe and secure context for social life, focusing its effort on the contrast to the structural and long-term factors that produce social inequalities and whose extreme consequences became visible only in extraordinary terms during the disasters.

Secondly, the dialogue on welfare between sociology of public action and sociology of disaster raises the issue of the potential for critically rethinking the causal relationships among phenomena. As far as knowledge is concerned, this will also mean changing the informational basis our knowledge is grounded on. It will imply going beyond the understanding we are used to but also relating it in a different way, considering cause-and-effect relationships and links from a different point of view. It means overcoming the reductionist and simplified models of reality which, precisely because of the epistemological foundations on which they rest, can only reproduce the problems, relationships, inequalities and fractures that capitalism has contributed to creating and reproducing as the only possible horizon (Fisher, 2009). A paradigm shift is thus needed to develop a new way of conceiving fragility and, at the same time, social protection. This shift will involve complicating the picture, rather than simplifying it, by adding voices, grammars, and vocabularies that can open up knowledge to unpredictable possibilities and images (de Leonardis, 1998), composing the unimaginable to build rights and wellbeing beyond the horizon of the predictable. In this perspective, the concept of preparedness suggests a movement in the direction of unhinging the logic of sectorialisation and towards a transversal logic of action, whereby multiple points of view and experience perspectives contribute to defining problems and responses, while remaining sensitive to socio-ecological interdependencies and

the values of eco-social justice (Gough, 2017). A knowledge that, although centered on people, transcends the interaction between human and non-human actors, bearers of "different visions and interests, who have interpersonal and intergroup relations within specific power and authority structures" (Lanzara, 2005, p. 54). An understanding of reality able to connect various sources, voices and formats of knowledge, with the capacity to assess their salience and systematize them within an informational infrastructure that can coordinate and hybridize heterogeneity as an element of strength rather than dissonance.

With regard to the issues at stake here, this raises the question of how to include people's — especially the most vulnerable — life experiences and lay knowledge in the decision-making processes; but also how to recognize and make visible social groups that are invisible to public institutions characterized by a tendency to categorize people and reduce their identity (as citizens who are bearers of rights) to single symptoms of disease (being ill, unemployed, poor, homeless and so on) based on their institutional competence (Barrault-Stella & Weill, 2018), and failing to recognize them as social persons.

A third element of interest has to do with the reconfiguration of vulnerability in the direction of care. In this respect, being ready and prepared for risks arising from catastrophic events does not exclusively stem from the quality and richness of the data and information collected, but from the links and cause/effect relationships that this information makes visible. From this perspective, welfare may be re-conceptualized by going beyond logics of cause-effect to explain the origin of social emergencies in terms of distinctions between autonomy/dependence, winners/losers, rights-holders/needy and so on, to instead assume the awareness that vulnerability and interdependency are part of everyone's life and connect people with the environment. Just as awareness of fragility is a shared condition that must go hand in hand with awareness of the inequalities it conceals.

And it is perhaps here that the perspective of preparedness could help us move a step further. Preparedness in this perspective may be channeled towards a logic of care, understood as a specific configuration of a social relationship, in which both carer and cared-for play an essential role in establishing and maintaining the care relationship (Noddings, 2015) and which is characterized by co-responsibility. A perspective that shifts the focus from the individual (an economic actor) to the interdependency relationship (Tronto, 2015), and towards a reconfiguration of the environment and who/what is part of it, meaning both humans and non-human as well as technology and devices that shape their relationships (Mol, 2008; Mol et al., 2010). This particular configuration of social relationships is economically, politically (and historically) conditioned and it conflicts with logics of measurement, profitability, time constraints, cost reduction, standardization, and economies of scale in multiple ways (Dowling, 2020, p. 38). "Substantively, care theorists change our perspective when they ask: what happens when we put care, rather than production, distribution, and the maintenance of its systems of power, at the center of social life?" (Tronto, 2015, p. 23). This does not mean that care should be the guiding principle informing all our behavior, or that we are positing caring as the solution to all woes. But it does mean assigning care a prominent place as a structural condition of our lives (Dowling, 2020, p. 206). Acknowledgement of the reciprocal dependence between the need for care and the integrity of the world we live in means revisiting the concept of collective responsibility by which welfare is ideally informed and which has become progressively weaker over time (Castel, 2009), starting from the neoliberal welfare turn. More generally, this speaks to the importance of reconnecting the logic of the economy with the need to care for society and the environment and not vice versa, a task that requires political action that acknowledges both old and new rights, and is adequately resourced through the availability

of basic goods and services (Collettivo per l'Economia Fondamentale, 2019).

Last, the fourth direction for research concerns the current confrontation of the welfare state with a multiplication of crisis or emergency situations that it cannot prevent, because they are connected to global processes (i.e., the climate change), although it has to face and manage their consequences. Even in countries with a strong tradition of welfare state, this is thus leading to the emergence of the above-mentioned 'humanitarian' logic (Fassin, 2010), different from the welfare one as it uses a language of suffering and compassion, instead of that of social justice and rights. It is an intervention only devoted to the population most affected by the disaster, and since it does not aim at modifying the status quo and the injustices that it produces (Fassin, 2010), it develops a policy of inequality. Moreover, it is characterized by a limited and ephemeral action that develops in the emergency, but it disappears right after it, leaving the previous condition completely unaffected. Investigating how these different logics of action will combine is then of great relevance, since we envisage the risk that the mechanism of institutional delegation to solidarity action shields government actors from the urge to rethink and radically reorganize the way in which social protection is constructed, essentially leaving part of the population with minimal or no access to social rights. However, drawing on collective social property to offer greater security via public and collective policies (Castel, 2004), i.e., on a strong and wide welfare state, is the only possibility to stand ready and adequately prepared for the next catastrophe or even for the current one. In this respect, a prepared welfare is the one that takes shape in terms of access to social rights and the construction of public action tools that work with knowledge deriving from the interdependences that are defined by the peoples' daily lives, and that recognizes the dignity and the rights of all persons, starting from everyone's right to give and receive care.

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Davide Caselli – Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy)

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7305-7436

☑ https://www.unimib.it/davide-caselli

Davide Caselli is post-doc researcher at University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy). His work is focused on expertise, social policy and financialization. He is member of the Foundational Economy Collective (https://foundationaleconomy.com) and the Sui Generis Research Lab (http://laboratoriosuigeneris.altervista.org/chi-siamo/).

Barbara Giullari – Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna (Italy)

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6137-7598

✉ barbara.giullari@unibo.it; ☑ https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/barbara.giullari

Barbara Giullari (Ph.D. Sociology and Social Policy) is Associate Professor of Economic Sociology at the Department of Sociology and Business Law of the University of Bologna (Italy) where she teaches "Local Social Planning" and "Labour and Care Regime". Her main research interests are related to transformations of work and employment trajectories, social work, transformations of welfare systems and local social planning, knowledge and public action, educational policies development.

Carlotta Mozzana – Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy)

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2217-2906

☑ https://www.unimib.it/carlotta-mozzana

Carlotta Mozzana is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy). Her main research interests include the role of knowledge in decision making processes, the transformation of public action, the forms of social vulnerability and the socio-institutional changes of welfare.