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Pierpaolo Donati

# **FAMILY POLICY: A RELATIONAL APPROACH**



SOCIOLOGIA,  
CAMBIAMENTO  
E POLITICA SOCIALE

*Collana diretta da*  
**Pierpaolo Donati**

**FRANCOANGELI**

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Pierpaolo Donati

**FAMILY POLICY:  
A RELATIONAL APPROACH**

**FRANCOANGELI**

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*To the young people who want to know*





# *Introduction*

## *Family policy from a “differential” viewpoint*

### **1. The issues and the goal of the book**

The purpose of this book is to propose a new way of looking at the family and family policy in the context of a society that is in the process of globalisation. In the light of this objective, it aims above all at challenging the way in which family public policy is understood and practiced in Western nations today. It sets out to highlight positive aspects as well as points where crises have arisen from the contradictions and shortcomings of current public policy on the family. Empirical research has in fact shown that family policies today are involved in a number of vicious cycles that generate more problems than they solve and in some cases lead to total policy failure, if the original intent of the policy is taken into account. As a secondary aim, the work will present alternatives to the ways in which the family is considered and treated today. And so our purpose is to open a conversation among policy makers, social theorists and citizens, now using very different terms, challenging some of the current orthodoxies of public policy. The ultimate goal is that family find a way to be known and treated as the resource for society it has always been and remains. The family is not simply a refuge from society, nor a burden. Understanding what family *is* crucial to the development of civil society. The arguments presented here are based primarily on empirical research, although I realize that they are not presented in details and full length (it would take a lot of space reporting on hundreds of researches done at the international level, as shown in a book which I have edited recently: Donati ed. 2012). I must recognize that the selection of the relevant researches may depend upon the most general approach adopted by the observer. As to me, I have no problem in recognizing that the approach underlying this text is what is called critical and relational realism. I define the family as a social relation, and not simply as an aggregate of people. From the viewpoint of relational realism, the family is an emergent effect, with its powers and qualities. I realize that many scholars do not share these views. They hold that

the position taken here could be discriminatory against different forms of families, in particular one parent families and homosexual families. This criticism, I believe, misunderstands my position. I do not intend to support any form of discrimination. I recognize the dignity of any human person irrespective of his/her sexual orientation, and I share the need for the implementation of human rights, in particular the social equality between men and women. What I wish to avoid is the conflation between the logic of distinction and the logic of discrimination and oppression. Discrimination is to treat unequally what/whom is equal. But in case social relations are different in their qualities and powers, then they have to be treated differently (logic of distinction). The logic of distinction is progressive, the logic of discrimination is regressive. That is why I assume the former and refuse the latter.

The originality of this volume rests in its analysis of the present situation, its challenge to public policy and its presentation of some alternatives to begin this conversation. It seeks to review the relations of the family and public policy and summarize current research on families and on policy from a phenomenological perspective. The viewpoint is 'differential, that is it highlights what makes a difference. Approaching these data *from the family's point of view*<sup>1</sup>, it operates through employing distinctions, highlighting the differences, that are hidden in the field observed, often unexpressed in the face of a colonizing assumption that the family is the mere product of society.

I begin with the following questions: What makes a group of individuals a family? What is it about a family that makes it a family compared with another social form that is not a family? What makes a social policy "family friendly" compared with a social policy that is not? I know that much of public policy is deemed family policy when in reality it does not concern the family, or contains serious ambiguities. These ambiguities take place for two reasons: 1) First of all, the assumed goal may not be to value or even to protect the family, but rather to serve other purposes; for example, to increase the proportion of working women, to promote equality between men and women, to fight poverty, to maintain the birth rate, etc. Obviously these objectives are just and legitimate. However, they do not automatically promote the family as such. 2) Secondly, quite often the practical outcomes of

<sup>1</sup> It must be stressed since the beginning that in the field of sociology, most studies on the family see it as a mere product of society, i.e. as a social construction wholly dependent upon the societal factors which impinge upon it. This is certainly true for the so-called 'classics' (K. Marx, E. Durkheim, M. Weber), but applies to most modern and contemporary sociologists too. The present 'differential' point of view draws the distinctions of what sociologically constitutes a family not only by observing the family from its environment, but also and mainly by looking at what emerges from within the primary social relations that make a family as an expression of its life-worlds, i.e. of people's lived experiences (*Lebenswelt*).

such policies on family relationships are more negative than positive, in so far as these policies promote individualistic behaviour to the detriment of family solidarity. And this results in the increasing breakdown, conflict and fragmentation of family relations.

The same misunderstandings are seen when people attempt to define the family. Many people say that they want to promote the family, but the definition they give is vague, inexact, and ever more neutral (neutral as regards quality) to the point that the family is eventually confused with any other type of primary group of daily coexistence in which at least one adult takes care of another person (often a minor, but in other circumstances another adult). Today it is evident in the Western world that many conceptions of family have been assimilated into generic relationships of care.

In this book, I want to highlight the issue of family policies, *taken from the differential viewpoint of the family*. This differential point of view is precisely the point of view that continually reintroduces the family/non-family distinction in the definition of the family and in the evaluation of social policies. This means: 1) that the target of social policies must be explicit (not implicit) and direct (not indirect) in terms of what is a *proprium* of the family *as such* (the rights and duties, roles, relationships, freedoms and responsibilities of those involved in family relationships); 2) that legislation and the outcomes of policy interventions must be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they have “produced family”, or, in other words, whether the laws and specific measures adopted have produced more family or less family.

In this sense it differs from most of the public debate (and research) on these issues, which tends to be mainly descriptive, or at least lacks a proper reflexivity. To be reflexive on family policy issues means to re-introduce the family/non-family distinction into what has emerged (the outcomes) from previous interventions. For instance, it is certainly a good thing to increase the participation of women to the labour market, in order to prevent their poverty, but how do we evaluate the resulting data that we now have a higher percentage of women who are single mothers instead of having more stable couples? It is certainly a good thing to give a benefit to a single mother to raise her child, but what do we do when we realize that this benefit is being used by her partner, who will not marry her since the benefit will be lost when they marry? Thus one outcome is that the partner does not take his responsibility with the woman and with their child. It is certainly a good thing to promote the adoption of children when they are abandoned or find themselves with people who are completely unable to raise them, but what would we say when we realize that in some places an increasing percentage of adoptions fail, due to the rejection of the family by the adopted child or when

we find that many adopted children in some contexts tend not to marry? What then needs to be developed in adoption policies and services to strengthen what families, acting as families, can contribute to the needs of these children? Of course, I am not saying that older policies must be terminated, but that in each case we have to change the way they are pursued in order to produce *more family* instead of the less family that now seems to have resulted.

The arguments presented here are based primarily on empirical researches, although I realize that the latter are not discussed in details (an extensive analysis of the international literature is summarized in Donati ed. 2012). Although I must recognize that the selection of these researches may depend upon cultural orientations, nevertheless, in my opinion, the ones quoted in the book are grounded in reality, not in ideology. As a matter of fact, the sociological approach adopted here is in line with the paradigm called critical and relational realism. The reader may share or not – or only partially – my definition of the family, this is perfectly understandable. What I want to emphasize is the gist of my sociological argument, which defines the family as a *sui generis* social relation, and not simply as an aggregate of people. All social relations have specific properties and qualities, and more so in the case of the family. I am not advocating that there is only ‘one model’ of the family, as the structural-functional (Parsonian) theory has claimed. There is ‘no standard model’ for the family, since the family is an emergent relational phenomenon. Certainly we can observe many different configurations, including one parent, reconstituted and colored families. But the family, when defined from the viewpoint of public policy, has to meet the expectations of public institutions and political systems, and therefore we need to know what kind of rights and obligations people take in living together.

As we all know, there is much debate as to what concerns couples and families of the same sex. I believe that the people supporting or living in these forms have and must enjoy the same human rights as any other human person. In my work I claim that every human person is entitled to a full recognition of the human dignity irrespective of his/her sexual orientations. No question about the moral, legal and social equality between men and women. But, on the other hand, we must pay attention to the peculiarities of every relational configuration of the family. To say that there are different forms means to recognize the *sui generis* qualities and properties of each form. A “differential approach” is not a discriminatory approach, just the opposite is true. When I say that, for policy reasons, it is necessary to distinguish between different family forms, this statement must be interpreted in the sense that social and public policies should help families according to their own structure, which is not to say that there should be some form of discrimination. Discrimination is

where the equals are treated in an unequal way. But families are not 'equal' in their needs and their contributions to society, so welfare measures should be designed according to their different needs which reflect, to a great extent, their structure. My differential perspective emphasizes the need to observe the family and family policies from the point of families themselves, and of their relational networks in their everyday life-worlds. Actually, much of the present-day commentary on the family comes from the point of view of the state or the market. Reflecting these primary orientations, it inevitably would show little awareness of unintended consequences of public policies on family life itself.

## **2. A critical perspective on the current approaches to family policies**

The differential perspective, that I want to propose here for sociological analysis and for social policy development, is a response to the need to find innovations to replace current approaches. Many are no longer appropriate responses to current family phenomena or have failed outright. In the new global context families must continually re-calibrate their responses to potential displacements of their functions.

Using public education as an example, when there are differences between family and school culture, children risk failure and families risk disruption in their own educational functions. Some parents effectively adapt to the education process by finding ways to influence schooling and the education of their children. Some may remove their children from public provision in a variety of ways. The education institution fails also when parents are not even implicit partners in its processes. Research has continually and robustly confirmed that parent involvement in the education process is one of the chief components of educational effectiveness and student success (Subotnik & Walberg 2006; Walberg, 1984). Schools can experience success with children when they consciously develop real partnerships with parents (Constable & Walberg 2009; Paik & Walberg 2007). The example of the transaction of the family with the social institution of education could be extended to every other societal institution, whether health care, work, justice and the courts, welfare and its transaction with families. In many places a major part of the social worker's role is to work between the processes of a given social institution and a vulnerable family's prospective involvement in these processes, so that the transaction is individualized and effective for the institution and its clientele (Constable & Lee 2004, 218-248).

Our historical context is the following. Throughout the 20th century, the family was the object of attention and discussion primarily from the point of view of the state. The family was considered relevant as a cell of public order and as a basic form of political control. Even today many people still think that the family and public, family policy should be approached in this way. They emphasize the fact that if the family has value it is because it ensures social order. It is therefore in this light that the family must be the object of “public” policies. But this way of looking at the family and of creating family public policy has become more and more obsolete for a number of reasons that are too complex to comment on in this introduction.

Fundamentally, the processes of modernization have eroded the family as the cell through which public order is reproduced. In countries with something similar to American and European social policies, the family is now precisely the place in which all the shortcomings of an advanced capitalist society are manifested. The ‘solutions’ to family problems, which are developed on the basis of these approaches, are no longer characterized by stability and conformity to an order designed by a political-administrative system. With this, we do not mean to support the thesis – as someone could misinterpret us as claiming – that the family, in so far as it is the sphere of the private, is “an island which the legal system of the state must only barely touch” (as a famous Italian jurist once said). Recognizing that the family is a sphere of the private does not mean affirming that it must be left to complete self-determination. The family is certainly a private sphere but the meaning of the family as private is not that it is an island in a stormy sea or an oasis in a heartless world. The “private” family is connected to the public sphere in every way. Between the two worlds, there is a constant and dynamic interdependence. In any case, the meaning of the family as private is no longer the older, typical idea that existed in a traditional or a modern society, when family life was largely infused with common values and a widespread sense of belonging to a community. With the crisis of the nation-state, with the evaporation of the myths of modern culture and with the coming of globalisation, the meaning of what is “private” – privacy itself – is redefined in terms of what happens in the public sphere, where mass consumption and the collective imagination of the mass media dominate. At the end of the 20th century, the “private” becomes a relationship of discretionary boundaries, of openness and closure with an external world that is as invasive and pervasive as it proclaims to be liberal and permissive.

In the transitions that took place between the 20th and 21st century, the family and family public policy have come to be observed from another point of view. This is not the state’s perspective, but nevertheless one which is at

the same time deeply intertwined with the state, within today's dominant systems that we will call *lib/lab* (see ch. 1) (Donati 2000a). While *lib/lab* systems are different in their internal logic, they become pragmatically similar as their policy and program responses oscillate to dysfunctional extremes in their search for ever-elusive "subjects", who can take responsibility. These are the very families and members of families, which the systems themselves have disqualified from the game. This approach presently views the family almost exclusively from the point of view of the needs of the market, while leaving the protection of the family to individuals (and not to the rights and duties of the relations which make up the family). The family comes to be defined and considered essentially from the point of view of the demands of work, production and consumption. Thus the family is defined as supporting a right of an individual to his or her privacy. At present, the strongest tendencies are in the direction of the market as an arbiter of social action. These tendencies are evident in the United States as well as in the European Union (although with different patterns). They are evident in other areas of the world as well, even though they are actualised in different ways according to the national and regional contexts. In this defining context family public policy essentially comes to be identified with a policy of equal opportunities for men and women to participate in the labour market, and to enjoy the fruits of their work. This is a very different approach from approaching crucial social realities from the point of view of the state and public order.

In effect, the family today is now in the hands of the logic of the market. Family relations are represented as dimensions of mere affection and of daily care, and are evaluated and exchanged for the value that they have in relation to the market. The result of this process is that the family comes to be defined as a gender-neutral cohabitation of people who take care of one another. And so family loses its own specific nature. And so also, family public policy loses its specific nature and is reduced to policies that promote equal opportunities between men and women and for the social inclusion of all people – basically that of children and the most vulnerable – in the system of social guarantees.

In the face of this turn of history, my *differential* point of view highlights the social dilemmas that have resulted. The crucial questions, which this book hopes to address, can be summed up by concerns for the increasingly widespread distress, stemming from the societal displacement of what family life actually is for those who live it. Family life is not valued by society for what it really means for the persons who risk their existential destiny in it. Rather it is considered as an emotional compensation in a world that is alienated and co-modified.

The differential perspective looks at things in another way. This view sees the family and its needs from the perspective of the everyday life-worlds (*Lebenswelt*) of families, not the perspective of the state or the market. It adopts a vision that is first of all cultural, in that it observes and evaluates the social world from the point of view of the social and human capital that is found in family networks and in the associational orbits, which exist in them and around them. This social capital is to be used for human civil development. By human civil development, or civilization, we mean the recognition of human rights that were previously acknowledged and or implemented only to a small or limited extent. In the case of the family such rights include the right to see the family recognized and supported as a relational good with social functions in the public sphere. The point of view that I call differential here does not intend to deny the importance of the state (or, in more general terms, the political-administrative system) or of the market. I am well aware of the fact that these social systems (or spheres of justice) have their specific importance and corresponding functions. However I am saying something else. I am saying that the family and family public policy have their own *sui generis* viewpoint. This viewpoint, precisely because it is specific and original, resists tendencies for the state or market to deal with the family in ways that amount to subordination, exploitation, colonization, bureaucratisation or co-modification.

This differential point of view, therefore, offers a perspective on family public policy, which supports alternative courses of action relative to those defined by the state or by the market.

### **3. The alternatives put forward by my point of view**

And so with this perspective there is an inherent distinction between what is a family and what is a non-family. The implicit distinction continually and systematically becomes a part of the observations and actions that are needed to define a policy, which is 'family friendly'. No longer treating the family as morally indifferent, and no longer identifying family public policy from the point of view of the market or the state, it is potentially able to offer alternatives to current processes. The differential point of view first of all recognizes once again the family as a "*fait social total*", involving all dimensions of life, enduring in spite of whatever profound and extensive changes it may undergo. Secondly, the objectives and the results of family policies would be redefined and evaluated in relation to their negative and positive effects on the family's way of being and acting as a family.



Obviously, the change proposed here is only just beginning to evolve, since the differential point of view has up to now been largely absent, denied or removed from public culture, and continues to be so. Apparently, highly modernized societies lose in a radical way the capacity to distinguish between the family and the non-family (other primary groups). They seem to refuse *a priori* to make this distinction. They are somehow immunized against relationships. But it is precisely in this underlying *modus vivendi*, this culture, this systemic construction (of non-distinction), where these societies encounter serious hardships and failures. And these hardships and failures stimulate the search for a new relational approach to the family. Those who propose the differential point of view therefore are making a bet on the future. The bet is that a life, which is more civil and human, can be achieved only when we operate on the basis of new dynamic balances within a framework of human ecology (Archer 2000). The family would be considered as a specific social relationship that unavoidably has to carry out a three-fold mediation between the individual and society, between nature and culture and between the private and the public.

In order to understand the differential point of view fully, it is necessary to put it in the framework of “relational sociology” (the sociology of relations). This type of sociology can be defined as a pure and applied social science that sees social distinctions and therefore social differences, not in terms of oppositions, separations or irreversible evolutionary phases, but rather in terms of relationships between terms that have their own qualities, identities and properties, which generate emergent effects (Archer 1995). Family relationships are of such a nature. Comprising the emerging effects of the individual and relational qualities of people, the family becomes in itself a certain type of social relationship that is unique, original and primary. It has meanings and functions that have no functional equivalent. Its meanings, functions and relationships are unsubstitutable by other types of relationships, whether actually existing or even envisioned as potential substitutes.

#### **4. The common thread of the book**

The reader may ask himself if this volume has a common thread that runs through it, a thread that not only is treated as a foundation in the various chapters, but also presents an original perspective for international debate. The common thread of this volume outlines the reasons why the family cannot be neutralized, or rendered indifferent – or, we might say “indifferent” – as if it should not make any difference in the public realm. As a

consequence, my proposal is for a kind of public policy that provides the family with a new status as a social subject, a citizen.

I am aware of the challenge and the enormous difficulty that developing this concept into a prospective criterion for policy brings with it. The notion of the family as social subject does not mean a return to the past. Rather it outlines possibilities for the future, based on rational consideration and the analysis of social realities. Clearly the dominant views in the West are profound scepticism and confusion about the fate of the family. I hope that these “differential” theories may stimulate new directions in knowledge, research and action. This hope would need to be founded on evaluation from the point of view of an impartial social science.

I would like to explain this scientific foundation in the last part of this introduction, in order to articulate further the thesis of the book. The majority of the scholars in all disciplines assume that the family is subject to processes of transformation that change it in two main directions. The first direction can be called de-institutionalisation (or deregulation or privatisation). The second direction is that of the “individualisation of individuals” (or “subjectivisation” of the rights and behaviours of self-referent individuals). Most scholars maintain that family relationships change as a consequence of these inevitable societal processes. They refer to the breakdown of the family, to a new “order from noise,” to the fluctuation and chaos of familial relationships, to the emergence of “new families”, that is single parent families as voluntary choices, to family-types created or “blended” when two one-parent families join together<sup>2</sup>, whether cohabitation without marriage or so-called ‘families-of-choice’, etc., and finally to same sex marriages. All of these forms tend to erode the differences between family and various other forms of primary social groups. All of these changes reflect precisely the process of becoming in-different that this present volume intends to explore and present for discussion. Many who have contributed to this discussion doubt that these processes could be understood in a socio-cultural sense as higher levels of civilization. Rather, they believe that these phenomena must be understood mostly as an expression of regressive tendencies of the modernisation in the West. What sociological foundation could sustain the alternative “differential” perspective? The general arguments that I can propose, in synthesis, are of two types. In the first place, I can easily observe that the de-institutionalisation of

<sup>2</sup> In the US, over half the people who get divorced remarry within four and a half years (data of the year 2010). In a new “blended family” the difficulty is getting it to blend. Paradoxically it can best be “blended” when the connectedness of the two original family structures, including lost members, achieves some real recognition in the new blend and in its acknowledged history (Constable & Lee, 2004, 206).

the family and the individualisation of individuals have been greatly overestimated. On the whole, they represent only one side of the reality. Actually all societies, even the most modern ones, are based on a complex of social expectations. According to these expectations family relationships should accomplish societal tasks. And these tasks must become institutionalised or at least be brought closely in line with the needs of the public institutions, which deal with the family, such as the school system, the judiciary system, the political-administrative system, and so on. The individualisation of individuals certainly takes place, but this does not mean that family relationships become less important to most people. Quite the contrary. People are becoming more and more aware of the essential importance of the relationships and the networks of relationships that make up what we call primary and secondary social capital for human development in society, i.e. relations of trust, cooperation and reciprocity in primary social networks and in voluntary associations (Donati 2003b). Without this relational social capital, there would be no human development, no political democracy, no economic growth, and no flourishing civil society. Those who speak only of the de-institutionalisation of the family and of the individualisation of individuals do a disservice to science and to social action, because they ignore relevant phenomena and hide the other side of the coin.

In the second place, if I were to make a table of the possibilities for family life (typology of family forms), what I could see there is a possible configuration that modern family policies have tended to obscure, and which reflexive modernization<sup>3</sup> tends to make even problematic, but which in the future could take on increased meaning, becoming more important for possible future development. I am referring to the fact that the present configurations of family policies support three types of family patterns (those described in the cells A, B, C below in the fig. 1), while they systemically dismiss a cell of the table (D), which remains latent.

If we compare two criteria, the institutional definition of family (high or low) and the value attributed to family relations as such (high or low), we find four family types that can be considered in relation to the dominant direction of society.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to the theory by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994), which I have criticized elsewhere (Donati 2010).