UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Comparative Analysis of Welfare Systems

2627-1-F8702N004-F8702N00402

Learning objectives

Knowledge and Understanding (D1)

The course provides theoretical and methodological tools for analysing welfare regimes and European models of capitalism, with a specific focus on sociological and comparative political economy perspectives. Participants will acquire fundamental knowledge of social and labour policies, with a special emphasis on the Italian context and emerging social risks.

Applied Knowledge and Understanding (D2)

Participants will be able to critically use the concepts and theories learned to interpret empirical data related to different welfare regimes and models of capitalism in Western Europe. They will also be able to compare policy approaches and understand the characteristics of institutional and socio-economic contexts from a comparative perspective.

Independent Judgment (D3)

The course aims to develop students' ability to make independent assessments of institutional, economic and social transformations. Particular attention is devoted to critically analysing welfare and labour policies, emerging social risks, and the dynamics of inequality reproduction.

Communication Skills (D4)

Through individual presentations and group discussions, the course strengthens the ability to clearly present complex concepts, argue coherently, and use sociological language appropriately and effectively.

Learning Skills (D5)

The course lays solid foundations for further study, fostering autonomous learning and the ability to critically

navigate the scientific literature, including from an international and comparative perspective.

Contents

The course explores European welfare regimes as embedded within contemporary capitalism, focusing both on their diversity and on the processes of convergence and divergence across countries. It addresses the complex relationship between social cohesion and economic competitiveness, the role of agency and institutional context, and analyses the Nordic model, the Continental regime, the Anglo-Saxon system, and Mediterranean capitalism. It also investigates the main socio-economic transformations currently affecting European countries, the challenges facing welfare systems, emerging social risks, and the policies developed to protect citizens, with particular attention to the Italian case.

Detailed program

The first part of the course introduces the key concepts for studying European welfare regimes and contemporary capitalism. A comparative perspective is adopted to examine the regulatory structure and functioning of different policy arenas. The course investigates how various European institutional settings promote specific combinations of social cohesion and economic competitiveness. It also explores how welfare policies affect not only citizens' well-being but also countries' economic capacity and competitiveness. The role of agency — the capacity of social, economic, and political actors to promote change - and of institutional context - the structures and rules governing actor interaction — is also addressed.
The second part of the course examines different approaches to welfare adopted across European countries, with a focus on:
• the Nordic model, marked by high levels of social protection and universal policies;
• the Continental regime, which emphasises inclusion but is also challenged by new forms of dualisation;
• the Anglo-Saxon system, known for its more liberal approach;
• and Mediterranean capitalism, with its specific features such as the centrality of the family in welfare provision.
The third part of the course explores the major socio-economic changes currently affecting European countries and discusses how both new and traditional social risks - linked to demographic shifts, technological innovation, and labour market precariousness - are impacting welfare systems. Finally, the course analyses the policies adopted in different countries to address these challenges, with a specific focus on Italy. The reforms aimed at enhancing social protection, strategies to promote inclusion and equity, and initiatives designed to support economic competitiveness within a sustainable welfare framework are discussed in depth.

Prerequisites

None

Teaching methods

The teaching is composed of a lecture-based component (60%), delivered in an interactive format, and a participatory component (40%), which includes guided discussions, practical exercises, group work, readings, and presentations. Classes are held in person for 70% of the course and online in synchronous mode for the remaining

30%.

Assessment methods

Final assessment consists of a written exam with 4 open-ended essay questions based on the two compulsory texts. Duration: 90 minutes.
Evaluation criteria include:
• Understanding of content (DdD 1–2)
• Independent reasoning (DdD 3)
• Written/oral communication skills (DdD 4)
• Ability to link theory and empirical data (DdD 5)

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Required Readings
• Ranci, C., Pavolini, E. (2024) Le politiche di welfare, Bologna: Il Mulino (new edition)
• Burroni, L. (2016) Capitalismi a confronto, Bologna: Il Mulino
Additional books or scientific articles on topics of interest may be agreed upon with the instructor.

Sustainable Development Goals

NO POVERTY | GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING | GENDER EQUALITY | DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS