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**Local differences and social inequalities in access to childcare options.
A comparison between and within Italy and France.**

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In the last decades one observes a growing scientific emphasis on the relevance of the first years of life for the cognitive, social and emotional development, and a consequent widening of the definition of children's needs. Accordingly, the investment of parents in their children's early years is also increasing, along with the demand concerning the quality level and educative contents of childcare.

Nevertheless, parents' orientations concerning childcare options are severely constrained by the institutional configuration of policies and services. In particular, the supply-demand gap for early childcare services and the specific targeting of monetary support, pre-structure the childcare options of parents in most European countries. The span of childcare policies and services varies widely not only among countries, due to different welfare developments and settings, but also among local contexts, because the implementation of these policies and services is mainly local, even in centralised countries. This means that the local institutional configuration strongly constraints the parents options regarding childcare. By doing so, then, it indirectly influences other areas of individual and family life, such as the participation to the labour market of the parents and the gender contract between them, as well as their opportunities to participate in the life of their neighbourhood institutions (such as day-care centres) and of the social networks that develop around them.

Based on a comparative study between Italy and France, the paper aims at highlighting how the combination of national and local features of the welfare mix and of the services' supply produce a span of options for parents which is specific of each local context. This creates the conditions for different types of social inequalities (in accessing the services, etc.) to be reproduced locally. The analysis of four local case studies, two municipalities in Italy (North/South) and two municipalities in France (Paris agglomeration/Bretagne) will allow to underline both the differences between the two countries and between local contexts within each of the country.

Introduction

In the last years, one observes increasing attention in social sciences towards childhood (Zelizer, 1985; Qvortrup, 1995; James *et al*, 2000; Corsaro, 2003). More specifically, childcare emerges as a privileged object of study (Jenson, Sineau, 1998; Letablier, 1998; Waldfogel, 2001; Leprince, 2003; Moss, 2003). This is true because of its implications with the ongoing changes in the socio-demographic trends (decline of the birth-rate and aging of the population); the transformations in the labour market; the changing strategies of reconciling family and professional life; the consequent growth of care needs; the reforms of welfare systems and the growing decentralization of policies and externalization of services. The European Union has fixed specific targets for the increase of coverage rates of early childcare and pre-school services, as a support of the increase of women activity rates (Lisbon strategy).

Still, early childcare provision is not only a means to reconcile family and work. Good quality childcare services can help contrast social inequalities and social fragmentation in various ways. As it is shown by a vast psychological literature, the motivational and cognitive resources begin to accumulate already in preschool age, when the fundamental learning abilities develop with the maximum intensity¹. Several research results show that the access to care services of high pedagogy quality partly neutralizes the irregular distribution of the cultural resources among the families, and increases equal opportunities among children, by exposing them to different relations and *stimuli* than the family ones. (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, 2000; OECD 2001; Waldfogel, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 2002).

Moreover, one observes a recently growing attention about the opening of childcare services to the territory they belong to, that is to say their neighbourhood. This goes parallel with the trend towards the development of a less “looking after” and more pre-educational and pedagogical approach, as well as the opening to a wider participation of the parents. This opening towards the neighbourhood generally passes through special events such as summer parties, or through *parenthood support* initiatives², which often involve the *crèche* garden. The latter carries out a function of physical bridge between the structure, generally closed to strangers because of safety reasons, and the

¹ This aspect is particularly remarkable because the recovery programs are generally little effective and the prevention of inequalities is the most efficient solution.

² This broad term encompasses all those activities aiming at supporting families in their parental responsibilities and include: organized spaces where adults and children can spend time with educators; meetings with experts; extended face-to-face meetings parents-*crèche* staff; occasions to help young families socialize, such as *crèche* parties, etc. The aim is to prevent the development of family and social problems in a society where horizontal ties are increasingly narrowing (Mingione *et al*, 2003).

surroundings (Wenger, 1998). There is increasing interest on the potentiality of these experiences to promote social cohesion at the very local level, by helping the socialisation also of adults (parents and service workers). In particular, services provided in partnership by the public and the third sector are often characterised by features of participation and social integration, and foster integrating projects as self-help, time-banks, etc. Specific projects are often aimed at the social integration of immigrant children and adults.

Yet, most European welfare states, which have been built on the then dominant male breadwinner model, are not designed in order to deal with the new – deeply gendered – social needs emerging from the major changes ongoing within the family and within the labour market (Bonoli, 2004). In fact, early childcare services are severely lacking in Europe, with the exception of Scandinavian countries. In particular, continental conservative welfare states seem to be facing hard difficulties in developing reforms in order to answer to the new social risks (Palier, 2006). In general terms, the gap between demand and supply favours the reproduction of social and territorial inequalities in the patterns of access to childcare services. Moreover, the reforms that are being developed in some EU countries seem not to decrease such inequalities (see § 1.4).

The paper deals with the social implications of local differences in the provision and organization of childcare services in two European countries, France and Italy, with two different corporatist welfare systems and with a partly different development of childcare policies³. This comparison is particularly interesting due to the opposite combination of relatively high birth rate with high female participation to the labour market in France, and low birth rate and low women activity in Italy (the latter especially in the Southern Regions).

The paper is organised in three parts. In the first part, I briefly present the childcare systems in the two countries, along with some recent relevant reforms. The second part analyses how the impact of common policies and reforms is specific to each local context, and how differences *within* each country can be even wider than the differences *between* countries. In the last part some elements of conclusion are drawn.

³ This paper is based on the fieldwork carried out for my PhD thesis, articulated on the national and local level, including secondary analysis of quantitative data, analysis of normative tools, interviews to experts, policy makers, civil servants, public, for profit and third sector services' managers and workers, and 83 parents of children of 3 years of age (about 20 interviews in each local case study).

1. France and Italy: two different childcare systems within two welfare models.

The French and the Italian welfare states have both corporatist origins (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1997), and in both systems the family is charged with relevant responsibilities, but with a totally different degree of public support, which has been defined as active as opposed to passive subsidiarity (Kazepov, 2001).

Although it is possible to observe a few common steps in the development of childhood policies and childcare services in the two countries, family policies and childcare services are much more developed in France than in Italy.

In order to contrast a birth decline that was already becoming evident in France, ever since the 19th century a remarkable set of family support measures were introduced in this country. In the following decades, new measures have been added to those pre-existing, widening the overall panorama and reaffirming the pre-existing family-oriented system (Leridon, 1995) The history of French family policies shows a continuous oscillation between familialism and republican individualism (Comaille, Martin, 1998), the country has a generous and rather organic system of family policies.

On the contrary, in Italy the first and only explicit and organic attempt to build a system of family support was held during the fascist period (1925-1943; Saraceno, 1998). Despite the deep transformations intervened over the last decades, in Italy family and childhood policies remain a marginal and confused sector, where reforms have been added to a limited set of pre-existing measures, never coming to a coherent and generous system. As other areas of social policy (e.g. social assistance), early childhood policies do not define citizenship rights: the childcare services remain, in fact, “individual demand” services, and the steadily increasing demand continues to be largely unsatisfied. Besides, serious territorial differences continue to be reproduced, and areas of excellence (particularly, but not only, in the central regions) exist side by side with very weak contexts (especially in the South of the country).

More specifically, as far as childcare services are concerned, in both countries the first such structures have been developed at the end of the 18th century, and were specifically targeted to abandoned children. Throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century, the main aim of such structures was to allow women with young children to keep working in the developing industrial sector; services had no pedagogy content, but rather a hygienist approach.

It was only in the Seventies that attention was mainly devoted to the contents and quality of childcare. In both countries this was a decade of deep reform of both the pedagogical approaches

and quantitative increase of childcare services. The supply of traditional services was enlarged, whereas the so-called integrative services (see note 2) began to appear, as long as a new attention to the child's development was applied.

In the Nineties the UN Declaration of Children's Rights (1989) gave new impulsion to the debate on children's welfare; childcare services were indirectly and marginally concerned by this reforming wave.

Finally, the turning of the new century was rather influenced by the EU Lisbon strategy about the widening of reconciliation policies in order to increase the activity rates of member countries.

The reforms carried out in these subsequent phases shaped two rather different sets of family policies. In the following paragraphs we will briefly compare the situation in the two countries at the national level in relation to income support measures for families with young children, early childcare provision quantity and diversification, cost of childcare services, trends in the evolution of the childcare provision. This will be useful as a framework for the following analysis of the local differences.

1.1. Income support for households with young children

If we directly compare the single measures that compose the welfare provision for families with young children in the two countries, each one of the French measures shows a higher degree of inclusiveness and of institutionalisation than the eventually corresponding Italian one (see Table 1.). A birth bonus is paid in France from January 2004 to families with an income under a certain threshold, as a contribution to the initial expenses that a birth involves. In Italy there has been only a sporadic experiment (lasted one year, introduced through a yearly budget law), limited to the second child of UE mothers resident in Italy. Presented as a stimulus to the birth-rate, it has implied a generic disbursement of funds, so much more useless as it was not inserted in a wider project of family support. Similarly, a birth bonus for the first child was paid over the year 2005.

The family allowances are generous and universalistic in France (*Allocations Familiales*), while the Italian *Assegni al Nucleo Familiare* are economically limited and conditioned to the composition and the family income, and to the position achieved on the labour market by the household reference person.

A specific situation like the lone parents with low income finds in France a specific answer at the national level. This also happens because of the diffusion of the phenomenon, wider than in Italy, where no specific measure is dedicated to the single parent households, and where not even a general measure of last resort like the French RMI exists. The support of these households depends,

therefore, on the extended family, except for some local measures of income support, not equally present on the territory and however conditioned by severe budget constraints.

Regarding the generosity of income support, a family with two children, of 4 and 2 years of age, and a gross annual income of 23.300€ (around 1,5 SMIC) receives in Italy every month 111,55€ of *Assegni al Nucleo Familiare* (see table 1.). The same family receives in France a total of 274,25€ (*Allocations Familiales + Apje*⁴), more than the double. If the two children are both younger than three, the total paid in France reaches 435,91€, while it rests unchanged in Italy.

Table 1. Main income support measures for families with children <3 in Italy and France.		
Income support measures	France	Italy
Birth bonus	<i>Prime à la naissance</i> (since January 2004) 808,31€ <i>una tantum</i> . means tested.	<i>Bonus for the second born child</i> 1.000€ <i>una tantum</i> (only paid between 12/2003 and 12/2004, not means-tested). <i>Bonus for the first born child</i> 1.000€ <i>una tantum</i> (only paid in 2005, not means-tested).
Family allowances	<i>Allocations familiales</i> for all families with two or more children at charge	<i>Assegni familiari</i> means tested and addressed only to dependent workers, unemployed on benefit, retired dependent workers.
	<i>Apje</i> <i>Allocation de base Paje</i> paid for every child until the age of 3; means tested	– only very low income households with at least 3 children at charge get a specific income support .
Income support for lone parents	<i>API</i> Income support for at least 1 year + housing support	– No specific measure, eventual priority access to local income support schemes.

1.2. Availability and diversification of the supply

Although the French early childcare system as a whole appears as much more developed in comparison to the Italian one, in both countries the relative majority (more than 40%) of children <3 is exclusively taken care of by parents – that is to say almost always by mothers – while around 10% are in collective *crèches* (Drees, 2003; Istat, 2005; see table 2).

Rather, the elements that make a difference are: on one side the early entry in the *école maternelle* at two years⁵, and the regular individual care in France (around 20%); on the other side the wide full

⁴ The data refer at 2004, and therefore do not include the *Paje* (01/01/04).

⁵ This figure does not appear in table 2, mainly because of the strict definition of main childcare service applied during the analysis, which excludes all children attending part-time the *école maternelle*. The proportion of children <3 years of age attending the *école maternelle* in France is anyway estimated around 10% (Leprince, 2003).

time care by grandparents and the important for profit collective sector in Italy. More precisely, in Italy around 20% of all children <3, and 45% of those with a working mother is entrusted every day to grandparents (Sabbadini, 1999); this percentage still increases for children under two years (54,5%) (Lo Conte *et al*, 2003). It is evident that the care by grandparents fully covers the working hours of parents: 57% of these children spend between 20 and 39 hours a week with grandparents (*ibidem*). Not by chance, the families with children and working mother are the only type of family for which the informal support received has not decreased during the '90s (Istat, 2001).

In Italy, care by grandparents is based in half of the cases on the quality of the intergenerational relationship, that contributes to perpetuate a scarce propensity to externalise the care of young children in Italy. On the other side, however, over 15% of mothers resort to this solution mainly for structural reasons (lack of places, high costs, ...), and over 20% appreciates above all the convenience of care by grandparents, probably in opposition to the rigidity of services (entry and exit hours, distance, no access in case of illness, ...), that would be more interesting however from the educational point of view; only 8%, in fact, have chosen grandparents primarily for education or socialization reasons.

Table 2. Children <3 by main type of care in Italy and France (%).		
Type of care	Italy	France
	1998¹	2003²
Parents	62,5	64,0
Grandparents	19,5	4,0
Individual care	3,5	20,0
<i>of which at home</i>	–	1,0
Crèche	11,4	9,0
<i>of which public</i>	7,2	
Other	3,1	2,5
TOTAL	100,0	100,0
¹ Source: Own calculations on Multiscopo 1998.		
² Source: Own calculations on DREES, 2003.		

The diversification of supply is a declared objective of childcare policies in France, with the purpose to increase the “freedom of choice” of families. In Italy, the diversification seems to be rather the result of different initiatives, not governed and therefore not inserted in a systemic and coherent frame of development⁶.

The different types of care in the French system show a higher degree of institutionalisation. Even the type of care that presents the maximum degree of internalisation and familisation, the care by parents, is accompanied here by a monetary measure that institutionalizes it (*Allocation Parentale d’Education, APE*; see table 3).

The individual care is since a long time controlled (*assistantes maternelles agréées*), often organized (*relais*), and in some cases truly inserted in the net of public services, and directly managed by the municipalities (*crèches familiales*⁷), whereas in Italy the individual care provision is for the greatest part irregular, without training, contract nor guarantees. Although difficult to esteem, it is possible to hypothesize that in Italy a meaningful quota of the potential demand for individual care is absorbed by the informal care by grandparents.

Type of care		France	Italy
Collective	Early entry in <i>école maternelle</i>	Historical, important	Recent and limited
	Public <i>crèches</i>	Long tradition	Limited
	For profit <i>crèches</i>	No	Wide
	Third sector services	Long tradition	Recent
	Integrative services		
Individual	Childminders	Wide, regulated and supported. Ratio adult/children from 1:1 to 1:3	Irregular and not supported Ratio adult/children generally 1:1.
Family	Extended family	Limited	Wide and systematic
	Parents (mainly mothers)	Wide, with public support (<i>APE</i>)	Wide, no public support
	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>Limited but growing</i>	<i>Very limited but growing</i>

⁶ The national law 285/97 financed several diversifying initiatives, but on a project, non continuative basis.

⁷ Where families pay the same fee as for public crèche, and childminders have spaces and times for collective activities with the children they care for.

The alternative and integrative collective services (*Times for Families*) are still little diffused in Italy, totally absent in vast areas, and still experimental in many municipalities; they generally foresee the presence of adult family members together with children. On the contrary, in France these structures (*haltes garderies, haltes jeux*) have a longer tradition, are managed both directly by the municipality or by associations, and don't foresee the presence of adults of reference because they also aim at freeing parents from the burden of care some hours a week.

Finally, the *crèches*, central element of the care system in both countries, are regulated in France by a national tariff, and supported by an important direct government share to the expenses, while in Italy they are completely delegated to the initiative of the municipalities, and therefore conditioned by their financial possibilities, and exposed to very wide local differences in the fees as well as in the way of functioning.

1.3. The cost of childcare for families

One first fundamental difference among the two countries with regard to the costs of care services concerns the degree of national homogenisation. In France, both *crèches*' fees and the demand-side monetary support for individual care are defined at the national level. On the contrary, in Italy fees vary considerably between the Centre-Northern regions and the Southern ones, but also from a municipality to another.

If the cost of collective services for the families is not very dissimilar between France and the Centre-northern Italy⁸, what is really different among the two countries is the final cost of the individual services. First of all, the regulation of the *assistantes maternelles*, allowing them to take care of up to three children, permits already by itself the families to contain the costs, that are in fact around 30% lower in comparison to the cost of the individual care in Italy, largely irregular, non professionalized and most often provided on a 1 adult to 1 child basis (see table 3.). Besides, after monetary transfers (*Afeama* and *Aged⁹*), the cost in France is 60% lower than the initial cost, and 70% lower than in Italy, where no demand-side monetary incentives exist at the national level. Such difference reaches 80% in the case of the amounts foreseen by the *Paje* since 2004 (*Complément de libre choix de mode de garde*). Finally, the institutionalization of the individual care and its insertion in the net of the public services, through the *crèches familiales*, allows fees analogous to those that families would pay in the *crèche* (related to the family income level), around 40% less than the individual care with the allocations in France, and up to over 80% less than in Italy.

The law 328/00 introduced also in Italy the possibility to provide *vouchers* at the local level, in order to economically support the families that buy care services on the market. These are not,

⁸ We will deal with the specific local differences in § 2. Here we refer to data from the Municipality of Monza, in Northern Italy (see table 4).

⁹ *Allocation familiale pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle* and *Allocation pour la garde d'enfant à domicile*.

however, comparable with the French measures. First, they depend on financings transferred to the municipalities, that can autonomously destine part of them to the partial reimbursement of the care expenses of families who don't succeed to accessing public *crèches*, besides the care of other non self-autonomous people (elderly, disabled, etc.). The local character of the measure, then, conditions the entitlement to the hazardous fact to reside in one of the few municipalities that have introduced it. Second, even in those few Municipalities, the small entity of available funds limits access to very low income level households (the threshold varies according to the place). Finally, the effect on the cost decrease is ridiculous in comparison to the analogous French measures. In Monza, for example, a double-income family with income under 18.000€ would have right to 10% of reimbursement of the expense for a private *crèche*, or for a regularly hired childminder (what is rather rare in Italy, as we has seen).

Care services		Yearly gross income			
		23.300 € (1,5 SMIC)	31.200 € (2 SMIC)	46.800 € (3 SMIC)	
Public crèche	Northern Italy (Monza)	172,30	230,10	312,58	
	France	209,00	280,00	421,00	
For profit crèche	Northern Italy (Monza)	504,17	504,17	504,17	
Individual care	North. Italy (Monza)	Childminder	1.120,00	1.120,00	1.120,00
	France	<i>Assistante maternelle</i>	800,00	800,00	800,00
		<i>A.M. after Afeama</i>	340,46	340,46	340,46
		<i>A.M. after Paje</i>	222,84	222,84	324,06
		<i>Crèche familiale</i>	209,00	280,00	421,00

1.4. Individualisation and privatisation trends

The non take up rate of public crèches is remarkable (in Italy it is estimated around 25% on average; Innocenti, 2001). Yet, several recent national policy reforms seem to aim more at financing individual care services (economic incentives to hire private childminders), private care services (incentives for the creation of company *crèches*, for profit *crèches*, micro-*crèches*, etc.) and the familiarisation of childcare (economic incentives to parents that leave their job to care for their young children).

In France the recent and present tendencies seem more aimed at the conservation of the public sector, rather than at its innovation and enlargement. The government strategy has been pointing for some years now more and more decidedly at the individualisation and familisation of care, through incentives to individual care (tax relieves and monetary benefits) and the income support of people that withdraw from the labour market to take care of young children (*APE*), with all the known implications in terms of career. On the other side one observes, instead, a decreasing investment in collective services aiming at the early socialization (Eme, Fraisse, 2002). According to the rhetoric of the “freedom of choice”, the reform of childcare policies should answer to the unsatisfied desires of families. In reality, the actual configuration of the incentives makes the individual care very advantageous for the middle-high incomes, widening only in part the access possibilities for the middle-low income households (see table 4). The risk is, therefore, to strengthen a double pattern of access favouring social segregation, with low-income households having access mainly to public crèches, and middle-high income households resorting to individual care.

In Italy, after the 1971 law (the implementation of which has hardly reached two third of the planned quantitative increase of places), no new financing plan has been approved for public childcare services. Presently, the funds for the collective public services are steadily threatened by the continuous cuts to transfers to municipalities (Budget laws 2003 – 2005). The tendency is twofold.

On one side, space is left to the private entrepreneurs, that answer to the market trends, that is say to the unsatisfied demand for places in the collective services. Since the mid Nineties, then, more and more often the development of for profit childcare entrepreneurs is stimulated through national and regional incentives for company *crèches*, private *crèches* and micro-*crèches*, and through the externalisation of public services, above all to cooperatives. All of this has the objective to decrease the pressure of the unsatisfied demand on the public services, saving money in comparison to the cost that would entail a similar direct enlargement of the public supply¹⁰.

¹⁰ Private entrepreneurs are, in fact, obliged to integrate the public incentives with their own investments.

Meanwhile, on the other side, the main part of care needs continues to be covered by the informal support of the nuclear and extended family. The absence of specific incentives for family care should not surprise: not only it is coherent with the passive subsidiarity overall approach, but the serious lack of services is already by itself an implicit, strong incentive to internalise care.

In sum, such reforms move economic means from the financing of (new) *public* services to new *private* services, which have nevertheless market prices. This risks to exacerbate the existing tensions and inequalities in the patterns of access to services of different quality level, according to class and ethnic groups, as well as gender inequalities in the access to paid work.

2. Local welfare mix: four cases for analysis

The responsibilities of childcare services are predominantly local, as naturally local is their implementation. At the level of territorial governance, therefore, the articulation increases. In order to investigate this aspect, we will deal with four local cases, two in France and two in Italy, showing that the differences *within* each country can be wider than the differences *between* countries. The local cases were selected among middle-sized cities, in order to avoid the extreme situations of very big cities, concentrating quantitatively important needs, but also important resources, and small cities with more limited resources and complex needs, demanding more creative solutions (such as inter-municipal services). The selected cases are the following ones: Montreuil, in the Paris suburbs; Rennes, in Bretagne; Monza, in Lombardy; Cosenza, in Calabria.

In France, thanks to the existence of a national frame that gives coherence to all the measures and the existing services, the differences among the two examined contexts are less important than the differences observed within Italy, but they are however remarkable. In the Italian contexts, the territorial element plays a major role. The notable differences that divide the two Italian cases illustrate the gap that separates the average level of development of the local welfare in the regions of the Centre-north from the one observed in the Southern regions. This gap characterizes the Italian situation in an unavoidable way (Mingione, 2001).

Table 5. shows some main indicators of childcare provision in the four case studies that we analyse below.

Table 5. Childcare services supply in the four local cases.						
	n. children <3 V.A. (%)	n. places/ n. children <3	n. places/ applications	Collective regular services	Collective “flexible” services	Individual services
Monza	2.621 (2,2%)	21,3% ¹ (14% ²)	50%	6 municipal crèches; 11 for profit crèches; 1 associative crèche	2 Tempo Famiglia	Irregular, non estimable; Training course
Cosenza	1.486 (2,1%)	10% ¹ (3% ²)	95% non meaningful	1 municipal crèche; 7 for profit; 2 no profit	– (only children >3 years)	Irregular, non estimable; Training course
Montreuil	2.861 (3,1%)	50% ³ (19% ⁴)	24%	4 municipal <i>crèches</i> 4 dipartimental <i>crèches</i> 2 associative <i>crèches</i>	6 <i>haltes-jeux</i> associative 1 <i>crèche</i> <i>familiale</i>	850 places by <i>a.m.</i>
Rennes	5.318 (2,6%)	57% ⁵ (32% ⁴)	40%	14 municipal <i>crèches</i> 6 associative <i>crèches</i>	16 <i>haltes-jeux</i> associative 5 <i>crèche</i> <i>familiale</i> 11 innovative services	5.000 places by 2.900 <i>a.m.</i>
¹ Collective supply, public + private. ² Only public collective supply. ³ Collective + regular individual supply. ⁴ Only collective supply. ⁵ Collective + individual + children >2 anni in <i>école maternelle</i> .						

2.1. Montreuil, a *red* Paris suburbs privileging collective services

Montreuil is a so-called *red municipality* in the Paris *banlieue*, traditionally governed by left parties, with a strong orientation towards public services. It has 90.674 inhabitants, and its population has deeply changed in the last years, with a strong immigration both from France (18% of the population) and from abroad (32%). The deindustrialization process has left many empty industrial and handcraft spaces, which are nowadays increasingly occupied by artists and show business workers, also attracted by the dynamic cultural policy of the municipality. This has an impact on the local childcare needs, due to the often atypical working times of these workers. Montreuil has a higher unemployment rate than the national average (17,5% in 1999) as well as a higher share of persons on social assistance. The growing number of low income families with young children questions the social mix criterion traditionally regulating access to public crèches and favours a social segregation between low income household predominantly accessing crèches and middle-high income families increasingly turning to private individual childcare. In fact, the

share of families receiving state benefits for private individual childcare, here rather low, is increasing (Fraisie, Bucolo, 2003).

The childcare system in Montreuil comprehends an important public provision, due to the particular position of the Department of Seine-Saint Denis, that – differently from most French department administrations – intervenes directly through the direct management of four medium-size crèches, which are to be added to the four large municipal crèches. This peculiar configuration poses a few problems, as to the multiplication of stakeholders, responsible actors, access criteria, that calls for more coordination (Fraisie, Bucolo, 2003). Nevertheless, it guarantees a wider public collective provision, testifying the prevailing political orientation of both the municipal and departmental administration, with a traditional preference for the public collective care as opposed to individual, especially private individual care (private childminders)¹¹. In fact, the relations with the associations of private care workers are less developed than elsewhere, and the mismatch between demand and supply for individual care in the city seems relevant, with 16% of regular childminders caring for no child, and a high share of families turning to informal care solutions. Similarly, the dynamic local associative sector (two parents' crèches and six integrative services), although economically supported by the municipality, doesn't seem adequately sustained as far as management and administration issues are concerned. This limits the possibilities to qualify and systematise the private supply, that could cover a good part of the unsatisfied demand (only ¼ of the applications are accepted in public crèches every year), especially considering the increase of the atypical needs in town, to which the individual and associative care could better answer.

2.2. Rennes, a rich and diversified childcare provision

Rennes is the chief town of Bretagne, in the West of France. It has 212.494 inhabitants, and a vital economy developing around innovative sectors and an important university centre. The city of Rennes and the first suburbs circle are a largely urban area, whereas the second circle is a predominantly rural area, with less services and greater distances between inhabitants. This difference is therefore particularly relevant from the point of view of childcare services provision. The overall childcare provision is the most rich and articulated of the four cases presented here, even if not covering the whole existing demand.

The Rennes childcare system includes 20 crèches, of which 14 municipal and 6 associative, 27 integrative services, of which 16 associative, and 5 *crèches familiales* (municipal network of childminders). This explains the relatively high take up rate of the services, sensibly higher than

¹¹ The municipality holds a *crèche familiale* (municipal network of childminders) linked to the hospital and the particular care needs of its workers.

the other three local cases (see table 5). Still, only 40% of applications for public collective crèches are accepted.

In Rennes, as well as in Montreuil, a consolidated engagement of the municipal administration is observed in guaranteeing a good supply of public collective care, although filtered through the Breton context, where traditionally the individual care is particularly strong. In fact, around 5.000 places are available by regular individual childminders¹², who are, moreover, particularly organised through *relais* organizations, which assure continuous training and collective activities, and which have built positive and useful relations with the public administration. Another peculiar Breton feature – which goes in parallel with the important presence of individual care for the youngest – is the high rate of early entry in the *école maternelle*, often at two years of age. Yet, this approach has become in recent years more and more controversial at the national level (Défenseur des enfants, 2004).

The geographical configuration of the area has favoured the development of a peculiar combination: the local supply (including the associative and innovative provision) is particularly rich and articulated in the city centre, and rather limited, and relying almost only on individual care in the rural outskirts (Savina, Gaultier, 1997; David, 1999). As a consequence of the lack of collective services in the outskirts, on the one side the integrative services are increasingly used – in an improper way – as a substitute of regular full time services. On the other side, associative organizations are called to elaborate creative solutions, such as itinerant childcare services collecting children of families leaving at great distances.

This situation can be read as an exemplification of the urban/rural divide that characterizes France as far as childcare services provision is concerned (Clément, Nicolas, 2003).

2.3. Monza, a Northern affluent city with attempts for innovation

Monza is a medium size city (121.220 inhabitants in 2003) in the Lombardy region, at the centre of an economically lively area – the Brianza – rich in SME in both industry and handcraft and, lately, services. Monza is also the appointed chief town of the new province of Monza-Brianza, presently in the process of being formed, as separated and autonomous from the one of Milan. Steadily governed by catholic parties, Monza experiences since 2003 the first administration by a centre-left coalition, with an independent mayor. Childcare policies seem up to now to develop in a direction of continuity, with no major path-breaking initiative; nevertheless, a wider effort in the widening of public provision is evident in the new local government.

¹² Who can accept also older children after school, as well as children living in the outskirts, whose parents work in the city.

Here one finds in the rhetoric of local policy makers a notable attention to childcare, that nevertheless is only partly concretised, in the context of more and more scant resources. A notable diversification of the supply is observed, with the presence of different providers of care, both as to the sector (public, for profit, associative, company services) and as to the approach (collective, individual, innovative, family micro-services).

The collective care provision is represented by six medium-big public municipal crèches and 11 small-medium crèches (see table 5). One public crèche is located in each of the neighbourhoods, while private for profit ones are rather concentrated in and around the city centre. Altogether, only 50% of the applications effectively received is satisfied by the public municipal crèches. In its turn, the existing private for profit collective provision could hypothetically answer only to the half of the demand unsatisfied by the public services. Yet, not all the families that do not have access to public structures can afford a market-level fee¹³.

As far as the individual care is concerned, the degree of regularization is still extremely low if compared to the French cases, but a relative improvement is recorded, as a consequence of specific initiatives in such sense: a professional training course for childminders; the project to promote the constitution of an association or cooperative of trained childminders; the introduction of a small voucher for very low income households that did not have access to public crèches and that hire a regular childminder.

The innovative provision comprehends two municipal daily services for children and adults, a service targeted to the integration of immigrants (children of immigrants represent over 8% of all children <3 years of age) and a series of initiatives of parenthood support (creative laboratories, meetings with childhood experts, etc.), contracted out to third sector organizations.

Given the financial difficulties, common to all the Italian Municipalities, here as elsewhere there has been a notable impact of the law 285/97, that has given impulse to the territorial initiative, but on a project, non continuative basis.

However, the existing resources on the territory are not put into a system, public and private for profit actors don't have relationships, and the whole supply is far from satisfying the existing demand, given the relatively high female activity rates. It is, therefore, the intergenerational solidarity that covers the existing gaps; particularly the role of grandparents can be described without exaggerating as necessary for the balance of the system. Acting as full-time baby-sitter for free, or as a support in the various emergency moments (in case of illness, or of holidays), with incomparable features of flexibility and reliability, they allow their daughters and daughters-in-law to work, preserving the income level of the families, but hiding a potential demand for care

¹³ It is difficult to determine the take up rate of the real demand, also because not all the families who turn to private crèches had previously tried to access public structures, in many cases due to the knowledge of the scarcity of places.

services that remains underestimated. Local policy makers do nevertheless have a symptom of the growing demand, in far as every time a new service is opened and a new initiative is begun, a remarkable waiting list is observed.

2.4. Cosenza, a Southern depressed city, attempting to guarantee a minimum provision

Cosenza (72.305 inhabitants) represents effectively the prevailing situation in the Southern cities. The overall economic system is rather weak, especially concerning the industrial sector, and strongly dependent from the national and EU transfers, and with an overrepresentation of the public administration as an employer. Unemployment is much higher than the Italian average (23% vs 8,7% in 2003), and employment much lower (35% vs 44,8%); both these data are sharper for what concerns women's situation.

As a consequence, despite the fact that Cosenza is a provincial chief town and centre of a university, both supply and demand for care are here strikingly depressed. The public provision is limited to one single crèche, which could in theory accept 70 children, but is in fact open only for 40, due to a lack of workers. What is more, until three years ago the crèche was only open part-time, until 1 p.m. Only a recent collaboration between the municipality and a third sector organization has permitted in the last year to open the service also for a few hours in the afternoon. In presence of a public coverage equal to less than the 3% of the potential demand, and part-time, the unsatisfied demand seems however very limited. The explanation cannot reside only in a cultural resistance to the externalisation of care. First of all, one has to note that the public crèche is not adequately known by the local citizens: the re-opening after a restructuring has not been advertised, in order not to favour the development of a demand that could not be satisfied.

Second, and more generally, in order to understand a situation so different in comparison to the regions of the Centre-north, that have known a notable increase of the demand and supply during the last decades, it is necessary to hold in mind that Southern Italy has one of the highest unemployment rates, the lowest rate in manufacturing employment, and one of the lowest female employment rate in the EU (Mingione, 2001). In other words, here the span of childcare options for the parents is radically limited by the absence of opportunity on the labour market, particularly for women. Mothers are seen as the most natural caregivers on the one side because they have scarce probabilities to be employed, and on the other because the whole system of social policies is severely lacking, in a context where social needs are, instead, diffused. Here early childcare is not a priority, as far as other areas of social intervention absorb the existing scant resources: income support, prevention of deviance, and the still huge institutionalization of out of family children. All

the resources of the law 285/97 have been devoted to a project addressed to children in age of compulsory school and teen-agers (the so-called *Children's city*).

The development of the local welfare system appears impossible without an inversion in the local economic-productive development. Therefore, it appears here particularly difficult to start a sort of virtuous cycle *à la scandinave* among services' development, women's employment development and economic development: the care services sector, in fact, cannot take off, if there is not a consistent productive sector that creates the need for it and supports its costs. The sexual division of responsibilities is reproduced and strengthened, with the segregation of women in the exclusive role of caregivers.

The existing private services – small family-managed structures with a lesser degree of specialisation than the one observed in the Northern case¹⁴ – are characterized by fees equal to the double of public local ones, but much lower than those observed in Monza. As a consequence, those households where both parents (or the only parent present) are working, and who did not have access to the public crèche, can more easily turn to a private one, with a lesser impact on the family disposable income.

The insufficiency of childcare services in the city centre is reflected in the almost total lack in the outskirts. As a consequence, several families change the official residence of their children (for instance stating they are living with their grandparents), in order to fulfil the requirements to access the public crèche.

3. Conclusion

Italy and France currently show tendencies partly convergent and partly divergent. On one side Italy tries with great difficulties, through a timid quantitative and qualitative development of public supply, to reach a more European level of coverage. At the same time, however, an opposite movement is observed, that limits public development in favour of private supply. This movement is less pronounced than in France, above all because of lack of resources, but it has – in a way – more serious consequences, because while in France this happens on the basis of a certain degree of development, in Italy such transfers occur together with a difficult attempt to consolidate a sufficient level of public coverage. These schizophrenic tendencies can seem paradoxical, but they are due to two different phenomena: on one side the increasing pressure of the demand stimulates the local supply (also public) also independently from the public national support. On the other side,

¹⁴ E.g. receiving together children under and over 3 years of age, and in some cases also children in school age after school hours.

and in an opposite way, the financial pressures on social expenses stimulate liberist answers, given the orientations of the governments in the two countries¹⁵.

The local management of childcare services could represent a fundamental element to contrast social inequalities, as far as it allows to better respond to the specific needs of the local context.

Yet, local differentiation can turn out to be in reality an element that exacerbates such inequalities. In fact, national measures that act in similar way on deeply different territories can have very diversified impacts.

So, in the Northern Italian case, the insufficient public answer to an increasing demand for childcare services results either in a commodification of care (through the hiring of childminders, but above all through private *crèches*), or in an unsatisfied need for de-familisation (through the move of childcare provision from parents to the extended family, or through the temporary exit of one of the parents – generally the mother – from the labour market), when private care is unaffordable for families who did not have access to public structures.

In the Southern Italian case, instead, the virtuous circuit elsewhere working between services and female employment becomes a perverse cycle of lack of jobs, lack of services and scarce de-familisation of care; these three elements strengthen each other, reproducing a local situation of serious social deprivation, and allow low quality service to work in absence of competition and controls.

In the working class Paris suburbs, the growing importance of demand-side monetary support for individual care promoted by the national government meets only a small part of the unsatisfied demand for childcare, as such benefits are interesting only for middle-high income level households, which are underrepresented in the municipality. On the other side, the combination of both local and departmental investments in public collective services barely answers to one fourth of the demand for such services. This leaves growing space to informal and irregular care solutions which do not allow to bond families among each other, nor permit them to get in contact with the local administration through access to services.

Finally, in the Western French case, the most articulated childcare system is observed, with the widest public provision, as long as a large proportion of the population being able to afford private individual care and profit of the national demand-side incentives. Here inequalities in access to childcare are mostly related to the possibility to choose the preferred type of childcare solution, along with the differences between the city centre and the outskirts.

Like in other areas of social policies, then, local differences in the provision of childcare services create different spans of options for citizens, according to which the access chances and the choice

¹⁵ A new centre-left government is in power in Italy since April 2006.

possibilities, along with the implications these have on other areas of individual life (e.g. women labour market participation), heavily depend on the place where one happens to leave.

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