

## THE NEED FOR A BIG SOCIETY IN ITALY AND EUROPE

di Emmanuele F. M. Emanuele

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In the context of a crisis which affects Europe, and in particular Italy, as well as the rest of the world, the welfare system has obviously been brought to the centre of international debate in an attempt to identify a new form of government capable of compensating for the inefficiencies of both the market and the State by relying on the self-organising ability of civil society.

Hence, there may be hope for a true renewal of the social security system. I am referring to what I call the “Third Pillar” and the British Prime Minister, Mr David Cameron, calls the “Big Society”.

I believe that the actions taken by the Third Pillar, or Big Society, are the only the way to address the crisis. That is to say by the diversified world of the Third Sector which includes the associations, foundations, NGOs, social cooperatives, social enterprises and voluntary organizations which have been freely established by citizens and represent a *tertium genus* as regards to both the State and the Private Sector and form, albeit with the structural differences that distinguish them, an ambit in considerable growth in Italy and Europe. Faced with the State’s evident difficulty to ensure that increasingly greater resources shall be available for social expenditure and the lack of private for-profit organisations capable of offering solutions in this field, in my opinion the only answer lies in the ‘Third Pillar’.

This is a lively and dynamic universe that, in Europe alone, provides employment for twenty million individuals, of which one million and three thousand in Italy. There are about ten thousand social enterprises in Italy, of which seven thousand and three hundred are cooperatives, and over two thousand six hundred foundations and other non-profit organizations. Two hundred and forty four thousand people are employed in these enterprises which have a volume of business of 6.4 billion Euro.

Still in my Country, 26.2% of the citizens carry out voluntary work and, according to an Eurisko survey in 2008, twenty five million Italians annually donate 3.4 billion Euro to non-profit organisations, which amounts to more than half of the (6.2 billion Euro) overall funding for aid organisations.

These are the reasons which convinced me, as I disclosed in 2001 with a book entitled ‘Il non-profit strumento di sviluppo economico e sociale (*Non-profit organisations, an instrument for socio-economic development*)’, and confirmed several years later in a second book entitled ‘Il terzo pilastro. Il non profit motore del nuovo welfare (*The Third Pillar. Non-profit organisations drive the new welfare system*)’.

The Big Society project discussed in the United Kingdom, which thanks to David Cameron and Lord Nat Wei, who I had the honour to have as my guest in Rome, is already being experimented in several areas of Great Britain and is essentially similar to the one I advanced with the ‘Third Pillar’ theory.

Both projects represent a huge cultural change whereby, in their everyday lives, in their homes, neighbourhoods and workplaces people no longer turn to officials, local authorities or central government in order to find the solutions to the problems they encounter, since they are both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their communities. The Big Society, or Third Pillar, means communities capable of building new schools and hospitals and of managing cultural and recreational amenities. It also means facilities capable of training for employment, foundations that help offenders to rehabilitate themselves, etc.

This is why I am convinced that the formula may also be applied in Europe and, for the reasons I mentioned at the beginning, has existed in Italy ever since the late Middle Ages when religious institutions, arts and craft guilds, brotherhoods and lay confraternities worked together in order to assist the destitute and grant credit, establish schools and universities, care for the sick and accomplish works of art which subsequently became World Heritage. However, as demonstrated by the research performed by the American political expert, Robert Putnam, who points to the regions in Central and Northern Italy as models of widespread civic culture, the subject may certainly not be restricted just to the original social background.

With a capital of fifteen thousand organisations, three hundred and sixty thousand employees, a volume of business of ten billion Euro and eight million users, social enterprises in Italy represent the most structured answer to the demand. Then we must add the public benefit associations and four million voluntary workers which make a considerable contribution to the production of such goods and services. The social enterprise network is, therefore, deeply rooted in my Country and, having considerable socio-economic power, operates where politics have left scope to do so. If anything, the problem in Italy is, regrettably, the political delay in recognising and using to the greatest advantage such social capital.

Therefore, we must acknowledge that David Cameron has had the courage to translate into an accomplished and ambitious political project the very scheme that has been nurtured in our society for centuries which, as yet, the Italian political class has failed to implement and has, conversely, constantly opposed starting from the 1890 Crispi Act passed during the Risorgimento when a State type liberalism prevailed, then under the fascist regime which brought the centralist State model and, finally, even during the democratic and republican Italy. Only recently, a Reform of the Constitution has enabled civil society to endeavour to act, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity, in areas where the 'political society' has failed to do so. However the obstacles placed by politics in my country are enormous.

Across the Channel social involvement is not in the very advanced stage which was reached in my country centuries ago. However, due to David Cameron's ability, politicians are very willing to dialogue with the various institutions belonging to the Third Pillar. In Italy the situation is quite the reverse: the foundations for a Big Society already exist within the social fabric though, rather than fully deploying its potential, the ruling class obstructs this sector.

Aware that the State is no longer able to provide the solutions, David Cameron has organised this project with great skill and determination.

Following his model, even in Italy and Europe the aim must be to encourage that the vital part of society emerges through a culture of active citizenship centred on individuals, companies and neighbourhoods. This means the State's intrusion must be reduced, though not for the purpose of privatising but for that of socialising and, above all, means teaching the political class to recognise that civil society is a resource not an opponent.

In Italy the Third Sector, which I call the Third Pillar, is actually a strength. It is not a third party placed between the State and the market with the supplementary role of providing services in order to cover their shortages. This is a different kind of player, most suitable for a role in the organisation of services and employment since it is flexible, capable of producing relational goods and fostering social cohesion. This sector has a wealth of expertise and social contacts which must not be wasted and, as far as the re-establishment of the social system is concerned, has enormous potential considering that associations, groups of voluntary workers, social enterprises, foundations and intermediate bodies take care of peoples needs and find innovative solutions for them.

In my vision, which is not unlike that of Mr Cameron, the State must take a step back and its intervention should be restricted to establishing the rules of the game and programme areas, ensuring that the truly poor classes are protected and supporting those self-governed activities which, established on the concept of social solidarity, have set the same goals.

On the other hand, in order to actually become the Third Pillar, the Third Sector must modernise, improve the efficiency of its strategic policies and, above all, of the management of the facilities, activities and human resources in order to be increasingly more independent from political influence and rely less on public resources.

In order to accomplish the great Big Society plan in Italy and Europe, we need a farsighted political class which, like the current coalition government in the United Kingdom, is capable of starting reforms to provide more scope and power to civil society, extend the principle of subsidiarity and devise a tax system that helps the Third Pillar to grow.

I believe that the huge change in which we all trust must be implemented on the basis of fundamental values and certainties.

The first value is the central position of individuals who come before the State, the laws of which must recognise this ultimate aim. The traditional Welfare State developed amidst the contrast between the Public and the Private sector. Anything public was obviously associated to 'morality' since it aimed at public benefit, as anything private was 'immoral' and had no social purpose. This was a serious error which has partially endangered the inheritance of an ancient and well-established traditional European, especially Italian, welfare society. An excess of pure welfarism has been encouraged rather than the establishment of a system which aims to empower and provide opportunities for individual potential; an *ex ante* rather than an *ex post* assessment has been preferred. This rationale must now be changed.

The second linchpin is families, since we must admit that there is a undeniable link between their happiness and the wellbeing of society. Moreover, families are fundamental economic units and, above all, the most important nucleus of any welfare system.

Yet, another fundamental cornerstone is the need to 'do things together', which prevents isolation and loneliness and creates a welfare community. This network of people, families, neighbourhoods, associations, for and not-for profit businesses, voluntary organisations and cooperatives fosters the sense of civic responsibility, trust and mutual support. Social bodies and intermediate communities are not to be mistrusted since they are venues in which the dynamics of relationships help individuals to become self-confident and aware their own potential.

This is the way I conceive the only, in my opinion, possible future of the social security system in Italy and Europe, efficient, multicultural, participatory and open to all, in which the State's role is essentially restricted to regulating and policy making with a view of encouraging, rather than stifling, social vitality. Encouraged by the British experience, the Fondazione Roma is prepared to lay the foundations in Italy for this new and better Big Society and, as already abundantly proved, to undertake both the task of stimulating theoretical reflections through a high level debate and to be the local vanguard in order to create experimental projects based on this new model which could be used as an example to be replicated in many different environments and areas of the country.

I therefore trust that today's debate concerning the renewal of the welfare system and the Big Society will remain open and productive for some time and that people's expectations in the British experiment may materialise.

Prof. Emmanuele F. M. Emanuele  
Chairman  
Fondazione Roma