Interview: Emanuele Ferragina

Emanuele Ferragina joined Sciences Po in January 2015 as an Assistant Professor at the Observatoire sociologique du changement (OSC) and the Laboratory for Interdisciplinary Evaluation of Public Policies (LIEPP).

We gave him an interview.

LIEPP: You joined Sciences Po and OSC in January 2015. Can you tell us about your main topics of interest?

Emanuele Ferragina: My research mainly focuses on two overarching themes: the study of the welfare state from a comparative perspective and the study of social participation and social capital. I have published articles on welfare regime typologies (analysing institutional structures and their outcomes) and on the transformation of family and labour market policy. For what concerns social participation, I have proposed a new analysis of the determinants of social capital in the European regions, and used social participation to measure poverty in the United Kingdom. All my studies are based on ‘the comparative method’, with a mixture of quantitative, historical and qualitative analyses.

LIEPP: How will your projects connect with other LIEPP researchers’ ones? In which way are you planning to use the interdisciplinarity of the laboratory?

E.F.: I have an undergraduate degree in political science, a masters’ degree in economics and a PhD in social policy (driven by a sociological approach), for this reason I feel all my academic career is based on interdisciplinarity. I am very happy to join the LIEPP and have the possibility to collaborate with economists (especially with those interested in social capital), political scientists (especially those engaged in the study of the Welfare state and European governance), and of course sociologists in my department.

LIEPP: You worked on social capital. What does this concept bring to the analysis of the European Welfare States?

E.F.: The relation between the welfare state and social capital has intrigued scholars from different disciplines. Neoclassical theorists postulated that the welfare state distorts the markets by providing excessive coverage against risks and contributes to the creation of dependence among individuals. In a similar vein, communitarians suggested that large welfare states rule out private control over the small things of life. Diverging from neoclassical and communitarian theorists, the institutionalists highlighted that welfare state policies can contribute to the creation of social capital. In this respect, universal welfare states would tend to increase social trust, while means-testing social programs would undermine social capital reproduction.

In response to this theoretical debate, an expansive body of empirical literature developed. Economists used experimental design and micro tax data to investigate whether public support to charities crowds out the propensity to donate. Sociologists, on the other hand, employed qualitative case studies or large-N comparative designs based on survey data to analyze much broader questions.

For these reasons I think the debate on the link between the welfare state and social capital has the potential to draw the attention of scholars from every social science discipline. I have already discussed with scholars at the LIEPP about potential research collaborations on the welfare state and social capital at the crossroad between political science, sociology and economics.
LIEPP: You created a think tank with a team of Italian researchers, and often intervene in media. What is the link between research and action for you?

E.F.: I use my research to inform the public debate, through the think tank I have founded with other researchers (the Fonderia Oxford), my books for the general public (I have published two works in 2013 and 2014 that have been commented by the main Italian newspapers and political talk shows), and my newspaper articles (on il Fatto quotidiano). My vocation is to bring my empirical findings into the public arena. The nature of the political debate is often oversimplified (especially in Italy), it is our duty as academics to use our research to make a positive contribution to the debate.

To know more about Emanuele Ferragina’s work, take a look at his online profile.

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