

State Disintegration and Para-State Re-Integration: the case of Caritas Diocesana in Vicenza, Italy.

Veneto, now one of the productive cores of industrial Europe, experienced a long season, from 1970's to early 2000's, of economic booming, based on a tight fabric of family based, export oriented Small and Medium Enterprises (SME). Veneto was also - during the later part of this period - the unchallenged electoral domain of Liga Veneta (then merged into Lega Nord), a populist formation which constructed its fortune around an anti-state discourse. The state was accused to be both over-present (with excessive taxation), and over absent (with no infrastructures to economic development). These discourses had developed from within boom-related social transformations, where de-regulation, ideologies of self reliance, unbridled individualism, intra class competition had proliferated in the process of economic expansion.

After the 2008's economic breakdown, though, all this significantly changes. Individualism - to say it with one of my informants - "has turned itself into solitude" and people are eventually turning towards the state, asking for help and assistance, which the latter doesn't seem able to provide anymore. Interviews I conducted with the Regional Government executives, revealed that public welfare expenses for families were cut from 2.5 mln, in 2011 to to 360.000 € in 2013. In this situation, the role of Caritas Diocesana in Vicenza (strengthened by more than 1,5 mln € given by private donors in the last 6 years) has increasingly expanded, getting to para-state proportions. Besides of "soup-kitchens", Caritas Vicenza provides free healthcare, dentists, psychological assistance, social services. It has help desks with economic advisors for families and small enterprises, to whom they provide counselling, legal and accounting assistance, and negotiate with creditors on families' behalf. Exploring the transforming relationship between state and para-state strategies, this paper looks at the structural re-articulation of institutional fields under economic distress.