Social policy plays a very important role in the social quality of Europe, and not only because it considerably affects the life conditions of the population. I will argue that its structure and weight affects at least as much: a) the possibility of acknowledging as common goods social benefits such as health, education, social security; and b) the presence of public discourse arenas about these goods, where the daily life of democracy is carried out. This is why social policy holds a great importance even for the building of European democracy, and for Europe’s socio-political integration in itself.

In European scientific and political debate on social policy, special attention must be paid to the requirements it has to possess in order to enact public cultures and practices in the everyday social life. I wish to stress that some of the crucial requirements concern the organizational set up of welfare operational agencies, and their relationship with citizens. And I’ll therefore analyse these qualities of welfare organizations as a driving force behind social quality.

My thesis particularly refers to the welfare mix formulas between State, market and third sector, and to the current development of the latter. In this reorganization of welfare lurk both the dangerous tendencies to the marketization of the social and the potential creation of “espaces publiques de proximité”, public arenas where politics take root in daily life. I will analyse the processes of institution building that are under way in the third sector, drawing some conclusions about the qualities institutions must possess.
in order to meet the standards of social quality, including the participation of citizens in public life. I’ll particularly stress the key role of learning institutions (*). 

1. Public affairs

It is common knowledge that in social policy, in different forms and degrees according to the different national welfare systems, an essential point is its sustainability with the imperatives of economic growth and the transformations and reorganizations it requires, in conditions made even more severe by new social problems, such as job precariousness and unemployment, and the ageing population.

A problematic aspect of the question is mostly the risk that this need for sustainability may result in a complete subordination of social policy to economic policy, weakening its power of intervention on the social costs of economy itself. These costs are high, as we know, deeply tearing the social texture and jeopardizing social cohesion itself.

In my opinion, however, the risk of a weakening in social policy is even worse, in that its political function of multiplier of democracy is jeopardized. This risk consists of the transformation of common goods – or public goods, as mentioned later in the paper – in private affairs of the individual and his family. Security, social integration, health, education – the fundamental assets in the quality of life – run the risk of becoming a
matter of private choice in the free play of supply and demand; or else they might be subject to the good will of individuals, so that solidarity is reduced to a private virtue, pertaining to personal conscience. The risk to be taken into account while considering social policy is not only the “marketization”, but also the “privatization” of the social (Ferge, 1997). In other words, what Habermas calls “privatistic retreat from citizenship” (1992, p. 11).

In social policy this tendency is not only revealed through the atomization and individualization of the social, but also in processes that weaken and deprive of its meaning the institutional sphere where social life takes place. Namely those institutional mediations by which social goods and problems are collectively acknowledged as “Commons” (Hardin, 1968), and practices of responsibility sharing are developed.

Clues of this tendencies are visible where the distribution of social benefits is: a) oriented on the basis of need, instead of right, b) replaced by private solidarity (family or charity) or c) organized according to the market law of supply and demand. Problems and goods dealt with by social policy become the private affairs of individuals, at the same time being removed from the sight of public responsibility. Nowadays the existence of such a thing as a right to health is basically replaced by a matter of consistency between supply and demand of health services, in terms of efficiency and, if anything, of “client’s satisfaction”. And poverty comes back in the spotlight. When speaking about poverty, the focus of attention tends to shift from right to need, as we learnt from the debate on the use of this notion in polities, even as far as European interventions are concerned. Furthermore, this notion steers the allocation of welfare on the basis of merit, and above all encourages a tendency to naturalization: standards of living below the
threshold of human dignity become natural, imputable to fate or at least to personal responsibility (see Abrahamson, 1997, and Saraceno, 1997).

This tendency risks worsening a worrying social deficit, indicated from many parts by the increasing number of social barriers and fractures, both material and symbolic, by social inequalities that are becoming deeper and deeper, and by a weaker social cohesion. But this tendency could also impoverish and destroy the daily social texture of public life, and of democracy itself.

In other words, paying attention to these tendencies means realizing that the reorganization of social policy poses a problem of public space. Let us see in what sense. The historical experience of the welfare states, especially in Europe, has bequeathed, along with many failures and problems, also a social heritage of publicness (Oeffentlichkeit): in the course of their building, the public space spreaded and took root in a variety of public arenas. There, political conversations and practices grew richer in social themes, choices and actors, and at the same time problems and goods dealt with by social policy, along with professional and administrative competences, acquired a public significance.

In social policy, what was at stake was not only the satisfaction of social needs and the acknowledgement of rights, but also, and especially, as Nancy Fraser (1989) and Iris Young (1990) have respectively pointed out, the “public discourse” on needs and rights, i.e. precisely the existence of public arenas with a variety of voices and issues about responsibilities, competence and institutions. Ultimately, in these public arenas, the ineludibly social nature of the life conditions of individuals has become the topic of an uninterrupted conversation between social actors. While discussing what kind of society they wanted to build, they had the opportunity of learning on a daily basis the
corresponsibilities towards the *res publica*. In different forms and degrees according to the different welfare systems, social policy has on the whole articulated public space, keeping it vital and helping it cast its roots into daily life, as far as discourses and practices about on social matters were concerned.

All these considerations therefore suggest taking the public space, and the quality and density of public life social policy generates, as a crucial reference point from which to analyse the transformations that are under way and to make choices in this field. Starting from this reference point it is possible to specify both the risk factors inside the above mentioned tendencies and at the same time the requirements of social policy that enhance public daily life. These are precisely the requirements to turn to account for the building of European democracy and for the very sociopolitical integration of Europe.

In other words, it is with reference to public life that social policy acquire a strategic significance for European social quality. Let me therefore argue this point, thereby elaborating the notion of social quality.

As we know (1), the latter is measured not so much on the population’s life standards, or on its quality of life, as on the practice of citizenship. For an integral part of its definition is the extent of powers and resources by which citizens can participate in public life and in discussions and deliberations on matters of common interest. Three further points, however, are to be taken into account if we look at the question from this perspective.

First of all, from this point of view it becomes clear that social quality doesn’t refer to products but to social processes: relationships, discourses and practices, instead of goods, services and consumption. It is in this sense, I think, that quality must be considered as a “societal” requirement, not only generically social. It concerns the
intersubjective level of social life – neither just objective nor just subjective. This is why it is also a reflexive requirement. Social quality is such only if it becomes a subject of social, public discourse, a ground for society to learn and reflect on itself.

Secondly, in this perspective social quality is defined as a political quality, just in that it concerns public life. And at the same time it redefines what “politics” is, transferring it in daily life, according to what Anne Showstack Sassoon (1997) suggests on this subject.

Finally, for these reasons, social quality is to be measured against aspects and questions of social policy that are relatively left out by current analyses and theories. These tend to focus their attention on “who” benefits, and “how much”. Most distributive and redistributive choices, as a matter of fact, concern how many resources are to be allocated and to what social categories. From the perspective suggested here, on the contrary, it becomes clear that social quality calls as much for an analysis of the “how”: which organizations and institutions implement social policy, how services are organized and in what way they operate in the social, which cultures and practices they enact, etc. For instance, these cultures and practices can actively promote welfarism, dependence, passivity, or vice versa generate empowerment, capability of choice and action, in a word citizenship. In their daily activity, organizations and institutions of social policy release a creative potential for the structure of social life, giving it shape. Their way of operating therefore constitutes a strategic factor for the quality and density of public life (or vice versa for its decay).

Having explored these three points, I can now formulate the central thesis of this paper: the quality of cultures and practices of organizations and institutions that implement the social policies constitutes a driving force for European social quality.
What depends on it is not only the availability of resources for the private life of citizens, but also the possibility for them to participate in public life, in the elaborations and deliberations on problems of common interest.

2. The social quality of the third sector.

Let me develop my thesis drawing attention to an emerging phenomenon in the field of social politics: the development of “third sector” and non-governmental organizations that, combined with market and State, give rise to the s.c. “welfare mix”. This is the centre of the reorganization under way in the different national welfare systems, and albeit differing in ways, degrees and institutional arrangements, it tends to be presented as a new welfare model (see for ex. Anheier, 1990; Rifkin, 1995; Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993). Let us briefly see what it consists of.

A) the state, both on a local and a central level, gives up almost completely its task of providing social benefits, though keeping its function of directing and controlling social policy, particularly by financing it;

B) the benefits are provided by third sector organizations, that express the economic and solidarity initiative of the civil society: the non-profit supply of benefits combines economic efficiency with a client oriented attitude, and freedom of choice with solidarity;

C) the development of a social market for the exchange of benefits and services of public utility is promoted, furthermore promising to create new employment, being this a typically labour intensive sector.
This model tends to be presented as the best formula to come out from the crisis of the welfare state. In Italy, in particular, great rhetorical emphasis is placed on its virtues, and especially on the virtuous role of the third sector, the main reagent of the mixture. Once out of the magnetic attraction of eulogistic reasoning, however, it is clear that this model is susceptible of different interpretations and implementations, and most of all it is open to very different developments. Exaggerating for a moment some phenomena that are actually much more complex, we might say that social market is apt to become a vehicle of marketization of the social, where social needs and problems are dealt with like a market area for private economic business (even when it is non-profit); or viceversa it could become a place for a variety of social actors to invest energy and resources to cultivate the social, and to take care of its quality, thereby generating social quality.

In order to focus these different developments, and their possibile combinations, a reflection on a critical point of welfare mix is needed, i.e. on the fact that this confirms the breaking of that equation between “public” and “state-owned” that has historically represented the cornerstone of the welfare state. Over the last twenty years, this breaking was caused by many events that I shall not examine here, and which generally affect the historical role of the State (the disintegration of the collectivistic pattern, the crisis of socialdemocracies, the basic notion of the redemption of society from the intrusive protection of states spread by the theories and policies of neo-liberism, and last but not least the weakening of the organizational principle of the state-nation).

The state’s undertaking of responsibilities and competences about social goods and problems has historically constituted a critical condition for acknowledging them as public. The results of bureaucratization, welfarism and paternalism are well known, but the still unresolved question is how to otherwise acknowledge the public (not: state-
controlled) nature of social goods and problems. Overcoming the identification between state-controlled and public does not set the conditions in which co-responsibility and participation in common welfare are to be acknowledged. On the other hand, rediscovering and turning to account that society is capable of self-organization and self regulation can lead to a serious misunderstanding: as shown by the entire tradition of liberal thought, the very existence of civil society is based on the presence of institutions that support it and are supported by it, the risk otherwise being of becoming profoundly uncivilized. Therefore, besides ceasing to identify what is public with what belongs to the state, it is necessary to revise the conditions by which the public nature of goods, problems and actors of social policy are to be acknowledged, and to develop welfare mix and social market as a process of institution building.

Bearing this crucial point in mind, let us now examine the characteristics and tendencies present in the social market and in the third sector, looking for clues that might reveal the two different, if not completely opposed, tendencies I have just mentioned.

The first line of development could be briefly resumed as “privatization of the social” (something more than the “marketization of the social”, as we will see). It is essentially a tendency to deal with social problems and needs as if they pertained to the sphere of private relationships and choices. It is widespread in forms of action and organization apparently heterogeneous, and inconsistent with each other: both those following the market pattern and those inspired by voluntary action and charity. For in the discourses and practices of social services, the allusions to the market law of supply and demand are continuous, even when there is no money exchange at stake. In this kind of relationship, the individual beneficiary (and his family) becomes a “client” of the
service, ultimately a consumer, so that the service reduces its range of competence to the satisfaction of a private demand. In such a relationship, actors, goods and needs are cut down to their private dimension, disembedded from the social texture they belong to.

Clues of this tendency, however, can also be found in the discourses and practices of the voluntary service, based on, and justified by, moral choices and virtues which pertain to personal conscience, and therefore strictly private. From this perspective, the very notion of solidarity undergoes a semantic drift: no longer being a synonym of social nexus, whose responsibility we jointly share, it then becomes an altruistic, moral choice whose only judge is to be found in the internal court of personal conscience.

Both these cultural patterns, which moreover mix together in the concrete organizational forms of the third sector, tend to eliminate any reference to what is public from their vocabulary and range of choices, responsibilities and assets at stake in the activities carried out and in the services provided. In both cases, these social relations, thus reduced to a private dimension, generate non-transparent organizations. The pattern of supply and demand, for example, tends to push in the background, to make indeed invisible, the constitutional asymmetry of the relationship, if only because the “demand” takes often the features of need, more or less urgent or severe. They are asymmetrical because they assume on the part of the petitioner a bargaining power which in fact is weak or nonexistent.

Something similar happens in the implementation of the voluntary service pattern. The rhetoric of solidarity, benevolence, altruism, etc., tends to ignore that in this case giving acquires a fundamental asymmetry. Gifts without reciprocation, as Marcel Mauss said, condemn the receiver to a personal subjection. The asymmetry of power lurks here, under the mask of good conscience. And its public significance becomes invisible.
In conclusion, the issue of power, intrinsic in actions and relations of social services, a strictly public issue, is removed from the sight. It is also, however, a primary issue in social policy and in its redistributive intention, where, to put it with Michael Walzer’s words, what is at stake is the redistribution not of goods but of powers.

This tendency to “privatization of the social”, however, has many other aspects that I cannot examine here. Several studies indicate for instance a perverted effect in the expansion of third sector organizations. Even when seriously devoted to a social purpose, these organizations tend to become more interested in their own survival, or in the success of the enterprise, than in their original ends. It is another aspect of the non-transparency I mentioned above.

A particularly critical example is found in the field of the professional training of more or less disadvantaged groups. Italy is not the only country in Europe where vocational training grants, even European ones, have no spin-off for employment, since they are used to support the voluntary or non-profit structures they are organized by, to the benefit of the trainers, and of the trainers’ trainers, not of the trainees.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the way these organizations interact with the social contexts they operate in, with other organizations and with public authorities. The predominant ideology is competitive, the prevailing custom is consociative, or lobbyistic. The only relationship with public institutions is reduced to the funds allocated and to the few, unprocessed data that the organization will provide in exchange in its report, as for instance easily reportable indexes: in Italy the criterion of costs is the prevailing one. These relationships tend to take an instrumental character, which results in a mutual shirking of responsibilities (Clarke & Newman, 1997). The public administration settles for sparing money, and the private organization settles for
carrying out or expanding its private business. The risk is therefore a vicious circle, where the influence of these organizations on social policy grows hand in hand with the poor functioning (or even decay) of public institutions.

Even if the cases of enterprises whose statute is only apparently non-profit are generally marginal, these organizations enter the public scene as pressure groups, or lobbies, aggregated on the basis of interest, not of purposes and values, thus affecting policy-making in the role of private actors, even if well meaning.

In the welfare mix and in the third sector, however, there are also signs of a different, if not opposed, line of development. It might briefly defined as oriented to the creation of “espaces publiques de proximité”. This definition was used by J.L. Laville (1994) to indicate the most important public goods created by some initiatives from below, such as associations of citizens, non governmental organizations or social enterprises, in different areas of social policy. From his research, as well as from other studies on similar experiments, several characteristic elements can be drawn which can be interesting for our line of reasoning (2). Their observation indicates some quality criteria about organizational forms, cultures and practices, which make social policy a crucial field of public daily life.

1) The most important field of action is the fight against the social exclusion of groups, local communities and individuals living in a more or less disadvantaged condition. This could be done, for instance, through the regeneration of deteriorated areas, and through professional training and the creation of employment. Particularly significant, from the cultural point of view, are the initiatives to reduce and overcome the presence of places of segregation, where people live in very problematic conditions (like, typically, mental hospitals). Even though their weight is small, in the whole scenery of social policy, these
forms of segregation disprove the principles of citizenship, based on the acknowledgment of some fundamental rights for the whole population; and above all they remove unresolved social problems and contradictions from public sight and discourse.

2) Methodologies of action tend to social promotion. Procedures may vary according to different contexts, but some interesting experiments are carried out in the field of health promotion, in initiatives of social entrepreneurship and in joint projects of regeneration of deteriorated areas. The common idea is that problematic individuals and social contexts subject to intervention are not be considered and dealt with as social and economic costs, but as a reservoir of valuable resources for society as a whole. On this idea are also based the proposals, now circulating in policy-making (see for example Commission on Social Justice, 1994), of a shift in social policy: instead of distributing the benefits to fill gaps, trying to invest on social and economic potential resources. But here I want to speak mostly of the social daily practices inspired by such an idea. For it requires a little copernican revolution of the organizations operating in the social, especially concerning the relations they establish with their beneficiaries. These are no longer defined by their needs and deficits, to be singled out and satisfied, but by their capabilities, which must be recognized and stimulated, putting them into practice. This little copernican revolution is hard to accomplish, since it puts under debate professional cultures and forms of power that are deeply rooted in the social services. And it is even harder to accomplish when it concerns relationships with particularly weak individuals deprived of a bargaining power, and very different from those actors whom the contractual ideology presupposes as partners in the services. The experiments under observation work toward two goals: on the one hand acknowledging beneficiaries as actors in the social contexts where they live, capable of acting, sharing and pursuing life projects; on the other hand
taking care of and transforming those contexts – usually hostile and problematic – to make them rich in relations, receptive and integrated, i.e. capable of enduring the differences and contradictions that those beneficiaries symbolize. Evidently, these methodologies do not avoid the issue of asymmetry: on the contrary, they face it and bring it to light in the social environment where they operate, making it public, subject to collective choices, discussions and actions.

3) The organizational forms of the experiments under observation are characterized by a remarkable social embeddedness. This requirement, which should be the primary virtue among the forms of self-organization in civil society, is systematically cultivated as an antidote against the above mentioned risks of self-interest on the part of the organizations and against an instrumental use of social resources for their own survival. The initiatives at issue work toward finding and attracting inside the projects of social intervention even non dedicated or specialistic resources present in the local contexts. A variety of competences, interests and cultures become therefore part of the social intervention, blurring the boundaries of specific authorities and dismantling the barriers that remove the situation from public sight and privatize social problems.

Moreover, these initiatives operate in such a way as to involve a variety of different actors, both public and private, in shared projects. For example they put in connection different competences and powers, in order to overcome, among other things, the traditional specialistic compartments in social policy. In the partnerships thus created develops an atmosphere which is different from the usual contrasts and hostilities in the relationships between different operational agencies, in particular between public and private services. And the public administrations are urged to interact not only on financing and costs, but also on the goals of social policy pursued in the projects,
therefore on purposes, besides means. Even conflictual situations are no longer economic
competitions on means, but rather political conflicts on purposes. The networks thus
created develop cultures and practices of cooperation and co-responsibility, instead of
instrumental aggregations of private interests, and conditions of mutual learning.

Ultimately, in these experiments, the initiatives of civil society and its economic
and moral resources function in a “reflexive” way: as multipliers of sociality, producing
actors, relationships, social links, reasons for exchange and communication. The essential
insight is that homeopathic principle according to which “the therapy for the social is the
social”, plus one more qualification. This societing work, dealing problematic matters
and involving public authorities, creates spaces of public discourse and action: thus,
problems and goods dealt with by social policy become something concerning
everybody, a field of collective learning and of shared responsibility towards public
welfare. The public spaces that are in this way created are “espaces de proximité” in the
sense that the public dimension of the issues at stake is expressed in actual interpersonal
relations, and is rooted in people’s daily life. They are the spaces of everyday life politics
which Anne Showstack Sasson precisely talks about.

3. Learning institutions

In social policy, the third sector has acquired a weight that cannot be ignored. The ways
to interpret and practise the social action it spreads promise innovation and are generally
welcome, so that they are often considered the primary reagent of the welfare mix. As
we have seen, however, the third sector’s influence can take very different directions,
with opposite results as regards the interpretative criterion adopted here: the
acknowledgement of the public nature of problems and solutions in social policy. What
develops in the third sector and in the social market can lead to the privatistic retreat from citizenship, to the privatization of social problems and to their removal from the field of discourses and practices of society as a common world, as a shared social building. Or vice versa, the third sector can contribute in a decisive way to keep in the public space the issues dealt with by social policy, translating them into a practice of citizenship and into the democratic participation in daily social life. With this potential, the third sector can represent a reservoir of social learning to pursue those standards of social quality we have adopted as a goal and as an essential condition for the building of European democracy.

This can happen, however, only if the social transformations under way in this field match institutional innovations, and if the processes of institution building thereby triggered (3), along with the resulting institutions, respect certain quality requirements. Let us see which ones. Those experiments from below already mentioned that give to social intervention the potential to create public spaces unfortunately tend to remain just local, short-lived, tied to specific and contingent situations. Public life, to be such, needs not only to be rooted into daily reality, but also to persist in time, to free itself from contingency, and to create a “community of memory and discourse” (Bellah et al. 1986). In other words, it implies both active citizenship and institutions to keep it alive. In actual terms, the experiments at issue are often scarcely visible and hard to spread, and therefore need an institutional interface to promote their growth and spreading, and to invest the value (even economic) they produce as a social capital available to collectivity, as a patrimony of collective intelligence. The role of local administrations and the relations they establish with the aforesaid initiatives is for instance decisive. As we have seen, the contracting out for private supplying, either market-oriented or voluntary, of
public utility services can be reduced uniquely to the criterion of costs, leading the contracting parties to shirk their responsibilities, and resulting in particularistic agreements, if not even in patronage, and in a loss of interest for the common welfare. Instead, a continuous interaction and confrontation between partners must be developed on projects, choices, practices, and a space of discourse on purposes, values and shared, collective responsibilities must be created.

In such cases the quality of social processes becomes relevant. As we have seen, the methods of action, the organizational forms, the daily practices of intervention and, precisely, the quality of the relationships between actors – whether institutional or not – are at least as important as the results obtained. Or more precisely, the social quality of the results entails the quality of the social processes that have produced them. In other words, the goal of social quality requires that the interactions between civil society and institutions on social policy work as a continuous cross-reference between bottom up and top down boosts. Thus the former find space and conversation partners that transform in public assets experiences and subjective, private interests, and the latter find concrete, plural actors and practices to translate public interest into daily life. I call this process of institution building “a sandwich”, to emphasize the fact that social quality is the result of convergence of these two boosts, and that the density and richness of social texture depends on their cooperation. This sandwich is to be built not through formal and completed contracts, but through an ongoing partnership that keeps public discussion open to a variety of actors, voices and “vocabularies” on problems and solutions at issue. In short, the “sandwich” processes of institution building, based on this ongoing partnership, promote mutual learning and give rise to a joint elaboration of the standards of social quality pursued.
This quality of process requires, and in its turn produces, quality for the institutions. It is a quality that, in particular, can be measured on their skill for learning. Let me elaborate on this point. Suppose that institutions, besides being necessary instruments for the quality of common life, are also, and more precisely, common goods of a second level: their efficiency is estimated on their ability to mediate the acknowledgement and the co-responsibility towards common goods. They are the patrimony of collective intelligence (or stupidity) that democratic societies have at their disposal to face problems (4). Not only can we not do without institutions, as admitted by mainstream economic theory itself, but when facing, as is the case today, particularly in social policy, new problems and bonds, uncertainties and high risks, and widespread innovations, we need precisely learning institutions. This notion, that transfers in the institutional field the theoretical and analytical results obtained in the study of organizations, evokes a different picture from the usual stereotype of bureaucracy, which is characterized, especially in public administration, by opacity, idleness, resistance to change and, specifically, by the inability of learning.

On the other hand, a learning institution has few points of contact with that management-oriented transformation of the State and of the institutions under way in several national contexts: of course, being an organization capable of learning implies innovation, entrepreneurship, risk taking – all the typical requirements of economic organizations. These virtues, however, cannot be cut down to business level, to the company-oriented formula. For the institutions measure their own ability of learning on their public function, on the social processes they trigger and on the social quality produced in them.
Institutions are capable of learning when they are willing to listen to and interactively communicate with civil society, open to experimenting, to (self)evaluating and rectifying mistakes, in short, open to change. Therefore, learning means in this sense enhancing the cognitive frames used to define collective problems and solutions, and to make choices on common goods. This enhancement becomes part of the patrimony of society’s collective intelligence, constituting a crucial requirement for social quality. On the other hand, learning, intelligence and reflection, on the part of social actors and institutions, seem nowadays essential qualities for societies that estimate their wealth on the basis of immaterial goods, of a cognitive and communicative nature – even on an economic level – and that are qualified as learning societies, or lifelong learning societies.

We might therefore say, in conclusion, that science and policy making aimed at social quality should devote particular attention to these institutional qualities, and to the factors that generate them in the daily flow of relationships, practices and discourses on social matters. This kind of reflection is especially indispensable when discussing the rising importance of the third sector, and the necessity to enhance its growth potential of democratic participation in public life, which has been the subject of this paper. For it is particularly in this area of social policy, as we have seen, that not only the improvement of the life conditions of individuals or social groups is at stake, but as much that essential societal requirement represented by the public space, i.e. the citizens participation in public life, in the shared choice and building of the quality standard of social life.
(*) Several arguments introduced in this article are developed in de Leonardis (1998).

(1) Naturally I refer here to the conceptualization of social quality developed in Beck, van der Maesen, Walker, 1997, especially in their introduction and in part III.

(2) The main researches constituting the background of the following observations concern several local cases in different national contexts. Laville’s book analyzes some experiences in France (besides Chile and Quebec); about English cases see Leadbeater, 1997; about the case of social enterprise in Germany, Ireland, Switzerland and Italy see de Leonardis, Mauri, Rotelli, 1994; about the experiences of the fight against social exclusion through economic initiative in several southern European countries (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy), see

(3) About institution building, particularly in the cases in which the main characters are non institutional actors, see E. Olstrom (1990).

(4) I draw this conceptualization of institutions, mentioned here, from Donolo (1997).

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