Ferdinand Eibl, *Social Dictatorships: The Political Economy of the Welfare State in the Middle East and North Africa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, pp. 363

For some time now the international financial institutions have been engaged in a critical review of the approach they took during the period of the so-called "Washington Consensus" and of its social effects. At the same time, in the past decade the academic literature has shown a tendency to question precisely the magnitude of the social effects of the structural adjustment interventions of the IMF and World Bank. Underlying this position is the assertion – of which Harrigan and El-Said (2014) offer an early and influential example for the Middle East and North Africa, followed by the less cautious work of Cammett and Diwan (2016) – that the liberalization measures did not affect formal welfare provisions or that initially the stabilization measures had substantial negative social effects, before being outweighed by the growth that supposedly followed the adjustment. This thesis is accompanied by the idea, which gained currency in the early 1990s, that the implementation of the reforms had been partially impeded by various local interests, undermining their effectiveness. Ferdinand Eibl's *Social Dictatorships* is an extremely ambitious text, with the great merit of not being restricted to the narrow confines of a single discipline but instead offering the first comparative analysis of welfare states in the Middle East and North Africa and contributing to the literature with a new, comprehensive dataset, which clearly fits into this debate.

This comparative study revolves around a theoretical framework that the author develops in the first chapter and goes into more thoroughly in the rest of the work. This framework, which might seem schematic and deterministic – a critique that the author raises only to reject it – posits that the dynamics of social spending and welfare commitment are determined in each country by the configuration of the coalition in power, which is viewed as static from the time of its formation onwards. Note that this approach is indispensable to the use of the term "dictatorship," which is not defined by the author; and more importantly, in the theoretical framework it is the static nature of the coalition that determines the welfare model and the level of social spending, which for each type of welfare regime, the author contends, remains roughly the same (as does the ruling coalition, at this stage the two notions no longer being kept distinct).

The theoretical framework that Eibl proposes, in fact, revolves around what he calls a "rational approach to authoritarian politics," which can be summarized as a vulgarization of the notion of the "rational agent" of neoclassical economics. Hence the importance accorded to the elites and the strong characterization of their behaviour, and to coalitions. In Eibl's view elites are rational agents in a competitive context, whose interest is to maximize their objective function, namely the accumulation and preservation of a scarce good, power. The interaction between elites thus becomes the "primary driver" of the dynamics of politics, which is essentially limited to competition and alliance. Factors that the author calls "ideology" – every type of political stance or representation of social partners – are held not to be decisive, and social policies are nothing but a functional mechanism to reinforce the coalition. The elites, in Eibl's theory, are like independent individuals, not representatives of any defined social interest. The impression is that in Eibl's reductive analysis, there is a lack of integration between the notion of the "subject" as rational agent and the notion of social policies as the allocation of resources motivated by the maintenance of power. In fact, the nexus between the space of intra-elite coalitions and society and thus between *instrumentum* and the space of its effectivity is not theoretically clarified, since the very characterization of the agents excludes the most intuitive version. The impression is that in order to get around this problem without rejecting the theory, the author is forced to use historical contextualization, which is proposed later on in the text as an ad hoc explanation for single elements of the theory.

On this theoretical base, Eibl proposes the thesis that the moment of formation of the intra-elite coalition, together with national specificities, determines the characteristics of social policies, the calculus being reducible to just a few variables: intra-elite conflict and communal cleavages determine whether the coalition is broad or narrow; the narrow coalitions have as outcome minimal or segmented welfare provisions, while broad coalitions produce "broad" or "broad-and-generous" provisions, which the author calls "social dictatorships." In this case, the only external independent variable considered – substantiating the assertion that the theory accounts for the influence of the international institutions – is external threats. These variables considered, then in the author's view the type of welfare policies enacted and the level of social spending are given once and for all. As noted, Eibl's claim is that these do not change as long as the regime retains power. Given the length of the period examined (from independence, or World War II, depending on country, to 2010), schematization and certain partial considerations, at least chronologically, are necessary in the subsequent chapters that substantiate the statement and the underlying hypotheses.

The key point of the second chapter is the renewed claim of stability of the spending pattern for the entire period considered, this time accompanied by a graph of the ratio of welfare to total expenditure over time. The resemblance of each country's path to that of the average of the ratio for countries in the same category (broad welfare providers, etc.) and the supposed stability of welfare expense levels are the major findings, and the result is presented as the corroboration of the theoretical framework. However, this similarity of pattern between country and group does not demonstrate the validity of the theory, which instead should be constructed a posteriori on the basis of the data. Moreover, this thesis is progressively presented more and more as a theory with predictive ability, without proper consideration of the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning. Further, despite the great attention to quantitative criteria and the use of modelling in the following chapters, it is difficult at best to attest to the demonstrative validity of these graphs. In fact not only is the author's definition of "welfare expenditure" unclear, but the ratio of total public expenditure to GDP is not reported; presumably, graphing this ratio would show variation in the magnitude of social spending over time. At the same time, the assertion that variations in welfare expenditure on the order of 20 or 30 percent of GDP are not significant is questionable, to say the least. Yet the main shortcoming is the relative neglect of historical and complex dynamics, which appear to be given scant consideration in this reductive view. In fact, although the author's stated method consists in the crossing of quantitative and qualitative data, the persistent impression throughout the treatise is that historical complexities are merely mentioned and quantitative data alone are effectively used in the analysis. The most typical example is the discontinuous consideration of demographic dynamics, a feature whose systematic treatment would be decisive for the general argument; instead, changes in social expenditure per capita are considered only erratically.

This feature is visible also in the following chapters, which respond to two different objectives: to provide historical elements in support of the theory, hence demonstrating that the formation of the elite coalition is decisive in determining spending patterns and that this formation is consistent with the notion of rational agent proposed earlier; and to ascribe precisely to these factors what the author calls the "path dependence" or absence of "retrenchment" in social spending even when economic rationality would have imposed it. Thus the decision to take only internal factors as significant, scarcely mentioning the dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s and the intervention of the IMF and the World Bank, reflects the focus on elites and, in this context, interest groups. As to the moment of formation of coalitions, what stands out is above all the hypostatization of a limited period of time, abstracting from historical dynamics, a weakness that threatens to undermine the value of the historical evidence cited in support of the theoretical framework.

Indeed, the interesting chapters on Tunisia and Egypt – respectively "broad and generous" and "broad" welfare providers in the author's taxonomy – would appear to be limited to the years 1956-59 as regards intra-elite competition and alliance formation in Tunisia and 1953-54 in Egypt. Likewise, Tunisia's "path dependence" – and the consequently scant impact of the Washington Consensus on welfare spending and related interests – is illustrated simply by the UGTT's "lobbying" for education between 1969 (the book's sole mention of the ouster of Ben Salah, while changes in development strategy are ignored) and 1987 (arguably by coincidence, the year in which the first structural programme of the international financial institutions entered into force) and the UGTT and popular mobilization against the 2004 reform of universal care. For Egypt, the lack of any change in the pattern of social expenditure after Camp David and the end of the external threat is attributed generically to the debt contracted between 1967 and 1973 and not related, for instance, to the change in the cost of debt refinancing over time, the intervention of the IFIs and the related "bread riots" of 1977, or to the opposition faced through the 2000s by the proposal for health insurance. Those cases are cited as evidence of the influence of various constituencies and the strength of "path dependence," a feature already affirmed by the Cox model presented in Chapter 4. Moreover, as Eibl argues using the now classic example of subsidies, popular opposition constitutes only the "told story" of "status-quo defense"; the "untold story," here, amounts simply to cronyism, albeit coated with the rebellious patina typical of mainstream economics. But what Eibl calls status quo is not *ancien régime*. In this sense the author only takes account of the antagonistic aspect of the relationship between state and markets, failing to consider that it was precisely these regimes that carried out the reforms; and that as they inevitably impacted on the social pacts already in being they required reinforced links with at least part of the entrepreneurial class. In this sense, cronyism is the sign of a non-unidirectional bond between state and entrepreneurs, in whose configuration the international financial institutions intervene. Ultimately, Ferdinand Eibl's *Social Dictatoships* is a text that expresses with great clarity the theory of which it is the bearer; it is recommended for specialists interested in the debate on the evolution of social policies in the Middle East and North Africa and in comparative analysis, who will certainly appreciate, despite the schematic nature of the book, the author's subtle use of different methodologies, as well as the attentive archival research and interviewing upon which it is based.

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