

# Historical-sociological research ITALY

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## Four stages in the history of the welfare state

In Italy the recent history of the relationships between social policies, family and kinship can be roughly subdivided into four stages. An initial take-off period, going approximately from 1900 to the end of WW1 and the advent of fascism in 1922, was characterised by provisions favouring the weaker categories in the population (women and children). During the fascist Ventennio family policies grew significantly and the regime was the promoter of an organic set of reforms meant to enhance a patriarchal model of the family submitted to the control of the state. Since the main aim of these reforms was to fight the decline of fertility and to support fathers and fatherhood, women's participation in the official labour market was thwarted.

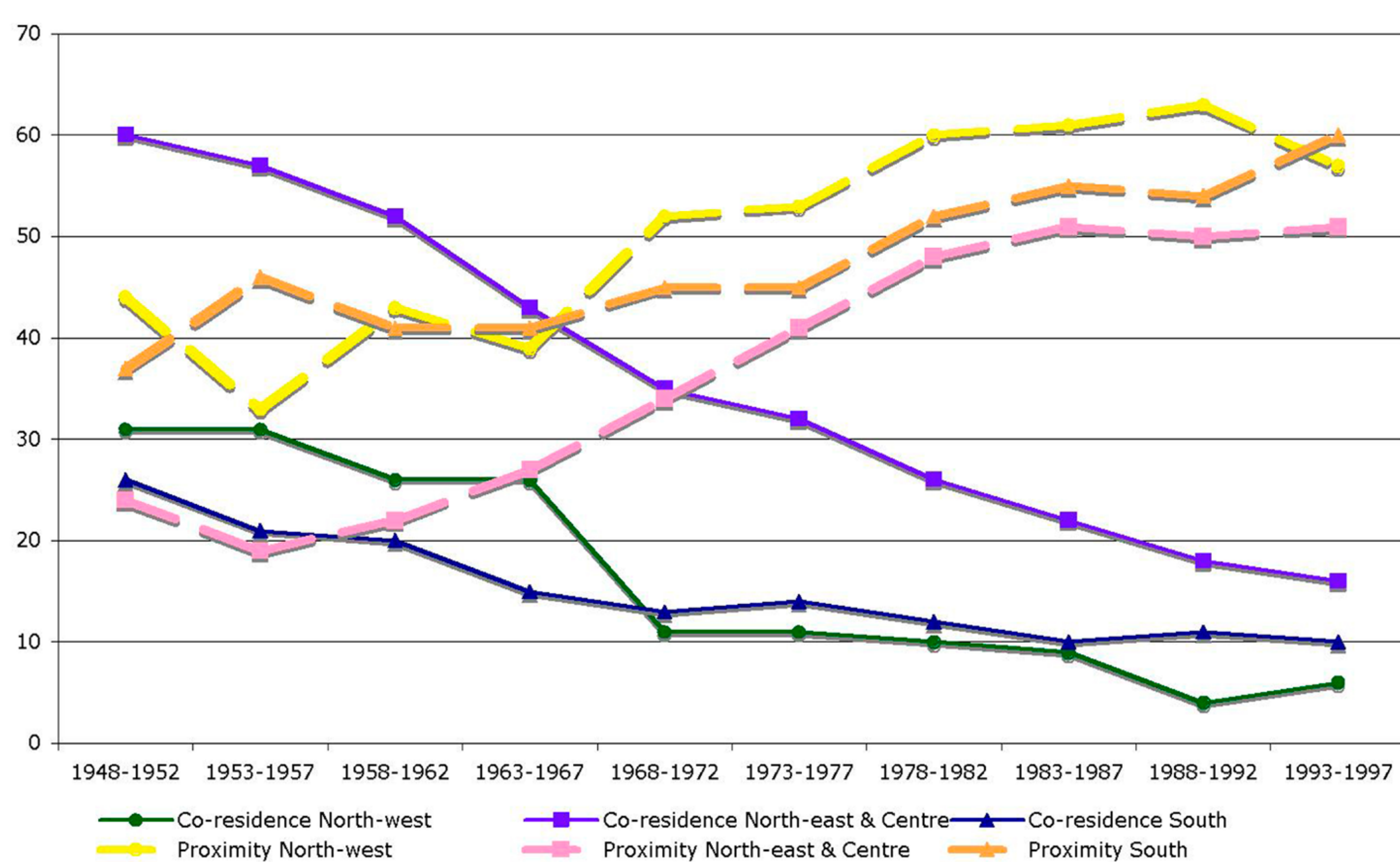
The transition from fascism to democracy was marked by clear discontinuity: for at least two decades the prevailing attitude was to avoid or reduce to a minimum any interference by the state with family matters. This was partly due to the attitude of the ruling Christian Democrat Party, predictably sensitive to the calls of the Catholic Church, the main bearer of the ideology of "subsidiarity", also in view of the extensive involvement of ecclesiastical structures in the provision of services for the family. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, however, a tendency towards decommodification became increasingly evident.

The two previous periods of enlargement and consolidation of the welfare state have been followed by a period of crisis which is lasting to the present day. While the elderly have mostly enjoyed a comparatively high degree of social sheltering, young adults have been badly hit, not least because the Italian social security system is mainly of the "occupational" type, which means that there is no provision for a minimum wage to which everyone is entitled on the basis of the principle of citizenship. Thus, young people are neither helped nor encouraged to become independent.

## Families under challenge

As a consequence of the crisis of the welfare state, the family is asked once again to resume some of the tasks which had been taken over by the state. But the family which is currently charged with heavy support duties is not what it was in the 1950s: in the course of the second half of the 20th century, it has experienced the end of the economic boom, deep structural transformations in the labour market and massive demographic changes which have greatly shrunk kinship networks. Moreover, the very structure and composition of domestic groups has considerably changed.

From coresidence to close proximity<sup>a</sup>: residence at marriage in Italy with respect to at least one parent of either spouse by marriage cohort and macro-region, 1948-1997  
(Source: Our elaboration from data provided by Barbagli, Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2003)



<sup>a</sup> "Close proximity" has been obtained by adding the couples who started their married lives living in the same building as at least one parent of either spouse, but residing in another flat, to those who settled at a distance of less than one kilometre.

## Family forms in the past: the "three Italies"

Italy was characterised for centuries by a chequered geography of family forms and pronounced regional differences. "Three Italies" were still detectable around 1950: the proportion of people living in nuclear families was highest in the South, whereas in the cluster of central and north-eastern regions, where sharecropping had been both most widespread and most resilient, the weight of complex households was greatest;



Wedding in an Italian mountain village, ca. 1920

the north-western regions displayed intermediate levels. Since the middle of the 20th century the proportion of households in which married couples live with the parents of one of the spouses has declined everywhere, most dramatically in central and north-eastern Italy. This process of "nuclearisation" of the Italian family has been at first interpreted as the shearing away of the traditional couple's ties with parents and kin, an essential step towards the making of the modern family. More recently,

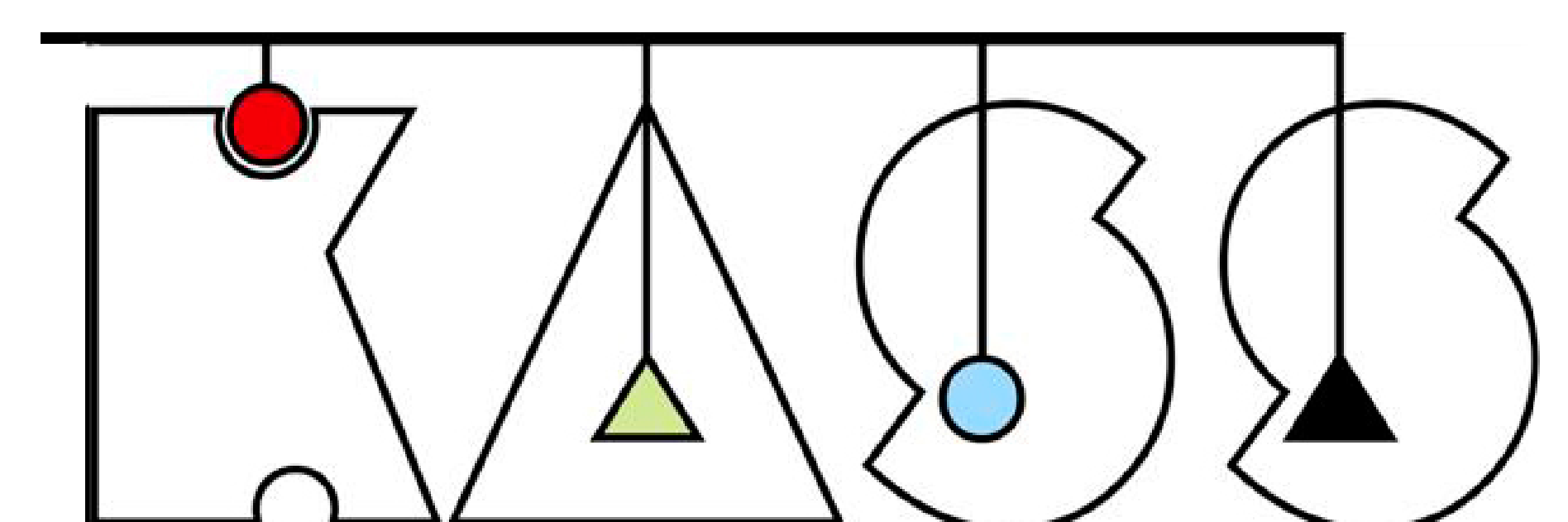
however, an alternative interpretation has been put forward by Italian sociologists and demographers, who have contended that the "break" with parents and kin is far less drastic than the declining proportion of complex families suggests, and that the old patterns of coresidence have actually been replaced by new patterns of proximity between parents and children and, more generally, between relatives.

## From coresidence to spatial proximity

The convergence of the "three Italies" towards increasingly low levels of coresidence has been mirrored by a simultaneous and contrary convergence towards the high levels of spatial proximity which are a distinctive feature of Italy in the wider European context. For about 25 years, over 50% of "neolocal" couples have started their married life either living in the same building as at least one parent of either spouse (though residing in a different flat), or settling at a distance of less than one kilometre. This points to a twofold process: on the one hand, it reveals a growing desire on the part of the younger generations to seek privacy and greater autonomy through the creation of separate households at marriage; on the other hand, it suggests that both the new couples and their parents continue to seek residential proximity. The immediate motivation behind this search for proximity is mainly the parents' wish to "help downwards", for example by buying for their children a house located not far from their own house in order to make childminding easier. In the longer term, however, this residential choice comes to comply with a widespread moral value which asks adult children to "help upwards" by taking care of their elderly parents. All in all, although the undisputable primacy of the nuclear family is certainly indicative of changes in the values that had buttressed the complex family, the metamorphosis of coresidence into proximity appears to be symptomatic of significant continuity as regards the role and importance of close kin as sources of social security.



Intergenerational solidarity (Tuscany 2004)



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