

Expanded abstract

Comparative socio-historical approach to the Spanish regional Third Sector of Social Action (TSSA)

Over the last four decades, the Spanish Third Sector of Social Action (TSSA) has been institutionalised as an agent of the welfare state with its own sphere of action. This process has taken place at the same time as the regional authorities have assumed responsibility for the implementation and management of social policies, particularly social services.

This article is part of the research project Comparative Perspective of the Third Sector of Social Action in the Autonomous Communities (PECOTSAS) which asks whether the need to conform to the regional welfare systems has guided the TSSA along a path of regional differentiation (in some cases, such as the Basque Country or Catalonia, in a very distinct manner, given their national peculiarity recognised in the Spanish Constitution).

More specifically, the aim of this article is to explore the elements that, over the last four decades, have influenced the socio-historical configuration of the TSSA. We examine the different factors that have marked the particular regional trajectories of the TSSA.

The article is based on the comparative study of a sample of Spanish regions following the research design of the PECOTSAS project. Within the framework of the project, primary qualitative information has been collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups, as well as secondary information (national and regional documentation and legislation).

In this article, we have relied on primary qualitative empirical material, mainly discursive, which reflects the self-awareness or historical memory of the actors in the sector themselves. The analysis has taken into account the convergence of the actors' discourses and has contrasted them with other sources (primary or secondary) in order to establish hypotheses or conjectures regarding the general meaning of the discourses analysed and the existence of plausible relationships between them and the phenomenon under investigation. In any case, we consider that the "truth" of the actors interviewed, their historical self-consciousness, is an instance (discursive, cultural, ideological) that operates on the reality of the TSSA itself, and even on its own history. This self-awareness is a representation that operates in the here and now: it defines the identity on the basis of which the actors position themselves in the face of the changes they have experienced.

We have structured the comparative analysis along three types of elements: a) the political conditions that make the TSSA possible; b) the structural conditions of economic and territorial development; and c) the social actors involved in the social mobilisation linked to TSSA organisations.

As for the political conditioning factors underlying the current TSSA, the focus of analysis has centred on the period between the end of Franco's regime and the beginning of the democratic era. The most immediate precedents of today's TSSA date back to the civic and solidarity actors of the 19th century (ecclesiastical entities and civil associations of a solidarity nature or linked to workers' mutualism). During Franco's dictatorship, there was a conglomerate of social welfare entities, many of them of a religious nature, which carried out social action and even advocated for rights. However, the numerous social mobilisations, joined by sectors of the Catholic Church, which emerged to demand rights and collectively resolve needs not supplied by the public sector during the capitalist modernisation of the final stage of the dictatorship, especially in urban industrial areas, served as the basis for the emergence of associations that would characterise the democratic transition from 1977 onwards. These mobilisations constitute the general and immediate historical background to what, in the democratic period, was to become institutionalised in the TSSA.

In the informants' historical reconstructions, the democratic transition appears as the foundational moment of the development of the Spanish TSSA. The effects derived from the processes triggered by the end of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy delimited the conditions of possibility for the development of the TSSA in Spain. On the one hand was the recognition of a catalogue of fundamental rights and public freedoms, which enabled associations and social mobilisation to develop without the restrictions of the previous period. On the other hand, during the transition, the political and legal foundations were laid for the construction of a modern, decentralised welfare state, with its own mechanisms of government. The construction of the Spanish welfare state, supported by the corresponding regional government mechanisms, laid the foundations for the establishment of collaborative relations between the public sector and the associative sector, within the framework of a mixed system for the management of matters considered to be of a social nature. Adjustment to this framework gave way to a process of rationalisation and professionalisation of the TSSA entities, which over time have lost some of their critical vigour. This process was paralleled by the assumption of a dominant role as service-providing organisations, marked by dependence on the purposes and modes of financing established by the public administrations.

The structural conditions of economic and territorial development are represented, in the discourses collected in the research, as the origin of the needs and forms of interaction that explain the different forms of social action and development of organised civil society. In the informants' representations, the reference model of a vigorous associative movement appears to be associated with industrial economic dynamism and the related urbanisation process.

Thus, in the regions of early industrialisation, such as Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque Country, the needs (problems of industrial agglomeration, uprooting, environmental deterioration, industrial reconversion and unemployment) fuelled demands and mobilisation along with the formation of organisations supported by a thriving voluntary sector. For their part, in areas with delayed industrialisation, dispersed population settlements and territorial heterogeneity, such as Andalusia, Castile-Leon and, to a certain extent, the Valencian Community, a heterogeneous configuration can be distinguished in which the rural space has been marked

by traditional modes of mutual assistance as opposed to the cities where the patterns have been similar to those of the industrial regions but marked by the development and decisions of the public administration. This distinction between rural and urban environments also serves to differentiate dynamics in the territories of early industrialisation.

The informants' representations converge on the leading role of the Catholic Church and of the families or those concerned in the social mobilisation that gave rise to the Spanish TSSA. References are also made to the public administration, the foundations of savings banks and financial institutions, the workers' movement and social intervention professionals, but they do not attain the relevance of these two actors.

The role of the Church appears to be based both on its traditional authority and political legitimacy during the dictatorship, and on the renewal of its social and political role that a sector of the Church undertook during this period. Church organisations opened up to social demands, promoted initiatives, and provided space and capacity for dialogue to associations that subsequently became independent. Representations are different in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Madrid and Valencia, where the Church plays an important role in the generation of the associative movement, to those of Andalusia and Castile-Leon, where its presence is more associated with traditional forms of association and charity.

In the discourses, the mobilisation of those concerned and of the 'families' seeking solutions to their problems, represent the social initiative with secular roots. In the first decades, the organisations of those concerned were oriented towards the demand for rights and the organisation of collective responses, with parents playing an active role. Subsequently, they would have redirected their action towards the provision of professionalised services and dependence on the action of public administrations. There are also differences between the regional cases: if in Catalonia, the leading role has been played by a well-established associative movement (neighbourhood, workers', leisure or Catalanist), it has been the association of families with cooperativism in the Basque Country, the neighbourhood movement in Madrid and the family initiative in Valencia.

The results indicate that, from a socio-historical perspective, the regional differences in the TSSA are rooted both in the forms of unequal distribution of power resulting from the process of democratic transition and in the differences in the patterns of economic development, population distribution and historical traditions of social mobilisation of the Spanish regions, without losing sight of the fact that these elements also have an impact on intra-regional differences.