Self-organization practices in cities: discussing the transformative potential
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Self-organization and local institutions. Who learns, who changes?

In a growing number of small and large cities across Europe, citizens are engaging and mobilizing to demonstrate their ability in creating innovative solutions for important social and spatial challenges. We are witnessing a different set of micro-practices that are transforming cities 'from below', thus questioning not only the relation between active citizenship and the State (Uitermark, 2015) but also forms of urban activation themselves. In this brief introduction we examine the politics of urban self-organization with a particular focus on the implications for local governments and the transformative potential of these practices for local communities.

We argue that a focus on self-organization practices in contemporary city raises new questions around the relationship between active citizenship and local governments; this is particularly relevant under global neoliberal conditions where States' retrenchment from social welfare has heightened since the 2008 financial crisis.

Self-organization in cities is a debated term. The term is often used to refer to different forms of local activation. Since the 1960s, self-organization has been understood as the mechanism of internal change within complex urban systems and widely used to build models of city evolution (Allen, 1997; Thrift, 1999). But the notions of self-organization and citizens' participation are often mutually confused. There is, however, a fundamental difference between collaborative participation and self-organization (Boonstra, Boelensb, 2011). The papers presented in this Special Issue highlight this major difference and offer

a more specific definition of self-organization in cities. When using the term self-organization, we mainly refer to community/citizen-led initiatives that originate outside the government control. In particular, all the contributions in this Issue shed light on the urban as an important scale of analysis when examining relationships between people, places and institutions.

Self-organization should not be understood as a consequence or result of the State retrenching from or not efficiently delivering public goods. Firstly, this argument is dangerous, considering how active citizenship can be commodified within the continuous erosion of the welfare State. Secondly, the observation of self-organization in cities portrays a more complex architecture of actors at different scales and with different intensities that coalesce, meet, and collaborate.

Therefore, self-organization today cannot be simply defined as a force originated in cities without specific interventions from outside. We reject the concept of self-organization as human agency within a liberal and individualistic framework of self-reliance beyond the State (Davoudi, 2001 quoted in Savini, 2016). Do-it-yourself actions, tactical urbanism, everyday making, social innovation, are all buzzwords that in many cases have been used as an excuse for the decreasing role of the State, or as instruments for the public to reclaim public space and reconfigure everyday life (Savini, 2016). It is time to consider self-organization as an arena of opportunities that emphasizes bottom-linked governance which focuses on reconnecting local communities to their governments, as well as scaling up processes of institutional learning. We have argued elsewhere how local governments should reconsider their relation to community/citizen-led initiatives in order to ensure policy backing that is durable, sustainable, and effective (Ostanel, 2017).

Citizen-driven activation increases the possibilities for a broader range of people to become directly involved in all stages of social and urban change while citizens' activation may simultaneously fill the gaps left by government in basic social services (Alford, 2009). In this context, public institutions are challenged to find new ways to provide public values in an open, transparent way but avoiding practices that seek to commodify active citizenship. What we claim in this introduction is that analysing self-organization is also about understanding how local institutions

can put into practice processes of institutional learning and engage with different forms of community/citizen led activation. Agents involved in processes of self-organization can create important spaces of autonomy within these dynamics but as other papers in this issue have discussed, agent mainly witness the existence of different forms of collaboration between self-organized initiatives and more institutional actors.

This study raises new urgent questions, such as: how can self-organization empower local communities and produce socio-political transformation at a local level? And, to what extent and under what conditions can self-organizing in cities contribute to processes of institutional learning and change?

Among the buzzwords we have aforementioned, social innovation has surely been the most pervasive one. Under the impulse of a pervasive European discourse, social innovation has become a buzzword applied in very different contexts. In 2011, the President of the European Commission Barroso launched the 'Social Innovation Europe' initiative, defining social innovation as a 'pivotal instrument to meet unmet social needs and improving social outcomes. In this context, social innovation is for the people and with the people. It is about solidarity and responsibility. It is good for society and it enhances society's capacity to act'. From this moment, social innovation has strongly entered into the public debate inspiring EU policies (as the 'Europe 2020 Strategy') and as a consequence national and local debates and practices. Before Barroso's social innovation initiative, this concept focused mainly on the insertion of technology in production processes or innovation in management processes. But since its origin, social innovation has not been a neutral term and scholars have discussed the relationship between social innovation and the reduction of public spending. Critical scholarly discussions have showed how social innovation could be employed as a strategy or tool to justify the retrenchment of the welfare State. Jamie Peck problematizes the discourse centred on social innovation that could be used to justify the reconfiguration of the State's role in social welfare provision and the rising privatization and commodification of different urban services. According to Peck, social innovation is another example of 'fast' policy interventions, highly replicable and communicable, de facto launching a 'policy of good practices' that could be transplanted everywhere regardless of the social

and institutional context (Peck et al, 2013).

The pervasive rhetoric on co-production/co-creation associated with the discourse on social innovation has missed the opportunity to develop critical research in real-life scenarios where bottom-up action is performed in a dynamic relation with local institutions. Critical analyses of co-production have mainly focused on the factors that enable institutions to design more open decision making processes. These analyses, however, have not taken into much consideration the role that real-scenarios of urban activation have in complex processes of institutional learning. Much of this research has focussed on factors that can enable institutional change within local government; such as: i) the organizational structure and procedures within the public organization; ii) the administrative and political culture; and iii) the incentives/supporting facilities to community led initiatives (Kleinhans, 2017; Voorberg, Bekkers, Tummers, 2015).

An important question raised in this issue that requires further critical scholarly attention is how spatial transformations produced by community/citizen-led initiatives can push for formal and/or informal institutional changes. In this sense, we can overcome the risk of considering self-organization as a 'vehicular idea' for practices of depoliticization when applied to social and urban settings (Swyngedouw, 2010).

What if the more traditional literature on social movements and the most recent literature on self-organization/social innovation would be merged into one analytical framework to claim that community based activation and the collective making of political claims should be mutually reinforced both in theory and practice? For the most part these two conceptual frameworks have remained separated in the literature, overlooking the synergies created between conflict and collaboration. Sophie Watson in the previous issue calls for a better understanding of conflict and collaboration as mutually reinforcing elements of an ongoing political process, where conflict is not only unavoidable but also a necessary aspect of participation and engagement (Watson, 2018).

Space plays a major role in this new analytical framework. Research practice should go beyond a 'space-as-container ontology' (Gotham, 2003) affirming that a full understanding of human actions requires the recognition of the spatial nature of human agency, since space is an assemblage of spatial uses,

practices, and representations 'involved in the production and reproduction of social structures, social action, and relations of power and resistance' (*ibid.*). Space and environment are no longer passive fragments of the city because they provide resources for various groups constructing themselves differently within the space. Space is neither a romantic container for otherness nor a battleground among different communities; it is a specific element forming social interaction and, as a consequence, shaping identities through its use. Urban space is in this sense social and political.

Sophie Watson highlights the potential of new forms of community and social organising that use urban space as a policy and political resource (Watson, 2018). Community/citizen-led actions in cities are inspiring models of active citizenship that can help rebuild cities to be more inclusive, just, and responsive to local needs (Watson, 2018).

The transformative potential of self-organization practices

The new wave of self-organization practices articulates the urban as more than a terrain of struggles between dynamics of exclusion/marginalization and processes of resistance/activation. In cities, inhabitants have built nets, associations, communities based on shared practices for a variety of intentions: to apply solidarity and equity principles to new forms of consumption (solidarity based purchasing groups); to experiment with tools of social and environmental sustainability (short distribution chain, urban agriculture); to fight against the monetization of daily life through free reciprocal service exchange (time banks) or through ethical finance services; to invent virtuous forms of trade (fair trade shops); to rethink urban space from an ecological perspective (through energy saving and the use of renewable energy); to reinvent places and save them from profit obsession (self-organization practices aimed at reusing dismissed/residual spaces); to imagine different forms of production (reinventing production cycle inside abandoned factories); to build a more conscious right to the city (through the occupation of houses or the collective planning of public spaces); to rethink culture as a common good that cannot be commodified (through the re-invention of abandoned culture-spaces destined for demolition). These multiplicities of practices have the potential to create

'relational goods'. The term 'relational goods' emerged in different theoretical conversations in the late 1980s through the works of philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1986), the sociologist Pierpaolo Donati (1987), and the economists Benedetto Gui (1987) and Carole Uhlaner (1989). These goods are non-material goods that are essentially linked to interpersonal relationships (Bruni, 2012): they cannot be produced or consumed solely by individuals and they can only be appreciated when shared in reciprocity. In particular, Guy describes them as «immaterial goods connected to interpersonal relationships» (1987: 37). Uhlaner refers to «goods that can only be *possessed by* mutual agreement that they exist, after appropriate joint actions have been taken by a person and non-arbitrary others» (1989: 254). According to Bruni these goods can be materialized through specific properties: they are goods where the *identity* of the people involved is an essential element; they are mutual activities, shared actions and reciprocity play a fundamental role; they are co-produced and co-consumed *simultaneously*; they are led by *motivations* and values that create a distinction between relational goods and non-relational goods; and they can be interpreted as *emerging facts*, being a third component beyond the contributions made by the agents.

All the practices previously outlined have these properties. Moreover, they can be interpreted as 'contextual goods': their aim is to better the quality of the context in which people develop their daily activities (Magatti, 2012). On a smaller scale, many transformative urban practices articulate how context drives change and how space is not a neutral support for human activities. Rather space is the means through which we build our relations, identities and projects. 'Contextual goods' are what is created out of a joint effort to improve the qualities of communities and their territories.

In this wide spectrum of different urban collective actions, many practices are 'informal' actions of re-appropriation (i.e. practices that challenge property and normative regimes in the attempt to recover a multiplicity of spaces that have been dismissed by modernity). These practices are islands of resistance but also incubators of new urban imaginaries, which include: organizational experiments that are potentially able to build the city even out of an institutionally recognized framework; symbolic and material tactics of spatial sense-

making (de Certeau, 1990); molecular and minute writings that transgress the text of the planned city; and capillary battles with power mechanisms (Agamben, 2005).

Informal self-organizational practices offer themselves as potentially significant laboratories of social and environmental experimentation. These experimentations are activated by '*poetical* because *poietical*' subjects are builders, craftsmen [sic], authors not of texts but of practical and ethical acts that inspire plausible alternative scenarios of possibilities to come (Gargani 1999). Moreover, they can be interpreted as an interconnected urban social movement that is able to produce integrated instances rooted in a renewed social, political and environmental consciousness. They succeed in merging land care, occupation, production, security, social inclusion and participation. «They are the organizational forms, the live schools, where the new social movements of our emerging society are taking place, growing up, learning to breathe, out of reach of the state apparatuses, and outside the closed doors of repressed family life. They are successful when they connect all the repressed aspects of the new, emerging life because this is their specificity: to speak the new language that nobody yet speaks in its multifaceted meaning» (Castells, 1983: 330-331).

According to this perspective, many urban spaces (abandoned, suspended or threatened) have been reinvented by heterogeneous populations. In these spaces, conviviality (Illich, 1974), bonding value (Caillè, 1998) and share value (Porter and Kramer, 2011) have been tested as possible answers to capitalist hegemony. The path is to build goods with a high relational, contextual, and cognitive content (Magatti, 2012). A way to reclaim the right to the city is to transofrm the city itself. In fact, the right to the city cannot be conceived as a way to access what already exists; rather it is the right to change it through the reinvention of an urban life that would be more in accordance with our desires (Lefebvre *et al.*, 1996).

As Castells would argue, if the process of city-production is most evident in the case of social revolt «it is not limited to such exceptional events. Every day, in every context, people acting individually or collectively, produce or reproduce the rules of their society, and translate them into their spatial expression» (Castells, 1983: xvi). Therefore, these practices cannot be

interpreted as «dramatic and exceptional events. They are, in a permanent form, at the very core of social life» (Touraine, 1977: 45). They often contradict power and institutional structures and try to imagine and produce a different city. In this framework people experiment with new ways of being together; create new languages that are able to name things differently; and build social relations that challenge or disrupt what is already established.

Nevertheless, most existing research on informality and self-organization practices combine romantic descriptions with populist ideology. A substantial literature interprets informal practices as a revolution from below (De Soto 1989, 2000), emphasizing the role of people in acting against the State. This stance is comprehensibly sympathetic to the various struggles that take place in the informal territories of claims. Nevertheless, this approach risks producing an ideological and populist celebration of the informal without understanding its inner differentiation and complexity. Informal practices are not, for themselves and without distinction, a virtuous and homogeneous social entity that acts on the base of shared and progressive values. In some cases, they end up implementing spatial privatization processes based on forms of neo-liberal individualism. In other cases, they appear to be forms of 'urban populism' (Castells, 1983) that do not necessarily call into question the urban status quo or create a just city despite their good intentions (Roy, 2009). Finally, and interestingly some forms of insurgency succeed in producing 'public' (services, spaces, goods), implementing an alternative model of urban space production and effectively transforming the city itself. But under which conditions? Or what should be done to achieve this goal? And, as highlighted in the previous section, what role could institutions play in this respect?

With regard to those practices that are able to produce public value, it is important to acknowledge that different resources, knowledge claims, experiences, and competences aimed at addressing public problems cannot be confined to formally recognized institutions (Cottino, Zeppetella, 2009). Rather these factors interweave with informal practices that are able to find significant and usually unconventional answers to collective needs. In this respect, public institutions cannot be considered the only subjects entitled to provide public

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services or to produce public politics. Informal practices can be thought as *de facto* public politics if (and when) they succeed in addressing public issues (Crosta, 1998).

In this relatively new sense-making framework, it is important to avoid simplification and deconstruct dichotomous relations (formal-informal; citizen activism-state) in order to adopt a critical stance on what is at stake in the realm of self-organization practices. If we achieve this, we could possibly overcome the risk of depoliticizing self-organization practices as actions divorced from principles of social and economic justice. We could also challenge dominant conceptions of activation as service providers and apolitical moderators between citizens and local governments (de Filippis et al, 2010), and instead emphasize activation's potential for building power and trying to have an impact on the root causes of social and spatial problems.

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