

## Problematizing critiques in planning research engaged with citizen initiatives: the journey of two doctoral researchers<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Il cambiamento è un tema centrale della pianificazione urbana. Molti studiosi hanno guardato in questo senso alle esperienze di organizzazione dal basso, spesso con l'obiettivo di contribuire direttamente a questi esperimenti di cambiamento sociale. Queste ricerche si caratterizzano per un forte coinvolgimento politico ed emotivo dei ricercatori che può rendere però difficile l'esplicitazione di una critica delle esperienze studiate. L'articolo riflette sul tema della critica alle pratiche di auto-organizzazione dei cittadini utilizzando le ricerche di dottorato degli autori per esplorare la difficile costruzione di uno spazio di critica da parte dei ricercatori implicati concentrandosi sui vincoli emotivi, etici e relazionali. In conclusione l'articolo afferma che le voci critiche non dovrebbero essere omesse per ragioni ideologiche, di amicizia o di appartenenza, ma accolte come strumento di cambiamento e di riflessione collettiva con i partecipanti della ricerca.

Since its beginnings planning has focused on how to change society. Many scholars have looked at insurgent experiences, aiming to contribute with their competences to these experiments of social change. Considering the political and emotional engagement between researchers and subjects in this field of research, the cultivation of spaces of critique is at least problematic. However, there is a lack of reflection and understanding on this issue. The article discusses the issue of critique within urban planning literature on citizen self-organization, then uses the authors' doctoral engaged researches to explore the problematic generation of spaces of critique, focusing on emotive, political and relational issues. The paper concludes that in order for engaged research to be an effective instrument of change, critical voices should not be hidden (for ideological, friendship or belonging reasons), but should be embraced as shared fields of reflection with the participants of the research.

**Parole chiave: auto-organizzazione;** critica; ricerca implicata

**Keywords:** self-organization; critique; engaged research

### Introduction

Planning deals with change. Different schools and generations of planning theories (Allmendinger, 2002) have explored how

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<sup>1</sup> The authors discussed together the themes and cases analyzed here and worked together in the elaboration of the contribution. In the final draft § 1, 2, 4 are jointly to the two authors, § 3.1 to Francesco Campagnari, § 3.2 to Alice Ranzini.

to change society. Scholars have often advocated for a radical transformation of society to remove oppression along social, economic, racial, ethnic, gender, spatial and identity lines. Radical planning scholars (Holston, 1995; Sandercock, 1998; Miraftab, 2009; Friedmann, 2011; Cellamare, 2019) have looked at citizen self-organized and insurgent experiences as developers of emancipatory practices pursuing these goals. Scholars often conduct research on them aiming to contribute to social changes, engaging directly in collaborative research activities.

In recent years, research has underlined the need to develop more thorough analyses of the actual emancipatory outcomes of citizen practices (Meth, 2010). This strand of planning research – as well as debates in the action-research and engaged research tradition – has however missed a central aspect of the assessment of their eventual negative aspects: the difficulties of researchers in developing critical perspectives on these initiatives. Considering the political and emotional engagement between researchers and subjects in this field of research, the cultivation of spaces of critique is at least problematic.

The article aims to contribute to the planning debate on engaged research by discussing the problems linked with the development of spaces of critique as members of self-organized initiatives. The article is practice-driven, and it draws from our own experiences of research. In the first section, we present current debates on citizen self-organization, placing the issue of critique within this literature. In the second section, we use our doctoral researches on self-organized experiences to explore in depth the problematic generation of spaces of critique, focusing on emotive, political and relational issues. In the third and closing section we argue that engaged researchers should be critical with the experiences they inquire about, as it is a crucial tool for the evolution of citizen initiatives.

### **Finding spaces for critique in planning and engaged research**

Citizens and their initiatives occupy a central place in current urban and planning literature: insurgent planning perspectives have focused on citizens as generators of alternatives, social transformations and emancipation beyond neoliberal systems (Holston, 1995; Sandercock, 1998; Miraftab, 2009; Friedmann,

2011). Studies on self-organized citizens and reappropriation practices have similarly described citizen initiatives as processes of emergent sensemaking, freedom and autonomy (Ostanel and Attili, 2018; Cellamare, 2019). These researches contributed to subvert the discipline's determinist attitude towards a more democratic and inclusive way of both practicing and researching urban planning (Friedmann, 1993).

Scholars often develop research on these organizations and initiatives out of their support for the ideals they promote and the effects of social transformation they supposedly generate. Engaged scholars of insurgent practices often act as activists or community-based planners with the aim of empowering these communities (Siemiatycki, 2012), activating personal ties and participatory research methodologies. These methods contribute to the strengthening of affective relations and connections between researchers and subjects (Porter *et al.*, 2012) towards a «scholarship of engagement» (Boyer, 1996).

This kind of engaged research has developed into two main approaches, that express different interpretations of what makes knowledge 'relevant' for research and social change (Piven, 2010). The first, rooted in the rationalist tradition that sees researchers as detached observers of reality, devoted to objective evaluations and recommendations, sees engaged research either as 'participant observation' – aiming to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge – or 'consultancy' helping communities to develop better decisions (Van de Ven, 2007). On the other hand, the action-research approach defends the epistemological, political and ethical legitimacy of collective knowledge production and the non-neutrality of the research process. It supports a more intentional engagement of researchers, with the goal of developing collective learning and empowerment processes beyond the power relationships of contemporary society through auto-reflexive processes (Reardon, 1998; 2006; Saija, 2016). These approaches produce different ways of engaging with research subjects, but they both disregard the difficulties that researchers face in dealing with the critical interpretations of the citizens' initiatives they are observing.

The issue of cultivating (or not being able to cultivate) spaces of critique has been potentially faced by all planning scholars involved in research processes based on engagement with their

subjects, be it through the development of action-research processes, the adoption of ethnographic methods or simply the activation of personal ties. The relationship between researcher and context shapes the role researchers can play in the process (Siemiatycki, 2012), affecting the transformative potential of knowledge production as well as the way in which critique can be voiced.

Planning research traditions assign different functions and roles to critique. Phronetic (Flyvbjerg, 2006) or interpretive (Sandercock and Attili, 2010) approaches tend to suggest the development of critiques to their case studies in the public sphere: their publicization, diffusion and reception might lead to learning and adaptation processes by the involved subjects and the public. The action-research paradigm considers instead change as an effect and not just the content of the research output. Critique is considered an internal part of the collaboration between researchers and communities, playing a crucial role in determining the transformative outcomes of the research process (Saija, 2016).

Despite the arguments of action-researchers for critical approaches as emancipatory and self-determining practices directed «against identified irrationality, injustice and suffering» (Kemmis, 2007:125), literature reporting cases of action-research as well as traditional participatory activities seldom reflects on how to deal with the inner conflicts that it inevitably raises. In fact, while action-research scholars emphasize the importance of conflict, they rarely provide insight on how to deal with personal suffering and doubts to people involved in conflicting processes (McArdle, 2007; Armstrong and Ludlow, 2020).

This lack of reflection fails to recognize the difficulties and dilemmas of researchers on the field. Interacting with collectives that by definition struggle for public legitimization and recognition through their practices, engaged researchers tend to avoid critique acting mostly as activist-planners supporting the communities' claims with their technical competences (Sager, 2016), or as mediators between local groups and academia (Sartoretto and Custòdio, 2020). They often do not report cases of conflict with people they engage with. Critique and conflict may be disregarded by researchers as something that went *wrong* in the research process, to be hidden from public debate. As

literature fails to guide them on ways to voice critiques, engaged researchers - especially at early stages - might withhold critiques, undermining potential transformative effects.

In the next section we start the discussion by presenting the reflections linked to critique in two cases studies of urban self-organized experiences. They are the result of doctoral dissertations that dealt with different immersive and engaged research dimensions: in the first, the researcher inquired a foreign citizen-initiated cultural centre with whom he was connected through a european network of peer initiatives; in the second, the researcher has explored the practices and activities of a community-based organization she was already a member of, based in her neighborhood. Although the two researchers approached their contexts and subjects from different positions and roles, they faced similar problems in relation to the development of spaces of critique: they had to balance their different roles and positions in the research process; they struggled to cope with the distance between practices and ideals of these organizations; and they had to find ways and techniques to let their critiques become occasions of learning for the initiatives they explored.

### **Balancing loyalty and critique in engaged research: reflections from the field**

#### *Striking a balance between commitments*

As part of my doctoral dissertation<sup>2</sup>, I studied the urban transformation activities of Truc Spherique, a citizen-initiated organization running the cultural centre Stanica Zilina-Zariecie in Zilina, Slovakia. The research aimed to understand how citizen initiatives developed institutional dimensions and how their undertaking of new projects could generate innovative effects (Campagnari, 2020).

I met R, the deputy director of Truc Spherique in 2015, at a meeting of Trans Europe Halles, the european network of citizen- and artist-initiated cultural centres. I attended the meeting representing a similar citizen cultural centre in Italy. In 2017 I visited Zilina and Truc Spherique. The case impressed me to the point that I decided to focus on it for my doctoral dissertation. R and his colleagues recognized me as their peer (Marzano, 2006):

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<sup>2</sup> The paragraph reports the doctoral research of Francesco Campagnari.

I was seen as part of a similar initiative belonging to the shared common ground of Trans Europe Halles.

I strategically used participant observation as a preliminary source of information, to familiarize with the members of Truc Spherique and with the context: I attended the weekly meetings of the organization; I took part in their social activities; I incrementally acquired information through daily interactions.

Personal connections facilitated the interview process with the members of the organization. Approaching them for interviews emerged as an organic evolution of informal conversations. Through this process, I was able to reach richer and deeper levels of exchange, activating different aspects of my personal, professional, and cultural selves to establish a connection.

While the establishment of these connections of friendship and the belonging to a shared social context of citizen-initiated cultural centres facilitated the acquisition of information, they complicated the presentation of critical research findings on Truc Spherique and its activities.

During the research I uncovered certain aspects of the organization that I found problematic. Over the years, Truc Spherique became institutionalized (de Leonardis, 2001), with the consolidation of an organizational culture based on friendship, autonomy and freedom. These internal rules had become rigid and less adaptable to change: the founders of the initiative increasingly disregarded and unappreciated the critiques voiced by many new members, with considerable discomfort and distress. Several members of Truc Spherique suffered burnouts, as a result of intensive stress and unsustainable workload. Observing their new projects, I also noticed how the efforts of some members of Truc Spherique of transferring learning points to the native organization were systematically blocked.

The same rules that made Truc Spherique an utopic organization for its founders made it unbearable for others. In addition to enforcing rules distressing to some members of the organization, the leadership of Truc Spherique was also not interested in learning from critiques, and innovating their way of operating. As a consequence, many new members of the organization left after short periods of time.

As I developed these critical interpretations of some aspects of Truc Spherique, I felt discomfort in voicing public critiques. Firstly, because I feared losing the friendly relationships I

established with members of the initiative: friends are supposed to understand, not to criticize each other's action publicly. On a second level, I belonged to a similar initiative, part of the same European network: as such, I was supposed to be an activist 'on their side', promoting and defending cultural centres. Criticizing them would undermine the public legitimation and the agenda shared by all these spaces.

Beyond these two levels of commitment, I was however deeply loyal to my own academic voice, as well as to my political and ethical ideals. My role as researcher positioned me in the scientific community, pressuring me to present my own honest interpretation of the evidence I found. Ethically and politically, I was (and am) convinced that the violation of ethical principles is never justifiable, even if it would lead to some practical or political gains; as a consequence, I could not justify nor support some of the practices I observed in Truc Spherique, because I believe (among other things) in the right of workers to receive fair treatment and in having a healthy and non-oppressive workplace.

Considering these loyalties, analytical perspectives, personal political beliefs and interpretation of the Truc Spherique case, I incrementally rooted my voice and critiques on personal values and scientific rigor, placing them above friendships and group loyalty. While I expressed these critiques in the dissertation, I avoided to assign blame and objectify social relations as oppressive<sup>3</sup>. I saw my critique as an interpretation of the complexity of the situation, where different actors, through their positionality, make different experiences and pursue different ideas of common good (Crosta, 1998). For instance, I described how the complex system of organization through spheres of autonomy in the organization has both emancipatory and repressive dimensions: it empowers its members to conduct autonomous and free action, but it represses any desire to be autonomous in different ways.

I expressed these critiques hoping they could lead to the

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<sup>3</sup> In developing my reflections, I recognized that not all oppressive relations are the result of deliberate and intentional action; some of them can be traced back to unintended consequences and inability to learn from feedback. In the case of Truc Spherique, the missed learning and innovation opportunities, as well as the lack of acknowledgement of feedback, could be attributed to cognitive limits associated with institutionalized frames. At the same time, some actors deliberately chose to not adapt their operations and their ways of seeing the world to what others proposed.

transformation of Truc Spherique through processes of personal and organizational learning: I engaged with several members during the analysis and writing phases. I shared with some of them reports and working papers where I expressed my critical opinions, asking them for feedback. The answers I received were supportive and provided useful insights. I have also been invited to Zilina to present the research to the organization and its community. The presentation of these critiques in person, as well as through the voice of a friend, might help the organization shift forwards.

### *Learning how to detach*

At the beginning of my<sup>4</sup> PhD I decided to reflect on my direct experience as a member of a community-based association. With this research, I aimed to contribute to the academic debate on inclusive planning in deprived urban areas, focusing on how community networks organize (Blokland, 2017) to tackle poverty and exclusion in the city.

Laboratorio di Quartiere is an association active in Giambellino Lorenteggio, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Milan. In the last 10 years, through voluntary work, it has developed initiatives to support people in poverty, acquiring a great capacity to involve inhabitants. It has also produced relevant knowledge and data about living conditions in the neighborhood, enjoying an excellent reputation with local institutions.

I first met its members in 2012, when I moved in the neighbourhood looking for cheap accommodation. The organization was already active, with a very close group of founders that had and still have strong credibility in the neighborhood. I entered the association after finishing my Masters degree and I met neighbors that became first and foremost friends to me. I was taught by older members of the myths (Douglas, 1986) of the organization, its values and goals. Entering the group I grew personally and professionally, enhancing my capacity to deal with territorial inequalities. This experience also trained me as a researcher, getting acquainted with theories and practices of action-research as an expression of the political and social role of university (Cognetti, 2016).

These relationships facilitated the investigation of members' personal trajectories of activism. The research often took place in

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<sup>4</sup> The paragraph reports the doctoral research of Alice Ranzini.



non-formal and non-public contexts such as private houses, bars and restaurants, phone calls as well as during the organization and managing of collective activities of the association, in which I was still engaged.

Due to my positioning, the research became also a reflexive journey into the history of the association; I discovered the base of the organizing process, composed of personal motivations, strong social ties and common experiences from before my entry in the group.

The neighborhood, the group of activists and the practices they developed to cope with new social and territorial issues, had all changed since the founding of the association. The neighborhood has been the object of a redevelopment process. The association has played a mediating role between inhabitants and public administration, acting as a gatekeeper both in the local network and in the public debate concerning the transformation of the neighborhood; to do so, the politically active members enacted multiple identities as inhabitants but also as professionals. However, the public narrative of the group kept framing them as inhabitants devoted to voluntary work and community development.

Even the activists' personal paths of engagement in the association constituted one of the main elements of innovation in the forms of participation shown by this case (Ranzini, 2020), some of the volunteers that held central positions in the past years opposed the political turn and the professionalization of the organization (Biorcio and Vitale, 2016) and left the group; others with strong political commitment did not accept to be criticized in their role and behaviour.

In dealing with these inner conflicts, the research has been strongly influenced by my affective commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1991) towards the organization and by the intimate relationship with its members. At the beginning of the doctoral research I was perceived as a peer by the activists. For a long time I shared their thoughts and expectations, contributing myself to the reproduction of the organizational culture (Schein, 1985) of the association. Moreover, even if I did declare my research interest, I continued being involved in the activities of the association. This positionality therefore made my researcher identity always subordinate to the activist one, with relevant consequences on research methodology and on ethical positioning.

Due to this trajectory in the association, I experienced a difficulty in critically exploring the disjunction between group's practices and narratives. Firstly, I naively expected that research would confirm the justifications and public narratives that I used to convey myself as an activist; instead, its results disappointed me as an activist. Secondly, the affective relationships with the activists nurtured strong expectations for a positive narrative of the organization that made me feel vulnerable towards the group judgement on my research behavior and afraid that expressing critique would delegitimize the association in the neighborhood. Aware of the limits of my positioning, I discussed outcomes and doubts with colleagues and supervisors more than with the other activists. I wanted to go beyond a rhetorical representation of my case study, avoiding both criticism of non-objectivity (Siemiatycki, 2012) as well as to enact myself as an activist scholar using research to legitimize an experience in political and public arenas. Discussing the research with external observers helped me to be more detached and to reconcile my different identities. I reconsidered the divisions within the group not as a sign of its dissolution but as an opportunity for an organizational change. I learnt to deal with doubts and disappointment that, even frustratingly, prevented me from producing stereotyped representations. Instead, I used them to stimulate a dialogue among the members, supporting the organization of meetings with old and new members to discuss the future of the association.

Despite radical engaged research perspectives affirm the transformative effect of the research process both on practices and on the understanding of practices (Rowell *et al.*, 2017), the very inner positionality and the affective relationship with the community of co-researchers could limit researcher's capacity of self-reflection on its own environment as well as of affirming research roles different from the activist one.

### **Towards a new role for critique in engaged research**

Current planning theories see critique as an important but unproblematic activity, developed either externally – influencing cases presenting results in the public sphere – or internally – sharing critical perspectives with members of the organization, relying on its ability to learn.

The two cases showcase instead the difficulties and dilemmas linked with the presentation of critiques of both types. During research we struggled to cope with the distance between our ideals of these organizations and their actual practices. In the field of engaged planning research, being critical towards these organizations is still a taboo, therefore when us young researchers faced this dilemma we had no references and felt we were doing something wrong.

When we started reflecting on how to voice and express critiques, we had to balance our different roles and positions as researchers, activists, friends. Critiques had to be justifiable in the public sphere for all these roles and attachments. The problems of critique are linked with the emotional and political relationships that at the same time facilitate access to the field. As researchers we could feel discomfort in developing critiques to our interlocutors out of fear of losing friendships.

Emotional attachment is one of the most problematic issues to deal with in engaged research (Ellis, 2007). It affects not only the theoretical-practical aspects of research but also its moral and ethical dimensions. This kind of research is transformative of the researcher's identity in professional and personal terms. The construction of a space of critique therefore requires the researchers to balance their multiple selves and roles. The public sphere is a field of confrontation between modes of justification, with its own specific grammar of action (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991). As such, critique in the public sphere risks being perceived as a critique of the systems of political belief and legitimation of these initiatives. Their precariousness leads them to perceive research as a threat when it voices critical aspects. Critique could lead to social harms for participants, such as losing credibility inside one's community or towards other organizations.

In our researches we presented our critiques as occasions for change and learning for the initiatives we explored. Instead of being more loyal to these experiences we suggest engaged researchers to practice critique avoiding blame. Their interpretations can foster a reframing of conflicts inside the group, beyond the institutionalized ways of doing and towards innovations. The outcomes of these researches can constitute a system of feedback for citizen experiences to learn, conveying unintended consequences.

Researchers can maximize their support of these initiatives by representing the complexity of reality, raising awareness and legitimizing the multiple perspectives within the organizations and in their environments.

We propose to see engaged scholars as *researcher-activists*, who critically help self-organized experiences in facing their challenges and updating their practices, but keeping a critical eye on them. To do so, scholars should explore critics both with communities and the academic community, nurturing a public discourse on conflicts in engaged research. However, researchers should also be aware of the unavoidable unbalance of power between researcher and participants of the research (Fuji, 2012), considering how their critique could be misunderstood or lead to unintended negative effects for the initiatives.

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