

Rethinking the innovativeness of civic initiatives: institutionalised practices as resources for action and limits to innovation.

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Abstract

The engagement of public administrations and civic initiatives with public problems has been interpreted by focusing on the engagement of the former as institutionalised, rigid and incapable of learning, and on the latter's engagement as flexible, experimental and innovative. Recent research has however underlined how civic initiatives can undergo processes of institutionalisation. In line with this perspective, this contribution explores how institutionalisation influences the engagement of civic initiatives with new problematic situations. Analysing case studies in Slovakia and France, it argues that institutionalised initiatives can engage with these situations opening new experimental processes, in which their institutionalised practices can be a resource for action; their capacity to develop institutional innovations on the basis of these new experiences is however limited, suggesting that the innovativeness of civic initiatives should be problematised.

L'impegno di pubbliche amministrazioni ed iniziative civiche nella risoluzione di problemi pubblici è stato interpretato considerando l'azione delle prime come istituzionalizzate, rigide e incapaci di apprendere, e quella delle seconde come flessibile, sperimentale, innovativa. Recenti ricerche hanno tuttavia sottolineato come le iniziative civiche possano sviluppare processi di istituzionalizzazione. In linea con questa prospettiva, il presente contributo esplora come l'istituzionalizzazione influenzi l'impegno delle iniziative civiche in nuove situazioni problematiche. Analizzando casi di studio in Slovacchia e in Francia, si sostiene che le iniziative istituzionalizzate possono confrontarsi con queste situazioni aprendo nuovi processi sperimentali, in cui le loro pratiche istituzionalizzate possono essere risorse per l'azione; la loro capacità di sviluppare innovazione istituzionale sulla base di queste nuove esperienze è tuttavia limitata, suggerendo che l'innovatività delle iniziative civiche vada problematizzata.

Keywords: civic initiatives; innovation; institutionalised practices.

Parole Chiave: iniziative civiche; innovazione; pratiche istituzionalizzate.

Civic initiatives and institutions, learning relations beyond a dichotomy

In the last decades, urban and planning studies have highlighted how the action of public administrations is not the only one capable of producing public services and goods. Reflecting on

a plural production of public (effects) (Crosta, 2010), research has highlighted how civic action is able to deal with problematic situations and generate public effects (Balducci, 2004; Cognetti, Cottino, and Rabaiotti, 2004; Donolo 2005; Paba, 2010; Cellamare, 2011; Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2014)¹.

While this line of scholarship suggests a common ground between the actions of citizens and those of public administrations, it also reinforces a dualistic interpretation of the handling of public problems between the actions of citizens – flexible, emergent, experimental, innovative – and those of public administrations – rigid, oriented towards the reproduction of previous experiences, incapable of learning. These processes are considered to be more effective than public administrations (Cognetti, Cottino, and Rabaiotti, 2004: 19) and the expression of greater public value (Cellamare, 2011: 130); they are also capable of going beyond the reductionism of public administrations (Balducci, 2004), including the excluded (Paba, 2010) and of creating unconventional services and goods (Cottino and Zeppetella, 2009).

This dualism has been conceptualised by framing public administrations as «institutions» or «instituted society» (Castoriadis, 1987; Cellamare, 2011: 142), while civic initiatives have been framed as part of an «instituting society» (Cellamare, 2014: 26) characterised by emergent sensemaking, experimentation and absence of institutionalisation processes. Recent research has however proposed a more nuanced interpretation of the differences between these actions. Seeing institutions as «a common response by the members of a community to a particular situation» (Mead, 1934: 261), I have argued elsewhere (Campagnari, 2024) that over time, with the

¹ This line of scholarship is closely associated with other strands of research inquiring the practices of citizens. For instance it shares with Social innovation studies the focus on the resolution of problems, improvement of the human condition, and satisfaction of the needs of humans (Moulaert, MacCallum, and Hillier, 2013; Ostanel, 2017). And it shares with radical research on autonomous spaces (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Groth and Corijn, 2005) and insurgent planning (Friedmann, 2011) the focus on the mobilisations associated with these initiatives. It is however an original and distinct approach, combining the inquiry of the effects of innovation with the political value of these practices through a pragmatist conceptualisation of the notion of public (Dewey, 1927), focused on the resolution of public problems and on the generation of public effects (Crosta, 1998; 2010).

typification of habitual actions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), civic initiatives also formalise institutions and objectify their own practices, ways of doing, problems and publics. These initiatives undergo processes of institutionalisation (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Jepperson, 1991), considering this process not (only) as the adoption of pre-existing, administrative forms of action, but also as the creation of institutions of their own.

Two examples of civic initiatives undergoing processes of institutionalisation of their internal practices and their public effects can help understand this transformative process.

Truc Spherique is a civic initiative offering cultural, social and artistic services in the cultural centre Stanica Žilina - Záríečie, in the city of Žilina, Slovakia. It was started in the mid-1990s by a group of teenagers aiming to foster the local artistic and cultural offer. Over the years, Stanica's team produced and reproduced a distinctive system of practices based on autonomy and friendship. This system constrains action defining the specific way of acting considered appropriate in the initiative: the members of the team are prescribed to perform their tasks through individual autonomous activities and to socialise with the other members as friends.

Mains d'oeuvres is another civic initiative, based in St-Ouen, in the northern suburbs of Paris. It runs the cultural centre of the same name. It was established in 1998 by people and organisations who already experienced the creation of cultural centres in abandoned buildings to foster artistic and civic imagination (L'extrait, 2002).

Mains d'œuvres presents instead the presence of two different and often clashing systems of practices: an activist approach – which prescribes and justifies going beyond one's formal role, for instance taking responsibility for clearing up the cultural centre or working overtime – and a professionalist approach – in which actors are guided to act according to formal roles. The first approach was drawn from the activist milieu of the initiative, while the second was introduced over the years adopting external social institutions. This integration stemmed both from a push by employees to defend their rights (respecting formalised job descriptions and working hours) and from an effort to comply with the obligations and responsibilities associated with public subsidies, in line with the professionalisation of other spaces

of artistic critique in France (Dumont and Vivant, 2017; Vivant, 2022).

The institutionalisation of internal practices has progressed along with the institutionalisation of the public effects of the initiatives². While Truc Spherique initially experimented with different artistic and cultural services affecting different publics, over the years its artistic programme has reached stability and regularity, assembling local publics for weekly activities (concerts, theatre, community activities) and nation-wide publics for summer festivals. Every year they organise over 200 concerts, theatre performances, literary debates, film events, and summer festivals, attracting over 20.000 visitors per year.

The artistic programme of Mains d'œuvres reached a stable configuration striking a balance between supporting Ile-de-France artists – assisting over 250 artists per year, with artistic guidance, the rental of music studios and trainings, organising weekly events and annual festivals attracting audiences at the metropolitan scale and offering cultural and social services for neighbours, like a school of music for children.

Civic initiatives are therefore no strangers to processes of institutionalisation: they are not (only) processes of experimentation rethinking existing ways of doing, but also processes that institutionalise practices of their own, and exploit them over time.

This change in perspective highlights the limits of the initial dichotomous interpretation of public administrations as institutions and civic initiatives as experimental actions. Recognising that civic initiatives can also become institutions, some new questions for research emerge.

² Without delving into the large literature on the topic of public problems, we can say that a problem can be considered “public” when actors act and see its consequences as affecting a wider community beyond the people directly involved in the situation, to the point of deeming necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for (Dewey, 1927: 15-16). Private problems, experienced by individuals separated from one another, are transformed into public problems, which concern a community (Vitale, 2007: 11-12), through processes of publicisation and problematisation (Cefaï and Terzi, 2012). In this sense, these initiatives generate public effects as the problems they tackle, initially perceived and experienced by their initiators, are publicised through the solutions they experiment to said problems, namely the services they develop over the years. Through this publicisation, they establish a public: a community of people affected by their operations.

Sociological and organisational research has long underscored the fact that institutionalisation limits the ability of actors to tackle new problematic situations out of their routines, as they reduce cognitive flexibility (Lanzara, 1997; 2016; De Leonardis, 2001). Crystallised routines tend to be taken for granted and repeated, regardless of the feedback provided by the environment. As the environment shifts and evolves, routinised actions lose their effectiveness and generate anomalies and other (unintended) effects. Institutions limit the flexibility of individuals to seamlessly learn and absorb these anomalies, as they interpret the world through objectified frames (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; De Leonardis, 2001).

Civic initiatives have been so far interpreted as processes able to develop experimental solutions in a continuous learning process with their environment. If we start to associate them with the concept of institution – with all the limits of institutions in engaging flexibly with their environments – we are led to wonder how they behave when they encounter new problematic situations: how do institutionalised civic initiatives respond to emerging problems outside their routines? Are they able to easily experiment and learn, as often attributed to these initiatives, or does institutionalisation limit their capacity for action? How do they innovate their practices given these new experiences? While civic initiatives have been usually framed as processes from which public administrations could learn to act, integrating their innovative solutions in their institutionalised practices, these questions problematise how civic initiatives themselves could be innovated.

The rest of the paper tackles these questions and explores this new problem. In the next section, I illustrate the research design and methods. In the following section, I outline the main results of the research; I then discuss the main learning points of this research. In the last section, I summarise the outcomes of the paper and draw potential future lines for research.

Research design and methods

The paper presents research based on two case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009; Stake, 2010) of urban projects developed by long-standing civic initiatives out of their institutionalised practices. Case studies are qualitative empirical investigations that inquire

a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009). The two cases are explored through a case-oriented approach: the main objective is to understand the dense situations of each case, abductively constructing categories, concepts and theories rather than pursuing generalisable knowledge of the relationships between variables generated deductively and a priori (Della Porta, 2012: 207).

In order to answer our research questions, the transactions of the initiatives with new problematic situations are explored through the concept of experience (Dewey, 1925; 1938). “Problematic situations” do not refer to situations that differ from a supposedly normal state, but that are labelled, understood, and experienced as such (Cefai, 1996: 46). A problematic situation arises when «the usual reactions of an organism to the solicitations of its surroundings no longer provide the satisfaction of its needs and desires» (Cefai, 2016: 27; Dewey, 1938). Something breaks the harmonious continuity of experience, and the situation appears problematic, confusing and perplexing (Dewey and Bentley, 1949). Actors worry, question and investigate to define what the problem is, what are its causes and who is responsible for it (Dewey, 1927).

I consider experience as the ongoing process of dynamic organisation of a system formed by interactions between an organism and its natural or social environment (Quéré, 2002: 168; Cefai, 2013). Experience can be seen as a conduct that originates in the subordination of action to the awareness of the perceived effects of previous activities (Zask, 2002: 137), developing a learning process (Bateson, 1972).

The analysis of these processes of experience focuses on three analytical aspects, deduced abductively (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) from the analysis of the cases and in relation to current literature: seeing institutions as intentional supra-individual human aggregates (De Leonardis, 2001), constituting a common response by the members of a community to a particular situation (Mead, 1934: 261), I explore (a) how institutionalised practices are mobilised in the engagement with the new problematic situation; this approach will shed light on how institutionalisation affects the way civic initiatives

elaborate practical solutions to new problematic situations; considering innovation as a process of reframing (Schön, 1979; Schön and Rein, 1994) that renews the stock of experience (Schütz, 1951; 1953) to account for changing environmental feedbacks, leading a community of people to see and do things they take for granted in unprecedented ways (Lanzara, 2016: 7), the multiple reorientations of action in the new problematic situations are explored to see (b) how the institutionalised practices are innovated within the experiences of resolution of the problematic situations and (c) how they are innovated in the ordinary operations of the civic initiatives; these two analytical lenses will inquire if and how institutionalisation hinders the ability of civic initiatives to develop processes of innovation.

I selected the cases in a two-step process. First, I looked for institutionalised initiatives (meaning initiatives with stable and continuative operations in activity for more than fifteen years), that had recently launched a new process of urban transformation out of their institutionalised operations. I identified four cases corresponding to these criteria.

Second, I selected among them the initiatives in which I had more chances to observe processes of learning and innovation in the new urban transformation. I selected the two with the largest presence of external actors in the development of the new urban projects – multiplying the chance of interactions and conflicts between different practices and normative orders – and the highest commitment of the initiative to this new process – reducing the risk of the project being irrelevant for the initiative. Waiting for further research on the topic, I assume these cases to be *paradigmatic* (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230) of institutionalised civic initiatives engaging with new problematic situations; this assumption will guide the development and the generalisation of hypotheses about their internal mechanisms. The cases also have a *critical* value in relation to a broader set of civic initiatives. Critical cases have «strategic importance in relation to the general problem» (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). Their rare features – engaging with new problematic situations albeit institutionalised – allow us to reconsider aspects of civic initiatives that we generally consider true: in this case, their ability to experiment and innovate. The idea that «if it is valid for this [critical] case, it is valid for all cases! (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230) supports the

generalisation of the considerations drawn from these cases to all civic initiatives.

The selected cases are the Nová Synagóga project in Žilina, Slovakia, developed by the NGO Truc Sphérique; and the Espace Imaginaire project in St-Denis, France, developed by the association Mains d'œuvres. The Nová Synagóga project has been developed by Truc Sphérique in Žilina, Slovakia. In 2011, Truc Sphérique was asked by the Jewish Community of Žilina to take over a local Synagogue, a national monument formerly used as a cinema. The director of Truc Sphérique assembled a team composed of members of the organisation and people orbiting around it. This group of initiators launched a process of restoration and conversion of the Synagogue into a contemporary art space, attracting other people and organisations to the project. The renovation was developed through spontaneous and unconventional solutions. While Truc Sphérique had experience in managing architectural transformations, they had no idea of how to manage the restoration of a national monument and therefore went beyond their institutionalised operations. The renovated contemporary art space Nová Synagóga opened in 2017.

The Espace Imaginaire project has been developed by the association Mains d'œuvres in St-Denis, France. In 2016, Mains d'œuvres won a public call by the St-Denis municipality for the reuse of an abandoned open field. They launched the Espace Imaginaire project, which focused on the involvement of residents and artists in the co-conception, co-construction, and co-management of a cultural and ecological space. The project aimed at developing a shared horizontal governance where people could experiment with their own projects. The project received organisational support from the employees of Mains d'œuvres. In 2018, the centre counted around sixty co-managers, with several self-constructed spaces. In 2019, Mains d'œuvres disengaged from the project, leaving its management to the newly established Espace Imaginaire association.

Data collection took place between 2017 and 2019. In the Nová Synagóga case, I conducted four months of field research, with participant observation, 40 semi-structured interviews with members of the initiative and other actors involved, and the collection of 120 documents (including press releases,

newspaper articles, meeting minutes, architectural plans, public presentations). I conducted three months of field research in the Espace Imaginaire case, with participant observation, 26 semi-structured interviews with members of the initiatives and other actors involved, and the collection of 70 documents (including administrative documents, project proposals, newspaper articles, leaflets meeting minutes). Additional observations and interviews with key actors in 2022 contributed to the assessment of the long-term learning effects of the two projects.

Data was then analysed using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, with the construction of codes linking information with themes and categories (Bazeley, 2013) and the development of grounded theoretical memos (Charmaz, 2014). The analysis contributed through an abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) to the definition of the three analytical lenses of the paper.

New experimental processes, practices in action and limited innovations

This section first presents (a) how institutionalised practices are mobilised in the engagement with the new problematic situation, establishing a dialogue between the two cases.

The efforts to innovate these practices differed across the cases. The Nová Synagóga case is then presented illustrating (b) the efforts to innovate the institutionalised practices of the initiative within the experiences of resolution of the problematic situation, while the Espace Imaginaire case is presented focusing on (c) the efforts to innovate them in the ordinary operations of the civic initiative.

Institutionalised practices in action

The institutionalised practices and normative frames of the initiatives play a double role in the engagement with the new problematic situations³. First, while they are not considered

³ While here I focus on the relation between initiatives and these new problematic situations, it is interesting to note that institutionalised practices have a similar double role also for the other people interacting in these situations. For instance, architects involved in both projects use the practices institutionalised in their discipline to organise architectural operations (drawing, planning, researching, experimenting spatial configurations); architectural historians, as we will see, similarly import in the Nová Synagóga

effective in orienting action on the whole situation, they are adopted as responses to the situation (Mead, 1934) to organise more limited and partial operations. This process is visible in the organisation and set up of artistic events and concerts in the Nová Synagóga and in the Espace Imaginaire, which followed the procedures respectively consolidated in Truc Spherique and in Mains d'œuvres.

Conversely, the reproduction of these institutionalised practices entails the reproduction of expectations about the forms of authority and knowledge that should be considered legitimate. In the Nová Synagóga restoration for instance the idea that practical knowledge has more authority than expert knowledge in orienting a project was reproduced directly from Truc Spherique.

Nová Synagóga: innovating institutionalised practices in the situation

These institutionalised practices were not always effective in the new experimental processes, as explained by a member of Truc Spherique and the Nová Synagóga project:

«...I think we try to operate similarly [to Stanica], but we see it's not working, or it has to be adapted, and it's a different type of operation, or different requirements from the space» (interview, 03/05/2018)

In their transactions with the (social and material) environment of action, they generated effects experienced by some as undesirable. People then launched efforts to change the course of action and then integrate what was learnt through experience in their practices, in other words trying to innovate them.

These efforts have been oriented in the Nová Synagóga case towards the innovation of these institutionalised practices only within the new situation. People from outside the initiatives attempted to modify and innovate them, based on other institutional materials (Lanzara, 1997) and stocks of experience (Schütz, 1951; 1953). However, these attempts were hindered by the leadership of the initiatives, who blocked the innovations by deeming them ineffective, inadequate, and illegitimate.

project the idea that expert knowledge should prevail over practical knowledge in orienting the project.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the Nová Synagóga case, for instance in the process of definition of the restoration style for the Synagogue. Operative decisions were since the beginning mostly taken by the director of Truc Spherique, on the basis of his legitimacy as a leader and his practical ability to secure financial and material resources necessary to fund the renovation through spontaneous and incremental actions. Among the first decisions, there was the choice of removing part of the historical layers of the building. Seeing this type of choice as a mistake and considering the historical accuracy of the restoration to be more important than its financial sustainability, the involved historians of architecture tried to change this decision-making process, launching efforts to institute a Restoration Board – composed of architects, historians and other experts – with a prescriptive and normative authority over the project. The main initiator of the Board explains that:

«...this was actually our aim: to make this kind of discussion club, or discussion forum, where we can observe the process and intervene somehow when something would quite go wrong.» (interview, 09/05/2018)

They wanted the project to follow meticulous research and planning, rather than being developed spontaneously, experimentally and incrementally. This effort was delegitimised by the director of Truc Spherique, who didn't wait for their prescriptions to act. He instead continued following the practices of Truc Spherique based on incremental and tactical project management. The reproduction of this approach led for instance to the choice of renovating the roof of the Synagogue using zinc – for which the director had obtained a discount thanks to a partnership with a manufacturer – rather than more historically accurate but expensive copper.

Similarly, the curatorial team of the Nová Synagóga – which included members of Truc Spherique and external professionals – started curating the programme and organising live events following Truc Spherique's institutionalised practices, based on individual autonomy.

Some members perceived this approach unfit to organise the large-scale artistic exhibitions programmed in the Nová Synagóga, and proposed to adopt more professional practices

that they experienced in other art institutions. A former member of the curatorial team behind this effort illustrates that

«...people from Stanica want to work in this old-school way: that everything, everyone does everything. [...] And [the director] wants to use this system because somehow it works also here in the Synagogue. And I think it's not, not good [...] Because in the gallery, you need a production team, PR team...» (interview, 25/04/2018)

This effort was blocked as well by the director of Truc Spherique. The predominance of the institutionalised practices of Truc Spherique in the situation contributed, over time, to the integration of the Nová Synagóga team in Truc Spherique, creating a single team managing two cultural centres.

Espace Imaginaire and Mains d'oeuvres: innovating institutionalised practices in the initiative

On a second level, the efforts to innovate these institutionalised practices have focused not just on their application in the new situation, but also on the initiatives themselves. While in the first level, the proponents of these innovation efforts were often external people bringing different perspectives and practices in the new situation, in this second level the efforts were mostly led by people active both in the new project and in the initiative. These efforts were present in particular in the relation between the Espace Imaginaire and Mains d'oeuvres, as people overlapped more often between the initiative and the new project: the coordinator of this new project was also the head of the "Arts and Society" department of the Mains d'oeuvres cultural centre. She was assisted by three civic service volunteers who split their time between the Espace Imaginaire and her department. The construction and setting up of the outdoor and indoor spaces, as well as the set up of infrastructures and the technical management of events, was led by the technical team of Mains d'oeuvres. The director of Mains d'oeuvres and its Board of directors supervised the whole project.

Both the coordinator of the Espace Imaginaire project and the members of the technical team felt that they lacked the necessary material, organisational and financial resources to properly manage this new project. They also lamented their excessive workload with the director of Mains d'oeuvres.

These actors leveraged the experience of the new situation to continue conflicts on existing institutional faultlines. They argued that the issues they experienced in the Espace Imaginaire were not limited to this situation, but that they were part of a specific Mains d'œuvres' way of managing tasks and workloads, and tried to push for a general change. Their efforts were dismissed by the director and the Board of Directors, who refused to increase the support or reduce their workload. As the leader of the technical team recalls:

«I wanted to hire someone just for Espace Imaginaire, but financially it didn't fit into our budget. You see, the management said no to me several times» (interview, 19/03/2019)

The direction justified this choice by arguing – with a positive connotation – that these practices are part of the identity of Mains d'œuvres, that employees should behave as activists dedicating voluntary work to the association and that they should simply get by with the available resources. They advocated for the activist approach instituted in the association, defending it on the basis of the praiseworthy public effects generated by the initiative, which – considering the organisational and economic fragility of the initiative – would not be possible without the extensive use of unpaid labour. As a member of the Board of Director explains:

«There's a volunteer side to it, which you're obliged to have. When people are salaried here, all of a sudden it becomes: "Ah, I finished my day at 5 o'clock...". No, it's not like that: it's like a manager's job in a company: as a manager, you get a salary, and you have a workload, and as long as the work isn't finished, you do it. [...] That's why I was talking about militancy» (interview, 22/03/2019)

Following these interactions, the proponents stopped enacting activist practices, adopting professionalist practices instead: different members of the technical team refused to continue being involved in the Espace Imaginaire, withdrawing from its activities and sticking to their ordinary tasks. As the already mentioned manager of the technical team explains:

«...at one point I said "Well, if you don't want to hire someone, I'm not going there anymore". And that was that» (interview, 19/03/2019)

The coordinator of the project similarly refused all extra-contractual workloads and limited her assignments to her job description.

Institutionalised civic initiatives engaging with new problematic situations: potentials and limits

The inquiry of the engagement of these institutionalised civic initiatives with new problematic situations leads to the formulation of three considerations. The first two are elaborated considering these cases as paradigmatic cases of institutionalised civic initiatives, and are related to the dynamics of experimentation in the new problematic situation. The third more generally sees the cases as critical cases of civic initiatives and reflects on the failures to translate these experiences into innovations of the institutionalised practices of the initiatives.

First, the cases suggest that civic initiatives, even if institutionalised, can support the development of new experimental processes. While in their ordinary and habitual experience they reproduce their instituted practices, when they encounter new problematic situations they can recognise the limits of their routines and open new spaces of experimentation. This process mirrors their initial phases, when they experimented and mixed different experiences in the build-up of effective solutions to their situation.

In order to launch a new experimental process, it is crucial that the members of the initiative intersubjectively share a definition of the new situation as problematic, recognising the limits of their routine activities in treating it effectively. If that is not the case, they would engage with the situation by reproducing their instituted practices, perpetuating their ordinary experience of things. The leaderships of the initiatives play a central role, orienting and legitimising a shared understanding of the situation as problematic, and defining which of the instituted practices are ineffective (and therefore require further experimentation) and which instead are to be reproduced.

This leads to a second consideration, about the value of instituted practices and systems of authority in new situations. Compared with non-institutionalised initiatives, institutionalised civic initiatives have the advantage of mobilising a repertoire of operative solutions and normative orders already tested

in practice to face new situations. While the practices of the initiatives may not be reproduced as a rigid framework to orient these operations, nor be the only source of knowledge, they can be a precious and valuable stock of experience. Actors mobilise and assemble these operative building blocks to develop new and effective combinations. Similarly, the members of the initiatives often implicitly reproduce the systems of authority instituted in the initiative in the new experimental process, ordering the situation. These elements are not used as rigid pre-established frameworks for action but with an experimental orientation. Furthermore, the encounter of people external to the initiative with these practices can lead to their dissemination and adoption in other situations.

In these experiences, people act, perceive the effects of their own activities and try to reorganise their conduct accordingly. As we saw, however, these processes of reorganisation and learning were halted when they were directed towards the innovation of the institutionalised practices of the initiatives. As a third consideration, these critical cases suggest to problematise the almost taken for granted idea that civic initiatives are innovative: while these initiatives can indeed develop new solutions in new situations, the integration of new experiences in their institutionalised practices is not straightforward and may require the opening of conflicts about legitimacy and effectiveness. While the efforts to innovate practices were developed in different settings in the two cases – the new problematic situation in the Nová Synagóga and the civic initiative in the Espace Imaginaire case – in both they were blocked by the leadership of the initiatives, defending the institutionalised order. They still considered the instituted practices effective, valid and worth reproducing. Or, to put it in other terms, they refused to experiment potential changes to their institutionalised ways of doing. We do not know what effects these proposed innovations would have generated, if implemented. What we can note is simply that, while civic initiatives are often described as experimental and innovative, in these cases the leadership of the initiatives refused to experiment beyond their status quo and chose to exploit their institutionalised practices.

These considerations offer a renewed understanding of civic initiatives and in particular of institutionalised initiatives in

their engagement with new problematic situations. Differently from emerging civic initiatives, in the engagement with their problematic situation, they do not experiment in full or draw experience from other contexts, rather they can use the repertoire of operative solutions practiced in the initiative over the years. These experiments are nourished by these institutionalised practices and oriented by their normative ways of doing; at the same time, the innovation of these practices is limited by institutionalisation itself, as efforts to reorganise and innovate these practices may require the opening of internal conflicts.

Conclusions

The paper reflected on civic initiatives and their interpretation, between experimentation and institutionalisation. Civic initiatives have long been framed as processes able to develop experimental solutions, from which other actors – especially ineffective public administrations – could learn and take inspiration. By focusing on the engagement of institutionalised initiatives with new problematic situations, the paper questioned how civic initiatives may respond to emerging problems outside their routines, exploring their ability to experiment and innovate their practices through experience.

The paper first showcased how institutionalised civic initiatives may indeed adopt experimental approaches to these new problematic situations. Rather than reproducing their instituted routines, they can launch new processes of experimentation. Along this process, second, the paper illustrated how the knowledge formalised in the initiative – operative routines and normative ordering of the situation – can be a valuable repertoire used to experiment with new solutions.

At the same time, third, the paper suggests that the taken for granted idea that civic initiatives are innovative should be problematised. The results of the critical cases presented by the paper illustrate that the integration of new experiences in their practices is not straightforward once institutionalised, and may require the opening of conflicts about legitimacy and effectiveness.

Across these considerations, the paper exposed the central role of the leadership of the initiatives in opening new spaces of

experimentation, in selecting routines to discard or reproduce, and in welcoming or blocking innovations.

These results suggest future directions for research. Research could expand the field of cases of engagement of institutionalised civic initiatives with new problematic situations: adding cases from different urban, national and institutional contexts could help expand, revise and challenge the considerations developed here.

In particular, research could follow the groundwork laid out in this paper by focusing more extensively on the mechanisms of innovation of (institutionalised) civic initiatives, building a typology of the different elements withholding or facilitating innovation in these initiatives, in connection with broader innovation literature. Research could expand the focus on the use of institutionalised practices and routines in new problematic situations, in order to understand the different types of knowledge used and their selection process.

Furthermore, while the paper focused on the innovation processes linked to the civic initiatives themselves, future research could also explore the innovation effects of these new problematic situations beyond the initiatives. For instance by exploring how translocal and supralocal networks convey experiences and innovations in an ecosystem of learning relations, and how these are appropriated by different actors, can help understand how innovation can be diffused translocally through local experimentations. In particular, these lines of inquiry should take a closer look at the processes of experience, at the efforts of innovation of the institutionalised practices of the initiatives and at the relations they activate to learn and diffuse their experience.

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