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Cities and Self-organization

Carlo Cellamare

The explosion of self-organization

In the contemporary city, we are today more and more witnessing different practices and processes of "re-appropriation of space": regeneration of empty buildings, spaces of cultural production, urban gardens, green areas given renewed significance and re-shaped public spaces, and so on. Beside this, we could also mention experimentations that are activating new social services and welfare spaces, and finally squatting projects, which are defining different modes of co-existence, housing and service provision.

This is a vast field of activity and experience, with the widespread involvement and the leading role of the inhabitants, organized or not in committees or associations, and other local actors. Such experiences are both illegal and legal, and question the relationship and the very meaning of the institutions.

We should even consider in particular micro-practices that are able to broaden and transform the city from the bottom up, alongside more stable forms of social production. A specific kind of "city making" built upon a mix of practices, social relations and modes of local activation.

As a consequence, the way we are looking at the city is radically changing: questioning the relationship between the State and the citizens, these processes of re-appropriation are re-configuring both the mechanism of place making as well as the organization of social relations and local services, thus questioning the very concept of "public" and "publicness" in the city.

These practices of re-appropriation are representing different modes of city organization as well as different cultures of action/policy making in the contemporary city. They are also representing different modes of what "public" means in the city: some practices of re-appropriation are acting as collective actions that take into consideration the mechanism of social inclusion, while others are acting in a way which could be described more as private, or specific to some groups only, rather than designing public/collective actions.

In many cases, these are practices and processes of re-appropriation of the city that are also processes of resignification of spaces and production of places. Among these practices,

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many of them are re-opening spaces or re-activating some specific territories/neighbourhoods benefiting from very localized creativity and capitalizing on social relations that are fully embedded in local societies.
We should also critically consider that practices of re-appropriation are often substituting the role of local policies and in some case promoting actions that are illegal/informal in a context where institutions are losing financial capacity as well as accountability.
These experimentations are so focused on action that are simultaneously redefining the modes of social conflict as well as the routines and spaces of citizenship participation. These practices can be considered sites where to experiment and shape political capacity, thus questioning the very functioning of local democracy.
This context gives us the possibility to critically analyse the processes of re-appropriation that are changing the contemporary city, not only in big cities but also in small localities. We should be attentive to possible points of strength but also to ambiguities and challenges linked to these experimental processes.
First of all, considering the tension between the possibility to define different models of local activation and cultural/political production and, at the same time, the problematic erosion of the capacity of institutions in answering local needs. We should consider whether practices of re-appropriation are de facto substituting the role of institutions as well as weakening the transformative impact of traditional social conflict.
Some cities like Rome are strongly shaped by these practices and this condition is being mirrored all around Italy and Europe. If we consider the Global South, some of these practices have historically played a relevant role in the production of local economies as well as in shaping parts of the city (Hou, 2010; Mehta, 2004). This pushes us to consider the role of more structural dimensions in the critical analysis of re-appropriation practices.
In the current climate of weakening welfare states, we should consider whether and how these practices of re-appropriation are substituting the important role of institutions, thus reinforcing neoliberalism, and, as a consequence, an unequal distribution of disadvantage.

Self-organization in the history of the city

Self-organization has always existed; it has been a fundamental component of the city. It was often the ordinary way of construction and evolution of the city, where the interventions of authority and political power were concentrated in some spaces and in some works of the city. Self-organization was placed within the evolutionary principles of pre-modern society.

Modern society, above all starting from the constitution of the modern States and the relative monarchies (but the democratic States have not been different in this), has instead tended to control or to absorb such processes (Bourdieu, 1994). In this sense, modern society has introduced all forms of control of space, which can be traced back to the logic of the panopticon (Bentham, 1791; Foucault, 1975; Scandurra, 2003; Decandia, 2008).

The same urban planning, although born with the needs of good management of the city, the solution of the health-sanitary problems of the cities in rapid growth, the rethinking according to mobility and efficiency, represented in many ways a form of control of space, as well as management of the soil regime. Haussmann's Paris is the best known and most striking example (Scandurra, 2001; Harvey, 2003).

Even more, modern society has introduced categorization, and consequently separation and dichotomy, between institutions (here understood in the sense of State institutions, as functional apparatuses of the modern State) and inhabitants, in turn categorized as citizens, and more later as residents. In the modern State, the introduction of specific duties changed the relationship with the city. On one hand, such duties were defined in terms of the exclusive roles of specific state apparatus to which the decision is delegated with regard to certain aspects (thus related to jurisdiction and authority), in particular in the management of the city. On the other, they were considered as specific professional skills for the definition (interpreted in an exclusively technical sense, but in reality always also political) of those same aspects delegated and made exclusive to specific categories of subjects specially trained (engineers, architects, planners, etc.). Such transformation has determined a great process of expropriation of the capacity for transformation of the city by the inhabitants, and even of the design capacity to think it (and of the connected creative possibility). Alongside this

dynamic, we recognize a process of autonomy of the political, as a dimension in itself with respect to the evolutionary processes of the social, often constituting it as a category managed by a group of experts and expunged from the ordinary life of the inhabitants.

Despite all, self-organization has survived, has continued to live in the ordinary life of the city although in conditions of subalternity, often considered illegal, putting back into question that separation between institutions and inhabitants[1].

On the opposite, as we said before, today we are facing with an explosion of experiences of self-organization, even beyond the dimension of protest and the great social and urban movements that have characterized all the continents, from the Arab Spring to protests in the squares of Greece and Turkey to the great movements that have gone through New York and the United States (Harvey, 2012a, Graeber, 2007). Above all in countries where people experience the inadequacy of local institutions and administrations and their inability to respond satisfactorily and according to the public interest to the social needs that emerge in urban contexts, the territories tend to develop widely self-organization forms and overcome the autonomy of the politician and, in particular, of the institutions. They even aim to manage without them.

These processes must also be read within a change in the political and institutional context. In fact, in conjunction with a strong and prevailing affirmation and action of a neoliberal-style society, it is emerging a progressive orientation of the State to support such models and trends. The State seems often to be more allied or dominated by economic forces and private interests (and therefore the political dimension is subordinate to the economic one) than committed to protecting the public interest of citizens. This orientation of the "public", which is part of a historical process of retreating of the welfare state since the 80s of the last century, is so strong that citizens often perceive the State apparatus, and in particular local administrations, such as the main enemy to face. Within this context, we can also better understand the growing attention that, in different ways

1 Even in cultural terms, in the context of urban planning as a discipline and scientific research, a different tradition has been kept alive, which found in Geddes (1915) and in many other scholars its main representatives (Paba, 2010).

and in different contexts, has been addressed to the theme of the "common good" and "common goods", and more extensively of the *commoning* processes. Therefore, if the modern State had expropriated the capacity for planning and collective management of their life contexts due to a "superior" public need, today it is seen as the less adequate interpreter and no longer have people recognized its capacity for define a "public interest". Faced with this problematic loss, it is therefore clear and profound the need to reconstruct processes that define a public and collective dimension of coexistence. Similarly, the need to reconstruct "community" dimensions of coexistence within diversities emerges with force, where social relations gain centrality to qualify daily life.

Finally, the forms of self-organization also represent an overcoming of participation as it has been progressively interpreted. The participation of citizens in the collective and political life of the city has a noble and very important meaning. The difficulties and distortions of the concrete experiences have disqualified it, disappointing expectations, creating processes more characterized by the construction of consensus if not the development of forms of "social buffer" with respect to problems and conflicts, causing great frustration and increasing the distrust in administrations. Faced with dissatisfaction with participation, when transformed into a farce, forms of self-organization are a way of seeking solutions in autonomy.

Discussing self-organization

As a consequence of this evolution of the political and social processes that cross the cities, there are different dimensions, not always co-present, that we can grasp in the experiences of self-organization.

Firstly, there is a dimension linked to the spontaneous process of the inhabitants of use and management of the living context, of the construction of the city and of the production of both physical and symbolic, both material and immaterial space, of self-organization in daily life, of care and management of the places of collective life. To interpret these processes, to grasp the "structural coupling" between space production and re-signification processes, we need to develop an approach able to read and interpret urban practices, and the world of signs and meanings that they carry with them. As Castoriadis (2001) said,

«the symbolic leans on the material».
A second dimension is linked to the contestation of the prevailing models and of the dynamics of political, social and economic transformation of which we spoke previously. It is often activated starting from resistance to forms of urban speculation, from the reclaiming of disregarded rights and better urban living conditions, from opposition to subaltern urban development models to prevailing economic and private interests, which are part of the extractive capitalist dimension (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2017), of the commodification of the city (Harvey, 2012b), of biopolitics (Foucault, 2001). Not remaining in the dimension of pure resistance, these experiences develop strong planning and tend to practice alternative perspectives. All this gives rise, in the first place, to a strong political intention, a clear stance towards the prevailing cultural and political models, which generates a re-appropriation of the city's spaces and their re-signification. Secondly, as we said, it is an action not only of resistance, but also of construction of alternatives. Although supported by a deep critical reflection, the dimension of action prevails in these experiences. The realization of change is a fundamental objective[2]. In this dynamic, it is to recognize that such experiences have the ability to construct a real and meaningful politics. Thirdly, they constitute the attempt, as far as possible, to build spaces of autonomy, which others define spaces of freedom, i.e. spaces where rules of coexistence defined by alternative models and values take place[3].

2 The dimension of "constituent processes" is often associated with the concreteness of the objectives. In reality, there may be some distortion in this perspective. The "constituent" character of self-organization processes is often associated with the definition of new and / or alternative "institutions". This objective, which nevertheless has an important political character that should not be underestimated and aims at thinking and constructing alternatives also in the institutional field (also for obtaining a formal recognition), is criticized because it can bring back to the same problematic and critical issues in which the structures of the State apparatus. Therefore, the same "institutional" character is questioned and constitutes the problem, although it could be developed through participatory or commoning processes.

3 In this regard, it should be noted that these are not spaces without rules or criteria of cohabitation, although these may not be explicit or defined. Taking up some elements of the debate in the previous note, these are "dismissing" rather than "institutional" or "constituent" processes. They aim at deconstructing the formal rules (and also the implicit social models) of the "established society" (Castoriadis, 1975), because in this historical moment it is much stronger, with the fundamental objective of not remaining subordinate and conditioned and

The third dimension is completely different and can easily generate distortions. However, it is often dictated by practical needs and is also found in very radical experiences, such as squatting experiences and housing movements. This is the need to make up for the shortcomings and / or absences of the public administration, to give concrete answers to urban and social problems in a context of progressive retreat of the welfare state. Some examples are the construction of autonomous responses to the housing problem (squatting experiences, but also the illegal housing or large slums all over the world), or to the lack of green areas and public spaces (from which the great proliferation of self-managed green areas and shared gardens), up to the theme of work. It is clear that this (implicitly) substitute action of the shortcomings of the public administration must be accompanied by recalling it to its commitments and tasks. However, this dynamic generates some distortions. Firstly, there is the risk of creating a social buffer, although this may be unavoidable. Given the lack of listening and response from the public administration, social need is urgent and calls for an answer. Unintentionally in this way, the public body is relieved of a problem and there is a risk of reducing social conflict. Secondly, in autonomously seeking answers to problems, "only those who make it go forward". There is the risk of putting in difficulty the weaker subjects (except when the forms of self-organization expressly aim at mutual aid, as in the struggle for the home) and give space to the stronger ones, generally represented in the contexts of hardship and poverty by illegal economies and organized crime. Thirdly, there are open spaces for the re-examination of what the public interest is, which can be guided by a profound and serious political reflection, but can also emerge from unregulated processes dictated by private interests (as often happens in the territories of unplanned built areas). In fact, there are several "public cultures" (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2014). The differentiated character of political processes and positions can cause possible distortions, if not

creating spaces of autonomy. However, this does not mean that these are pure deregulation spaces, but rather the attempt to create the conditions to be able to develop autonomous processes. These will then structure coexistence and "life forms" (Agamben, 2011), in their turn "generative". Although starting from quite different cultural and political assumptions, the reflection on "generativity" (Magatti, 2012) actually fits into this path.

also anti-democratic dynamics. The same "popular economies", born in South America as an alternative to extractive capitalism, give space to ambiguities that now put them under critical lens (Gago, 2015).
Because of this third dimension, the experiences of self-organization can today be characterized by profound ambiguity. Their interpretation does not arise in the wake of a romantic or apologetic vision, but leads to a critical approach, based on discernment, on the ability to critically read practices and processes of self-organization through the values and ideas of the city they bear.

Self-organization as a structural fact and the relationship with politics

The historical process of development of forms of self-organization calls for some considerations and some questions. A first consideration is the recognition, unlike what happened in modern society, of the multiplicity of subjects that build the city and "produce space". To make the city are not only institutions or economic forces, but many other active subjects, who may also have the ability to be or become protagonists, in some cases with better outcomes and modalities of the institutions themselves.
The question is therefore "who is caring for the public interest if the institution does not do it any more?" and how it is then produced and defined. The city is a "field" *a là* Bourdieu, a place of conflict between these forces, where spaces of autonomy can be built.
The second consideration is that self-organization is a structural fact[4]. It is not just an anomaly, a factor of protest, but a form by which society reorganizes itself.
Self-organization is (or has returned to be) a fundamental engine of "making city", not only in terms of care, maintenance and responsibility of the local living space, but also in terms of "production of space" in all its dimensions, material and immaterial, of a structural factor that builds the city. The question is rather whether this structural character is linked

4 In reality, if self-organization is a structural fact, it can still be considered a question. In this contribution, we do give an affirmative answer to this question. In some ways, it can be considered a recognition of a constitutive factor, of its founding role.

to the recognition of existing ordinary practices and political intentions that construct spaces of autonomy or if it is rather the consequence of the change in the ways of acting of state structures and the retreat of the *welfare state*. In the latter case, the prospect is the disintegration of the city as a *polis* and as *civitas*, as an organic body that - despite its differences and conflicts - is self-governing and produces its own culture of coexistence. It follows a situation in which, on one side, the social subjects, especially the weaker ones, are abandoned to themselves and, on the other, we must develop a difficult path of reconstruction of the "common good" in a context of preponderance of economic forces and functionalization of social skills and abilities to the "extractive capitalism".
A final consideration is to highlight how the experiences of self-organization are social laboratories and of cultural production. They are today the spaces where the production of politics and political culture takes place. In this sense, such spaces are today to be enhanced because those ones where the future can be thought (Appadurai, 2013).

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