

RC21 CONFERENCE 2013, BERLIN

SESSION 29: PARTICIPATION BETWEEN CONSENSUS AND CONTESTATION

TITLE: Facilitation Companies in Participative Urban Regeneration Programs in Italy: Technology of neoliberal governmentality? An explorative research in two Italian Cities

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The priority given to “reconstruction of social ties”, “enhancing of citizenship” and “promotion of participation” was not the only possible way to face social problems. How could this particular analysis succeed, while others (pointing at transformation of the economic system, growing inequalities, or persistent discrimination) have become impossible to conceive or to listen? (Tissot 2007: 9)

Abstract

Our paper discusses Italian Participative Urban Regeneration Programs (PURPs) within the framework of variegated neoliberalization (Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2010) and studies in governmentality (Foucault 2004, Imrie e Raco 2000, Raco 2012, Ong 2006). In particular we will focus on the role and main features of Facilitation Companies (FCs) working within PURPs to facilitate citizens' participation and to bring together the different points of view and interests expressed by national and/or local governments, civil society, individual citizens. We analyzed: 1) interviews made to two FCs' managers 2) two FCs' website contents through Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk 1997). Thus we expose the first results of an explorative work aiming to study Facilitation Companies as a governmental technology in the context of global neoliberalization processes. In doing so, we refer to two different approaches in social science: 1) studies in governmentality (Foucault 2004, Rose, 1996), focusing on the role that FCs assume within the new urban governance (in particular related to Social Policies); 2) a mix of sociology of professions and public policy analysis (Nonjon 2006), focusing on the interaction between the “participative” job sector and the “participative turn” in urban policies. We claim for the possible impact of this analysis on the overall understanding of premises and results of Italian Participative Urban Regeneration Programs.

Participative Urban Regeneration Programs have actually mobilized a considerable amount of (mostly public) economic resources, workers and professional sectors: from international, national and local

representatives to their respective administrative officers, from architects to academics coming from very different disciplines, from consulting agents to social workers and construction companies. A great amount of academic and non-academic literature has been produced to affirm the importance of the “participative turn” contributing to the emergence and the structuring of a new political, social, economic and cultural paradigm: participatory urban policy. To prove the pervasive and hegemonic character of this new paradigm it is enough to answer the following question: who can, indeed, study, project or decide about the contemporary city without any reference to the concepts of governance, participation, regeneration, integration of policies? Arguably: nobody.

In this short introduction we point to some major critical aspects that we find both in the Italian field of Participatory Urban Regeneration Programs and in that of its analysis.

Firstly we recall the structural weakness of participative urban regeneration policies in Italy – with regards to economic, cultural and organizational/institutional investments – compared to other European experiences such as the French and the British ones (Allulli 2010, D'Albergo 2009, see par.6 for a deeper discussion on the point). While it seems that this weakness has until now discouraged a deep critical analysis of PURPs experience, we claim the importance of such an analysis to better understand and practice what an “innovative urban policy” could be. We find this lack particularly noteworthy considering that – albeit its above mentioned weakness – it has been among the most innovative ones in the field of Italian public policies. A critical analysis of the conditions of emergence and affirmation of the paradigm and a realistic evaluation of its results are just beginning (see, for different approaches: Pasqui 2010, Bifulco 2010, Moini 2012, Colombo e Gargiulo 2012) and haven't yet balanced the widespread rhetoric character of the Italian participative discourse. In our experience in the fields of social research, social work, architecture and grassroots urban movements, we frequently listened to academics and politicians talking about participation. Quite often, as the dialogue became more confidential, we heard them say that “nobody actually knows what participation is really about”, that “any policy now is supposed to be at least *a bit participative*, so you can find the P-word anywhere, even in actually non-participative policies”, or that “you can never say no to a Round Table, even if decisions are already taken”.

In order to overcome these critical aspects, we point in two directions that we consider promising, albeit until now very little explored:

- 1) put the participative turn in perspective, exploring the relationship between the paradigm of Participative Urban Regeneration and the neoliberal one, which a) flourished in the same decades, b) was promoted at the international level by the same actors, and c) made “the urban” the center of its mostly financial accumulation regime. Far from asserting some mechanic coincidence between the two, we suggest that a lot of work has to be done to analyze and discuss their complex relation. In doing so we refer to “variegated neoliberalization” theory (Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2010);

2) looking at this paradigm through the lens of studies in governmentality, considering neoliberalism as a mobile technology (Ong 2006). We therefore claim the importance of identifying and analyzing the whole set of public and private actors involved in participatory urban regeneration policies and analyze each of them as well as their interaction. This analysis should take into account the social features, the rhetoric and the moving institutional and political frame with which each actor have to deal.

The paper is structured as follows: first of all we introduce our theoretical references (par. 2-3); then we define Facilitation Companies and explore their role in relation with the concept of governmentality (par. 4). In par. 5 we briefly explore the methodological tools used for the empirical analysis. Paragraph 6 and 7 introduce the case studies and paragraph 8 exposes our analysis. Finally, in par. 9 we draw some partial conclusions.

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