

“Social innovation and territorial development in *contested neighbourhoods*: a matter of debate”

Elena Ostanel*

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(*) Università IUAV di Venezia, Santa Croce 1957, Venezia contact: ostanel@iuav.it

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1. The space of *contested neighborhoods*

In and beyond Europe today we witness strengthened structural spatial divisions within city neighbourhoods, with increased inequality and sharper lines of division (Marcuse; van Kempen, 2000; Balbo, 2014). Neighbourhoods are increasingly hyperdiverse (Tasan-Koc et al, 2014): they are more diverse in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but many differences also exist in lifestyles, attitudes and activities. Continuing immigration and increasing socio-economic and ethnic concentration in neighbourhoods question social cohesion in local societies worldwide (Hulchanski, 2009). In Europe, high rates of unemployment, austerity and poverty make hyperdiverse neighbourhoods and local societies increasingly complex and contested. All low-income segments of society are affected, immigrants especially, who can only rarely rely on solid community networks. This situation strengthens the polarisation of urban space, and ethnic concentration in neighbourhoods overlaps with situations of social exclusion and deprivation. Proximity does not automatically mean recognition, and native inhabitants can consider diversity as disturbing all that is familiar and homely, all that they have grown up with and take for granted, including socio-spatial knowledge of their neighbourhoods.

Traditional state-driven top-down revitalisation strategies have resulted in lot of cases in new urban dynamics and tensions, gentrification processes and social exclusion. In Europe ethnic concentration in neighbourhoods overlaps with situations of social exclusion and deprivation, thus increasing the complexity of hyperdiverse cities. In any case we witness a stalled urban regeneration investment across many European cities and disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Arapoglou, 2012). Regeneration budgets and the 'property-led' model are beleaguered, with finance enormously constrained outside core economic areas following the 2007 financial crisis.

In this situation, urban neighbourhoods have become a privileged unit of observation and policy intervention and

area-based initiatives inspired by a social innovative approach have been experimented in dissimilar urban contexts in Europe and outside (Bianchetti, 2015; Ostanel, 2014).

This article focuses on what we have called *contested neighbourhoods* (Mantovan, Ostanel, 2015): spaces where immigration complexifies a more general condition of social and spatial exclusion in a context where the institutional capacity to respond to local needs has been challenged.

In these neighbourhoods some specific urban questions arise: the interstitial insertion of migration both in residential and public spaces; the humanization of the urban decay, considering immigration as the cause of it; the fragmentation of urban space, thus affecting social cohesion; forms of interaction where proximity does not mean recognition and place attachment is contested.

Although contested neighbourhoods are in need of assistance, the presence of the State is constantly diminishing in time of crisis and due to the constriction of the welfare state, thus reinforcing the perception of insecurity as other researches has highlighted (Manzo, 2012; Briata, 2014; Cagnetti 2007; Pastore, Ponzo, 2012).

Stazione neighbourhood in Padua will be presented in this brief article. The research has been conducted between 2011 and 2012, funded by the European Integration Fund. It was part of the Project "Mediare.com. Percorsi di comunità attraverso la mediazione", conducted in collaboration with the Padua and Venice Municipalities. The research has led to the publication of the book "Quartieri Contesi. Convivenza, conflitti e governance nelle aree Stazione di Padova e Mestre" edited with Claudia Mantovan after the collaboration in her research project "La partecipazione di autoctoni e migranti alla vita della città come fattore di sicurezza urbana: due casi studio nei Comuni di Padova e Venezia".

After the research, I participated to the start up of a coworking space named CO+ (empowered by E.S.T-Educazione, Società, Territori) specifically dedicated to the urban renewal of the railway station neighbourhood. As stated by a recent article by

Maurizio Busacca, *CO+* describe a new market of coworking which focus is not the working space itself but the effects (intentional as well as unintentional, to quote Hirschmann) that occur a territorial level (Busacca, 2015).

2. The case study of the Railway Station neighbourhood in the city of Padua, Italy

A case study that opened up different reflections is Stazione neighbourhood in the city of Padua, Italy.

In 2012 the 15.7% of Padua's total population is made of foreigners, which is almost double the national average (Municipal Statistical Yearbook, 2012). The railway station neighbourhood (i.e. an urban unit called 'Stazione') registers a concentration of migrants that is particularly relevant, that is to say 22.45% of the entire population (Municipal Statistical Yearbook, 2012). The area has rapidly changed, mainly due to the growing diversity in the ethnic backgrounds of people partaking in commercial activities: nowadays many shops, restaurants and services are run by migrants. The territory around railway station is also a place where many migrants live, due to the availability of affordable and easily accessible housing in the area. Residents mainly come from Romania, the Ukraine, Moldova, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, Morocco, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Albania (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015).

Similarly to what happened in many other contexts in Italy, the railway station in Padua epitomizes the current debate about the presence of immigration in cities: migrants are accused of surpassing the 'upper threshold of correct visibility' (Brighenti, 2010) while manipulating urban spaces. Beside this, migrants embody risks (Lupton, 1999; Amin, 2012) and, as a consequence, are considered 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996): automatically their sole presence on public spaces as well as behaviors are considered both deviant and described as 'incivility' (Mantovan, Ostanel, 2015).

To this extent a conflict among the use of the neighbourhood between autochthonous and immigrants is exacerbating and

public spaces are the location where this contradiction mostly occurs. For migrants, the growing production and occupation of urban space means setting up a complex web of new territories where symbolic as well as material resources are found and produced.

Notwithstanding these uses of space are subjected to a strong process of hypervisibilization because they are challenging the taken for granted spatial order (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015). The autochthonous population, mostly made by an old population (35%), react to the presence of migration considering it as an improper invasion: for much of the native local population, this complex web of territories of sociability constitutes a sort of 'socio-geographical transgression'.

The narratives collected are somehow extreme: migrants are considered as the spatial actors producing urban decay even if they do not vandalize the urban space. Their solely presence is considered deviant. The analysis of the public discourse can confirm this attitude: an analysis of the local newspaper 'Il Mattino' from 2007 to 2011 shows that almost 40% of articles on the presence of migrants in the railway station debates about security policies and 31% describes criminal events. Furthermore, only 6.8% of the articles reports migrants' opinions while 23.2% represents 'native' local residents' voices in contrast (in some cases organized into committees). In addition, 13.6% of the articles report the opinion of police forces (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015). To construct these narratives, the articles always refer to migrants and their specific nationality as actors performing disorder in the neighbourhood. This is in line with the national tendency to ethicize the danger (Mantovan, Ostanel, 2015) in public discourse.

The railway station is not only reshaped by the migrant presence: due to the localization of many drop-in services (i.e. public showers, kitchen, public health services) and due to its accessibility, the railway station neighbourhood is a referral point for different marginal population: 'new poverty', social exclusion and drug dependencies are social dimension that are present in the neighbourhood. This condition exacerbates the

conflict at neighbourhood level and the native local population somehow relate this situation of social exclusion to the growing presence of immigration.

Amin (2008) discusses 'phenotypical racism' as the practice of fitting bodies into a vicariously fashioned iconography that triggers powerful negative feelings: in this sense migration personifies a sort of 'placement of prejudice' (Valentine and Sadgrove, 2013) that links racial and spatial issues. Bodies in space constitute 'a practico-sensory realm in which space is perceived also through sight, smells, tastes and hearing. It produces a space that is both biomorphic and anthropological' (Simonsen, 2010, p. 174).

In this condition, encounters in public space as well as moments of reciprocal recognition are extremely rare, not only for the absence of proper public spaces dedicated to it (public spaces are only infra-spaces) but also due to a situation of spatial fragmentation that de facto shape multiple but untouchable accessibility to urban space. When occurs, social interaction does not mean recognition in a condition where proximity do not generate place attachment or collaborative place making.

3. Social innovation and territorial development: a matter of debate

Even if some scholars have argued that some area-based and mixed community programs have led to wider economic transformations of cities, social polarisation and state-led gentrification (Moulaert et al, 2013), in Europe urban neighbourhoods have become a privileged unit of observation and policy intervention. In some cases area-based initiatives have been key to producing social cohesion, and transforming power relations and socio-spatial inequalities in hyperdiverse neighbourhoods (Oosterlynck et al, 2013).

In the Italian case we assist to a new wave of bottom-up practices of urban regeneration that describe themselves as social innovative. Let's think about the annual conference of coworking space that has been hosted in Florence in 2015

(called 'Espresso Coworking') as well as the recent "Festival del Cambiamento" organized by RENA in Bologna: specific panels to discuss the urban outcomes of social innovative practices have been organized and extensively participated. As anticipated in the first chapter, a recent article described these practices as CO+ to describe a condition where the sharing produces some territorial effect in the space where these hubs are set up.

The relation between social innovation and urban regeneration is a matter of debate: scholars have recognised that this outcome occurs particularly when neighbourhoods are set within wider city and regional contexts, due to the fact that macro-economic forces may exaggerate neighbourhood problems (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001). Only conceived as related to other levels outside the neighbourhood boundaries, area-based initiatives can push towards the development of innovative assets of multilevel governance for urban revitalization and territorial development (Vicari and Moulaert, 2009) overcoming the ineffectiveness of 'solo' local policies.

Recent evidence from research has highlighted how social innovation is a productive domain when applied area-based initiatives of territorial development (Moulaert et al, 2013). An innovative social approach can push towards the explicit attention to how institutional and social networks and interactions between levels of governance can work to enable or constrain innovation in governance and institutional learning. To be effective, social innovation should not be considered as a tool box that could provide rapid solutions to pressing problems (ivi, 2013) but a highly contextual matter that needs to be deeply analyzed within particular institutional and spatial settings. To this extent, territorial development is conceived as a grounded process in 'spatialised' communities, taking inequality into account in the spatial and social distribution of disadvantage. In this framework path-dependency is at the core of the urban regeneration discourse as a recognition of the conditions of possibility that are shaped by an area's own history. Only this attitude recognises the fault lines of social exclusion and fragmentation in local societies that can deepen the divide

between integrated and excluded social groups. This is especially key when dealing with action-research on hyperdiverse and contested neighbourhoods.

So conceived, processes of territorial development have different sites of actions: the 'constitutive outsides' (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015; Cancellieri, 2015), the neighbourhood in its multiple spaces, diverse inhabitants and forms of activation as well as the image produced by the outside and inside.

It's clear how these attitudes mainly questions the competencies as well as the processes of urban regeneration itself. From an action planned by experts in a specific time and place, urban regeneration is more and more conceived as a process intrinsically path dependent and contextual; in other words it is a practice that facilitate socio-spatial change in the existing and lived tissue of the neighbourhood, aiming at modify both social relations between individuals and groups as well as the power relation in the planning process (Moulaert *et al*, 2013).

4. What happen in *contested neighbourhoods*

While there are strong expectations of the socially innovative capacity of hyperdiverse neighborhoods, the conditions under which cohesive and inclusive practices develop within them are matters of debate; many scholars on social innovation have pointed out the risk of marginalizing the needs of fragile or weaker social groups within the urban fabric even with an approach of social innovation (Moulaert *et al*, 2013). Forms of participation and local policies that are ignorant of lines of social exclusion and fragmentation in society may lead to the reproduction or even deepening of the dividing lines between the integrated social groups and those excluded (ivi, 2005). Moreover, the scientific debate on social innovation recognizes the necessity of institutions that would enable regulated and lasting practices of social innovation and clear citizenship rights guaranteed by a democratic state functioning.

The weaknesses highlighted could be particularly risky in contested neighbourhoods where: i) usually immigrants can access a differentiated grade of citizenship participation ii) neighbouring relations are affected by an 'emplaced' prejudice (Amin, 2008) that prevents meaningful contacts (Valentine, Mayblin, 2015) among diversities iii) a pervasive media representation contributes to the creation of a moral panic (Cohen, 1973; Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015) that nurtures phenotypical racism (Amin, 2008) iv) local institutions struggle in the provision of policies in the lack of resources and in the absence of integration and coordination between different competencies and geographical scales.

As I mentioned before, in the case study of the railway station neighbourhood we assist at the development of different bottom-up initiatives mainly framed by local associations in proxy of the local administration that did not take a real public guidance of the dissimilar grassroots initiatives; the local government mainly acted with an approach that I elsewhere described as an excess of regulation (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015). Furthermore, the management of diversity is shaped as a mere problem of social order and urban aesthetics (ivi, 2015).

To this extent the Municipality at one has acted using zoning ordinance and urban renewal, on the other timidly supported jeopardized grassroots initiatives dealing with social inequalities and cultural promotion (Mantovan, Ostanel, 2015). In the absence of a coherent local policy on territorial development, bottom-up initiatives strongly suffer from the lack of sustainability as well as long lasting effectiveness.

I will here discuss the CO+ experience to discuss on these problematic issues. Above the bottom-up initiatives analyzed, the one describing itself as working in the field of social innovation is CO+, a coworking space specifically dedicated to urban regeneration at neighbourhood level; CO+ hosts different professionals that, beside working on their specific field, collaborate to a process of territorial development in Piazza Gasparotto. Piazza Gasparotto is considered as a public space that need to be rehabilitate by activating a collaborative place

making process. In fact the 'Piazza' is known in the public debate as a place of marginality and insecurity, mainly populated by drug addicted and minor offences.

As a consequence of an action research done in the neighbourhood, the project consisted in activating an urban garden run by a group of inhabitants, in collaboration with the public kitchen managed by the church active in the area. The ultimate objective of the project is to involve the target of the drop-in services in the area as well as the marginal population living in the Piazza and to expand the urban garden by making it a place of encounter among included and excluded population. The project has been defined in the collaboration with a group of coworkers and discussed during some public meeting, in order to shape the project idea considering inputs from the user communities. Even if CO+ asked for a public-private partnership to rehabilitate the square as a catalyst of a broader intervention at territorial level, the former administration as well as the current one (from a left wing administration to a right wing, leaded by Lega Nord from 2014) refuse to establish a formal collaboration for the rehabilitation of an abandoned public space and *de facto* only recognized the possibility to build up the urban garden without paying the tax for soil occupation. The urban garden is now in its start-up phase, being activated in May 2015.

5. What socio-spatial effects of social innovative practices?

I here would like to set up some open question based on the observation of CO+ experience in the city of Padua as well on the results of some conferences organized in the last years by Tracce UrbaneNetwork in Italy (Cellamare, Cognetti, 2015).

I will focus on some issues that could be further discuss to work on the social and spatial effect of bottom-up initiatives that work on territorial development in *contested neighbourhoods*.

1. representational level: bottom up initiatives seems to be capable to explode new narratives on marginal spaces that are usually described as spaces of deprivation in the local public

discourse. In context where the dominant discourse shape different accessibilities to urban space, these initiatives insert themselves in the public debate by expressing that different images as well as uses of space are possible. As an effect, news accessibilities to urban spaces are shaped with consequences on the forms of social interactions in fragmented neighbourhoods.

2. spatial *bricolage*: they usually are practices that consider space as 'easily shaped', as an object that can be changed by incremental 'do it yourself' activities. In this sense space is a tangible dimension where to measure the effect of *day to day* practices of change. Spatial *bricolage* acts in performing different forms of place attachment, recognition and comfort.
3. place attachment VS incivilities: in contested spaces where the rules of daily cohabitation are usually questioned, these initiatives construct spaces that can be medium of communication/recognition while negotiating conflicting elements of coexistence. They shape public spaces where to instantly negotiate micro-conflict in social interaction. In this sense these spaces reinforce their *publicness* (Cancellieri, Ostanel, 2015) in neighbourhoods where the use of public space is extremely rare or fragmented.
4. decategorization: they usually produce places where to work in 'decategorization' (Valentine, Mayblin, 2015): in other words not focusing on group differences but rather on shared interests cross over the categories through which encounters with diversity are normally approached. Valentine and Mayblin (2015) indicate the importance of working on the 'collective meanings' that emerge from contact as an act of translation. Translation in the contact zone is 'dialogical and political work' which involves both 'recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge and culture, and an openness to the ideas, knowledge and practice of others' (Santos 2005: 20).
5. spaces of micro-planning: these initiatives most of the times work on marginal/abandoned spaces that let the possibility to experiment solutions of urban and social regeneration where different competences arose from the bottom up (on demand due to in real time). These micro-planning actions question the

timing as well as the competencies needed for the regeneration of urban and social spaces.

At the same time some more problematic aspects must be taken into account.

Starting from the relation with the institutional dimension, the question is to what extent social innovative practices can perform an *upscaling* able to work on new institutional arrangements (institutional learning) as well as on publicizing the social effect of micro-practices (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991). Secondly, the question is whether and how these practices responds to particular needs in time of crisis and in the wearing away of the welfare state. It is a matter of competences as well as of sustainability of practices that are performed by private actors that are in some cases exceeding their mission. In neighbourhoods (and cities) where social exclusion is becoming more severe, a relevant question is how social innovative practices can really respond to emergent social needs (i.e. new poverties, drug dealings, exclusion, conflicts).

As we consider the spatial effects of these practices, we should bear in mind the risk of privatizing the spaces and the services, while, on the contrary, a process of collective empowerment should be envisaged. To this extent, as above mentioned, contested neighbourhoods are sites of particular interest in order to evaluate if the access to different grades of citizenship rights can affects the capacity to get involved as well as to be beneficiaries in/of bottom-up initiatives.

To conclude this brief article, what the *new wave* of social innovative practices of territorial development primarily question is the very notion of urban regeneration as a top-down and formal process of planning: these micro-actions perform both in the urban and social space, producing some intentional and non intentional effects, that shape life at neighbourhood and city level. The open question is to what extent these practices can become more inclusive and work as pioneering experiences for more generalised local policies.

The role of institutions, in this process, is key and must to be re-organized in a process of reciprocal understating (Donolo, 2007; Donolo, Fichera, 1998) as well as mutual learning.

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