Social Innovation in Southern European Cities

Discourses, practices, policies and politics.

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Social Innovation In Southern European Cities: Discourses, practices, policies and politics.

Workshop Report

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Overview of the workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to explore the notion of social innovation (SI) in framing new ways of organisation and mobilisation, looking at discourses and practices that shape today’s post-crisis era. As a discourse on social innovation gained momentum in recent years among different actors and within governing circles, there has been a considerable amount of debate whether it is able to provide alternative solutions for current social, political, or economic inequalities and injustices. Focussing on the Southern European context, the workshop also aimed to go beyond current conceptual and normative understandings of social innovation, by engaging with questions about its possible theorisation in the contexts of Southern European cities. Discussions were therefore oriented towards how social innovation relates to social mobilisation, public policy development, and the historical-geographic characteristics of Southern Europe, taking mostly the cases of Spain and Italy as the totality of cases presented are rooted in these two countries.

Here in this document, you will find a summary of the main issues - defined as “topics” that have been considered relevant and requiring further research by the participants - that emerged in the sessions and in the collective discussions that were held during the two days. More in particular, many of the issues discussed in the last paragraph arose during the last session that was introduced by Filippo Celata.

1. Sessions outcomes

Session 1: Local policy discourses and systems

Participants: Elena Ostanel | Clara Medina García | Margherita Grazioli
Chair: Marc Pradel
Discussant: Francesco Chiodelli

During this session SI was mainly discussed as a hybrid instrument for the design and implementation of policy frameworks, creating a bottom-linked approach between social movements and other forms of civic action on the one hand, and institutions on the other. Cases discussed were in Rome, Bologna and Madrid.

Main emerging issues:
- The need to unpack the utopian understanding of SI in public discourses
- the real and potential role of SI in increasing public trust instead of welfare state disengagement
- the realities and challenges of so-called “enabling environment” for SI: how to study enabling processes and how to make them possible
- The role of SI practices in shifting the logic of collective action from confrontation and conflict to “dialogue”;
- Analysing the role of street-level bureaucracy in SI (i.e. the role of housing squats as containers of housing emergency managed by the state) in policy areas that deal with social marginalities
- The role of informality as both an enabler of SI and an obstacle to it;
- the dark side of SI as forms of communitarian and exclusive belonging and social practice;
• The impact on politically and socially regressive governments and politics - i.e. nationalist extreme right/neoliberal conservatism - on SI practices and actors social innovation practices dealt with regressive governments?
• How impacts and institutional learnings of SI are assessed and the pitfalls of a technical and unpolitical understanding of SI.

Session 2: Place-making, culture and arts

Participants: Stefano Consiglio, Fabio Corbisiero I Annachiara Autiero, Fabio Landolfol Alice Buoli
Chair: Marianna d'Ovidio
Discussant: Giulia Pezzi

The session dealt with bottom-up practices dealing with the reclaim and valorisation of urban assets, the deployment of inclusive and inter-cultural participative practices in diverse neighbourhoods where artistic practices or cultural heritage were the focus of the action. Cases discussed were in Naples and Madrid (but with examples of practices in Dakar and Barcelona).

Main emerging issues:
• The role of SI practices as tools for the management of urban diversity and change in the context of hyperdiverse, dense neighbourhoods in southern European historical centres;
• The role of SI practices in forging localised and trans-local microcitizenships that focus on cosmopolitanism through place-making;
• The role of SI practices in shaping the co-production of public spaces and in the reuse of public assets and negotiation of this role under different governance conditions;
• The role of SI practices in allowing valorisation processes - i.e. the role of tourism in southern European historical centres - and in orienting them towards certain outcomes;
• The role of SI in negotiating the inclusive/exclusive character of these processes of valorisation in reference both to the quality of employment opportunities and the wider outcomes in terms of urban inclusivity (i.e. housing);
• How SI practices variably articulate their relationship with labour: from their role as employment policies - building an economic basis - to that as facilitators of processes of professionalisation - giving resources to high-skilled individuals.

Session 3: Concepts, criteria and impacts

Participants: Hülya Ertas I Gaja Maestri I Federico Prestileo
The session highlighted four main topics: the subjectivation of individuals and groups involved in certain SI practices; governance of the socially innovative processes (relations among different levels of -urban- governance); institutionalisation of informal practises; and the role of the (urban) space in shaping socially innovative practises. Cases discuss were both localised - a case in Palermo - and involving multiple locations (cases in Italy) or framed at a global scale.

Main emerging issues:
- The role of SI practices in managing “economies of poverty” instead of organising collective action to claim for change of wider structural economic, social, political factors narcissist component of SI in its ability to reflect upon and intensively work around the design of professional identities, trajectories and ethical identities;
- The restructuring and recomposition of family structures as drivers of certain SI practices that aim at decentralising to individuals/families the care of certain marginal social groups;
- The mobilisation of expectations of binding human relationships and intimacy as a driver of certain SI practices mobilising “homing” policies and practices and more in general the renegotiation of the private/public realms nexus;
- the role of spatialities - sharing, managing, using certain working spaces - and de-spatialisation in the shaping of certain professional networks - working at a distance, cooperating through digital tools;
- SI as drivers of the subjectivation of individuals and social groups: “social” and “innovation” as resources for professional “legitimation” versus the more traditional politicization of professional subjectivity;
- the regulation and governing of certain informal practices as arenas for the rise of certain SI actors and practices and their relationship with street-level bureaucracy traditionally dealing with informality;
- Relations among different governance levels

**Session 4: Actors and identities**

Participants: Francesco Gerli | Paolo Inno | Martina Massari
Chair: Luca Bródy
Discussant: Paolo Spada

The session focussed on the wide issue of agency of SI, the current ways to assess and evaluate them, and their conceptualisation as in different ways as social entrepreneurship, as cultural production, and as intermediate space. The cases discussed involved Italy, mainly the cities of Milano and Bologna.
Main emerging issues:
- The issue of how to evaluate the effectiveness of urban regeneration policies in the peripheries and of the measurement of the social impact of SI practices in this context
- The issue of a teleological and ethical understanding of SI as something good in itself;
SI as a form of cultural production and a form of reproduction and legitimisation of the social order through cultural hegemony;
SI as a driver for the creation of intermediate places between vision and action
the tension between the constant change of SI practices and the stabilisation of policy frameworks
The relationship between SI and devices such as Urban living laboratories, policy labs, community, innovation hubs and the need to critically analyse where the agency is located in these contexts;
The lack of adequate connection between SI research and public policy literature
The critical issue of the social construction of what is “value” in SI practices and policies as opposed to a traditional understanding of profitability and/or organisational achievement;
SI as a proxy concept for too many things

2. Emerging issues for future research on social innovation

In the context of the after-session and final plenaries, the discussion has been based on some overarching, open issues that have also been considered worthy of further investigation

- The problematic meaning of the Southern-European context and framework in the field of social innovation and of the research on social innovation: what are the dimensions that have to be taken into account to characterise this relationship (the welfare system, social composition, the role of the family, peculiarities in the urban social compositions and spatialities?)
- The role of the articulation of conflicts as one of the main drivers of comparative differences between northern European and southern European contexts in which SI practices are rooted
- The potential and need to update, revise and challenge existing definitions and understandings of SI (i.e. Moulaert et al. framework) both in a broad sense and also in its applicability to the Southern European context.
- The problematic and under-researched relationship between SI and the theorisation of community, society and universalism: SI is supposed to resolve societal problems by mobilising the community, this opens up a wide series of critical issues that need to be addressed (and that are discussed further in the points below).The link between SI and politics in respect to the role of ideology, conflict and dialectics; the processes of both institutionalisation on the one side and of cooptation on the other;
- the character of SI practices of leaders’ recruiting as basins for new and traditional forms of politics and the contribution of SI practices to the rise of the character of the so-called “new urban activist” and the need to put this nexus of issues and relationships in a historical perspective.
- The relationship between SI projects and practices and ideologies and politics of communitarianism and localisms: how SI projects and practices intersect with them and how are they part of specific, local applications of such ideas while reproducing their risks (the local and the community traps). And also what are the actual
conditions through which SI projects and practices can escape the local trap, by escalating - jumping scale, from the local to the regional, national - and impacting wider systems while posing the need of deeper reforms of such systems.

- The need to have a governance-minded approach to social innovation able to fully make sense of the different local frameworks of multi-level governance and how do they contribute to shape SI practices and projects, as well as they embed/hybridize/coopt them: such a perspective is key in understanding variances in local systems of social innovation.

- The issue of positionality of SI researchers and more specifically the role that “activist-researchers” - and also their relationship with so-called “new urban activists” - play in SI practices and projects and in broader terms the role that university-led third-mission and co-production play in the structuring of the governance of social innovation in cities; and also the issues in terms of autonomy that this increasing inter-minglings pose.

- The need in studying SI to deeply engage in trans-disciplinary research, as an example, to bridge discussions about institutions, social movements, urban activism, institutional learning and to formulate new paradigms in social innovation theory.

- The role of spatial capital and in particular of certain kinds of spatial capital that is available in certain South-European situations such as relatively disinvested historical centres where social innovation represent emerging ways of both producing place-making and negotiating the social mix.

- SI as a self-reflective field, where legitimation of “innovation” is obtained ignoring/rejecting the existing/traditional knowledge, no matter its impact/usefulness;

- the problematic nature of an excessively case-study based SI research: too little attention to what is beyond the context, and the problem of normative bias and generalisation.