

21. Social Innovation in the Cities: Politics, Policies and Actors

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Format: traditional (call for abstracts and individual presentations of around 15 minutes)

The theme of Urban Social Innovation is today pivotal to rethink forms and contents of the urban governance of social services, integrating in a unitary framework the debate on the transformation of democracy and the Welfare State, the relations between State, Market and the Third Sector, finally the relationship between institutional vs bottom-up action on the territories. At the same time, the concept of Social Innovation risks to become a passe-partout and ambiguous concept. It can refer: 1) to new urban and territorial movements, generating alternative discourses, performing new practices, and rethinking new types of relationship with the local authority to answer social demands that neither the market nor the State have responded; 2) to a renewed equilibrium between the "institutional" and the "non-institutional field", as the public actor engages itself in promoting citizens' activism, with the result of widening public institutions' sphere, and inverting the privatization of public sector; 3) to a laissez-faire strategy, rather than being part of a new season of collaborative governance. By this way, the final effect would be exacerbating, rather than reducing, the gap between those who have the resources to act and those who are deprived of it, and then being placed in conditions of marginality. Social Innovation can be defined as an answer to the erosion of social capital, and as an instrument for building a new urban welfare that focuses on the activation of civil society, but also as a framework for the expression of new forms of grassroots participation and as the experimentation of direct democracy and self-organization practices, in response to the crisis of traditional forms of representation. Although, under the umbrella of Social Innovation we can identify also practices that act "legitimizing" neoliberalism by "softening" it and activating individuals in order to compensate the weakening of public intervention through a sort of "caring neoliberalism", in which the inclusion of civil society serves to partially balance the retreat of the State, offering cheaper services.

Within such a theoretical frame, we wonder if Social Innovation refers to grassroots mobilization and community self-organization, practiced by the subalterns. Is it expression of a form of bottom-up re-politicization? Or, on the contrary, behind the rhetoric of Social Innovation we find an adaptation and a fully acceptance of the dismantling of social rights and the end of the "public city"?

Far from aiming only at questioning the widely argued negative effects of neoliberal urban policy, the panel is open to papers that, focusing on the relations between grassroots practices and institutional change, critically

investigate a plurality of practices of innovation, adaptation and resilience. We are interested both on theoretically contributions – focusing on how practices of social innovation express an alternative (or end up to comply with) to the neoliberal model grounded on commodification, privatization, and competition – and empirically research on experiences of alternative models of cooperation, aimed to recreate public spaces and services, opposing (or going along) the processes of gentrification, privatization, and commodification. Both case-studies and comparative papers are welcome.