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Prima Colonna

Scrivere una recensione significa letteralmente passare in rassegna, cioè riconoscere pregi e difetti di un'opera scorrendo per intero le sue pagine, percorrendo con gli occhi quelle righe del testo che Ivan Illich paragonava ai filari di una vigna. L'atto di recensire, dunque, è il modo di esprimere un giudizio fondato anzitutto sulla lettera del testo e solo secondariamente sul contesto. Nel suo acuto editoriale, Scira Menoni prende le distanze da un sistema di valutazione dei prodotti scientifici che finisce per dare maggiore importanza al contesto invece che al testo. L'uso dei cosiddetti parametri bibliometrici, per esempio, ricava il valore di un testo scientifico dalla sua relazione con una testata editoriale e con altri testi dai quali è citato. La reputazione sostituisce la conoscenza diretta del testo da parte di un valutatore esperto.

Con le sue modestissime possibilità, (ibidem) difende la valutazione in prima persona, discrezionale finché si vuole, ma basata sulle ragioni del testo. La nostra scelta di quali libri recensire non è certo neutrale, come non lo è la scelta dei recensori ai quali affidare il compito. Su (ibidem) favoriamo un confronto aperto tra libri e persone che formano il loro giudizio attraverso la lettura. Chi ci segue sa inoltre che su (ibidem) non diamo importanza alle barriere disciplinari. È benvenuto chi scrive in un modo penetrante di questioni urbane. Il sapere della città è tanto poco circoscrivibile quanto lo sono i processi di urbanizzazione planetaria di cui parla Neil Brenner. Cosa è l'urbanità al giorno d'oggi? Gabriele Pasqui se lo chiede leggendo il libro più recente di Giancarlo Consonni. La risposta non è alla portata di un singolo sapere, né forse lo è mai stata. La lettura deve seguire le tracce di urbanità liberamente, fin là dove esse la conducono.

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Communities, institutions and the messy world of contemporary urban governance



Nick Gallent and Daniela Ciaffi (eds.)
**Community Action and Planning.
Contexts, Drivers and Outcomes**
Policy Press, Bristol 2016
pp. 304, £ 26,99

The collection of essays edited by Nick Gallent and Daniela Ciaffi arrives at a pivotal moment in the development of the long-standing debate about ‘participation’ in policy-making and planning. In the context of a complex and mutually reinforcing set of changes in the fields of technology, organization and even class identity formation patterns in Global North societies, new categories aimed at describing emerging participative practices are coming to the fore with unusual speed. Concepts such as co-creation (Nevens *et al.* 2012) and co-design (Manzini 2015) have been mobilized in order to describe new participative technologies conducive to pro-active and highly engineered processes of transition from current socio-ecological and socio-technical states of affairs to new states of affairs, deemed to be more *inclusive*, *sustainable* and *resilient*. More widely, scholars and policy-makers have also underlined a vast *laboratorial* turn not just in urban policy but in urban life itself (Karvonen and Van Heur 2014) as the final outcome of a revolutionary long march of capitalism towards an era of mass creativity organized around the ubiquitous device of the ‘pro-

ject’ (see Boltansky and Cappiello 2007). In this perspective, our cities would be in the process of becoming massive test-beds where sets of highly sophisticated actors would be constantly engaged in the implementation and evaluation of policy innovations introduced by highly pluralistic governance arrangements towards the advent of a new kind of democracy, namely an *experimental democracy*.

If this is the direction of societal change, the collection of Gallant and Ciaffi may even look quite old-fashioned in its prevalent focus on ‘community action’ practices related to spatial planning operations promoted by government institutions. Instead, precisely because of this focus, the book usefully reminds readers of the long-standing hegemony of large organizations – such as the State – in producing organizational change also via new ways of stakeholders’ mobilization. If it is true that business management has been a source of massive organizational change for the State – mainly through the raise of new public management – it is also hard to underestimate the role played by social and urban movements that, with the support of some *compagnon de route* in the social sciences, have promoted a true uprising against traditional top-down, professionalized and data-driven urban planning. So, at the heights of a pervasive *buzz* about co-creation and co-design, it is important to reassert that government is an unavoidable object for anyone who is interested in organizational and social change in cities: first, for the congenital promiscuity of the demands it has to accommodate between the efficiency promised by business-like technologies for stakeholder engagement and the inclusiveness preached by grassroots participative efforts; and second for its still gigantic size that is further dramatized by the pulverization of much of our economic and social life.

Examining the act of planning from a community perspective

Ciaffi and Gallent aim to examine «the act of plan-

ning from a community perspective», embracing an understanding of the (highly contested) concept of community not «as a passive consequence of residential proximity (but) as a product of active exchange across social networks» (p. 5). In this perspective, what is to be investigated is how the social, cultural even scalar complexification of contemporary societies contributes to, articulates or even prevents community action. Also because community actions – as the editors underline – have their, extremely variable, rationalities: they can be instrumental to exercise pressure on planning decisions or to nurture elective communities – echoing current discussions about commons and related collaborative efforts – or, more plainly, to reproduce a sense of belonging and of social bonding that is highly in demand in post-fordist societies. These key issues, with many others, are raised in a set of contributions focusing on case studies involving North America, Europe and Australia and by a more limited number of theoretical, transversal contributions on issues such as social capital and the role of temporality in community action. The objects of the case studies are quite diverse, from more traditional spatial planning and policy-related urban movements to participative planning programs and, finally, to more holistic policy processes combining land and housing development, resources preservation and self-management. Built as the outcomes of qualitative fieldwork – enjoyable, tick accounts of community action processes in which authors have often been directly involved – or, alternatively, more oriented at discussions of wider, longer evolutions of actors, tools and forms of action, the case studies give a sense of the variety and of the comparability of processes taking place in different institutional contexts.

Designing institutions for community action

How institutional arrangements can be reshaped to host and nurture community action is a core question of the book. Grassroots urban practices have been instrumental to the reform and even the establishment of representative democracy – see Vilà on the role of neighborhood movements in Barcelona – but also deeply resent the distorted politicization patterns typical of some local contexts (see two of the three Italian cases that Ciaffi covers).

Differently, when community action is the explicit goal of policy and institutional design a whole set of new challenges arises. The first, according to Gallant and Ciaffi, is that of creating «institutional structures – within community planning exercises – that can resist the uneven distribution of power and resources across a community network» (p. 37), precisely the challenge that has left many people disillusioned regarding the real possibility to turn transactive and collaborative planning models into models of true procedural justice. On this ground, the contribution of Messaoudène *et al.* is especially telling in presenting how, in the framework of the distinctively community insensitive French ‘Politique de la Ville’, the same basic engagement tools can lead to opposing results, given the communities uneven and unaddressed performances on key variables such as social and cultural capital and the presence of a ‘natural leadership’. In the same vein, both Van der Pennen *et al.* and Kilkpatrick *et al.* observe how *local characters* – such as the so-called ‘everyday fixers’ on the community side and the ‘reflective practitioners’ on the government side with ‘boundary crossers’ between the two – can prove strategic in getting closer to transactive planning models by mediating between the logic of citizens’ collective action on the one hand, and the logic of formal institutions with their procedural, abstract frameworks on the other. The institutional ability to expand a space of mutual understanding between these two logics would actually be the precondition of a ‘fourth way’ of public policy able to marry self-organizing citizenship with trust in state institutions.

The second challenge, a very intriguing one, regards the relationship between community action exercises, statutory land use planning and the dilemmas it creates. Parker and Gallant focus on UK community planning initiatives from the New Labour years to the coalition government’s ‘new localism’ strategy. Through parish and neighborhood development plans, statutory planning has been confronted with processes of local engagement leading to highly qualitative, informal pools of territorial evidences and preferences. By constraining such exercises within established land use plans and by not supporting them adequately in organizational terms, the State has somehow revealed the lack of clari-



ty that characterizes the goals and implications of such exercises. Finally, the issue of scale – raised by Filino in his case study on Toronto – is also relevant, illustrating how institutional frameworks unevenly transfer and filter collective demands through the layers of representative democracy while leaving scales that are not included in such frameworks largely unattended and therefore prone to sudden protest eruptions. As a consequence, regional strategies, critical as they are to achieve sustainability and resilience goals, are trapped between the rhetoric of multiscale governance and the reality of local resistance – the Toronto case study focuses on neighborhood resistance – amplified by socio-spatial polarization: if this is the context, says the author, ‘integrative transactional planning’ simply becomes utopia.

Collaborative games for deep local democracies

Another possible reading of this essay collection concerns community action exercises in what could be defined as ‘deep local democracy’. By this, I mean practices that not only involve change in the field of decisional procedures but also the direct application of new ways to conceive certain policies and commons. In this perspective, Satsangi discusses a Scottish land-trust case study that, following changes in legislation aimed at overcoming inherited patterns of land ownership concentration, has managed to combine collaborative governance, land collective control and sustainable growth. Wolf-Powers goes back to the rightly notorious case of the rise of cooperative housing – of community development organizations in New York and the strategic role that it played in the regeneration of abandoned land and building assets during the city’s 1970s-80s great crisis. Despite critiques of the alleged assimilation of these actors to the neo-liberal governance of the city, the author underlines how that case represents a true example of public-policy co-production and a challenge to a professionalized, insular conception of urban planning. As in other cases of accumulated social and political capital in cities, one of the key issues here is to assess how such networks can reposition themselves in a context that has shifted dramatically from decline to growth, making the production of affordable, alternative hous-

ing way more challenging. Hamidduddin *et al.* also discuss housing as a realm of potential, deep agency in relation to cooperative co-designed housing in Freiburg – the well-known Vauban development – as the historical outcome of the interaction between local institutional autonomy and alternative political cultures. An “enabling framework” combining formal master-planning with autonomous, intensively interactive design processes at a lower scale has proved to be an unprecedented experience of collaborative planning. An experience that now poses on one side well-known concerns regarding social homogeneity and inclusiveness of these experiences while on the other it projects such concerns in the future by fears of the demographic implications of such homogeneity.

Planners and the mess of urban governance

The collection gives a very valuable contribution to the analysis of the role that community action practices can play in the increasingly messy landscape of contemporary urban governance, democracy and public policy design. A landscape where opposed demands tend to compete for short and small policy innovation openings, collaborative efforts cohabit with conflictual stances, and the representation of powerful interest groups claims legitimacy as much as policy communities and grassroots groups do. Planners have adapted to this messy landscape by supporting or criticizing collaborative planning, supporting episodes of conflict and resistance with their expert knowledge (at times against other planners’ plans) and some other times engaging in brave paths of policy innovation through co-design projects. Over time, this led professional planning activities to migrate out of the box of planning departments. It also prompted state agencies to allow new kinds of intermediary organizations to play a larger role in challenging established instrumental framing and political influences. If everybody talks about a horizontal and networked kind of governance, it is clearly important to understand the perimeters, shapes and reciprocal relations of the ‘rhizomes’ that make up such networks. We may have in fact the multiplication of collaborative arenas cutting through traditional pyramidal decision-making systems. However, as long as these collaborative arenas concentrate in certain social worlds – following the

unequal distribution of political, cultural and social capital – they can have the perverse effect of making more intensively democratic the very social worlds they also increasingly separate from the rest. The challenge of a paradoxical urban democracy organized around vast pockets of even extreme horizontal participative and creative networks in a sea of disenfranchised, insular and passive groups has yet to be taken in depth by conversations on transactive, collaborative planning and co-creation.

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