

The Spatial Politics of Philanthropic Action in Turin: The imaginaries of sustainable development and social innovation in the institutionalisation of alternative cultural production as a field of urban governance.

PhD Thesis - Collection of Articles
Doctoral Program in Urban and Regional Development
DIST – Interuniversity Department of Urban Studies and Planning

Phd Candidate: Francesco Puletti, Polytechnic of Turin

Supervisor: Carlo Salone, Polytechnic of Turin

Reviewers:

Davide Caselli, University of Bergamo

Sergio Montero, University of Toronto

Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of philanthropy in urban governance through a collection of four articles. The aim is to spatially and politically analyse the role of an Italian foundation of banking origin in the institutionalisation of alternative cultural production as a field of urban governance in Turin.

Drawing on the emerging creative and cultural ecology literature, the first part of the collection proposes a conceptual and empirical framework to analyse alternative cultural production in Turin. By formulating a pluralistic conceptualisation of the creative economy, the collection expands the scope of previous inquiries into alternative systems of cultural production to encompass organisations that are often marginalised in such field of research.

The second part of part of the collection, focuses on the role of philanthropy in the urban governance of alternative cultural production, trying to understand how the latter is construed as a specific policy field, how the strategies of alternative cultural organisations and those of the analysed foundation interact with each other, which socio-spatial imaginaries are foregrounded and foreclosed by such process and how it reconfigures the relationship between state, philanthropy and the territory.

Starting from the identification of the variation, retention and reinforcement of socio-spatial imaginaries as the central element of institutionalisation processes, the collection adopts a Cultural Political Economy approach as a meta-framework for theory building. This meta-framework is applied through an historical materialist policy analysis of the evolution of the Italian cultural policy field. The theories of (de)politicisation and (de)territorialisation are identified as two heuristics to analyse the Italian foundation model. This framework is applied to study two call for proposals promoted by the analysed foundation: Compagnia di San Paolo (hereafter CSP)

The results highlight four distinguished roles played by the foundation in the institutionalisation of alternative cultural production as a field of urban governance: (i) that of an arm's length body of the State; (ii) that of technical political-guide of public institutions and of the grant-seeking third sector; (iii) that of "philanthropic party" and; (iv) that of "mediator" between fields and scales. Furthermore, the research highlights how the interaction between CSP and alternative cultural organisations is characterised by the negotiation of interests and a delicate balance between collaboration and autonomy. Organisations often align with the foundation's funding criteria to access resources, adapting their projects to fit these frameworks. However, many organisations also reinterpret these frameworks in creative ways to maintain their independence and pursue their specific missions. Despite these adaptive strategies, the research highlights the ongoing risk attached to potential dynamics of isomorphism, where alternative cultural organisations become increasingly similar in their structures and practices due to shared funding sources and institutional pressures towards entrepreneurialisation.

Accordingly, the research highlights how the socio-spatial imaginaries foregrounded by the analysed calls are central not only to the way alternative cultural production is conceived but, also, to how it is carried out. Positioning themselves in the meta-frame created by the UN and the European Union for the development of urban agendas, the calls support an interpretation of the 'right to the city' that affirms the compatibility between the shared use and production of urban space fostered by alternative cultural organisations and economic development understood in terms of an increase in their efficiency, innovation and economic self-sustainability.

The results also show how the conveyance, translation, and adoption of international policy paradigms at the local level legitimises a philanthrocapitalist approach to urban governance through discourses and practices that support and conceal it simultaneously. This process appears to be traversed by a tension that politicizes the role of the analysed foundation within public action while depoliticizing the discourse that supports it towards its recipients, respectively through the territorialization of an expertise in the material and cognitive support to alternative cultural organizations, and the deterritorialization of agenda-setting processes that justify the ultimate goal of this support.

Keywords: philanthropy, urban governance, alternative cultural production, social innovation, sustainable development