Ruling the unruled? The institutionalisation of social innovation in urban governance
Insights from France and England

Summary

In the current socio-economic scenario, the 2008 global economic crisis and the associated austerity policies adopted in many countries have profoundly reduced the effectiveness of urban welfare actions and have led to an escalation in neoliberal policies in cities (Peck et al., 2012). Contemporary cities are thus witnessing a rollback of public interventions in urban issues (Birch & Siemiatycki, 2016; Peck, 2013; Walks, 2010), but at the same time, a rollout of bottom-up initiatives, aiming at autonomously addressing the shortcomings of the municipalities. Moreover, we are also witnessing a crisis of forms of representation (Castells, 2012). Indeed, as it is evident from the current national and international public debate, representative democracy is increasingly in crisis (Manin, 1997; Fung, 2011; Della Porta, 2012; Tormey, 2014), and participatory democracy has not yet found a balance. Within this complex scenario, a crucial and very controversial issue pertains to the role of

civil society (citizens and third sector associations) in 'city making'. Over the past years in many European countries and cities, social innovation has been considered as a possible partial solution to the economic crisis and to the current welfare system failures (Moulaert et al., 2007), leading to the belief that civil society can co-operate – and sometimes even substitute governments – in urban welfare provision and spatial planning interventions. In this sense, many European countries, with

different models of spatial governance (Janin Rivolin, 2017), have recently been trying to organize and stress this great socially innovative ferment – originating outside the governmental apparatus – within institutional frameworks. Among the others, the Neighbourhood Plans instituted in 2011 in England with the 'Localism Act', the Conseils Citoyens that since 2014 have profoundly redefined 'La Politique de la Ville' in France are two emblematic examples of this new faith in co-creating

and co-managing the city with citizens and associations. The emergence of these new forms of co-governance calls for a broader reflection on the possibility of codifying grassroots social innovation through formalized tools. Starting from a righ theoretical investigation on the concept of social innovation in spatial practices in the academic and policy discourse, this research proposes to understand social innovation as a 'magic concept', i.e. a concept that is increasingly pervasive in policies as well as in practices due to some precise characteristics. Once this new theoretical argument has been clarified,

the research focuses on the tools of co-governance through which the socially innovative energies of civil society are intercepted. Indeed, the research project aims to understand whether bottom-up urban practices of social innovation can be virtuously channelled and pushed through codified instruments or, on the contrary, codification ends up limiting or even destroying its innovative character.

In more practical terms, the research aims to understand (a) at what conditions and in what institutional settlements it is possible to develop mutually engaging relationships between municipalities and civil society capabilities; and (b) if the new instruments can transform the established power relationships (Arnstein, 1969; Foucault, 1982) between administration and civil society, or they are simply 'flanking mechanisms' (Brenner and Theodore 2002, p. 374) of traditional

asymmetrical relationship of power. From the case studies and multiple focus areas investigated, it will emerge how the local context plays an important role in the ability of these tools to effectively channel social innovation present on the ground