Who shape the city? Non-profit associations and civil society initiatives in urban change processes: role and ambivalences

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHO SHAPE THE CITY?
Non-profit associations and civil society initiatives in urban change processes: role and ambivalences.

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ABSTRACT: *The present paper focuses on non-profit sector and civil society initiatives within urban change processes. More specifically, it looks into experiences that are characterised by a local/area-based approach and that arise in relation, response and reaction to the processes of city change, becoming and being recognised as one of its actors. By examining different initiatives variously involved in the regeneration process of a semi-central neighbourhood of the city of Torino (Italy), and by investigating their origins, goals and actions, the paper addresses the transformations that they go through over time, their complex relation with other local actors, and their role in the regeneration process, overall pointing out the different forms of ambiguity and ambivalences that they bear.*

KEYWORDS: area-based approach, neighbourhood change, neoliberal urbanism, non-profit sector, Torino

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1. Introduction

Within the frame of the re-articulation of the relationship between the state and civil society (Swyngedouw 2005), citizen participation and third sector inclusion in setting and implementing the policy agenda has gained much currency. Even if the actual impact of the participatory practices in policymaking has proven to be weak, 'participation' has become a hegemonic frame of reference, an (unavoidable) approach that is regarded as able to assure efficiency, legitimacy and empowerment (Moini 2011). Such rhetoric has spread in the realm of urban policies too, as shown, for example, by debates concerning new modes of governance in urban regeneration (Moulaert, Martinelli, González, and Swyngedouw 2007) or citizens involvement in local development (Gaynor 2011; Garcìa 2006; Silver, Scott and Kazepov 2010). "Active citizenship appears a panacea for dealing with much of the fallout of our time" (Gaynor 2011, 28) and the involvement of non-profit organisations and bottom-up initiatives is often considered to be the premise and promise of a more just and democratic city. For some, it implies the government-sponsored participation of stakeholders and ordinary citizens in decision-making. For others, it involves forms of resistance to the urban neoliberal agenda through bottom-up initiatives and social movements. However, these promises are not necessarily fulfilled and the contradictory tendencies of such dynamics require careful consideration (Fainstein 2010; Mayer 2003; Purcell 2006; Vitale 2007).

Given this background, this paper focuses on the role of non-profit organisations and civil society initiatives in the processes of urban change. In particular, it looks into experiences having an area-based approach that arise in relation, response or reaction to urban transformation processes. In doing so, it adopts a diachronic approach, to problematize internal transformations as well as changes in the relationship with other public or private local actors.

The present work aims at offering a twofold contribution. First, it aspires to further develop the connections between the literature focusing on the non-profit sector and that which engages with the implications of neoliberal urbanism. Second, it aims at discussing the rhetoric of 'participation', 'civil society inclusion' and 'activation of local resources' in the processes of urban change, underlining ambivalences and criticism. More specifically, it argues that, even when such rhetoric informs the local practices of governance, inclusion and participation present a selective character: only some stances are legitimated, empowered and included, namely those aligned with the existing neoliberal urban agenda. At the same time, it underlines that relying on the actions and interventions of the civil society or non-profit sector in shaping and supporting the processes of urban regeneration may involve a number of criticism both in terms of in-

ternal transformations (wherever associations and initiatives increasingly adhere to market logic in order to survive and be included) and social justice (as these actors can be also considered the stakeholders of specific interests and visions of the city).

To develop these arguments, the paper focuses on the neighbourhood of San Salvario (Torino, Italy), taking into account associative experiences and bottom-up initiatives developed in the last 20 years in relation to the different phases of the neighbourhood's transformation. The city of Torino offers interesting groundwork for the analysis: to face the challenges of post-industrial restructuring and economic globalisation in a time of (local and national) political turmoil, a renewed mode of governance, bringing together local authorities, civil society and private sectors around a shared agenda – in other words, a pro-growth urban regime – has emerged (Belligni and Ravazzi 2013). In this frame, the neighbourhood of San Salvario stands out as a case of urban regeneration that was not targeted by an integrated public plan. The public seemed to stay 'in the background', giving space to a rhetoric of 'activation of local (civic) resources' that assigned a crucial role to associations and bottom-up initiatives. The apparent absence of the state, however, needs to be understood in the frame of the abovementioned local urban regime in which the issues of cooperation and convergence around a shared agenda were pivotal. By addressing the emergence, development and transformations of selected local NPOs and civic initiatives, the paper puts into focus their role in the process of change, their goals and actions as well as their relationship with other local actors, aiming at exploring the ambiguity that these dynamics may entail.

The analyses here presented rely on two years of ethnographic fieldwork (2011 - 2012) and further periods of research in summer 2013 and fall 2014. Different data collection methods were adopted, mainly participant and naturalistic observation, in-depth interviews and media analysis. The participant observation took place in the neighbourhood's public spaces, commercial activities, public events and in local socio-cultural associations: during the fieldwork, the author regularly took part in the activities of several NPOs based in the neighbourhood that were either focusing on local development or on the issues of social inclusion and advocacy connected to the presence of migrants. Qualitative interviews were carried out as well, resulting in a body of around seventy recorded interviews with different actors: local authorities and civil servants (at neighbourhood and city levels), associations' representatives, residents, shopkeepers and entrepreneurs. Lastly, archival and media records were employed to observe the discourses and representations on the neighbourhood.

At the beginning of the research, the neighbourhood was showing signs of new changes and, possibly, of gentrification. Ad hoc zoning policies or integrated public re-

generation projects were not observable, being in this sense different from the previously gentrified areas of Torino (such as the Quadrilatero Romano, briefly described in Section 3). As the narrative and image of the neighbourhood revolved around the characteristics of multiculturalism, diversity and civic engagement, the research aimed at investigating the dynamics, main actors and socio-cultural implications of a process of urban change in which these elements were often boasted of and where a clear intervention by the local authorities seemed to be absent. In other words, the interest was to go beyond such a shared narrative and to investigate the actual implications of this process, questioning the role and protagonism of the local NPOs, associations and civic initiatives. To do so has required a complex exercise involving both proximity and distance, being directly engaged in the activities of the associative fabric of the neighbourhood while adopting a critically aware position at the same time. While gaining access to the field has been relatively easy, the role of the researcher and the phases of fieldwork exit and analysis have been more difficult to negotiate.

The contribution is organised as follows. The second section is devoted to a review of the main critical issues involved, bridging the reflections on participation, the third sector and the civic initiatives with those on city change and neoliberal urban transformations. The third section focuses on the case study, providing an overview of the recent transformations of Turin, introducing the case of the neighbourhood of San Salvario and outlining some of the associations and civic initiatives under analysis. The following section tackles, in more detail, the role of civil society initiatives in the urban transformation process, investigating the examples in light of the critical tensions and contradictory tendencies highlighted through the literature review. Finally, the conclusion completes the argument by summarising the findings and questioning the involvement of bottom-up initiatives and the civil society actors in the processes of urban change.

2. Changing actors in changing cities?

In the last few decades, global transformations have reshaped the geography of state power and the relationship between scales (Brenner 2004). Cities have become crucial knots of this new asset and city governments have been increasingly asked to take charge of the development of their territory, finding new strategies to combine economic development and social inclusion. Within the ongoing dynamics of globalisation, scalar restructuring and the transformation of the leading economic sectors, cities have increasingly emerged as landscapes of consumption and of production that are

called to compete at the regional, national, international levels to attract investment and to promote urban growth (Ache, Andersen, Maloutas, Raco, and Tasan-Kok 2008; Florida 2002; Logan and Molotch 1987; Zukin 1995). The pressure and the new possibilities framed by this new geography of state power have supported a progressive shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in urban governance (Harvey 1989). From being mainly responsible for the local provision of services, facilities and benefits for the urban population, urban governments assume the role of the entrepreneur, concerned with finding ways to foster local development (Harvey 1989; Logan and Molotch 1987).

In this frame, urban public policies increasingly proceed through an area-based approach in terms of both addressing social issues and promoting economic growth (Andersson and Musterd 2005). Regeneration programs mostly target districts that are considered to be problematic or that have previously experienced a process of deterioration. Similarly, the strategies of local competitiveness often focus on the reassessment of specific urban areas to attract capital flows: urban development is frequently uneven as also underlined by the literature on gentrification, social mix and neighbourhood effect (Andersen and Van Kempen 2003; Lees 2008; Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2015; Smith 1982; Uitermark, Duyvendak and Kleinhans 2007). At the same time, associations, movements and bottom-up initiatives focusing on specific segments of space and considering the territory not only as a geographic frame but also as an instrument to attain broader goals, such as social justice, quality of life, identity, have become increasingly common (Bourdreau 2003). To analyse these experiences, the 'right to the city' literature, which frames protests and mobilisation within the cities as responses to the neoliberal processes of urban change, is often adopted. In this picture, the city is not only the territorial frame but it is also the target and the symbolic and cultural resource of the claims that are put forward (Harvey 2008; Mayer 2009; Mayer and Boudreau 2012; Uitermark, Nicholls and Loopmans 2012). This literature helps to highlight the urban and spatial focus that is at the core of an increasing number of associations and initiatives having a specific territory as the main focal and starting point. However, it has been also underlined that many of these forms of civic engagement are not characterised by a 'cry and demand' approach and that they do not call for an 'urban revolution' (Uitermark *et al.* 2012). Indeed, most of the associations, NPOs and civic initiatives that come to be involved in the processes of urban transformation do not bring forward (any more) stances of systemic change or political struggle, challenging the neoliberal pro-growth approach of urban change or suggesting alternatives. Rather, they are often aligned with the existent approach and may even

function as elements of stabilisation and legitimation (Busso 2018; Gaynor 2011; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009).

These observations introduce the issues of participation, activation and involvement of the civil society and non-profit sector in the processes of urban change. Urban and regional governance, intended as a model of decision-making emphasising negotiation and consensus and foreseeing the involvement of stakeholders and civil society organisations in the formulation and implementation of policies, has been gaining momentum in European cities (Bagnasco and Le Galès 2000; Brenner 2004; Le Galès 2002). In a context of real or perceived state and market failure, third-way approaches that seek to connect, in new ways, the economic and the social dimensions by going beyond the market and the state, have gained new resonance (Cochrane 2000; Mayer 2003; Swyngedouw 2005). These experiences might be considered an example of the emergence of innovative horizontal and network arrangements of 'governance-beyond-the-state' in the re-articulation of the state-civil society relationship (Mayer 2003; Swyngedouw 2005). The adoption of participative approaches, the involvement of grass-roots and bottom-up initiatives as well as that of individuals or actors from both the economic sector and the civil society seemed then to be a win-win solution, in which economic growth could go along with social inclusion. 'Participation' has indeed come to be considered a new hegemonic frame of reference in the policy-making process (Moini 2011), a panacea in urban governance, city development and planning, premised upon the supposed benefit in terms of efficiency, sustainability and participants' empowerment (Jones 2003). It has also been underlined that the role of the state and the government in urban policies has increasingly shifted from service provider to enabler (Briata, Bricocoli and Tedesco 2009). Local resources and local non-public actors are involved and they are called to take charge of the processes of regeneration, improving the situation while empowering themselves, providing economic relief to the state funds while offering a promise of greater democracy (Raco 2000).

Even if a more participative and inclusive approach to urban policy might indeed offer a premise for a more democratic and just city, it also presents a series of contradictory tendencies. These regard, between others, the internal transformation of third and voluntary sector associations, the relationship with other local actors, and their influence on the parameters of political democracy (Mayer 2003; Purcell 2006; Swyngedouw 2005). What may appear as the fulfilment of claims put forward by associations, social movements and third-sector in previous decades – to be able to influence processes of urban change and 'remake the city' – seems actually to have become part of a new mode of governance, reproducing state power in new spaces and contributing to the stabilisation of neoliberal policies (Mayer 2000, 2003).

For a start, non-profit organisations appear to have increasingly adopted the values of the private market, becoming more market-like in their actions, structures and approaches. Both resource constraints and environmental influences may have a role in this process. On the one hand, as organisations require resources to survive, changes in the relationship with public and private funders (e.g. austerity measures and spending cuts to social welfare) may create the need to adopt market strategies to deal with resources constraints. On the other hand, the methods and values of the market may be taken on because a conformation to the external rules and requirements may be needed to gain support and legitimacy (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). However, 'marketization' and 'professionalisation' trends risk compromising the role of the non-profit sector as "value guardians, service providers and advocates, and builders of social capital" (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004, 138). Indeed, the adhesion to the logic of global competitiveness enhances an approach "focusing more on economic growth and development than on issues of collective consumption, social services and revenue redistribution" (Bourdreau 2003, 183). The growing competition, the cuts to the available resources and, overall, the entrance into the market, have often contributed in transforming the political role of the non-profit sector, generally taming its antagonist dimension and conflict stances (Busso 2018). Similarly, inclusion in urban governance can also emerge as a form of control (Uitermark *et al.* 2012) and, in this sense, integration can complement repression through institutionalisation and co-optation when and where oppositional groups are transformed into service providers (Mayer 2000).

Another issue to be considered is that the involvement of bottom-up initiatives, associations and urban-based experiences is not per se a guarantee of greater democracy. These strategies may lead to a more democratic city but they can also lead to a less democratic and just one (Purcell 2006). An exclusive focus on the decision-making process, assuming that a participative process will result in just outcomes, without questioning the content of policy, seems to be problematic at least (Fainstein 2010). Third sector and grassroots participation in urban governance is not necessarily inclusive, empowering or egalitarian. Generally, the involvement is rather selective, favouring some organisations and interests and excluding others (Silver, Scott and Kazepov 2010). Working with third sector associations and bottom-up initiatives, local authorities empower some actors, initiatives and visions of the city while others become or remain excluded. Often, those who are included are not the most progressive voices but rather those aligned in favour of a neoliberal agenda of urban growth. Moreover, it has been noted that the kind of participation effectively promoted by public authorities often favours well-structured interest groups rather than ordinary citizens (Colombo and Gargiulo 2016). In this sense, not all of the interests put forward by associations

and locally-based initiatives are considered to be equally legitimate by political institutions. At the same time, not all of the individuals or groups who may have an interest at stake have the resources to attempt participation. Power inequalities may remain strong and participation can end up reinforcing rather than reducing the inequalities between social groups (Silver *et al.* 2010). Different associations, bottom-up initiatives and non-profit organisations are contemporarily present and active in the urban space. Each one has a particular vision of the city, a set of priorities and specific claims. These are not necessarily directed to social justice but they may express narrow interests and even favour capital and exclusion. While this multiplicity may be considered a characterising trait of the cities, forms of inclusive governance may end up creating a disparity, legitimising some claims and excluding others. Moreover, such forms of inclusion offer legitimation to the political decisions and they dismiss or preclude further protests or opposing voices. The issues of access, legitimacy and representation therefore call for specific considerations (Mayer 2003; Swyngedouw 2005; Vitale 2007).

3. Associations and bottom-up initiatives in Torino urban change

Torino is the capital of the Piedmont region, in the North-West of Italy, and it is the country's fourth largest city in terms of population, with around 875,000 inhabitants in 2018. The city is most known for its industrial heritage: FIAT, the largest national automobile manufacturer, was founded in Torino in 1899, having its headquarters there that since. Torino has been long considered a 'one-company-town' and the automotive industry has deeply affected the city economic and social structure, its everyday rhythm and its external and internal image (Bagnasco 1990). Not surprisingly, the crisis of the Fordist mode of production became the crisis of the whole city, breaking down its identity as much as its economic foundations. Also, this transition took place in a framework of (national and local) political turmoil, collapse of the traditional national party system and crisis of political legitimacy. In this policy window, the new phase of elected mayors created the basis for a novel political stage that can be usefully described as 'pro-growth urban regime' (Belligni and Ravazzi 2013). The crisis has been dealt with by strategically following a shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism, aiming for the creation of a political internal consensus and a shared agenda of urban change. The need to put the city forth, to differentiate the economic base and to imagine a new path of development emerged as crucial.

The concept of 'urban regime' (Stone 1989) provides a useful framework to observe Torino's recent government cycle, highlighting policy-making based on negotiations

and agreements between public institutions and civil society organisations (Belligni and Ravazzi 2013). Two elements appear to be particularly meaningful for the present analysis. The first one is the creation of a new pro-growth agenda of urban change with the purpose of leading the city beyond the fate of a declining one-company-town. Such an agenda has become central in shaping not only the actual policies but also the narrative and images of what the city was and should become. The second one regards the governing process and it concerns the institutionalisation of governance practices: the involvement of private actors, non-profit organisation and social enterprises, a collaborative, shared approach, the rhetoric of participation and the activation of local resources in the transformation processes emerged as rather distinctive aspects.

The pro-growth agenda of Torino has been modulated along three guidelines: the regeneration and redevelopment of the concrete urban fabric and its infrastructure, the support of knowledge, technological innovation and research and, finally, tourism, entertainment and consumption (Belligni and Ravazzi 2013). After the release of the Urban Master Plan in 1995, the new mayor launched the works for the first Strategic Plan of the city. Through this, the local authorities attempted to create a common dialogue for the future of Torino involving different urban actors and re-structuring the relations between civil society and the public administration. As mentioned, the process had the result of creating the basis for an urban governance, producing consensus around a shared vision, taming conflicts and protests and building a network of urban actors linked together by a common cognitive frame, relations of cooperation and dynamics of trust (Pinson 2002). The new narrative about the city and its future was largely shared by the political institutions and by a significant part of the civil society, which was crucial in shaping the frame for the urban transformation, legitimising certain choices over others and prescribing and proscribing specific directions of change.

The Winter Olympic Games of 2006 were the most spectacular example of this new trend, with a world-wide resonance that gave new visibility to the city, opening Torino to both a national and an international audience. Relevant efforts have been indeed devoted to affirm a new urban image to globally compete with other cities in attracting flows of people and resources (Vanolo 2008). Along with mega-events, local authorities have supported the creation of spaces and services for leisure and entertainment as well as the renewal and expansion of the museum, art, cultural and creative network. Some assets and resources that have already existed but that have previously been left in the background have started to be reinforced and marketed for the sake of tourist and city users that were becoming the new preferred target of the public intervention. A growing relevance has been given to night-time entertainment too, through the promotion and the celebration of a vibrant nightlife, a dynamic cultural and artistic

scene and an alternative and authentic atmosphere (Bolzoni 2016; Crivello 2011). More concretely, the city historical centre, and the so-called Quadrilatero Romano district, in particular, became the first area to be involved in a process of state-led gentrification, with transformations in its demographic composition, residential and commercial land-scape (Semi 2004, 2015). Considered to be a successful example of urban regeneration by the local authorities, it set the model for further transformations. However, the in-surgence of the financial crisis of 2008 merged with a massive public debt, largely due to the organisational costs of the 2006 Olympics, disrupting the path of urban change. Unexpectedly, Torino found itself in a new and severe urban crisis, greatly affected by the fiscal consolidation rules and related austerity policies, with a high unemployment rate, a rising number of poor and of closing business. While the economic crisis and its effects appeared to have been for long largely unaddressed, the urban branding, the discourse and the narratives of the city and its future proceeded along the lines already traced in previous years.

Within this process of urban change, the neighbourhood of San Salvario has itself gone through different phases of fortune and despair, moving from being considered a degraded and dangerous area to being the new trendy night-time entertainment district of the city. In its transformation, a central role of NPOs, bottom-up initiatives and civil society is often underlined by the local actors. On the other side, the local public authorities are described as staying in the background, setting the scene rather than directly intervening. Despite this perceived absence, the framework of the opportunities and constraints that the local urban regime put in place, the shared pro-growth agenda, the narratives and the selective inclusion of some stances over others have proven to be crucial.

San Salvario is a semi-central neighbourhood of Torino, planned and built in the mid-19th century right outside the city historical centre in an area tightened between the central railway station and the main city park. Its urban space has always been charac-terised by a social and functional mix: in line with the original urban plan, the area pre-sents a combined commercial and residential use, having buildings with storefronts at the ground level and residences in the upper ones. The proximity to the central railway station contributed to making the neighbourhood the first beachhead of following waves of immigration (from the rural area around the city at first, then from the South of Italy and, since the Eighties, from other countries). At the same time, its position within the city, its historical buildings and the closeness to the main city park and a branch of the University, have supported the presence of the representatives of middle class households, entrepreneurs and professionals (Belluati 2004; Ires Piemonte 1995). The share of the foreign population in the area has been steadily growing up until

2010, going from 5.5% in 1990 to 26.3% in 2010. It then started decreasing, reaching 18.7% in 2018[1]. A vibrant and rich fabric of socio-cultural associations, bottom-up initiatives, residents and entrepreneur committees has always characterised the neighbourhood.

In the mid-1990s, the issues of building deterioration, industrial and small retailer crises, drug-dealing, street micro crime and a difficult inter-ethnic coexistence merged together in a climate of social tension and distress (Allasino, Bobbio and Neri 2000; Belluati 2004). San Salvario came to be considered a dangerous and problematic area, an example of 'urban crisis', and in 1995 such simmering tensions, mainly connected to the migrants' presence, considered by some to be the reason of the general decline of the district, suddenly exploded in concrete manifestations (Allasino *et al.* 2000). This outburst, however, had the positive outcome of triggering the intervention of both public institutions and civil society, acting along different lines.

> On the side of public policies, there has not been, in San Salvario, a big, planned intervention. This does not mean that the City and the public authorities did not invest or that they did anything but… there was not a big project […]. So public policies, yes, but without a proper plan, therefore in a kind of fragmented, disunited, also anarchic way if you want. In the end, they met and crossed with the activation of voluntary resources, associations, and so on. With a relevant bottom-up, grass-root push.[2]

In absence of an integrated plan of neighbourhood regeneration, the actions of the municipal authorities were mainly related to the issues of public safety and building deterioration, with some infrastructural intervention in the public spaces. On the other hand, associations, local committees and the civil society in general emerged as crucial in addressing the neighbourhood crisis in social and symbolic terms (Allasino *et al.* 2000). While a certain number of cultural and social associations and bottom-up initiatives were already present in the area, new initiatives emerged in reaction to such a complex time. Some of those experiences merged in the NPO 'Agency for the Local Development of San Salvario' (*Agenzia per lo Sviluppo Locale di San Salvario)*, a second-level association with the goal of promoting the social, cultural, economic and environmental development of the neighbourhood. Launched in 1998 thanks to the support of the municipal authorities, which explicitly claim to have acted towards the empowerment of the local resources, it currently brings together 27 non-profit organisa-

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[1] Author's elaboration on data by the Statistical Office of the City of Torino. While not being the area of the city with the highest share of migrants, the numbers are constantly above the city average.
[2] R. interview, September 29th, 2011. Third sector representative.

tions working in the neighbourhood, each with a specific theme. Instead of focusing on a specific population, the Agency adopted a multidimensional approach, looking first and foremost at the territory as a whole. In the initial phase especially, its actions revolved mainly around conflict mediation and encounters between different local realities, in addition to the issue of urban public safety and the facilitation of the relationship between residents and local authorities. It therefore fulfilled a central role in the creation of a climate of mutual knowledge and trust between the local actors and in structuring a frame of cooperation between civil society and the local authorities. The Agency became a channel of communication through which to articulate requests, complaints, priorities and needs and to mediate between the different actors. It was recognised as the main interpreter and collaborator of the municipality for the interventions in the area.

Mostly thanks to the symbolic and social work put forward by the local NGOs and civil society, the internal and external image of the neighbourhood has started to change. San Salvario came to be considered a positive example of multicultural integration and the diverse, gritty and authentic atmosphere of the neighbourhood started to attract the interest of young representatives of the so-called 'new urban middle classes' (Butler and Robson 2003). In a period in which "sharing the streets with working-class and non-white residents, even if personal interaction remains superficial, is part of [the] image of an authentic urban experience" (Lloyd 2006, 77-78), the multicultural character of the area, from a reason of stigma, became a positive element to value (Aytar and Rath 2012). A growing population of students, young artists, architects and designers, attracted by the availability of residential and commercial spaces with a rent lower than that of the surrounding areas and by its proximity to the city centre and the university, started to live and work in the neighbourhood, setting the basis for a gentrification process (Semi 2015). New initiatives reflecting this new phase and the socio-cultural characteristics of the new residents emerged. 'Sustainable San Salvario' (*San Salvario Sostenibile*), claiming a green, sustainable and smart approach to local development to achieve a better quality of life, is an example. Established in 2011 as a new core project of an already existing association, which was previously launched "to undertake projects on the territory of the neighbourhood"[3], it reflects the preferences and consumption practices of the new inhabitants of the neighbourhood, a young urban middle class attracted by authentic urban experience and careful to the issue of environmental and social sustainability. Its main focus has been the realisation of an interactive website and app where the stores, restaurants and café of the neighbour-

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[3] A. interview, February 1st, 2012. Third sector representative.

hood could showcase their involvement in sustainable actions while the residents and neighbourhood's users may rate them and give feedback from a sustainability point of view.

The high degree of homeownership and the fragmentation of the housing property contributed to the slowing down of the neighbourhood's demographic transformation. However, the commercial landscape has been proven to be more porous. Along with a soft residential gentrification, the signs of commercial gentrification soon became visible (Bolzoni 2016; Semi 2015; Todros 2010). Little by little, design, graphic and architectural studios and a few night-time venues started spreading next to old stores and ethnic shops. Later, these new commercial enterprises were joined by an increasing number of restaurants, cafés, cocktail bars and night-time clubs, which first sprung alongside and then progressively displaced existing commercial businesses such as ethnic shops and traditional everyday stores. A classic state-led process of gentrification, which was visible in the case of Quadrilatero Romano (Semi 2004), cannot be traced here. However, the positive evaluation by the local government of such a transformation, together with the combination of dynamics taking place at different scalar levels (e.g.: the change in the national law on commerce and the zoning policies that the local government put in place in neighbouring areas) and the qualitative characteristics of the area facilitated a process of commercial gentrification, closely followed by the emergence of the neighbourhood as a night-time entertainment district (Bolzoni 2016). Thanks to its 'gritty' and 'authentic' atmosphere, San Salvario soon became the place to be. It became the area of the city where new businesses were opening, revolving around its new functional specialisation within a broader city frame characterized, on the contrary, by economic stagnation and business closure. The commercial landscape of the neighbourhood has been deeply changing, becoming increasingly socially and culturally homogeneous.

> Right now, shutting down a daily activity means opening up a night-time one. [...] We used to have a neighbourhood where the commercial activities were open only during the day. During the night, it used to become a no man's land. But now we risk the opposite problem: activities are open only at night and during the day... no man's land.[4]

Some associations and bottom-up initiatives already at work in the neighbourhood tried to equip themselves to deal with this new path. Other ones emerged having it as the main focus. A group of residents launched, in 2010, 'Respecting San Salvario' (*Rispettando San Salvario*) to oppose and denounce the impact in terms of noise, po-

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[4] M. interview, July 26th, 2012. Public sector representative.

tential sleep-deprivation and the un-sustainability of the new role of the neighbour-hood as the main night-time entertainment district of the city. Most of the members were old-time residents, living in areas of the neighbourhood where a strong concentration of night-time entertainment businesses were present. Between their actions, it is possible to point out petitions and letters of protest to the local authorities and collection of information on the effect of sleep deprivation and on the relevant regulations on the matter. In summer 2012, the association became known thanks to the display of banners reading 'sleeping, yes please', 'sleeping is a need' and 'sleeping is well-being' from the windows of the resident members. The goal was to denounce the impact that night-time entertainment activities could have on the residents' well-being and, overall, to question the distribution of the benefits and costs of such a process of uneven urban development.

4. Ambivalences, lights and shadows

> I strongly claim the role and the importance of public policies that worked on multi-culturalism, on the associative fabric, on the re-activation of the resources of the neigh-bourhood.[5]

In describing the urban regime that has characterised the recent government cycle of the city, the involvement of both profit and non-profit private actors in formulating and implementing the public agenda has been underlined. The participation and activation of local resources emerged as a common rhetoric that served the purpose of both legitimising the agenda of transformation and easing its economic burden. This section aims at shedding light on the ambivalences of such involvement and of the activation of local resources in support of the processes of urban change. In particular, it under-lines the selective nature of these dynamics and their implications for the transforma-tive potential of associations and bottom-up initiatives. The former expresses that only some organisations and initiatives of those emerging in the urban context are recog-nised and included, while others are regarded as irrelevant by the local authorities and left behind. Sharing the pro-growth agenda, contributing in terms of supporting and stabilizing it rather than contesting it, emerges in this sense as a central prerequisite. The latter focuses on the issue of the 'marketization' of the non-profit sector and it un-derlines the transformations that associations and initiatives may go through in the at-

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[5] I. interview, June 5th, 2012. Public sector representative.

tempt to be recognised and included, on the one hand, and to economically survive, on the other, both within a competitive, market-based setting.

The Agency for the Local Development of San Salvario, as described, had a pivotal role in the process of neighbourhood regeneration, by organising complaints, requests and needs, as well as mediating between the residents and the public authorities. It contributed to the formation of a locally-based social capital, both in terms of potential resources for the action embedded in social relations for the people and the associations directly involved in the activities (*à la* Coleman 1990), and in terms of reciprocity, civic engagement, social trust and social relations that can be mobilised for civic action (*à la* Putnam 1993). Social mediation, service provision, advocacy and support were key in the initial stages of its activity. In other words, the Agency fulfilled the role of value guardian, service provider and advocate, and builder of social capital that are recognised as characteristics of non-profit organisations (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004).

In 2005, the Agency set up a project for the renewal of an empty building, which used to host the public baths of the neighbourhood, to create a Neighbourhood House. This was to be a social and cultural venue where associations and residents would have the chance to meet, interact and organise activities together. The project was funded by the local authorities (60%) and by the Vodafone Italy Foundation (40%). The municipality, which owned the building, granted the Agency its use for the following 30 years, free of charge. The San Salvario Neighbourhood House was launched in summer 2010, hosting a café-restaurant and rooms for workshops, activities and events. Its management, organisation and enlivenment became a core activity of the Agency. More generally, in the 2000s, the engagement of the Agency became increasingly directed towards cultural and artistic initiatives, setting up projects in response to local and national calls too. The research highlighted a recurring concern shared by the residents and other local actors: a progressive shift from socially and locally grounded actions to broader cultural, artistic and entertainment initiatives, and the risk of a decreasing attention to the social issues of the neighbourhood. The abovementioned shift was also marked by a turn in the Agency leadership (the founding director was dismissed in 2009[6]) and it has to be understood considering the (changing) relationship with the local authorities, especially in terms of resource provision, too. Indeed, up until 2009, the Agency had been largely supported by the local administration in economic terms, which allowed them to have staff almost entirely dedicated to the actions of social mediation and intervention, locally-based networking and the facilitation of the interaction between the residents and the municipal authorities. The economic support in

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[6] B. interview, February 2nd, 2011. Third sector representative.

that year drastically reduced within the frame of general cuts by the local government and of transfer of the remaining funds elsewhere, leaving the Agency with the task of finding new resources to survive. In the frame of a marketization process, inevitably, the needs, tasks and priorities were re-formulated, undermining the roles previously fulfilled by the Agency in local civil society.

A shift may be observed in the case of *San Salvario Sostenibile* too. The web-project described above was launched to intervene in the neighbourhood within the frame of sustainability. It soon attracted the interest of the local authorities and, at the end of 2011, public funds were given to support the project's development. The program was then extended to the whole city, where the topic of environmental sustainability was growing in relevance, with Torino having presented its candidature as a Smart City in an EU public competition for funds towards urban improvement. Moreover, the smart city discourse, celebrating the role of new technologies in ensuring sustainability, inclusion, wealth and other positive effects, was emerging in the city rhetoric (Vanolo 2015). In the following years, the project became structured as a replicable model and it is currently available in different Italian cities with an app that, in the view of the organisers, should allow for someone to create a sense of community and to find, rate and review the sustainable enterprises of each area, assigning a sustainability index rate to each of them. While, in the beginning, *San Salvario Sostenibile* appeared to be strongly rooted in the neighbourhood and directed towards the promotion of sustainability in the area, while also tackling the critical issues connected to gentrification and night-time entertainment, the following steps marked an increasing distancing from its local base and a growing centrality of the web-project. This was soon renamed as *Sostenibile.com*, erasing the reference to the area.

Finally, moving the attention to the case of *Rispettando San Salvario*, probably the closest to the 'cry and demand' movements identified by the 'right to the city' literature, it is relevant to underline that in the interviews with the local authorities, a strong de-legitimisation of the protest emerged.

> There is this idea that the city centre should be sanitised, that it should belong to those who live there, and therefore these uses… but I think there's a cultural battle to do here, because, really, if you want silence, if you want to hear the birds singing, you just do not live in the city.[7]

City officers interviewed during the research mostly depicted the night-time activities as a sign of an authentic and vibrant urban life and considered such protests as

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[7] I. interview, June 5th, 2012. Public sector representative.

marginal and irrelevant. The fact that the complaints were directed against a path of economic development centred on consumption and entertainment, considered pivotal for the whole city and a part of the urban development agenda, clearly played a key role. Around the issues connected to the progressive specialisation of the neighbourhood as a night-time entertainment district, different voices emerged in time, both in favour and against, paired with a diversification of the contesting basis and of the arguments brought into focus. However, the local government did not seem inclined to give a proper space and to legitimise these stances.

> In this office, we prefer to focus on the positive rather than on the negative aspects of this. It is true, there are problems with some citizens, but to have to deal with problems connected to nightlife, rather than connected to security, is a step forward for us… it would be great to have more of these nightlife problems![8]

The dynamics that emerged in the case under analysis provide different elements to critically reflect upon. The process of the marketization of the non-profit sector appears here to be particularly relevant. The fieldwork highlighted that local associations and bottom-up initiatives often find themselves to be struggling between their original vision, with the claims that they originally expressed, and the urgency of attracting public or private funds to sustain their actions. In order to survive, in economic terms, they need to be able to intercept larger trends and to build their image to fit within the strategic vision of the city. The logic of global competitiveness enhances a discourse and an approach that focuses more on economic growth and development than on the issues of social services, common goods and redistribution (Bourdreau 2003). The pervasiveness of this logic may also easily affect the third sector, with the unwanted outcome of pushing social claims into the background. The relevance of the context, the political as well as the economic, is stringent. The re-articulation of the relation between the state and civil society, with the involvement of the third sector in the management and regeneration processes of the city, risks dissolving the social and political perspectives into economic ones (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Mayer 2003; Swyngedouw 2005). In a way, the changes in the actions and attention of the Agency and those of San Salvario Sostenibile that have been depicted above may be read using these lenses. It is possible to consider them as experiences that have had to deal with a complex and changing economic and political context, where certain adjustments have to be made to be legitimized and to have access to further resources. In this frame, the partial shift from a program more centred on social interventions to one largely fo-

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[8] F. interview, July 24th, 2012. Public sector representative.

cussed on cultural promotion by the Agency acquires full meaning. Increasingly, these initiatives, whose actions were used to complement the state programs, come under pressure to substitute the state intervention and to run their actions using economic logic. Under such circumstances, advocacy, empowerment and social interventions are increasingly overlooked in favour of more profitable, market-oriented actions. It has to be underlined, however, that the experiences analysed in these pages were not based on the refusal or challenge of the model of market capitalism, promoting a concrete alternative or threatening or undermining such a model in the first place. Instead, they were rather complementing it, easing its negative impacts without openly questioning it (on similar dynamics in different fields, see Gaynor 2011 and Nickel and Eikenberry 2009).

Another issue concerns the different and changing relationship with the local authorities. In the case of San Salvario, some initiatives were 'allowed to the table' and received incentives and concessions by the city authorities while others were not. With some of the local actors, the municipal authorities have developed a preferential relationship, leaving others aside. The inclusion in the local governance and the support of the authorities had, in many cases, changed through time too. This selective inclusion may be put in relation to the construction of the political agenda, to the definition of priorities and how they should be framed and therefore approached (Cochrane 2000). The initiatives that speak the same language, that use the 'right' keywords and that have framed an issue in the expected way may be preferred over others. As mentioned already, the adherence to (or at least, the acceptance of) the urban pro-growth agenda emerged as a prerequisite for involvement. The linguistic coding, the definition of the problems and the strategies of the actions therein are crucial, but they are, at the same time, extremely problematic, since they reflect only a "partial representation of civil society" (Swyngedouw 2005, 2001). Some definitions of the problem, strategies of actions and lists of priorities are therefore empowered while others remain silent, not only in the political sphere but also in the civil arena (Mele 2000). Once again, this raises the issue of legitimacy and representation (Vitale 2007), questioning the possibility of insuring a greater democracy and social justice by including voices from the civil society and the third sector in shaping the process of urban change.

One of the elements that stands out the most in the case of San Salvario is the relative absence of migrants from the scene. In recent years, they have been considered as a problem, as a bearer of social issues to be solved, as targets for projects and interventions, as an asset for a commodified experience of diversity but rarely as autonomous social actors. In a neighbourhood where a quarter of the population is made up of foreigners and in a national frame where non-citizens are not allowed to take part to

democratic political consultations and the waiting time and the requirements to have access to Italian citizenship are complicated and long, the forms of civic engagement seem to have failed in conveying their access to the political life, in its broadest meaning, too. However, the case of foreign-born residents is just an example. There is a segment of the population, often the most marginalized one, that does not participate in the associative life and whose claims remain largely unarticulated. Assigning a central role to bottom-up initiatives and civic associations in the processes of urban regeneration does not guarantee by itself the democracy of the process or the participation of the whole population. Indeed, only a segment of those who live, work or use a neighbourhood participate, with the risk of letting others stay unheard, even under a shining veil of involvement, participation and social justice.

5. Conclusive remarks

The present contribution focused on the ambivalences and criticism that the inclusion and central role of third sector associations, bottom-up and civil society initiatives in the processes of urban change may bear. To do so, it investigated the transformations taking place in a semi-central neighbourhood of Torino, where the local authorities performed the role of enabler rather than that of a provider, choosing to support the expression of local resources instead of explicitly acting to lead and manage the process of regeneration. A greater role of the bottom-up initiatives in the urban regeneration process has often been considered to be a premise and a promise of greater democracy and social justice, offering further legitimation to political decisions. Even without discharging these premises, a number of critical issues have emerged.

The first level of criticism is that not all of the stances, voices and points of view find expression through the associations, bottom-up initiatives or the actions conducted by the civil society. In a certain way, participation in such forms of action may mirror and reproduce social inequalities. Voluntary participation often results in homogeneous groups and those who are in marginal positions may be discouraged by practical, cultural and symbolic barriers. Moreover, not everyone who experiences difficulties or who is against a certain process of urban change translates these positions into protest: the effort that a person might put into protesting is proportional to the value at stake and the chance of success (Hirschman 1970). The means and the access to express an opposing voice or to actively contribute to imagining a path of change are unevenly distributed within the neighbourhood's population. What is missing is therefore as relevant as what is present.

While this is a critical element already, it becomes even more crucial whenever the stances and interests expressed by particular associations and initiatives come to be considered representative of those of the whole population and legitimated as such. This opens up to the issue of selective inclusion, legitimation and support by the local government. As seen in the case of San Salvario, the municipal authorities have supported, even economically, some approaches and initiatives while dismissing others as irrelevant and not representative. In being selective, they influence and lead the process of change even without directly intervening. By welcoming some stances and actors in line with the preferred path of transformation and disregarding those who speak towards a different one, the urban neoliberal agenda may unfold under the rhetoric of participation, offloading public responsibilities.

Finally, to assign a mandate to civil society, third sector and bottom-up initiatives to take on the responsibility of urban regeneration may diminish the critical and transformative power of these experiences in a process of professionalization and marketization that shows the influence of neoliberalism and the pervasiveness of the economic logic.

Overall, 'activation of local resources', 'civic engagement' and 'participation' appear frequently mentioned by the local actors and constitute a shared narrative in the description of the San Salvario process of change. However, the experiences that come to be included and that become part of the local governance are those (already or increasingly) aligned in favour of the urban neoliberal agenda. Rather than participation being a chance to include new, alternative and different stances in the process of transformation, only pro-growth, market-based initiatives become legitimated and acknowledged partners of the local authorities. The transformative potential of such involvement and the chance to bring about social change through it appears therefore jeopardized. The analysis here aimed at problematizing the role and relevance of bottom-up initiatives in urban regeneration processes, underlining the need for a critical understanding of these dynamics and outcomes. The role of associations and civic initiatives in shaping the city calls for careful consideration and the attention being paid towards the outcomes and those who benefit by such dynamics has to stay high to avoid reproducing and creating new forms of social inequality.

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