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**The politics of innovation,  
entrepreneurship and community as a  
discursive practice.  
Researching a startup incubator in Milan.**

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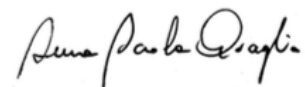
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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anna Paola Quaglia". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'Q'.

Anna Paola Quaglia

Turin, May 11, 2018





*A mia madre*

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# Summary

This study investigates innovation as a discursive field and it aims to answer the following research questions: under what conditions of possibility does the discursive practice “innovation” become subjectively and collectively sensible and meaningful? How does such discourse “speak the truth” to and for the subject?

The research explores innovation as a meaningful social fact that, on one side, features ideal and objectified traits as an object of knowledge and, on the other, it socially inscribes itself into reality through spatialization.

The analysis problematizes innovation as a social phenomenon that manifests itself *in* and *through* spaces –urban, organizational and corporeal, contingently to relational processes and subjective enactments.

To answer the research questions, the study performs an analysis of innovation as a discursive field through a genealogical exercise that builds on an ethnographic observation conducted at Core, a startup incubator and co-working space located in Milan.

The inquiry moves from the basic consideration that acknowledges as meaningful the relationship between innovation, the city and the urban space at large. Rather than assuming the “city-innovation” nexus as given, the study

investigates some of the epistemological grounds, ontological properties and features of the rational discourse underlying innovation (Chapter 1). More precisely, this study begins with a problematization of how innovation is commonly thought and represented as requiring specific spatial conditions to thrive, and how a particular configuration of the object “city” is pre-reflexively implied and imagined when the *desideratum* “innovation” is evoked.

Building upon this first genealogical analysis, the “eventualization” of innovation as a discursive practice is then investigated with reference to Milan’s contemporary social space (Chapter 3). In the chapter, particular attention is paid to key policies and initiatives embraced at the local and national governmental levels from 2011 to 2016.

Building on the assumption that for a discourse to materialize into a social practice, organizational and corporeal *spaces of configuration* are needed, the results of the ethnographic investigation are then presented.

The organizational spatial rhetoric and pedagogy are analyzed in order to shed light upon the material conditions of the appearance of the discourse of innovation (Chapter 4). Finally, the relational conditions of possibility for innovation to occur are explored, and the experience of being an “innovative” subject is investigated (Chapter 5).

This study offers a contribution to critical social theory and research, as well as to human geography, in two ways. On the one hand, it performs a “methodological journey” to show *how* certain objects of thought e.g. the urban space, the city or innovation– territorialize in institutions, rituals, “banal” gestures, unconscious and pre-reflexive practices through spatial relations. On the other hand, this work sheds light on the rhetoric of innovation by arguing that it corresponds to a new anthropological discourse rather than being a simple expression of historically contingent economic necessities.

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# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Innovation is *everywhere*: it is believed that we currently live in an age of innovation, that our economy and society should be innovative and that we should act but also *feel* and ultimately *be* innovators. What innovation means in its concreteness seems often completely secondary in such a myth that does not, as any myth, have a singular voice but a multiplicity of different ones that results in a “social” fact.

“If my grandmother’s brother who lives in a little village in Sardinia knows what a startup is or that it exists, we may have a problem”, stressed Alessandro, a startup entrepreneur reflecting on the linguistic diffusion and pervasiveness of the word “startup” in the socio-spatial fabric (July 2016)<sup>2</sup>. “Nowadays, if you drop a pen on the floor, you claim to be doing a startup!”, added Gianluca with a hint of irony (freelancer, February 2016).

Examples are various, and they are not confined to the “sanctuaries” of innovation e.g. co-working spaces, incubators, fab-labs, maker-spaces, contamination labs<sup>3</sup>. Nor this social phenomenon concerns only the actors engaging in innovative practices such as startup entrepreneurs and freelancers.

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<sup>1</sup> Provided that this is an original piece of work, some arguments here presented draw loosely on previous shorter texts. Paragraph 1.2.1 partially reproduces Quaglia (2017a). Other texts from which I have drawn from, include Quaglia (2017b; 2016) and a set of short online pieces published in a dedicated column called “Start-up” on *Philosophy Kitchen, Rivista di Filosofia Contemporanea* in 2017 available at: <<http://philosophykitchen.com/category/rubriche/start-up/>> [Accessed 15 February 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Interviews are reported, whether in parenthesis or in the text, as follows: occupation of the interviewee, month and year of interview. Unless otherwise specified, all the interviews were conducted face-to-face and in Milan. See Chapter 2 for further methodological details.

<sup>3</sup> Co-working spaces are shared workplaces by independent workers and firms. Incubators are organizations which support startups and early stage companies by providing consultancy and

“I want France to be a startup nation. A nation that thinks and moves like a startup”, said the newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron at VivaTech, a tech conference held in Paris in July 2017 (Agnew, 2017). Macron equated the governmental practice to the most current expression of innovation, namely a “startup”. This comparison was earlier voiced by Matteo Renzi, the current leader of the Democratic Party and former Italian prime minister. While in office, Renzi described Italy as “a big startup, not only as a museum or monument” (Agenzia Vista, 2015). On a similar note, Luigi Di Maio, the Five Star Movement’s (M5S) candidate for prime minister in the spring 2018 general elections, declared his intention to transform Italy into a “Smart Nation” (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2017).

Even Pope Francis has engaged in the startup trend. During his papacy, Scholas.lab, the Vatican’s accelerator focusing on non-profit educational tech projects, was put in place in 2015. This initiative was followed by the recently founded Laudato Si’ Challenge, a tech accelerator inspired by Pope Francis and focusing on for-profit and mission-driven startups that address environmental issues (Balena, 2017; Ungerleider, 2017). “Hallelujah!”, insiders rejoiced: entrepreneurial capitalism is being blessed by the Pope itself (EdSurge, 2015; Marich, 2015).

There is not one origin, one big player, one system of thought, one ideology that directs as a conductor of an orchestra would do, such unfolding. Innovation does not have one meaning, not it is one particular “thing”. In spite of the attempts that social scientists made to “fix” it down to the ground (see Dosi *et al.*, 1988), innovation represents a form of relationship whose power lies in its deliciously seductive indeterminacy.

In strictly economic terms, innovation represents an act of creating, either incrementally or radically, a new process or product producing marketable effects. From an economic point of view, value of some kind related to such advancement has to be generated for an action to be called innovative. This definition, by necessity, discerns human actions that are economically meaningful from others which are not. However, if it is possible to assess whether innovation is generating an economic value or not, a task which economists take care of and

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training services as well as office space. Fab-labs are small-scale digital fabrication laboratories, while maker-space is a broad “umbrella” term which includes fab-labs and other kind of organizations (e.g. hackerspaces), offering technological and manufacturing equipment, alongside educational opportunities. Last but not least, contamination labs are an Italian organizational variant of the described spatialities to be found in some universities (for further details, see footnote n° 115).

that allows to circumscribe the mystical allure around innovative practices, innovation does not stick to such narrow definition from any angles we wish to look at it. It slips through it as its discursive and practical origins cannot but be attributed to the realm of the economy: innovation gathers consent and attention across the whole spectrum of political forces because of the economic expectations attach to it in terms of prosperity, occupation and growth. However, innovation does not remain “still” within such rigorous boundaries. It may mean or imply technological innovation, but even when that is the case, innovation does not express just about that.

There is nothing new in arguing that to surgically divide the economy from the society bears little sense: this latter, conceptualized as an historically contingent type of association (Latour, 2005), literally makes up the former and it is not simply embedded in society as Karl Polanyi and Mark Granovetter argued. Innovation, as Daniel Cockayne noted on affects with regard to contemporary forms of entrepreneurship (Cockayne, 2016, pp. 457-458)<sup>4</sup>, is not more “social” than, for example, craftsmanship or automated work. It is a different “social” fact, a different type of association and it displays at the surface level a number of characteristics, the first one being the kind of space where it may flourish and thrive: the city.

This study analyzes the *experience of innovation* in the contemporary social space and it aims to answer the following research questions: under what conditions of possibility does the discursive practice “innovation” become subjectively and collectively sensible and meaningful (Foucault, 2008)? How does such discourse “speak the truth” to and for the subject (Allouch, 2012, p. 2)?

Three contemporary puzzles drive my research curiosity.

First, innovation is diffusely represented as a desirable agent of change. Second, the city is *thought* to be the dominant center of organization for society and the economy (Monte-Mor, 2014, p. 261). Third, innovation and the “city/urban space” are conceived as intimately woven together (see, for example, Balducci, Fedeli and Curci, 2017): they synchronically evolve as if one could not, by definition, exist without the other. This is due –many scholars argued (see, for example, Rossi, 2017)– to the cultural, cognitive, material, immaterial and

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<sup>4</sup> Rather than examining contemporary forms of work through the neo-Marxist concept of “affective labor”, Cockayne analyzed how affects is produced and generates a certain psychic investment which is functional to contemporary forms of production and work.

affective components of contemporary capitalist production and consumption, all features that are more prevalent in cities. According to this view, innovation requires specific spatial conditions to thrive and a particular configuration of the object “city” is pre-reflexively implied any time the word “innovation” is mentioned.

Rather than assuming these considerations as givens, this research builds on a simple, provocative argument: innovation and the contemporary city do not exist but as *effects*.

I am not, of course, saying that roads, infrastructures, traffic lights, squares, markets, density, loud rattle and many other expressions of urban distinctiveness, are not real. Nor I am arguing that innovation is not an *actual* object: precisely because it is increasingly employed to describe institutions, policies, practices and individuals, innovation is there for all to see. Paraphrasing Raymond Williams (1983, p. 14), innovation is a *keyword* in contemporary social spaces whose variable usage reflects a fundamental societal and cultural change and possesses a striking anthropological flavor in the sense of being, literally, a new *logos* on *anthropos*.

Hence, I am saying that how we have come to *think, perceive, image, represent* the city-innovation nexus is an invention that does not ground its positivity on any original right or fact. Representations are radically material in their effects precisely because we do not recognize the power they hold on us *when* it is being exercised. However, they can be ultimately changed in spite of seeming eternal. They are just temporary “lenses”, “a new wrinkle in our knowledge [...] that will disappear as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form” (Foucault, 2005, p. xxv).

Before moving on, a clarification is needed. Innovation and the conceptually related notion of social innovation, are pervasive and appealing yet often employed in an analytically inconsistent manner in the public discourse, to express *change* of some kind. If, in broad terms, it may be argued that innovation is about technological change –that is hard technologies, while social innovation emphasizes social change, yet often retaining the agency of technology while emphasizing the democratic process at its origin, this distinction proves slippery in practice. One reason for this is due to the scientific literature that has backed and legitimized the public diffusion of both terms: for example, Joseph Schumpeter, a widely-cited author in scholarly and non-scholarly accounts, and

inspiring figure among contemporary entrepreneurs, elaborated a theory of innovation that “went far beyond the usual economic logic” (Moulaert, 2009, p. 12). Schumpeter *de facto* opened up the way for an humanist interpretation of the entrepreneur as a social actor that produces social effects and meets human needs. What we are left with is a conceptualization of “the economy as a field of social practices” (*Ibid.*, pp. 1-2), and of social practices as the basics of development broadly conceived. Yet, the disagreement may rise when we try to pin point what a human need is: should social innovation or innovation be assessed by looking at the social dynamics they generate and build upon, the technological advancement they embody, or the marketable effects they produce? Are these criteria mutually exclusive or shall we consider them all? Indeed, one way to circumscribe the mystical allure around the terms, would be to apply an analytical toolkit that restrain their vagueness. However, this thesis *does not* aim to offer a detailed overview of what innovation is or is thought to be across disciplines, thus to somewhat reduce the linguistic and semantic confusion that characterizes it: in other words, I do not aim to assess whether something –a city, a policy, a practice or a firm– should be deemed innovative or not according to a more or less shared definition. Rather this study builds precisely on the pervasiveness, diffusion, catchiness of innovation and social innovation, and the continuous overlap that is observable between these terms –and I do so to explore *innovation as a discursive field*. This implies, as the reader will realize, that innovation and social innovation will often run as synonyms: this is not so because I do not acknowledge the conceptual distinction between the two, but because in the field site, distinctions blurred. The interest lays in assuming innovation as a signifier that floats in contemporary social spaces, holding collective value and subjective significance for reasons that exceeds theoretical consistency, analytical concerns and economic logics: differently stated, I am concerned with how innovation *actually* goes about rather than how it *should* be.

## Overview of the thesis

During the first hour of the course delivered at the Collège de France in 1983, later published as *The Government of Self and Others*, Michel Foucault outlined in a clear fashion some methodological remarks characterizing his practice of philosophy.

First, Foucault clarified that the object to be analyzed should not be taken as something “unchanging throughout history” (Foucault, 2010b, p. 3). Rather, it should be conceived as a situated and historically contingent *experience*. Second,

the author listed three dimensions of such experience: forms of knowledge, exercise of power and subject's mode of being. Madness, for example, may be conceived as a singularity born out of heterogeneous forms of knowledge and a set of norms that asserted deviance and normality. Such norms of behavior, continued Foucault, are *normalized*, enforced through mechanisms of power, "techniques and procedures by which one sets about conducting the conduct of others" (*Ibid.*, p. 4). Last, subject's mode of being expresses the ways through which the individual acts on the self to become an adequate subject of his or her time. The grasp that power holds on individuals ultimately depends on the passage between technologies of power into technologies of self. That is, the ability of technologies of power to turn into practices of the self: authorities of various kind, which define what is desirable to achieve in a certain time, act through the self rather than merely "outside of it" through explicit requests. This passage to the mechanics of collective life, is crucial in Foucault's thought and proves particularly important in contemporary times in which the autonomization of the self leads to the illusion of the individual's autonomy from power. On the contrary, the existing mentality of government is transformed into just apparently independent and autonomous acts of freedom and self-care that directly concerns ethics (Rose, 1992, p. 143) –all of which are effects of the exercise of power and a "litmus test" of its efficacy.

Indebted to Foucault's analytical way of proceeding, the purpose of this study is, as anticipated, to analyze the *experience of innovation* by experimenting a method. What does it mean from an analytical point of view?

It means to suppose that the object of inquiry exists only as an effect of "multiple determining elements" (Foucault, 2007, p. 46), thus it implies to wonder: how would that effect exist if it had to be generated *ex novo*? Which conditions of possibility led to such historically contingent appearance? This notably corresponds to what Foucault named "genealogy".

In pursuit of this research direction, innovation is framed as a discursive practice sustained by a rational discourse i.e. the discourse of innovation. Foucault used the term "rational" to qualify the mutation of language into a discourse in *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003, p. xi), corresponding to a structure that sustains what is said and what is unsaid, *orienting* postures and gazes, thoughts and feelings. Following Weber's conceptualization of social actions, the adjective "rational" here means that innovation as a discourse (and thus, social action) is portrayed as both reasonable i.e. appropriate to think, to feel and *valuable*, and as

instrumentally rational to achieve certain collective ends –for example, prosperity (Weber, 1978, pp. 24-26)<sup>5</sup>. This distinction between discourse and discursive practice is useful because it allows to approach separately two different, yet constitutive moments pertaining to the object of inquiry: one in which innovation finds its legitimacy as an object of knowledge on one side, and one in which it becomes actual in the form of a social practice on the other. Differently put, if a discourse is “the relation of situation and attitude to what is speaking and what is spoken about” (Foucault, 2003, p. xi), a discursive practice corresponds to the enactment of such “relation of situation and attitude”.

Thus, the concept “discourse” here functions as an analytical tool to approach a social fact, in this case innovation, which is ideal but also material in its effects, objective but also subjective in the sense of being “on paper” but also and ultimately, lived and experienced by individuals. Indeed, a discourse happens *somewhere*, it materially looks like *something* and it is embodied by *someone*: otherwise, it would be practically impossible to claim the existence of any social fact, and innovation makes no exception in this sense. Moreover, following Foucault, the object of a discourse does not pre-exist to the discourse on that very object (Tanca, 2012, p. 199).

The analysis problematizes innovation as a social phenomenon that manifests itself *in* and *through* spaces –urban, organizational and corporeal, contingently to relational processes and subjective enactments.

Differently stated, following Hoffman (2014) that explored subjects as sites of urban politics, this work is mainly concerned with the *spatialization* of innovation and its politics.

To proceed in this research direction, the study performs a genealogical exercise empirically grounded in an ethnographic observation conducted at Core, a startup incubator and co-working space located in Milan that featured innovative rhetorics. From *this* “grounded” angle, I approach the “urban” as an *effect* of an array of socio-material practices and I elaborate a reflection about Milan’s contemporary politics and social space.

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<sup>5</sup> Beside instrumental rationality and value-rationality to which I have referred to, Max Weber introduced two other categories that orient social actions: affectual and traditional factors.

This study is organized into four chapters, each of which is dedicated to answer, either theoretically (Chapter 1) or empirically (Chapter 3, 4 and 5) a specific research question, plus a methodological chapter (Chapter 2).

Chapter 1 aims to answer the following question: *how* has the city become the spatial unit of measurement of our contemporary material and symbolic success from an history of knowledge's angle? In the theoretical chapter, I present an overview of some illustrative forms of knowledge, spanning from Jane Jacobs' writings to Richard Florida's "creative class" theories, that allows to grasp some turning points that led to the contemporary configuration of the object "city".

Chapter 3 investigates the politics which results from such "virtual" configuration: how does innovation territorialize and reconfigure the city/urban space? The "eventualization" of the discourse of innovation –intended as a process "whereas certain forms of knowledge actualize in the present and give rise to new power relationships" (Foucault, 2007, p. 59)– is analyzed against the backdrop of Milan's contemporary urban scene and public policy framework from 2011 onwards<sup>6</sup>.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the material conditions for the discourse's appearance through the analysis of Core's spatial rhetoric. This second empirical chapter aims to answer the following research question: materially, what does innovation "look like"?

Building upon that, Chapter 5 analyzes the experience of being a subject at Core. Thus, this third empirical chapter aims to tackle the following aspect: what does it mean to experience "innovation" and to be an "innovative" subject?

As far as methods are concerned, Chapter 2 clarifies my epistemological stance and accounts for the methodological process as well as the challenges encountered during the ethnographic fieldwork.

Finally, conclusive remarks follow. By making reference, once more, to the methodological approach applied and to key findings of this study, this last section aims to make intelligible the evolution of innovation from being a technique to acting as a technology of power which offers a radically different

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<sup>6</sup> More precisely, the analysis focuses on a five-year period (2011-2016) with a particular attention to the year 2016, when I conducted my ethnographic observation.

answer to the question “how can we live together?”. In the end, some final remarks on the ethical-political implications of innovation are presented.

# Chapter 1

## Investigating the “city-innovation” nexus

### 1.1 Introduction

“The first appearance, following my appointment as the running candidate of the Five Star Movement, wishes to witness a priority. The priority of this country is to provide work to new generations. But also to those generations that lost their jobs because of new technologies: they must be given new job opportunities and reintegrated into new forms of work. To have a medium and long term perspective for this country and to govern in this direction, it means to create a *smart nation*<sup>7</sup>...<ehm> ‘una città’ [a city]...‘una nazione’ [a nation]...‘una nazione intelligente’...[a smart nation] that allows everybody to find job opportunities in hi-tech and emerging sectors” (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2017).

Luigi Di Maio conveyed this message during his first public appearance as the official candidate of the M5S in the spring 2018 general elections, while paying visit to Talent Garden, a widely known co-working space in Milan, and meeting local startups in September 2017.

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<sup>7</sup> Mr. Di Maio used the English term “smart nation”. For this reason, I reported the original expressions in Italian to draw attention to the slip of the tongue.

Mr. Di Maio listlessly said “città” (in English, city), but it meant “nazione”<sup>8</sup> (in English, nation). He intended to say something but used another word instead: that is an apparently innocent Freudian slip of the tongue (Freud, 1933).

However, this unconsiderable and unconscious event offers a way to outline some introductory considerations on the topic. It allows to wonder “why just this particular slip is made and no other: one can consider the nature of the mistake” (*Ibid.*, p. 24) –what emerges in the slip itself.

This parapraxis has arguably a sense of its own. Mr. Di Maio unconsciously related *smartness*, closely associated with the imaginary of innovation–technology–prosperity, with the idea of “city”. Such event bears in itself a precise idea of a “good” and adequate way to govern on one side (Vanolo, 2014), and of economic development on the other.

Moreover, the primacy of the city is asserted over other spatial scales and mostly, the state. In addition, there is also a figurative superimposition of the former over the latter. By pronouncing one word after the other, “città...nazione” (in English: “city...nation”), Mr. Di Maio referred to a political about turn in spatial terms: the city is *thought* as the most important spatiality for the contemporary governmental practice and the space of the urban spreads out over the territory. This finds many echoes in the contemporary field of scientificity which at the very moment it assesses the city’s primacy as a political *locus*, it recognizes that the urban phenomenon is paradoxically losing its distinctiveness (Bolocan-Goldstein, 2014): “where does the city end?” and “what does ‘urban’ mean?” –many scholars have been wondering lately (see, for example, Brenner, 2017). Moreover, the contemporary spatial re-scaling of governmental rationality towards the city is witnessed by the same expression “smart nation” –to which Mr. Di Maio made reference to as a virtuous mentality of government to adopt. Such expression recalls the Smart Nation paradigm envisioned by Singapore, a city-state largely “identified with the imaginary of the intelligent city” (Vanolo,

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<sup>8</sup> The notion “*nazione*”, unusually adopted in the Italian political discourse but by populist and nationalist right-wing parties or coalition (e.g. Fratelli d’Italia), corresponds to a collectivity that consciously thinks, perceives and represents itself as being united by origins, language, history –regardless of its manifestation in a political unity (See Enciclopedia Treccani. [online] Available at: <<http://bit.ly/2BsF1kl>>. Accessed 15 February 2018).

2014, p. 888). Therefore, from any angle we wish to look at it, “smartmentality” (*Ibid.*) has politically displayed an intrinsic urban character and expresses the use of technology to foster urban innovativeness –environmentally, socially and economically. Within this view, technology can be interpreted as a *technique* i.e. a technical thing (e.g. skills and appliances) which is applied, while innovation as a *technology* i.e. the discourse about technique(s) (Behrent, 2013, pp. 58-59). This distinction is useful as it allows to frame innovation as a procedure for governing men which makes use of various techniques to this end. Indeed, underneath the concept of “smart city” that celebrates the union between the urban space and technology, one finds the idea and the wish *to innovate*.

As said, this study is dedicated to exploring innovation as an ambiguous social fact and more specifically, this chapter intends to theoretically set the stage for the empirical analysis that follows.

The chapter is organized in two parts: first, by approaching the discursive politics of innovation, I highlight three of its constitutive features: innovation as a global technology, a human trait and an urban phenomenon (paragraph 1.2). Second, pointing towards the city as *the* foundational place of the discourse of innovation, I explore some genealogical lines of the epistemological perimeter of the “city-innovation” nexus (paragraph 1.3 onwards). This second part constitutes the core of the chapter and it sets the theoretical stage of the study: however, since a genealogical approach is embraced, the theories referred to are not simply tools of analysis: they constitute to all intents and purposes, research findings.

The aim here is to reflect critically on the scientific literature as if it were a discourse itself, therefore an object of desire and power (Foucault, 1972, p. 216), wishing and asking its publics –whether the scientific community, policy makers or the general public alike– for something. Moreover, even though the “prognosis” that some scholars argue for might differ quite substantially, there are a number of common, ultimately unchallenged, at times deterministic traits that their *logos* performs. Approaching the issue from the perspective of an history of knowledge allows to question these “natural” postulates and to hopefully display the artifice of that logical case of knowledge.

The guiding question of the chapter is the following: *how* has the city become the spatial unit of measurement of our contemporary material and symbolic success from an history of knowledge’s angle? To answer this question, the second part of the chapter is structured as follows: paragraph 1.3 presents the

common “story” about the “city-innovation” nexus. Paragraph 1.4 presents the conceptualization of the object “city” by Jane Jacobs, conceived as an illustrative forerunner example of the common scientific “wisdom” previously presented. Building on that, sub-paragraph 1.4.1 provides an overview of some meaningful scientific discussions that have made intelligible the relationship between the object “city” and innovation and that since the 1960s onwards, have shaped the conditions of intelligibility of economic and social development as we know it today. Finally, sub-paragraph 1.4.2 shows how some “embryonic” ideas outlined by Jane Jacobs have found voice and legitimacy, implicitly or explicitly, in contemporary relevant scientific discussions.

## 1.2 Making sense of innovation<sup>9</sup>

“San Francisco is for many of you but, if I may say, also for many of us *a capital of the future* (emphasis added). The risk for our country is to be full of extraordinarily beautiful cities that are capitals of the past. Therefore, the challenge, the big challenge that we are facing is to *transform ourselves* (emphasis added) and to be jealous of our past...of who we are...but also in love with our future [...]. I won’t do the usual speech that everybody does: ‘I ask you to return to Italy’, No, I ask you to go on, not to come home. I ask you to go on and *to change the world* (emphasis added) with your ideas, your passion and determination” (La Stampa 2014)<sup>10</sup>.

Matteo Renzi, the former Prime Minister of Italy and first of his institutional standing in contemporary Italian political history visiting San Francisco and Silicon Valley, said that in front of the Italian startup community of the Bay Area in September 2014. Renzi’s speech is symbolically significant for various reasons, not ultimately for the place where it was publicly given. The official visit, praised by the well-known economist Enrico Moretti (2014), reflected the Prime Minister’s positioning on innovation, one of the hallmarks of his political agenda and public narrative since 2013<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The content of this paragraph draws from a previous text (see Quaglia, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Freely translated from Italian.

<sup>11</sup> Matteo Renzi served as Prime Minister of Italy from February 2014 until December 2016. His political debut as a national leader officially dates back to the year 2013 when Renzi became Secretary of the “Partito Democratico” (the major Italian centre-left party), a position that he held until March 2018. Previously, Renzi served as Mayor of Florence (June 2009-March 2014) and President of the Province of Florence (June 2004-June 2009).

A first important message can be distilled from Renzi's performance: innovation does not equate innovative entrepreneurship. Rather it corresponds to a kind of stance to the world i.e. "flesh and blood" with the economy that matters "in the last instance" (Althusser, 1971). Moreover, Renzi's words are illustrative of three features of innovation that may be regarded as potential bearings that orient the present inquiry. The former two explicitly concern the kind of spatialities that such discourse builds upon and calls for. The latter feature points towards a kind of subject, the ideal leading character of such a discourse.

First, innovation emerges distinctively as a global phenomenon that may be interpreted as a mobile technology that territorializes in local assemblages (Ong and Collier, 2005). Lighten of technical sophistications that are intuitively associated with this term, technology expresses the sum of material and symbolic activities produced to organize human life, in a more or less conscious way. Applied to innovation which is pre-reflexively associated with technological progress at the current time, the concept "technology" allows to account for the evolution from technological to social innovation. In other words, it invites to explore and make explicit specific matters of social organization and management.

In addition to that, such definition emphasizes the technology's adaptive capacity: innovation uproots itself, travels, crosses boundaries and roots itself in places, quite far and different from its mythical origins (i.e. Silicon Valley), where it recomposes and mixes the existent.

Generally associated with globalization, this technology is global precisely because the "here" can be subjectively and collectively understood only if related to the "there" but with a relationality that is stretched out globally<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, "global" is also suggestive that "what you can do for *your country*" is sided with "what you can do for *the world*": "I ask you to go on, not to come home. I ask you to go on and to change the world", emphasized the former Italian Prime Minister during his speech.

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<sup>12</sup> A parallel is drawn from Foucault who in the introductory remarks of the essay "*Des Espaces Autres*", stated: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (Foucault, 2010a).

Conceptualized as an expression of globalization, innovation exemplifies “fundamental questions about the spatial ontology of contemporary social organization” (Amin, 2002, p. 386). How is this global dimension lived “on the ground”? What does it mean, cognitively and affectively, to be an entrepreneurial self in times of globalization? How does this spatiality materially shape and confer meaning to such acting? Moreover, how is the “global” employed in the discourse of innovation and to which ends is it functional in the economy of the discourse itself? These questions point towards a powerful psychic dimension attached to the notion of the “global” which is virtual and imaginary but that produces actual and real effects (see Chapter 4 and 5): “globalization” can be touched (e.g. an object) but also felt by individuals.

Second, innovation explicitly relates to an inner character of individuals in terms of cognitive and affective capacities. Skills and emotions, knowledges and desires, learning capabilities and affects manifestly assemble together: “your ideas, your passion and your determination”, said Matteo Renzi addressing Italian startup entrepreneurs. This does not mean that innovative practices taken as exemplary instances of post-Fordism, are emotional ones while working at an assembly line is unemotional. Rather, such intensified affectivity that is often publicly acknowledged and praised, is suggestive of an unmediated or less mediated relationship between oneself, work outcomes and therefore, life conditions. Stated differently, the representation of the individual is one where he (or she) bears on its shoulders its own fortune: it corresponds to an ideal of freedom as self-mastery, recalling the notion of positive liberty outlined by Isaiah Berlin in 1958<sup>13</sup>.

This ideal of freedom is individualistic and relational at the same time. The conditions of self-realization are set forth by a collectivity and the individual is represented as somebody that draws meaning for its acting from such conditions. Such archetypical human being is not represented as free in absolute terms but free to express himself or herself according to historically and spatially contingent conditions for expression. Therefore, what emerges is not simply the old image of the self-made and self-centered man that, in the case of the entrepreneur, might

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<sup>13</sup> Berlin (1969) outlined a difference between negative and positive freedom: the former substantially expresses freedom from external constraints, while the latter corresponds to freedom of self-realization, therefore pointing to an inner domain of drives that the individual wishes to realize. In a way, positive liberty corresponds to the manifest visible expression of “what is inside” of the individual, a notion –said Berlin– that may lead to paradoxical/authoritarian outcomes in light of its connection with a collectivity (for example, a Government) that sets forth the conditions of self-realization.

have generated positive externalities for the society but as a side-effect (e.g. occupation).

The new image of the contemporary self corresponds to an ideal mix of desires, business pragmatism and ambition to do some good: “to change the world” as Matteo Renzi declared. A significant shift from pragmatism to almost ardor belief is occurring: from “things I need to do in order to make a living” to “things I need to believe in order to live”, from entrepreneurship as a type of occupation to the entrepreneurial self, from innovation to *innovator*. In this regard, certain nouns such as innovation and creativity, have become substantive adjectives that *qualify* human beings. For example, the controversial creative class of Richard Florida, the “techies” of San Francisco or the social innovators of Milan (Sgaragli and Montanari, 2016). Innovation is represented as something other than, strictly speaking, a matter of work and this marks a qualitative shift at the normative level. Certain human beings –but potentially each of us– *embody* innovation. It is not “just” a matter of expressing oneself but rather of making visible “what is inside” of the self: an unfolding of interiority. As Nikolas Rose (1992, p. 153) argued “the self-steering capacities of individuals are now constructed as vital resources for achieving private profit, public tranquility and social progress”.

Third, the discursive politics of innovation points toward certain desirable environments of expression. To refer once more to Renzi’s speech, “the capital of the future” favors innovators, while “the capital of the past” does not. This leads to a third and fundamental feature that expresses the second kind of spatiality of the discourse of innovation: the city.

On one side, innovation may be interpreted as a contemporary manifestation of the transnational flow of urban policy ideas and models (see McCann and Ward, 2011). To paraphrase Edward Said’s famous essay titled *Traveling theory* (1983), contemporary globalization implies traveling *urban* theories, of which innovation is, in many ways, an essential cornerstone.

The city actively and materially gives signification to “globalization” for individuals: certain places are represented as and representative for “global” while others as and for “provincial” (Vanolo, 2015). Moreover, such discourse functions differently depending on pre-existing local dynamics: innovation territorializes in a variegated manner and acquires economic, political, social and anthropological significance at the urban scale.

On the other, my argument is that what underpins such flow is a specific configuration of the urban phenomenon both as a physical and metaphysical artifact. Stated differently, the city has emerged as the foundational site for innovation as a discursive practice –a fact may seem even banal and obvious to remind. How often have we heard that ours is an urban age? However, from my perspective, the key question to answer is the following: *how* has the city become so?

### **1.3 Approaching the “city-innovation” nexus epistemologically**

Over the last thirty years, the nexus between processes of urban and regional development and innovation has been extensively explored and acknowledged as meaningful by urban scholars, economic geographers, economists and social scientists at large.

The intimate relationship that binds cities and innovative economic practices together has been conceptually framed with reference to the so-called “innovation sectors”, “knowledge-based economy”, “cultural-cognitive capitalism” (Scott, 2008; 2014), “cognitive capitalism” (Vercellone, 2005), depending on the epistemological gaze adopted by scholars. Despite these differences, the literatures seem to agree loosely on a number of aspects which are useful to be recalled in order to place the object of inquiry within the broader knowledge production’s framework.

The consensual account tends to run as follows: in the background of structural transformations of the global economy, slowly starting to manifest in the 1960s and then becoming abruptly visible in the 1970s and 1980s, the qualitative role played by the “urban” and the sources of productivity gains have substantially changed.

Since the end of mass production and the beginning of a new post-Fordist era in the global North<sup>14</sup>, urban spaces, capital and resources have displayed “a more than intimate” relationship –in spite of calls of “the end of geography” and the

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<sup>14</sup> A note on the geographical scope of this study is needed: the analysis presented refers to and is informed by the interpretation of areas of the world and countries (i.e. Italy and United States) I have the greatest familiarity with. Therefore, this study is historically and geographically situated and reflects, to a certain degree, my own personal experience. It articulates a view from specific places (e.g. Cuneo, Turin, Milan, New York) with potentially broader relevance elsewhere.

dissolution of cities (McLuhan, 1964; O'Brien, 1992). Not only the kind of capital and resources driving contemporary economic development in advanced capitalist economies have become more and more spatially concentrated in cities, particularly in global ones (Sassen, 1991). The city's prominence as a site of production, consumption and government has been amplified by investing it with agency. As various scholars argued (see Rossi, 2017), the city has been progressively *thought* as a socio-technical space, a complex process of subjects, objects and places that are differently assembled in ways in which value can be created (see Simone, 2010, p. 5)<sup>15</sup>.

The emerging ontology of contemporary capitalism is one that centers on innovation, cities and cognitive capacities of workers, a "diagnosis" that various economists, economic geographers, urban and even critical scholars would substantially agree with.

Since the rediscovery of the city from the 1980s onwards (Amin and Graham, 1997), scientific research has sparked in various directions exploring the value of urban and regional agglomerations for post-Fordist industries, for other socio-economic aspects of life (Amin and Thrift, 2017) and noneconomic ones<sup>16</sup>.

Cities have not been merely conceived as expressions of capitalism but rather as its lively engines (Castells, 1977 and 1989; Harvey, 1989) and innovation as one of its manifest expressions. Innovative industries have been discovered to "naturally" cluster in places like urban environments (Florida and Mellander; 2014; Moretti, 2012; Scott, 2010) and city-regions (Markusen *et al.*, 1986; Storper *et al.*, 2015; Scott, 2000). Duranton and Puga (2004) explained this tendency in terms of "micro-foundations of urban agglomeration economies" i.e. "sharing, matching, learning". According to these scholars, such spatial properties mitigate uncertainty, volatility and the high turnover of the labor force –all features that characterize flexibly organized and highly productive economic activities. Out of such properties, face-to-face relational networks (Amin and Graham, 1997, p.

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<sup>15</sup> AbdouMaliq Simone argued that urbanization rather than the actual city should be understood as a process that concerns "the multiplication of relationships that can exist among people and things" (Simone, 2010, p. 5). Nevertheless, the above presented interpretation of Simone's definition holds some validity: with reference to the planetary urbanization thesis (Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmid, 2017), it highlights the tension between actually existing urban nodes and processes of urbanization from which Simone moves his argument from.

<sup>16</sup> The word "noneconomic" refers to what does not pertain, strictly speaking, to market exchange mechanisms. For example, see the work of Zurkin (1995).

413) have been acknowledged to play a crucial role for tacit knowledge to circulate, “*the* key corporate and territorial asset” (Hudson, 2016, p. 51). “Urban thickness” (Moretti, 2012), therefore, has become a significant topic of interest – almost a spatial fetish– for scholars, policy makers and the general public alike.

The logic supporting such increased public attention towards cities runs as follows: in the long term, economic growth depends upon productivity gains largely originating from tradable sectors i.e. sectors whose production is exportable (Storper, 2013). For advanced global capitalist economies in the wake of post-Fordism, these go under the label of “innovation sectors” i.e. knowledge-intensive industries and activities. The assumption, known as “trickle-down” effect, is that productivity gains generating from innovation are to be reflected across the whole labor force’s wage level –with differences depending on the worker’s skills, the economic sector and the geographical location. Differently stated, innovation has a multiplier effect on wealth creation.

Moreover, innovation is said to originate from intangible forces, flows of ideas, knowledge creation and learning processes (Hudson, 2016)<sup>17</sup> that produce visible effects –a belief that confers to the process undetectable, “magical” and emotional hints. As Ron Boschma argued, “there is a strong awareness that knowledge creation and learning (or the capacity to learn) is critical to the competitive advantage of firms and regions” (Boschma, 2005, p. 62) and skilled individuals play a greater role in this process.

As dense and thick sites of agglomeration, cities (and city-regions) display the organizational and institutional but also cognitive and social advantages that enable such “mysterious” innovative collisions to occur (see Storper *et al.*, 2015; Boschma, 2005)<sup>18</sup>. “Competitive advantage is created and sustained through a highly *localized process* (emphasis added)”, stated Michael Porter (1990, p. 19) and spatial proximity, the quintessential quality of cities, is a critical component that fosters competitiveness in this sense.

Institutionalist theorists argue that innovation doesn’t “look” the same everywhere as it builds upon pre-existing local forms of economic specialization (Storper and Scott, 2009). Differently put, path-dependency i.e. historical

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<sup>17</sup> See Hudson’s analysis (2016, pp. 48-64).

<sup>18</sup> The city is one of the spatial expressions of agglomeration economies that has currently superseded others (e.g. *milieu innovateur*, learning region). On the morphology of agglomerations, see Conti *et al.* (2014, pp. 130-136) and Chapters 6 and 8 in Conti and Giaccaria (2001).

specificities of different kind, matters importantly and it is problematic for places displaying limited competitive advantages to become out new innovation clusters. It is also difficult to reverse decline or stagnation and various authors contend that it will become even more so in the new innovation “gold rush” (Moretti, 2012).

The city has, therefore, also symbolically and materially epitomized the spatial unevenness of contemporary modes of production and consumption (Storper and Scott, 2009), both within and among places.

With reference to intra-urban dynamics, Allen Scott described the ambivalent character of contemporary urbanism in terms of “the escalating contrast between its surface glitter and its underlying squalor” (Scott, 2008, p. 18). Others have problematized the implicit multiplier effects of innovation and high-technology in local economies (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2013 and 2016). Various sources (Breau *et al.*, 2014; OECD, 2017) acknowledged that spatial divergences among cities and territories have become a tendency across major advanced capitalist economies rather than exceptional side-effects of innovation. Moreover, in recent times, the positive relationship between innovation and socio-economic inequalities has led to re-politicizing understandings of the former. For example, platform cooperativism problematizes platform capitalism (i.e. sharing economy) and articulates an alternative vision of the digital economy to the dominant Silicon Valley model (Scholz and Schneider, 2016).

Causal explanations of the nexus “city-innovation” as well as the “prognosis” put forth by scholars may vary consistently: utopia and dystopia come to co-exist in contemporary readings of urban and social spaces (MacLeod and Ward, 2002).

Regardless of the actual resilience of the above-described urban and regional economic policy idea, innovation is offered as an unquestionable priority. As Jamie Peck (2014, p. 398) noted, “cities must act, and be *seen to* act, even if the aspirational reach continually exceeds the effective grasp”.

On one side, innovation corresponds to a new national economic necessity with a strong urban and regional character. On the other, it is often presented as desirable for all, from highly-skilled professionals to low-skilled workers and everywhere, from New York to Catania (Rossi e Di Bella, 2016).

Policy-makers in the Global North (as well as in the Global South) act as if they have little choice but to embrace this new imperative economic imaginary. What Nigel Thrift argued on the New Economy paradigm still holds validity

today: innovation is “both a description and, at the same time, an assumption of what constitutes a normal future” (Thrift, 2005, p. 113).

It is true that recent urban policy initiatives in New York<sup>19</sup> and Milan (see Chapter 3) move from the explicit acknowledgement of the exclusionary dynamics that innovation generates: in both cases, economic inclusion through, for example, the guarantee of a fairer access to work for marginalized groups, has been rationalized as a matter of socio-spatial justice. Therefore, in the most progressive variants of innovation-based urbanism, its implicit benefits are interrogated and policy measures are taken to include the excluded. Notwithstanding that, innovation is not questioned as *desirable*. To paraphrase Thrift (2005, p. 113), innovation has been redesigned as a contemporary normal desire.

Therefore, even though differences should be acknowledged, one important question remains unanswered. These very differences soften when facing the pristine logical, inseparable and epistemologically enlightened cornerstones of our sensical understanding of how the economy works nowadays and what “really” matters: the importance of skilled individuals and the centrality of cities. As Rossi (2017, p. 2) noted:

“[...] cities are omnipresent in today’s public discourse concerning the present and future of global societies, in positive or negative terms: as places of innovation for some [...] and of exploitation for others [...]”.

The important point about these considerations is the following: whether a site of prosperity or despair, the city has progressively affirmed itself as *the* space that matters greatly more than others. This is the case, first and foremost, for the contemporary governmental practice defined, as already stated, as “the mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct men, to direct their conduct, to conduct their conduct” (Foucault, 2014, p. 12).

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<sup>19</sup> I am referring to a set of initiatives on digital equity (e.g. broadband access) under mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration (2014–present time) for “a more inclusive, more democratic technology community in New York City” (Shieber, 2015). The appointment by the City Hall of affirmed personalities in the field such as Maya Wiley (mayor’s counsel and Chief Legal Advisor from July 2016 to August 2017) and Sreenath Sreenivasan (Chief Digital Officer from October 2016 to May 2017) is significant in this regard.

However, one could wonder: how is it so? How has the city become the spatial unit of measurement of our contemporary material and symbolic success from an history of knowledge's angle? More precisely, how has the "urban", sensed as *naturally* connected to certain things as if they were *innate* to its streets, primarily "creativity" (Florida, 2012a, pp. 183-202), "innovation" (Moretti, 2012; Storper, 2013; Storper and Scott, 2009, p. 162), "affects, social relations, habits, desires, knowledges, and cultural circuits" (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 250), a place wherein history is happening, come to be so?

To paraphrase Michel Foucault on madness (2008, p. 3), let's suppose that the contemporary planetary tangled bundle "city-prosperity-hope" does not exist, let's treat it as a singularity (Foucault, 2007, p. 63) of the Global North and South and, finally, let's trace some genealogical lines, namely "something that attempts to restore the conditions for the appearance of a singularity born out of multiple determining elements of which is not the product, but rather the effect" (*Ibid.*, p. 64). Indeed, it is not that cities were not "there" before and mostly, they were unimportant for economic development. Rather, it is plausible to assume that, since 1960s onwards, the object "city" is lighten by a completely new epistemological light.

The question I am posing is not merely one of *logos* performativity: if repeating is believing and therefore acting through a sort of inertial motion, the issue here at stake is rather one of a profound discursive change on object configurations (Daley, 1982, p. 133), whereas the notions of "city", "creativity", "innovation" (and "knowledge" and "human capital" could be added) would play the role of epistemological indicators.

In the so-called Chomsky-Foucault debate on human nature held in 1971, Michel Foucault characterized epistemological indicators as those notions "of which the classifying, delimiting, and other functions had an effect on scientific discussions, and not on what they were talking about" (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 6). Therefore, following his take, it is our relationship with those objects –with the city, for example– that has changed, rather than the objects *per se*.

Before moving on with the chapter, a clarification is needed: the Foucauldian analytical grid to approach a singularity is constituted by archeology, strategy, genealogy which are not three subsequent level of analysis but rather contemporaneous dimensions of the same analysis (Foucault, 2007, p. 65).

Archeology corresponds to the problematization of the system of acceptability moving from a fact of acceptance (e.g. madness → history of madness) by identifying “the breaking points which indicate [the system of acceptability’s] emergence” (*Ibid.*, p. 62). Foucault’s work of the 1960s and early 1970s (from *The Birth of the Clinic* published in 1963 to the *Archeology of Knowledge* in 1969) largely tested the archeological method (Tanca, 2012, pp. 196-203). Strategy entails the recognition that there is no principle of closure because of “the essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it” (Foucault, 2007, p. 65). Strategy, in other words, acknowledges the volatility of power relationships in which the singular effect (e.g. innovation) can be investigated contradicting universal and linear accounts.

According to Foucault, there are two forms of knowledge, *savoir* and *connaissance* that are related but differ from each other: “instead of exploring, the consciousness/knowledge (*connaissance*)/science axis (which cannot escape subjectivity), archaeology explores the discursive practice/knowledge (*savoir*)/science axis”. (Foucault, 1972, p. 183). Differently stated, archeology problematizes the subject of learning as *some-body* historically objectified and it is concerned with the analysis of discursive formations in which knowledge of any kind may become possible (Tanca, 2012, p. 197). The archeological and genealogical methods meet, in my view, on the notion of *savoir* i.e. discursive formations and practices on knowledge, including scientific discussions. However, genealogy adds the analysis of mechanisms of power in their mutual relationship with forms of knowledge (Rabinow, 1984, p. 7). Differently stated, genealogy builds on archeology to answer the following questions: first, *which knowledge has produced this singular effect?* and second, *how* it does so?

It is the “how” of this second question which exhorts to analyze power relationships –that is individuals co-existing with other individuals in a certain historically contingent manner. Thus, the choice of certain authors (e.g. Jane Jacobs) and streams of research (e.g. Endogenous Growth Theory) to analyze the nexus “city-innovation” should be understood in light of the above considerations: given the “effect” I have observed in the ethnographic fieldwork, they correspond to the *savoir* that allows to say something about the *pouvoir* analyzed in the remaining chapters –and vice versa.

Moving from these considerations, the next paragraph investigates the changing urban *episteme*, starting from Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).

An *episteme* corresponds to the conditions of possibility “in which knowledge grounds its positivity” (Foucault, 2005, pp. xxiii-xxiv). To simplify, the epistemological field represents the set of elements that *allow* historically contingent spaces of knowledge<sup>20</sup> of any sorts to manifest –from conscious subjective positions to unconscious structure of feelings<sup>21</sup>, and to objectify human beings<sup>22</sup>.

The choice and mention of Jane Jacobs deserves some caveats as the reason for identifying *that* author rather than another one, lays in the consideration that the “Jacobsian” city makes intelligible a focal point of experience (Foucault, 2010b, p. 3). It is an exemplary instance of “a possible knowledge (*savoir*), normative frameworks of behavior for individuals, and potential modes of existence for possible subjects” (*Ivi.*), very much commonsensical in the present times. In other words, it is an illustrative example that allows to say something about the way we have come to understand the city, both as a concrete artifact and as an ideal form, as well as its residents, therefore us, the citizens.

## 1.4 The city of Jane Jacobs versus the “old city”

Urban writer and journalist, Jane Jacobs is a well-known intellectual figure of contemporary times, able to raise sympathetic accounts across different publics<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> On this point, I will return to in Chapter 3 (paragraph 3.1).

<sup>21</sup> All of these elements, for example the ones above mentioned, are subjects and objects of knowledge (Tanca, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> According to Rabinow (1984, pp. 8-11), Foucault analyzed during his life span three modes of objectification: dividing practices (e.g. *The Birth of the Clinic* originally published in 1963), scientific discussions (e.g. *Archeology of Knowledge* originally published in 1969) and subjectification (e.g. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1981-1982). The former two largely concerned technologies of domination, while the latter technologies of the self.

<sup>23</sup> Originally from Scranton, Pennsylvania, Jacobs moved to New York City in 1933 where she began her journalist career that moved up in 1952 when she became associate editor of *Architectural Forum* and she started covering stories on urban planning, design and development. Two moments of Jacobs' life are worth to mention. First, April 1956, when *Architectural Forum* sent Jacobs to Harvard University to speak at a conference on urban design: in that occasion, she vigorously argued against orthodox planning theories that, according to her, paid no respect to “strips of chaos that have a weird wisdom of their own not yet encompassed in our concept of urban order” and seek to apply “one standard solution for every need”. Apparently, during that occasion, she met with William H. Whyte (senior editor at *Fortune* magazine and author of the

As Brian Tochtermann (2012) argued, conservatives, liberals and socio-democrats have sympathized with Jacobs' ideas. She was a true pop icon, particularly among New Yorkers that named a block of Hudson Street located in Jacobs' beloved Greenwich Village after her: "Jane Jacobs Way".

Jacobs published her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961 in which, in a provoking and polemical style and mostly on the basis of her personal and professional experience of mid-twentieth century New York City (Jacobs, 1961, p. 15), she harshly attacked "modern conventional city-planning", a kind of expertise concerned about "how cities ought to be" (*Ibid.*, p. 8). As the principles informing their plan and actions were ideal in shape, planners and designers happened to be uninterested about how cities worked in "real life", she argued, and therefore they were largely unable to foster social and economic vitality (*Ivi*). Hers was undoubtedly a call "to learn and to apply as much *knowledge* (emphasis added) that is *true* (emphasis added) and useful about cities as fast as possible" (*Ibid.*, p. 16).

The content of her critique was the following: experts, a category of professionals intellectually influenced by Howard's "Garden City", Le Corbusier's "Radiant City" and Burnham's "City Beautiful" principles of planning<sup>24</sup>, conceived the city as follows: first, as something to be ordered by universal standards and second, as a problem of simplicity rather than organized complexity. Jacobs combined those "classics" of planning history all together in the expression "Radiant Garden City Beautiful" that condensed bad ideas about the city to be dismissed.

The important points to pay attention at are the following: first, the kind of critique Jacobs advanced and second, the kind of city she articulated through her account. Such exercise of critique of an instituted practice and the object "city" that emerges out of it, meet at the level of knowledge claims, defining what can be known about a given "object" and what exactly, once known, do we know about the urban fabric.

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well-known book *The Organization Man*) who invited her to write a series of articles on the topic in *Fortune*. This leads to a second meaningful date in Jacobs' life: April 1958, when her famous piece "Downtown is for people" ran in *Fortune*. Expanding her ideas from that piece, she then wrote, supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. This biographical note borrows importantly from Sparberg Alexia (2006)

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed overview of urban planning rationales see Hall (2014).

As far as it concerns the kind of critique Jacobs put forth, she advanced two very important claims. First, even if principles of planning and urban design may look good “on paper” (which doesn’t seem to be the case, anyway, in her critical analysis of mid-twentieth century city-planning), a reality-check is needed to break “familiar superstitions, oversimplifications and symbols” (*Ibid.*, p. 13). A city-plan, when in place, has to be *changeable* and *adaptable* to account for a problem of organized complexity, not of chaos (*Ibid.*, p. 222). In other words, the plan is not the plan, but the city is the plan. Therefore, a plan should not outline a utopian vision of urban life, namely “how we might prefer think about a subject” (*Ibid.*, p. 428), but rather it should deal with “the inherent nature of the subject itself” (*Ivi.*). Moreover, the city –this being her second important claim to pay attention to– is able to articulate and express its own needs and desires: colloquially, we may say that the city “*talks* and somebody should listen”<sup>25</sup>. Conceived as a process (*Ibid.*, p. 440), the city is *knowable* by almost anybody where “anybody” is also the layman “busy” living the *real* ordinary life of cities (*Ibid.*, p. 441), the long neglected and disregarded subject of experts, as Jacobs argued. Methodologically, inductive reasoning replaced deduction.

Corollary to such arguments, the city is conceptually framed as a problem of *management of multiple and interconnected quantities* (*Ibid.*, p. 433): people and objects, living and non-living organisms. This conceptualization calls, differently from the “mechanical” city, for a different technique of management of the object “city” that centers, first and foremost, upon the appearance within the field of interest of governmental practice of a new matter of concern: “a multiplicity of living individuals working and coexisting with each other in a set of material elements that act on them and on which they act in turn” (Foucault, 2009, p. 22). This is precisely the core problem that power is concerned with and this marks, in Foucault’s terms, the shift from disciplinary mechanisms to *dispositifs* of security: the dominant object of government concerns *less* specific performances of a multiplicity of individuals that co-exist in a space (e.g. a city) and *more* a series of

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<sup>25</sup> In Jacob’s seminal book, it is rather unclear “*who* should listen”, whether a new kind of expert or ordinary people which are directly in charge (but still, in charge of *what* exactly?) and to *whom* –whether to practical ordinary issues or ordinary people. Specifically, ordinary citizens seem to be both *explanandum* and *explanans* of the city: they are simultaneously sources of knowledge for the planner and knowledge-seekers, therefore planners themselves. Moreover, two aspects have received great attention among critical *and* mainstream scholars in the last forty years. First, Jacobs’ holistic configuration of the city as a socio-technical infrastructure (see, for example, Simone, 2010). Second, community-participation as a tool for urban planning and design as well as an active posture embodied by citizens themselves towards the city as an object of collective care.

*possible* events produced, in unforeseeable ways, by individuals in relationship with otherness, including contingent material aspects<sup>26</sup>. The governmental practice emerging out of Jacobs' account, should function less through imperatives like "do that, behave in this way, walk there, live here and work on the other side of town". Thus, imperatives that spatially organize the city according to specific and *a priori* defined *desiderata*, following political and economic functions as well as the planner's analytic necessities to manage complex matters<sup>27</sup>. Illustrative examples in this sense, are factory towns (e.g. Turin and Detroit), reaching their ultimate expression in the Western world around the mid-twentieth century wherein the city was spatially ordered based on a clear separation of functions (e.g. residential, commercial, industrial). However, far more and transcending the diverse physical manifestations of what can be described as disciplinary mechanisms, a planning approach to urban issues that established clear ends to be pursuit, coherently with a general plan that binds its singular expressions together, was the subject of Jacobs' critique. Planning should be intended in a broad sense: the set of activities that concerns the production and regulation of the relations of people and structures in space (Fainstein and DeFilippis, 2016, p. 1).

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<sup>26</sup> To simplify, the three mechanisms of power described by Foucault during his first lecture of *Security, Territory and Population* (2009), are the following: "This is allowed, this is not allowed" (i.e. legal code), "behave this way" (i.e. disciplinary mechanisms), "interact" (i.e. *dispositifs* of security). It is important to note that Foucault did not conceptualize such mechanisms on a progressive continuum that goes from juridico-legal mechanisms (i.e. from archaic period up until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), then disciplinary ones (i.e. from the eighteenth century onwards, substantially corresponding to the modern era) to end with *dispositifs* of security (i.e. contemporary times). Rather than an historical timeline, the emphasis lays on the dominant feature that rationalizes the exercise of power: in this regard, Foucault traced a difference between a history of technologies on one side and an history of techniques on the other. Each period, he argued, involved a combination of different techniques, namely the juridico-legal code, mechanisms of discipline or of security, but it is precisely the organization of such combined system according to a dominant characteristic that matters in his inquiry. For this study, what is important to note is the following: sovereignty, discipline and security all pose a matter of *spatial organization* and directly concerns *a multiplicity of individuals* as a target of intervention. Moreover, spaces of discipline are understood as empty spaces constructed from scratch to discipline in a certain manner: indeed, Foucault referred, as an example, to the town Richelieu, built in the first seventeenth century reproducing the form of the Roman camp. Therefore, to my understanding, it would be somewhat problematic to describe any existing contemporary city in their integrity as spaces of discipline rather than of *loci* wherein disciplinary mechanisms, are in place alongside others.

<sup>27</sup> The consideration that tools and methods are more functional to and revelatory of the analyst rather than to and of the analyzed, was also noted, among others, by Armen Alchian (1950) to whom I will later refer to.

Control, order, separation and bold certainty *vis à vis* the ability to predict the future characterized the “statistical city”, as Jacobs synthesized the wishful rationale underpinning planning practice of mid-twentieth century. Differently, the urban writer spoke of *a multiplicity of desires* in her quasi-organicist understanding of the object “city”, dismissing top-down rational planning techniques irrationally going after a *unique desired goal*: urban mixture and dynamism *versus* separate uses and staticity. However, in spite of such fluidity, statistics is not dismissed all together as a technique<sup>28</sup>: probability, meaning the likelihood for an event to occur, still underpinned Jacobs’ argument.

The opposition of a linear planning attitude (i.e. “things shall be done this way”) in favor of one that is more circular (i.e. “let’s be open to the multiple possibilities posed by urban life itself”), basically put at its center a loose process i.e. social interaction which is, by definition, uncertain in its outcomes. The process becomes the medium to reach an imaginary, in the sense of not yet existent, and desirable state. On one side, this echoes quite significantly the “communicative turn” in planning practice where “planners would no longer prescribe either ends or means. They would act as negotiators among various stakeholders” (Fainstein and DeFilippis, 2016, p. 7)<sup>29</sup>. On the other side, an open-ended outcome is still an outcome to be governed. Similarly to diseases or theft which cannot be eliminated but only managed through probability techniques (Foucault, 2009, p. 20), the given “diversity”, the natural feature that qualifies cities according to Jacobs, is not a random condition, therefore ungovernable. On this point, she wrote:

“To generate exuberant diversity in a city’s streets and districts, four conditions are indispensable: 1. the district, and indeed as many of its internal parts as possible, must serve more than one primary function: preferably more than two. These must insure the presence of people who go outdoors on different schedules and are in the place for

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<sup>28</sup> On this point, Jacobs wrote the following: “with statistics and probability techniques, it also became possible to create formidable and impressive planning surveys for cities –surveys that come out with fanfare, are read by practically nobody, and then drop quietly into oblivion, as well they might being nothing more nor less than routine exercises in *statistical mechanics* (emphasis added) for systems of disorganized complexity” (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 437-438). Despite that, it holds validity to argue that probability is implicitly maintained by Jacobs as a technique of planning.

<sup>29</sup> According to the authors, emphasis on procedures was embodied by rational planning as well, but it was rather a top-down approach centered on cost-benefit analysis, differently from the communicative model that developed from the mid-1960s onwards (Fainstein and DeFilippis, 2016).

different purposes, but who are able to use many facilities in common. 2. Most blocks must be short; that is, streets and opportunities to turn corners must be frequent. 3. The district must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good proportion of old ones so that they vary in the economic yield they must produce. This mingling must be fairly close-grained. 4. There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there. This includes dense concentration in the case of people who are there because of residence” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 150).

Arguably, what emerges is that the plan is not dismissed (nor, arguably, probability techniques are) but its focus has changed from specific goals to the setting of certain conditions, thus legitimating the presence of uncertainty as a factual element of reality to cope with. In this regard, it is interesting to refer to the seminal paper “Uncertainty, evolution, and economic theory” by the economist Armen Alchian (1950). The scholar advanced an evolutionary interpretation of rational choice theory in which rationality (framed in terms of profit maximization) is bounded to uncertainty and incomplete information (Vromen, 2004, p. 106): “adaptive, imitative, and trial-and-error behavior in the pursuit of ‘positive profits’ is utilized rather than its sharp contrast, the pursuit of ‘maximized profits’” (Alchian, 1950, p. 211). In addition to that, Alchian argued that individuals do not act in a “vacuum”: they operate in an environment that evolves and adapts apace with humans, introducing chance, alongside motivation, as an element determining one’s outcomes –“survival” as he called it<sup>30</sup>.

According to Jacobs, it is the very nature of the city that calls for such a methodological shift. On this point Jacobs wrote:

“Underlying the city planners' deep disrespect for their subject matter, underlying the jejune belief in the ‘dark and foreboding’ irrationality or chaos of cities, lies a long-established misconception about the relationship of cities –and indeed of men– with the rest of nature. [...] The cities of human beings are as natural, being a product of one form of nature, as are the colonies of prairie dogs or the beds of oysters” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 443).

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<sup>30</sup> Alchian described his analytical framework as one “closely akin to the theory of biological evolution. The economic counterparts of genetic heredity, mutations, and natural selection are imitation, innovation, and positive profits” (Alchian, 1950, p. 220).

The logical consequences that follow from such account are the following. On one side, as the city is fully ascribable to the natural order, it has its own natural laws. On the other side, as the city has its inherent nature, such natural laws turn into a *de facto* limitation to the governmental practice whereas “a government that ignores this limitation will not be an illegitimate, usurping government, but simply a clumsy, inadequate government that does not do the proper thing” (Foucault, 2008, p. 10). It is precisely through this conceptual move that asserted the belonging of the city to nature that its role as the *locus* of civilization has been renewed.

The approximation of the city to a living quasi-organism fully revealed itself in language. The use of the biological metaphor of the ecosystem was adopted by Jacobs to describe the city’s socio-economic fabric in a quite literal sense. The parallel between the economy and ecology, further developed in *The Nature of Economies* (2001), soon turned into an equivalence. Cities and economies do not simply perform as if they were ecosystems, *they are ecosystems* “composed of physical-economic-ethical processes active at a given time within a city and its close dependencies” (Jacobs, 1992, p. xvi).

First introduced by the British ecologist Sir Arthur George Tansley (1935), the concept of the ecosystem was employed by its inventor to describe an anthropogenic nature composed of living and non-living components, featuring human beings as a key biotic factor that introduced changes into the system. Rather than exemplifying the “balance of nature”, the ecosystem depicts, in Tansley's terms, a never-ending search for equilibrium in a perpetual condition of unbalance, instability and uncertainty (Cameron and Earley, 2015, p. 475). Analogously with Tansley, Jacobs described the city via a systemic approach that centered on the recognition of the ecosystem’s inherent dynamism due to human and non-human factors. However, this description prescribed that the unknown potentials associated with a dynamic system unleash in the absence of “a hierarchical command over the ensemble, which is self-organized and is making itself up as it goes along” (Jacobs, 2001, p. 204), winking to a reality ideally outside of the political arena with the capital “P”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> I am referring to the institutions that are legally in charge of the highest administrative decisions (and some executive ones) on a certain territory.

This conceptual move to a systemic approach<sup>32</sup> to thinking the city internally (i.e. as an ecosystem) and externally (i.e. as part of nature) paved the way to the separation of the city as an existing *physical* arrangement from the “urban” as an enacted form of being. As Monte-Mór noted, the adjective “urban” has recently gained autonomy from the conventional notion of “city”, loosening its original substantive reference (Monte-Mór, 2014, p. 260).

Elevated to an imaginary but yet real space of possibility, the “urban” sets the benchmark for contemporary forms of social organization –much beyond the borders of the city itself– for two reasons.

First, the urban scale understood as an entity displaying certain characteristics in relation to other scales and landscapes, began to lose its distinctiveness<sup>33</sup>.

Second, in light of its elusive nature, the city is conceived as continuously developing and as a system whose positive elements should be maximized (Foucault, 2009, p. 19)<sup>34</sup>. The urban is not, anymore, represented as a substantive fact. Rather, it is thought as a process whose outcomes are uncertain –a conceptual move that served as a prelude for an experimental and incremental approach to planning.

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<sup>32</sup> Systemic thinking can be conceptualized as an epistemological *continuum* oscillating between two poles and it centers on a shared holistic approach to matters that are thought in their complexity (i.e. as systems) and multiple interconnections with other systems (i.e. what are called “feedback loops”). The notion of the ecosystem exemplifies such tension. The two poles express quite divergent positions on, at least, three aspects: the idea of equilibrium, the technique of forecasting and the state of uncertainty. Roughly speaking, the former holds that equilibrium can be reached within the system. Equilibrium depicts a desirable condition that may be forecasted and the variable “uncertainty” can be basically controlled: the assumption is that “tomorrow’s world will be much today’s” (Wack, 1985). On this, see part two “The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts” of the documentary *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* filmed by Adam Curtis (2011). The second pole leans towards the idea of incremental rationality: forecasting is not dismissed all together as a technique, but uncertainty is retained as a structural feature of the environment. The system is always developing; thus, the future is not quite predictable and equilibrium is an aleatory possibility. See Wack (1985) and for further details on system thinking (Conti, 2012, pp. 131-166).

<sup>33</sup> On the ambiguous morphology of the contemporary urban form, scientific discussions have sparked since the 1990s onwards. See, for example, Soja (2000), Lefebvre (2003), Brenner (2014) and Brenner and Schmid (2017). For a critique of contemporary theorizations of the city, see Scott and Stoper (2015). For some Italian contributions on the debate: see Balducci, Fedeli and Curci (2017); Bolocan Goldstein (2014).

<sup>34</sup> According to Foucault, since the XVIII century onwards, the entry of the market economy (and economic development) within the field of interest of governmental practice, led to the reorganization of space above described. From a different epistemic position, Henri Lefebvre (2003) attributed to the advent of the industrial city –and the dual process of implosion and explosion– the onset of urban society (see Monte-Mór, 2014).

Thus, the “Jacobsian” city, differently from the “old” one, self-organizes, is dynamic, embodies mixed-uses and, as said, by ultimately being a process, its future is “in the making”. Differently stated, rather than functioning through orderly mechanical rhythms leading to predictable ends, the city affirms itself as an uncharted yet exciting land to be scouted by those who govern and those who are governed.

### 1.4.1 A genealogical reading

The notion of “city” emerging from my previous analysis corresponds to the application of an entirely new *grille* [grid] (Foucault and Chomsky, 2006, p. 18), well exemplified by Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*<sup>35</sup>, which since the 1960s has travelled a long way and interestingly triggered many contemporary scientific discussions and inquiries, as well as public discourses<sup>36</sup>. In other words, Jacobs’ work and intellectual influence, whose effects are predominantly visible at the crossroad of urban studies and planning (Blessing, 2017), economics and economic geography, should be regarded as an exemplary instance of such an epistemological shift.

As a general introductory remark, it is important to notice how those ruptures have started manifesting from conceptual changes of spatial relationships wherein power materializes (Foucault, 2009). In this regard, drawing upon Janet Daley (1982, p. 133), “how is that we manipulate our conception of reality in such a way as to make important innovations in *spatial relations* (emphasis added), and at times, create wholly new object configurations?”.

To place the relevance of Jacobs’ ideas within the contemporary production of knowledge and attempting to trace some genealogical lines, it is worth referring to Robert Lucas’ “On the mechanics of economic development” (1988). Lucas, awarded with the Nobel prize in economics in 1995, was looking for an adequate model of economic development “capable of exhibiting behavior to gross features

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<sup>35</sup> At least two other publications by Jacobs should be mentioned as seminal works in this sense: *The Economy of Cities* (1969) and *The Nature of Economies* (2001).

<sup>36</sup> Such genealogical exercise is partial for the following reason. I am not claiming that Jacobs is the “original inventor” (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 18) of a new way of thinking. Rather her contribution should be placed within a broader spectrum of intellectuals (e.g. Vincent Ostrom and Herbert Simon) that roughly simultaneously, albeit in different disciplines or social realms, started to criticize the contemporary dominant “planning” culture. With reference to the analytic and theoretical approach here presented, I am particularly indebted to the class “Planning and counter-planning” (A.Y. 2016/2017) taught by prof. S.J. Collier, which I attended during my visiting research period at The New School.

of which resemble those of the actual world” (*Ibid.*, p. 5.)<sup>37</sup>. To do so, the scholar, drawing upon previous works by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz incorporated human capital into the neoclassical model of growth. Lucas introduced the notion of “external effects” of human capital i.e. the influence people have on the productivity of others (Lucas, 1988, pp. 37). These, the scholar argued, “must be viewed as remaining largely invisible, or visible at the aggregative level only” (*Ibid.*, pp. 38) and “*must* have to do with the ways various groups of people interact” (*Ivi.*). To think through his adequate model of economic development, Lucas wrote:

“I have been following very closely the lead of Jane Jacobs, whose remarkable book *The Economy of Cities* (1969) seems to me mainly and convincingly concerned (though she does not use this terminology) with the external effects of human capital” (*Ibid.*, p. 37).

Moreover, he added:

“[...] it seems to me that the 'force' we need to postulate account for the central role of cities in economic life is of exactly the same character as the 'external human capital' I have postulated as a force to account for certain features of aggregative development. [...] What can people be paying Manhattan or downtown Chicago rents for, if not for being near other people?” (*Ibid.*, p. 39).

It is interesting to note that the fact that Lucas took up some of Jacobs’ ideas and formalized them into the language of economics is non-negligible *per se* and for its consequences. This marked the introduction of a new idea *of* and *on* economic development, substantially echoed in contemporary economic paradigms: the New Economy and knowledge-based economy.

According to *The Glossary of Statistical Terms of the OECD*, the New Economy:

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<sup>37</sup> At the very beginning of his paper, Lucas argued that “it is easy to set out models of economic growth based on reasonable-looking axioms that [...] bear no resemblance to the outcomes produced by actual economic systems” (Lucas, 1988, p. 5). Such a statement in itself resembles importantly the kind of critique (as well as the way of doing critique) that Jacobs addressed against modern conventional city-planning largely concerns, she argued, “about how cities *ought* to work and what *ought* to be good for people and businesses in them” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 8), rather than how they work in “real life”.

“describes aspects of sectors of an economy that are producing or intensely using innovative or new technologies. [...] [It] applies particularly to industries where people depend more and more on computers, telecommunications and the Internet to produce, sell and distribute goods and services” (OECD, 2007).

As Nigel Thrift pointed out (2005, p. 113), “the growth of small high-tech firms, the increasing importance of mobile and highly skilled talent, the rise of entrepreneurship and the centrality of venture capital” are features generally associated with the New Economy. After the “dot.com” bubble’s bust, the New Economy was quickly dismissed as an analytical concept, but from its ashes the concept “knowledge-based economy” has gained increased popularity<sup>38</sup>. Substantially incorporating the New Economy’s characteristics, the knowledge-based economy:

“describes trends in advanced economies towards greater dependence on knowledge, information and high skill level, and the increasing need for ready access to all of these by business and public sectors” (OECD, 2007).

The concept reflects “the fuller recognition of the place of knowledge and technology in modern OECD economies” (OECD, 1996, p. 3).

Thrift (2005, pp. 113-117) associated the origins of the New Economy paradigm with a set of overlapping sources: the cultural circuit of capital i.e. business schools, managers and media as well as governments and economists. In addition to that, Thrift noted (*Ivi.*) that the infrastructure itself i.e. information and communication technologies (ICT) that materialized in the everyday life of families since the 1980s onwards, played a role in normalizing such generalized and global trends.

In light of its authority in shaping the knowledge-power nexus (Foucault, 2007, p. 61)<sup>39</sup> in contemporary times, economics has played an important role in

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<sup>38</sup> On the evolution of the concept see the critical review by Hudson (2016, pp. 65-87)

<sup>39</sup> The knowledge-power nexus should be understood with reference to the “manifestation of truth”. In this regard, Foucault argued “that it would be difficult to find an exercise of power that is excessed without being accompanied, in one way or another, by a manifestation of truth” (Foucault, 2014, pp. 4-5). Nonetheless, it is somewhat an open question whether in last chapters of *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Foucault made a similar point with reference to the contemporary governmental practice, neoliberalism.

legitimizing the circulation of the new ideas of and on economic development. If Robert Lucas made a breakthrough in this direction, Paul Romer has taken the lead since the 1990s.

Romer, a prominent contemporary scholar and Chief Economist and Senior Vice President of The World Bank since October 2016<sup>40</sup>, was one of Lucas' PhD student at the University of Chicago. Together with Lucas, he is best known for its seminal contributions (Romer, 1986; 1990) on New Growth Theory (NGT) or Endogenous Growth Theory (EGT)<sup>41</sup>, whose vision in a nutshell is that “of perpetual change and innovation through competition” (Aghion and Howitt, 1999, p. 2).

NGT focuses on “the interplay between technological knowledge and various structural characteristics of the economy and the society, and how such an interplay results in economic growth” (*Ibid.*, p. 1): its basic concept is that productivity growth is due to endogenous factors rather than exogenous ones<sup>42</sup>. Romer clarified this take as follows: first, ideas are goods, second, ideas are non-rival goods and third, their production displays increasing returns to scale (The Economist, 2006; Holcombe, 1988; Romer, 1993).

Such a conceptual shift produced two relevant implications. First, from a spatial point of view, it leads to focus on “thick” labor markets epitomized by dense urban agglomerations (Moretti, 2012; The Economist, 2016). Second, from an anthropological point of view, this shift emphasizes human capital as “the most important input in the production of new ideas” (Romer, 1993, p. 71).

In the 1990s, it started to become *obvious* what was until then *unknown*: cities and ideas matter the most for economic development, an understanding that

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<sup>40</sup> In May 2017, Romer apparently left the Development Economics Group (DEC) while retaining his role as Chief Economist (Mayeda, 2017; Holmes, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Thrift acknowledged the role of economists, specifically of Romer and others, in legitimizing, through the production of a formal body of knowledge, the discourse of the New Economy (Thrift, 2005, p. 116). In addition to that, various sources associated “the dynamics of the knowledge-based economy and its relationship to traditional economies” (OECD, 1996, p. 3) with the New Growth Theory.

<sup>42</sup> For an overview on NGT, see the symposium of *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* (8, 1, 1994), Aghion and Howitt (1999), Fine and Dimakou (2016, pp. 46-66).

foresees as ideologically desirable a dynamic mix of free-market ideas<sup>43</sup> and communitarian uprisings, individual freedom and collective care.

These new object configurations emerged *within* specific formative rules (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 18). Jacobs's work, in spite of its formal weakness<sup>44</sup>, is an exemplary instance of this new epistemological gaze (Duranton, 2017). As Ralph Blessing argued:

“Jane Jacobs’s work –in particular, *Death and Life*– has held up so well not simply because of its powerful prose and its author’s authenticity but because of *the city it evokes* (emphasis added). [...] the city of our imagination and ambition is still the same Jane Jacobs described, at least for the most of us” (Blessing, 2017, p. 88).

### 1.4.2 Re-thinking the city

The “Jacobsian” city is an illustrative example of the contemporary configuration of the urban space that gained full visibility out of convergent streams of research in the 1990s and 2000s, in at least three ways.

First, the source and value of spatial concentration for firms, jobs and people. Commenting on the differences between small and big manufacturers, Jacobs claimed:

“typically, they [small manufacturers] must draw on many and varied supplies and skills outside themselves, they must serve a narrow market at the point where a market exists, and they must be sensitive to quick changes in this market. Without cities, they would simply not exist. Dependent on a huge diversity of other city enterprises, they can add further to that diversity. This last is a most important point to remember. City diversity itself permits and stimulates more diversity” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 145).

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<sup>43</sup> Duranton (2017) drew a parallel between Jane Jacobs and Friedrich Hayek as both authors in an extreme fashion warned about the danger of rational planning.

<sup>44</sup> Jacobs’ arguments on the mechanisms of economic development, the genesis of cities and her naivité on certain socio-spatial issues raised scientific skepticism (see Desrochers and Hospers, 2007; Fischer, F. and Altrock, U., 2014; Duranton, 2017). However, if Jacobs’ belonging to the scientific domain can be questioned, her work does belong to the archeological territory (Foucault, 1972, p. 183).

Jacobs' descriptions of urban economic ties (particularly for small entities) and of how "*new* (emphasis added) work multiplies and diversifies a city's division of labor" (Jacobs, 1969, p. 12), are strikingly similar to more recent formal economic accounts focusing on the benefits of agglomeration. A notable example comes from New Economic Geography (NEG), a stream of research in regard to which Jacobs can be considered as a prophet (Papageorgiou and Pines, 1999, p. 225).

Starting from Paul Krugman's seminal paper "Increasing returns and economic geography" (1991), NEG has argued that trade costs, variety, and scale are pivotal factors for spatial concentration and specialization (Storper, 2013). Specialization may equally correspond to the spatial concentration of economic activities engaging in the same "kind of work" or producing the same "kind of product" (*Ibid.*), reflecting either the notion of "Jacobsian" diversification or Marshallian specialization. Nonetheless, what emerges as important from such accounts are economies of agglomeration and, more precisely, external economies of scale. Spatial concentration underlies "un-traded interdependencies" (Storper, 1995): as Duranton and Puga (2004) argued, "thickness" favors *sharing* of human relationships, *matching* of people to jobs and continuous *learning* among "communities of innovators" (Storper, 2013).

Second, in calling attention to face-to-face interactions. Jacobs emphasized how unmediated information exchanges may generate positive external spillovers i.e. what Lucas called "external effects of human capital", potentially raising the overall level of productivity (Nowlan, 1997, p. 112)<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, she attributed such possibility to the very nature of the urban space (Jacobs, 1961, p. 146).

In her account, the city is a *locus* of knowledge exchanges and spillovers because of its diversified economic base i.e. it holds in itself the "ingredients" for the multiplication of wealth. This configuration of the object "city" has proven to be highly relevant for the economics of ideas that is no more a footnote to economic analysis (Romer, 1993, p. 63) but rather its "beating heart".

Third, Jacobs' conceptualization of diversity holds in itself two different understandings that have mingled together in contemporary scholarly and non-scholarly accounts. On the one hand, closer to a more sociological and anthropological sensitivity, diversity expresses a space of difference and tolerance

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<sup>45</sup> David Nowlan has similarly explored the importance of Jacobs' ideas on economics and his contribution has proven relevant for this study.

(Jacobs, 1961, p. 72). On the other, corresponding to and generating from an efficient use of mixed economic pools (*Ibid.*, p. 144 and p. 148), diversity portrays an economic functionality<sup>46</sup>.

The signifying chain “diversity–tolerance–economic development” builds upon a particular relationship between the city and nature. The former is understood as a legitimate part of nature and the natural quality of cities is diversity, Jacobs argued. Cities are also conceived as “natural economic generators of diversity and natural economic *incubators* (emphasis added) of new enterprises” (*Ibid.*, p. 148). According to Jacobs, the proximity of heterogeneous elements qualifies the “urban”: “so many people are so close together, and among them contain so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, bees in their bonnets” (*Ibid.*, p. 147).

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, proximity and diversity in urban environments, whether conceived as diversified economies or as serendipitous *loci* of encounter, have established themselves as legitimate fields of inquiry (for example, see Boschma, 2005; Glaeser *et al.*, 1992; Henderson, 1997; Duranton and Puga, 2001; Florida, 2002; Ponzini, 2014).

Designating, delimiting and situating a certain type of scientific discourse (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 6), the importance of such topics depends on them being conceived as catalysts of economic development. The natural character of cities is not only an intrinsic quality but also an object to govern. What Jacobs described is a condition that may self-reinforce itself through time, revealing the cumulative and circular character of economic development. However, some actions should be taken to foster such “naturalness”. Differently stated, the production of innovation requires consistent and continuous institutional and organizational efforts, an idea reinforced by the widespread use of the biological metaphor describing such concerted and collective acting: the “innovation ecosystem”<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Desrochers and Hospers (2007) noted that, in spite of Jacobs’ imprecisions and mistakes when it came to economics, the idea that diversity leads to innovation has been backed by scientific inquiries that, nonetheless, display a weak empirical base since “localized knowledge spillovers” are invoked rather than assessed.

<sup>47</sup> “Institutional effort” does not equate a concerted territorial acting. The former implies tangible investments or actions on the side of the institutions (e.g. in education, infrastructures or the setting of specific rules that may encourage innovation processes). The latter corresponds to a

The ongoing debate focusing on the drivers of changes in the geography of economic growth and population and its uneven trajectories (Storper, 2013) in post-industrial times, may be taken as evidence in this sense. Colloquially named “the chicken and egg” enigma, such a discussion is enlivened by a query on the casual mechanisms of place-based development.

According to Storper and Scott (2009), a fairly recent set of scientific discussions are cling at arguing that “people follow places”. Differently from a more conventional view, these theories argue that individuals with high-levels of human capital i.e. the labor force driving the knowledge-based economy, are mobile and locate in places offering a number of enjoyable features (*Ibid.*, p. 148). Enrico Moretti (2012)<sup>48</sup>, like Michael Storper and Allen Scott, leans towards the more conventional argument of “people following jobs”<sup>49</sup>: within these scientific accounts, cities are primarily portrayed as sites of production rather than amusement *à la* Clark *et al.* (2002).

A contemporary focal moment for the rejuvenation and vigorous unfolding of the “chicken and egg” debate coincides with the publication of Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002. Since its appearance, *The Rise* has sparked a lively public discussion and academic inquiries on the nexus between creativity, economic development and place-making, have increased significantly (Scott, 2014, p. 567). The influence of Florida’s theses on policy-making have also known a truly global reach, analogously to the critiques it received (see Peck, 2005; Krätke, 2011).

Building upon and conceptually bridging Jane Jacobs’ (1969, 1984) and Robert Lucas’ key arguments (1988), Florida (2002, p. xxi) described a newly born social class, the “creative class” i.e. “the leading force at the beachhead of social, cultural, and economic change” (*Ibid.*, p. xvi). Displaying little class consciousness if compared to the industrial working class, the “creative class” is largely unaware of its powerful collective bond and common underlying strength: creativity (*Ivi.*). This latter, the scholar argued, is “something that is innate in each of us and *shared* (emphasis added) by every one of us” (*Ibid.*, p. xi). In post-industrial times, creativity is also “*the* (emphasis added) mobile factor of

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technique of management. Notwithstanding such important differences, the concept “ecosystem” emphasizes a relational organization of innovation.

<sup>48</sup> Moretti’s emphasis on creativity and human capital does remind Florida’s arguments, but the logics is quite different.

<sup>49</sup> According to Richard Florida, “jobs versus people” is a false dichotomy as “skills and skilled people are a mobile factor of production” (Florida, 2014, p. 200). See also Florida (2012b).

production” (Florida, 2014, p. 200) and the “*key* (emphasis added) human and economic resource” (*Ibid.*, p. 197).

Creativity is portrayed as a universal human feature with deep social roots: it is simultaneously “innate in each of us” (Florida, 2002, p. xi) and embedded in places that significantly “shape its characters and objectives in many different ways” (Scott, 2014, p. 568). Therefore, as creativity can be socially “nourished” and skills and skilled people are flows rather than stocks (Florida, 2014, p. 200), the quality of place becomes a pivot to leverage upon. In Florida’s theory, place is described as “the primary social and economic organizing unit of the postindustrial, post-Fordist age” (*Ibid.*, p. 197). This understanding of the contemporary spatial hierarchy which largely downsizes the role of the firm, is interestingly shared by Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 250) according to whom “*the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class* (emphasis added)”.

The reference to neo-Marxist scholars allows to pose an additional and provocative question: to what extent does the “multitude” (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2009) conceptually overlap with the “creative class”? The question, surprising as it might sound, is worth to ask, both analytically and epistemologically. Despite their different ontologies –the “multitude” is not a class and the concept of the “creative class” is problematic (Krätke, 2011, p. 40), these two social bodies as conceptually framed by their proponents, arguably meet on certain grounds. The levels they encounter upon are the following: the metropolitan productive fabric logically encompasses the notions of the “multitude” and the “creative class”, as they both exemplify the cognitive and affective labor of contemporary economic production (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 132) and their precariousness. This strangeness, if welcomed<sup>50</sup>, interestingly points to the epistemological perimeter shared by different scientific debates on the economy, the elected subjectivities and spaces wherein “things” happen.

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<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, if this “strangeness” is opposed, it offers a timely opportunity to pay attention to some related matters: has Florida’s “creative class” being generally evaluated and processed analytically or synthetically? More generally, what does our reaction to such an object say about our view of the world? And how does this latter, namely our view of the world, slip through and shape our knowledge claims? These questions are, undoubtedly, not much of a novelty as there is a long-time interest in human sciences, from Kant to Foucault and many others, on epistemology and, as an effect, on methodology. However, they are regularly locked away as they remain silent, paving the illusion, on the side of the researcher, that the act of knowing –of producing knowledge– *isn’t* a technique of subjectivation on his or her self *and* on others. By not doing so *out loud*, domination, in its multiple facets, is in fact perpetuated as the space to de-subjugate the self (Foucault, 2007, p. 56) is occupied by mirages of psychic freedom.

Notably, Florida's theory centers on the three "T's" of economic development –"technology", "talent", "tolerance"– and on the quality of place, "the locus of creativity and innovation" (Florida, 2014, p. 197). A place, as Florida claims, has to be enjoyable and welcoming to be attractive for the creative class i.e. the reservoir of valuable human capital in contemporary times. Such quality results from the natural, cultural and built amenities it offers as well as the presence of other talented people (*Ibid.*, p. 198). Differently stated, a good place to be, live and work is a space of difference, an expression belonging to Jane Jacobs' vocabulary whose thinking, according to Brian Tochtermann (2012), has paved the way for neoliberal urban development's ideas of which Florida's thesis are exemplary.

Florida has strongly rejected the "reductionist chicken-and-egg thinking about cities, innovation and economic growth" (Florida, 2012b). He defined the kind of critique his "creative class" theory has received, as inconsistent. In his view, glancing the urban vitalism and organicism of Jacobs, the issue to pay attention to is the following:

"the very mechanism of work here is *the city itself* (emphasis added). Dense and interactive connectors, cities are economic and social organizing machines" (Florida, 2012b).

Similar epistemological takes on urban life and civility are significantly present in Edward Glaeser's *Triumph of the City. How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (2011). *Triumph of the City* offered an alternative amenity-driven account of urban economic development whereas mild winters, affordable and good-quality housing and schools, public goods as safety, consumer amenities as well as the presence of other skilled people are valued. According to Glaeser (2005 and 2011), these features shape the uneven geography of urban growth, even though they may not be simultaneously exhibited in one place and they assemble through complex and changing trade-offs (Storper and Scott, 2009, p. 152). Along these lines and importantly drawing upon Jacobs (Nowlan, 1997; Desrochers and Hospers, 2007), the scholar argued (Glaeser, 2011) that cities are sites of human progress, happiness and pleasure as well as engines of innovations since Ancient Greece onwards. Described as pathways from poverty to prosperity, cities born out of a

*physiological* need of human beings to socialize and learn<sup>51</sup>. In this regard, “cities make us more *human* [emphasis added]” (*Ibid.*).

Differently from Florida and Glaeser, Enrico Moretti (2012) framed the “chicken and egg” problem in the following way:

“specialized high-tech workers will not move to a city that does not have a cluster and high-tech companies will not move there because finding *specialized labour* (emphasis added) will be difficult”.

This position, substantially shared by Michael Storper and Allen Scott, emphasizes that only skilled individuals bearing a structured relationship with historically and geographically specific forms of learning and innovation (Storper and Scott, 2009) constitute the kind of human capital that triggers innovative processes. Differently stated, such accounts argue that it is not a matter of *many* talented people interacting at the organizational and more broadly, urban level. What matters is the *kind* of talented people doing so and the possibility for them to reach over an already receptive local base. Intuitively, such approaches provide a different set of advices for urban and regional policy-makers as they make clear that the indiscriminate, “low-cost” and highly rhetoric hunt for “talents” is a problematic issue.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the “city-innovation” nexus moving from the premise that the city acts as *the* foundational place of the discourse of innovation. The inquiry began from a closed examination of Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, identified as an illustrative example of our contemporary understanding of the city and urban life at large. The overall objective was to display how the city’s specific nature as an object of governmental action (Foucault, 2008) has evolved since 1960s onwards.

From the point of view of urban policy, the chosen authors –exemplifying key issues of the contemporary debate on the pattern of economic development<sup>52</sup>– offered different analysis and this contribution did not intend to dismiss such

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<sup>51</sup> The ability to learn in Glaeser’s theory corresponds to creativity in Florida’s.

<sup>52</sup> The review offered does not exhaust but exemplify the debate on cities and economic development, following the lead of Storper (2013, pp. 14-91). For example, on the concept and theory of the creative city, a notable contribution came from Landry (2008).

divergences as irrelevant: urban policies informed by different theoretical claims do inscribe differently into the real. Nevertheless, as the focus laid on the dominant urban *episteme*, it was relevant to outline their common epistemological groundwork. On one side, the politics of the future importantly centers on the city configured as previously described. On the other, urban citizens are conceived as the human inputs of innovation in “newer postindustrial, post-Fordist and ‘flexible’ economic systems” (Florida, 2014, p. 196).

However, the aim has been to retrace the epistemological stage of the production of the discourse of innovation to later follow its circulation and unfolding in the contemporary social space. To proceed in this direction, this study will metaphorically proceed to “Via Dogana 4”, where the Office of Labor Policies, Economic Development, University and Research of Milan Municipality is located (Chapter 3). Later, it will end up at Core, a Milanese organization where I conducted an ethnographic observation (Chapter 4 and 5). Stated differently, the aim is to explore the epistemological continuity that cuts across relevant scholarly discourses until it reaches the desk of policy-makers and of the “co-worker”.

The term “co-worker” is here employed in a figurative sense: it exemplifies the individual/possible subject that differently engages with “innovation” (or it is represented to do so) as well as a social practice, namely a way of acting. Therefore, as the introduction of this study has clarified, the research goal is to understand *how* a “virtual” discourse becomes ultimately embodied by individuals whose answers to the question “what is to be done?” or “what can I do?”, as well as their politics, cannot be separated from the *episteme* they operate within (Foucault, 2014, p. 4-5).

## Chapter 2

# Investigating innovation. A methodological reflection on the field research process.

### 2.1 Using interpretative methodologies

Discussions on methods among geographers are somehow paradoxical. On one hand, “we” always talk about methods as “we” often express the need to do that<sup>53</sup> or “we” are rightly asked by the scientific community to inform the readers on how we have come to reach certain conclusions. On the other hand, there seems to be a general tendency to shorten the reasoning on methodology, as if it were a simple tool of inquiry to be justified and, mostly, as if focusing too much upon the researcher’s epistemological and philosophical gaze on the object of inquiry would correspond, by default, to a kind of “bothering” fetishism or narcissism. The recurrent buzz in the discipline still is: “do it, rather than talk about it” (Tickel *et al.*, 2007, p. 1).

The above-mentioned risks are to some extent real (see Lynch, 2000) but avoidable if the discussion treats methods as constituting *acts of knowledge*. In this sense, it is not only that methods illustrate the researcher’s epistemological

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<sup>53</sup> This is the case particularly among junior researchers and this fact may be symptomatic of a perceived and diffused methodological opacity that “might get in the way of collective learning; the verification and triangulation of knowledge claims becomes more difficult; and communication and exchange with cognate fields, indeed across the field itself, are encumbered [...]” (Tickel *et al.*, 2007, p. xiii).

stake on the object of inquiry, what is knowable and how it is so from a situated and singular point of view. If the researcher is methodologically transparent, discussions on methods emerge simultaneously as discourses on ourselves, on the object of inquiry and more specifically, on the ways knowledge is produced. Methods are, therefore, far from being merely practical issues to sort out. They are valuable to demonstrate the consistency between the scientific arguments articulated and the methodological choices made (i.e. methodological consistency). Methods also enlighten the ways objects are configured and, therefore, become knowable by the researcher, uncovering his or her positionality and intimate relationship with knowledge. Drawing upon these considerations, two questions guide the discussion that follows: first, what does the reader need to know about the methodological “journey”? Second, in what ways does knowing, at least partially, the process of knowledge production add knowledge on the object of inquiry itself?

The first part of the chapter intends to epistemologically situate the inquiry, by making explicit the ways I approach the elements of “power”, “subjectivity” and “discourse” (paragraph 2.2 and sub-sections 2.2.1). These categories are crucial conceptual frameworks for the analysis and they have oriented my gaze with regard to the object of inquiry. The second part of the chapter presents an account on the methodological technique adopted: ethnography (paragraph 2.3). The structure of the ethnographic observation and the tools employed (sub-paragraph 2.3.1) as well as a number of challenges (sub-paragraph 2.3.2) encountered during the fieldwork will be detailed.

## **2.2 Some preliminary considerations**

To begin the discussion, it is useful to recall the broad research questions directing my epistemological and methodological gaze: under what conditions of possibility does a discursive practice become subjectively and collectively sensible and meaningful (Foucault, 2008)? How does it “speak the truth” to and for the subject (Allouch, 2012, p. 2)?

Searching for “the conditions of possibility” builds upon a set of considerations and bears implications.

First, such stance suggests that the singularity under investigation –the practice of innovation– would not exist *without a discourse* (or, better said, various discourses) that authorizes and legitimizes its existence. In this sense, the term “practice” expresses a discursive practice and *a subjective and collective*

*action* that “embodies the complexities, contingencies, and meanings that constitute most socio-economic and political-economic phenomena” (Jones and Murphy, 2010, p. 367).

Second, and drawing from the previous consideration, “conditions of possibility” are not *ideal* entities but rather very *material* social processes: they do not stand in the “air”, they ground themselves in reality. A Foucauldian epistemological stance informs this study: therefore, a discourse is *materially* observable in the effects it generates –which are, first and foremost, *spatial*. A discourse is conceptualized as a sort of *impersonal* textuality that “overrides society and governs the production of culture” (Said, 1978, p. 677) and gets *personal*, making itself visible territorially, organizationally and corporeally.

Third, whenever the term “discourse” is used, a social tie is implied. This stance draws from the idea, proposed by psychoanalytical theory<sup>54</sup> and Michel Foucault, that “words and signifiers have material effects” (Kingsbury, 2009, p. 488). This stance points toward the discursive matrix that forms the subject and invites to research the self as “[...] nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history” (Foucault, 1993, p. 222). There is not, if such approach is fully embraced, a singularity of the subject, or a positivity of the self as Foucault said (*Ibid.*), but only “a kind of infolding of exteriority” (Rose, 1998, p. 37). However, my personal sensibility tends to problematize the fixity that the “nothing else” attaches to subjects. I share, in this sense, the invite of Blackman *et al.* (2008) to account for the different grasp that power holds on the subjects it produces and to investigate tactics of counter power that are subjectively and collectively enacted. It follows that this study aims to account for *continuities* and *discontinuities* produced by the contemporary discursive technology “innovation”.

Notwithstanding these positions, I disagree with scholarly accounts that contend that Foucault’s subject is static *vis à vis* power (Pile, 2008, p. 210)<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, Foucault’s notion of power as a field of relations rather than a substance opens up a space where aside of conduct, there is also and always counter-

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<sup>54</sup> Notably, Jacques Lacan argued that the unconscious is structured like a language. However, according to Lacan himself, the discursive functioning of the psyche and linguistic determination of the subject were arguments already articulated by Sigmund Freud (especially in *The Interpretation of Dreams* originally published in 1900) (Lemaire, 1977; Althusser, 1996, p. 24).

<sup>55</sup> I understand this critique, but I see this point as the product of certain interpretations and uses of Foucault’s philosophical toolkit. Moreover, in more general terms, it is certainly tempting, from the side of the researcher, not to account for differences, nuances, acts of resistance as, in fact, is more difficult to investigate singularities rather than universals.

conduct, a possibility that his very notion of critique as “the art of not being governed quite so much” (Foucault, 2007, p. 45) importantly relates to and envisages. The possibility of “not to be governed quite so much” (*Ivi.*) calls for a stance that wishes to look at how subjects hold themselves together (Blackman *et al.*, 2008, p. 7), an element that psychoanalysis engages with by an analytic toolkit conceptually centered on a positivity of the *split* subject.

Drawing upon such approaches, discursive materiality is conceived as a relational matter. “Living together” and, more broadly, the relationship with otherness is mediated by and tied to a discursive practice. The interest lays precisely in conceptually placing and acknowledging the process of subject formation within the discursive matrices that assemble, mediate and conduct individuals towards certain *teloi* and subjective truths, namely *being and acting in accord with reality* (Cavallari, 2014).

Four, subjectivity is understood as nothing but a contested terrain: fragmented, de-centered and substantially split, the “subject” as an epiphenomenon observable by an outsider’s eye, is conceived as a temporal and unstable synthesis of different forces that continuously “fight” each other. The ontology of the subject lays in this on-going struggle and never-ending process of becoming, despite the pronoun “I”, the linguistic mean *par excellence* used to express oneself, conveys an illusory sense of subjective unity.

Five, power is conceived as an immanent condition of being-in-the-world (in Heidegger’s sense) and of *any* social relation (in Foucauldian sense). Moving from the consideration that power conceptualization produces certain analytical and methodological effects, this study acknowledges the elitist image and representation associated with the selves observed during the ethnographic fieldwork. The analysis deals with people that are supposedly in positions of power and authority (Smith, 2006, p. 646): entrepreneurs, managers, organizational cadres, investors. In addition to that, innovation is generally associated with economic practices that rely on learning, creativity and innovation (Scott, 2014), subjective capacities and skills that build upon different forms of capital likely to be possessed in larger amounts by “powerful” rather than “powerless” groups.

However, I avoid both the trap of assuming that differences exist only among social groups, and not within them, and I abstain from tracing the boundaries of any social group relying on an *a priori* idea on power structure (Desmond, 2014).

My act of producing and using knowledge, therefore, should be regarded as an act of *understanding* that starts from a practice that is a given fact and unfolds in a tense and unsolvable space between reality on one side and its representation on the other. In this regard, the next paragraph aims to clarify further the category “subjectivity” and to acknowledge the double epistemological movement that methodologically informs this study: one that looks at a reality that is given and one at a reality that is produced.

### 2.2.1 Subject(s) matter

Since the turn of twentieth century, a widespread interest has mounted on the topic of “subjectivity” and the discussion has been customarily accompanied by the basic consideration that sees subjectivity as a very complicated matter. Acknowledging such “messiness”, a good way to proceed analytically is by clarifying the conceptual vocabulary that “subjectivity” implies, with reference to some streams of literature that have informed this study and that meet on certain grounds.

The notion of “subjectivity” holds a number of implication as it calls into question various elements: alongside the already mentioned “subject”, “self” and “I”, “subject formation”, “subjugation”, “subjectivation” and “subjectification” describe different moments of the process of becoming a subject. To start with the former, subject formation corresponds, in general terms, to the encounter of the individual with a symbolic dimension to whom it is subjected.

In Foucault’s terms, it is a form of power –what he called “technologies of power” and “technologies of the self” –that subjectifies the individual. Subjectification (in French, *assujettissement*) corresponds to both passive subjugation and active resistance. The subject is subjected to power, but it is, at the same time, a necessary anchor bolt for power to *exist*. This necessity frames the very possibility for acts of resistance to *co-exist* –not peacefully but in struggle– with forms of power (see Milchman and Rosenberg, 2007; Butler, 1997; Oberprantacher and Siclodi, 2016). On the other hand, subjectivation corresponds to “the relation of the individual to him/herself; to the multiple ways in which a self can be constructed on the basis of what one takes to be the truth” (Milchman and Rosenberg, 2007, p. 55).

Differently and as previously mentioned, psychoanalytical knowledge advances claims on some positive foundations of the self. Such *savoir*, in spite of the numerous voices and schools of thought that have composed it –what

Kingsbury called “theoretical volatility” (2009, p. 487), grounds its distinctiveness with regard to other knowledges and practices, on a set of shared elements.

Since Sigmund Freud onwards, two theoretical ideas have affirmatively distinguished psychoanalytical theory: a de-centered human subject and the unconscious. Indeed, the psyche has been theorized as composed of different forces, continuously struggling with each other and its mental processes as being conscious and *unconscious*. In such approaches, the individual emerges as a “*some-body*” subjected to certain symbolic authorities: in other words, the production of subjectivity results in a relationship with something *external* to the human body, through a sort of inter-directional process where the “outside” is constitutive of the “inside” and vice versa. For example, Freud’s theorization of the psyche as composed of the Ego, Id and Super Ego, reflects the continuous movement “in and out” what is immanent to the subjective experience and what transcends it, in the form of social ties, cultural norms, heritage (Dorfman, 2010). Similarly, Lacan’s three registers, namely the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, translates the idea that “the subject is in the discourse of the other” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 43). Conceived as such and in line with a Foucauldian perspective, the individual is not understood in a position of exteriority in relation to power (Foucault, 1978, p. 94) as it symbolically is a space of *embodied* power and resistance towards it.

In addition to that, the notion of the unconscious blurs the difference between the normal and the abnormal, and instills seeds of doubt and dissatisfaction towards what is visible (Forrester, 1980). This, I contend, marks an additional point of convergence between psychoanalytical knowledge and Michel Foucault’s project.

Nevertheless, what a psychoanalytically informed gaze adds is an explicit focus on the relational process of subjective constitution, allowing to place individuals in their *singular* position with regard to discursive practices, therefore with otherness. This reference to “otherness” points towards practices that not only conduct men (Foucault, 2014, p. 12) but also, in order to do so, *tie them together* through certain means. Thus, attention is paid to *spaces* which are, by definition, relational, group dynamics and communitarian rhetorics. To investigate these aspects proves important to highlight the affective process that invests the individual and profoundly modifies its psychic life with regard to an imaginary “must-be” embodied by a leader, a group or expressed by an idea. This is a concise non-clinical definition of what identification is about (Freud, 1949): a

necessary trait for the development of subjectivity which expresses the very meaning of individual *bargaining* towards forms of power and emotional ties<sup>56</sup>. Nevertheless, this work does not aim to analyze the process of identification. For the purpose of this study, I retain of Freud's theory of identification, the general notion that forms of power emerge as emotional ties, acting on individuals through intensification of emotions, mechanisms of idealization, intellectual inhibition and influences of suggestion (*Ibid.*, p. 33). Building on this general idea, I account in Chapter 5 for group dynamics as they relate to *the unfolding and making of a community*. Coherently with the conceptualization of the object of inquiry as a discursive (battle)field, the community is conceived as a *process* which does not show a fixed, defining and "once and for all" substantive characteristic nor holds a moral value as an enduring ideal (Smith, 1999, p. 20). Two elements justify this focus. First, the community expresses the discursive relationality belying social ties, thus reinforcing the argument which I have previously presented on "otherness" as a constitute element of social acting, subject formation, discourse proliferation. Second, the community –as Chapter 5 will explore in-depth, was one of Core's organizational goal and it functioned as a technique of management.

All of these conceptual elements have significantly informed my take on "discourse", "subject" and "power", both in the research design and "in the field": this Foucauldian/psychoanalytical gaze has oriented my inquiry, even though such *savoirs* have been analytically employed concurrently with others. Throughout the study, I will refer to certain Foucauldian concepts (e.g. governmental practice) and I make use of some psychoanalytic ones (e.g. daydream), but this, by no means, implies that the analytic toolkit exhausts itself in such specific knowledges. Precisely because I have taken seriously the position that "what we know" on a singularity, for our case innovation, is the result of heterogeneous processes that have not proceeded linearly, but, still, they have met on certain grounds (Foucault, 2007, p. 64), it has been desirable and necessary to employ a multiplicity of knowledges and analytic concepts. How innovation has inscribed into reality as an effect of different technologies, discourses, knowledges,

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<sup>56</sup> Psychoanalysis is arguably clear about the distinction between, on one hand, identification, a necessary and unavoidable foundational *process* of the Ego and of the subject and, on the other, the positive affirmation of subjectivity. Roughly speaking, the former corresponds to an ideal *doit être* (must-be), while the latter expresses the possibility for the individual to slip out, once lived through, of such request of *must-be* articulated by otherness. Therefore, subjectivity corresponds to the potential for a human being to move from the imaginary space to the symbolic one, a condition where the imaginary still "lives", but it does not *govern* the now de-centered subject.

techniques of management, subject positions and interactions, desires and needs constitute the object of inquiry –a focus which arguably calls for a multi-angle and multi-dimensional approach.

However, it is important to clarify that to argue about lines of convergence between Foucauldian and psychoanalytical research practices does not mean to sustain the argument that divergences between them are inexistent. Nor, to be more explicit on this point, to ignore the fact that Foucault and psychoanalytical theory and practice, share an ontological incommunicability: if Foucault does not engage with the psychic but to denounce its normativity, psychoanalysis seems reluctant to recognize its own *savoir-pouvoir*.

Foucault's critique on psychoanalysis mainly concerned two "pities" of Freud's science. In the first place, psychoanalysis, under the deceptive guise of a liberating practice, in fact risk reinforcing "power's incarnation in the form of sexuality" as it may operationalize sex independently from the discourse that allowed it to exist in these terms (Dorfman, 2010). In the second place, in Foucault's own words (Allouch, 2002, p. 9):

*"Les psychanalystes rejettent l'idée que la psychanalyse puisse figurer parmi les techniques de subjectivation* (in English: "psychoanalysts reject the idea that psychoanalysis may be counted among techniques of subjectivation").

However, according to Jacques Derrida, Foucault himself is not excused from a sort of indifference towards his own discursive complicities (Said, 1978, p. 679)<sup>57</sup>. On a more ontological level, Joan Copjec criticized Foucault's historicist approach that has opened the way to disregarding desire –what she called "illiteracy in desire"– as if being and appearance could match (1994, pp. 24).

In addition to that, Cavallari (2014) noted with reference to Judith Butler's works (see, for example, Butler, 1997), that a critique of psychoanalysis "understood solely in its rigidity, as an *identitarian dispositif* (emphasis added)" improperly conveys the message that Foucauldian and psychoanalytical

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<sup>57</sup> Edward Said (*Ivi.*), comparing Foucault's approach and Derrida's on textuality, reported this passage of the latter's critique of the former taken from *L'Écriture et la différence* (1967) and mostly addressing the methodology employed in *The History of Madness* (1964): "*Je serais tenté de considérer le livre de Foucault comme un puissant geste de protection et de renfermement. Un geste cartésien pour le XXe siècle*" (In English: I would be tempted to consider the book by Foucault as a powerful act of protection and containment. A Cartesian gesture for the XX Century.)"

approaches cannot but be antagonistic to each other. Moreover, clinically, psychoanalysis engages with psychic disturbances of various forms. Therefore, it has been conceived, since Freud onwards, first and foremost as a therapeutic practice and space in which a person, following specific rules –to freely speak about what is known and unknown– brings to the attention of the psychoanalyst his or hers *malaise* to reach a psychic relief. This marks a substantial difference between psychoanalysis as a clinical practice and, for example, ethnology and geography. Even though they do meet on certain grounds, the meaning and the effects of *time* for the psychoanalytical practice is different than for other human sciences. Complementary to its tasks, psychoanalysis necessarily rely on an analytic toolkit of *intervention* that seeks an ontological stability that “reads” and, as an effect, forms the subject.

Notwithstanding this lively ongoing argument, this Foucauldian/psychoanalytical gaze corresponds to the methodological *approach* I have made use of as a mean to disassemble a text (Said, 1978) and to analytically come to terms with reality in its concreteness. However, empirically, a methodological *tool* that welcomed this double movement that looks at a reality that is given and at one that is being formed, is needed. In this regard, ethnography best suited this purpose since what is at play in an ethnographic space is a virtual textuality (Chapter 1) that “eventualizes” (Chapter 3) and materially unfolds and acts on spaces and bodies (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

Following Schatz (2009, pp. 5-10), ethnography is defined in two fold ways: first, as “immersion” and second, as sensibility. Schatz and others (see, for example, Crang and Cook, 2007) equate the former to participant observation, *the* method that traditionally, for classical anthropologists, conveys meaning to the word “ethnography”: it expresses *in nuce* the possibility and the ability on the side of the researcher, to get the closest as possible –in terms of acts, feelings, temporality, etiquettes, rituals and modes of relationship– to the object under investigation which generally is a *cultural* product. It can, as the inquiry here presented did, be complemented by additional techniques of inquiry such as interviewing.

The latter, i.e. ethnographic sensibility, builds on participant observation but exceeds the fieldwork’s boundaries and expresses the interest of studying the *construction* of meanings that inform our social acting. In a certain way, ethnographic sensibility emerges out of the spread between “experience-near” (participation) and “experience-distant” (observation) (Geertz, 1973 cited in

Schatz, 2009, pp. 6-7). Differently put, ethnography as a sensibility is concerned with the analysis of an anthropological statement or a series of statements that make up a discursive formation, which are not-hidden but yet not-visible (Foucault, 1972, pp. 107-110): given that they are not manifest to our immediate perception yet not hidden under the surface, ethnography as a method and as a sensibility opens up a field of analysis of modes of existence; and it concerns on the first hand, understanding how the “social” *functions* and, on the second hand, interpreting such functioning.

## 2.3 Setting the ethnographic stage

Closely following Yanow (2013), the second part of the chapter is dedicated to outline the research setting with reference to place, time, exposure, positionality, access, data collection and analysis. The overall aim is to justify the trustworthiness of the site of this study, starting off from two questions foreshadowing the research design: “what kind of organization is likely to provide illustrations of the political issue under investigation?” and “what is the best neighborhood or community, region or state within which to explore the research question?” (*Ibid.*, p. 283).

Starting from the latter question, Milan was chosen as the reference urban environment where to identify a specific site of inquiry. The choice for this particular city moves from the general consideration that Milan, compared to and differently from other Italian cities, is nationally and internationally recognized as a place of “innovation”. Economically vibrant, particularly in the creative, cultural and hi-tech industries and well-insert in the flows of global capital, Milan has recently been gaining attention as the national reference point for the newly emerging startup economy.

In addition to that, under the guidance of the former centre-left mayor Giuliano Pisapia, Milan administration has been promoting a collaborative governance model centered on the concept of social innovation. Born out of austerity measures that downsized the financial capacity of the local administration to effectively intervene in the socio-economic fabric, this experimental approach in urban policy (Caprotti and Cowley, 2016) has envisaged to activate and foster a network of public and private actors on specific projects, bottom-up needs and demands with the generalized aim to innovate. Such management turn that founded its political credibility on Milan’s consistent economic authority, was suggestive of an urban environment where multiple

elements of the discourse of innovation were circulating. This specificity suited well the purpose for the study and it posited Milan as an apt context where to explore my research question.

Further, reconnaissance of Milan's ecosystem –a catchy, commonplace biological metaphor expressing a network of diverse agencies that co-evolve cooperatively and competitively for innovation to foster– was done before the beginning of the fieldwork in early 2016. By analyzing news media, policy documents and through the development of a “network of contacts loosely based around the germ of my project” (Crang and Cook, 2007, p. 18), few relatively important local organizations were identified as potential sites for the ethnographic investigation, Core being one of them.

When preparing for the fieldwork, I hardly oriented myself *vis à vis* what I was observing and starting to familiarize with. Was I wandering “within the true” (Foucault, 1972) or, rather largely driven by perceptions and intuitions? Was I, perhaps, being dazzled by the very same instruments that should have helped me to orient myself in the urban field at large? The answers to these questions are largely affirmative, but such confusion was inherent –and, therefore, meaningful– to the very object of inquiry: the discursive practice of innovation. The mounting “buzz” on innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity and startups made it practically difficult to clearly understand “who was doing what” and most importantly “how *relevant* was its claim to be doing something”.

Notwithstanding, it became clear, *before and during* the fieldwork, that what seemed to be an overwhelming problem and a source of anxiety at first, namely the matter of being unable to make sense of “who was *really* a startup” or “who was *really* innovative”, turned out to be the most interesting, and yet unexpected, issue to reflect upon. Innovation as a discursive practice rather than innovation *per se*, started to emerge as the real object of study. How was that the term “startup” and “innovation” at large, guzzled them all and were so pervasive in contemporary social spaces? *Where* did the “coolness” and “rightness” those terms were popularly associated with by default, generated from? Was Core a relevant “*where*” in this sense?

The potentiality of an organization in terms of its illustrative power with regard to the issue under investigation, could not be assessed only in narrow terms and through rather opaque performing criteria (e.g. how many startups have the organization trained?). The matter concerned, first and foremost, the production

and circulation of a meaningful discourse, a loose concept to be operationalized “in the field”.

To address these considerations, Core’s suitability –alongside other potential sites of inquiry– was assessed on the basis of the following qualitative criteria: the year of establishment, the organizational culture, its business intents and governance structure and the symbolic assonance, at the level of the discursive practice, between organizational and governmental rhetoric. The rationale guiding the choice was to find an illustrative –rather than statistically representative case– of a larger political problem. To do so, I first planned to identify a place that had a not too recent history and whose foundation ideally had to date prior to the 2011-2012 “event” from which the empirical investigation moves from (see Chapter 3). The idea underpinning the research design was (and is) to account for a larger transformation and social fact and to do so, I had to account for differences between the past and the present, by ideally establishing some temporal and conceptual benchmarks to proceed analytically.

Second, I kept “still” as criteria for selection few keywords which were symbolically charged of strong signification and high expectations for societal and cultural change (Williams, 1983, p. 14). “Innovation”, “technology”, “creativity”, “community”, “ideas” and “startup” were, in this sense, the most important linguistic signs I attentively monitored. Coupled with the aim “to change the world”, they have produced a signifying chain that I aimed to explore “on the ground”. Therefore, the organizational culture had to importantly relate to these elements and “talk” a similar *language* of the one pervading contemporary social spaces and circulating by means of news media, policy documents, scholarly and non-scholarly accounts. Alongside this more general trait, a specific continuity at the level of the discursive practice performed by the organization on one side, and the urban governmental practice on the other<sup>58</sup>, should have emerged, thus pointing towards sites publicly praised as “harbingers of epochal change” (Fisher and Downey, 2005).

Last, the organizational rhetoric, business scope of activities and ideally, governance structure, should have mirrored such “global” dimension, thus

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<sup>58</sup> In this specific case, I am pointing to the government with a capital “G” and power with a capital “P”, namely the institutions that are legally in charge of the highest administrative decisions (and some executive ones) on a certain territory, such as cities, metropolitan areas and regions. For our case, the level of government is Milan Municipality.

representing an organization that positioned itself, discursively and practically, in a globalized world.

Once possible field sites were identified, contacts had to be made. I had presumed that gaining access to the field would have been difficult given that private organizations could have been rather suspicious and unwilling to accept my request. Differently from my expectations, the process ran smoothly and it was fairly easy to gain access to the fieldwork<sup>59</sup>. After negotiating my position (see paragraph 2.3.2), at the end of January 2016, the ethnographic observation began at the organization fictitiously named “Core”.

Before proceeding further, it is important to justify the choice of the name. In the English language, Core is a noun, adjective and verb that expresses the inner and essential part of something. The term has a similar-sounding to the French word *coeur*, meaning heart. The choice of such name was inspired by the affective and emotional components that characterized the organizational business logics as well as the subjective experiences of which I took statements of.

### **2.3.1 Place, space and time**

Core is located in the Sarpi<sup>60</sup> neighborhood, commonly known as the “Chinatown” of the city<sup>61</sup>. Centrally positioned, Core was easily reachable through local transportation as well as from peri-urban areas, metropolitan and regional outskirts. It was adjacent to “Milano Porta Garibaldi”, a main transportation hub located in “Piazza Sigmund Freud” and facing “Piazza Gae Aulenti”, one of the symbolic projects of a relatively recent massive urban renewal plan called “Progetto Porta Nuova”.

Even though the neighborhood did not play any role in the selection of the field site, it is noteworthy to say that it was home to other “innovative” enterprises such as Yatta (a maker-space) and Fabbrica del Vapore (a creative and cultural

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<sup>59</sup> The time span between the first contact with Core and the start of the ethnography was about one month and ten days. During that period, email exchanges and two meetings occurred between myself, Core’s CEO and the Incubation Manager.

<sup>60</sup> The name comes from the homonym Via Sarpi, its main arterial road and geographically extending up to Vie Procaccini, Montello, Ceresio, Maggi and Canonica.

<sup>61</sup> The neighborhood is not an ethnic enclave but rather a symbolic place of historical significance for local Chinese and representative of the Sino-Italian encounter (Cologna, 2015). The neighborhood has gone through a profound gentrification since the late 1980s onwards and its renewal has intensified in the last decade. Mostly inhabited by upper-middle class Italian residents, the neighborhood is still characterized by an important presence, particularly along “Via Sarpi”, of Chinese wholesalers and retailers.

production complex) being the most significant<sup>62</sup>, together with other co-working spaces and players of innovation sectors<sup>63</sup>.

Since its establishment in Spring 2010, the organization's strategic position with regard to the external environment has evolved, simultaneously to the local urban governance approach towards "innovation". Nonetheless, Core's cultural claim over the city remained unchanged: "welcome to the space that wants to change Milan"—its entrance wall performed.

During the fieldwork, the organization's economic rationality was on board with the *spirit* of contemporary Milanese policies on innovation and economic growth, a spirit largely portraying innovative practices "as precepts or receipts and ultimately as morality" (Foucault, 1972, p. 219). Moreover, Core was actively involved in a number of institutional initiatives on social innovation promoted by the local administration. As a result, over the past years, the organization's ties with the urban political fabric have thickened, and it has progressively affirmed itself as a legitimate and publicly recognizable "voice" of Milan's innovation ecosystem.

Core was a classic example of a hybrid organization: a for profit entity pursuing a social aim. The organization's market positioning in the field of social innovation implied that Core operated at the interface of the public and private sectors. It also combined commercial logics and social value creation, elements featured both in its rhetoric and business scope of activities. Materially, the hybridity of Core consisted in being, at one and the same time, a co-working space, a startup incubator and a community-builder, this latter describing a management practice that actively creates and enhances the "community" as a technique to generate positive impacts. Indeed, the organizational culture distinctively referred to entrepreneurship—in all of its diverse manifestations—as a tool to "change the world" and Core marketed itself as meaningful place that could actively enable such transformation. It offered to its customers a range of different services: co-working desks i.e. space as well as training services such as incubation programs and business consultancy. In addition to that, Core displayed a rich program of events such as meaningful learning experiences which were

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<sup>62</sup> At the time of the ethnographic observation, Fondazione Feltrinelli, a major private cultural player locally and nationally, was about to move its headquarter in Viale Pasubio, adjacent to Via Sarpi, reinforcing the image of the neighborhood in the local urban geography of innovation.

<sup>63</sup> For a general overview, see the crowdsourcing map of Milan's innovative ecosystem available at: <<http://bit.ly/2fnr4rF>> [Accessed 30 November 2017].

often publicly accessible by non-members. This feature was potentially suggestive of a place that sought engagement in a consistent manner with different publics and with the external environment at large.

The “community” was the English word that the organization adopted to describe its members which were internally named “Cories”. Discursively portrayed by Core as social innovators, the members supposedly shared an attitude to positively impact by engaging with social problems through their innovative entrepreneurial projects, both locally and globally. This ideal group encompassed entrepreneurial selves of various kind: startup entrepreneurs, freelancers, external workers, social enterprises and associations or individuals differently-engaged in the innovation field such as investors, business mentors or curious actors. Core publicly praised that the community counted over three hundred members locally and fifteen thousand scattered across the eighty analogous organizational spaces around the world.

As far as it concerned its governance structure, Core was part of a large global network of similar organizations located in cities across the world, in the Global North and South alike. Each entity functioned in a relatively autonomous way from a management point of view but notwithstanding differences, such network conferred to Core a truly international allure. A global community of “changers”, in size and geographical distribution, existed according to the official narrative.

The organizational space and the community were two critical hallmarks of Core, reflecting materially and symbolically the organizational imaginary of a collaborative space, and conveying a sort of “global sense of place”, an expression that Doreen Massey employed to describe places linked to places “beyond” (1994, p. 156)<sup>64</sup>.

The characteristics above outlined suggested that Core could be an illustrative field site of the larger political issue under study and an appropriate angle from which to explore innovation “on the ground”.

At the time of the field research, the organizational chart of Core was fairly simple: the CEO, part of the Board of Directors<sup>65</sup>, headed a team, mostly at junior

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<sup>64</sup> Massey referred to localities and territories rather than organizations.

<sup>65</sup> The Board counted four individuals holding different share percentages. However, during the field research, some major changes occurred since the CEO became the majority shareholder of Core. Such changes at the level of ownership produced important consequences in terms of the organization’s business scope of activities, market positioning and culture. As the next chapters

level, made of eight individuals responsible of different aspects of management: space and community<sup>66</sup>, content<sup>67</sup>, events<sup>68</sup>, incubation and scaling programs<sup>69</sup>, communication and administration. Few trainees, working alongside Incubation and Scaling managers, and a group of Hosts completed the team. In addition to that, since Core was actively involved in FabriQ, the Social Innovation Incubator of Milan Municipality, few other figures featured in the organizational chart, albeit they had limited influence on the daily workflow at Core.

The ethnographic observation lasted six months, from January to July 2016. My presence at Core was on average of three to four days per week spanned over twenty-six weeks, for a total of seventy-seven days of organizational fieldwork. The amount of time I spent at the organization varied on a daily basis: the time-span approximately ranged from a minimum of three to over fifteen hours, albeit on average I committed for a consistent and fairly steady number of hours<sup>70</sup>. Time variance depended upon the daily agenda of activities that took place at Core in terms of events or meetings<sup>71</sup> as well as the peculiarity of a relational approach to ethnography (Desmond, 2014). For this study, relational ethnography practically meant that I “followed” the inquires of my informants and their geographical

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will examine, the relevancy of that for the present study laid exclusively on the possibility to observe “on the ground” how the signification of innovation/social innovation evolved, displaying all its constitutive ambiguity as a social fact, and what this meant in terms of identity for the organization and for its members.

<sup>66</sup> “Space and community” corresponded to the care, both physical and symbolic, of the organizational space and community. As far as it concerns the latter, the Community Manager was responsible of community building as well as community attraction. Two organizational figures were specifically dedicated to “space and community”. Chapters 4 and 5 will clarify these roles further.

<sup>67</sup> “Content” meant, quite literally, the kind of content that was communicated by various means by Core: for example, the topic of an event. There was one organizational figure, namely the Content Manager, dedicated to this aspect. Chapters 4 and 5 will clarify this role further.

<sup>68</sup> The Events Manager took care of the organizational aspects of events and was responsible for the management of meeting rooms rental to non-members, an additional service offered by Core on top of co-working spaces and training programs.

<sup>69</sup> In general terms, incubation and scaling programs were designed to support entrepreneurial projects at various stages (from ideas to early-stage startups up to, ideally, more mature business projects) through training, coaching, networking connections (also with risk capital investors) and, at times, by the provision of a physical space to work from. The incubation programs were generally sponsored by private firms, both as a way to enhance their public image (i.e. corporate social responsibility) or as a marketing leverage to target certain customers. Such a peculiarity implied that quite rarely (to what I was able to learn) startups or businesses in need would pay for an incubation service.

<sup>70</sup> That is to say that “time-varying volatility” was not the norm and when it happened, there was a reason for that.

<sup>71</sup> In addition to that, as I was commuting from Turin, train schedules (and in this sense, personal needs) posed a stricter matter of temporal limitation.

trajectories also outside of Core: I took part in the organization's events, meetings, training programs, I met informants for interviews and informal conversations in venues different from Core or, following a snowballing exposure (Yanow, 2013), I engaged with individuals that were not physically present there<sup>72</sup>, but they were either non-resident Cories or recommended figures to talk to. Additionally, "relational" also meant to be open to the unexpected as much as possible. All of the "followed" situations or people, in one way or another, were *connected* to Core. For this reason, the effective days "in the field" were slightly higher: seven more days should be added, for a total of eight five days of fieldwork including pre-field and post-field ones.

Data collection encompassed non-participant as well as participant observation. As "research on social relations is made out of social relations" (Crang and Cook, 2007, p. 19), the ethnographic observation meant different things. First and foremost, "being there", acting as if I was a resident member on a working day. I would go to Core from early morning to late afternoon, sit at a desk and live/work with its inhabitants. This implied also "hanging-out" with my informants, both in informal (e.g. the coffee shop or in the kitchen during breaks) and formal settings (e.g. in the occasion of events). Moments of activity (i.e. working hours) and inactivity (i.e. coffee, lunch or cigarette breaks) were of crucial importance to enter social processes. Moreover, I would vary my location to gain different perspectives of the organizational space and to observe the daily-life at Core by embodying an active posture. This latter refers to a sort of methodological tactics put forth in a condition of research which is uncertain, when the research questions are open-ended and the object of inquiry loosely defined, and particularly so at the beginning of the fieldwork. Practically, it meant that, once in the field site and especially at the beginning when I had to familiarize with technicalities of different kind, habits, roles and relationships, language and so on, I would not filter, namely deciding on a priori base which information sensed or observations made could be appropriate field notes with regard to my research design. Instead, I would write them down, and later, when reviewing the field notes, I would reflect on the meaningfulness of the data gathered in order to proceed further. Such mental approach allowed me to "follow" and delve into, once exposed to all the diverse aspects of life at Core, some lines of inquiry that are presented in the empirical chapters that follow.

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<sup>72</sup> This meant also that Skype was, at times, used as a tool to conduct interviews. For those small minority of cases, this peculiarity is declared when interviewees are quoted.

In regard to participant observation<sup>73</sup>, I played the role of the Host, a non-staff member in charge of the daily care of the organizational space and clerk receiving<sup>74</sup>. I did so one day per week for six weeks (from mid-June until the end of the fieldwork). Such role, of which Chapter 4 refers to, was meaningful for a number of reasons.

First, it illustrates that I was able to build some trust with regard to Core's management during the field research. Despite the consideration that such "job" neither required any specific skills nor gave any monetary compensation, Hosts had access to some sensitive data, they were normally given keys for the opening and closure of Core<sup>75</sup> and they were asked to update files regarding the in-stay of Cories holding day passes. In other words, Hosts had some responsibilities and, in spite of being non-staff members, they would actively contribute to the daily workflow of the organization.

Second, being a Host allowed me to grasp a different angle precisely because of the specific tasks it implied. The only required skill for the "job" was a good will to do routine tasks (e.g. emptying the dishwasher, watering plants, placing toilet papers in the bathrooms, answering the phone and welcoming visitors) and being available to members' needs. As the organizational space was a critical feature of Core's culture and business model, its daily care and maintenance was fundamental for it to be a true "feather in the cup".

To supplement my observations, interviewing of eighty-six individuals directly identified by myself or by means of snowballing, was done. The attempt was to map the variety of perspectives of "innovative" selves, resident or non-resident at Core, exposed to its influence in different ways, engaged in innovative practices as well as subjects indirectly linked to the organization (e.g. guests of

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<sup>73</sup> I have chosen to mark a distinction between participant and non-participant observation starting from the consideration that the former implies what Wacquant defined as "enactive ethnography": "a distinctive mode of social inquiry eschewing the spectatorial posture to grasp action in the making" (Wacquant, 2014). In the case of non-participant observation, I acted *as if* I were a resident member at Core, but my job task corresponded to field research rather than, for example, working on a specific entrepreneurial project.

<sup>74</sup> This occasional role was performed by a non-member volunteer that one-day per week would be a Host in exchange of a one-day per week access to the co-working space and the possibility to participate to Core's events. Ideally, each day would count a different Host but often, due to the absence of an assigned figure and for necessity, team members would take care of the Host's tasks (see Chapter 4).

<sup>75</sup> I have asked not to be given the responsibility of opening and closing Core as I wished to mark some difference between my role and the field of inquiry.

events or projects that involved multiple private or public actors) or suggested by informants themselves. The interviewees counted sixteen organizational figures<sup>76</sup>, sixty-seven individuals, of which fifty-six were Cories<sup>77</sup> and twenty-six had physically worked at Core during the research field<sup>78</sup>.

From a qualitative point of view, out of the non-representative “sample” from the point of view of external validity, thirty-one interviewees were employees or collaborators of startups, sixteen were freelancers, external workers or more “classical” kind of businesses (e.g. web agency)<sup>79</sup> and ten were either investors (five business angels and one employee of a venture capital fund) or business mentors (four in total). In addition to that, five policy and governance representatives were interviewed.

The semi-structured interview format lasted between thirty minutes to over one hour, depending on the interviewee. None of the interviews were recorded because I felt tape-recording could compromise the research setting –also in light of the large number of individuals present at Core, formalized my role in an environment characterized by the absence of formality and negatively interfered with the spontaneity that characterized social interactions between myself and the informants. The largest majority of interviews were one-to-one and face-to-face conversation<sup>80</sup>. The topics of the interview varied depending on the interviewee

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<sup>76</sup> I interviewed the CEO, the Community Manager, Operation Host, Content Manager, Events Manager, Incubation Programs Manager, Communication Specialist, Accounting and Finance, three trainees, two Hosts, two employees at FabriQ and one Board member (beside the CEO), for a total of sixteen organizational figures. The Scaling Manager did not agree to be interviewed.

<sup>77</sup> It was extremely confusing the definition of “Cory”: to my understanding, the organization encompassed under this label all paying individuals but, in addition to that, also non-paying ones such as incubated or accelerated startup entrepreneurs (of on-going and finished programs), investors, business mentors and even old co-workers. Therefore, I am similarly applying a loose definition by including under the label “Cory” all of those individuals, paying or not for the membership, addressed and counted as such by Core.

<sup>78</sup> I am referring to individuals holding different kinds of membership (e.g. day-passes, quarterly or annual ones) that during the months of the ethnographic fieldwork had work for some time at Core.

<sup>79</sup> Two invited guests of events held at Core were interviewed and in light of their specific business activities, I added them in the count of “startups” or “freelancers etc.”. Moreover, as I will detail in the next chapters, the label “startup” functions as an empty signifier, therefore it encompasses legally defined innovative startups (see Chapter 3) as well as those business activities that represented themselves or were represented by others as such. Moreover, startups were selected either because there were suggested by the organization or on my own initiative, by trying to cover old and current participants of business training programs.

<sup>80</sup> In one occasion, I interviewed simultaneously the CEO and Vice-President Marketing and Sales of a startup and, in a different occasion, the two founders of another startup. Moreover, ten

but my overall objective was to explore the situated and singular inflation of the signifier “innovation”. To do so, I investigated how Core reflected on its practice and how it employed certain management techniques to reach certain ends, how Cories lived the “community” and the feelings they had while in the organizational space, how startup entrepreneurs or “innovators” at large, rationalized themselves with regard to innovation and how they understood their acting *vis à vis* a larger cultural tendency. These objectives were reached by delving into the personal histories, business projects, relationship with the internal environment (in the case of individuals physically working at Core) as well as to the external one.

Some of the interviewees were consulted on various occasions as their account and situated knowledge proved to be particularly useful to disclose in-depth. More specifically, four of them were key figures of Core’s organizational team, namely the CEO (eight times), Incubation Manager (ten times), Community Manager (three times) and Content Manager (two times) while the fifth was a startup entrepreneur whose firm was, at that time, incubated at Core (six times). These repetitive encounters corresponded to a strategy enacted to increase the overall credibility of the study by repetitively engaging with some members and returning, as a fact-check, on certain issues (Schuermans, 2013, p. 6).

Data collection was done by means of a paper and electronic field diary. In addition to that, the ethnographic material encompassed social media communications, flyers, newspapers articles, policy-documents and pictures<sup>81</sup>. The data was organized using the program Evernote, a tool that allowed to manage in a coherent manner weekly folders with the revised notes and related documents gathered in the field research as well as to “tag” with certain keywords and categories the data. Such data organization proved useful as a preliminary step to data analysis.

In spite of acknowledging that the process of research was not a linear read-*than-do-than-write* model (Crang and Cook, 2007) but each stage, namely reading, “doing” and writing, mingled with the other continuously, data analysis occurred at a later stage and was organized as follows. Two larger categories were

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interviews were conducted by Skype since the interviewees were not residing in Milan or adjacent areas.

<sup>81</sup> Many of the documents supporting the analysis of Milan policy framework are available at: [www.lavoroedformazioneincomune.it](http://www.lavoroedformazioneincomune.it) [Accessed 15 February 2018].

used as a first way to discern the data, namely “objects” and “subjects”, followed by sub-categories (e.g. “discourse”, “community”, “methodology”, “feelings”).

Starting with the former, I intended to bring the material processes out from the texts. This meant references by informants to concrete aspects, either listlessly made during conversations or explicit statements to punctual “spatial” questions that I asked (e.g. how do you feel in this space?). It also meant to analyze the ways people acted in the space *without being asked* how and what they felt. How the organizational space was lived by and assumed significance for the entrepreneurial selves that inhabited or crossed it on one side, and the way those individuals interacted with each other and socially aggregated together or broke apart as a group on the other, constituted an important aspect of the ethnographic observation. Indeed, the aim was to highlight the feelings which were associated, either by means of words or bodily, with regard to the organizational space and to understand which material/spatial aspects, if any, the informants were pointing to as meaningful. This part of the analysis, to which Chapter 4 is dedicated, focused predominantly on the ethnographic observation of Core’s spatial rhetoric and on members directly experiencing the space. However, it was not exclusively so because references to spatial categories, whether existent or symbolic, or material processes, were present in others’ accounts as well: urban environments, territories, the “globe” or physical spaces in light of the set of “things” they all enabled, have emerged as symbolic benchmarks of subjective and collective acting.

As far as “subjects” are concerned, a theme to which Chapter Five is dedicated, I intended to bring subjective specificities out from the texts and to see in which ways, if any, they intertwined and formed a wider textuality that exceeded themselves. Singularities meant personal histories and stakes as well as the situated sense of the subject’s acting with regard to universals e.g. “community”, “innovation”, “city”, “society”, “economy”— to mention the most important ones. The goal was to understand “on the ground” what “innovation” implied, not only by asking certain precise questions (e.g. do you feel innovative?) but by exploring similarities in terms of feelings, methods, acts, underpinning their words and behaviors.

### **2.3.2 Challenges**

In an attempt to talking about ethnography as I have experienced it in the field, rather than doing it (Barnes *et al.*, 2007, p. 1), I now account for some

methodological challenges encountered in the field research. Indeed, the process of selection and access to the field, in spite of the “pristine” and linear description of it conveyed in previous paragraph, practically occurred through chance, empathy, tactics and reciprocal expectations between myself, as a researcher on one side, and the informants and the organization, on the other.

For an ethnography of a private organization to take place, the access to the fieldwork had to be authorized and negotiated accordingly and such specificity in terms of accessibility posed issues of threat, ethics, credentials and reciprocity. Moreover, I was clearly advancing a bizarre request for the business world that arguably runs to a large extent on execution: that of a person that would go there and observe them while *they were working*<sup>82</sup> and interacting with each other.

“My first approach to Core occurred via phone and e-mail. I had no connection with the organization’s team nor anybody could intercede for me and, it goes without saying, I was very anxious about the chance of not being able to get in and start my fieldwork. Through Core’s website I identified a senior employee to whom I could forward my request: I had high hopes, ideally nurtured reading through her online biographical profile in which her drive towards social issues was emphasized, that she might sympathize with my cause. I nervously phoned Core and asked for Emma. By chance, as I later learned, it happened that a former PhD student currently employed by Core, who took my phone call, informed me that Emma was not working there anymore but that she could take care of my request. Knowing very well the difficulties of conducting firsthand research, Olivia argued with her team that “we have to help a PhD student”. I later forwarded an e-mail to make sure that my request would not be forgotten: in that, I must confess, I naively emphasized how ethnographical methods were being used by big corporations as, for example, Facebook –winking in an opaque way to its prescriptive potentials. Shortly after, with a little surprise on my side, Luigi, Core’s CEO, suggested to meet, together with Marica, the Incubation Manager” (December 2015).

The self-reflective field note arguably out speaks how access works: to repeat myself, chance, empathy, tactics and expectations, both on the side of the

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<sup>82</sup> During the fieldwork, my research role at Core was subject of occasional sarcasm as I was perceived as somebody that was not working.

researcher and its future informants and more importantly, continuous negotiation of the ethnographer's belonging to his or her field of action.

When I met Luigi and Marica, I was concerned not to be perceived as a threat for the organization. As such, I highlighted the fact that I was qualified to investigate Core as a researcher as well as familiar to the organizational discourse, this also in light of my previous, albeit limited, working experiences in global firms. Shortly after, my access was granted and I was authorized "in the field" as a Cory rather than as part of the organization's team. I behaved as any member did by sitting at a desk in the co-working space, freely moving around and in and out the organizational space, and by doing my own work, field research. From day one, unsurprisingly, I was continuously addressed as a Cory: I had my own profile, fully disclosing my identity and intentions, both on the intranet and on a small postcard hanging at the entrance on the "Cories' wall", where pictures and profiles of members were exhibited (see Chapter 4). More importantly, the membership entitled me to participate in all of the organization's public activities and events and, occasionally, I was invited to specific activities such as incubation programs, business and team meetings. This allowed me to observe and freely interact with the whole range of individuals that inhabited and crossed Core, namely co-workers, startup entrepreneurs, team members, investors, business mentors and so on. Moreover, during the last two months of the fieldwork, as previously anticipated, I managed to be a Host, an interesting organizational *factotum* taking care of the space and welcoming the visitors.

Members were informed of my presence through an e-mail disclosing my research goals<sup>83</sup>. Interestingly, the text, according to what I later learned from one of the interviewee, contained some warnings: "Watch out, the Big Brother is watching you!". "Grande Fratello" (meaning "Big Brother" in Italian) or in its shorter and colloquial version "Gieffe", was since then my given nickname and it was used throughout the fieldwork both by some team members and Cories.

Nevertheless, specifically in light of such an apparently communitarian environment, the currency of exchange had to be managed properly and wittingly. Before starting my fieldwork, I prepared a short summary of my research intent that, upon their request, I sent them. Through that document I negotiated my subjective space of maneuver and more precisely, I made clear from the very

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<sup>83</sup> I was introduced as a PhD candidate "exploring the production of subjectivity in emotional economies" through an ethnographic methodology.

beginning that my role did not equate that of a consultant and that the knowledge I would have produced might have not been of any usefulness to Core. Still, throughout the field research I hardly fully understood why I was accepted as an ethnographer. However, as Kunda (2006, p. 8) argued, many descriptions can be easily transformed into prescriptions and this was a good enough incentive for an organization to “let me in”. Nonetheless, I would like to say how, from my perspective, this fact is completely understandable –even though it does make the researcher’s job quite complicated, and it is, by no means, an issue exclusively related to the “business world”. Social groups, from communities to business organizations, acting according to a rationality of some kind, are likely to be “interested in an analysis of their own situation” (Schuermans, 2013, p. 7) and possibly to some “returns”, even symbolic ones. On this point, I was asked by Core’s management to write short articles ideally titled “Life at Core”, similar in style to the widely known “Humans of New York” series. This request, towards which I displayed some general willingness at the very beginning, never materialized<sup>84</sup> and, thinking backwards, precisely in light of the difficulties above mentioned, it was much better that it did not, as any acts from my side could be potentially suggestive of my “subsumption” within the social field I studied. This is not to say that, for example, the “community” was necessarily a negative thing, but that it was indeed necessary to mark some difference between my role and the field of inquiry. Moreover, even if I was fictionally portrayed as “one of them” and I, myself, simply by being physically there, “played the role” of a Cory, it was clear from the very beginning that my positionality would not allow me to be quite “like them” nor I was effectively perceived as such by my informants.

The organization and all the team members had been open to my requests, willing to discuss in numerous occasions and to share thoughts, information and contacts with me: the amount of time I was dedicated was consistent and generous and I was granted full independence during the field research with no perceived restrictions on my side. In other words, I was able to maintain the autonomy I wished to have also *because the context* effectively allowed and facilitated it. For all these reasons, I am grateful and indebted to the organization and my informants.

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<sup>84</sup> Neither myself nor the organization brought up this argument again during the field research. Indeed, despite my initial and probably naive availability, I soon realized that it was a much better idea to avoid implicit endorsements of Core’s activities to defend my independence as a researcher.

Still, the terrain was “slippery” and what is generally called the “giving back” moment is revelatory in this regard:

“I was asked promptly by Luigi and Marica if I could share with them some insights on how they could improve their business. What information Cories shared with me on a number of issues i.e. the community, space and how was Core perceived internally and externally were topics of their interest. I felt very uneasy in that situation and at times quite unable to understand what my role would require doing. I have answered to their questions in a rather general way, emphasizing the fact that it was my very personal opinion driven by the impressions I had. On space, I emphasized the infrastructural issues as the fact that internet was not working properly and sometimes the dysfunction of the psychical space was lamented. On the community, I claimed that belonging was a tricky and slippery issue and that the imposed ‘we’ is generally hard to cope with: maybe, in attempt to implicitly loosen the ‘biopolitical grip’ of the organization, a greater space of maneuver and autonomy could be provided to its members. Additionally, I mentioned the fact that it was, at times, difficult to make sense on what Core really did and that, alleged to such perception, laid the fuzziness around ‘innovation’ and ‘social innovation’, words subsumed in a cultural and economic bubble that, I argued, would likely explode at any time. Moreover, with some surprise on my side, I was asked to disclose, at a later stage, some detailed information on the interviews as well as to write an article to be displayed on the organization’s website, sharing my experience at Core. Still, I am quite positive about the fact that any descriptions or personal insights I shared with them, could be transformed in prescriptions. After the meeting ended, I felt that they were impervious about my task even though I took great care from the very beginning to defend it. Still, my discomfort and irritability (that likely emerged) towards their requests was not clear to me - was I, perhaps, uneasy because I was unconsciously scared to help the ‘bad capitalists’, whatever that means?” (September 2016).

The answer to the above question is no. However, it is simply an illusion to believe that the researcher does not have its own myths while studying social processes (Leghissa and Manera, 2015, pp. 18-19). Nevertheless, my own “myths” do not relate with classical Marxist takes on power, capitalism and class

structure. My epistemological stance with regards to power, as outlined in paragraphs 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, clearly calls for an understanding of power as something that is not surgically divided between the “powerful” and “powerless”. In this regard, my own personal history informed my positionality: I am a white, middle class, highly educated subject that studied political science, economics and geography. Differently stated, I probably share, on the paper at least, more similarities with urban “elites” (Smith, 2006) or with, as a business mentor harshly described startup entrepreneurs, “a bunch of well-educated and trendy kids that have no idea what hunger is” (Skype interview, June 2016), rather than with marginal groups.

I was myself fascinated by the myth of innovation: the enthusiasm surrounding it as well as entrepreneurship at large did not leave me unresponsive, mostly because of its perceived transformative capacity as a practice within a culture that, alike any culture, nails you down to take responsibilities by means of historically contingent conduct and counter-conducts (Taliani, 2016). At the same time, I felt sharply an imperative and therefore dangerous discourse, lingering innovation and wrapping the collective consciousness: what Michel Foucault described with the words “love this, hate that, this is good, that is bad, be for this, beware of that” (2009, p. 3). Differently said, I had not a normative stance towards my field of inquiry but rather a critical gaze that guarded off the apparent innocence and not manifest injustice related to the social fact “innovation”<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, I have distanced myself from both dystopian alarmism (Coutard and Guy, 2007, p. 714) and euphoric visions of the future: roughly speaking, whether it is the “hand” of the market or capitalism (whose contemporary mode of regulation, according to critical scholars, is neoliberalism), causal relationships are at stake, “*a* does *b* because of *c*”. As those debates leave little space for the subject to bargain his or her position and, simultaneously, attribute an over-reaching, all-encompassing power to the “market”, “innovation”, “technological change”, “capitalism” or “neoliberalism” under the guise of metaphysical entities,

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<sup>85</sup> I am not arguing that my own positionality produced no effects and I am aware that what I name “critical gaze” could *de facto* and easily turn into a normative one: the reader will judge the effectiveness of the analysis presented in this regard. However, such risk does not justify, in my view, the absence of a discourse of truth on oneself *related* to the topic. To be more explicit on this point, reflexivity does not here imply talking about oneself but to make explicit the reasons, mostly latent, which inform theoretical, empirical, methodological choices as well as the very decision to investigate *that* particular object of inquiry, rather than another one. This relates, in my view, to what Francesca Governa called “*radicalità saltellante*” (Governa, 2014) which in English could be freely translated as “bouncing radicality”, meaning the ability to look at oneself from the outside, warding off issues of self-projection.

paradoxically the prospects to transform society seem limited only to radical solutions: either the subject “goes with the flow” (preferably with a mix of enthusiasm and pragmatism) in the former cases, or he or she goes *against* it (albeit, it is unclear how) in the latter ones<sup>86</sup>.

To return to the “giving back” puzzle, my discomfort laid in the use of any knowledge –that, in this specific case, it was gained through prolonged exposure to various informants, among which there were Core’s customers– to increase any kind of control on the self, a possibility towards which I felt uneasy and for uses I could not closely monitor. Moreover, I had the impression that my role and the necessity to preserve a degree of independence was overlooked –in spite of the care I put to explain what I was doing by making clear, from the very beginning, my critical stance. This points towards the fact that the exercise of critique “on the ground” is difficult to carry.

Last, as far as it concerns ethical issues, all the interviewees were informed of the general purpose of this study, they freely gave consent to participate<sup>87</sup> and everyone was informed that anonymity was assured (Schuermans, 2013, p. 12). As such all names used throughout this study are pseudonyms. Moreover, Core informed its members via email of my presence and research intentions with explicit reference to the methodology adopted, ethnography. Last but not least, any time I engaged in a prolonged conversation<sup>88</sup> with a person or a group, I fully disclosed my identity and research intentions.

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<sup>86</sup> Connected to this and mostly concerning contemporary critical literatures, the use of political categories such as “class” and “capital” to explain contemporary entrepreneurial subjectivities appear unsatisfactory as a closer scrutiny quickly reveal that they hardly fit in the analytic concepts of the ruling class, or more lightly, of the “powerful” as opposed to the “powerless”. In this regard, there are few notable exceptions (Virno and Hardt, 1996, Lazzarato, 2014; Hardt and Negri, 2009), introducing notions as the “multitude” or “immaterial labour”, loosening others as “class” and drawing upon Foucauldian notions of “biopower” and “biopolitics”. However, even within these cited neo-Marxist debates, the “grand narrative” holds very much. If biopolitical production is conceptualized as the hegemonic form of contemporary domination and exploitation (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2009), biopolitics and biopower, similarly to capitalism and neoliberalism, risk to “describe everything, but analyze nothing” (Rabinow and Rose, 2006, p. 199). Indeed, where does the biopolitical hold end?

<sup>87</sup> Moreover, I respected the unwillingness not to be interviewed displayed by some individuals. In addition to that, information disclosed in private, for example, those concerning the personal lives of the interviewee or when the interviewee asked me not to publicly disclose certain information, are kept confidential (Schuermans, 2013, p. 12).

<sup>88</sup> “Prolonged conversation” generally meant an information exchange beyond greetings or practical matters.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has intended to highlight the value and the trustworthiness of this study. For this reason, I have made explicit my epistemological and philosophical stances with regards to pivotal elements of the inquiry, as well as to practical but not less important, methodological considerations: *where* I conducted field research, *why* and *how* I did so, *who* I talked to and *which* challenges I encountered. The overall objective of the chapter has been to prove a methodological consistency between the methodology adopted and the object of inquiry, as well as to display a methodological transparency on how data have been collected and analyzed.

The next chapters consist of the empirical parts of this study and they are dedicated to the “eventualization” of the discourse of innovation in Milan (Chapter 3) as well as to the material processes and subjective experiences contingent to it (Chapters 4 and 5).

## Chapter 3

# The discourse of innovation. Politics, cities and subjectivities.

“What, then, is so perilous in the fact that people speak,  
and that their discourse proliferates to infinity?  
Where is the danger in that?”  
Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*

### 3.1 Introduction

As explored in Chapter 1, the relationship between cities and innovation is scientifically framed as intimate and meaningful, a nexus that cannot be ignored by contemporary politics and policy-makers. Acting in a globalized world and within a certain *episteme*, their reason to govern lays upon and it is limited by, as Michel Foucault argued (2008, p. 13), a matter of enabling collective prosperity to be<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> The expression “reason to govern” corresponds to what Michel Foucault named governmental reason. In this sense, it does not imply that government and power *desires* the well-being of its citizens. Rather it means that the governmental action will be judged as inadequate (or not) depending on such reason. Therefore, it functions as an internal limitation to governmental rationality (Foucault, 2008).

In contemporary times, the selectivity of economic development is understood as a dependence upon innovation and for those places on its advanced ladder, innovation of a particular kind (Storper, 2013): one that it is likely to emerge out of “thick” territories organized as ecosystems, enabling interactions among people whose “ideas unexpectedly collide to create something that did not exist before” (Moretti, 2012). Differently stated, productivity gains i.e. the technical analytic concept currently employed to explain a place’s prosperity in a market economy, display precise spatial origins: cities and human brains –external and internal effects of human capital in Robert Lucas’ vocabulary (1988).

As argued in Chapter 1, the politics of the future vigorously centers on the city as a physical and metaphysical artifact. The city corresponds to the spatial unit of measurement of our contemporary material and symbolic success. Michael Storper (2013) pragmatically pointed at the management of the city-region development as “*one of the most critical challenges to humanity* (emphasis added)”. Edward Glaeser (2011) normatively described cities as sites of *human progress* and *happiness*. Enrico Moretti (2012) emphasized the urgency to understand “the forces that will determine the location of future jobs and the fate of particular cities and regions” if, the author continued, we wish to “maintain our prosperity, even in the midst of tumultuous change”. Last but not least, Richard Florida (2008) sympathetically warned the choice of a city to be “the most important decision of your *life* (emphasis added)”.

Diversity, knowledge, creativity, *the* desirable features of a modern economy and society, are acknowledged as distinctive traits of urban environments that can and should be organizationally “nurtured” by policy-making. Cities can perform poorly if badly governed (Polizzi and Vitale, 2017, p. 139) and if they prove incapable of organizational change (Storper et al., 2015, p. 198). Despite the mysticism surrounding innovation, there is no serendipity in economic development, otherwise prosperity would be a lottery (*Ibid.*, p. 197).

On this note, various sources seem to agree on the contemporary spatial hierarchy of capitalism that thrives *also* because of what happens beyond the walls of the firm itself (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 250). The phenomena associated with capitalism in its most vanguard and rampant discursive expressions as tech and innovative entrepreneurship, idioms as “open innovation”, “sharing economy” or neologisms as “*startupper*”<sup>90</sup> and “maker”, differently

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<sup>90</sup> “*Startupper*” is the slangy expression for startup entrepreneur in Italian and it is widely adopted in the public discourse.

mobilize the city as a first meaningful interlocutor and as a profoundly diverse object of government from older times. Rather than simply being a system of mechanical circulation, the city now ideally corresponds to an “in-between” space of dynamic interaction between *porous* organizations and institutions on one side, and “open source” citizens on the other. To use a colloquial expression, “bumping into each other” has to be planned and organized. As an effect, cities are diffusively understood as natural environments for innovation to occur (Jacobs, 1961).

Building upon Foucault (2008), the city can be described as a site of veridiction for the governmental practice and as a progressively irreducible scale of being –both in contemporary times and for the future to come. Framed as such, the term “city” condenses on itself the idea of a lively market (which assesses what works and what does not work according to its own manifestation of truth) and entrepreneurial citizenship (whose individual and collective interest is irreducible)<sup>91</sup>. As Donald McNeill argued (2017, p. 233):

“we are now at a point where the entrepreneurial city, which Harvey (1989) saw as the assumption of market-oriented language, strategies and targets, meets the city of entrepreneurs”.

The contemporary city has renewed itself as the mirror of societal prosperity from many different points of view –economically, politically, culturally, morally and aesthetically. This is not much of a novelty *per se*: long time ago, the Aristotelian *polis* already set the norm for human progress and happiness and New York, to name a widely referred paradigmatic example of economic innovation in contemporary times, had a well-recognized role as an iconic urban center at the turn of the twentieth century. Historically, cities display a consolidated image of “intense foci of creativity in the sense that they are places that periodically generate technological innovations and economically useful knowledge” (Storper and Scott, 2009, p. 162). As such, they have differently affected the historically contingent economic, political, cultural, moral and aesthetic rules of citizenship. However, the contemporary city does so differently since its specific nature as an object of governmental action has changed and “the consequences of this is that

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<sup>91</sup> In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault attributed to the market (rather than the city) the characteristic of being the site that “must tell the truth in relation to governmental practice” (Foucault, 2008, p. 32). Moreover, the author qualified the *homo oeconomicus* as the subject of interest (*Ibid.*, pp 267-289). Therefore, drawing upon Foucault’s arguments, I am advancing a personal interpretation.

governmental practice can only do what it has to do by respecting this *nature* (emphasis added)” (Foucault, 2008, p. 16).

The virtual discourse on the city grounds itself on three pillars.

First, the urban social fabric is thought as a living ecosystem, a conceptual move that grants to it an unprecedented natural and systemic character. The city is *thought* and managed in its integrity, encompassing human and non-human factors.

Second, to sustain its vitality, a city has to be adaptable to change (Moretti, 2012), ultimately by being loyal to its intrinsic nature (i.e. a living eco-system) characterized by “a process of continuous destruction and regeneration that ultimately drives innovation, today as in the past” (*Ibid.*).

Third, in virtue of its ontology, the city has progressively affirmed itself as the natural “social playground” for learning and knowing-in-action (Schön, 1983). Since its citizens are conceived as the human inputs of innovation for contemporary economy and society to prosper, the desirable highly-valued capacities they embody, are not acquired “once and for all” in a lifetime through education, but they have to be nurtured and organized through continuous social interactions<sup>92</sup>.

Ultimately, this brief introduction points towards three interrelated problems that the technology “innovation” is concerned with: first, a matter of what an adequate governmental action is; second, which spatial (re)organization and new hierarchies does it call for; third, which kind of subject/citizen is generating. These three elements deserve a joint close scrutiny for the following reason:

“the things which the government is to be concerned about are men, but men in their relations, their links, *their imbrication with those other things* (emphasis added) which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, *the territory with its specific qualities* (emphasis added), climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to other kinds of things which are *customs, habits, ways of doing and thinking* (emphasis added), etc.; lastly, men in their relation to that other kind

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<sup>92</sup> As argued in Chapter 1, Enrico Moretti and Michael Storper (among others) argue that those exchanges are likely to translate into something marketable, leaving some of the magic aside, *if* they take place in specific economic sectors of the local production system and *if* there have a local mature financial back-up in the form of venture capital.

of things which are *accidents and misfortunes* (emphasis added) such as famine, epidemics, death, etc.” (Foucault, 2000, pp. 208-209)<sup>93</sup>.

To unpack a virtual discourse and to determine the material effects on bodies and spaces, the present chapter moves from an event wherein the “virtual” has eventualized.

Before moving on, a conceptual clarification is needed. The term “virtual” is here intended as something *being such in power* and as a synonym of *potential*: it is what anticipates the act, thus in a way it corresponds to a representation<sup>94</sup>. Besides, an event, in Michel Foucault’s words, is the effect of a procedure of *eventualization*, whereas certain forms of knowledge actualize in the present and give rise to new power relationships (Foucault, 2007, p. 59). Knowledge and power form an analytical grid and a nexus that “constitutes the acceptability of a system, be it the mental health system, the penal system, delinquency, sexuality” (*Ibid.*, pp. 59-60) or innovation. As anticipated in Chapter 1, Foucault distinguished two forms of knowledge: *savoir* and *connaissance*. These two forms of knowledge intersect, shape complex webs of meanings and they are never independent from each other. An event is, therefore, the effect of such continuous interweaving that comes from multiple angles.

Chapter 1 was dedicated to the formal rules that govern the object “city-innovation” (*connaissance* i.e. science, objective knowledge). However, to explore this field of scientificity, the analysis moved from the conditions [*savoir*] that allowed for “that type of object to be given to *connaissance*” (Foucault, 1972, p. 15). As argued, the “Jacobsian” city was interpreted as an exemplary instance of such conditions –of such *savoir*.

*Connaissance*, clarified Foucault, is “only one of the possible forms of alethurgy” (Foucault, 2014, p. 7), a concept that expresses the set of procedures

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<sup>93</sup> The quotation is taken from the essay “Governmentality”, originally part of the lectures given by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France in 1977-1978, known as “Security, Territory and Population”. I have here made reference to the translated text published in the volume “Power” edited by James D. Faubian, rather than to the version published in Foucault (2009) edited by Michel Senellart.

<sup>94</sup> Famously, Gilles Deleuze introduced the concept of virtuality in the 1960s –a notion later employed in seminal co-authored works with Felix Guattari such as *A Thousand Plateaus*. In this regard, Deleuze argued that the virtual produces real effects and *may* actualize (e.g. language. See Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 75-110). Moreover, “every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images. [...] the actual is the complement or the product, the object of actualization, which has nothing but the virtual as its subject” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, pp. 148-149).

for declaring something true. Thus, this chapter intends to explore further other set of conditions i.e. politico-institutional, and to bridge elements of knowledge with mechanisms of power (Foucault, 2007, p. 60). Drawing upon Rabinow (1984, p. 50), a practice always combines technologies of rationalities of different sorts with strategic games of liberty which are enacted by those who govern *and* those who are governed. That is to say that innovation, even though it is here interpreted as a “global technology”, gains a variegated character and it becomes “true” when it meets the specificities of the locality where it takes root in.

The discourse of innovation is investigated with reference to the contemporary urban social space of Milan. However, for the Italian case, local politics, importantly shaped as they are by territorial actors, have to be understood with reference to the broader national framework of development (Terhorst and Van De Ven, 1995). This fact i.e. the politico-economic salience of the state, holds validity in spite of major contemporary spatial reconfigurations that, in the case of city of Milan, converted into a post-metropolitan process according to the interpretation articulated by Balducci, Fedeli and Curci (2017)<sup>95</sup>.

Therefore, the institutional framework within which Milan has acted, is retraced with reference to relevant urban and national policies, norms and organizations that have *formalized* the discourse of innovation locally and nationally.

Institutions are analytically conceptualized as the material and symbolic, formal and informal conditions that constraint human interactions (North, 1994, p. 360; Bonazzi, 2000, p. vii). Coherently with such consideration, the analysis develops with reference to key policy-documents, initiatives and actors and it is enriched with ethnographic data gathered during the fieldwork.

The chapter is structured as follows: drawing upon this introduction, paragraph 3.2 historically places the relevancy of innovation in the contemporary timeline of Italian politics, at the national and local level. Paragraph 3.3 (and subsequent sub-paragraphs 3.3.1, 3.3.2 and 3.3.3) analyzes the general features of the public discourse on innovation by paying attention to its constitutive political, legal, anthropological and spatial dimensions. Following a similar outline, section 3.4 shifts the focus to the case of Milan. Particular attention will be given to the role of space and its changing conceptualization in the current public policy

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<sup>95</sup> For a critical account on the evolution of Milan’s spatial configuration see also Goldstein Bolocan (2017).

rationale and framework (sub-paragraph 3.4.1). Last but not least, paragraph 3.5 elaborates a reflection on the politics of innovation.

## 3.2 An event

The year 2011 has marked a threshold in Italian contemporary politics: on November 16, Mario Monti was appointed by the former President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, prime minister of an *interim* government, following Silvio Berlusconi's resignation.

In the midst of the Eurozone crisis in the years 2010-2011, Berlusconi's conservative government was stacked in a political and economic turmoil that centered on a debt crisis hunting Italy's economy. The mounting spread –the yield difference between Germany and Italy on the 10-Year government bonds– soon turned into a popular “buzz” word that synthesized the country's insolvency risk and the need for structural changes. To ward off a default and to limit the risk of contagion from Greece, austerity measures sought by the European Central Bank were approved by the Italian parliament in November 2011, shortly followed by Silvio Berlusconi's resignation as Prime Minister of Italy.

The coming to power of Monti's cabinet, generally labelled as a technical government, marked an *event* in Italian contemporary history. Since then, building upon the lasting trends of changes characterizing a post-industrial country in the after-math of the 2007-2008 financial crisis as well as the domestic and international contingencies that led to the appointment of a technical government, the awareness on the “things to do” emerged as fully intelligible in the public consciousness.

If, as critics argue, the era of austerity for greater fiscal rigor has begun with the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, the austerity rationale has coupled with growth-driven strategies of governance (Rossi, 2017, p. 97). “Cuts”, particularly severe at the local administrative levels, and pro-growth and entrepreneurial policies –of which innovative entrepreneurship is an expression– should be regarded as “two faces of the same governmental coin”. It is, therefore, in the background of such ambivalent framework that the increasing political attention towards innovation should be interpreted.

The initiative that symbolically “kicked things off” as far as innovative entrepreneurship is concerned, corresponded to the establishment of a Task Force of twelve Italian experts<sup>96</sup> in April 2012 by the will of Corrado Passera, the Minister of Economic Development in office. The Task Force was asked by the former minister to “make policy proposals on how to turn Italy into a friendlier place for the establishment and development of innovative startups” (Executive Summary, 2012d, p. 7)<sup>97</sup>. The outcome resulted in the release of a policy document called “*Restart, Italy: why we have to restart from the youth, innovation and startups*”<sup>98</sup> in September 2012. What seemed clear from the very beginning was that “the stakes at play” were much broader than an attempt to create “a simplified occasion to do business” (Mr. Edoardo, member of the Task Force, July 2016).

A few months earlier Monti’s appointment, Giuliano Pisapia won the local elections in Milan. In early June 2011, the new mayor took office leading a centre-left coalition and the city’s “renaissance” as “the guiding light” of the country –as national and international media have been diffusely representing Milan (see Severgnini, 2016; Di Vico, 2017).

Building upon a consistent economic legacy, the city of Milan and its surrounding areas<sup>99</sup> have recently consolidated their role at the national forefront for innovation, especially in the creative, cultural and hi-tech industries as well as for the financial sector (Camera di Commercio di Milano, 2017a). On this topic, Camagni (2017, pp. 490-491) has contended that the driver of the contemporary

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<sup>96</sup> The experts involved were the following: Andrea di Camillo, Annibale D’Elia, Donatella Solda-Kutzmann, Enrico Pozzi, Giorgio Carcano, Giuseppe Ragusa, Luca de Biase, Mario Mariani, Massimiliano Magrini, Paolo Barberis, Riccardo Donadon, Selene Biffi. The Task Force was coordinated by Alessandro Fusacchia, the advisor on European affairs, youth and innovation of the minister Passera. The group was composed of professional figures cutting across different fields of expertise e.g. entrepreneurs, journalists, investors, professors, public officers.

<sup>97</sup> By temporarily framing the analysis in such a way and by identifying the year 2011 as a threshold, I am not suggesting that the Italian government’s attention towards competitiveness or innovative entrepreneurship is something new in absolute terms. However, the identified event marked a constituent shift quantitatively (i.e. in terms of economic resources mobilized to this end) and qualitatively (i.e. public perception and institutional endorsement on the matter).

<sup>98</sup> From now on, I will refer to the official publication as follows: in general terms, *Restart, Italia!* or the report. When the full version is cited: Rapporto (2012a) for the Italian version and The Report (2012c) for the English version. Otherwise: Executive Summary (2012b) for the Italian version and Executive Summary (2012d) for the English version. Moreover, unless the English versions are cited, the quoted texts have been freely translated from Italian.

<sup>99</sup> The economic importance of the city of Milan should be understood in relation to its polycentric metropolitan and regional systems. In this regard, it is appropriate to think of Milan as “a case of centre without centralization” (Perulli, 2014 cited in Armondi and Di Vita, 2017).

wave of development characterizing Milan's urban economy precisely corresponds to a technology-led entrepreneurial urbanism. Beyond the "classics" of fashion, finance and real estate, the city's economic leadership at the national level, has increasingly leveraged upon the new cognitive-cultural paradigm (*Ivi.*; see also Scott, 2014).

Opposing the national trend, the province of Milan<sup>100</sup> has been exhibiting over the last decade a good economic resilience in the face of the crisis (Pacchi, 2017) and more recently, a strong dynamism. In 2015 the metropolitan area's annual per-capita income (value added per inhabitant) almost doubled the national one (about 45,700 euro compared to 24,400 euro; Istat, 2017a) and between the years 2008-2014, its growth was consistent (4.8 percentage increase compared to 1.85 percentage decrease registered nationally over the same period) (Pasqui, 2017a)<sup>101</sup>.

Recently, the city has also been represented as "the only place in Italy where startups could do business for real" (Mr. Fabio, member of the Task Force, Turin, June 2016). In June 2016, the city was praised by the Financial Times as "Italy's Startup Hub". Crowning Milan with a new "decoration", the city has been pictured as a virtuous entrepreneurial case of development and administration, an exception in a country where the red tape normally drawbacks entrepreneurs (Sanderson, 2016).

Since the appointment of Pisapia administration onwards and strengthen by the international exposure that the city gained during the mega-event Expo 2015, the idea of the so-called "modello Milano" has grown in strength. Conveying the idea of Milan as a role-model and best practice to emulate nationally, this representation has ever since rooted itself in the urban collective consciousness. The "*milanesità*" –a distinctive trait representing a certain way of doing things and of "getting things done"– served as a prelude to what many described as the city's "renaissance" (see, for example, Pasqui, 2017a and Camagni, 2017).

Over the years, the city has been transformed into "an elected space in which *to reason civically* (emphasis added)", said Mr. Edoardo, a member of the Task

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<sup>100</sup> Since January 2015, the new institutional entity "Città metropolitana di Milano" (in English, Metropolitan City) replaced the Province of Milan following the approval of Law 56 of 2014 that consistently reconfigured the politico-institutional geography of the country (see Bolocan Goldstein, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> See also Camera di Commercio di Milano (2017a; 2017b).

Force working and living in Milan (July 2016). He also added: “a ‘*pensiero*’ of Milan<sup>102</sup> has emerged through time, out of a dynamic, historically situated, instrumental combination of ideas mingled together to create something”.

The city’s pivotal role in innovation sectors has also re-claimed its leadership in the field of innovation in public management: “Milan is different from other cities: it is *naturally* (emphasis added) inclined towards innovation”, claimed a close collaborator of the Deputy Mayor Cristina Tajani (December 2016).

Mrs. Tajani has been leading as Councilor the Office for Labor Policies, Economic Development, University and Research of Milan Municipality<sup>103</sup> since June 2011, holding special mandates on fashion, design and innovation. The Office has ever since played a crucial role in advancing the Municipality’s innovation policies. More precisely, from 2011 to 2016, the Office rationalized its role with reference to social innovation, a strategy expressing a political way of acting as a public administrator and of managing “growth patterns typical of an advanced economy” as well as “as one of the aspects of the smart city”<sup>104</sup> – as Mrs. Tajani clarified in the foreword to the *Milan White Paper on Social Innovation* (Sgaragli and Montanari, 2016, pp. 2-3).

The next paragraphs reconstruct the discursive weave of innovation with reference to its “imbrication” with notions of politics, space and subject. What does saying certain things mean, imply, lead to in terms of power and desire (Foucault, 1972)? How do the discourse’s governmental “speakers” rationalize their practice? What kind of spatial configurations does the discourse of innovation envisage? What does it ask, pretend, require from individuals as a form of power?

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<sup>102</sup> “*Pensiero*” means a way of thinking or a mindset.

<sup>103</sup> From now on, “the Office”. Under the current administration led by Mayor Beppe Sala, the Office has been renamed as “Office of Labor, Business, Human Resources and Economic Development of Milan Municipality” and Cristina Tajani has been reappointed as deputy mayor.

<sup>104</sup> Alongside Councilor Tajani, the Director of Economic Innovation, University and Smart City division, Mr. Renato Galliano, has played an important role in the definition of Milan’s smart city strategies. For further details on the smart city agenda and on the evolution of the public policy framework, see Armondi and Bruzzese (2017), González (2009) and Briata, Fedeli and Pasqui (2016).

### 3.3 The making of a public discourse

Mr. Edoardo is a prominent public figure on innovation in contemporary Italy and one of the experts involved in the Task Force established by the national government in 2012.

Sharing his general take on such experience, Mr. Edoardo spontaneously commented: “yes, I am one of those responsible for starting such a cultural hype”. Suggesting between the lines that the collective euphoria on innovation has gone far and out of hands, he clarified further his thoughts about the Task Force initiative:

“on one side, it was and it still is, a very positive effort to be acknowledged: it proves that there was the draft of a plan from the side of governmental authorities on what to do *vis à vis* the severe and drastic economic transformation we were and we are going through. Moreover, it was intended to build upon and catalyze a pre-existing cultural feature: the entrepreneurial attitude to self-employment”<sup>105</sup> (July 2016).

Taking a step back in time, *Restart, Italia!*<sup>106</sup> clarified in an accessible and non-technical language, the practical logics of innovative entrepreneurship as a much-needed drive for economic growth in a country marked by severe industrial decline.

Italy’s economy has notably been characterized over the last decade at best, by very low growth rates and at worst, by stagnation –a possibly “secular” condition of the post-recession era we are living through, according to the current minister of economy and finance, Pier Carlo Padoan (Di Pillo, 2015). Building upon such premises, innovative entrepreneurship offered a way out of troubles for

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<sup>105</sup> In Italian, the interviewee used the expression “*mettersi in proprio*” which alternatively to “self-employment” stresses a “do it yourself” attitude.

<sup>106</sup> The report consists of four parts: the first and second parts are dedicated to the legal definition of a startup firm and its life cycle (i.e. “Launching, growth and maturity”), while the third part focuses on the role of territories and local business ecosystems. The fourth part proposes a mechanism to evaluate the impact of the comprehensive set of initiatives favoring and promoting startups. In light of the present reflection, section III and part IV of section II (i.e. “Awareness”) are extremely relevant. As mentioned in footnote n° 98, the report was published in Italian and English, both in an extended version and a summary. Since there are quite often important differences in the texts, I will make full use of all of the versions in order to be as accurate as possible.

a “troubled” country. In this regard, the report provided a clear, pragmatic and visionary rationale of redemption for its public that soon turned into an imperative discourse to love and be for (Foucault, 2009, p. 3).

*“Italy must become a friendlier place for new innovative enterprises. This must be done in the knowledge that innovation comes at a price. Only by renouncing undue income and privileges and by becoming active, a country can become more open. This is the price we must pay if we really want to change, if we too want to shape modernity and be part of the transformation”*<sup>107</sup> (The Report, 2012c, p. 12).

As a first light and *pop* attempt to articulate a reflection on an industrial policy centered on major horizontal measures to come, a significant role was granted to innovative entrepreneurship –largely consisting of small businesses, especially so in the early stages of their life cycle. The standards set were high: to revive the productive fabric, to stimulate domestic competition, to promote economic growth and employment, especially among young people (Executive Summary, 2012b, p. 2).

*Restart, Italia!* should be regarded as the first inaugural step toward much larger legislative efforts to foster innovation. Decree-Law 179/2012, symbolically called “Italy’s Startup Act”, was the initial cornerstone. Converted into Law 221/2012, the decree legally defined an innovative startup i.e. an innovative enterprise of high technological value<sup>108</sup> as a way to channel horizontal policy-

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<sup>107</sup> The original text, albeit sharing a similar tone, interpreted differently the imperative necessity to change: “[...] A price that we can no longer afford not to pay, if we want to seriously *transform ourselves* (emphasis added), if we too want to *interpret modernity and go with the change* (emphasis added)” (Rapporto, 2012a, p. 12).

<sup>108</sup> As reported in *The Italian legislation in support of innovative startups. Executive summary* (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, 2017a), this regime may apply to companies operating in any sectors and there is no age-restriction in order to benefit from the offered incentives. More specifically, a startup corresponds to any unlisted companies with shared capital that is: 1) newly incorporated or has been operational for less than five years; 2) based in Italy or in another EU country but with, at least, a production site branch in Italy; 3) displaying a yearly turnover lower than 5 million euros; 4) not distributing profits; 5) exclusively or prevalently focused on the production, development and commercialization of innovative goods or services of high technological value; 6) not resulting from a merger, split-up or sell-off of a company or branch. Last, the company’s innovative character is assessed if at least one of the following criteria is met: a) fifteen percent of the company’s expenses are devoted to R&D; b) at least one third of the workforce counts PhD students, doctors or researchers; or alternatively, two third of the workforce holds a Master’s degree; c) it is the holder, depositary or licensee of a registered patent, or the owner and author of a registered software. For further details see artt. 25-32 of Decree-Law

incentives. It outlined a set of measures on entrepreneurship “coherently with the 2012 National Reform Program<sup>109</sup>, namely section III of the 2012 Economic and Financial Document and the European Council recommendations” (art. 25, Decree-Law 179/2012). Indeed, the consistent shift underwent by the contemporary Italian governmental practice should be interpreted in relation to the current growth strategy of the European Union, “Europe 2020”, to which each member state is committed and whose overall developmental priorities are “smart growth, sustainable growth and inclusive growth”.

The decree welcomed many of the policy proposals advanced by the Task Force (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, 2017a, p. 4) and art. 25 clarified the following:

“the present dispositions are directed towards sustainable growth, technological development, new entrepreneurship and employment, particularly youth employment, with regard to favorable innovative startups. [...] The dispositions of this section contextually aim to develop a new entrepreneurial culture, a more favorable environment towards innovation, as well as to promote larger social mobility and to attract talented people, innovative firms and capital in Italy from abroad”.

The economic logic underpinning the norm is clear and the choice of words conveys the image of a country that “knows where to go” in order to be successful (The Report, 2012c, p. 139).

The governmental policies on innovation, inspired by and starting off with *Restart, Italia!*, have established new formal conditions for vanguard forms of entrepreneurialism plugging in and drawing from an existing, historically specific entrepreneurial culture. However, the dispositions have envisaged a complementary and larger goal of setting a cultural groundwork of a new economic and societal era (Downey and Fisher, 2006).

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179/2012. In addition to that, the regulatory framework has introduced a particular type of startup i.e. an innovative startup with a social goal, regulated by Decree-Law 155/2006 (Article 2, paragraph 1) and Circular 3677/C issued by the Ministry of Economic Development in January 2015.

<sup>109</sup> The National Reform Program fulfills the task to translate EU objectives into national targets and it is part of the Economic and Financial Document, the most important document for the setting of the fore-coming national government’s economic policy.

To move in this direction, innovative entrepreneurship has ever since been bound by “a national debate able to transform certain foreign words into a new Italian *discourse* (emphasis added)” (Rapporto, 2012a, p. 110). Differently put, the concrete economic practice has been tightly coupled with a more elusive and subtle discursive practice of innovation. This in pursuit of “a cultural and organizational climate *aware and enthusiastic* (emphasis added) about the social and economic contributions offered by whom that innovates and creates opportunities” (*Ibid.*, p. 139).

On that note, according to Mr. Edoardo’s, the Task Force initiative determined a novelty: “it offered a much-desired new narrative for many, reflecting our real conscious or unconscious thrives in times of structural transformation, to the question ‘what can I do?’”

Innovation has proven effective in communicating a visionary pragmatism. To innovate has been represented as a reasonable, logical and normal aspiration: who would dare to say to be against innovation? However, innovation has exceeded mere pragmatic considerations even though such pragmatism has constituted the “shared practical understanding” that qualifies innovation as a practice (Schatzki *et al.*, 2005, p. 11). That is to say that innovation, building on the overreaching autonomy of the “economic” over human existence, has not encompassed solely a vanguard set of economic novelties. Rather, it has been offered as an embodied attitude that ideally belongs as much to business men and entrepreneurs than to ordinary citizens and public administrators, and which concerns market and non-market activities, economic and non-economic aspects of human life.

Such an understanding of the process of innovation –one that leaves the economy to enter and to shape society at large– has emerged distinctly with regards to contemporary Milan public management’s techniques. However, before approaching the case of Milan in details, three “interludes” that explore the sliding structure of innovation, swinging between “vision” and “pragmatism”, are presented.

### **3.3.1 “War heroes” and contemporary politics**

“Politics, namely the ‘control room’, is made to destroy the beauty of things”, declared Annibale d’Elia, an influential expert on innovation and public policy and one of the member of the 2012 governmental Task Force. Mr. D’Elia was

hosted as guest speaker at the public event called “Fuckup Night. Stories about failures” held at Impact Hub, a widely-known Milanese innovative space, in February 2016.

The evening symposia, dedicated to professional “fuckups” of three invited guests, hosted over a hundred participants and it was the second time this one-of-a-kind event was held in Italy –with Milan as its first elected location. Fuckup Nights corresponds to a global event series which, the evening presenter clarified, “has been founded by a group of friends in Mexico City in 2012 and whose basic idea is to publicly debunk failure, breaking in a rather informal and ironic way – maybe with some beer served, the veil of shame and dishonor associated with it”<sup>110</sup>.

Coherently with the spirit of the initiative, Mr. d’Elia began his intervention by revealing his own failures: “if there are failures, there is hope”, he started off. Referring to his experience as a leading public policy figure in the youth policy program “*Bollenti Spiriti*” at Puglia’s Region from 2005 to 2016<sup>111</sup>. Mr. D’Elia reminded that the overall objective of the initiative was “to create a welcoming place for young ideas, for beautiful things...those sorts of things that are homed here at Impact Hub”.

The analysis presented by Mr. D’Elia to the large audience, sketched clearly the methodological difference between the “old” and “new” politics. As the state is described as a “uselessly complex, bureaucratic” entity whose “scope is to destroy beautiful things”, the “old” politics symbolically corresponds to a “brochure targeting youth, one of them likely to be colored”. “The state”, the speaker continued, “preserves itself by communicating in a politically-correct style, but it is unable to share resources in times of uncertainty and scarcity, it is jealous of its own power and it is terrified to make mistakes, therefore it does so continuously”. On the contrary, the “new” politics is radically different from the “old” one:

“it understands that the key to innovation is *new* people (emphasis added): it allows young people to be the leading characters of transformation processes in the digital era. It takes the courage to send

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<sup>110</sup> See the organization’s website for further details: <https://fuckupnights.com> [Accessed 8 January, 2018]

<sup>111</sup> Mr. D’Elia currently collaborates with the Office led by Mrs. Tajani in light of his expertise on social innovation, urban regeneration and creative and digital manufacturing.

youth, the ‘scouts’ of the future, to do recon and to experiment without planning”.

Politics, cognitively associated with the image of the widespread inefficient and rent-seeker machine of the state, should *activate* citizens, and especially young people, rather than “telling them what they should do and how they should do it”.

The argument raised by Mr. D’Elia, advocating in favor of a “*lean* public administration”, echoed *Restart, Italia!*:

“the policy measures mentioned [...] include some recommendations aimed at instilling –in *all citizens, but especially in young people* (emphasis added)– a greater awareness about the potential of innovative business” (Executive Summary, 2012d, p. 3).

Stressing the potential politics of innovation, the report further specified:

“the awareness that *any one of us* (emphasis added) can create a job for him or herself and start a business. The awareness that ‘another, ever present possibility’ exists, one that can motivate in equal measure unemployed people and employees who are already happy with their jobs” (The Report, 2012c, p. 15).

“The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ politics are radically different” –emphasized Mr. D’Elia heading towards the conclusion of his speech. In his view, the clash of these diverse cultural worlds has begun: “it is *war* (emphasis added)” –he theatrically concluded, followed by a thunderous applause.

If the choice of words is not casual, one could wonder building on such explicit opposition (i.e. us *versus* them): who are, then, the war heroes and warriors? And where are them?

A similar foreboding language was used in the report to warn that if innovators –a term used interchangeably with startups and innovation, are not supported, they go to friendlier places or they simply make do with the contextual conditions, the result being an impoverished country (The Report, 2012c, pp. 11-13).

### 3.3.2 Keeping up with the global times

Stefano Firpo is the General Director for Industrial Policy, Competitiveness and Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development. Mr. Firpo intervened during Milan's meetup of Startup Europe Week in late January 2016<sup>112</sup>. With reference to the articulation and coordination of the national effort on innovative entrepreneurship, Mr. Firpo started off his speech by clarifying the mission of the department: “we are *imagining* (emphasis added) future perspectives”. Indeed, the department of the Italian Ministry of Economic Development headed by Mr. Firpo is the lead institution dedicated to economic innovation, steering the institutional agenda for the country's development path. In light of its role, the department has ever since been the key advocate of legislative initiatives favoring innovative entrepreneurship.

Throughout the years, the scope of “Italy's Startup Act”, has been progressively widened by the so-called “Decree on Labour” (Decree-Law 76/2013), the “Investment Compact” (Decree-Law 3/2015) and the Budget Law for 2017 (Law 232/2016)<sup>113</sup>. The legislative interventions have offered a set of horizontal incentives for legally defined startups for five years after their date of incorporation, corresponding to direct and indirect economic incentives and exemption from administrative burdens<sup>114</sup>. All of these mix-efforts have

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<sup>112</sup> The annual event series, promoted by the European Commission since 2016, simultaneously takes place in various cities across Europe and is one of the numerous symposia celebrating innovative entrepreneurship and business ecosystems development. For further details, see: <http://startupeuropeweek.eu> [Accessed 8 January 2018].

<sup>113</sup> A detailed overview of the set of initiatives put forth by the government is reported in the publicly accessible *The Italian legislation in support of innovative startups. Executive Summary*, which was published by the Ministry of Economic Development in February 2017. All the technical information presented in this paragraph have drawn importantly from such policy-document unless otherwise specified. Recent evolutions of the legislation in favor of innovative entrepreneurship are detailed (in Italian) in the recently published *Annual report to Parliament on the implementation of legislation in support of innovative startups and SMEs* presented by Minister Calenda in December 2017.

<sup>114</sup> The measures include (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, 2017a): online and free of charge incorporation, exemption from the payment of some fees (registration at the Business Register and the Chamber of Commerce), flexible corporate management, exemption from or flexible application of regulations on various issues (covering of losses, compensation of VAT credits, labor law, bankruptcy, intellectual property i.e. the so-called “Patent Box”, tax credit on R&D), flexible remuneration options (e.g. stock options or work for equity schemes), tax bonus for investors, support for internationalization by the Italian Trade Agency, regulated access to financial instruments and schemes (e.g. equity crowdfunding, Smart&Start Italia and Invitalia Ventures) and the SME Guarantee Fund, and, last, simplified conversion to an innovative SME at the end of the five-year startup regime. Complementary to such measures, the programs “Italia Startup Visa” and “Italia Startup Hub” establish a preferential procedure for the granting of visas

envisaged to favor new forms of innovative entrepreneurship on the one hand, and to support the existing industrial fabric, predominantly made of SMEs which are traditionally more reluctant to innovate, on the other hand.

The intervention has sought a concerted engagement of various public and private, local and national institutions for policies to be more effective and to tackle different aspects of innovation, from educational programs to internationalization. Among the national players, the Ministry for Education, University and Research and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have partnered the Ministry of Economic Development on specific programs<sup>115</sup>, while other territorial or sectorial institutions<sup>116</sup> have been involved in the implementation of specific legislative dispositions.

More recently, a new industrial policy for the digital transformation of the country's productive fabric called "*Piano Industria 4.0*" has been implemented. Introduced by the Budget Law 2017, the policy has aimed to favor competitiveness and innovation by offering a set of incentives to firms – independently from their territorial location, dimension and sector of activity– from hyper-depreciation and super-depreciation schemes, tax credit for R&D to fiscal incentives for risk investments in industry 4.0 and startups (Italy's Plan Industria 4.0, 2017). In addition to that, the plan has also sought to institutionalize networks of national and local actors that could actively facilitate such desired

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for EU and non-EU citizens launching a startup in Italy. Recent evolutions of the legislation in favor of innovative entrepreneurship include further tax exemptions for investors and a preferential procedure for the granting of visas for non-EU citizens investing at least five hundred thousand euro in innovative startups (Ministry of Economic Development, 2017).

<sup>115</sup> For example, a pilot project has been launched in 2013 by the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry for Education, University and Research, for the creation of Contamination Labs (C-Labs) in four universities located in Southern Italy. Building on a suggestion outlined in *Restart, Italia!*, C-Labs have been offering a multidisciplinary environment and training programs for the development of business ideas in the selected universities. Following the same rationale, other four self-financed non-MIUR C-Labs have been recently established and seventeen new C-Labs have been funded by the Ministry for Education, University and Research in 2017. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs collaborates with the Ministry of Economic Development on the program "Italy Startup Visa". Other ministries such as the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and Ministry of Internal Affairs, have been involved, for example, in the definition of specific dispositions (e.g. guidelines of "Italia Startup Visa").

<sup>116</sup> For example, the *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* (CDP, in English: National Promotion Bank) on the initiatives ITAtech and AccelerateIT, the SME Central Guarantee Fund to facilitate easier access to bank loans, the Italian Trade Agency (ITA) on the "Startup Service Card" or Invitalia (the national agency for inward investment promotion and enterprise development, owned by the Ministry of Finance) on Smart&StartItalia. For further details, see Italian Ministry of Economic Development (2017b).

transformative process (i.e. Digital Innovation Hub and I4.0 Competence Center, *Ibid.*).

Thus, the government has proceeded in two parallel and complementary directions. On the one hand, horizontal measures have been set forth to stimulate the creation of new innovative firms and to incentivize established enterprises to innovate, reviving their competitive advantages. On the other hand, the governmental effort has promoted the formation of networks of “enablers” that form what is commonly known as “ecosystem”

An ecosystem includes a wide variety of institutions and social actors which are simultaneously competing and collaborating with one another: public and government institutions (e.g. Municipalities, Metropolitan cities and Regions), industrial authorities, banking and financial players, university, research centers, the local productive fabric as well as a range of meaningful organizational spaces such as incubators<sup>117</sup>, co-working spaces, maker-spaces, fab-labs and cultural centers of the territory.

*Piano Industria 4.0* has identified startups and innovative SME as important elements of economic revitalization and active bearers of the country through what is commonly known as the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”. However, the scope of the policy has been broader as it offered a medium-long term industrial vision to strengthen Italy’s strategic placement in the changing economic geography of globalization<sup>118</sup>.

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<sup>117</sup> The term “incubation” corresponds to a set of supporting activities for the launch and development of innovative enterprises. The legislator introduced into the Italian legal system (Decree-Law 179/2012, art. 25, par 5), the entity “certified startup incubator” with the intent to identify structures in the capacity to offer efficient incubation and incubation services for hi-tech innovative enterprises. As the *The Italian legislation in support of innovative startups. Executive summary* (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, 2017a, pp. 9-10) reports, the company has to conform to a set of requirements concerning physical facilities, management and track record in incubation and acceleration of new innovative companies. It is noteworthy to highlight the relevance conferred to physical aspects: a minimum of 400 square meter of dedicated space to incubation activities and, among others, a well-functioning internet infrastructure have been set as requirements. If certified, an incubator enjoys the following benefits: online, free of charge incorporation, exemption from the payment of the Business Register fees, flexible remuneration options (i.e. stock options), simplified access to guarantees on bank loans and a special track to benefit from the Italia Startup Visa program. For recent legislative evolution on certified incubators see Ministry of Economic Development (2017, pp. 21-22).

<sup>118</sup> The composition of the Steering Committee which elaborated the plan, is illustrative in this regard as it included universities, research centers, associations of manufacturing and service companies, trade unions and various ministries (see *Italy’s Plan Industria 4.0*, 2017, p. 7).

Outcomes in terms of industrial production and investment in traditional industries (e.g. instrumental goods) have been cautiously optimistic and Italy's economic performance has recently accelerated as an effect of the incentives introduced (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze *et al.*, 2017)<sup>119</sup>. Notwithstanding that and in spite of the conspicuous legislative effort on innovative entrepreneurship since 2012 onwards, the so called “startup economy” has struggled to emerge as an economic flywheel.

“I am concerned because Italian startup do not ‘die’ and I am worried that the startup ‘world’ remains no more than an isolated one. Moreover, despite we have made ourselves visible on a global scale, there is a necessity to free ourselves from provincialism: it is a *global* (emphasis added) phenomenon”

Mr. Firpo declared, while concluding his intervention at the Startup Europe Week. Indeed, as Chiarello (2017) noted, the Italian startup phenomenon is of marginal importance for the economy, in spite of playing a role of great symbolic relevance in the public discourse: the 7,398 startups as at 30 June 2017 (Ministry of Economic Development, 2017), represents only 0.46 per cent out of the total number of joint-stock companies. Moreover, a set of other indicators (i.e. turnover, value of production, initial investment and occupation generated) returns an overall fragile picture of the economic resilience of the startup paradigm in the Italian context.

“Startup basics”, of which Mr. Firpo's words are illustrative, imply a peculiar business rationale and a global character, and neither elements seem to characterize the factual reality of the innovation phenomenon in contemporary Italy –even though its discursive dimension is powerfully present and, thus, material in its effects.

### **3.3.3 Spatial implications of the technology “innovation”**

According to contemporary business orthodoxy, a startup is “a way to make a lot of money in a very short time as well as a recently-constituted firm with high-technological content and growth potentials” (member of the Task Force, June 2016). Differently from more traditional type of businesses, a startup aims to what is known as “exit”: the sale of the company on the market at the highest possible

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<sup>119</sup> For the year 2018, the industrial policy will be converted in *Piano Nazionale Impresa 4.0*.

value in a relatively short period of time after its establishment, either by being acquired from or by merging with a larger company. The underpinning rationale is the following: if its business model is not repeatable and scalable, a startup has to fail and the faster it does so, the better –as the efforts may then be devoted to the next innovative entrepreneurial idea. Thus, the life cycle of a startup “does not begin or end with a specific ‘finished’ product” (Cockayne, 2016, p. 459) and its presence on the market depends on the ability to gather risk capital.

This economic practice, therefore, necessitates of an environment in which failures are welcomed. Differently put, an *agile* territory in its configuration and management is required, favoring –or at the very least, not obstructing– experimentation and exchanges. Thus, complementary to punctual dispositions “to get rid of the unnecessary difficulties which are in the way of innovators” (The Report, 2012c, p. 139), innovation –the wished object to be chased in the contemporary political consciousness– has emerged as intimately dependent upon *hard* and *soft* socio-technical infrastructures.

An innovative practice such as a startup, ideally and culturally calls for exchange, relationships, diversity, chance and interconnections. It calls for a place that “does not waste” its time as “time is money” and that offers resources: spaces where to work from, to be trained at and to meet peers and professionals such as investors. In addition to that, financial resources i.e. angel financing and venture capital funds, are crucial for startups seeking to scale up their businesses –also in light of the custom of the “one-hour commute” that investors apply when deciding in which company to invest. Thus, where risk capital investors are, matters. As an effect, place plays an important role for innovative businesses and favorable locations are those exhibiting favorable *existing* arrangements.

All of these desired features imbricated with the technology “innovation”, point towards “dense agglomeration of people and economic activities” (Scott and Storper, 2015, p. 4). Even though this is not a universal rule but rather a general tendency, cities and, more precisely, “successful” ones, benefit of a territorial advantage to act –or be seen to act (Peck, 2014, p. 398)– as magnets of innovative practices.

Available data on startups confirm that the Italian geography of innovative entrepreneurship is distinctly urban and unevenly distributed across regions, self-reinforcing pre-existing patterns of economic development and territorial

divergences. Out of the nearly 7,400 innovative startups<sup>120</sup>, 15.7 percent of them are residing in the metropolitan area of Milan, followed by Rome (8.4 percent), Turin (3.9 percent), Naples (3.5 percent) and Bologna (3.1 percent; Ministry of Economic Development, 2017, pp. 43-44). Moreover, over 52 percent of startups are located in Northern Italy (31 per cent of which in the North-West area), despite a relatively recent and gradually on the rise localization in the South of the country (particularly in Campania, Sicily and Puglia regions; *Ibid.*, p. 40)<sup>121</sup>.

The important point about all of this is the following: by identifying an economic practice as desirable, the politics of innovation has called for a particular morphology of the territory i.e. the city. At the same time, innovation has also demanded a specific enactment of it: “can we imagine a *lean* (emphasis added) public administration?” asked Mr. D’Elia during the previously refereed Fuckup Night. “A public administration”, the guest continued, “which is not affected by the ‘Palio di Siena’ syndrome? One that, in times of scarcity and uncertainty, shares resources, contents, opportunities and it respects and appreciates talent?”.

The idea of an iterative and light planning approach in public management that favors open experimentation dates back to *Restart, Italia!*: “whole areas should be turned into startups and work accordingly to startup principles” (The Report, 2012c, p. 121) –the Task Force suggested, proposing a national challenge that rewarded the most innovative territorial projects. In spite of the fact that this proposition has never being implemented, the idea underlying the concept of the ecosystem *de facto* reflects a *lean* management’s approach to the territory.

“We need to create *ideal places* (emphasis added) and a city like Milan is, in this sense, an ideal *ecosystem* (emphasis added) for startups”, Mr. Corrado Passera

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<sup>120</sup> As argued in paragraph 3.2, the Italian legislator introduced in 2012 the entity “innovative startup” as a mean to convey a set of horizontal measures to stimulate innovation, growth and occupation. See footnote n° 114 for details on the legal definition of innovative startup. Moreover, since 2012, the Italian Minister of Economic Development closely and regularly monitors startups’ performances, and regularly publishes reports and updates. All data are publicly available at <startup.registroimprese.it> and < <https://bit.ly/1BD0XQY> > [Accessed 25 February 2018].

<sup>121</sup> Italy does seem to display a distinctive trait whereas innovation is *also* territorially diffused: following Lombardy as the Italian region with the highest percentage of innovative startups (22.9 percent), Emilia-Romagna (10.9 percent), Lazio (9.7 percent) and Veneto (8.6 percent) count some significant presences. Particularly Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto regions exemplify the persistence of local specificities in the ways economic activities are territorially organized, reflecting the country’s historical industrial clusters. Source: Ministry of Economic Development (2017, pp. 40-43).

argued at the Startup Europe Week, while running his electoral campaign as a mayoral candidate in Milan's local elections in 2016<sup>122</sup>. Known for politically kick-starting the governmental engagement on innovative startups when in office as Minister of Economic Development in Monti's cabinet, Mr. Passera clearly equated ideal places for innovation to ecosystems. However, his line suggests that ideal places should be designed: that is to say that nothing is left to chance –an argument echoed in *Restart, Italia!* which advocated for innovation to be actively *nurtured*, equally by policy-makers and citizens.

Building on the three presented “interludes”, the next paragraph approaches how innovation has been enacted and conferred a situated political signification by the city of Milan.

### 3.4 Milan is “IN”

At the end of Giuliano Pisapia's political mandate as a mayor, when the local elections were approaching in Spring 2016, the running candidate deputy mayor Cristina Tajani<sup>123</sup> intervened during the public event “*Milano City Makers: gli innovatori diffusi che fanno la città*” (In English: “Milano City Makers: the *diffused* (emphasis added) innovators that make the city”)<sup>124</sup>.

The event hosted a wide spectrum of guests, ranging from public officers, experts, entrepreneurs, managers and academics to representatives of professional associations and trade unions. Performing the political ideal that “public policies

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<sup>122</sup> In 2016, Mr. Passera was running for mayor in Milan, but he later withdrew his candidacy and provided support to Stefano Parisi, the centre-right candidate.

<sup>123</sup> At the time, Deputy Mayor Tajani was running her electoral campaign to support the political candidacy of Beppe Sala as mayor leading a centre-left coalition. Sala's electoral victory would have likely meant, as it then happened, Mrs. Tajani's re-appointment in the Office.

<sup>124</sup> The celebratory event was held on May 4, 2016 in Milan at La Fabbrica del Vapore, an old factory converted into a creative and cultural production complex. The event was promoted by “*InnovareXincludere*” (in English: “Innovating to include”), an association co-organizing the event and endorsing Mrs. Tajani's electoral campaign in the local elections. It was part of the participatory project “*MilanoIN*” which, introduced to the public in February 2015, has aimed to gather key local players to define a future scenario for an inclusive development agenda for the city –where the smart city agenda, growth and innovation demands could match needs of solidarity and inclusion (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 10). For a brief history of the policy framework “*MilanoIN*”, see Armondi and Bruzzese (2017, p. 34).

are collective stories”<sup>125</sup>, the subject of discussion centered on innovation, politics and place-making.

During her speech, Mrs. Tajani recalled the Office’s methodological approach towards the city:

“*we have acknowledged* (emphasis added) the existence of phenomena, such as startups and various practices of collaborative economies, which were purposeful with regards to the crisis and as such, they deserved to be sustained by public action. Our attitude has been one keen to listen, support and enable citizens”.

“*Milano è IN–innovare X includere*” (in English: *Milan is IN–innovating to include*) –an additional subheading of the event– narrated of a city that, similarly to many localities, dealt with a number of challenges. Among others, the downfall of the public welfare and the shrinkage of public resources for local administrators stood out in the background of an economic crisis which has reassembled more an immanent condition of contemporary life rather than an economic bust.

However, the event’s title already emphasized the virtuosity of the city compared to others. “*Milano è IN*” (which in English would be “Milan is IN”, wherein “IN” is the acronym for “Innovating to Include”) expressed a “sense of the proper” that belonged to Milan and not elsewhere (Cresswell, 1996, p. 3): Milan is “IN”, other places are “OUT”.

“We are following with interest Milanese events as Milan’s experience will shape the national one”, said Massimiliano Smeriglio, Vice President of Lazio Region during his intervention at Milano City Makers. This leitmotif was echoed by Paola Natalicchio, former mayor of Molfetta, a town located in Puglia Region: “this public administration, without ideologism, has conquered *unknown territories* (emphasis added)”. Politics can, the guest speaker clarified further, effectively act as a facilitator if it approaches *reality* with a visionary pragmatism.

Milan keeps up with the times on many aspects according to its administrators (Sgaragli and Montanari, 2016). Described as a virtuous case wherein “if you plant a seed it grows”, a public servant collaborating with the Deputy Mayor

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<sup>125</sup> The quote belongs to Annibale d’Elia, guest speaker of the event Fuckup Night (see previous paragraphs) held in Milan at the end of February of 2016. Mr. D’Elia, one of the founding member of the association “*InnovareXincludere*”, has been an active supporter of the Deputy Mayor Tajani.

Tajani stressed how the Office brought an innovation in the way the administration has run the city (December 2016). A collaborative planning approach that entailed listening and interacting with citizens has been adopted by the local administration to approach the city's needs. This has been performed "not by uncritical adhering to its demands" but in order to manage "complex issues with limited resources" (*Ibid.*).

This contemporary form of government has been described by Polizzi and Vitale (2017) as an enactment of a "collaborative government" for a number of reasons.

First, Milan's administration pragmatically has embraced and supported innovation in the classical economic sense of the term. The city has successfully marketed itself as a national and international virtuous example of resilience in the face of the uncertain economic conjuncture. It has done so by leveraging upon historical economic strengths and recent promising tendencies on innovative entrepreneurship (Comune di Milano<sup>126</sup>, 2016, p. 2).

Second, this collaborative government has embodied a political approach that has outspokenly recognized and attempted to counterbalance economic innovation's exclusionary side-effects. Indeed, the saliency of cultural and creative activities for the local economy has produced –similarly than in other cities (Florida, 2017)– new forms of socio-spatial inequalities within the urban fabric and between the city and its hinterland (Camagni, 2017; Pacchi, 2017). Worsen inequality dynamics for marginalities<sup>127</sup>, social malaise, on the rise among middle-class youth and stagnant social mobility (Bagnasco, 2008) have urgently posed a matter of social re-organization to local policy-makers.

In this regard, the Milanese example is illustrative of how innovation has been employed as a political methodology i.e. a lever that *activates* the collectivity and

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<sup>126</sup> The cited publication corresponds to the *Report delle attività e degli interventi realizzati dal 2012 al 2016* where the activities and interventions carried out by the Office are detailed and accounted for.

<sup>127</sup> Latest data confirm (Istat, 2017b) that absolute poverty in metropolitan centers in Northern Italy is higher (5.5 per cent in 2016 and 9.8 per cent in 2015) compared to the national average (4.9 per cent in 2016 and 7.2 per cent in 2015) as well as to the Centre and South of the country. The opposite dynamic characterizes relative poverty which is more concentrated in municipalities with less than 50,000 residents compared to metropolitan cities and adjacent areas in Northern Italy. See also the report on poverty by Caritas Ambrosiana - Osservatorio diocesano delle povertà e delle risorse (2017) which similarly assessed an overall improvement of the state of poverty in Milan with, however, cases of chronic poverty on the rise.

triggers imagination, also as a civic “anti-depressant” alleviating the anxiety of the present.

“You did well by keeping them *together* (emphasis added)”, said Aldo Bonomi, a well-known Italian scholar addressing Mrs. Tajani during the aforementioned Milano City Makers. Mr. Bonomi implicitly referred to the importance for youth, largely suffering for the current economic situation, to act meaningfully<sup>128</sup> and to the government’s responsibility in articulating a credible path for the collectivity in this sense. The dual capacity of innovation, thus, is emerging: in the case of Milan, innovation has functioned as a mean of social reinterpretation and control.

Third, the municipality has actively sought the engagement of civil society and supported civic and bottom-up dynamism (Pasqui, 2017b) –thus, elevating civil society to the role of co-actor in urban policy-making alongside more traditional public and private stakeholders. Innovation, in this regard, has been understood as a socio-economic *desideratum* to further enable or activate through the setting of framework conditions of collective support (Sgaragli and Montanari, 2016, p. 18).

According to a policy advisor working at the current Mayor’s Cabinet (December 2016), innovation has been politically conceived as both a tool to generate economic development and a relational method to organize society. “The difference between Milan and other cities is that here a precise *political choice* (emphasis added) has been taken on innovation”, he added.

Building on the previous considerations, the next paragraph moves to the analysis of the set of policy initiatives played out by the Office from 2012 to 2016.

### **3.4.1 Spaces of politics, politics of spaces**

As previously argued, the politics of innovation has built on a number of considerations. In Milan, innovation has been acknowledged as a non-negligible economic necessity generating employment and growth in an advanced economy. In addition to that, it has also been conceptualized as “*humus*” to foster social processes of inclusion of citizens potentially excluded from “classical”

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<sup>128</sup> “To act meaningfully” here means that a practice is subjectively and collectively valued as such.

innovation's outcomes *and* a methodology for the “management of the future” and for re-organizing the existing social system.

“To activate”, “to acknowledge”, “to stimulate”, “to re-invent” have been effectively employed as political methodologies of intervention by the Office. The patterns of action have spanned across a diverse range of initiatives and along four strategic axes of engagement: “*innovazione e ricerca*”, “*crescita economica*”, “*formazione d'eccellenza*”, and “*lavoro*” (in English: “innovation and research”, “economic growth”, “training and education” and “labor”) (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 2)<sup>129</sup>.

With a budget capacity of almost 8,5 million € from 2012 to 2016 for the segment “*innovazione e ricerca*”<sup>130</sup> –which is of greater interest for this study, the public resources available to be effective coherently with the political ends outlined, have been described as limited (public officers, Mayor’s cabinet, December 2016). Indeed, the advent of the “new politics” deserves some caveats, given that it should also be understood as an effect of shrinking public resources. “The activation of networks to activate networks”, a latent trait of many of the initiatives put forth by the Office as it will be shown, is the result of a profound re-scaling of the state and cities in times of globalization. Such re-shifting has implied for the Municipality *to activate itself* in order to gather additional resources through national and international calls and partnerships: a total amount of 44,186 million € distributed across the four axes of intervention, was co-financed by various actors partnering on specific projects with the Office (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 3). For this financial tactic to be successful, the Municipality has consistently leveraged upon pre-existing strengths, dynamics

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<sup>129</sup> Even though the Office’s effort on innovation should be placed at the crossroad of these four axes, “*innovazione e ricerca*” is the most relevant area of intervention to pay attention to, followed by “*crescita economica*”. As a matter of fact, the interview conducted with two public officers working at the Office in December 2016 centered, broadly speaking, on innovation and innovation policies and only *ex-post* I realized that they were mainly referring to the axis “innovation and research” as they outlined the limited budget capacity by the Office on innovation, compared to the budget of the Office of Social Policies, Health and Rights, responsible of social priorities such as emergency housing. However, the report –which I was given and suggested to consult by the interviewed public officers– does not make a clear distinction between the two areas of engagement, thus it is practically difficult to assess whether an initiative belongs to “innovation and research” or “economic growth”.

<sup>130</sup> The other areas of intervention had available the following budgets: 48,949 million € to “training and education”, 21,018 million € to “economic growth” and 8,807 million € to “labor” (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 3).

and good practices: “in Milan you do not invent anything, you boost the existing” (public officer, Mayor’s cabinet, December 2016).

From 2012 to 2016, the Office has importantly centered its counter-strategy – “counter” to the difficult historical contingencies, on a spatial lever in two ways<sup>131</sup>. Directly, the administration has granted financial support for the physical and territorial organization of a network of collaborative spaces i.e. incubators and accelerators<sup>132</sup>, co-working spaces<sup>133</sup>, fab-labs and maker-spaces<sup>134</sup>. Indirectly, it has linked the provision of training support on entrepreneurial projects to several organizational spaces offering incubation programs (or similar services) or access to co-working for selected participants<sup>135</sup>.

The chosen patterns of actions by the Office have been thus wide in scope, ranging from support for the development of new startups to the promotion of smart working through the provision of a number of vouchers for individuals. Complementary to that, an openly political attention and commitment to “innovative” organizational spaces have been paid. Reflecting the material enactment of the concept “social innovation”, such spatialities have been conceived by the Office as pivotal agents of the local ecosystem, promoting “new entrepreneurial forms and ways of being employed” (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 8) –beside their practical function of limiting the sense of isolation of post-Fordist workers (*Ivi.*).

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<sup>131</sup> On this point, it is noteworthy to mention the Municipality resolution n° 1978/2012 which authorizes and regulates the allocation of vacant public real estate.

<sup>132</sup> The incubators and accelerators targeted include the following: Speed Mi Up, PoliHub, Smart city Lab, Base, Alimenta2Talent, FabLab, FabriQ, Spin-off Via Giusti and Via Quarenghi, and A.I.R. “Acceleratore di Impresa Ristretta” operating in Milan’s penitentiary circuit (Comune di Milano, 2016, pp. 5-6). Each project has experienced a different involvement of Milan Municipality, always acting in partnership with national and local strategic partners such as universities or public and private consortiums. Moreover, each initiative has been targeting a variety of citizens e.g. makers, startup entrepreneurs, students or inmates.

<sup>133</sup> Through the call “Bando coworking” issued in 2013, fifty-four spaces have been mapped and provided with some financial resources (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 8).

<sup>134</sup> Local fab-labs and maker-spaces have been mapped, some financial resources were provided for their care and for the creation of additional ones. Moreover, the FabLab, an incubator for digital craftsmanship, has been inaugurated in 2017 (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 8).

<sup>135</sup> For example, the calls “FabriQ I”, “FabriQ II”, “Start Up in Rete” or “MYC - Milan Young Citizens”. In addition, the aforementioned “Bando coworking” also provided vouchers for co-workers (Comune di Milano, 2016).

Looking at their urban distribution, the set of activities endorsed and the actors supported by the Office have touched all the nine boroughs of the Municipality with a visibly higher concentration in the urban core.

If indirect measures are taken into account (e.g. in the forms of support to co-working spaces), the Municipality's overall involvement has indeed more densely concentrated in the central area, particularly in the "*Centro storico*" (in English: historic centre), zone 2 (e.g. districts: Central Station), 3 (e.g. districts: Città Studi, Lambrate and Porta Venezia) and 9 (e.g. districts: Porta Garibaldi, Porta Nuova and Isola) with some notable exceptions in the district Turro (zone 2) (Comune di Milano, 2016, pp. 32-33). However, if only *ad-hoc* projects (e.g. FabriQ and "*Tira su la cler*") are considered i.e. public actions which have been the outcomes of the Office's proactive engagement on specific issues, some peripheral areas (e.g. Chiesa Rossa, Quarto Oggiaro and Niguarda) have been targets of intervention. On the topic of urban regeneration projects, one public action I familiarized with during the ethnographic observation, is important to examine as it is an illustrative example of the Office's approach towards marginalized neighborhoods or marginalized groups: FabriQ, the Social Innovation Incubator of the Municipality of Milan<sup>136</sup>.

FabriQ has opened in 2014 in Quarto Oggiaro, a problematic neighborhood in the North-West part of the city (zone 8). Built in the late 1950s for working-class Southern migrants, now turning into a destination for non-EU migrants, the neighborhood has historically suffered from chronic dynamics of socio-spatial exclusion in the form of poverty, diffused criminality, residential segregation, spatial isolation from central areas of the city and high unemployment rates – condition which has been worsen by the incidence of the NEET (Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training) problem on the local population. In more recent times, positive signals of social revitalization have begun to improve the negative public image of the neighborhood as "the *Scampia* of the North" (Mosca, 2016) –one of which being FabriQ.

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<sup>136</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, the organization Core whereat I conducted the ethnographic observation, has been in charge of the management of FabriQ together with the Brodolini Foundation since its opening. Thus, in light of such connection and coherently with the "relational" approach adopted, I visited the space on several occasions (approximately six or seven times), either to participate to events or to interview startups and managerial figures. However, it is important to make explicit that I have not conducted an ethnographic observation at the Social Innovation Incubator.

The Social Incubator –the first of its kind in Italy to be created and owned by a public administration, has acted along two axes of intervention. On one side, incubation programs and co-working desks in a renovated space of 700 squared meters homed in a former school, have been offered to social enterprises and startups with a clear social goal selected through public calls (i.e. FabriQ I and II to which a third one has followed in 2017)<sup>137</sup>. On the other side, coherently with its mission of reviving the local socio-economic base, FabriQ has aimed to become a sort of “community hub”, “a public space managed by private actors in support of citizens<sup>138</sup>” –in the words of one of organization’s managerial figure (June 2016).

The public narrative on FabriQ, however, has general emphasized the entrepreneurial character of the space in the sense of being a *locus* whose “bet is to generate occupation through enterprises delivering a social impact in a context suffering from infrastructure and also, social problems”.

Such was the message conveyed by Deputy Mayor Tajani which, with a few days distance from the local elections, ended her electoral campaign and first political mandate by paying visit to FabriQ.

Mrs. Tajani engaged with startups during the social gathering at the closing of an event on wearable technologies which was held at the Social Innovation Incubator in early June 2016. The Deputy Mayor emphasized the importance of FabriQ as “a much-wanted project by the Municipality that has expressively chosen this particular part of the city for it to locate”. In that occasion, one of the startup of FabriQ, asked to publicly present its socially innovative entrepreneurial project, declared: “we don’t really do much social innovation” –a statement followed by a somewhat nervous laughter.

As Armondi and Bruzzese (2017, p. 28) noted, the case of FabriQ exemplifies “the role of urban space in connection with complex processes of technological and organizational innovation in economic activities and in urban management”. More specifically, this public action illustrates the symbolic and material importance which has been conferred by the Municipality to the use of space for

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<sup>137</sup> The call “*Startup in rete*” also provided to twenty socially innovative projects, financial support and access to a four-month accelerator program offered by FabriQ. Further information are available on the Milano Smart City website: <<https://bit.ly/2rvVf5M>> [Accessed 25 February 2018).

<sup>138</sup> The Italian expression was “*presidio pubblico*” where the word “*presidio*” emphasis an oversight over the territory.

new forms of production and work (e.g. startups) to foster processes of urban regeneration in peripheral contexts. In Milan public policy approach and more specifically in the case of FabriQ, social impact in the form of greater social inclusion has thus been linked, along other aspects, to the physical presence of socially innovative enterprises in deprived areas of the city clustered in an *ad-hoc* space. Such “belief”, though, builds on an assumption which is problematic. Indeed, it assumes that firms which are sited in a specific location will employ the local workforce –an assumption that finds little evidence in the case of FabriQ and which does not take into account the organizational specificities of early-stage firms (not to mention the particularities of the social sector)<sup>139</sup>. “We are generating no occupation”, another team member at FabriQ informally commented, while we were heading back together to the city center at the end of aforementioned event.

The first call for proposals “FabriQ I” was launched in early 2014 with a budget of 140,000 € directly invested by the Municipality and over 46,000 € provided by third parties (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 10). Six firms with a potentiality in terms of social impact<sup>140</sup>, were incubated for nine months –one of which was also provided with financial support (*Ivi.*). The second call for ideas “FabriQ II” issued in December 2014 with a budget of 292,000€ –half of which provided by the administration (*Ivi.*), welcomed foreign candidacies and focused on smart city, accessibility and sharing economy. Seven firms were selected and awarded with a financial contribution of 20,000 € each and a nine months incubation program at FabriQ<sup>141</sup>. As at February 2016, seventy-four people have been counted as employees as a result of the two calls of ideas (*Ivi.*).

The selected projects have included startups operating in different sectors – from wearable technologies to the sharing economy– and cutting across different

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<sup>139</sup> For example, risk capital is more difficult to gather for startups with a social goal because of a generally more limited profitability of their business model. It is for this reason that the typology “innovative startup with a social goal” has been introduced by the Italian legislator which, until the recent Budget Law of 2017, provided higher fiscal incentives for investments in enterprises pursuing a social aim compared to “regular” innovative startups.

<sup>140</sup> The first call for ideas defined social impact as the creation of “new models, whether public or private, improving the efficacy and efficiency of social services on the supply side, limiting social costs sustained by citizens, without the worsening of their quality” (see, for further details, the slides of the press conference for the inauguration of FabriQ available at: <<http://bit.ly/2EZ9NCV>> [Accessed 15 February]).

<sup>141</sup> Further information on the call are available on FabriQ website at: <<https://bit.ly/2Ka7SKN>> [Accessed 25 February 2018].

fields of interest –from sports to music, from corporate welfare to food waste– as well as targeting different publics –from elderlies to disabled people, from students to parents.

Thus, in spite of general claims of “employment inclusion” or “social impact” *on the socio-economic fabric at the neighborhood level* and with reference to this specific project, social innovation has emerged, building on Brenner *et al.*’s sharp definition of neoliberalism (2011, p. 184), as a “promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested” concept. Such inconsistency pertains to anything belying a social outcome –that is something implying a definition of social good, from startups to policies. Indeed, according to which criteria should social innovation, social inclusion, social impact be assessed on? Moreover, what does “success” mean in these cases?

A sort of ambiguity pertaining the manifest rationale belying the described public initiative, has emerged. On the one hand, social impact has been discursively framed as a result of the territorial presence of innovative businesses in terms of employment and growth spillovers on the local fabric which, however, displays a weak knowledge-based economy. On the other, social impact is associated by *default* with innovative forms of entrepreneurship which, however, ground themselves on fragile bases as they customarily encounter organizational, financial and logistical difficulties to survive on the market, not to mention to thrive from an economic point of view. Differently put, innovation and technology have oscillated from representing anti-poverty measures to being forces with a wide-reaching capacity –economically, socially, culturally– whose positive outcomes, though, are more often invoked than assessed.

In the words of one organization’s managerial figure (June 2016), the value of FabriQ should be assessed on a different level:

“I am a little skeptical to define FabriQ as an incubator because it is not. Among the various actions endorsed, occupation is not the main outcome we envisage to generate –even though many of the startups that have gone through our calls are ‘alive’<sup>142</sup>. The startup

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<sup>142</sup> It is interesting to note how what is often valued as an issue i.e. low mortality of startups, has been here considered as a positive outcome –an argument which has been frequently employed by policy-makers to assess the “success” rate of policy-initiatives on innovative entrepreneurship (see, for example, Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, 2017; de Bortoli, 2017).

‘world’ is a very particular and aleatory one. We focus more on increasing competencies to favor self-entrepreneurship”.

This different interpretation offered by the interviewee on FabriQ’s mission emphasizes the pedagogical logic sustaining the initiative, a characteristic which finds echoes in other public actions by the Municipality such as “MYC–*Milan Young Citizens: la partecipazione dei giovani al futuro della città*” (in English: MYC: youth participation in the future of the city) and which underpins the saliency of organizational spaces (of which FabriQ is an example).

On this point, it is also worth mentioning Base Milano, a hybrid hub for entrepreneurial and cultural activities inaugurated in Spring 2016 at the former Ansaldo plant where “engines, train carriages and tramways” were produced between the 1960s and 1980s –as the organization’s website reports<sup>143</sup>. Symbolizing the industrial past of the city, the area was sold in 1989 to the Municipality on the obligation that the designated use would have been activities of cultural significance. In 2014, following a public bid issued by the Office, part of the area<sup>144</sup> has been assigned to a temporary joint venture (in Italian: “*associazione temporanea di imprese-ATI*) for the creation of what is now known as “Base Milano”. Located in the Tortona district, a newly trendy design and fashion “spot” of the city, this hybrid space hosts co-working spaces, a residence for “talented” individuals called “*casabase*”, a “*bistro-bar*” and it also offers, in light of its extended surface area of 6,000 squared meters (soon to be doubled), a venue rental service. If the renovation of Base has witnessed a consistent economic commitment by the local administration (1.8 million € with 3.45 million € to be additionally invested in the near future; Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 5)<sup>145</sup>, the management refers to the previously mentioned *ad-hoc* constituted social enterprise, gathering private and public actors (Arci, esterni, H+, Avanzi and Make a Cube).

Such investments in innovative workplace and activities confirm the Municipality’s interest to leverage upon spaces of creativity and innovation to reach its political ends. However, it is also demonstrative of the correspondence

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<sup>143</sup> Further details are available at: <<http://base.milano.it/en/about/>> [Accessed 8 January 2018].

<sup>144</sup> Other parts of the site have been assigned to Teatro alla Scala and MUDEC, Museum of Culture, inaugurated in 2015.

<sup>145</sup> The renovation of Base has been co-financed by the Municipality and third-party bodies; these latter have invested 2,7 million € so far and they are expected to commit for 7 million € in the second round of investment (Comune di Milano, 2016, p. 5).

between political ends and space, echoing Michel Foucault's description of ours as an epoch of space –literally obsessed by space (Foucault, 2010).

The ways through which the range of actions and projects have been realized by the Office, reflect the popular ecological metaphor of the ecosystem. The previously described initiatives of FabriQ and Base are good examples of such public management approach which limits the involvement of the administration to the allocation of vacant spaces and to the general definition of their uses (in the material and figurative sense of the term), though conferring their management to third parties.

On a project-base, the administration has partnered with various actors, all with a different stake at play “in the game of innovation” (The Report, 2012c p. 120): public and private institutions such as universities (e.g. the Polytechnic University of Milan and Bocconi University), financial institutions and banking foundations (e.g. Cariplo Foundation), professional associations and the local Chamber of Commerce, a wide spectrum of profit and not-for-profit actors as well as national and international institutions (e.g. Brodolini Foundation or NYCED–New York City Economic Development Corporation).

The ecosystem has thus corresponded to a strategic territorial entity defined as the sum of:

“the relationships among the components of an economic system that interact to generate innovation. [...] A system that fosters the development of new ideas and knowledge exchange, the creation and enhancement of new skills, and business startup” (Sgaragli and Montanari, 2016, p. 4).

Building on this functionalist perspective, the ecosystem has also affirmed itself as a distinctive politics of governing and being i.e. a governmental approach whose aim is to set “those specific conditions, spaces, tools, and investments in knowledge and innovation [that] may become key factors to change the destiny of a neighborhood, a community or a city” (*Ibid.*, p. 3). In the form of a “fate changer”, the ecosystem has gained significance as a practice for governing that centers on the technology “innovation” in all of its diverse significations.

The *fil rouge* linking the examined set of public initiatives has been simultaneously characterized by two elements.

First, the political methodologies employed have aimed to legitimize existing collective trends. This leads us back to what the concept of ecosystem entails. The term implies that places should be designed in a certain way, thus displaying certain qualities and managed accordingly to them. “Nurturing innovation” here implies that a critical threshold of diffusion (of innovation) has to be reached within the urban space, so that the territory in its integrity turns innovative. However, this passage occurs through a sort of fictitious move of name change and renaming objects: the city gets diffusively innovative by means of acts of acknowledgement of certain *existing* social facts as innovative. Differently put, through a circular and cumulative process first built on the “diagnosis” or, to use a widely-used cartographic term in public policy circles, “mapping” of actors and needs<sup>146</sup>, places gain a sort of public authority over the topic by projecting a renewed “up to the times” public image based on novel linguistic grounds. This is a first analytic lens through which to interpret the set of initiatives put in place by the Office.

Second, the management techniques adopted by Office have planned to activate “innovative” attitudes across the whole spectrum of citizenship.

If language encodes a different kind of relationships with and grasps over reality, the metaphor “eco-system” expresses the idea of open innovation with innovation that vertically crosses all the components of the system –from the highest government authorities to, for example, incubators and co-working spaces, down until it reaches ordinary citizens.

Thus, the concept prescribes a network building capacity on the side of places which should be intent-oriented and adaptable to internal and external changes. That is to say that places are thought as systems which are internally composed of diverse (in hierarchy and scope) interconnected elements, simultaneously “wired up” to the world (The Report, 2012c, pp. 120-121). Configured as an adaptive platform (*Ivi.*), the territory turns innovative when each of its components features internal dynamism and strategic openness to the outside as constitutive traits, and shares the system’s goal.

On this note, it is suggestive what Mario, a startup entrepreneur in his mid-fifties, told me while reflecting on the social function played by incubators and co-working spaces: “If you want a functioning system, it has to become a social

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<sup>146</sup> On contemporary cartography, see Enthoven (2016).

system and the new paradigm of exchange... the contemporary spirit lays in the *network* (emphasis added)” (Turin, May 2016). Offering a Marxist interpretation of the innovation phenomenon, Mario’s analysis reminded of what Manuel Castells argued on the relationship between space and society: “space does not reflect society, it expresses it, it is a fundamental dimension of society, inseparable from the overall process of social organization and social change (Castells, 2004, p. 83).

This second analytic lens offers a way to interpret the importance conferred by the Office to organizational spaces of different kind. These spaces express the meaning of the written line which has been used, drawing upon Collier and Ong (2005), in the introduction of this work: innovation is a mobile technology that *territorializes* in local assemblages. Indeed, the verb “to territorialize” implies an action of material and figurative modification of the territorial morphology –and incubators, accelerators, co-working spaces, fab-labs and maker-spaces– have been chosen by the Office as *elective spatialities of action* to this end.

Materially enacting innovation, such organizational spaces have been publicly praised as sites of possibility, encounter, collaboration and empowerment, ideally aggregating individuals differently engaged in innovative practices –or about to do so. They have also materialized what belies to innovation: “the transformation of both the ways a society meets its members’ needs, and the modalities and interactions with which it finds out these responses (Sgaragli and Montanari, 2016, p. 3).

However, coherently with the concept of ecosystem –whose introduction and diffusion in the public discourse expresses the political intention to transform the territory– what happens inside such spaces “goes on” in the city’s streets: their walls have been designed to be porous since innovation is –the discourse goes on, an open process which does not foster behind “doors closed”. “Learning becomes a lifestyle” –said a speaker at Milano City Maker– and the city is configured as a “field of diffused and continuous micro-learning experiences” with “the Mayor as a *deejay* (emphasis added), playing a music that aggregates”.

### **3.5 Discrepancies: “a startup is whatever”**

A symbolic “burden” placed upon active citizens (see Marinetto, 2003) operating in facilitating networks, is emerging and its appearance is intimately connected to a kind of politics that has been progressively conceived as “a *prototyping policy*

(emphasis added)”<sup>147</sup>. This salient anthropological trait swings from a matter of citizenship to the realm of the economy and back. Such ambiguity has belied the approach enacted by Milan public administration, echoing the recommendations of *Restart, Italia!* and centering the public legitimacy of its political actions on the loose signifiers “startup” and “innovation”.

As far as the economy is concerns, relatively small business entities with relatively small financial capabilities –which are publicly represented by *default* as “innovators” (Task Force, 2012a, p. 11), are conferred an extraordinary symbolic power. They are imagined capable of shaping in “the good and the bad” the country’s future and of solving broader societal problems of our times.

This marks a paradoxical element in the discursive practice of innovation that Carolina Bandinelli (2015) similarly noted in her study on social entrepreneurship. Tied to structural issues, such problems do not appear “fixable” by one or few individuals with limited power as “innovators” are. However, the economy is just one side of the story –as Milan’s case has made clear.

Asked about his engagement in the Task Force, Mr. Fabio described it as “an intelligent mechanism of consultation to take non-stupid decisions” (Turin, June 2016). The ambitions, he recalled, were high: intercepting an international trend by acknowledging emerging meaningful socio-economic experiences to *restart* –culturally, politically and economically– the country. Understood by Mr. Fabio as a strategic opportunity for the newly appointed Monti’s government to push the country back into the circuit of global capital, the outcome we are left with is:

“a mixture of echoes and international suggestions, with an Italian personality that is emerging”.

A critical analysis on the available data raises a note of caution in spite of the enthusiastic tones which have been publicly adopted. Italian startups tend not to fail as much as the orthodox “wisdom” suggests they should: the mortality rate is extremely low (3.2 per cent as at June 30, 2017 compared to the previous year) and almost 90 percent of startups constituted in 2013 are still active in 2017 (see Ministry of Economic Development, 2017, pp. 33-38). They are “zombies” –as

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<sup>147</sup> The expression was coined by a public officer of the Municipality of Milan at a private event that celebrated the conclusion of an international scaling program held in Milan in June 2016. The program was sponsored by local and international financial players and organized through a public-private partnership at the EU level, involving a conspicuous number of promising socially innovative startup in need to scale-up.

insiders normally describe them. This implies that the available statistical data are hardly symptomatic of economic innovation. Rather, they are illustrative of the diffusion of *innovative practices* as legally defined. Considering other indicators such as weak effects on employment growth or limited and mostly early-stage risk capital investments<sup>148</sup> (coupled with customary practices adopted by investors<sup>149</sup>), the rationality behind the political efforts and the consistency of its founding economic logic might be questioned. Whether startups are flywheels of the economy or not does not concern this study, but the inconsistencies in the usage of words do clash and do create some lines of force (Foucault, 2009, p. 3) *vis à vis* the imperative discourse that *created* them: what is a startup then, if it is does not generate much economic innovation?

“Whatever modern thing made by youth”, Mr. Fabio answered. Since the outcome in terms of occupation and economic growth have been limited due to a structural lack of capital financing, he located the validity and impact of the set of initiatives envisaged by the Task Force on the cultural side, describing its effects as follows:

“a widespread attitude to activate youth through guidance in order to free the incredible energies that young people do have: it is not just about doing business but rather to imagine oneself as *an active subject* (emphasis added), one that transposes ‘words’ into tangible things”.

In a similar fashion, Mr. Edoardo, another member of the Task Force to which I previously referred to, added:

“the entrepreneur has been legitimized as a contemporary hero and has gained respect, dropping the banner of the enemy of people, as the one that produces wellbeing for all. But more simply put, the

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<sup>148</sup> On this aspect, Italy lags considerably behind other EU countries and the USA. The large majority of financial players are located in the Northern part of the country, the most important center being the city of Milan with some exceptions to be found in Rome. Thus, companies with scalable and replicable business models will likely gather seed investments locally and for subsequent rounds they will look for other financial interlocutors which are unlikely to be found in Italy. What such scenario lead (e.g. in the case of an acquisition from a foreign company or investment by a foreign venture capital fund) in terms of economic returns for the local economy is an open question that this study does not address, but that it would be worthy to investigate further.

<sup>149</sup> For example, the “one-hour-commute” rule of investors as a sensical principle for investing and the unlikelihood that startup founders earn a regular income.

entrepreneur is the archetype of pulling yourself together and get by” (July 2016).

Thus, in contemporary times, innovation is not “business as usual” and this is so for two reasons. On one side, it is not unusual that it is not, strictly speaking, a matter of business. On the other side, doing business and being entrepreneurial has become a way to act politically.

With reference to the case of Milan, innovation has become “*a diffused political subjectivity* (emphasis added)” –in the words of Cristina Tajani (Milano City Makers, Milan, March 2016). This kind of conduct has been consciously validated by the government, foreseeing a qualitative shift in the relationship between citizens, politics and space.

From the point of view of ontology, innovation has been presented both an *explanandum* and *explanans*: it has featured as the “thing” to be explained and what explained the *explanandum*. It has also been the wishful object to chase and the politics to chase it. However, the logics has appeared even more twisted than that, since the wishful object to chase already existed.

To better understand this point, it is useful to refer to the expression “*innovatori diffusi*” (in English: “*diffused innovators*”) which powerfully exemplifies such tautology by emphasizing the “everyday” belying to innovation when it gains the form of a collective ritual. The expression, part of the title of the event Milano City Makers to which I have previously referred, has begun to circulate in the local public discourse during the last period of Mrs. Tajani’s first mandate.

On the one hand, “*innovatori diffusi*” pictures the individual as *a some-body subjected to innovation*: he or she is an *innovator*. This is to say that innovation has been clearly rationalized as a form of power that qualified subjectivity.

In this regard, social innovation has expressed precisely “a form of intervention of the public service that legitimizes, acknowledges and is coherent with *spontaneously emerging territorial demands and vocations* (emphasis added)” (Tajani, Milan, January 2016)<sup>150</sup>. Differently stated, in the case of Milan,

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<sup>150</sup> The quote belongs to Deputy Mayor Tajani, guest speaker at the event “*Imprenditorialità e politiche sociali. Tra startup, impatto sociale e sviluppo del territorio*” (in English: “Entrepreneurship and social policies: startups, social impact and territorial development”) held in Milan in late January 2016 at Società Umanitaria and organized by FabriQ.

to govern has entailed acts of recognition of “how cities work in real life” (Jacobs, 1961) and of what citizens do and want to do.

On the other hand, in the expression “*innovatori diffusi*”, innovation corresponds to a widespread and socially scattered practice: an array of bodily activities –but even more, a form of being– whose field of practice is the city, waiting to be recognized. The passage from technique to technology of power sustains such shift: innovation does not merely correspond to the execution of a particular task or the outcome of an action. It is not an episodic fact, it is rather the structure, “what stays beneath” the epiphenomena i.e. the by-product of a larger substance (Caruso, 1969, p. 15).

Innovation, therefore, has centered its power upon the possibility of ambiguity that pertains to it. It is precisely through the political use of such inherent ambiguity that the signifying chain where the signifier “innovation” operates has been “stretched” across different semantic domains by Milan’s administrators. Thus, the discursive practice of innovation belies a tautology and the governing practice alleged to it, has increasingly corresponded to a sort of symptomatology of society: an imaginary kind of politics as it will be further shown, though lacking imagination.

### 3.6 Conclusion

The present chapter has explored the making of a powerful new public discourse, and the ways through which it has been produced and managed, turning into a discursive practice bearing implications on how politics, space and subjects are conceived. To do so, the analysis has paid attention to the contemporary Italian and Milanese practices of government enacted to regulate, define and enhance the diffusion of innovation as an economic and social “tool” of collective prosperity. This has been done to analyze three interrelated elements of the discursive practice of innovation: one concerning the style of governmental action, one related to spatial morphology as a condition of existence for the technology “innovation” and last, it has introduced the issue pertaining to subject formation that it will be deepened in the following chapters.

The concept “startup” has corresponded to the departing point of analysis as it was the first and evident outcome of the *event* from which the study has moved from. However, the chapter has broadened the reflection on innovation –which has emerged as a contested discourse, with multiple signification, uses and

inflation and different consequences on the relationship between citizenship and politics.

In next chapter, the discursive practice of innovation is explored as *it was taught* in one of its meaningful spaces of territorialization, Core. In the memories of the organization's founders, Core produced a pedagogical effect on the city itself as "we have literally introduced a *new language* (emphasis added)" (Clelia, founding and board member, June 2016), this one being the language of innovation.

## Chapter 4

# The materiality of innovation: space and objects

### 4.1 Introduction

A celebratory video circulating on the web informs the viewer that “at Core, people have been *eating, sleeping, dancing* and *making love* (emphasis added)”. “...I have actually known people that did so”, emphatically argued Olivia, recalling with passion, hints of Core’s history (content manager at Core and founding member, March 2017).

Since its founding in 2010, the conscious idea behind Core’s design has been articulated as a matter of subjective and collective methodology. As the first co-working space opened in Milan, Core has been a place with a very strong relational understanding of itself *vis à vis* the city and the world. Clelia, a “pioneer of the first hour”, recalled that “back in those days Milan was a different city than it is today” (June 2016). Described as closed-minded and scared of itself, acting largely passively towards the future, the urban space as a site of the existent and of the possible was part of Core’s problematization and self-reflection from the very beginning. Indeed, Core thought of itself as a *porous* organization yet to be, an idea that was in line with the spirit of contemporary times.

Many fictitious divisions between what belongs to the “economy” or “society” blur once the visitor accesses Core. This points intelligibly towards the materiality of the space and its ability to make possible new types of association and walkable paths for human beings. “The new language”, which Core laid claims to in Milan, immediately posed a matter of material organization and design in its founders’ memories.

Images of the “old” factory (with its rigid and inflexible organization of labor) as well the bureaucratic soul of white-collar workers and environments described by William Whyte in his *The Organization Man* originally published in 1956 are residual memories of the past for many, at least idealistically. Typifying a precise historical period spanning several decades of the last century, these images have been progressively substituted in the collective consciousness by others. These new images do not necessarily correspond to a representative reality of contemporary organizational spaces, but they are nevertheless popularly lively and tagged as a fascinating frontier of desirable working environments. Google’s offices or WeWork, a known chain of co-working spaces in the USA, are examples in the collective consciousness in this sense. Widely circulating on national and global media, such images of progressive working environments, arguably epitomize the organizational frontiers of contemporary capital (Fisher and Downey, 2005). Designed in a certain manner, these organizational spaces evoke associations like “creativity”, “innovation”, “knowledge-economy”, “sharing”, “wealth”, to provide an immediate visual sense of the qualities and features of those companies.

As a means through which *to know the world*, an image condenses on itself and successfully functions through implied information. Efficacy, trustworthiness and collective acceptance is reached when the psychic associations an image generates, whether consciously or unconsciously, are meaningful and immediately understandable to the viewer. In other words, it evokes a smooth logic that does not require much thinking to get to the desired point.

Our image is one of an open and interactive space wherein “open” describes the space as it relates to the outside world and hints at a particular kind of subject and social process. The implied information it relies upon relates to an idea on what development *looks like* in advanced capitalist societies as well as *how* it is generated. However, it also suggests how the conception of the *vital* space and its “social” extension has evolved. “People, planet and profit”, is how Clelia

described this relational rationality (June 2016) and desire for *systemic* change informing Core's agency.

At the turn of the century, despite the global but largely American “dot-com” hype and bust, the Italian variant of the New Economy was socially confined to a small group of passionate professionals. Their pioneering voice of a futuristic new way of working and living was relatively limited (Gennaro, freelancer, May 2016), and the appeal they exerted on society was contained. Given that the technologies of production (Foucault, 1988, p. 18) were less socially diffused than today, the myth surrounding them and the collective significance of the pioneers' acting were contained to a few circles in Italy. In Foucault's analytic terms, the contemporary technologies of sign system, of power and of the self as we currently experience them, were still weak in their ability to conduct individuals. These technologies made sense for relatively few and “the social and material construction of control” (Dale, 2005) contingent to such practices, was largely not existent.

Things have changed, however, and that envisaged future is closer. As argued in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, the collective perception on innovative practices, technologies, methods and techniques, has evolved. These have gained public legitimacy both as signs of desirable change and as mirrors of change itself. In this regard, civic, political and institutional interests have mounted significantly in recent years, particularly following the global economic crisis. As a result, futuristic images of work and life have increasingly grounded themselves into reality and became empirically observable.

The discursive practice of innovation sees experimentation without planning and expression for its own sake as constitutive elements. However, innovative practices are not taking place in a “void” nor “up in the air” – even if innovation is popularly represented as a mysterious and serendipitous process. As already argued in the introduction of this work, a discourse happens *somewhere*, it materially looks like *something* and it is embodied by *someone*: otherwise, how could one claim that innovation exists?

The organization of working environments has evolved radically, also impacting the perception of time, both elements –space and time– that are functional to precise historically contingent pedagogical ends<sup>151</sup>.

If this is the case, the material processes for the discourse’s public appearance, what Karen Dale named “the reciprocal elements of the ongoing social-material relationship” (2005), can be unpacked. To such ends, this chapter intends to analyze the spatial pedagogy implemented by Core. Described as a “marvelous, exciting, surprising, comforting” crossroad of diverse entrepreneurial selves, Core has helped shape, produce and circulate a discursive cultural<sup>152</sup> vanguard in contemporary Milan *contingently on material processes*. Indeed, despite the inherent “nature” of being a place of work, it was described by its inhabitants as “home”, evoking images of a familiar place with no fear of expression –a *qualitative* trait of organizational change that the introductory quote illustrates. In this regard, Core should be conceived as a microcosm that reflects contemporary changes in work and business, world-views and ways of life, expressing a tension between past and present, local and universal (Kunda, 2005, p. viii) and highlighting a new relationship with space and time. In Mandelbrot’s mathematical terms, Core is a fractal social phenomenon –a small portion of a much larger entirety. If observed closely, its roughness belies a larger cultural tendency taking shape and *becoming* collectively commonsensical.

Throughout the chapter, close attention is paid to objects and spatial configuration. The organizational space becomes the main character and the object of inquiry in light of the ethnographic observation conducted within itself. For our case study, drawing upon Kale (2005), it is the “harmonic” whole as a result of the combined and context-dependent performance of discrete objects, that produces certain effects on bodies rather than a single artifact or technology<sup>153</sup>. Nevertheless, to eventually reach the point of displaying

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<sup>151</sup> It is pertinent to remind the etymology of the term “pedagogy”: παιδαγωγία derives from ancient Greek and it literally means *to conduct (αγω) a child (παις, παιδος)*.

<sup>152</sup> Culture is, for the present study, conceptualized as a battlefield system of collectively meaningful beliefs, methodologies and rules circumscribing our knowledge (i.e. *what* is knowable and *how* is knowable) on many aspects, of which emotions are an important part (i.e. *what* is felt and *how* it is so) as they are means through which we collectively convey values to “things” and facts.

<sup>153</sup> This line points towards the difference between the present study’s methodological approach on one side and Actor-Network Theory (ANT)’s and Science and Technology Studies (STS)’s on the other. Informed by ANT’s and STS’s skeptical attitude towards the dichotomy objects-subjects, this analysis does not focus neither on a particular mediated agent nor technology.

intelligibly how a certain discourse circulates by means of spatial rhetoric, single objects or specific spatial metaphors still hold a certain importance. Differently put, the aim is to retrace the material enactment of the discourse of innovation by means of organizational rhetoric: that is to say, how are material processes and things communicating discourse, alongside the more manifest “discursive discourse”? Thus, the issue lays in tracing a connection between a “*thing*” and “*other things*”, *some words and a body*. The body –which *belongs* to the subject but no less to discourses and practices (Foucault, 2003)– will be analyzed in Chapter 5.

The dreaminess of the organizational space and the spatial pedagogy of Core is best examined through three different lenses: its educational promises, its relationship to the external world and its design<sup>154</sup>. Informed by a psychoanalytic turn in geography (Pile and Kingsbury, 2014), the space is conceived similarly to a dream i.e. an overdetermined “connective medium” (Kingsbury, 2008, p. 112) of social, cultural, political elements that are condensed, displaced, represented and revised. As Steve Pile (2005) noted, the reference to the dream allows us to acknowledge the role of the psyche in the production of space and it allows to account for the dynamic interaction between the psyche that designs the space and the space itself. If the dream space, shaped by unconscious and conscious drives, constitutes the general point of observation and a symbolic compass, the Freudian concept of the day-dream is analytically employed in the last part of the chapter as a tool to unpack the message communicated by Core.

The chapter is structured as follows: following this introduction, paragraph 4.2 analyzes, drawing from the ethnographic observation conducted within, the rhetoric of Core with reference to what it promised and the contextual assumptions its effectiveness, trustworthiness and functioning relied upon. Paragraph 4.3 introduces the organizational space as a culturally significant *artifact*. The following sub-sections (4.3.1, 4.3.2, 4.3.3, 4.3.4, 4.3.5) are dedicated

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<sup>154</sup> A series of articles taken from “*L’educatore italiano*” (number 4, 1983) (Malservisi, 1983; Piazzoni, 1983, Alberti, 1983) and from “*Abitare con i bambini*”(1982; in english: “Living with children”), an edited book by the known Swiss designer, Linda Burkhardt (in particular, the contributions of Gunter Otto and Bruno Bettelheim) have been particularly useful in this regard as they have made intelligible what a good learning environment should look like. Also, from the perspective of an history of knowledge, the timing of those articles is interesting. Indeed, the *materialization* of the contemporary (mainly Western) *episteme*, defining the relationships with ourselves and others as well as objects, space and time, may be traced back to the years 1980s: during such period, knowledges from various disciplines have converged on a set of notions on the “nature” of certain objects as “subject”, “politics” and “space” (Foucault, 2008).

to specific elements of Core's spatial configuration, their linkages with the discursive field of innovation and the material effects they produce.

## 4.2 The organizational space: premises and promises

The educational promises put forth by Core departed from a vision of systemic transformation<sup>155</sup>, namely "to change the world" through social innovation. This was defined as "an approach to work and to life" and Core's value proposition was to be a place that "made things happen, not randomly but through a methodology" (Clelia, founding and board member, June 2016).

In light of that, Core defined its reason for being in relationship to larger ensembles, namely Milan and the world. Interpreted as imaginary benchmarks of subjective activation, a reference to these spatialities conveyed the organizational ideal that "your job does not end once you have finished working and similarly its effects are not limited". Ideally, this narrative acted at the subjective level in two ways: first, subjects were encouraged to feel responsible for their actions and second, they were empowered to feel that they were a part of an ongoing process of global change.

Core was intended to be a place in which the city's issues and needs were made visible. However, reflection and action were also contextual to times of globalization: this contributed to a relational view of scales as "international contents were continuously entering the conversation" (*Ibid.*) and global trends were embraced. Differently put, Core performed the global technology "innovation". "Global" was discursively mobilized as a nebulous but powerful metaphor of being. Its concreteness was manifested in the sense that "here" was understandable only if related to "there", describing much wider imaginary geographies to which individuals and the organization were exposed. Discursively, to perform "innovation is a global phenomenon" implied a sort of "*they* (virtuous) versus *us* (sluggish)" dichotomy. "Global" imposed a sentiment of catching-up, comparison and imitation that found legitimacy in an argument that often sounded: "they are doing it, thus we should do it". Stated differently, Core sought to bring *that* "global" here.

At the same time, despite its vagueness, the global "there" displayed a precise geography and provided a context for tangible "success stories", where the

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<sup>155</sup> A systemic change that was already ongoing in some places around the world and envisaged as desirable at the local level.

process of change was already happening: paradigmatic cases, mostly located in North America –such as the world-famous Silicon Valley, San Francisco, New York, Seattle, Austin, Toronto, London, were present and perceivable at Core, even without being outspokenly mentioned. Core’s *raison d’être* nurtured itself and strengthened its public legitimacy by mean of recurrent allusions to “elsewhere”, through words or more silently through spatial rhetoric.

Complementary to that, Core also provided “an occasion for a diverse range of people to meet”. Indeed, it sought to include the largest possible number of entrepreneurially engaged individuals, “all potential innovators”, in the organizational language, positively impacting the world –or about to do so– through their actions. Since its founding onwards, Core has targeted diverse publics engaged in socially-innovative practices, a broad contested label whose signification evolved throughout the years, significantly reflecting organizational and contextual changes.

These broader educational premises and promises were transposed into appreciable services i.e. co-working services and incubation programs. Both reflected the opportunity “to work together, rather than working in the same place” (Arturo, startup entrepreneur, March 2016), pivoting on the ideas of *sharing knowledge* and *engaging others*, either systematically (as in training) or “serendipitously” (chance encounters in an open space).

In addition, a rich program of events complemented Core’s educational premise: to create a place of knowledge exchange and continuous learning characterized by a circular temporality. “Core was a jungle, I used to metaphorically vine swing, getting closer to my own interests”, recalled Lucia (May 2016)<sup>156</sup>, responsible of environmental and sustainability projects at a local social enterprise.

In the general economy of Core’s rhetoric, the event of the global economic crisis (and its long-lasting effects) functioned as a manifest and irrefutable evidence of the organization’s credibility centered upon the assumption of a non-postponable necessity for systemic change. However, to actively counterbalance emotional tensions, social anxiety and angst about the future, Core had to clearly

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<sup>156</sup> Lucia mentioned this words with regard to the “old” Core, while enthusiastically reminding the “old times”. An issue of authenticity on what Core was (or should have been) and what innovation meant, came up continuously throughout the ethnography and Chapter 5 will address these theme in greater details.

communicate that the change it proposed was, indeed, possible. Both the “crisis” and the “global elsewhere” functioned as specters lingering over Core’s business activity and implicitly reinforced, even without being named, the *meaningfulness* and the *rationality* of its argument. The space had to actively *reassure* its members that innovation<sup>157</sup> was within reach.

In a complementary manner, Core’s narrative strategically converged on an elective subject, namely the change-maker as an agent of local change with a global reach, both as an individual and as part of a larger community. As an effect of this educational promise, the space had to *acknowledge* the importance of individuals by conveying the message: “your voice and action counts, we are waiting for you”.

To accomplish this, the environment had to be reassuring, enjoyable, fun, symbolically placing the individual at the center: a lived hive of *ideas, ideals and inventors*, preventing feelings of disaffection or alienation. Differently put, the space had to prove itself up to the task of realizing the expectations and promises it made (Malservisi, 1983).

This brief description points towards a constitutive ambiguity of Core, “a beautiful object, but also a very complicated one”, according to its CEO (February 2016). From the management perspective, the difficulty was to communicate what Core did as well as its identity and such tension was frequently debated<sup>158</sup>. A similar ambiguity was observable in the accounts of Core’s members: in many cases, Core was described as an empowering space rather than as an enterprise selling a variety of services (e.g. memberships, spaces and training) to be competitive on the market. Such observation, that will be explored in greater

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<sup>157</sup> The term “innovation” was employed as a synonym of “change” in Core’s narrative.

<sup>158</sup> Throughout the ethnography, I participated to four team meetings upon invitation. To my knowledge, a team meeting was held once a month and an overview of the management situation was there discussed. One of the topic, emerged also in many individual interviews as well as in numerous informal exchanges with organizational figures, was the contested identity of Core. The issue was both of a practical nature –was it a co-working space, a startup incubator or an event organizer?, and of a philosophical one –was it only a “business model” or something more? Intertwined together, the former difficulty was spelled out in terms Core’s positioning *vis à vis* the market and reflected an understanding of itself as an enterprise. The latter concerned more its “social” mission, legacy of its founding history wherein Core was described as a space for collective engagement. It is important to note that Core is legally registered as an enterprise since 2010, but in the accounts of some of its founding members, it was not run as if it was an enterprise for a long time. It is symptomatic, in this regard, the fact Core was economically unsustainable until recently and it has become so following a change in management and a consequent organizational restructuring that coupled with profound effects on its identity.

details, is suggestive of Core's success in communicating its educational promises in a way that was functional to its core business intent. More importantly, it strongly suggests exploring the pivotal elements of Core's organizational pedagogy: spatial acts of reassurance and recognition.

### 4.3 Welcome to Core!

Core was founded in 2009 by the collective will and financial "generosity" of few visionaries according to the official narrative. The organizational space was located in a central and well-connected part of Milan and, more precisely, in the Sarpi neighborhood. Commonly known as the "Chinatown" of Milan, the neighborhood "was not as you see it today" –Olivia told me as we strolled through its main street full of ethnic commercial activities. Core was emotionally represented as the result of a collective action that took shape by mean of a co-design process made of "post-it, recycled furniture and long days of collective thinking and work" (*Ibid.*).

A co-design process is notably a way to collectively personalize the environment by providing an intimate flavor: time, energies and individual efforts materialize in the spatial configuration that, as an outcome, ultimately feels ideally *yours* and *ours* at the same time. As a symbolic memory, these effects have been long-lasting at the level of Core's ideal representation and narrative of itself.

"so, you have to say that we are part of a global network and the first space of this kind has opened many years ago out of the idea of a group of friends...and these are the concepts that you have to use to convey the message of who we are: 'community', 'sharing', 'networking', 'contact', 'connection'. Depending on the person you are talking to, it may be worth to mention that *our space is malleable* (emphasis added) as it was conceived through a co-design process and recycling materials were used for its creation. Show around the space and inform the visitor of the different membership options".

Margherita, responsible for many aspects of the care of Core's space, trained me as a Host on the so-called "coffee talk" in June 2016. These "coffee talks" introduced individuals to Core and presented those potentially interested in renting a desk or in one of the services offered, the advantages "to enter the community". It corresponded to an informal semi-structured script, flexible enough to adapt to the visitor's interests and performed throughout a guided tour

of the space, ending in the kitchen with a complementary cup of coffee, courtesy of Core to its potential consumer.

It was not unusual for visitors to offer a look of amazement during these first visits to Core. “It is the classical ‘wow’ effect”, argued Marica, Core’s incubation manager, commenting on the hypnotic impact the space had on those who visited. “I do not quite understand how, I cannot formalize my thoughts, but it is a place that asks you to stay<sup>159</sup>”, added Eleonora, a long-time member (entrepreneur, March 2016).

Vividly colored, carefully decorated and diversified in its uses, the organizational space covered approximately 500 squared meters. The way in was through a gated “garden” located in between two buildings. Beach chairs, seats and wood or metal tables were scattered throughout. The outside areas were landscaped with decorative plants and a big beach umbrella that provided shade for Core’s members and visitors engaging in different activities in summer times: working outdoor, taking a break from duties or simply hanging out.

A stylized skyline of Milan was drafted on the exterior white wall: the outline was shaded black to provide a stark contrast with the surrounding white walls. Above the “Duomo”, Milan’s iconic center, bubbles of different shapes emerged, each displaying a word: “innovation”, “creativity”, “water”, “sustainability”, “global”, “collaboration”, “talent”, “trust”, “irony”, “green”, “bio”, “ideas”. On the side of the sketched skyline, connected to stylized wires framing the “urban” drawing, a switch headed by the word “Core”, written in capital letters, was present and symbolically displaying the “light on”.

The glassed entrance doors provided an enticing view of the front desk and lively interior space. A monthly calendar of Core events, coherently organized around a central theme of collective engagement such as, for example, “cognitive power” or “smart city”, were colorfully displayed on it.

Entering the space, one was normally welcomed by the Host, a central organizational figure for Core’s daily functioning. The Host served as a silent guardian of the organizational space. Each morning, after opening, the Host made fresh coffee, stored the bathroom with toilet papers and paper towels, emptied the dish-washers and made sure that the kitchen space was cleaned for members and

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<sup>159</sup> The first time I entered Core, I had a similar sensation, namely of a space that “mobilizes and wants you there” (reflexive field notes, January /2016).

visitors alike. Cories were invited to rinse their dishes and place them in the dishwashers, but it was not unusual that they were left there –unwashed and sitting in the sink from earlier– for the Host to take care of each morning<sup>160</sup>.

These duties were repetitively carried out throughout the day as the space had to be fully livable, functioning and immaculate in presentation from early morning to late evening. Said Paolo, one of the host at Core, commenting on the purpose of running around after the “innovators”:

“as there are a lot of startup and they have a very busy schedule, they stay here until very late and they may come on Saturdays and Sundays. They just need to place the dishes in the dishwasher, but at times they do not do that. This is like home for them, at times working is your first home. There is no schedule, no “outside” to work. This is why the Host needs to put everything in order. The space needs to be clean, it would be a problem otherwise as it would not create a good vibe” (March 2016).

In addition to these tasks, Hosts watered the plants, arranged meeting rooms and served as Core’s receptionist. The main reception desk also served as a privileged site for the Host to observe the “in and out” activity at Core.

“Hosting”, in the organizational and culture, was an “art” that entailed simultaneously *controlling* (drawing from its etymology) and *taking good care* of the territory. Ideally, a different Host served each day, at times substituted by Core’s team members. The “*do ut des*” agreement was that an individual could volunteer to serve as a Host one-day per week in exchange for a “light” membership i.e. one-day weekly access to the co-working space and the ability to participate in its events.

In the first years of Core’s opening, “everybody was a Host”, enthusiastically recalled Lucia (May 2016). Early on, each Cory would volunteer in rotation to be a Host as it was not yet an institutionalized organizational position. The idea, very much reflecting Core’s founding history, was that co-workers would actively take care of their *own* space of work, a custom suggestive of an emotional attachment towards the space that in later years continued to evolve. Indeed, even if the personal engagement of its members with curation of the space softened, exposure to the powerful seduction of the internal environment still bore its fruits. The

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<sup>160</sup> This habit was also displayed by some members of the organizational team.

organizational space emerged not only as the most important driver of Cory's choice<sup>161</sup>, but as a "functional space *plus*", embodying a desirable way of being. Stated Giandomenico, guest speaker of an inspirational event held at Core, and head of a consulting company providing design-driven strategies for enterprise innovation:

"offices as homes reflecting a liquid work-life. They are not just cement and bricks: the office is transformed into a hybrid space, a space of relationship that substantially is a work *plus* (emphasis added)" (March 2016).

In this context, Core was generally qualified as a space, a network, an environment or an atmosphere rather than an office by its inhabitants. Some members were highly poetic in their descriptions of Core celebrating its energy, magnetism and power in defining one's disposition, image<sup>162</sup>, sense of freedom and will to work longer. "If they feel they belong, they will *bleed* (emphasis added) to carry out their projects in full", noted Paolo on the pivotal role that the space played with regards to work ethics.

Strong feelings towards Core were exhibited by everyone I talked to, whether through interviews or informal conversations. These emotions ranged from joy and excitement to disappointment or complaining. Nobody seemed *indifferent* to the organizational space and its educational promises. Sonia, the community manager, described the organization's manifest rationality as follows:

"the scope is to be a place of encounter wherein people may find other collaborators. To be poetic, *to make their dreams come true* (emphasis added)" (February 2016).

The organizational space, similar to a dream, corresponded to a condensed allusion of many things: Core translated a wish into spatial relationships and concrete artifacts and its dreaminess generated mixed feelings among members. Such intensified affectivity is also suggestive of how the individual's perception

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<sup>161</sup> Unsurprisingly so, given that they were buying a service that had to meet certain practical criteria in terms of services and geographical location.

<sup>162</sup> The influence exerted over one's own image and perception, coupled also with a social projection of oneself that might prove useful business-wise. On this note, Alessandro, an employee of a communication agency, argued the following: "the idea –i.e. that we are part of a network and that by belonging here we contribute to progress– is a feather in our cup in front of our clients" (interview, March 2016).

of the spatial structure must be investigated with reference to social dynamics that spatially rolled out –an aspect which will be later approached. “There is a correspondence between ‘space’ and ‘belonging’ at Core”, Fabrizio, a long-term member, said (entrepreneur, February 2016). Thus, reporting Doreen Massey’s famous claim:

“what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'” (Massey, 1994, p. 2).

#### 4.3.1 A malleable space

On the right corner of the entrance, a small waiting room was created featuring several garnet-colored armchairs and a *chaise longue*, very much recalling the Procrustean bed, belonging to the grand-mother of the original founder. A classical “Billy” bookcase rested against the wall as book-sharing was an activity unofficially endorsed by Core and available to its members. Various and diverse books were displayed, ranging from the business and environmental genres to novels and light readings –some were indexed but the majority were not yet. As Sonia argued: “book-sharing is still an unfinished and not urgent ongoing project that requires some time to be completed”. This comment also hinted at the fact that on a daily basis there were a number of other more important tasks that could not be postponed in order “keep the place running”.

A sliding door separated the waiting room from the “Sala Eden”, the largest room at Core that was used for meetings, events and (eventually) co-working. On the opposite side was another meeting room, the so-called “Sala Porthole”. This room was designed with a *movable* “wall” made of *recycled* windows and fixtures that, if need be, could be moved to create a much larger space.

A curved wall, officially named the “Cories wall”, exhibiting “flying” tags with pictures and engaging descriptions of the organizational team and members, guided the visitor to the main open co-working space<sup>163</sup>. This area was illuminated by subdued natural light through a glassed ceiling but mostly through

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<sup>163</sup> Members were warmly invited, at several times, to display themselves both on the physical “wall” and online (on Core’s website and intranet). In fact, a small minority (approximately fifty persons) compared to the total number of members Core claimed to have, decided to do so. However, there was no perception of emptiness on the “Cories’ wall” as well as all across the organizational space as purposefully no empty spaces were left.

artificial light. On a regular day, various working stations were arranged to create a functional and creative space of “stimulating chaos” for its inhabitants<sup>164</sup>.

When needed, this area was converted to the “Sala Cyber” for hosting larger events. Depending on the contingencies, the space materially “opened up” and transfigured itself into something else. For such events, working chairs and tables, plants and lamps were placed in storage closets and foldable seats arranged in an amphitheater configuration to create a central “do-it-yourself” (DIY) stage, where guests performed and a projector screen unfolded for.

Core had the general capacity to host seventy to one hundred co-workers spread out across its floors, but on any given day, excluding summer months, approximately fifty people inhabited the space. On the main floor, approximately fourteen desks of different sizes formed “islands” and “spicy desks”. “Islands” generally hosted small teams of three to five individuals working on similar projects (e.g. a startup, an association or a firm). Freelancers and other autonomous workers shared the location. Desks came in different shapes and colors: most were in natural wood or white and coupled with red, green or black ergonomic chairs with wheels. Lamps and small Ikea-style plants were placed on top. The walls were painted in white with the exception of the far back of the space. A huge white bookcase made of recycled materials spelling out “C.O.R.E” in red covered the entirety of the wall’s width.

Several steps away from the bookcase, a spiral metal staircase led to the upper level which was smaller than the ground floor and rather curiously shaped. Metal, plastic and glass were the materials used to confer the form of the second level, both structurally and aesthetically. Chairs, comfortable pillows and a big velvet sofa together with some cartoon tables that could be easily *disassembled* and *moved*, were present. More “spicy desks” were reserved for Cories holding a basic membership with day passes, with small white and red tags reserving their spots. The furniture allowed for different uses of the same space. On most days, the space appeared as described, inhabited by people busy working, holding meetings and relaxing, during the lunch break, on the sofa. On special occasions, the “space

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<sup>164</sup> The spatial disposition of desks reflected also the needs of co-workers and it was functional to assure the general livability of the space. For example, as there were no private rooms, co-workers that were repeatedly using the phone were placed in certain spots to limit undesirable externalities for others.

craft shuttle”<sup>165</sup> space transformed itself into something else. The width of the area was contained, providing a feeling of proximity and coziness suited well for relatively small educational or inspirational events that required some complicity and interaction. Built and designed by the owner, a Chinese architect, a short walk to its far end provided a panoramic view of the main floor and the shared “kitchen”, the beating heart of Core.

A third underground space, the basement, was accessible through a glassed narrow staircase located right behind the front desk at the entrance. The basement was accessible through an entry that *imposed* the visitor to cast a glance, even inattentively, towards a curious tall hand-crafted tree, a mirror and over the main co-working space and the kitchen. With a capacity of approximately fifteen to twenty people (four to five “islands” were located), the underground space had no natural light and it was quite humid throughout the year. Besides the desks, it hosted a small “Sala Crustacean”. Behind a row of curtains, a storage closet held materials needed for day-to-day operations and cleaning (toilet paper, cleaning materials, chairs etc.)<sup>166</sup>.

A sense of openness featured in the *mobile* structure of the space allowed it to be adaptable for many uses and needs. This sense openness coupled with additional features of enclosure and collaboration, featured as complementary elements in Core’s organizational ideal. To strengthen these idealized elements of the organization, beyond its structural favorable features, the space had to be *opened up* (Malservisi, 1983) through other means, when need be.

### 4.3.2 Opening up

Alongside openness, the space was able to express a sense of enclosure and collaboration that facilitated encounters and knowledge exchanges of any kind: from beauty tips to “contamination”, the act of sharing ideas and generating a business outcome<sup>167</sup>. As alluded to in the introduction, Core managed to so by

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<sup>165</sup> The invented name I employed in the ethnographic notebook to identify the raised floor was “space craft shuttle” or, in its short version, “shuttle”: the bizarre shape and structure and the physical proximity to the glassed transparent ceiling communicated a sense of rapture and projection towards the outside (more precisely, the sky).

<sup>166</sup> For its narrowness, it was described by co-workers as the least comfortable space to work from at Core.

<sup>167</sup> The concept, part of the Italian startup jargon, describes the process through which ideas are collectively turned into a startup. In its most popular use, it corresponds to knowledge exchange outcomes that encompass various types of business activities beyond startups (e.g. freelancing).

acting as a porous organization. Internally, porosity was conveyed by means of co-working practices, a stimulating visual environment that projected a sense of horizontal connectedness. However, in light of being a porous organization, the space also opened up preventing, in a sense, the need for its members to go outside.

Specifically, the co-working practice inherently entails individuals working side by side and, eventually, doing different things –a feature that was generally perceived as valuable. At times, it was a driving force behind choice, particularly for freelancers or startup entrepreneurs who often spent a considerable amount of their time working alone. The value of co-working spanned from “you do not feel a fool”, “you feel you have a career”, “everybody is a free electron in this peculiar environment”, “you don’t have to talk about work-related issues, but lighter topics” to “focused people around keeps you focused”. The co-working practice favored a sense of freedom and of enhanced productivity and it emerged as an antidote to loneliness and feelings of subjective inadequacy.

At other times, however, co-working was infused with anxiety because of the social expectations that came with it. In this sense, Luisa, a freelancer, described with subtle irony the world she encountered at Core:

“I felt like in Google: a super cool environment with different working rhythms and wherein you could cook. Very stimulating: you could confront yourself with a diverse humanity...slackers, human meteors launching ideas and then disappearing. It is a space that pushes you to confront yourself in different moments, a sort of forced sociality<sup>168</sup>...it took me one year to fit in” (April 2016).

Indeed, the premise “to turn small talks into ideas” importantly underpinned Core’s educational premises. In this regard, Massimiliano, a young startup entrepreneur, enthusiastically claimed:

“this is a *smart sharing* kind of space, there are neither formalisms nor office-hours to be respected, it is designed to valorize synergies

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<sup>168</sup> During the interview, Luisa pointed towards another kind of sociality, tracing a difference between Core and corporate working environments: Core, in her account, was a place where “you don’t feel the constraint of collaborating with others, but you are exposed to the possibility of doing so –also through spatial means”. In this regard, she added: “rather than a space, it is more of a network...it is like a box in which little beasts are placed and then you see what happens”.

and to enjoy yourself at the same time. It rewards human capital in step with the Silicon Valley model” (June 2016).

Others explained their choices in more practical terms. The advantage of co-working was not necessarily economic, but rather functional. Co-working allowed for some to avoid utility bills and long rent contracts, providing increased flexibility for the worker. Along these lines, Gilberto noted: “it represents the future of work: it is an ideal way of working. You have neither rent nor bills to pay or directly to take care of” (entrepreneur, March 2016).

Avoiding annoying bureaucratic tasks created a favorable working environment and allowed members to focus on “things that matter”. This was a basic element of the contemporary work spirit that Core, as an enterprise and, more importantly, as an enterprise *plus*, had to offer. In other words, co-working was central to its business-intents and complementary to its educational promises.

Indeed, innovators have “no time to waste”, an ideal trait reinforced by the extension of the worker’s *vital* space *inside* of Core. Not only were there no office-hours<sup>169</sup> –a symbolic inflation of the notion of freedom<sup>170</sup>, but the environment encouraged personal self-care whether in physical, spiritual or learning-related forms, within the space itself. As an example, yoga classes and massages were available. Moreover, an extended program of events<sup>171</sup>, whether for community-building or attraction, guaranteed opportunities for social interaction and engagement on innovation-related topics.

External guests, coming from a wide range of fields (e.g. design, business consultancy, law, entrepreneurship) and expertise (e.g. environmental issues, marketing, crowdfunding, capital risk investments), would come *inside* the space. The organizational space created a learning environment for its members, ensuring the circulation of a multi-disciplinary knowledge, ideally relevant to

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<sup>169</sup> This was the case for those holding a particular kind of membership that, nevertheless, was quite common.

<sup>170</sup> For example, Carlotta, an employee of a foreign enterprise seeking to expand its business on the Italian market, explained her choice through a mix pragmatism and idealism: “I felt free from minute one and there were no office-hours to be respected” (May 2016).

<sup>171</sup> Under the label “events” I am including also training programs as I am defining “events” as meaningful learning experiences, wherein “learning” implies the acquisition of knowledge, skills, behaviors, values or preferences. The participants attending the training programs were selected, thus such events were mostly private occasions of encounter. Moreover, in general terms, the frequency of events varied, but the organization managed to be consistent over time with its offer.

each individual work activities. In other words, Core transformed itself into a *classroom* wherein the rules of innovation were thought for innovation to rule. Marica, who was responsible for incubation programs at Core, remarked:

“*I am learning what Core is by being here* (emphasis added): not to feel playing somebody else’s game. It is a place wherein human relations and happiness aren’t neglected” (February 2016).

Events came in different formats and encompassed various contents. Some were inspirational and motivational, others were celebratory and emphasized community-building. Training events with technical content were also available.

While these events had different functions, they were symbolically meaningful as they differently mobilized *eros* and the *ego*. The events materialized as stages upon which an intense affectivity was purposefully generated and the ways they were called were illustrative in this regard: “fuck”, “fight”, “soul”, “sexy” often qualified the occasion of encounter. Most events served food<sup>172</sup> and at times, drinks for collective enjoyment<sup>173</sup>. At other times, participants engaged in group games. The organizational *eros*, therefore, generated feelings and mobilized emotions like love, enthusiasm, stubbornness, empathy, joy and determination.

Being at Core meant to be immersed in a continuous learning environment that incited and stimulated its inhabitants, both cognitively and affectively. The environment’s symbology functionally marked the territory in this sense –as Domenico commented (entrepreneur, March 2016). *To walk around had to be a significant educational moment* (Piazzoni, 1983): corridors, walls, closets, windows, ceilings were imagined as spatial elements of a new pedagogy. To fulfill this function, spaces of communication and “dramatization” (*Ibid.*) were envisaged where upon activities and people were made *visible*. Beside the already mentioned “Cories wall” and the decorated entrance glassed door, other spots

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<sup>172</sup> Only one type of event was exclusively targeting Cories and it involved a shared meal cooked by two selected members generally helped by Core’s Community and Space Manager. In that occasion, new members were publicly welcomed into the community.

<sup>173</sup> Events were normally accessible by both internal members and external visitors; these latter were generally asked to pay a small monetary contribution with the exclusion of one kind of monthly event, the so-called “Expert spot”. During these occasions, some Cories (on a voluntary base) and Core’s CEO would make available their expertise for a limited time to both insiders and outsiders.

were dedicated to such ends. To explore further these spatial elements, our virtual “walking tour” heads back to the entryway.

### 4.3.3 Circularity

Facing the entrance wall, a detailed handmade calendar displayed the activities for the month. Events and opportunities were outlined and along the bottom, flyers and business cards. Many of these “add-ons” were from Core’s partners. Members benefited from some discounts on food, personal care services or printing and other “extras” mostly available at local retailers.

Heading then towards the main open space, the visitor could not help but notice a curious hand-crafted tree. The tree was a bizarre and symbolic object for a working space. It was constructed of wooden strips from old recycled furniture. It was also fairly large, occupying the entire corner it leaned on from floor to ceiling. Its branches symbolically pushed against the ceiling and its roots spread widely across a glass floor in multiple directions.

Right beside this anthropologically meaningful artifact, an acid green painted wall welcomed the visitor “to the space that wants to change Milan”. The wall rattled off the “things we do” and “how we do” them: “community”, “co-working”, “certified incubator”, “learning space”, “meeting rooms”, “events” alongside “trust”, “courage”, “collaboration”, “impact”, “passion” and “fun”. Moreover, it claimed Core being the first space of its kind in the Italian peninsula<sup>174</sup> and reminded viewers the kind of people (its members) to be found there. Core was a place for individuals who “collaborate to build a radically better world”: the so-called social innovators.

Several whiteboards were strategically located right at the entry of the main space. One faced the open space in a way so that any co-worker on his or her way to the kitchen, the bathroom or out of the building, could easily view its content. At the beginning of each month, Gloria, the event manager at Core, updated the board in vivid colorful markers using a slightly different communicative style than the one adopted for the entrance door. Together with other means, this handcrafted, classic means of communication with messages mainly targeting existing members, functionally *engineered* the community by offering some valuable contents and opportunities for collective engagement.

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<sup>174</sup> Since 2010, when Core was opened, other similar organizations have been established in six other Italian cities.

*The act of making visible* was therefore a fundamental communication tool for Core to produce and reproduce itself. This functionally served to limit uncertainty (Luhmann, 2005)<sup>175</sup> and conveyed a sense of reassuring control and success to both insiders and outsiders alike. Additionally, leveraging “visibility” as a means of communication, aligned with the organization’s educational premise. Visibility and more specifically, *to be visible* provided a sense of collective transparency that spatially projected the idea of “warding off scares to share” and promoted inherent collaboration. In this regard, the spatial configuration materially reflected the value of “sharing”, while maintaining a sense of social control: “I see you, even if I am not looking at you”.

Despite the fact that each member had an assigned location, it was not uncommon to find members “all over” the places: in the kitchen, in the garden or in small living room at the entrance. The same was true for Core’s team, even though they had available some private space on the main floor as well as underground<sup>176</sup>. The team consistently displayed a high mobility in terms of choosing spots where to work from –Marica tapping on her PC, legs crossed on a sofa located in “Sala Cyber”, Olivia working at the garden’s or kitchen’s table, or Sandro spending part of his work day on the raised floor of the building.

The “space craft shuttle” offered a global view of the main space. From its top, the glassed transparent pavement and the low edges of the metallic balcony amplified the power of seeing and of being seen. Similarly, individuals working upstairs were visible from the ground floor as the architecture assured a reciprocal, continuous visibility among those present.

Visibility coupled with a sense of horizontality. Different from the *Panopticon*, there were neither “watchman” nor an authority posts to define a hierarchical structure of relations or disciplinary restraints on freedom. Rather than through disciplinary mechanisms, the mode of spatial management planned a *milieu*: “a specific space of security [that] refers then to a series of possible events; it refers to the temporal and the uncertain, which have to be inserted within a given space” (Foucault, 2009, p. 20).

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<sup>175</sup> Notably, Niklas Luhmann defined an organization as an autopoietic system aiming to produce and reproduce itself by means of decisions.

<sup>176</sup> For few months in the first half of the year 2016, the so-called “incubation and scaling team”, the strategic center of the organization headed by the CEO, relocated downstairs, while the employees in charge of the community and space management continued to work on the main floor. This relocation happened a couple of days after the beginning of my ethnographic observation.

One of the features of the organizational space was extant in the walkways for internal circulation (Piazzoni, 1983). Hallways were not there just to canalize movements but rather to amplify and to diversify the educational possibilities. Core conceived itself as a space of meaningful circulation through diversification of its uses rather than separation of its chambers. In other words, Core retained but it also contained, uncertainty by assuring a circular, rather than linear, temporality of learning processes. This shows how the spatial structure manipulated perceptions of uncertainty and time, both of which feature as crucial aspects of innovative practices and of those who “scout the future” through trial and error.

The extension of the vital space, thus, happened by means of both space and time and touched many aspects of life at Core: learning opportunities, personal care and practical needs and lastly, social life. On this note, Marica (incubation manager at Core, February 2016), commented:

“It is a symbolic space wherein people, sharing the same spirit, feel comfortable, *at home* (emphasis added) and relaxed. Social relations emerge spontaneously, naturally and without constraints”.

Configured as such, the space created the *flavor* of an operative community (Malservisi, 1983), even though it was far from being perfect<sup>177</sup>.

#### **4.3.4 A taste of work**

The site *par excellence* wherein, ideally, hierarchy had no place and a sense of horizontality thrived, was the kitchen: “You do not queue up at the till in a kitchen, differently from a coffee shop”, commented the CEO (March 2016).

The kitchen was a warm and cozy place. The walls were painted in red carmine and decorated with white or natural wood furniture. At the same time, the

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<sup>177</sup> In this regard, few lamented “a discrepancy between its grandiose image and the services it provided”, somebody claimed that “there was *less love in its care* (emphasis added) compared to the past” and some others complained on the presence of larger teams that lowered “the overall entropy of the system” and which, more practically, frequently monopolized the kitchen for their needs: “I cannot even eat anymore!”, a member emphatically asserted on this point. Critical notes towards inefficiencies generally came from Cories that either were there for a long-time or experienced the previous management. Moreover, during the ethnographic observation, Core was planning to move and change location. This evolution (which included the period dedicated to the scouting for a new location), had negative effects on the daily-care of the space even in Core’s team account: “it is breaking into pieces and members lament it; we are not even “fixing broken things” as we should be about to move”.

kitchen conveyed the message that it was “your own place” as it was configured in familiar and chaotic ways which evoked “homey” feelings.

“Welcome into the shared kitchen” was the message adorned on the wall to greet each visitor –“a place where you can feel at home”. Tea, coffee and beverages of different kinds were offered to members. It was not unusual that sweets or small treats, leftovers from meetings, birthday parties or events, to be available for all to enjoy. The kitchen was well appointed: pots, glasses, dishes, seasonings, spices, small pantries, “shared” refrigerators (as they were called), stoves and ovens were all available for use by Core’s members.

The kitchen was materially and symbolically fully integrated within the organizational space. Meetings were often informally held at the kitchen’s table, maybe with a cup of a coffee in the hand. A dividing wooden panel, co-created by Core’s founders, separated the kitchen from the main open space. This panel held shelving for plants, books and cooking receipts that allowed to figuratively gaze over the co-working space. On this note, Sonia commented:

“the kitchen is one of the most beautiful spots at Core because it is *serendipitous* (emphasis added). The aim is to create places wherein people feel good and *enjoy working* (emphasis added)” (community manager at Core, February 2016).

In light of its function, the kitchen represented “a fertile ground of communication” (Luca, freelancer, May 2016) and was important at different levels.

As common sense suggests, the foundational purpose of the kitchen was to satisfy a basic need, namely nutrition and this was appreciated by Core’s members as it allowed them to save time and money. In the ways it was daily and spatially configured, the kitchen projected a horizontal relationality radiating from the fundamental biological feature all human beings share.

Building upon the social elements associated with eating and the enjoyment that comes from therefrom, the consumption of the space for very practical purposes made social interactions unavoidable: “rituals, same people, *fried garlic* (emphasis added): the space becomes an occasion to belong”, stated Eleonora, a long-time member of the organization (entrepreneur, March 2016). She also added that Core, and similar working environments, communicated a particular “*taste* of

work” (emphasis added), an interpretation shared by Luca who further argued: “change starts with food”.

The kitchen extended the vital space of its members by providing within the work environment a functional space that was normally found at home, but its presence also foreseen other opportunities:

“It is the first place where we meet each other in the morning, where we take a break, and where we find inspiration. It is the place to get to know each other and to talk not only about work, projects and challenges, but also of tales and dreams”.

The powerful idea of blending serendipitous and unforeseen possibilities, while cooking or listlessly making a coffee, materialized in the organizational space. In such an inherently democratic space as the kitchen, exemplifying the ideas of horizontality and informal social interactions, it was common to regularly encounter *habitué* or outsiders of diverse backgrounds and expertise. Startup entrepreneurs, freelancers, investors, business mentors, corporate and institutional figures or managers, regularly stopping by or participating to one of the many events that were weekly organized at Core.

The idea that “you never know” was lived and stimulated by the organization through communications, by leveraging needs and by intensifying satisfaction on a daily basis. Despite rhetoric praising “contamination” for its business outcomes –a fact that some members described as rather inexistent at Core, the power of this idea laid at the level of “underground effects on the mindset”:

“events, such as an inspirational one, are not interesting *per se*: however, they change the way you think, or better the way you look at things. I have seen it on myself: I have realized, while doing a work project, that I had interiorized a method” (Fabrizio, entrepreneur, February 2016).

Food emerged as a leverage in this regard and events exemplified well<sup>178</sup> how through the act of consuming a *shared* meal, alongside food, a learning content, encompassing knowledge, skills, beliefs and values, was more easily *digested*. Differently put, through the very simple expedient i.e. the shared act of communal

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<sup>178</sup> As previously said, during events, it was customary to share some food and eventually drinks, while listening to a conversation on innovation-related topics.

dining, a portion of the external world was processed, and eventually interiorized by those who were present (Freud, 2015). This shows how the spatial structure continuously produced occasions to belong and manipulated essentially social *flavors*. In the account of Luigi, CEO at Core: “spatial configuration is an important element with regards to our sense of belonging, but *it is the group that confers stability to a message* (emphasis added)” (March 2016).

#### 4.3.5 “You can do it, but not alone”

Core’s spatial rhetoric simultaneously conveyed a praise of individuality and of communitarian ideals. In such a “complex adaptive system” –a definition suggested by one of Core’s member, social moments were contingent to individual work tasks and when needed, one of the two elements were stimulated. “Core is a *living creature* (emphasis added)”, Olivia once told me.

As previously said, Olivia was the content manager of Core. Her primary responsibility was to organize the monthly schedule of events and define their contents. She understood her work task as one that *tailored the offer* upon the community’s wishes, rather than uncritically embracing outside trends:

“We need to understand how the community naturally evolves. There are a few startups and not very valuable. We are neither the Silicon Valley nor a private club: there is a value in itself in the practice of sharing knowledge” (June 2016).

Since its founding onwards, the organization has reflected *relationally* on its practice: Milan and the world have both influenced Core’s reason for being and its evolution over time. They did so, at times, as symbolic benchmarks, while at others, as real interlocutors. This relationality was due to both Core’s business focus, namely the global technology of innovation, and to its constitutive organizational porosity. To be a credible organization in its field, Core had to leverage a meaningful discourse with a global reach, while engaging different local publics to weave relationships that would reinforce its legitimacy. In other words, if any organization necessarily acts in relationship to the outside world, this very relationship was constitutive of Core’s rationality. The organization could not “survive” unless it talked “global” and “local” at the same time and in an intertwined manner.

This was so for two reasons. First, Core was part of a global network of analogous organizations and thus, its governance and daily management reflected

this relationship. For example, the visual brand identity, the managerial language and the spatial configuration and its management<sup>179</sup> were means of identification through which Core communicated its belonging to a larger community.

Secondly and more importantly for this study, the strategic reference to a global dimension allowed Core to produce, in a coherent manner, its own discourse, coupling with certain practices with a particular stance to the world. Differently put, Core functioned through a discursive-cum-practical global dimension (Thrift, 2005) that found its local expression and logical counterpart in the Milanese discourse of innovation which has been analyzed in Chapter 3.

To be “global” and “to talk” innovation marked Core’s representation of itself as an organization at the forefront of change. In this regard, the space was a communication tool conveying certain messages in concert with the spirit of times. Gianpaolo, the communication specialist at Core, synthesized his feelings towards the environment crafted by its employer, as follows:

“you cannot but be moved by this space, precisely because you feel that you are breathing change, starting off with the wi-fi password: *bethechange* (emphasis added)” (February 2016)<sup>180</sup>.

In the main open space, a hand-made polka-dotted world-map, scattered with wooden photo-frames of iconic images of cities around the globe, was drawn upon a wall. It depicted the global map of communities of “changers” i.e. the global network of organizations of which Core was part and their geographical location. It touched all five continents, but the global network was particularly visible in North American and European cities.

Upon the adjacent wall another inspirational drawing was observable. The handmade image placed the planet at its center. Sided by stylized human beings, iconic symbols of the city and rural scenes, all were placed around the earth and connected by an arrow. The image suggested that the relationships and the connection *had to be* re-thought, calling for a radically new understanding of those associations. According to the image, such renewal required imagination, invention and design thinking. Core, thus, presented itself as *a method of change*,

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<sup>179</sup> To my knowledge, guidelines were provided at the global level on a number of issues: space and community design and management, business development and community attraction. To what I have learnt, this knowledge was then given a situated meaning.

<sup>180</sup> The password was in English.

wherein inspiration, space, resources and people featured as elements of its methodological toolkit.

Those extraordinary images corresponded to graphical representations of a day-dream that materialized in the organizational space configured in the ways analyzed throughout the chapter.

A daydream or a fantasy, similarly to a night dream, is a wish-fulfillment that corrects an unsatisfactory reality (Freud, 2003, p. 28; see also Freud, 2010) and it displays a particular relation with the element of time<sup>181</sup>. A daydream condenses on the three temporalities of the past, the present and the future. The past represents the time when the wish, unsatisfied in the present, was fulfilled. Its presence marks the link between the act of fantasizing by adults, childhood memories and the childhood favorite pastime, namely playing. The future materializes as a new and desirable situation created through the daydream.

Core's conceptual thrive of *change* and *to change*, a central educational premise and a pivot in the economy of its discourse, displayed a peculiar relationship with the element of time. A sort of generalized *tabula rasa* of the past, *personally* deemed responsible of our present unsatisfactory times, was envisaged as necessary. Its promises were vague, but extremely powerful and high in their indeterminacy and their enumeration started from the basic assumption that “the “old way” was not sustainable anymore” –as Paolo, one of the Hosts argued while reflecting about the collective euphoria surrounding innovation (March 2016). Suggesting and implicitly planning against a dystopian interpretation of the present and future, Core had to present itself as an “engine of enthusiasm and catalyst of innovation” (Anna, trainee at Core, March 2016). Core had to be able to contradict dramatic forecasts spanning from “the lost generation” of Italian youth to Anthropocene risks<sup>182</sup>.

The predicted future had to be reversed, “a tough job” that somebody *must* do. The matter laid in framing “my place in the world” in a different way –suggested

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<sup>181</sup> The analytic use of the concept “day-dream” rather than “night dream” suits better the purpose of this study for a number of reasons: first, methodologically, tracing the latent thoughts of a collectivity is very difficult; second, empirically, certain factual elements as ambition and *eros* which are associated with a ludic-creative dimension of work and the blurring of the work-play dichotomy, have led me to theoretically lean towards the notion of fantasy (Freud, 2003, pp. 23-34).

<sup>182</sup> I am not implicitly suggestive that those issues are inexistent or false in absolute terms, but I am interested in pointing towards their strategic, rather than innocent, uses and meanings in the economy of a discourse.

Francesco Pozzobon, an influential public figure on innovation. Mr. Pozzobon urged individuals to see the crisis as a catharsis i.e. a moment of subjective and collective renaissance rising from the ashes of the systematic economic failure of our times (guest speaker, Fuckup Night, Milan, June 2016)<sup>183</sup>.

The desire to be fulfilled, for our case, was indeed “*to be someone and to have a place that recognized you as such and stimulated you to grow up*” –which is a condition that is generally lived during a happy childhood. Differently put, the desire to change pertained *de facto* to changing subjective perceptions of ourselves rather than changing the world. This shows how the spatial structure was designed to communicate that “*you can do it*” (Giordano, entrepreneur and researcher, April 2016).

Another characteristic trait of fantasies is that they are, by nature, egocentric stories: “His Majesty the Ego [is] the hero of every daydream and every novel” (Freud, 2003, p. 30). In this sense, the organizational discourse leveraged upon a sense of subjective dismay in the economy of the day-dream it projected<sup>184</sup>. The object of change moved from the “subject” to “the world”. Its allure was functional to subjective needs (Gabriel, 2016). It sought not to discourage subjects and, more importantly, *to transform them into some-one that could be some-body* and could do something meaningful in his or her life, despite the adversities. This legitimate human desire was discursively hyped by linking it to larger systemic efforts “to change the world”. As a result, Core’s discourse created characters, *heroes* rather than desiring and ordinary human beings and the wished future satisfied egoistic needs<sup>185</sup> of ambition and power or erotic desires<sup>186</sup> (Freud, 1933, p. 109), both for the organization and for individuals. For this reason, spatial rhetoric functionally *seduced* subjects and the dreaminess clearly communicated the message that “we are waiting for *you*” to come here, to change the world and, on a less romantic tone, to pay the membership.

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<sup>183</sup> On the same note, Mr. Pozzobon, in the occasion of a closing private event of an international scaling program held in Milan in June 2016, addressed the audience by saying: “Be happy: we have fantastic years ahead of us. We are making it!”.

<sup>184</sup> Day-dreams are not much distorted, unlike night-dreams and, for this reason, they are similar to child’s dream: in other words, daydream are easily interpretable (Freud, 1933, pp. 105-113). This is one of the reason why the analytic concept of the day-dream has been adopted rather than night-dream

<sup>185</sup> Namely, needs that concerns the Freudian concept of the Ego. On the structure of the psyche, see part 1 of Freud (1940).

<sup>186</sup> Freudian *eros* or *libido* corresponds to affective ties of any kind (Freud, 1949, pp. 38-40).

Other messages that were conveyed through the spatial rhetoric were that “change” and “innovation” were social phenomena rooted in certain places. Cities, with the sole exception of Silicon Valley, were the paradigmatic site of innovation *par excellence*. In this regard, the space performed and suggested *culturally* urban dynamics and recreated urban features within itself.

As discussed in Chapter 1 and 3, innovation has called for cities as favorable existing arrangements for its expression and Milan has affirmed itself as a favorable location in this regard. Alongside that, the practical and cultural enactment of a certain way of doing things has coupled with specific demands on space, its configuration and management. This “request” articulated by the discursive practice of innovation has often exceeded the physical city itself. That is to say that innovation culturally imposes a relational spatiality that is intrinsically urban wherein “urban” is a metaphorical space of *activation*, relationship, exchanges and proximity. Stated differently, the “urban” here means a space of possibility (“talk to each other, you never know!”). In this regard, as analyzed in this chapter, Core reproduced through its spatial rhetoric and configuration the normative ideal of city life that Iris Marion Young described as a “horizon of the modern, not to mention, post-modern condition” (2011, p. 263), wherein social differentiation without exclusion, variety, eroticism and publicity live, overcoming the dichotomy individualism-community. This urban ideal entails a system of knowledge, competencies, ways of feelings, predispositions and ambitions communicated by means of the organizational space –all elements which were constitutive of Core’s dreamy narrative.

## 4.4 Conclusion

The chapter has explored Core’s spatial rhetoric and configuration. The overall objective has been “to make the space talk”. As Bruno Bettelheim (1982) argued, the influence that the environment plays on individuals, differs from social exchanges that happen through words (for example, “do that!”) and which produces more direct and tangible reactions. Rather, environmental influences are more indirect and subtle given that their effects are deep-rooted in the unconscious. Nevertheless, the space actively mediates our desire to explore and its configuration is revealing a functionality as well as a connection with society. Indeed, the symbolic and material continuity between “inside” and “outside” is a feature characteristic of any built environments. The environment’s porosity, however, may vary depending on its guiding rationality and social function. Core’s relatedness was as much communicated by means of “silent” spatial

rhetoric and mechanisms (i.e. subconscious and unconscious) than through its “talked” culture (i.e. consciousness) –an aspect which will be further elaborated in Chapter 5.

The analysis here presented ends by advancing the argument that the organizational space functioned as a strategic leverage for the production and circulation of an urban ideal, rather than acting as a sort of “empty box” that hosted unrelated and random activities with respect to society. Culturally relevant beyond its function as a site for production of goods and services (Leghissa, 2013), the organization has emerged as a meaningful site that enacted innovation and as a space of subjective and collective activation.

Building on these considerations, the next chapter is dedicated to the experience of being a subject at Core and explores in-depth the corporeality of innovation.

## Chapter 5

# Embodying innovation: subjects and space(s)

### 5.1 Introduction

In early Summer 2016, a consultancy firm made of young business students visited Core to discuss a possible partnership. We sat in the garden and Sonia, community manager at Core, was passionately explaining to her guests what the “community” was about:

“[...] to enter *our community* (emphasis added), there are various types of membership that grant you different services. The basic one allows you to be put into the flows of information exchange and to communicate *with all of our members, locally and globally* (emphasis added), by means of internal virtual platforms. Our members, including freelancers, associations, entrepreneurs, externalized workers, can participate in the rich program of events to do networking. We basically provide a network for knowing each other within the community”.

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by Olivia, content manager at Core, asking: “is there sugar?”. Everybody laughed in delight and she ironically added: “I am not sure how to say it, maybe I should talk *starttappese* (emphasis

added)<sup>187</sup> and say ‘do you know where is *the startup sugar*?...because I need to make a cake for tonight’s event and for that, I need sugar, flour and eggs!’”.

Olivia’s witty words and the laughter are illustrative of a number of important points and potential directions of analysis, particularly if placed, as they were, aside the *script* embodied by Sonia.

First, the playful banter suggested distinctly the existence of a discourse whose power potentially laid in its indeterminacy and in its being “boundaryless” –just like the kind of organizations operating in an economy founded on innovation and change (Hirshhorn and Gilmore, 1992, p. 4). Throughout the empirical research, innovation has emerged as the “talk of the town” for its ability to cross semantic boundaries by re-drawing the geography of meanings as its language has changed the *names* of objects, subjects and practices, even if pre-existent to it. Its signification has directly called into question our stance towards the present, the past and the future alike. The laugh, in this regard, seemed to implicitly acknowledge the semantic uncertainty latent in the language of innovation as well as its overarching and influential character.

Second, a common ground for communication obviously existed among the above speakers, otherwise the conversation would not have happened. However, the discourse effectiveness depended upon two kinds of communication, namely diffused and mostly, specific communication (March and Simon, 1993, pp. 21-23)<sup>188</sup>. More precisely, a discourse is *specifically* communicated by formal organizations (for our case, by Core), but also *diffusely* beyond their walls. Indeed, *organizations produce the materiality that transpose a diffused discourse into a concrete gesture, tone, motion* and, as analyzed in Chapter 4, *space*. Their importance lays upon, at the minimum, the *influences* they generate upon individuals at the behavioral and more deeply, psychic levels, by means of specific communications and extended exposure through time<sup>189</sup> (*Ibid.*). Notably, using a stronger political vocabulary, Foucault paid great attention to institutions precisely because it was within these places that the bodily subject was constituted: it appeared, he argued, by means of concrete practices and things that

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<sup>187</sup> The expression “*starttappese*” is an Italian colloquial neologism, depicting the language of startups or startup entrepreneurs.

<sup>188</sup> According to these scholars, it is precisely this difference that marks the crucial importance of organizations as sites of social inquires, a theoretical consideration that this study builds upon.

<sup>189</sup> This refers both to daily (for example, in terms of hours) and throughout a life-time exposure.

marked the passage from the jurisdiction to the veridiction of an object (Foucault, 2008).

Third and concurrently, as it got specific, the discourse acted on bodies also through a *script*, namely a specific set of knowledge, values, feelings and emotions. In this regard, Core has *breathed life* into innovation as it has effected the subject in his *corporeality* (Dal Lago, 2016, p. 387). Differently stated, the report *Restart, Italia!*, the conspicuous set of policies, documents, initiatives and laws that have followed its publication, despite their relevance, would not have inscribed themselves into reality without the “help” of organizations. For our case, Core has been one of the institutions wherein the governmental object “innovation” and its spatial, political, cultural effects, have made their material and bodily appearances.

Chapter 4 has been devoted to Core’s spatial-material rhetoric and to the subject in its *relationship* with the internal environment. Building upon that, this Chapter is further dedicated to analyze the *experience* of being a subject at Core.

At the simplest level, it aims to pursue such intent by analyzing the organizational rhetoric, in the first place and the ways the subjects inhabiting Core bargained their positions, in the second place. Sonia, to return to the initial example, *embodied* the organizational script and Olivia, ironically, *reacted* to its requests: this exchange pointed towards a subjective bargaining and forms of resistances that were at play as the discourse did not unfold uncontested. As a matter of fact, subjects enacted Core’s rhetoric in singular ways –at their strategic convenience and need.

Indeed, *everybody and everything are innovative* but yet, the terrain of innovation has emerged as deeply conflictual beyond its uniformed representation: “as you have probably understood, our world is a lot of *‘fuffa’*”, an Italian colloquial expression meaning “hot air”. Olivia said that not to “throw the baby out of the bathwater” as she took very seriously Core’s role in introducing the word “innovation” in the city, but to denounce the various voices that converged on it, making it “dirty” (Wijngaarden et al., 2016).

Later evolved in a much more complex business entity that, according to some, lost its authentic passion, Core has exemplified the constitutive tension of the word “innovation” as a social non-homogeneous fact. In Bruno Latour’s terms (2005), innovation is a type of association born out of heterogeneous elements: these latter were not themselves “social” (e.g. governmental procedures,

“globalization”, techniques of production, situated interests and contingencies etc.), but composed through various processes of assembling, have resulted in a *collective action* that counts many forces and voices and that, to cut shortly, has been tautologically branded “innovative”.

This chapter aims to analyze how the contingent condition of membership that Core traced and that directly concerned cultural aspects of business, related to aspects of life and more importantly of citizenship, this latter being conceived as a collective, spatial and political matter.

Therefore, a number of interrelated questions are addressed throughout the following pages, ranging from issues strictly concerning the organizational culture (i.e. how have Cories bargained their subjective positions *vis à vis* organizational rhetoric?) to the broader matter of citizenship. As a matter of fact, this study has not intended to be “just” an organizational one and therefore to be confined within its walls: *a supposed symbolic and material bridge inbetween Core and the city* has motivated the inquiry and oriented the methodological choice outlined in Chapter 2. Therefore, what kind of “cityness” has emerged, if any, from this angle? Does the relationship “organization *versus* city” has anything to do with innovation as a matter of citizenship rather than “just” business? How is innovation subjectively and collectively lived “in the field”? Similarly, what does the term “startup” mean from this angle?

The chapter is structured as follows: paragraph 5.2 scrutinizes one of the constitutive elements that characterizes Core: its relatedness with the external environment, both local and global, and it places the organizational script in relation to the notion of citizenship. Paragraph 5.3 analyzes the membership organization i.e. the community. Sub-sections 5.3.1 outlines the ideal elements of the communitarian rhetoric, while 5.3.2 frames organizational belonging as an enactment of contemporary urban citizenship. Building on that, paragraph 5.4 presents a theoretical parenthesis on the notion of the “urban”, the relevance of spatial analyzes to understand its politics and examines some of its features with reference to the case under study. Building upon that, sub-sections 5.4.1, 5.4.2 and 5.4.3 provide an account on the experience of innovation as subjectively bargained, exploring commonalities and divergences among individuals and with respect to the ideal “innovation”.

## 5.2 On relatedness

Before proceeding, some complementary considerations to the analysis that follows are needed. As already emerged in Chapter 4, in light of its condition of relatedness *vis à vis* the outside world, Core did not engage in “just” business as usual and, more importantly for this chapter, the kind of influences it exerted upon its members was of a particular type. To elaborate on this point, it is useful to recall that any organization, as Luhmann (2005) argued, displays a degree of dependency with regards to the external environment and this dependency factor continuously benchmarks its positioning. Nevertheless, the intensity of such dependency may vary, contingently to the kind of organization examined. For our case, strong relatedness and hybridity emerged as Core’s characterizing features: in other words, the “inside” (i.e. the organization) and the “outside” (i.e. contemporary social spaces) reciprocally reinforced and legitimized each other in numerous ways.

As a for profit entity pursuing a social aim, Core was an example of a hybrid organization: it operated at the interface of the public and the private sectors and combined commercial logics and social value creation, elements featured both in its rhetoric and business scope of activities<sup>190</sup>. Complementary to its hybridity, Core’s members were its customers, not its employees: this substantive difference suggests that their job tasks were not *direct* concern of the organization, but their job satisfaction *indirectly* was within the organization's scope. Core did not manage its members through key performance indicators (KPI), namely in-role performances, as it did with its employees. Nevertheless, by supplying certain conditions of possibility, practically and symbolically functional to singular needs, Core acted contingently to the everyday working life of Cories, indirectly affecting their job satisfaction.

First, to retain its customers, Core had to provide basic services, namely a comfortable and efficient co-working environment. Second and concurrently, other retention and attraction strategies under the guise of additional services (e.g. learning opportunities) aimed to produce a *meaningful* experience for its members. In this regard and more specifically, Core operated at the margin of *intrinsic* job requirements, meaning that it manipulated the *extrinsic* space of work, stimulating extra-role behaviors: what Bateman and Organ in a seminal article called “citizenship behaviors” (1983, p. 588).

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<sup>190</sup> To my knowledge, this was the case until the end of 2016.

For our case, the communitarian spirit corresponded to the “extra-mile”, technically known in sectoral studies, as organizational citizenship, a concept part of a managerial vocabulary that, from the perspective of a history of knowledge, is significant *per se*. The organizational citizenship is described as an *affective* state wherein a “good soldier” performs discretionary gestures “that lubricate the social machinery of the organization” (*Ibid.*). It is worthwhile to take a pause on this point and to highlight how the terminology used in organizational studies is explicit in framing the organizational act in terms of citizenship and politics: in this regard, March (1962) notably described the firm as a political coalition, namely a conflict system made of multiple and divergent interests. Despite Bateman and Organ introduced the concept of “citizenship” in the discipline, arguing that there were not yet better notions expressing those human actions (Bateman and Organ, 1983, p. 588), the linguistic use should not be seen as casual: in fact, what is meant to be provisional has become mainstream in the language of management. On this note, Paul Rabinow (2003, p. 49) referred to an interview that Foucault gave to *Le Monde* in 1975 where the French scholar argued that, to inquire about social reality, “it was not necessary to search for anything hidden when it came to the intentions and projects” of the ruling classes: these latter would, in fact, likely outline in fine detail their plans, even though “they are not capable of grasping what they did” (*Ibid.*, p. 53).

Functional to Core’s business objectives, namely to secure the purchase of its services, the organizational citizenship ideally generated an additional “social extra”, meaning a pro-social, caring and active attitude embodied by the “good citizen”. This latter has emerged in Chapter 3 as a much-desired trait of the discursive practice of innovation diffusely “on air” in the contemporary Italian and Milanese social spaces. Indeed, the transformation envisaged both at the national and local levels –a desire reflected in the governmental practices themselves– could not have been confined to hermetic spaces, but to *porous* ones. Moreover, such transformation has called for a specific management technique, *concretely* put into practice at the organizational level.

The important point about this is the following: Core’s public legitimacy was fundamentally linked to this “extra” dimension. As an effect, the subjective experience took place in this “in-between” space of ongoing tension to “there”, a trait of openness that, as analyzed in Chapter 4, the spatial configuration exemplified distinctly. Moreover, even though it was privately managed, Core’s externalities were potentially more similar to the ones ascribable to “classical” educational institutions (e.g. universities). This was so since the “social

outcomes” it has produced have not yet been fully visible in the short term nor measurable at a larger scale: notably, it takes a long time for pedagogical practices to provide intelligible results.

The relevance of Core as a site of inquiry pivots precisely on this point: it has emerged as a space of citizenship wherein the conditions to be a “good soldier” were laid. Core foreseen, by means of its rhetoric, an ideal practice of citizenship and made visible a grid of intelligibility of both economic and non-economic behaviors (Foucault, 2008), wherein a series of contemporary universals –state, society, subject– materialized into concrete practices (*Ibid.*).

### **5.3 The community: an unconventional showcase?**

Core prescribed a pool of appropriate identities (Meinhof and Galazinski, 2005, p. 11), a “we” for its members, by identifying, naming and addressing them as Cories. An attitude to positively “change the world” by tackling urgent social problems through their innovative entrepreneurial ideas, both locally and globally, supposedly characterized the “community” –as Core used to linguistically aggregate the members part of its socio-technical infrastructure. This ideal identity depicted startup entrepreneurs, freelancers, founders of social enterprises and associations or, generally speaking, individuals differently-engaged in the field of innovation, such as investors and business mentors. The community counted, the organization publicly praised, over three hundred members locally and fifteen thousand scattered across the eighty analogous spaces around the world. Therefore, a truly global community of “changers”, in size and geographical distribution, existed according to the official narrative.

“*Ciao Cories*” was a common way to engage with members on online platforms, an address normally followed by updates on a wide range of topics: for example, Cories were apprised on how they could do their green groceries shopping, or informed on internal or external events and activities of potential interest to them. “Offline”, the label “Cory” was part of the daily vocabulary, both in formal and informal occasions: randomly employed, it functioned as an idealizing neologism on “everybody’s lips”, but to a greater degree, on those of the organizational team.

The community had one way through: to become a Cory, one had to pay for a membership, albeit this payment came in different forms. As previously anticipated, the most basic one granted access to physical and virtual platforms of potential interactions from three to twelve months. In this case, accessing the

physical space meant communal areas of the organizational space i.e. the kitchen, the garden and the small living room located at Core's entrance<sup>191</sup>. Moreover, such a membership granted access to events as well as to virtual platforms, namely intranet wherein the global community<sup>192</sup> was "online" and Facebook at work, a tool exclusively accessible by Milanese Cories. In addition to that, as anticipated in Chapter 4, each member would benefit from some discounts on the purchase of food, personal care services or printing, mostly enjoyable at local retailers.

On the top of this basic membership, additional options were available: for example, single individuals or teams could buy day-passes<sup>193</sup> or they could rent one or several "fixed" desks. In this latter case, keys of the organizational space were provided to guarantee full flexibility to its members (24 hours per day, 7 days a week, all year long).

Moreover, every member might have accessed to the kitchen and its facilities (e.g. fridges) and some, with an extra monetary contribution, might have purchased their own pantry in it.

On a weekly basis, a newsletter was e-mailed to Core's members: depending on the time of the month, it focused on "events", "community news", "calls and funding". Printed copies of newsletters in a "digest" version were then placed in communal areas. The overall idea of such media tools was *to acknowledge* people, (for example, incoming members), activities, occasions for learning and interacting, as well as innovation-related funding opportunities. In the organization's consciousness, those means were part of a coherent communicative structure that aimed "to fill up" with content the calendar and to give visibility to the monthly theme of engagement.

The themes of engagement, titled in a catchy fashion and forestalled by the hashtag "#", covered various topics, at times uncanny for the ways they were

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<sup>191</sup> Nevertheless, the organizational team monitored whether the physical presence at Core was continuous through time rather than occasional: if so, it was likely that "basic" members would have been invited to upgrade their membership and pay for their extended in-stay.

<sup>192</sup> In this case, members had to create their own profile and could access, depending on their interests, online sub-groups such as "happiness", "space design", "urbanists", "incubation and acceleration", "art" as well as local communities of Cories which were parts of the global network.

<sup>193</sup> If this option was chosen, members would have not benefited of a "fixed" desk, but they could have sat at one of the "spicy desks" located in the main open area or on the upper floor.

communicated<sup>194</sup>. “Our identity is relational: it is constituted by difference”, “the danger of a single story”, “creation and design to lay claim to and make yourself without safeguards”: these examples are illustrative of the different signifiers that were mobilized and that generated an obscure *and* familiar meaning. Such techniques stimulated a psychological suggestion of some sort and, more colloquially, “put a bug in the Cories’ ears” which were thus cognitively and affectively stimulated to explore further.

“We have the courage to take the road less travelled, similarly to today’s guests: we open new trains of thought, we manage complexity. At first nobody understands what it is about, but over time, the usefulness becomes intelligible”

Olivia argued, introducing the event’s speakers (March 2016). They were two young and highly-educated individuals that founded a *sui generis* consultancy company that mixed semiotics and qualitative methodologies (e.g. ethnography) to offer innovative marketing solutions to firms. They, together with the eclectic *parterre* of guests regularly invited by Core, reflected the value of multidisciplinary learning, but they also embodied the idea that only by bravely crossing knowledge domains, innovation would come.

Coherently with such ideal of cognitive flexibility, the themes of engagement included the culture of innovation, the genesis of ideas and new *mindsets* and encompassed a broad range of issues, from citizenship, work-life balance to design. Moreover, the topics displayed a strong and conscious connection between innovation and spaces, both virtual and physical, as well as geographical contexts: organizations, *cafés*, social media, cities that were familiar and others that were less so to a Western public.

Despite their variety, they converged on two elements. First, the high-value associated with collective interaction, whether conscious (e.g. organizations) or more nuanced (e.g. public or social endeavors), distinctively marking an innovative “*whatever*” –whether it was an environment or a project.

“To create relationships is an integral element of this working methodology: it is a precise tool conceived to generate energies that

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<sup>194</sup> Contents, as explained in the previous chapter, were conveyed by Core to its public by different means and techniques of communication depending on the target they were addressing.

produce effects and more precisely, a tangible impact for business activities”

argued Edoardo, a senior employee at Core (February 2016), commenting on Core’s rationality and mission. In this regard, spatial rhetorics, as analyzed in Chapter 4, communicated a set of values underpinning a “collaborative method” i.e. a *living lab* with different competencies: “an ecosystem wherein different species co-exist and compete for the sunlight and water”, specified Edoardo, pointing towards a survivalist pragmatism sustaining the collaborative rationality.

The second similarity shared by the various themes of engagement, corresponded to the kind of thinking envisaged as desirable, namely one that does not define its subject matter in advance (Buchanan, 1992, p. 16). In this regard, even when it was not expressively named as such, the methodology appealed for substantially resembled to what is known as “design-thinking” –an approach that is human-centered, open-ended, inquiry-based and does not move from a truth assumption but rather from “real problems”.

This method, comprising tools and skills but also feelings, emerged as a sort of symbolic crossroads between the diverse range of subjects and professions encountered. In this regard, the elaborate organizational system that Core put forth, comprising the community, events and training programs, functioned as a vehicle of methodological contamination. On this point, Luca, whose startup had been incubated for six months at Core, expressed the following:

“I have not found a colleague or a competitor that dealt with my same issues, but I have found a lot of people sharing the same difficulties. Being here led me to some improvements and few ‘light bulbs went on over my head’: it is kind of a societal experience...a sort of cognitive crossroad, both professionally and personally” (February 2016).

The effects of such “societal exposition” weren’t immediately tangible or measurable in business terms, but they were described by the most attentive as affecting subconsciously and unconsciously their practices: the so-called “underground effects on the mindset” referred to in the previous chapter (Fabrizio, entrepreneur, February 2016), which stresses the *ex-post* value of Core’s events.

In this regard, the term “community” condensed on a number of important suggestions, starting from the basic consideration that the organizational rhetoric

employed the English word “community” rather than the Italian one “*comunità*”. The first element it portrayed obviously envisioned social interaction, one of the underlying feature of the kind of thinking Core promoted and pivoted on. Second, deployed in its English variant, the concept “community” expressed the spirit of the age and more precisely, the idea of being up to the times. Gianpaolo, communication specialist at Core, emphasized consistently this point:

“Core doesn’t exhaust itself *here* (emphasis added), even though, for historical reasons, this space is fundamental. But the community does not always entail a physicality...there are values and reciprocal advantages that bond together the community. Communication, in this sense, is essential and also its technologies. This is *a community 2.0* (emphasis added)” (February 2016).

Core’s community presented itself as a digital one: this was so not only technologically (as all the members were digitally connected and logged into virtual platforms) but also *anthropologically*. This social fact points intelligibly to what Coutard and Guy (2007, pp. 216–217) described as “the social shaping of technology *and* the technological shaping of society”.

Third and concurrently, a digital community entails a kind of thinking which deals with complexity, one that interprets social phenomena as inherently complex bundles. More precisely, it matches the idea to be individually connected to a larger ensemble as well as to deal with problems that have ramifications throughout the whole system (Rittel and Weber, 1973).

All of these important elements formed and set in motion what Raymond Williams called “structure of feelings”, a notion that expresses social processes occurring in places that “you don’t see much around” (Valeria, event manager at Core, February 2016). It corresponds to a “true social present” and “cultural hypothesis” not yet formalized (Williams, 1977, p. 132), and encompassing “meaning and values as they are effectively lived and felt. [...] Affective elements of consciousness and relationship: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (*Ivi.*)<sup>195</sup>.

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<sup>195</sup> Williams referred also to a structure of feeling as “a social experience still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating” (Williams, 1977, p. 132).

Going to the heart of cognitive and affective aspects, the method not only thought to subjects how to manage risk, uncertainty and complexity – characterizing features of innovative practices, but it also educated *to feel them* in a certain way. These elements, to which the next paragraphs are dedicated, are worthy of exploration as they profoundly affect and shape how reality is felt and thus, the type of spatial thinking this “new” relationship implies.

“Here you find yourself reflecting upon the way you *feel* in the space”, stated Domenico (entrepreneur, June 2016), when asked to elaborate his feelings on the meaningfulness of Core. “*What does that mean?*”, I wondered at the end of the interview, and I add purposefully now: *how is it so?* Alongside space, the “community” has emerged as a technology of power, “an objectivizing of the subject” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18), a tool of management which suited Core’s hybrid objectives to define an appropriate extra-role behavior and loose space of action. However, notwithstanding the romance, “*engineered serendipity*” did not rule uncontested over subjects.

### 5.3.1 An ideal script

The word “subject”, Nick Mansfield (2000, p. 2) reminded, implies a social and cultural entanglement in which the human being is caught up and is *subjected* to. In a distinctively Lacanian approach that shows some important points of convergence with Foucault’s thought (Cavallari, 2014)<sup>196</sup>, the subject is configured within a weave of discursive structures<sup>197</sup> which are *social links*, directing his or her conduct: in other words, in such accounts, the term “discourse” not only implies a social tie, but it literally *is* a social tie. If that is true

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<sup>196</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>197</sup> Jacques Lacan first outlined the four discourses (i.e. those of the “master”, “university”, “hysteric” and “analyst”) in *Seminar XVII* (1969-1970) and in 1972, he outlined the structure of a fifth one, namely the discourse of the capitalist. As Stijn Vanheule reminded (2016, p. 6), Lacan did not provide a proper theory on this discourse and gave a non-Marxian account of capitalist culture (*Ibid.*). Out of the five, the discourse of the capitalist is a contemporary emergence that modifies the discourse of the master (Cimarelli, 2010): it means that, on one side, the subject is still configured through *other discursive matrices* and, on the other, that capitalism is conceived as a discourse, namely a system of relations –echoing Nigel Thrift’s definition of it (2005, p. 1). What might be relevant for our case is to note that Lacan argued that capitalism is psychically unsustainable because it produces subjects that are paradoxically not subjected. The individual is free from symbolic constraints and there is no truth but his or her own: in other words, such a discourse envisages by means of “surplus-jouissance” –a concept that builds on Marx’s “surplus value” - subjects which are master themselves. It would certainly be interesting to apply the “discourse of capitalism” to our case, but its analytical strength lays in proving able to concurrently pinpoint the other four discursive matrices -which falls outside the aim of this study.

for any kind of discourse, it has been more so at Core, given that identification was intentionally fostered to reach certain ends. Indeed, the experience of being a subject meant to be continuously exposed to a communitarian discourse i.e. a “social tie *plus*”.

The community, in the organizational rhetoric, existed *a priori* and its existence was, eventually, questioned *a posteriori*. In a sense, the group existed *before* the subject, but if his or her inclusion was immediate, belonging emerged as a conflicting field of subjective positioning, exemplifying the tension between logics of identity and dynamic, open-ended processes of experience.

As an embodied form of politics (Taylor, 2009), belonging (or non-belonging) is driven at times by desires and at others, by needs. In any case, it never fails to generate discursive struggles since group dynamics generate a profound alteration in an individual’s mental activity (Freud, 1949, p. 33). Thus, an imposed “we” does not automatically indicate the activation of the discursive process of *identity* (Meinhof and Galazinski, 2005, p. 11), but it opens up a terrain of subjective struggle. A community of Cories might have not existed as the organizational rhetoric grandiosely communicated. Nevertheless, the call for and the activation of a process of identification produced certain effects on subjects. On one side, at the very least, a “call to be” arguably generated a subjective negotiation of “not to be”. On the other side, belonging in its most “indolent” subjective manifestations materially affected social processes and their reproduction, an element of which Core’s CEO was very much aware as referred to in the previous chapter:

“spatial configuration is an important element with regards to our sense of belonging, but *it is the group that confers stability to a message* (emphasis added)” (interview, March 2016).

The community centered on the ideal of a group that recognized differences and limited the sense of exclusion. On one side, the organizational rhetoric praised individuality: in fact, brilliant ideas resided in the mind of the individual, namely the innovator that assumed risk and took courage to enact them. Concurrently, the individual was recognized in his or her singularity as he or she came “in different shapes and sizes” and differences were celebrated. However, on the other side, such ideal envisaged the group as *the* fundamental vehicle for impacting at a larger scale.

“‘Community’ is a trendy term nowadays. Even Ikea has a community, but they really are customers. I would say a community is

a group of people sharing an interest which is common [...]. Here, the common interest is to have a positive impact and we do so in innovative ways, by collaborating with each other and by sharing a set of values”

Olivia argued (March 2016), conveying the idea that “if you cannot do it alone, you do it together”.

On *a priori* basis, the community was invoked, unsurprisingly, as a desirable and intrinsically good thing. Indeed, in general terms, the communicative efficacy of the term “community” across a consistent spectrum of publics, builds upon a lasting historically-rooted perception that cherishes the community as a largely unquestioned symptom of goodness. As Miranda Joseph noted (2002, p. vii), “a celebratory discourse of community restlessly returns” for all kind of causes, from corporations to neighborhoods, making the exercise of *critique* a difficult one: how do you dare to question somebody that claims to be acting “for the community”?

The organizational *script* pivoted consistently upon this loose and ambiguous concept that made it easy for an “I” to slip into a “we”.

In early March 2016, Margherita, operation host at Core, in conversation with a future host and introducing “what kind of reality *we are* (emphasis added)”, stated the following:

“basically our job is to meet their needs and in exchange for your service, *we give you the possibility* (emphasis added) to work here, to participate in our events and to know our experts”.

As a slippery concept, the “community” ideally worked for all kinds of purposes, namely to attract members and to retain existing ones. But, at the same time, the seductive power of the community proved its efficacy upon Core’s employees: in Foucault’s terms, despite them being, to all intents and purposes, the community’s strategists, the strategy (i.e. the community), by extension, strengthen their own organizational commitment and at times, identification. Some of the team members did clearly recognize the business “nature” of Core that as a for-profit firm had, as a litmus test, to be economically sustainable. However, others were restless to reduce Core’s mission to mere business objectives: “we are not an enterprise as others”, Sonia told me during an informal conversation at the end of the ethnographic observation. Indeed, the idea that they

were “being *helpful*” rather than merely “*useful*” by providing specific services to the community, emerged distinctively. This element shall not be solely attributed to the conventional communicative business style that purposefully substitutes “selling” with “offering”, but it is rather symptomatic of the internalization of the organizational culture that the team itself was partially producing and partially circulating.

In the discourse’s economy, a reciprocal reinforcement between a singularity i.e. the individual’s cleverness, and a universal i.e. the community’s virtues, was displayed. The value of collaboration among peers coupled to networking, a more business-focused practice. Similarly, the value of sharing matched with “lightbulb” moments happening at the individual level. As a hybrid organization, Core featured an ongoing and unresolved tension between sociality (for the sake of sociality) and business –promoting a definition of value at times as a *principle*, at others as a *return*.

Hard work, individual difficulties and fatigue were ideally counteracted by the community. As a sort of family to rely upon, the community comforted and empowered its members.

“You have to think that the people that are here are taking risks, but at the same time, they are exposed to the risk of giving up in something they believe in”

commented Olivia (March 2016) on the community’s importance for entrepreneurial selves –whose life at Core was engineered to be fun, enjoyable, comfortable, intellectually stimulating, thus to contain risk and uncertainty.

### **5.3.2 Enacting urbanity**

Notably, the power of the community as a technique of power, lays in being a “floating” signifier, loose enough to seduce and mobilize many publics and to meet diverse subject’s needs. It is, indeed, *loose coupling* that confers stability to the organization (Luhmann, 2005)<sup>198</sup>, and for Core, the community functioned

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<sup>198</sup> Luhmann argued that loose coupling between premises and decisions shall be regarded as the condition of any system stability, pointing to the possible incoherence between “virtual” decision-making and actual implementation. In other words, for our case, Core elaborated certain educational and business premises, set forth specific means (i.e. the “community”) to reach those ends, but its internal stability required *not to question*: “don’t ask yourself any questions, but

precisely in light of its opaqueness. However, approached analytically, the community did sway from a notion centered on property to one consisting of commonality, very much reflecting the tension between its educational mission and its stringent economic needs.

Iris Marion Young, as anticipated in the previous chapter, advocated in favor of the ideal of city-life as “a vision of social relations affirming group difference” (2011, p. 251). Young argued that city-life, echoing memories of “Jacobsian” accounts of the city, envisages a set of affirmative values centered upon the concept of diversity by means of which, the scholar stated, the “city/urban” earns the merit of limiting communitarian and individualistic deviances. Social differentiation, coexistence of differences, eroticism, namely “an attraction to the other” (Young, 2011, p. 266) are in Young’s account, desirable inherently *urban traits* embodied in the material city itself. The city, also in light of its diverse uses, affirms itself as a diffused public space of differences. For our case, it is relevant to note that on the top –but also aside– of the city as an existing arrangement, the “urban” qualifies a possibility of being in the sense of *a state of being possible* as well as *a desirable relationship*.

In a way, in Young’s terms (2011), an unresolved tension emerged at Core between the ideal of city-life, on one side and the ideal of community, on the other. These two ideals shall not be regarded as mutually exclusive, but rather acting on a continuum, wherein Core leaned, at times, more towards the former and, at others, towards the latter.

Clelia, one of Core’s founders and pioneering members, emphasized that “the narrative of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Core are the same, but there is a substantial difference between the two”. Not fixed on a positivity owned by its members, “owners of what is common to them all” (Esposito, 2002, p. 3), the community was at its origins conceived as “what is not proper. [...] what belongs to more than one, to many or to everyone, and therefore is that which is ‘public’ (*Ibid.*)<sup>199</sup>.

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provide answers” –clarified the CEO during a team meeting, showing intelligibly the concept of “loose coupling” at work.

<sup>199</sup> Roberto Esposito, starting his reflection from the etymology of the term *communitas*, contended that what is “common” is not a property, but a symbolic obligation to give (from Latin, *munus*). He argued that “the community isn’t joined to an addition but to a subtraction of subjectivity, but which I mean that its members are no longer identical with themselves but are constitutively exposed to a propensity that forces them to open their own individual boundaries in order to appear as what is ‘outside’ themselves” (Esposito, 2002, p. 138).

As the first co-working space opened in Milan, Core had been a place with a very strong relational understanding of itself *vis à vis* the city: “it had a project for the city and the place was bearing responsibilities for it, and it still should”, added Olivia. This was happening at a time in which the city of Milan was different than today. In Sonia’s account:

“in 2010 nobody talked about ‘social innovation’: it was a curious fact that brought us a lot of attention. Nowadays Milan is changing consistently: it has internationalized itself and it is moving forward to be ‘a city of the future’...change is ‘breathable’ and this is a good thing, but we need to understand how to reposition ourselves and push up the bidding” (June 2016).

In a pioneering spirit, Core was remembered as a crossroads for significant innovative projects that, in later years, became well-known and praised examples of innovation, both locally and nationally: personalities as Davide Dattoli, founder of Talent Garden and analogous well-established realities (e.g. Avanzi) draw inspiration from Core according to its founders. “*Everyone viewed a different thing in Core* (emphasis added)”, said Olivia (June 2016), and Sonia added: “we have mobilized a lot of people, but now, it is time to understand what we’d like to offer to the city” (June 2016).

This tension between the “old” and the “new” Core emerged distinctly during the ethnographic observation. During a public event that celebrated “the past”, the invited guest, an entrepreneur that found at Core his future bride, recalled that the watch word back then was “talk to each other!”. An annoying invitation –he said, acting his usual reaction “no, I don’t want to talk, I want to go eating!”– that encouraged him to relate to others, sharing similar difficulties from your own, namely “the universal problems of the entrepreneur”. The audience reacted to his speech by pointing that “it is not enough to share a space, for a community to be”. However, the guest immediately clarified: “this is not a co-working space, it was more a group of friends that shared a set of values and among them there was *empathy* (emphasis added). Without empathy, you do not go anywhere even professionally”.

This exchange made clear the risk for the community –and for any community– to become a closed group of peers, leading us back to the old-fashioned ideal of community as a unity, whose values might have corresponded

to Esposito's *communitas* properties (2002)<sup>200</sup>. Notwithstanding that, the dimension of the *gift* lived well, and it still was existent during the ethnographic work.

The community was originally understood as a living lab always in the *process of becoming*, never fixed on a particular property of its members. This was an idea that persisted, as memories do, overtime and older members would not dismissed it very easily. In this regard, Olivia argued that Core had to be a place wherein any issues could be debated, from pornography to climate change (June 2016).

On this note, Lucia, a long-time member, enthusiastically reminded of the “old crazy times, when Core was *soul food* (emphasis added)” (May 2016): in her account, it was a place in which you were given freedom of expression and the contents were at the forefront, differently from today –she claimed. In a similar fashion, another member recalled that “there was more *love in its care* (emphasis added)” (Eleonora, entrepreneur, March 2016).

Feelings and experimentation were two key “ingredients” of Core since its founding onwards: even though they were differently engineered in the current times compared to the past, they were still very much present. The community emerged, in this sense, as a form of relationship in which one *learned* and *felt*, at times together, at others more diffusely and less systematically: through events, at the kitchen's counter, relaxing in the garden or working side by side. Just like, I contend, it ideally happens in a city. Indeed, a few years before becoming the main way of *understanding* and *governing* Milan by its governors, the idea of “urban experimentation” was foreseen by Core as a political methodology.

The concept of “urban experiment” corresponds to a normative epistemological lens that treats cities “both as laboratories, and as field sites

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<sup>200</sup> The organizational team was well-aware of this “identity crisis”. On this point and in general terms, it is useful to remind that the morphology of any group results from a complicated, delicate balance between “openness” and “closeness” towards the outside. Moreover, such issues point toward two interrelated matters which should be briefly elaborated. On one side, organizational growth requires a larger span of management control of organizational life. This includes ideals, values and emotions as the business rule applied on any of its aspects is methodologically the following “if you do not know how much it costs, it already costs too much” (Luigi, CEO of Core, team meeting, February 2016). On the other side, innovation has progressively become an institutionalized practice at the collective level, meaning that many voices have claimed credit for it and conferred it a strategic definition depending on their objectives.

where innovations and new ways of organizing urban life can be trialled” (Evans, 2016 cited in Caprotti and Cowley, 2016, p. 1441). Purposefully vague, the Milanese variant of “urban governance *by experiment*” (Caprotti and Cowley, 2016, p. 1442) has not designated specific areas or neighborhoods of interventions and its rationale has built its legitimacy upon a very broad claim to innovate through trial and errors. Functioning on a project base, this policy-approach has addressed the city in its integrity as “*Laboratorio Milano*”.

The temporality of events and the analysis of spatial and organizational rhetoric have been suggestive of Core’s groundbreaking role *vis à vis* the city: as a forerunner, the organization anticipated the kind of change that has invested the city from 2011 onwards. More interestingly, it has seemingly *started up a discourse* that has envisaged a kind of politics and a technique of management: it has done so a short time before the concept “social innovation” has been embedded into urban policies and the expression “diffused innovators” has been coined. Describing/prescribing a particular relationship between the citizen, the public administration and the city, “diffused innovation” is a form of relationship in which the former i.e. the citizen, takes active care of the city and wherein the diffusion of innovative practices are conceptualized “as bees, symptoms of a healthy environment”<sup>201</sup>.

Concurrently, the physical space has normatively performed, as analyzed in Chapter 4, an organizational *eros* and a particular enactment of publicity that now finds many echoes in contemporary urban policies: Core has literally materialized before similar “spaces of activation” have become objects of governmental attention and have gained momentum as crucial sites of economic as well as anthropological innovation. Seemingly, underlying this management effort, both on the side of the organization and of the local administration, we may find a normative ideal of urbanity, which the following paragraphs elaborate further.

## 5.4 A good citizen

The fact that a normative character is attached to city-life is not a novelty *per se* as it has many historical precedents: at the very least, we could count one dominant normative ideal for each theory of urban planning, each reflecting an epistemological evolution, at times rupture, with regards to the object “city” (Hall,

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<sup>201</sup> The expression is due to Annibale d’Elia in the occasion of the event “*Milano City-Makers*” held in early May 2016 in Milan (see Chapter 3 for further details).

2014)<sup>202</sup>. From a different epistemological basis, Henri Lefebvre (2003) notably advanced the thesis that human life under capitalism was being completely urbanized. “Urban”, as Lefebvre explained, denoted a type of social organization, namely *a virtual and possible object* which was the outcome of the dominance of the city, but paradoxically so, even in its absence (*Ibid.*, p. 3-4). In the late 2000s, Lefebvre’s controversial thesis was picked up by critical social scientists, importantly exemplified by Neil Brenner’s and Christian Schmid’s body of work on “planetary urbanization”. Calling for a new epistemology for an effective critique of political economy in a global urban condition (Brenner, 2014), the scholars contend that “this situation of *planetary urbanization* means, paradoxically, that even spaces that lie well beyond the traditional city cores and suburban peripheries [...] have become integral parts of a worldwide urban fabric” (Brenner and Schmid, 2017).

These evolutions, in which the changing functions of the city (i.e. notion) have coupled with new ideal forms of urban life (i.e. norm), are linked to a play of power that shapes them but which is also conditioned by them (Rabinow, 2003, p. 53). Thus, according to this perspective, the exercise of power changes accordingly to the renewed historically contingent forms of knowledge. Notably, this is so, if the object “city” is read through the lens of power/knowledge, two distinct concepts whose assemblage produce “a strategy without a strategist” (Rabinow, 2003, p. 53): in Foucault’s terms, power is understood as a field of conflictual relationships rather than a juxtaposition between the powerful on one side, and the powerless, on the other –or between those who govern, on one hand, and those who are governed, on the other. Dismissing the idea of a definitive agency and structure that directs conduct, thus the key question centers on “how” change occurs and reaches the level of being collectively convincing.

Differently, other critical accounts have emphasized the ideology that drives contemporary representations of what the “city” and the “urban” mean: ideology, a pivotal concept of Marxist approaches, corresponds *in nuce* to “the way that the forms of appearance of social reality under capitalism are systematically distorted to the benefit of some and the detriment of others” (Wachsmuth, 2014, p. 77). Thus, it is the relationship between cities and capitalism, or better said the nexus between them (Rossi, 2017), that have oriented such critical inquiries: the question to answer here centers on “why and for whose benefit” are cities and its associated signifiers (e.g. innovation), so discursively pervasive and powerful.

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<sup>202</sup> Peter Hall argued that the shifts in town-planning occurred over the last fifty years should be seen as developmental rather than paradigmatic (Hall, 2014, p. 411).

Without the aim to exhaust the conceptual avenues of Marxist and neo-Marxist debates, it is important to focus on an emerging tension between Lefebvrian and Castellan readings of spatial processes under capitalism. Notably, Manuel Castells criticized Lefebvre for his spatial fetishism and urged to focus on urban contradictions: the “urban” or the “space” are not objects of inquiry *per se*, the scholar argued (Castells, 1979), but they are relevant *because* of the uses capitalism makes of them. Dismissing Lefebvre's ambiguous “urban revolution”, Castells emphasized the ideological use of the term “urban” –even by those that should be critical towards it (*Ibid.*, pp. 86-95)<sup>203</sup>.

Acknowledging the risk of spatial fetishism, I also contend that space is a legitimate object of inquiry *per se* for two reasons. First, little can be understood about “what people are” and “what people do” (Pile, 2008) without looking at the spaces they inhabit (Leghissa, 2012): paraphrasing Lefebvre's reply to Castell's *critique*, we cannot sit aside space. Second, space has emerged, throughout the ethnographic observation, as *a specific technique of power*: as analyzed in Chapter 4, the organizational rhetoric importantly circulated by means of a spatial script that produced a collective fetishism of the space itself and thus, it had to be analytically unpacked, even through a sort of “fetishizing attitude”. The important point has laid on the kind of power and the kind of subjects such space envisaged, warding off the apparent innocence of a discourse that has not been represented as manifestly unjust or undesirable. What kind of subject do the techniques of power analyzed so far have wished for? For our case, as it should be clear by now, the economy is one of many instants of power and it should be kept as such precisely not to flatten the subject on a sole condition of possibility and to acknowledge forms of resistance *vis à vis* specific “techniques and forms of power” (Foucault, 1983). Moreover, given that a form of power is what makes individuals subjects (*Ibid.*), there is, not only, no way “to get rid” of power, but this latter is also symbolically desirable, as psychoanalysis has long contended: in a sense, we are all – differently– good soldiers.

For the case here examined, the “good soldier” learned good civic manners, those latter loosely corresponding to a form of relationship that belongs to and is embodied by *urban citizens* –not just city-dwellers. I am not arguing that this has

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<sup>203</sup> Despite their differences, both approaches attribute to the economy an all-encompassing importance *vis à vis* social reality: even though, as Louis Althusser argued, the economy matters “in the last instance” (1971) as the reproduction of the conditions of production happened in institutions, this kind of *critique* never exit capitalism as an *explanandum* and *explanans* of the “social”.

happened all over the world even though important resonances, particularly in the “Global North”, can be found in scholarly and non-scholarly accounts. However, this dynamic has seemingly materialized at Core and in Milan in these terms and through the described means. In this specific sense, the ideal of urbanity portrays a planetary dimension: it is not a “real thing” but rather a condition of modernity. The urban effects that Core, similarly to analogous realities and projects, have generated at the neighborhood level, notwithstanding the public noise around innovation as a tool of urban regeneration, have been much limited and shall be critically questioned. Paradoxically, despite the rhetoric, the city in its concreteness has not emerged, albeit continuously invoked, but it has rather corresponded to a “virtual” object of subjective and collective activation. Indeed, this contemporary ideal of urbanity is planetary in its discursive *situatedness*, meaning that the “planetary” has a situated function in the economy of the discourse. This epistemological shift has shaped the ways the city has been *felt*, not, or not necessarily, for what it was in its concreteness, despite the fact that such representations built upon factual urban realities: Silicon Valley or New York have very much functioned, uncritically, as imaginary benchmarks of progress, innovation, social meritocracy and justice, that legitimized the *goodness* of those efforts. Moreover, Milan as *the* most important urban area for creative and cultural industries in the Italian peninsula, has provided a fertile ground in this sense: arguably, if a policy-maker talks about “diffused innovation” in more peripheral areas of the country, the legitimacy of the discourse may likely find stronger resistances, in spite of its *coolness*.

More subtly, but in an extremely effective way, this epistemological shift has influenced “the way you *feel* in the space”, to quote the aforementioned puzzling statement of an interviewee commenting on Core’s emotional influence.

The paradigms of the creative city on one hand, and of the collaborative economy, on the other –to pick the “extreme” examples of the epistemological *continuum* centered on the nexus “innovation/city”, do not substantially differ as their *epistemological field is exactly the same*. At best, the latter is the progressive variant of the “bad” former, depicting the constitutive ambiguity of the loose object “innovation”. However, the kind of subject and the kind of relationality they prescribe are starkly similar<sup>204</sup>. Mixing entrepreneurship, innovation, a

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<sup>204</sup> This does not mean that the effects are equivalent or that “progressive” versions aren’t ideally desirable, but the fact that their discursive “dead-ends” are similar should be, at least, questioned. This position moves from the stance that concepts are useful if they analyze something, not if they describe everything.

communitarian and civic spirit, they both produce a discursive political “cocktail” that is truly global and finds no limits of application: from peripheries to city-centers, from climate change to the NEET issue, from economic to societal issues, such as migration<sup>205</sup>.

In this epistemological background, the elected individual, subjected to this particular form of power, is one that does not need either constraints nor control in order to be a “good citizen”<sup>206</sup>, but quite on a different note, he or she needs, in serendipitous ways, “to bump into” people “in the place for different purposes” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 150), at different schedules (*Ivi.*). Indeed, such normative ideal of urbanity has latently entailed a change at the level of what “public” signifies when the expression “public space” is employed. The perception of public space, intimately connected to the contemporary normative ideal of city-life, is one of “open to the public” rather than, for example, publicly owned. It focuses less on “ownership, mode and type of accessibility, degrees of enclosure, types and degree of control and [...] purpose” (Mitrasinovic, 2006), and more on alleged features of publicity, well epitomized by urban realities. Indeed, “public” has been progressively recognized as a place, in spite of its typology, wherein people encounter purposefully or by chance and engage with each other in a certain way –just like it happened at Core. “These kinds of spaces are fundamental: societies become as you describe them”, I was reminded by one of my informants (Fabrizio, entrepreneur, February 2016).

#### 5.4.1 Contesting serendipity

The ideal identity of the Cory was then drawn in the background of this intricate twist of heterogeneous processes and practices that encompassed talks, learning, sociality, random or, as the rhetoric went, serendipitous exchanges, food, parties,

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<sup>205</sup> During the ethnographic observation, on a billboard at Core, a flyer entitled “Integrated Futures” was displayed: it corresponded to the European Social Innovation Competition 2016, seeking “bright ideas to support the reception and integration of refugees and migrants in Europe”. The website of the EU Social Innovation Competition better explained the rationale behind the public call: “many refugees and migrants have the potential to be the next entrepreneurs and innovators, but without the right support, their skills can be wasted and they can be marginalized” The call awarded the three best business solutions in Fall 2016 with fifty thousand euro each. Available at <<http://bit.ly/2pTz49Y>> [Accessed: 5 July 2017]. This example shall be conceived as merely illustrative, rather than as a litmus test of the change at the level of governmental practice, but it still finds many echoes in actual innovative policies targeting marginalized urban groups and areas. For example, as analyzed in Chapter Three, the projects “Milano Young Citizens” and “FabriQ” in the case of city of Milan, are epistemologically aligned to such idea of innovation.

<sup>206</sup> “Good citizen” aims to express the idea of a subject in force of its productive and *extra-productive* contribution to the collectivity.

a wizardly space, work and pleasure. Its allure was, indeed, extremely seductive, but, as the colloquial expression suggests, “all that glitter ain’t gold”.

As Core’s philosophy centered upon innovation, it subsumed any contemporary social facts that, in some way or another, hinted at it: “the startup world” that, at the time of the ethnographic study, was “on everyone’s lips”, but also: the sharing economy, digital tech, cultural and creative practices, to mention a few. The graphical representation displayed on one of the garden’s wall could not convey more distinctly what Core was: a totalizing trope, that metaphorically or metonymically, changed name to innovation. Depending on the situation, Core could “talk”, as the light bubbles displayed on the graphics suggested, “innovation”, “creativity”, “water”, “sustainability”, “global”, “collaboration”, “talent”, “trust”, “irony”, “green”, “bio”, “ideas”. The organizational allure functioned making full use from a set of implicit signifiers associated, for example, to “ideas”. In this sense Core did not need to express the associations traced between diverse heterogeneous elements (e.g. “ideas” and “water”): it relied on implicit and explicit, cultural and material, global and local elements that assembled produced a “social” that, nevertheless, made more sense for some and less for others.

“For the love of God, I, by no means, feel to be an innovator. It is bullshit to say that we are innovative!”, vigorously argued Gregorio (freelancer, May 2016), displaying an outspoken uneasiness towards Core’s communitarian spirit. When asked “do you *feel like* a Cory?”, he stated “What?! I dislike any kind of collective identity. I have a strong sense of belonging to myself, that’s why I do not feel like a Cory”.

Differently, some interviewees, when asked the same question, embodied excitement and bonding towards being a member:

“Yes, I feel like a Cory. Core is like an airport where people, with different know-hows, arrive and depart. I am doing a lot more as a person since I am here and this has effects on the outside: it is a sort of attitude towards the world that I am building” (February 2016)

said Gianluca, a freelancer who described his experience at Core as “therapeutic”, stressing how “from a personal point of view, Core offered me a lot”. Many among the group of the “enthusiasts” counted Core’s team members: playing both in-role and extra-role behaviors, they embodied the “orthodox” definition of organizational ideal. Notwithstanding, depending on the component,

the intensity of the tie varied importantly, but unsurprisingly, they were the ones, whether in a “pretend to be” kind of attitude or for sincere personal belief, hyping the dreamy narrative.

Of other Cories questioned, a good number hesitated, took their time to reflect and possibly said “yes, I do feel like a Cory”, suggesting through their words or bodily expressions “why shouldn’t I?”<sup>207</sup>. “This label sucks, but yes. I am quite annoyed by trendy Milanese hipster etiquette”, said Gilberto, a long-term member (entrepreneur, March 2016). “Then, why is it “yes”?”, I asked him and he answered: “at the end, you come here every day and you feel dragged into it. I feel I am attached to this place professionally, and at times, personally”.

Individuals, both team members and Cories, *reacted* to the organization rhetoric, in some way or another, at the *individual* level. However, this important fact did not make such a discourse less powerful at the *collective* level. Individuals might have not adhered to the myth –and many of the interviewees did not– but either actively or passively, for personal or professional needs, they contributed to the circulation of mythological elements, hyping the noise surrounding innovation. At times, Cories denounced the rhetoric, but without acknowledging their *role* in its reproduction. At other times, they recognized the existence of a discourse and they interrogated their place within its production and circulation.

The important point about this is the following: the individuals *physically present in the space* were diverse but even though conflictual, group dynamics were always at play. In other words, otherness was continuously generating subjective struggles of different intensity: even in the case of non-belonging, the community was hard to be all together dismissed. Indeed, the space was “an occasion to belong”, as Eleonora described it (entrepreneur, March 2016) and individuals could bargain their personal place within at their convenience. In this regard, when asked “is there a community [of Cories]?”, interestingly, hardly

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<sup>207</sup> I am aware that my own role might have influenced their answers since my positioning might have been misperceived by the interviewees. Indeed, even though I was introduced as an independent researcher rather than Core’s consultant, it was arguably the case that, particularly during the first weeks of the ethnography, my presence was perceived with some suspicion. This might have led some interviewees to quickly dismiss my questions or to simply answer in line with the expectations that they might have thought I had. Alongside that, it might have been that I was perceived as engaged by Core to investigate on certain topics, a perception that might have induced certain answers rather than others. Moreover, the very topic of belonging is, as said, slippery *per se*: arguably people might have tended to be indolent and lazily say “yes, I belong, why not?” rather than explaining their thoughts on non-belonging.

none of the Cories answered “no, there is not”<sup>208</sup>. Their affirmative responses varied in content, but implicitly or explicitly, they made reference to its spatial dimension, an aspect analyzed in-depth in Chapter 4. On this note, Domenico commented: “I think that it is weird, but there is one [a community] which is deeply connected to the physical space”. “Could you describe what you share as a community?”, I followed on and he declared:

“sharing a space, the way we interact with each other, a sharing attitude of reciprocal exchange. Everybody seems very aware of the business side of being here, but this latter is inserted in a relationship which has a wider scope” (entrepreneur, June 2016).

In a similar fashion, Sonia acknowledged that: “*the people that are here* (emphasis added) are the ones that actually make the community” (interview, February 2016)<sup>209</sup>. But, officially, the community counted “over three hundred innovators”, even though the number was controversial and much debated by the organizational team itself. As a praxis, anybody who engaged with Core for a variety of reasons (even myself), was added in the database as a member, even if he or she did not pay for the membership: numbers were, in this sense, one of the tools employed by Core to boost the noise around innovation and therefore, increase the organization’s public legitimacy and allure.

There was also a smaller minority among Cories (obviously counting the already cited Gregorio) that spoke, by means of words or bodily, detachment and uneasiness *vis à vis* collective labels. Some argued that the Cory’s etiquette was “kind of funny”, others confronted my question by means of irony. In particular, Luca promptly answered: “no, I come from Foggia<sup>210</sup>” (startup entrepreneur, February 2016), a metonym that he later elaborated: “cynicism and age prevent me to answer positively and actually, the label ‘Cory’ even makes me laugh”. In

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<sup>208</sup> To some extent, interviewees might have felt the expectation to answer affirmatively in this case, but the important point I would like to make is the following: even social expectations are performative and as such, they should be deemed as meaningful empirical results. Indeed, the question to pose might be the following: why, in this particular case, are individuals expected to feel part of a group?

<sup>209</sup> During the ethnographic observation, I interviewed a consistent group of individuals that dealt with Core, but they were physically present at the space on an occasional basis, for example for events or training programs. Many of them had something to do with the “startup world”, under the guise of entrepreneurs, investors, mentors or influencers.

<sup>210</sup> Foggia is an Italian southern city located in the Puglia region. Arguably, the figure of speech conferred a sense of detachment, juxtaposing a touch with reality associated with certain kind of places and lifestyle on one side, and Core’s dreamy narratives, on the other.

his mid-forties, Luca founded a startup together with two friends and former colleagues but differently from young startup entrepreneurs he and his partners, had a strong record of work experiences:

“young “*startupper*s” think differently. They are a little bit punk, anarchic, super-convinced of their idea...differently, I have never said that this thing that we do, changes the world. It is likable, even a little bit smart, but it is the outcome of a long-term commitment rather than the idea of a day”.

“The world” I encountered at Core, as mentioned, was varied: not everybody engaged in the startup practice, but nevertheless the “startup” linguistic sign could not but be part of their own conversation, reflecting the mounting public discourse “startup-inflated”. This was also due to the fact that Core’s offer on the market, in light of being a certified incubator<sup>211</sup>, was importantly moving towards incubation and acceleration services, and obviously its organizational rhetoric was evolving accordingly.

“Everybody”, it seemed, “ended with both feet in the startup world” at the time of the ethnographic observation, willingly or less so. “Everybody”, moreover, had their own say on it, depending on how that “world” was contingent to their own practice. In this regard, three groups were identifiable: startup entrepreneurs, individuals or business entities offering services for startups and last, others operating tangent to the “startup world” and on a similar signifying chain (e.g. social enterprises and “creative” workers such as freelancers, marketing and communication agencies). The latter group counted individuals that were not startup entrepreneurs, but that were publicly named this way –pointing to the fact that the term “startup”, similarly to “community” and “innovation”, was an empty signifier. “We are not a startup, even though we are continuously called so”, argued Elena, heading a social enterprise converting flat roofs into green social ones, that attended a six-month incubation program at Core:

“It is a kind of linguistic violence and it is even kind of funny that realities that have been on the market for five years still call themselves ‘startup’. Notwithstanding, there is nothing bad in eking out a living” (March 2016).

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<sup>211</sup> See Chapter 3 for details on the legal definition of “certified incubator”.

The reaction to the “startup hype” ranged from harsh criticism to positive, at times, enthusiastic accounts. Leonardo, a web marketing expert at the business newspaper Sole24Ore and co-founder of a digital startup with a good reception on the market declared:

“we do not define ourselves as “*startupper*s”. [...] They are people that do not know what to do, with daddy’s money, with cheap ideas that aren’t great innovations” (December 2015).

In a similar fashion, Enrico, a business-mentor, argued:

“they are [*startupper*s] a bunch of well-educated and trendy kids that have no idea what hunger is. Startup is an illusion of work: there are a lot of ‘zombie’ startups and, by the way, you need to afford to have a startup. Put the well-educated on a PC, name them ‘CEO’ and they will avoid launching molotov” (Skype interview, June 2016).

After holding various positions as manager and CEO for big enterprises throughout his career, Enrico lost his job and disclosed to me that, after 2012, he had to reinvent himself and became interested in the startup phenomenon and “fascinated by its energy”. Nevertheless, he spared no one, firstly denouncing “incubators and accelerators of *lifestyle* (emphasis added)” that he described as “just like the libraries where we went to hook up and the only ones making a profit out of it”. In other words, Enrico pointed toward the “Italian anomaly”, characterized by a lot of “sellers of shovels in the new gold rush”, structural lack of risk capital and few exits (Magnani, 2016). Moreover, he emphasized the discrepancy between the mounting “cultural bubble”, insignificant economic facts and the risk that the few relevant realities that Italy counted would likely see no light in such a hyped and confusing sector: “we are all whores”, he laconically concluded.

Three crucial elements that Enrico mentioned, are worthy of elaboration that were echoed in other interviewees’ accounts.

First, the questionable economic resilience of startup entrepreneurship in the Italian case. On this point, Luigi, head of Core, declared:

“Half of the people that are here, are occupied, meaning that they are keeping themselves busy, but they are not employed for the job market because that market does not want them. However, this is not a

problem *per se*: it is better to keep busy and in two or three years to be absorbed by successful entrepreneurial cases” (March 2016).

The expression “keeping themselves busy” points toward the underlying pedagogical element guiding the startup fervor and the new practices of government: one that pivots on increasing the competencies of the “good citizen”, rather than merely to exercise control upon this latter.

Second and concurrently, innovative entrepreneurship has figured as a plausible answer to an increasing social malaise among well-educated middle-class youth facing the question “what do I do?”. “What is the alternative? Socially we are on the edge of the abyss: how can we go on?”, argued Massimiliano, a young startup entrepreneur (June 2016), implicitly linking the “global” and the subject. He described the crisis as a cathartic moment of awareness and the form “startup” as a model to boost structural change and as a mean of collective and subjective reinvention:

“startups provide hope and excitement: you feel appreciated, it is mainly a ‘thing’ for youth and it is also a tool that generates hope and empathy among peers”.

Third, this points toward some considerations on the trope “startup” as a tool of anthropological reinvention. Among the startup entrepreneurs interviewed, an ideal type of *startupper* has not emerged, and the most striking difference among them played on the age. On one hand, senior entrepreneurs (roughly over thirty years old onwards) pragmatically used the form “startup” at their convenience, but they were suspicious about the startup fervor. On the other hand, young people (ranging from twenty to thirty years old), were less critical and more seduced by the sparkling glitter around<sup>212</sup>. Moreover, from the broad picture reconstructed in this chapter, a messy ensemble of blurred identities emerged distinctly: ideals, ideas, vocabulary, practices and techniques assumed to refer to the identity “Cory”, “startup entrepreneur”, “creative”, “innovator” blended continuously and they symbolically caught in the discursive grips those individuals that, with more pragmatism and less romance, worked in innovative sectors. In this sense, the rhetoric built on supposedly desirable icons that, at first sight, allowed no “outside”. Purposefully broad, vague and indeterminate, this set of loose signifiers potentially allowed everybody to fit it, depending on the subject’s needs, and as

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<sup>212</sup> A similar behavioral dynamic was observable with regards to the community and the etiquette “Cory”: seniors were more reluctant to affirm their adherence, differently from juniors.

an effect the noise around innovation, despite counting many voices, has importantly intensified over the last years.

#### 5.4.2 A matter of methods<sup>213</sup>

A designer, an invited guest of a social event held at Core in Spring 2016, vigorously stressed to his audience, that addressing “real” problems posed a matter of method. Involved in a project for the settling of a school in one of Nairobi’s slums, he argued the following:

“A difficulty transforms itself in an element of the project. It is *lack* (emphasis added) that determines the project...lack of resources, not the *potential* (emphasis added) as we are customarily used to think”.

“Real” problems, in this context, meant basic human needs, while “lack” corresponded to the missing elements customary assumed as mandatory to solve a given problem *rightly* as if there was one moral way in solving it.

The designer brought the example of objects for daily-uses and basic needs (e.g. kitchen tools or braziers) made out of wastes founded in dumps. These “urban” objects were not accessible in their original industrial forms, but they were still well present in the collective’s consciousness: raw materials, namely things they had, were reinterpreted and the social system “synchronized” accordingly. Differently said, the situated problem was imbricated into a political assemblage and vice versa, meaning that universals were visibly intelligible in singularities.

According to the designer, the act of reinterpretation voiced a sense of belonging and marked the moment of exchange between tribal and urban languages. Despite romantic nuances attached to this specific conversation, the important methodological point for our case is the following: the respect and acknowledgement of ramified relationships with regard to a given problem are at the founding core of design-thinking as a methodology that pragmatically, albeit *emphatically*, expresses “*the capacity of man to re-organize* (emphasis added) in extreme, even apocalyptic, conditions” (*Ibid.*).

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<sup>213</sup> This paragraph loosely draws its inspiration from the lecture on contemporary design issues, theories and approaches presented by Anke Gruendel held during the class “Planning and counter-planning” (A.Y. 2016/2017) taught by prof. S.J. Collier and which I attended during my visiting research period at The New School.

At its core, it lays the idea that problems have neither an innate nor a definitive ontology. They are, in fact, *wicked* –as Horst Rittel firstly called them in the 1960s:

“a class of social systems problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting valued and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing” (Churchman, 1967, p. 141).

This definition emerges as *wicked* itself since it alludes to a potentially infinitive inclusion, under the label “wicked problem”, of any human problems which are, as social scientists have longed argued, complex by default. It entails a process of inquiry valuing observation, empathy, systemic thinking, creativity, testing of a prototype (i.e. a tentative answer of a problem) and ongoing questioning of assumptions and results. Design-thinking is not dissimilar, in this sense, to qualitative research methods: they both exemplify, on paper, open-ended approaches to the “social”, bearing in themselves a degree of uncertainty as there are no definite answers to problems and the process of learning is inherently valuable *per se*.

Such a methodology envisages a particular relationship with the present and the future. It stresses the value of the creative process in the process itself and the importance of being able to make out of “what you have the best in relative terms”. When facing an unsatisfying present and an uncertain future, “perfection is the enemy of good”, passionately argued Anna Barbero, one of the guest speakers of the 2016 Spring event Fuckup Nights.

The event that “praises failures” featured as part of the Milano Design Week 2016 and more specifically among the “Fuorisalone” activities, alongside an exhibition called “Failures–process beyond success”. This latter displayed a series of unsuccessful design projects of well-known designers and artists (e.g. Alessandro Mendini, Aldo Rossi, Ettore Sottsass, Marco Zanuso). The message it communicated was glaring: failing is part of the experimentation process that leads to innovation and any success stories count on and learn from failures. Failure is not only acceptable but *desirable* as it expresses the very meaning of experimentation: indeed, what is the point of an experiment if the outcome is guaranteed in advance?

A fertile ground for design-thinking is entrepreneurship, generally understood as a process of experimentation, particularly for high-growth ventures (Kerr et al., 2014) and more specifically, social entrepreneurship. Indeed, this latter, by definition, aims to tackle *wicked problems*, namely economic, environmental and political issues –ranging from climate change to social injustices at large.

“How do you do innovation?” asked Giandomenico, guest speaker at Core, invited to discuss “the culture of innovation” in February 2016, namely, as the subhead of the event went, “the values that had to be interiorized by a firm to be innovative”. Bringing up in the discussion the methodologies applied by the consultancy firm he led, Giandomenico stated the following:

“prototyping means *to disassemble* (emphasis added) the forecasted process of producing a new thing. This corresponds to the ‘lean startup’ approach. Our point is to help organizations that consult us, to bring inspiration into play...contamination...by interacting with people that have, on paper, nothing to do with them. For example, the banking system that confronts itself with elderlies and children...”

“This is the design-thinking methodology!”

intervened Edoardo, senior employee at Core.

Introduced by the Californian design-consultancy firm IDEO in the late 1990s, design-thinking is a methodology that envisages a particular relationship with knowledge: established knowledge and assumptions are openly and systematically put into question, disciplinary boundaries are “unashamedly” crossed and emotional ties –particularly empathy towards others– are pivots in this human-centered approach to innovation. The process which mixes creative and critical thinking, is described as valuable *per se*. Learning is conceived as experimental, thus knowledge is not given “once and for all”, and trial and errors are fundamentally welcomed for this reason. In a certain way, this methodology rejects a possible sense of shame of not-knowing and failing, a sentiment which paradoxically functions as a barrier to knowledge, preventing designers to understand what their users want.

Compared to design-thinking, the lean startup methodology introduced by Eric Ries in 2008, is more business-focused and quantitative. However, similarly to design-thinking, a lean approach envisages a continuous cycle of learning to test business ideas in order to manage uncertainty and complexity (Mueller and

Toring, 2012). Both approaches ideally outline certain conditions *to learn better* – marking a substantive difference between pedagogical tools aiming to increase competencies from others which merely discipline subjects and subject matters.

### 5.4.3 Startup subjectivities

Pointing at Core's *parterre* of economic activities, Fabrizio argued that "nobody is innovative here". Innovation has emerged as an issue that is tangent to the economy: similarly to technology, it ended up corresponding to a "virtually autonomous all encompassing agent of change" (Marx, 2010, p. 564). Differently put, the term "innovation" has been often employed to describe everything and to analyze nothing. Moreover, the analysis presented made clear that innovation has corresponded to a non-homogenous social fact and a much-contested terrain.

Three aspects marked the experience of being a subject at Core. First, subjects felt emotionally attached to their entrepreneurial project, precisely because they had a personal stake in it. This was particularly evident in the case of startup entrepreneurship where emotions played an important role for entrepreneurs and investors alike.

"It is a matter of having a good story, much better than having metrics, and to narrate it with enthusiasm. A good narrative demands a lot of work. At the end of the day, it is psychology because 'numbers' are just one side of the story: you have to show up with passion and make us dream" (February 2016)

declared Sergio, head of a local association of business angels. Mr. Sergio was lecturing an audience of startup entrepreneurs on risk investing: during his talk, he stressed several times that investors are also "mothers and fathers", thus emotions make a difference when deciding whether or not to invest. In a similar fashion, Luigi, Core's CEO who was also an early-stage investor, argued that "investing is arbitrary as fuck" (February 2016).

The so called "elevator pitch" is an important part of the startup business etiquette. Customarily performed by startup entrepreneur to arouse interests of potential investors, such technique is a short –from thirty seconds to two minutes– persuasive and emotionally intensive sales pitch. Whether facing business angels or venture capitalists, entrepreneurs have to convince the audience of the worth of their project in a very short time span which symbolically reflects the duration of an elevator ride. During such figurative "rides", the language employed aims to

create an emotional connection with investors and one common way to do it, is to contextualize the specific project with reference to larger societal issues –this being the second aspect characterizing the experience of being a subject at Core.

The term “startup” has emerged as a very intimate answer, at times to a global issue (e.g. environmental sustainability) and at others, to a personal one that had also social and cultural echoes. In the former case, “startup” symptomized the fact that the universal “globalization” was interiorized by individuals and materialized in the form of a subjective and collective *systemic* approach to life. The individuals encountered, which were differently engaged in innovative practices, related and valorized themselves with regard to the world as a “whole *we should care about*”. As argued in Chapter 1 and 3, also places have increasingly embraced a relational understanding of space which finds expression in the notion of “network”, overriding the one of the “territory”.

The world as a system has become an object to care about –toward which its members are individually deemed responsible for on a daily basis. Thus, globalization was performed relationally: it was experienced as an intimate social tie with the world in its integrity: a one-to-one relationship to whom they (we?) are *subjected* as members of the system. When this was the case, and it was particularly so in the accounts of young startup entrepreneurs, the discursive practice of innovation made full use of other sensational terms: “digital”, “technology”, “social innovation”, “impact”. In this regard, to think digitally corresponded to think of oneself as *connected* to a larger global system:

“I like to think that we are all connected, that all nature is connected, therefore one should be rewarded by the system for his or her contribution to the it”

Davide said (startup entrepreneur, March 2016). At times, such *global relationality* was also embodied by non-startup entrepreneurs. “To improve things, to make the world a better place” –as Domenico, another interviewee involved on a digital project on environmental sustainability, described his acting (Domenico, June 2016)– importantly marked what it would be appropriate to name as “startup subjectivities”.

Even when the “world” did not function as an imaginary benchmark that the subject held on to, all the diverse individuals encountered described the practices they engaged in as *meaningful to them*. In this sense, to act virtuously did not mean that the founders engaged on a project to “do good” for others. Rather, they

were subjectively articulating a personal interpretation to a matter that had concerned them in the first person: a disease or dysfunction that affected a significant other or even themselves, a service they wished to benefit from when they were in a particular subjective positioning (e.g. being a mother, a swimmer or a care-giver), or a passion of theirs (e.g. basketball, art and craft niches, music concerts, personal care, healthy food habits, Tarantino's movies). From startup entrepreneurs to free lancers or "classical" entrepreneurs (e.g. marketing and communication agency) many had a personal stake in their work as they often were, together with their few partners, solely responsible for their project performance and their own fortune. Moreover, even when this was not the case (e.g. external workers), reflexivity emerged as a distinctive trait qualifying the subject: an intimate quest to an existential meaning through a self-constructing process of one's own place, invested as much exteriority (i.e. epiphenomena, such as work, which are generally considered other than a "pure" psychic interiority) as interiority at Core.

The term "startup" –an entity that Marica described as "whatever" (incubation manager at Core, January 2016)– has emerged as a slippery and contested notion to define. However, such linguistic ambiguity is not casual and it is anthropologically significant in the sense of being a symptom of a new *logos* on *anthropos*. In this regard, the concept "startup subjectivity" expresses a form of contemporary subjectivity where the individual is subjected –thus becomes a subject– to a form of power which corresponds to the discourse "on oneself and of oneself" –the last element characterizing the experience of being a subject at Core. Differently put, reflexivity is a necessary and foundational process to forms of work which are hand-made "sartorial dresses" subjects create whereas *knowledge* concerns subject-making (i.e. knowledge of oneself) –of which contemporary forms of business-creation are a tangible expression in a *knowledge-economy*.

"You have to become a commercial agent. Exercise yourself in being a seller", a business mentor argued while addressing a parterre of startup entrepreneurs attending a training program. In a similar fashion, a startup entrepreneur coaching early-stage startups on risk investing and tactics to tackle "the first task of startups, namely to find investors", explained:

"the network is the most important thing that you: you have to play well your cards and be prepared" (training event, February 2016).

“To be ready” –for an “elevator pitch”, to talk publicly, to network– emerged as a mantra of the “startup world” and as a pervasive attitude encompassing also other forms of innovative practices hosted at Core. Building on that, such practices can be described as “emotional” not only since emotions were, for example, an important leverage to find investors or clients, but because the distance between the individual’s task and the overall project performance was reduced consistently. On the one hand, individuals put themselves into play by often shaping “at their own image” their entrepreneurial projects. On the other hand, their performance, success or failure, felt *entirely* upon them. “Ours is a mindset: do it, do it right, do it better”, explained Damiano –later clarifying his thought: “you need to continuously interact because you have to write *your own guidelines* (emphasis added)” (startup entrepreneur, Skype interview, July 2016).

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has intended to explore the experience of being a subject at Core with reference to the discursive matrix that formed and informed it.

In the first part of the chapter I have analyzed the organizational script articulated by Core, paying a closed attention to its qualifying trait i.e. the community. I have also made the case for a connection between the organizational script and the broader matter of citizen-making. Thus, I have examined the role of Core in socializing modern subjects rather than merely organizational members.

Moreover, I have framed the organizational ideal of subjectivity as an ideal of urbanity i.e. a normative script to be performed as much as within Core’s walls than beyond them.

The second part of the chapter has aimed to account for the *similarities* produced by Core’s organizational rhetoric (i.e. which are the aspects the individuals inhabiting the organizational space shared, if any?) and *differences* (i.e. how have those very individuals reacted to the discourse’s demands?) in terms of subjective positioning. Drawing upon Blackman *et al.* (2008), this part has wished to account for the different grasp that power holds on the subjects it forms.

# Conclusion

This study has analyzed the phenomenon of “innovation” through multiple lenses –theoretical, spatial, politico-institutional, material, organizational, relational, each corresponding to one of the elements that have shaped its contemporary form. However, as outlined in the introduction, the entry point of this study has been to view innovation in the context of its relationship with the city, both as a concrete artifact and as a field of “cityness”, meaning a kind of urbanity.

My research curiosity emerged from a contemporary scientific consensus and a shared public understanding structured as follows: first, innovation is necessary and desirable; second, cities hold the primacy over other spatial scales and third, cities act as natural sites of experiment where innovation blooms. In other words, the common belief that innovation and city are innately linked and that it is cognitively difficult to separate one from the other.

Building on these considerations, the general research questions I have attempted to answer are: under what conditions of possibility does the discursive practice “innovation” become subjectively and collectively sensible and meaningful (Foucault, 2008)? How does such discourse “speak the truth” to and for the subject (Allouch, 2012, p. 2)?

As outlined in greater details in the introduction and Chapter 2, this research question has first implied, to sustain the argument that innovation does not exist but *as an effect* of a multiplicities of elements and second, to suppose that the social existence of innovation had to be created *ex-novo*. Stated differently, I have asked myself the following: which are the sources of legitimacy that have led to think as possible, in the first place, and desirable, in the second place, innovation

in this specific way? Is it possible to perform out new, through a sort of methodological “journey”, “what stays beneath” innovation?

Innovation has been explicitly approached from different angles to examine the diverse *conditions of possibility* underlying its emergence in a distinctive way. Conditions of possibility are defined (Chapter 1 and 2) as those set of conditions that have made innovation a meaningful social fact –something which has gained a public legitimacy in the context of governance, collective pursuit, and as a state of being.

In addition, my interest was piqued by the variety of uses and semantic contexts in which the word “innovation” is employed. Many contexts appeared to share a silent commonality, even though the situated meaning could vary consistently. To innovate in the fields of government, business or university and research, might mean quite different things and bear diverse consequences. Even within such fields, a variety of meanings shapes the term “innovation” as firms and organizations all have different sizes, shapes and desired outcomes. Despite that, *similar rules of expression* regarding the concept of innovation appear beyond the specific content and fields of application within and across disciplines and contexts.

The use of the term “innovation” has thus been considered as not casual but rather as potentially revelatory of the changing “*silent configuration* (emphasis added) in which language finds support” (Foucault, 1973, p. xi). This “voiceless configuration” corresponds to what Michel Foucault defined as discourse, a definition which in turn led the philosopher to wonder: “[...] from what moment, from what semantic or syntactical change, can one recognize that language has turned into rational discourse?” (*Ivi.*).

The diverse usage of the word “innovation” together with a wide range of terms echoing *innovativeness* such as “startup” or “technology”, has been commonly adopted to imply an underlying *goodness*. To describe a practice, policy or initiative as innovative functions as a prescription on its desirability and as a tactics that raises tacit legitimacy and sympathy.

This custom has also been accompanied by a widespread collective enthusiasm of which the lack of any substantive coherence in the use of the word “innovation” may relate to. Indeed, the fact that innovation is turning into “a nothing at all” runs the risk of eroding its distinctive meaning, making potentially positive outcomes more difficult to identify. Despite this or, maybe, because of

this, the term continues to hold a seductive grasp over society. Moreover, this state of strong excitement inspires fervor and zeal in some, and it is tacitly or explicitly used as evidence of the significant positive change belying innovation – of its “smartness”. The argument runs as follows: if innovation generates enthusiasm, thus it must be worthy or even more, *right* or *good*. This position holds a very strong rhetorical value, is imbued with moral obligations and appears to have evolved into conventional wisdom. In addition to that, the search for enthusiasm has substantivized the politics of innovation in the sense that it is increasingly used by policy-makers and organizations alike, to fuel change. This is not a novelty *per se* since power can generate stability and endurance by fueling emotions rather than relying on coercion. This state of enthusiasm surrounding innovation was a complementary element triggering my research interest in the context of investigating *how* change occurs and reaches the level of being collectively convincing.

My intention has been to question the closure of a representation that appeared pervasive and imperative, and which, for this reason and in spite of calling for radical changes as one of its *mantra* is “to change the world”, risks falling short of its enthusiastically praised transformative capacity. Moreover, what seems to be missing is the recognition that innovation does not “stand out” of power or, even more idealistically, it is simply a way to change for the better the *status quo*: in a way, to get rid of rents and privileges, challenging the archaic practices of the “old world” and redistributing power. Questioning this assumption does not imply to argue that such acting is technical, thus not *political* and somewhat neutral. From the beginning of this research project, it has been clear that policy-makers and practitioners framed innovation in deeply political terms: they have been wishing to change the existing and they have been declaring to be doing so: what can be, I wonder, more political than that?

Language offers backing on this point: the etymology of the word and the signification of the term “innovation” express the centrality of human action. Indeed, as Benoit Godin (2015, p. 2) argued, innovation, in spite of assuming different connotations over the centuries, corresponds to a deliberate human change of the established order. In this sense, innovation is deeply political.

There is also a post-political aspect to innovation that deserves further scrutiny. The discourse of innovation does not inherently cause divisiveness or arguments, nor it is manifestly unjust. At first glance, “everybody fits in” just like, as Richard Florida argued, creativity “is innate in each of us and *shared* (emphasis

added) by every one of us” (Florida, 2002, p. xi). In this context, who would dare to say to be against innovation? Similarly, who would dare to argue against happiness or even, social justice? What these rhetorical questions all share *in nuce* is that they generate a social expectation by implying a correct response based on perceived public acceptance of the answer itself.

The moral grounds on which innovation is based produce two effects. The first concerns the disciplining of individuals; the second, political life at large.

Regarding the first, the imperative necessity to be “up to speed” with innovation, may paradoxically reduce the capacity of individuals to recognize that they are being *subjected* to certain mechanisms of power. As previously argued, largely drawing from Michel Foucault, power is not necessarily a “bad” thing: it is simply a dangerous yet unavoidable element of human relationships. Stated differently, if innovation is turning into a cultural and institutional *belief* of our times, it stands to reason that a tension between volition, inevitability and futurity arises. These three elements embody the concept of “will” which corresponds to the choice of what is inevitable<sup>214</sup>. As shown in Chapter 3, this is a definition that anchors the political legitimacy of innovation. As a consequence of this evolution, innovation is increasingly seen as an *action* rather than a *representation*.

Drawing upon Alvesson and Spicer’s (2012) work on contemporary organizational life, innovation can be interpreted as an expression of an economy of persuasion which functions through seductive images and a complex sign-system composed of cultural, social, moral and aesthetic elements. Differently put, the discourse functions through allusions and evocations –of what pertains to the unreal dimensions of “should be” or “will be”– rather than through references to substantive aspects of life. Alvesson and Spicer noted how what they called “functional stupidity” i.e. “an unwillingness or inability to question knowledge claims and norms” (*Ibid.*, p. 1201), prevails in economies of persuasions that are centered on image intensive activities (*Ibid.*, pp. 1202-1203). These activities are paradoxically represented as vanguard or “smart” expressions of the knowledge-based economy. This concept of functional stupidity problematizes the assumption of smartness belying the discourse of innovation. It challenges the celebration of autonomous individuals freely exercising their cognitive capacities, and implicitly suggesting that a lack of reflectivity belongs to traditional forms of

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<sup>214</sup> See Enciclopedia Treccani. [online] Available at: <<http://bit.ly/2BEPJnB>>Accessed 15 February 2018].

organization and older times of human history. Building upon Chiara Bottici (2014, p. 108) who argued that “if imagination is an individual faculty that we possess, the imaginary is the context that possesses us”, innovation may be described as “the imaginary that possesses us” and “the shared background of our social practices” (*Ibid.*, p. 111). The problem with the imaginary –which pertains as much to innovation as to other discourses– is that it may be illusory and it is alienating because it offers an imaginary idealization of the self as a *some-body* holding control over life and acting according to individuality and *will*.

In this regard, Chapter 4 presented a detailed analysis of Core’s material structure. In this context, the Freudian concept of day-dream was applied to interpret certain spatial aspects of the organizational rhetoric and its general rationale. As the analysis showed, the individual –whose interiority holds the ingredients necessary for innovation to flourish and for success in life– is unconsciously engaged through the external environment and lifted up as a quasi-heroic figure of local and global change, a representation which largely neglects the structural limits restricting human action. Thus, the seduction of innovation consists not so much in the invitation to dream, but rather in the *construction of the dream* itself<sup>215</sup>. Individuals are relieved of the obligation and the mental effort necessary to produce a dream based on *their own wishes*: the capacity to change the existing is within reach and the desire to transform oneself is a necessity. Core provided a sort of parental reassurance in this regard, by offering a safe and comfortable space to its members. In a sense, the discursive practice of innovation bypasses the capacity of individuals to fantasize by presenting itself as an *imperative yet enjoyable duty* where duty and pleasure work in concert.

A second factor surrounding the “morality” of innovation is political, in the sense that pertains to and affects the ways through which individuals manage to live together. If politics with the capital “P” is diffusely articulating policies which enact “positive and coherent understandings of reality” (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, p. 1202), one could wonder the following: what kind of civic engagement can it accept back? Innovation raises questions about the reaction of those who feel symbolically excluded from such optimistic representations

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<sup>215</sup> I am drawing loosely from an interpretation that the novelist David Foster Wallace articulated in his non-fiction book *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* published in 1997. The writer compared traditional advertisements with the newly ones produced by cruise lines: “In the cruise brochure’s ads, you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy. The ads do it for you. The ads, therefore, don’t flatter your adult agency, or even ignore it—they supplant it” (Wallace, 2009).

(Vanolo, 2015, p. 2), even though they may be identified as the direct or indirect beneficiaries of innovative policy-measures. Stated differently, what are the costs associated with politics bordering enthusiasm? Is this style really necessary?

These reflections allow to pose an addition question: what kind of critique is it possible and fruitful to carry out?

The overall aim of this study has been to undertake a sort of “methodological journey”, to show *how* certain objects of thought (e.g. the “urban”, the city or innovation) territorialize in institutions, rituals, “banal” gestures, unconscious and pre-reflexive practices. To unpack the elements, to show the artifice, choice and responsibility embodies the process of critical inquiry. Stated differently, critique concerns an interrogation of *how* what is apparently inevitable, maybe it is a little less so.

In addition, critique requires considering oneself as part of the object and field that is being examined. This demands the ability to recognize and renounce elements of personal “functional stupidity”, to question the root causes that make oneself amenable to that and to be “unscrupulous” towards them. In this regard, critique also allows space to practice “the art of voluntary insubordination” (Foucault, 2007, p. 47) that relates to a “politics of truth” (*Ivi.*), resulting in a positive emotional detachment that comes from knowing the ways we are conducted and we constitute ourselves as adequate citizens of our times. This allows us to be *less* governed by others and, on a psychoanalytical note, to get closer to our own desires.

Building upon the previous reflections, a series of conclusions from the present research follow and they are organized around methodological considerations and specific arguments about the object of inquiry.

Methods does not correspond narrowly to the specific methodological technique adopted (i.e. ethnography) but, at a general and more salient level, to the methodological posture embodied to conduct this study. Ethnography is an important part of the methodology section, but it does not exhaust its meaning. As argued in Chapter 2, this distinction has implied to retain a certain level of “suspicion” towards the reality I encountered as given in the literal sense of being *independent from will*. Notwithstanding that, the choice of ethnography has been consistent with such stance and it has proven to be particularly apt to approach the “city/urban” as an effect rather than a substantive fact of inquiry.

Each chapter outside of the methodology (Chapter 2), has been dedicated to one aspect of the “city-innovation” nexus. More specifically, how the object was conceived (Chapter 1), how it is governed (Chapter 3), what does innovation materially “look like” (Chapter 4) and what does it mean to experience it (Chapter 5). The “Russian doll” structure unpacks particular aspects (e.g. the organizational space) in a non-deterministic way and shows how a set of universals (e.g. the urban space) find a situated expression in singularities.

In Chapter 1, I explored the conditions “in which knowledge grounds its positivity” (Foucault, 2005, pp. xxiii-xxiv). In this section, I delved into the field of scientificity, offering an overview of meaningful scientific debates on the nexus “city-innovation” that produced what I have called “the discourse of innovation”. The analysis moved from a sign of epistemic rupture of which the seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) by Jane Jacobs, was deemed as illustrative. Thus, a first practical way adopted to explore the sources of legitimacy sustaining innovation, was to pinpoint “breaking points” in the domain of knowledge that marked the uprising of a completely different gaze over objects *which existed before*. Beside Jacobs’ contribution, a conceptual rupture in the field of economics was identified in the work by Robert Lucas (1988). The Nobel economist introduced the concept of “external effects on human capital”, and paved the way for a new cognitive framework of economic development aligning proximity, productivity and ideas. Chapter 1 focused on showing the “high degree of internal autonomy and coherence” (Rabinow, 1984, p. 9) performed by the contemporary discourse of innovation which set off, as Michel Foucault put it in an “Italian” interview with Paolo Caruso in May 1967, from the interruption between sense and scientific object(s) (Caruso, 1969, p. 96).

Building upon that, Chapter 3 performed the passage from the discourse to the discursive practice of innovation. Differently put, the aim was to make an explicit connection between the “virtual” discourse outlined in Chapter 1 and the “social practices and institutions in which it is embedded” (Rabinow, 1984, p. 9).

The chapter analyzed the politico-institutional conditions that facilitated and qualified the “eventualization” of the discourse of innovation in Italy and in particular, in the city of Milan from 2011 to 2016. The event from which the chapter moved, corresponds to the appointment of Mario Monti as Prime Minister of Italy and to the election of Giuliano Pisapia as Mayor of Milan Municipality.

Throughout Chapter 3, attention was dedicated to the institutional conditions implemented at the national and local levels to foster innovation both economically (mainly, as startup entrepreneurship) and also as a social practice.

The chapter also traced the evolution of innovation from technique to technology. If a degree of instrumentality pertains to both concepts, the difference between technique and technology lays in the latter turning into a condition which foreruns, regulates and substantives individuals in their relationship with other individuals.

Various symptoms highlight innovation becoming a sort of underneath commonality of our times, similar to the words “modernity” and “freedom” that signaled something other than linguistic customs in the 1960s and the 1970s of the former century.

A first symptom of such passage has manifested itself in the appearance of the entity “innovative startup” within the Italian legal system. It is not its introduction *per se* that evidenced such a shift, but rather the fact that (in contrast to other legislative interventions that preceded and followed “Italy’s Startup Act”), the term “startup” has immediately embodied something more than a technicality. The term expresses a kind of world-view, exceeding the economic logic that prompted its legal normalization. It functions as a sort of metaphorical medium condensing the idea of the country’s new socio-economic priority: innovation. Interestingly, this emergence has not been hidden by its “strategists”. On the contrary, startups have been configured by their proponents as opportunities for a broader societal transformation through “a national debate able to transform certain foreign words into a new Italian *discourse* (emphasis added)” (Rapporto, 2012a, p. 110). Thus, the analysis of the discursive practice of innovation has been linked to the emergence of the entity “startup” in the governmental agenda and in the public discourse.

A second symptom has been the quick emergence of innovation as a political matter. In which sense? Innovation is political not solely for its downstream effects: for example, growth, occupation, inequality dynamics or territorial divergence. Nor it is the increasing political attention it is receiving which makes innovation a salient topic on the institutional agenda, that exhausts the meaning of “political”. The “political” crosscuts each dimensions of innovation –from abstraction to empirical concreteness– since what innovation offers is a radically different answer to the question “how can we live together?”, calling to account

the foundations of collective life. In summary, the commonality belying the various usage of the word, suggests that innovation corresponds to a *mechanism of conduct* i.e. a method for governing individuals.

For this reason and for change to occur, the “old” politics had to leave the lead to the “new politics”. What’s “new” in the “new politics”? Chapter 3 used the case of Milan, to qualify this new *practice for governing* by exploring its contemporary public policy framework and style. This newness has been analyzed in twofold ways: first, by bringing to the surface how reality has been framed, understood and managed through what can be described as a *politics of activation*. Second, I examined the content of the public interventions promoted by the Office of Labor Policies, Economic Development, University and Research of Milan Municipality. The analysis focused primarily on the conscious processing associated with such political thinking and acting, rather than on the results achieved by specific public actions.

In the case of the city of Milan, the analysis showed the inherent ambiguity associated with the term “innovation”. Innovation often implies something *other* and *more* than what it says or provides. Milan public administration framed innovation as an economic necessity, a new style of public policy, a human trait featured by citizens, a form of active citizenship and a tool of urban regeneration. As an all-encompassing *desideratum*, innovation has functioned as a sort of figurative “box” whose variable contents leave visible marks but add little to the understanding of *where* their “container” is heading –as if, paradoxically, its multiple technical significations obscure the technology “innovation” more than they manifest it.

Moreover, when viewed through the Italian context, a paradox arises. In spite of collective euphoria and promised gains, a discrepancy has emerged over the years between a limited economic impact of innovation and a disproportionately high cultural significance. This discrepancy reinforces the argument here defended which values the anthropological significance of innovation, in the sense of being, a new *logos* on *anthropos* beyond economic implications. In addition, even if Milan compared to other areas of the country, is less representative of such tendency (given the primacy of the city in the most vanguard economic activities of our times), innovation has still emerged as a deeply equivocal term – foreshadowing a qualitative shift in the relationship between citizens, politics and space.

A third and final symptom proving the affirmation of innovation as a mechanism of conduct, concerns space and what stays beneath it i.e. social relationships.

The logics is simply: for a “new silent configuration” to emerge i.e. for a discourse to turn into a social practice, *spaces of configuration* are needed.

Whether in the abstract form of the object “city” as analyzed in Chapter 1 or in the concrete manifestation of spatial structures (i.e. organizations) and practices (i.e. startups) as analyzed in Chapter 3, 4 and 5, space is not simply one of the conditions of possibility for innovation to exist. Rather it is *the* condition of possibility.

As Marcello Tanca (2012, p. 196) noted, “geographical knowledge is the condition of possibility of any knowledge, any discourse and any mechanism of power”, thus explaining –the author continued– why geography, differently from psychiatry, was not part of Michel Foucault’s archeological project<sup>216</sup>.

A specific knowledge of space allows for changes of any scope to occur and for reality to modify accordingly. To be more explicit on this point, cognition e.g. to be able to think of something and to think *that* something, for example innovation, in a certain way, neither happens in a void or merely *in* space as if this latter corresponded to no more than a flat surface hosting human existence. The cognitive process itself is a spatial process that entails a “here” and “there” which are configured in a certain way. Such spaces of configuration are *territorial, organizational and corporeal*, each dependent from the others.

As Chapter 1 showed, the contemporary primacy of the city over other spatial scales grounds itself on three pillars.

First, the city has been *thought* as a natural incubator for innovation, thus gaining a positive connotation as an *agent* of change. Second, for the city to thrive as a site of innovation, the term “ecosystem” has come to signify both the nature of the urban fabric and a particular management technique –a term implying a potential political intention to transform the territory. To sustain its liveliness, the city has to respect its nature while being organized to meet manifold spontaneous demands. Third, the city has been conceived as a site of continuous learning for its

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<sup>216</sup> On the relationship between Foucault and geography, see also Crampton and Elden (2007).

inhabitants whose inner capacities –the key ingredient for innovation to flourish– are cultivated in the urban field itself, nurturing through their acting the city’s entrepreneurial vitality.

The city is thus configured as an *agile territory* hosting and valuing social interactions and learning in action –whose outcomes are uncertain yet potentially positive. The city turns into a laboratory characterized by diverse interconnected component parts. The separation between public/private and inside/outside is loosened, and contamination and exchange between them is understood as desirable.

Chapter 3 further explored how Milan public management enacted this new configuration of the object “city”. In this chapter, innovation emerges as a political methodology and a *spatial lever* for social reorganization. Incubators, co-working spaces, fab-labs or cultural centers are not just sites conceived by the local policy-maker wherein specific competencies are gained based on project’s needs (e.g. fine-tuning of business models). Rather, such spaces are ideally conceived as empowering and open, also in terms of their material structure and the kind of social conduct they seek to stimulate.

The underlying and often explicitly acknowledged rationale of the set of public actions towards active citizenship, targeted as much professional entrepreneurs as individual and groups at the urban and social margins, and as much the city-center as peripheral areas. Activation in this context refers to the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills *to pursue novel approaches to oneself*. Entrepreneurialism, therefore, concerns a process of self-making rather than, narrowly, an economic practice. As Carla Freeman (2014) argued, this process of continuous self-learning and discovering solutions to carve one’s own path –this being in a nutshell the meaning of entrepreneurial subjectivity– has been accompanied by loosening of traditional boundaries between public and private life, as well as public and private spaces. The popular and political attention that has been paid to organizational spaces of different kinds (e.g. co-working spaces, incubators, fab-labs, maker-spaces and cultural and creative centers) has proven important in normalizing the concept of “boundaryless” organizations.

With these considerations in mind, Chapter 4 and 5 offered an ethnographic account of Core, a hybrid organization operating primarily as an incubator and co-working space in the city of Milan. Core represents a tangible example of how an organization transposes a diffuse discourse into a concrete gesture, tone, motion

and space. Core and like organizations, function as “incubators” of subjects – beside of business ideas– and may be conceived as intra-uterine environments that educate to a silent language which greatly influences behaviors and more deeply, the formation of thought and feelings, through work and non-work-related experiences.

Chapter 4 further examined the material inscription of innovation, exploring how material processes communicated a discourse, alongside the more manifest “discursive discourse”. The spatial configuration of Core materially manifested a specific idea of urbanity, a global dimension and called for a particular mind-set on the side of individuals.

As an unconscious manifestation of power, the material structure also performed the idea of what pertains to the unreal dimensions of what is possible and not yet existing –in line with the contemporary configuration of the object “city”. Diversity (of ends and individuals) and exchange featured as key elements in Core’s organizational narrative that were effectively communicated by means of its spatial rhetoric.

The physical space of Core was malleable, adaptable and responsive to different uses and needs, and it was functional to confront a series of possible events. The blurring of inside/outside also occurred through a rich calendar of events, regularly held at Core and often attended by guests and non-members. These continuous learning opportunities, coupled with other inviting elements (such as the “shared” kitchen), extended workers’ vital space within the organizational space itself.

Interestingly, learning occurred in ways other than direct and formal engagement. The space itself –its hallways, for example– provided more than functional circulation. Rather, these elements stimulated thought and provided for regular educational moments.

The open space communicated a sense of transparency that favored exchange by limiting the subconscious inhibition to share. The open environment implicitly promoted interconnection and interdependence among workers and guests. This visibility also conveyed the idea of an *operative* community (Malservisi, 1983) –a place where “things were happening”.

However, to interrogate the closure of a representation has implied to retrace the conditions for the relational process that in certain spaces, at a certain time and

in a certain manner and not in other ones, conducts a collectivity –more or less consciously of being one– towards a direction rather than another one. Stated differently, such stance has entailed to focus on the *relational* conditions of possibility for innovation to occur.

To explore the experience of being an innovative self, I have examined group dynamics and the communitarian spirit that characterized Core’s organizational rhetoric. As argued in Chapter 2, innovation is a social and spatial process. Discourses, practices and relationships are bound together and build upon each other, and they are stimulated and encouraged by the physical environment in which they occur. For this reason, I have explored how individuals related to themselves and others, and how they reacted to the organizational script. Relationships bind individuals together and make a “virtual” discourse, an idea, an organization amenable to stabilize and to materialize in space and time. In spite a good degree of cynicism towards the official narrative and given that there is not a “standard” subject, a field of commonality among the diverse individuals encountered through my fieldwork, was observable.

At this point and for this reason, it is useful to present a brief methodological reflection on the concept “startup”. Startup corresponded, as a technique and practice, to a point of departure, given that it was the first and evident outcome of the *event* from which the study moved from. Throughout the research process, however, startup has come to embody a methodological opportunity, rather than simply an object of inquiry, opening a whole new range of scenarios of reflection in light of what it powerfully represents, evokes and recalls, says and, especially, do not say. Framed as a metaphor, a startup has emerged as an interesting linguistic sign precisely because of what it is tangent to it: its eclectic use has been functional to convey some desirable significations, both in the contemporary social spaces and at Core.

Uptake of the concept of startup is not solely dependent on business and economic considerations, but because of a certain degree of public comprehension, legitimacy, authority it expresses. If one says “startup”, a “wishful participation that border closely on enthusiasm” (Kant, 1979, p. 153), is observable among different publics –even among those “who are not engaged in this game themselves” (*Ivi.*)<sup>217</sup>. Observing what the signifier “startup” meant for

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<sup>217</sup> This quotation is taken from *The Conflict of the Faculties* which was originally published in 1798. Referring to the French Revolution, Immanuel Kant argued that the historical sign of progress –*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*– (Kant, 1979, p. 151) should be

the individuals variously experiencing it, has allowed to see its strength and hold, its imbrication with space, with globalization and with other pre-existing similar social practices (e.g. freelancing). This flexible methodological tactic has also allowed me to pinpoint innovation as the core issue. Indeed, the power of innovation lies in being a metaphorical discursive “palette” of convergence of diverse practices, older and newer ones, and words such as “digital” or “technology”, out of which a new “future-friendlier brushstroke” is emerging: a subjective methodology.

Such methodology displays three cornerstones. First, individuals think of themselves as part of a larger system towards which they hold a certain degree of responsibility. Second, the kind of problems they are concerned with are understood as “wicked” problems which are inherently and infinitely complex, with incremental solutions. Third, given that there are neither definitive answers nor an absolute external truth, continuous learning, trial-and-errors, reflexivity and self-critique feature as constitutive traits of the subjective experience of innovation.

This leads us to a further consideration of *relatedness*. On the one hand, individuals possessed a relational understanding of themselves and their actions had a truly global reach. As argued in Chapter 5, the universal “globalization” materialized as a systemic approach to life, an imaginary benchmark of activation or as a situated and intimate answer to a global issue (e.g. marine pollution) set forth by one or few entrepreneurs. On the other hand, Core itself displayed a condition of relatedness towards the external environment which was peculiar to its hybrid organizational structure.

As it organizationally exemplified innovation, Core had to be *permeable* to the outside world. What happened within “its walls” was ideally crafted to spill outside. The internal and external environments mutually reinforced their *innovativeness*, and increased their legitimacy.

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identified in “the passionate participation in the good, i.e. enthusiasm” (*Ibid.*, p. 153) that accompanied the event of the revolution, rather than in the revolution itself –or in the rate of its success or failure. See Michel Foucault’s lecture on Kant’s philosophical considerations on the unforgettable and connected events of the Enlightenment and of the Revolution held at the *Collège de France* on January 5, 1983 (2010). It is noteworthy to report that Foucault saw in Kant’s texts on Enlightenment and on the Revolution, the foundational cornerstone of the critical philosophy he linked himself to i.e. “an ontology of the present” (*Ibid.*, pp. 20-21).

The degree of interdependence with the external world was thus very strong. As argued in Chapter 5, Core had to “talk” local and global at the same time, reflecting the character of innovation as a discursive practice originating from a “global elsewhere” but rooted in “somewhere”.

The organizational space and the “community” reflected, materially and relationally, the very contemporary meaning of the object “city/innovation” and what this new normal desire of living together –this sense of urbanity– prescribes. As a form of relationship valuing individual faculties and collective power, the community exemplified a learning process that mixes emotions and cognition, rational thinking and intensified affectivity, and which occurs at unexpected times and in *unexpected spaces*, similarly to what happens in the city of our imagination.

There is one last element which deserves attention: a discourse does not simply prescribe “what it means to be a citizen of a city” (Foucault, 1997, p. 288) it also establishes a system of exclusion that separates who and what is appropriate from who or what is not appropriate –thus, it is excluded. When it comes to the discourse of innovation, if the rules of expression –the underlying commonality of the technology “innovation”– have been pulled out and analyzed, the rules of exclusion uncover a subtle problem. This is so for a number of reasons: differently from madness where deviancy was surgically separated from normality, the discourse of innovation effectively subsumes individual deviances, distinctive traits and idiosyncrasies within itself. As this study showed, the discursive practice of innovation does not ask –apparently– for a preferred type of subject, meaning an individual with specific traits (e.g. ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class). Even if diversity is emphasized, this does not mean that the discursive practice of innovation does not reproduce gender, racial, sexual or class inequalities. Notwithstanding that, those who suffer from a discrimination of some kind are not necessarily the ones who are excluded. Innovation defines adequacy in terms of posture i.e. a subjective methodology, rather than dependent upon a substantive fact.

This is of crucial importance because it is often difficult to identify systemic exclusion, and the political consequences of this are often unpredictable. To stress this point further, the matter I am posing does not concern what have been described as the exclusionary side-effects of innovation as an economic fact or program. Exclusion here corresponds to the rules that divide who shall speak from who shall not speak, that defines who shall participate in the “game” and who

shall remain silent. Of course, such consideration does not wish to express a sort of nostalgia towards discourses which are manifestly unjust compared to others which are less so. However, to think of exclusion simply as a fact rather than as the effect of a discursive matrix, as something which does not belong to our times in which differences and interconnections are valued, or –last but not least to– think of exclusion as an epiphenomenon which can be corrected and solved within and through the same safe rules of expression, is the proof that division and prohibition are active, even if they are less visible (Foucault, 1972). Thus, it is worth to ask: who are the madmen of our innovative times?

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