“The case of Centro Sociale Leoncavallo as an example of social innovation”

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Andrea Membretti
University of Pavia - Italy
A self-managed social centre coming from movements of the Seventies

- The *Centro Sociale Leoncavallo* was born in 1975, in Milan, in a blue-collar district. It was a bottom-up response to a strong need of places for self-organisation of the people: the aim of the centre was to organise political activities, while offering social and cultural services to the neighborhood.

- Inspired by the leftist part of the social movements of the sixties/seventies, the centre was squatted in a post industrial building by an informal group of young people and founded on self-organisation: no hierarchy and assembly power were - and still are - the organisational principles of *autogestione*.

- After the partial distruction of the building by the Police in 1989, the centre was finally forced to leave its headquarter in 1994. A new post industrial site was found and has been illegally occupied till nowadays, also thanks to a sentence of the magistrature, that recognized the public utility and relevance of the centre and of its activities.

- A change in the leadership of the centre, combined with a growing consensus reached among different urban populations (students, intellectuals, unemployed people, ..), signed the beginning of a radical re-organisation: from a small group based on strong identity and ideology, Leoncavallo gradually moved to a network organisation (connecting also other socio-political actors), more pragmatic and capable to develope a variety of services and professional skills, even if keeping a strong political connotation.
Leoncavallo 1989-94
Urban conflict/resistence

Photo: Archivio Leoncavallo
Towards a civic welfare?
New functions & a renewed role for the centre

Activities:
- Cultural services: concerts, theatre representations, art exhibitions, debates, bookshop/library
- Welfare services: free meals and hostel for migrants and for homeless, job information and orientation, legal assistance
- Political activities: campaigns, demonstrations, network activities
- Media and information: radio, web-site, info-point, posters, documents

Some figures (2006):
- 4 associations inside the centre, with 1.400 associates
- 80 active members of the centre
- 36 paid workers
- 39 voluntary workers
- 100.000 users/year
- A wide national and international network of associations and informal groups
- Leoncavallo Foundation
Leoncavallo 2008: spaces & services

Main entrance

Courtyard

Migrants hostel

Kitchen/self-service
Leoncavallo: a case study of Social Innovation in SINGOCOM project

Why the case study?

- To use the case study not as a demonstration of a theory, but mainly as a field of questioning to the theories (urban regeneration, social innovation, social economy, ..)
  - Attention to potentialities: case study as a situation of invention and discussion about the transformation of potentialities in resources
  - Case study as an element for comparison, with the aim to put in evidence the importance of contextuality (path dependence; resources/constraints)

- To use the research process (and the related theories) as an opportunity for the actor studied to better understand its dynamics (reflexivity) and to help positive transformations (action-research)
Approach to the case study

Main dimensions considered:

- Organisational cultures and practices:
  
  “organising is sensemaking” (1)

- Spatial and territorial dimensions

- Service dimension

(1) K. Weick
Research methods and Techniques

To study the different dimensions of social innovation, and to gather data related to different populations (activists, users, supporters, ..) it was necessary to use a variety of research methods and techniques.

Method: action research
- personal engagement of the researcher (level of empathy/distance)
- definition of the potential benefits/risks for the actor studied coming from the involvement into the research process
- activation of a mutual recognition between researcher and actor to be envolved (role of the brokers)
- mix between qualitative and quantitative approach

Techniques and situations/populations:
- active members: in-depth interviews
- human environment and spaces: participant observation (cultural events, assemblies, interaction between different populations, use of spaces, ...)
- history and ideology: study of documents (reports, web, video/photo)
- users of the services: survey through questionnaire (sample)
Social Innovation: a multi-dimensional concept

- The 3 dimensions of Social Innovation \(^{(1)}\)
  analyzed in the case study (ALMOLIN frame):
  - Definition and satisfaction of human needs
  - Change within social relationships
  - Empowerment and participation

- 3 key-concept used in the case study as operational tools:
  - Social enterprise
  - Flexible institutionalisation
  - Autogestione (self-management)

\(^{(1)}\) F. Moulaert et al.
Definition and satisfaction of human needs

- **Key-concept:** *Social (and political) enterprise*
  - relevance of practices (enterprise as acting, not as actor)
  - shift from expression of, and response to individual needs (culture, welfare, ..) to collective definition/response to these needs
    - from passive satisfaction (dependence of welfare state; consumerism of market) to active construction of processes (claim for rights: political sphere)
  - re-embedding (and reconceptualisation) of economics in social relationships (1)
    - reciprocity, refuse of monetarisation, economics as field of innovation (not costs, nor profit, but resource to produce social capital)
  - development of capabilities (2)

(1) K. Polanyi
(2) A. Sen
Change within social relationships
(inside and in relation to the outside world)

Key-concept: Flexible institutionalisation

- adaptation to external environment
  - organizational mimesis (associations, foundation)
  - use of public institutions (municipality, Parliament)
  - networking (horizontal and vertical)

- dialectis between movement and institution (1)
  - consolidation of repertoires of action
  - tension between institutional frames and informal processes
  - use of conflict to redefine the position in public arena

- public space of proximity (2)
  - introvert/extrovert (local/global)
  - Connecting community/ies to society (and individuals to community and to society), mixing different socio-spatial frames

(1) F. Alberoni
(2) J.-L. Laville
Empowerment and participation

- Key word: *Autogestione (self-management)*
  - informality
    - lack of (formal) hierarchy
    - lack of fixed roles
    - assembly power
  - reflexivity (recoursive processes)
  - different level of participation
    - decentralisation
    - strenght of weak ties (1)
  - empowerment
    - development of capabilities
    - recognition of individuals as citizens owners of rights

(1) M. Granovetter
Building citizenship as an innovative service

Social innovation in Leoncavallo case study:

a process of glocal production of active citizenship,
through a socially innovative management
of services and spaces,
towards the emerging of a public, flexible institution