Exploring the Dynamics of Social Innovation Through Art: the Case of Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal

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Structure of the presentation

1. Creativity, the arts and social transformation - a framework to understand places (spaces+communities) development

2. Montemor-o-Novo: arts-based social creativity

3. What have we learned in M-o-N about social innovation? Socially creative strategies, local development and ‘post-rurality’
1. Creativity, the arts and social transformation

- Art, the representation of the present and the anticipation of the future

- The “aesthetisation” of daily life and the democratisation of artistic production and consumption

- Art, metaphors and communication: conveying meaning across linguistic and cultural barriers

- Art as an arena of social tensions and conflict: dominance and resistance

- Social creativity: bringing together communication, civic participation and critical engagement, in addition to employment and income generation
1. Creativity, the arts and social transformation (ct’d): places development

- Commitment to artistic and cultural production in response to economic restructuring and social fragmentation
- Creative cities/places: from degeneration to regeneration (?); beyond the aesthetic; post-materiality (?)
- The ‘dark side’ of mainstream creative cities: gentrification, polarisation; social exclusion
- Socially innovative governance: regeneration ‘without’ polarisation and exclusion
1. Creativity, the arts and social transformation (ct’d): public art and public space

- Public art as new references for spaces undergoing decay or abandonment
- 'Giving public space back' to the local communities
- The work of art as mediator and conveyor of collective meaning
- Artistic sites and venues as 'new' public spaces
1. Creativity, the arts and social transformation (ct’d): socially innovative milieux

- Innovative milieux: information; knowledge; competences; creativity

- Socially innovative milieux: instability, uncertainty and ‘plasticity’ (diversity, tolerance, participation/democracy)
Katarsis/Lisbon in Montemor-o-Novo and Montemor-o Novo in Katarsis/Athens
2. Montemor-o-Novo - Arts-based Social Creativity

- Municipality of 18,500 inhabitants, 8,000 of whom living in the city by the same name

- 100 Km from Lisbon; 30 Km from Évora

- Alentejo region traditionally an area of large-scale agricultural estates: rural proletariat; history of class struggle, repression and mass outmigration; today: ageing and economic stagnation

- ... yet M-o-N has been successful in attracting population, strengthening the local economy, reinforcing social cohesion and becoming a centre of artistic creation
2. Montemor-o-Novo - Arts-based Social Creativity: the origins

• Rigid political-economic structure, poverty, repression, migration

• Interest in high culture by the rural ‘elite’: Montemor Club and ‘Carlista’ Society

• ‘Pedrista’ Society: catering to the cultural needs and aspiration of the workers

• Two cultural venues as physical and symbolic poles representing the local political-economic structure
2. Montemor-o-Novo - Arts-based Social Creativity: after the revolution

• April 25th, 1974 democratising revolution: collectivisation of the land, creation of cooperatives of production

• Communist Party rises to power in first elections (remaining there ever since)

• Access to culture as key feature of the local agenda (influence of intellectuals at national level + history of culture as arena of social contestation)

• Examples of initiatives: Municipal Gallery and Library, dedicated cultural office

- M-o-N gradually becomes a part of broader cultural and artistic networks

- Preventing the creation of an artistic ‘enclave’ from an early stage: pedagogy, community mobilisation and cohesion, inclusion of vulnerable and excluded groups (e.g. ‘Children’s Workshops’)

- Success of earlier initiatives + inflow of EU funds: art and culture become the strategic axis of local development

- Partnerships and networks; coherent sense of meaning and identity

Since 1983
2. Montemor-o-Novo - an Example of Arts-based Social Creativity: the present

- Harmonious triangle: community cohesion - cultural and artistic activity – rural landscape and culture

- Arts and culture as both instrument and outcome

- ‘Critical mass’ of artists and creators, third sector organisations and even ‘consistent’ for-profit initiatives
2. Montemor-o-Novo - an Example of Arts-based Social Creativity: three examples

a) O Espaço do Tempo (“The Space of Time”): choreographic centre and platform for artistic creation
2. Montemor-o-Novo - an Example of Arts-based Social Creativity: three examples

b) Oficinas do Convento ("Convent Workshops"): multi-dimensional artistic centre with a strong emphasis on rediscovering the local landscape and culture

Mestre Manuel M-o-N

Arthur Meyer, Netherlands
2. Montemor-o-Novo - an Example of Arts-based Social Creativity: three examples

c) João Cidade Association and Socio-Therapeutic Community: integrating artistic and cultural activity, inclusion and care of mentally handicapped persons, and broader community cohesion

http://www.joaocidade.com
3. What have we learned in M-o-N about social innovation?
Socially creative strategies, local development and ‘post-rurality’

• Explaining the trajectory of M-o-N: furtuitous factors, ‘favourable’ ‘initial’ conditions, socially innovative local development strategy

• Fallacies of composition and limits to replicability: avoiding the ‘best practice’ interpretation

• Rurality as essential component of local identity and crucial resource for local development

• Reconstruction of collective ‘rural’ identity renders this trajectory to post modernity distinct from urban post-industrial trajectories: post-rurality as a strategy for, and mode of, socially creative development (though not without its dangers)
3. What have we learned in M-o-N about social innovation? (ct’d)
Socially creative strategies, local development and ‘post-rurality’

• The crucial issues of the narrative:

• the relation between history and geography (time-space/place approach) framing social processes
• construction and reconstruction of social relations
• tensions and cooperation
• the role of outsiders
• characteristics of leadership
• collective meanings and shared local identity

• and... conceptual openness
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Ευχαριστώ! Thank you! Obrigado!

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