Cultural priorities and decision-making processes in urban governance

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ABSTRACT

Urban governance proves growingly complex, due to the combination of new space dynamics in urban practices, more diverse composition of the urban communities, and the perception of costs generated by homogeneous housing ending up in a patchwork of reciprocally isolated districts. In such a framework, where contradictions and conflicts can emerge, the design of decision-making processes proves crucial.
The conventional approach, adopted in the recent past, moves between the extremes of top-down and bottom-up policy design. Its layered structure can appear weak for the growing difficulty in capturing needs, instances, desires and orientations emerging from such a heterogeneous urban eco-system, where different time horizons and priorities meet and risk to collide with each other.
The paper focuses upon the need to craft a more consistent and effective approach to decisions aimed at urban governance, within a negotiation perspective where each agent (institutions, companies, social groups and families) can represent both the expected trails and outcomes on one hand, and the responsibilities aimed at crafting urban practices and at consistently exerting social impact.

Keywords: participation, gentrification, urban governance, democracy, community

1. Introduction: the emerging dilemmas of urban governance

Urban governance is becoming growingly complex, sometimes contradictory, due to the emerging features of contemporary society, where the more varied composition of different cultural groups is combined with a new - and still changing - distribution of income, generated by the radicalisation of inequalities, the reduction of what was defined ‘middle class’ and the emersion of new professions (often related to the digital dimension) whose weight exerts an important impact upon the value hierarchy. This ongoing phenomenon, whose outcome still proves unpredictable, may generate contradictions, conflicts and sometimes real clashes, and reflects itself upon the use of urban spaces and the related expectations.

The urban fabric itself, once comfortably divided into centre vs. periphery, is subject to the same magmatic change. In the after-Covid years we are still in, many employees decided to resign, opting for a more independent engagement and therefore a looser constraint with their spatial duties; digital nomadism has spread, also beyond its classical features of marketing experts living in Bali and working for US multinationals; the cost of urban congestion is no more compensated by the perception of safety and the comfort of proximity, within boiling urban communities that prove often reluctant to accept rules and practices that at the best are obsolete and insufficient.

Within such a complicated urban, social and cultural framework, the conventional decision-making processes appear weak and contradictory. Their recent history (although its remote version is not at all more convincing) often deploys between two overlapping layers: the visible one, formally legal and consistent with rules and regulations, has developed through the elaboration of models between the two extremes of top-down and bottom-up processes featured by the formal sequence of instances, projects and actions; at the same time, the lower layer, informal and often not really legal, has tried to translate opaque combinations of interests into action, formally justified by the growth of urban trade, the attractiveness of districts, the reduction of crime-oriented areas. The result has consisted in gentrification, transfer of public estate into private hands, preference for business developers upon social groups.

The reaction to these formally smooth and substantially obscure processes has often been violent (as highlighted by Lenna and Trimarchi, 2017). It clearly shows the obsolescence of the adopted decision-making processes. Even discounting for a sound and transparent orientation on the part of municipal administrations, productive and commercial companies, and social groups, what appears to be slow is economic analysis, whose textbook wisdom still survives, advocating a homogeneous composition of society where differences in income still are the main variable; at the same time, and even more, law-making is slow due to its funding characteristics, that require a phenomenon to become perceivably general in order for its dynamics to be captured in abstract norms.

2. The features and options of participatory processes

As the demand for more intensive and higher-quality public participation in decision-making processes increases, there is a growing need for a better understanding of specific participation processes and their values. Melo and Baiocchi (2006) point to an intensifying discussion across disciplines and contexts about the meanings, potentials, and pitfalls of “participation” in the present global moment. This discussion becomes particularly relevant in the context of the growing adoption of sustainability as a framework and orientation for urban governance. While some would categorise the shift towards sustainability as an example of new governance arrangements that are eroding democratic expectations

and practices (Tickell and Peck, 1996; Cowell and Owens, 2006), others recognize in it the potential for a movement towards democratically revitalised cities (Raco, 2007).

The article aims to develop a technical and critical analysis of the various options for decisions involving resident communities, social groups, productive and commercial companies, public institutions, and administrations. It also aims at exploring the possible options offered by the digitalization of participatory processes, given a more consistent democracy in issues related to urban governance with multicultural communities, creative ferments, social conflicts, and unequal accessibility to rights and services.

Supporting and encouraging high-quality, ongoing public participation is increasingly becoming a primary concern for local governments (Dahl, 1994; Creighton, 2003; Innes and Booher, 2004; Bingham et al., 2005; Melo and Baiocchi, 2006). As interest in sustainable development as a new planning and policy paradigm has grown, citizen participation has also emerged as a crucial element of local efforts towards sustainability (Bell and Morse, 2001). Public participation has been a fundamental aspect of transparent sustainable development since the term was formalised through the 1992 Rio Declaration, where it was emphasised "the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level", along with "appropriate access to information", states' facilitation of "public awareness", and "effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings" (Holden, 2011).

In urban governance practice, inclusive and even models have been theorised with such high expectations with aspirations towards the potential of public participation in addressing entrenched conflicts and disagreements between the local government and the public (Alden, 1996).

The main purpose of these urban-based interventions is usually to achieve social and economic goals that promote social cohesion, reduce inequalities, and prevent the imposition of top-down initiatives that are unwelcome among communities (Couch, Sykes, & Borstinghaus, 2011). However, most of these efforts have been implemented in relatively affluent and privileged contexts (Ferilli et al, 2015), where private stakeholders have taken advantage of local communities (Peck, 2022) and risk to result in gentrification examples or ghettos (Clerval, van Criekingen, 2015). In fact, itt is not uncommon for profit-driven activities to masquerade as social initiatives, both to secure more funding and to operate with fewer constraints and obstacles (Raco, 2003). In the current historical moment, there is a widespread sentiment that despite decades of egalitarian urban and social policies, the ability of the wealthiest and most powerful global and local elites to influence urban environments and planning discourse according to their interests and needs remains largely unchecked. This has led to a range of negative feelings and defensive behaviours in local communities, which are often neglected rather than effectively addressed by urban planners and policymakers. As a result, local communities have often

started to react and organise themselves to resist unwanted interventions or yet to accept passively their fate, not without consequences.

The analysis of decision-making processes proves complex due to the physiological difference among visions and interpretations on the part of each single agent to be involved. Now, even assuming shared good faith and the ability to properly capture the prevailing interest, the immediate obstacle we face is related to the multiplicity of time horizons within which positions are being formed and formalised: even the public administration moves along a short-term horizon, due to the electoral mandate; this implies possible contradictions between different layers of government (in our case, national and municipal) endowed with regulatory responsibility on the same matter. In the same way, companies and families may suffer from a different time horizon. This implies the need for a sort of regulatory delicacy, in capturing and reciprocally discounting the various time horizons of the organisations and groups entitled to participate in the decision-making process.

3. Urban governance and degrees of citizenship

Cities accommodate the majority of the world's population and due to the incremental processes that have made them increasingly central to globalisation (Sassen 1991), they have also become the primary sites of contention over the use and access to resources, territory, open spaces, infrastructure, and culture. Saskia Sassen's reflections on the governance of the city (Sassen, 2002), now require a more multifaceted analysis due to the increasing level of complexity. This complexity can be understood through a review of the literature that has accompanied the rise in complexity of urban governance, dating back to the first wave of globalisation in the past years.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, Stone has written about the so-called " regime analysis", which proved to be a fruitful guiding concept for the study of urban policies, especially in American cities. However, it also attracted the interest of scholars from other continents who used it to study European and Asian cities. At the core of regime analysis lies the study of informal relationships between public and private actors that enable city governments to develop and implement a political agenda. Elkin (1987) introduced the concept of an 'urban regime' from the perspective of urban political economy and highlighted that the characteristics of an urban regime stem from the division of labour between the state and the market, articulated along three main axes: 1) public-private partnerships; 2) electoral policies; 3) administrative policies. Stone's research led him to consider that the nature of urban governance transcends conventional paradigms of social control, as posited by elitist and pluralist theorists. It does not merely entail rival factions seeking to influence decision-making processes, nor does it reflect the outcome of a grand bourgeois domination framework, characterised by classist relations dominated by the capitalist mode of production. From this perspective, 'governing' is less about command-and-control power and more about the informal agreements through which certain forms of

activity coordination prevail over others. Governance emerges as a process primarily concerned with negotiation and adaptation, rather than issues of absolute control. Within this framework, informal agreements serve to bolster and guide formal capacities for action.

Contrary to a model of social control, Stone proposes a model of social production. In societies characterised by loosely structured networks and fragmented by tensions, he acknowledges the difficulty of achieving commanding power. Consequently, the exercise of power is less about control and more about the ability to act it is a matter of power to, rather than power over. This requires the shared adoption of a method able to facilitate the emersion of contingent instances, desires and needs; to carry out a common analysis of the reciprocal dynamics of such contingencies; to mediate and combine the various interests reflecting the value hierarchy of each agent; to fine-tune rules, constraints, actions, and funding to the emerging structure of moving interests.

Another productive endeavour aimed at comprehending the increasing complexity of urban governance is embodied in the perspective of 'collaborative governance' or its various synonymous terms (Blanco 2015) known as: interactive governance, governance-beyond-the-state, partnership paradigm, joined-up government, and network governance. This line of inquiry underscores the growing significance of collaborative forms of engagement between governmental and non-governmental actors in shaping local public policies. It shifts the focus from mere government (as a blocked portrayal of the actors involved in public administration) to governance, a collective process of defining and managing the policy agenda. Thus, it reinforces the notion of a transition in governance methodologies from principles associated with the market and hierarchy to emerging principles tied to networks and partnerships. Networks might be able to offer a third way between the state and the market, thereby expanding the public sphere through the involvement and empowerment of communities (Deakin 2002). The concept of 'network' in urban governance theories, prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, marked a significant shift from government to governance, reflecting changes in power dynamics and interactions between the state and society due to neoliberal processes like privatisation and depoliticization.

4. Conclusions: new institutional decision-making dynamics

In such a framework, action aimed at incorporating contingencies into a credible, consistent and possibly effective decision-making process needs a sort of permanent table of negotiations, where interests being pursued by each agent are counterbalanced by active responsibility. This could overcome the conventional structure of public action as many citizens, companies and social groups still consider it: a flow of monetary subsidies aimed at relieving agents from technical problems. This might sound consistent with communities' freedom to decide for themselves, but looking carefully it often reveals itself as a tricky regulatory capture, where the exchange occurs between monetary funds on one hand,

and rigidly constrained features and actions on the other. Survival costs some degree of freedom. A less rigid and more responsible process could grant a range of options on the part of each single agent, and at the same time substantial consistency with the shared goals of the whole urban community.

The Italian perspective within community and urban studies, particularly in the context of social innovation, has emerged as a significant analytical approach focusing on interactions among agents rather than institutions. This perspective emphasises local governance, transformative opportunities, social change, and collective actions. Recent works by scholars such as Vicari-Haddock, Vitale and Nuvolati have contributed to a growing body of literature exploring social innovation within the Italian context and its intricate connections with local governance. These studies reflect a deep sensitivity to local and territorial specificities, highlighting the importance of understanding social innovation through the lens of community dynamics and collaborative efforts, aligning with the broader discourse on social change and collective engagement in Italy's academic landscape.

This perspective offers insights into the attributes of urban governance actors and the patterns of interaction that arise among them. It emphasises the dynamics between the local level and other regulatory tiers, focusing on social groups over governing bodies, informal structures, and social networks. Rather than decisions being solely the outcome of meticulously planned programs or fixed power dynamics, they are viewed as products of ongoing mutual adjustments characterised by an incremental and adaptive process known as 'muddling through.' These interactions manifest as relational sequences where individuals continuously strive to optimise their outcomes by utilising their cultural resources to negotiate satisfactory resolutions with their counterparts.

Lastly, from a distinct perspective grounded in the examination of public policies and common goods, as outlined by Ostrom, emerges the conceptual and operational framework of the "co-city" proposed by Iaione in 2016. The co-city concept reimagines the city as a collaborative platform where stakeholders can share resources, engage in collective decision-making processes, and co-create urban resources and services. A co-city operates through a polycentric governance, addressing a diverse array of urban resources including environmental, cultural, knowledge, and digital assets. These resources are managed through contractual or institutionalised partnerships involving the state, society, private entities, and social organisations. The co-city model is founded on five core principles of co-designing common goods, tailored to the context of urban common resources and the diverse entities contributing to the development of the city's shared assets.

The first principle concerns collective governance and refers to the presence of a multistakeholder governance scheme in which the community emerges as an actor and partner with four other categories of urban actors, i.e. government bodies, businesses, universities, and organized civil society according

to dyadic schemes. The second principle, enabling state, expresses the role of the state in facilitating the creation of urban common goods and in supporting collective governance agreements for their management and sustainability. The third principle, called social and economic pooling, refers to the presence of autonomous institutions that are open, participatory, and managed or owned by local communities operating within non-mainstream economic systems[1] that share resources and stakeholders, leading to the creation of new opportunities and services. The fourth principle, experimentalism, identifies the presence of an adaptive, place-based, and iterative approach to designing legal and policy innovations that foster the construction of urban common goods. The fifth principle concerns technological democracy and highlights that access, participation, co-management, and/or co-ownership of technological and digital urban infrastructures and data represent an enabling factor for the cooperation and co-creation of urban common goods.

In order for this system to prove effective, we face a few important dilemmas: at the institutional level, elections should allow citizens-voters (as well as companies, groups of interest and informal social groups) to effectively monitor public action, in order for their vote to weigh as a credible sanction in the case of relevant distance between the shared governance orientations and the actual public action; at the productive and commercial level, the visibility of social responsibility (as it may appear in a social-impact budget and report) should become the rule for the economic layer of the urban community, in order to emphasise the possible convergences between clearly different interests; at social level, the openness of social groups aiming at a shared goal (often they can be defined and considered cultural commons) should be made compatible with the principle of representation, whose solidity proves fundamental for their participation to the decision-making process to be widely accepted as consistent with the shared orientations and value hierarchies.

[1] Non-main-stream economic systems might be entities such as cooperative, social and solidarity economies, circular, cultural, or collaborative economies, etc.

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