

The magnet and the container

A transnational space of expression for “Cities of change”
through Europe

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Permanence and nomadism, settlement and flows, have always characterised the very nature of the city. With extraordinary effectiveness, to describe the role of urban areas in the Mediterranean of the 16th century, Fernand Braudel writes: “The cities, motionless points in the maps, are actually fed by movement.” And you can retrieve this *long durée*, this historical continuity, in the deep changes that have marked the European cities in recent decades. In fact, since late Middle Ages, cities in Europe have played a crucial role as places of recovery in production, craft, artistic and cultural creation, as nodes of extensive trade networks, as spaces of individual and collective liberation from previous constraints of servitude. Urban development has, since then, accompanied historical progresses in our continent. And the cities were, at the same time, the stage and the main actor in any process of economic, cultural and societal transformation.

In recent decades, the end of Fordistic production model, the new forms of work organisation – diffuse, immaterial and reticular –, the increasing financialisation of the economy, have again profoundly altered the nature, role and functions of European cities. They appear, simultaneously, as the context of a restructuring, on a metropolitan scale, of social production and reproduction, as hubs of global networks of communication and exchange, subject to financial investments on real estate, infrastructure and resulting speculative revenue.

The combination of these processes has generated new contradictions, dramatic imbalances and growing inequalities. Problems that have been exacerbated by the crisis management of the last eight years and by the

consequences of austerity policies, with cuts in money transfers to local budgets reducing the room for territorial self-government, and which have often run down the very fabric of urban social cohesion. But, at the same time, cities have been and are the scene of resistance and innovation, often in terms of spontaneous ruptures and eruptions: the place where social protests burst and mutual cooperation unfolds, where street mobilisations and processes of artistic and cultural creation and productive innovation emerge.

The European Commission itself has recently stressed the leading role of cities and metropolitan areas in the construction of Union's choices and the need for a stronger coordination and exchange between them. A few pieces of data illustrate the importance of the issue: more than 70 per cent of Europeans live in urban areas, so there are focused mobility, production, trade, economic and social relations. In metropolitan areas 75 per cent of all energy consumption and 80 per cent of all emissions is concentrated, placing urban contexts to the core of the contemporary climate and environmental crisis. But urban areas are also the place where innovative policies could produce significant results in sustainable development and an even more radical social and ecological transformation. Consistent European policies can therefore set goals and promote strategies that are also the result of verification and dissemination of innovative experiences already achieved in some areas.

Such considerations make it even more worth facing the crisis of consensus and legitimacy of the EU's supranational institutions, and the role crisis of nation-states, reduced to a mere executioner of decisions taken elsewhere, paradoxically just as we are seeing a "re-nationalisation" of political discourse (from the Eurozone crisis to the "refugee crisis" and the collapse of the Schengen space). Precisely in such a critical context, the cities – as it was in crucial moments of transition in European history – can play again a leading role. Not only for the reasons already mentioned, could they be places of radical innovation in politics, spaces of actual reinvention of democracy. And in this way they could provide answers to the major challenges of our contemporary world.

A long "municipalist" tradition of thought and practice, oriented in this direction, is waiting to be rediscovered, from medieval towns to its recovery in the 1990s. This tradition seems today to live again in the experiences of government "for change." Everybody knows the "Plataformas ciudadanas"

– civic platforms born from the movements that filled the squares of the Iberian Peninsula from 15M in 2011 – who won elections in May 2015 in some of the most important cities in Spain, starting from the election of Ada Colau as mayor of Barcelona, Manuela Carmena in Madrid and others in Valencia, La Coruña, Zaragoza and many smaller towns. In this first year and half of government they have already introduced important innovations in local policies, in particular by investing in “citizens’ protagonism” – full transparency of the administration and direct participation of citizens in government decisions.

They chose to assign more resources in new welfare policies, suitable to counter the advance of mass impoverishment generated by the crisis. They intervened in urban planning, initiating housing policies more favourable to low-income residents and starting to hit the speculative interests of banks and financial holding companies. They have set up programmes supporting a more fair and inclusive social economy, by changing the rules of local tenders and procurement and by developing cooperative platforms instead of extractivist ones. They are trying to “re-municipalise” essential local public services, such as water and energy supplies, and even funeral services, which had been privatised in recent years. They decided, even in contrast to national and European policies, to devote themselves to the welcome of refugees and migrants, offering city spaces and resources and creating the possibility of direct “humanitarian channels”.

Certainly what is happening in the Iberian Peninsula is the spearhead, both from a symbolic and a material point of view, of a “new municipalism” trying to reinvent democratic practices from the local dimension. But it is equally true that the whole map of Europe is dotted with cases of already established or embryonic initiatives, which are testing new possible relationships between citizenship and local institutions, in search for creative answers to the challenges of urban development and coexistence. In this spirit, *European Alternatives* launched over the last year a first-mapping on a European scale of the “cities of change”, i.e. those cases where the initiative from the bottom of active citizenship (that is movements, associations, independent social and cultural projects) meets with original experiences of local governments, highly oriented to innovation. The first results of this work are amazing. In the North as well as in the South. In the East as well as in the West. Here we can mention only a few examples: the cities of Birmingham and Bristol in the

UK; the State of Thuringia in Germany; a Mediterranean metropolis like Naples and a city at the foot of the Alps like Grenoble; many municipal governments and two regional administrations, those of Attica and the Ionian Islands, in Greece; in Poland towns such as Wadowice and Slupsk. And these results were for the first time discussed and elaborated in the Campus of European Alternatives.

But we cannot stop at a simple, although necessary, photographic reconnaissance of existing initiatives. The experience of the last year has also highlighted the limits and contradictions of these alternative realities. The life of every country is crossed by economic and financial flows that are elusive to the communities' control and removed from local democratic decision-making. On the city-level the same relations between active citizenship and local governments often prove to be problematic. As well, legal and institutional constraints by higher levels of government: the nation-state and the European, severely limit the range of concrete action of even the most innovative municipal or regional administration.

To prevent these problems from translating into the impossibility of any real change, it became clear that two parallel paths need to be crossed and intertwined.

First of all, there is the need to organise a permanent exchange between these experiences as a mutual learning ground: the transfer of knowledge on single projects, or single civic participation models experienced by this or that city, can help to address and to resolve problems that emerge in another urban context and can help adapt and improve practices already in place.

Second, it is urgent – particularly in the current situation, where there is the risk of the “disintegration” of Europe – to construct and develop a transnational space of political expression among “cities for change”. It could be a decisive actor in increasing the potential of intervention and pressure on national governments and European institutions to affirm a real protagonism of the communities and local governments in political decisions that affect them. And it could contribute – along with so many others initiatives for social equality, rights and democracy in Europe – to the reversal of the current dominant power relationships and to the identification of truly alternative solutions.

Sharing the thought of Lewis Mumford on the city: “the magnet comes before the container.” (Mumford 1968: p.9) The cities’ destinies are the same as that of Europe, of which they are original and constitutive

elements. And in these turbulent times we need, desperately and hopefully, the attractiveness and connectiveness of many different magnets, capable of being the propellers of change.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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