

Interview to Gabriella Esposito De Vita and Stefania Ragozino
 edited by editorial board of Tracce Urbane

Q: Which aspects do we define in our research to consider such experiences as experiences of self-organization?

A: Could be good to start from the internal self-organization of the AESOP Thematic Group Public Space and Urban Culture (AESOP TG PSUC) of which, currently, Gabriella is the Main Coordinator for the period 2017-2019 and Stefania is one of the Responsible Members for Public Relations subgroup. The group works since April 2010 with the initiative of Sabine Knierbein (Associate Professor, TU Vienna, Austria), Ceren Sezer (Architect and urban planner, TU Delft, Urban 4, Netherlands) and Chiara Tornaghi (Reader, Coventry University, United Kingdom). The main aim of the group is to generate an international and interdisciplinary exchange between the research and practices on public spaces and urban cultures. By doing so, it aims to support research, planning and a design agenda within the AESOP community, and beyond. All this effort has been pursuing on a voluntary base that distinguishes our approach to work, cooperate and create synergies with European and extra-European colleagues, institutions, associations and activists.

During the Rome meeting “Cities and self-organizations” (11th-13th December 2017), in which participated AESOP TG PSUC members such as Gabriella Esposito De Vita (IRISS CNR, Italy), Sabine Knierbein and Elina Kranzle (TU Wien, Austria), Marianita Palumbo (EHESS, France), Stefania Ragozino (IRISS CNR, Italy), Mohamed Saleh (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, The Netherlands), and Burcu Yigit Turan (Uppsala University, Sweden), a strong synergy emerged between the two groups that co-organized the meeting, the TRACCE URBANE Network and the AESOP TG PSUC, especially with regard to common research themes and engagement methodologies. Sophie Watson (The Open University, UK), who was invited as mentor of the AESOP TG PSUC to contribute to the debate about the self-organizations, gave an inspiring lecture useful to decode these “unsettled and turbulent times” in which complexity, interconnectedness, chaos and uncertainty are increasing more and more. Emerged items were *collaboration* needed for successful self-organizations in cities, *social objectivity* constituted through acts of *power*, constitution of *identities* in a precarious and vulnerable terrain of political

practices, and importance of *difference* and *compatibility* of the power forms.

In our experience, to assess an experience as one of self-organization we consider firstly a general disaffection with government due to growing inequalities and increased displaced people, both aspects concerning with definite *autonomy* and *authenticity* from institutions and private bodies to pursue alternative objectives (Bridge & Watson, 2010; Hillier, 2002). Secondly, we can consider different aspects such as possible forms of *antagonism* and *agonism* (Mouffe, 2013) with regard to top-down approaches that exclude marginal communities or bypass them and to *conflicts of power relations* (Albrechts, 2003; Knierbein & Viderman, 2018), possible forms of *collaboration* and *interaction* among local actors/city users/activists to face austerity urbanism and uncertainty (Bridge & Watson, 2003) and to reuse common goods that are not used, degraded or not appreciated by expressing their *right to the city* (Brown & Kristiansen, 2009; Esposito De Vita, 2018; Novy & Colomb, 2013; Ostrom, Burger, Field, Norgaard, & Policansky, 1999; Ragozino & Varriale, 2018; Tayebi, 2013), as well as innovative way to consider and integrate *cultural and gender diversities* (Watson, 2013).

Q: Interaction with institutions: what kind of interaction do these practice have with institutions (dialogue/negotiation, conflict, ...)? What are the main strategies/objectives? Which are the limits and the ambiguities of these strategies?

A: With regard to this issue, the Rome meeting has highlighted two main themes: collaboration processes and dichotomy between formality and informality.

It was interesting the contribution of Paola Cannavò (University of Calabria, Italy), "CO-Roma, enable collaborative processes in the city", who presented, concretely, the «possibility to activate new governance forms that follow the transition from participation, with a consulting value, to the collaboration, with a deeply managerial character», and the model of a "Collaborative City". The two examples discussed, LabGov and Agenda Tevere Onlus, are experiments in which a collaborative process has been applied to create a dialogue between local actors and «define open and collaborative governance models to co-produce and co-manage common goods and services for the territory». She

assured that the reuse of common goods needs «new strategies and the energy of a community to be regenerated and used». Besides, these bottom-up processes necessitate implementation by local administration to be sustainable.

Also the contribution of Angela Barbanente and Valeria Monno approached this issue presenting the dichotomy between strengths and weaknesses of the “Urban Laboratories”. These forms of interaction between citizens and institutions are structured around the concepts of *social interaction* and *urban production*. They could be considered both a (democratic) way through which it is possible to re-appropriate of the city as a public space and a place of control and injustice «where citizens are used to offset the progressive disappearance of opportunities for urban democracy and social support through the welfare state». With regard to the dichotomy between formality and informality, a lot of experiences were linked to this issue, more than others the case of *multi-factory* Officine Zero, who declared – conversely to the main part of social collectives – the willingness to be constituted in a more formal way as an association. In this way the activist and free-lance workers group could apply to calls for projects and funds, as well as be recognizable in the turbulent economic and political Italian scenario. This group has attempted to be supported by the public administration in the process of public utility declaration for the area without success. They looked for a proactive dialogue that they find consistently only with the University of Rome and with some experts because of the impending presence of a big private body that aimed to invest in that area. The lecture of Sophie Watson offered some points of reasoning also in this perspective. In her opinion, different power forms should be compatible to each other in order to make urban, social and economic processes softer and more polite.

Q: Which kind of “community” are these processes producing? Are they creating new political communities or reducing social conflict?

A: We can say that urban self-organizations promoted community that are more informed and more stimulated with regard to economic, political and cultural scenario. Taking part to a self-organization means also obtain knowledge and competencies needed for a community that has to be able to co-produce externalities and share collectively the obtained results.

New political communities or reducing social conflict? It is hard to answer objectively. Sophie Watson spoke about the «importance of differences that cannot be ignored» and cited the idea of stranger (Simmel, 1908) to discuss the necessity to overcome barriers and obstacle of co-habiting this dynamic contexts.

In a wider sense, the Rome meeting has highlighted the strong linkages between the social production and the place in which the process occur. For example, the contribution of Ana Carolina C. Farias (ISCTE, Portugal) assumed the «production of space as a social production» representing the case of the BIP/ZIP Program – Priority Intervention Neighbourhoods and Zones (2011). This program aims to «rehabilitate and revitalize areas of the city through community-based actions that foster improved quality of life and territorial cohesion». In the examples reported by Paola Cannavò, the proactive role of the community is relevant for the success of the agenda, so that the Tevere River Park needs to start from «the creation of community spaces in key points, strategic to the activation of the regeneration process» in order to involve the territory in this transformation process by defining a shared scenario. This protocol tends to a process of social change based on a private/public covenant leading towards a more resilient city and society.

Angela Barbanente and Valeria Monno (DICATECh, Italy) presented the experience of “Bollenti Spiriti”, a program promoted by the Apulia Regional Government in 2005 as part of youth policy. Through a new way of doing economy – «from urban involution to generative policies» employing while ensuring the city – they started from young people to involve local actors and citizens in the recovery of public buildings in order to build a “small community defences” where is possible to face the urban involution caused by neo-liberal policies and practices.

Q: Are they producing new and innovative institutions (if it is possible) or just making bad institutions more accountable?

A: The socio-ecological elements such as environmental resources and decisional processes around them could be a field to observe how new and innovative institutions and new governance models could be formed in order to solve the dichotomy between conflicts and collaborative approaches. Filippo Gravagno and Giusy Pappalardo (University of Catania,

Italy) presented the case of projects developed within the framework of the Simeto River Agreement, which is both a «River Contract, a Plan for Local Development and an experiment to enforce participatory democracy along the decision-making processes in Sicily. [...] The Simeto River Agreement is an agreement between ten municipalities, the University of Catania, and a coordination of about fifty local NGOs under the umbrella of the so-called Participatory Presidium, with the aim of innovating the governance of common goods with a polycentric and multilevel approach. The broader goal is to allow synergies – through resilient organizational structures – amongst a variety of actors». The experiment was designed as a grassroots experience and today is a pilot case of complex partnership with public institutions. Innovation within institutions is a key question within the current scenario. Urban challenges such as the abandonment of industries and productive facilities, the shrinkage of the public investments in local development initiatives, the needs of more effective urban regeneration processes, the increasing of cultural diversities, request innovative approaches within the institutions and renewed tools for enhancing dialogues among communities, activists, social workers as well as economic actors.

Q: Can we witness a learning process both at institutional level and at community based level?

A: The rich parterre of practices and experiences presented in December during the Rome conference and the proactive discussion developed throughout the sessions with a very involved audience, offered a multilevel and multifaceted perspective to read the interactions between institutions and communities. In a few cases have been witnessed a virtuous cycle of awareness of the publics, in particular at municipal level, regarding civic economics processes and support to self-organized initiatives. Nevertheless, the mutual learning process seems to be discontinuous. As frequently happens, some frontier experiences promoted as informal and self-organized initiatives by activists, artists and cultural associations, informal movements and communities re-discovering their own crafts traditions, have been implemented within the city strategies by local governments. As well as, innovative policies have been designed by municipalities for enhancing community

engagement and local capacity building.

As scholars, we have been requested of observing, assessing and interpreting current processes on the one hand, facilitating, transferring and sharing tools with the territory, on the other. The December meeting offered this opportunity to our communities of scholars, institution representatives and activists.

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