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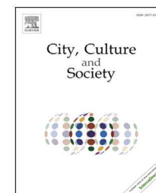

Introduction to SI: Against the creative city: Activism in the creative city: When cultural workers fight against creative city policy

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores artists' and cultural workers' activism in the context of urban social movements opposing creative city policy, focusing in particular on the meanings and images of creativity that emerge from this confrontation. Today this theme is important because it reveals a glaring contradiction in many culturally based urban policies currently being implemented, which have the explicit objective of fostering creativity but leave cultural workers out of their development. Cultural workers have begun to contest those policies nowadays as several authors have already been able to document (Borèn and Young, 2013; Novy & Colomb, 2013), which this special issue will also contribute to. This contestation is the best proof of the paradoxical divorce between cultural workers and policy makers in charge of creative city policy. For some, like David Harvey, The confrontation results from the intensive instrumental use of culture and the arts in contemporary capitalist cities as a resource for socioeconomic development, an exploitation scheme that had also been denounced by Sharon Zukin (1989, 1995) a long time ago.

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According to Harvey, this kind of exploitation would produce a tendency to increasing opposition to these policies by cultural workers: “The widespread though usually fragmented struggles that exist between capitalistic appropriation and past and present cultural creativity can lead a segment of the community concerned with cultural matters to side with a politics opposed to multinational capitalism” (Harvey, 2012: 111). For its part, Borèn and Young (2013) alert that “we currently know little about the basis for such contestation and how it might contribute towards different views of creativity in urban policy formation” (Borèn and Young (2013): 4). This special issue aims to contribute precisely to clarify some important issues in this regard:

- What kind of “creative city” is imagined by urban policy? How is the creative city implemented locally? How is a creative city contested by cultural workers?
- How do cultural workers organise their interests and how do they use their creativity for social mobilisation?
- How are different notions of “creativity” imagined and mobilised by activists within the considered urban social movement? How do such meanings of creativity differ from those mobilised and used by cultural urban policies at different scales (from small-scale projects, to the city level)?
- Is culture and social innovation also a product of mobilisation? To what extent does the creative action organised by cultural operators transform or expand into culture or socially innovative strategy?

Inspired by the suggestion of Borèn and Young (2013) this special issue aims to reflect on a more multifaceted comprehension of how creativity is imagined in different urban settings, as a key element to analyse political actions performed by cultural workers giving way to counter-culture and social innovation in cities. In order to interpret and truly value the potentialities of contestation by cultural workers of creative city policies in the following we will briefly make reference to some important contexts of this opposition. We then present the articles included in this special issue.

1. The creative city paradigm and the cultural sector

Along with the decline of manufacturing-based production as the engine of urban development, culture and creativity have become a common answer for promoting urban economic and social growth. The story is well known. The arts have greatly

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expanded during all of the 20th century. The cultural sphere has been broadened by the incorporation of a whole new range of activities with increasingly weaker ties to the original core of the classical arts, for example, cinema, photography, popular music and new media productions. Additionally, the public sector and, more recently, the third sector have consolidated their presence in this field. All of these changes have been accompanied by a deep socioeconomic transformation involving an enormous expansion in higher education, the tertiarization of the economy, as well as the development of corporate capitalism and the welfare state. The whole relationship between culture and economy has changed. Leisure has been transformed into a privileged space of consumption, and leisure activities are increasingly being imbued with entertainment and symbolic meanings. In the production of all kinds of goods and services, the symbolic dimension has gained central importance, which has led to an almost universal aestheticization of goods and everyday practices thanks in particular to publicity and design. As a result, culture as a sector has gained weight and centrality in contemporary societies (Rodríguez Morató, 2012). This centrality was made specific paradigmatically in the case of the large cities where the cultural sector tends to be concentrated and tourism becomes a crucial asset (Scott, 2000). This has created the base for the emergence of the creative city discourse.

Within the context of the transformations that have placed cultural activities and the arts at the centre of urban dynamics and governance, urban cultural regeneration has become a very common development strategy for cities all over the world, particularly in the case of old industrial cities needing to renovate their economic basis and national or regional capital cities aspiring to compete for global centrality (Evans, 2001). In Europe, cultural flagship projects began to proliferate around the 80s most of the time involving the building of major cultural facilities and the organization of cultural mega events (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; García, 2004). From the next decade onwards this development was transformed by a new vision linked to the idea of creativity. First, the experience of Glasgow as 1990 European Capital of Culture inspired the notion of the creative city (Charles Landry) centred on the promotion of the cultural life of the city. Then, since the new millennium, this vision has been strongly reinforced and also transformed by the theory of the creative class as the new dominant class in contemporary capitalism (Richard Florida) because this theory gave a crucial role to urban cultural life and cultural climate in attracting this new class and therefore in promoting economic development (Florida, 2002). In the framework of this new vision in the last two decades cultural branding and the promotion of creative clusters have emerged as the most common urban cultural regeneration schemes both in Europe and in other parts of the world (Evans, 2003).

Since their appearance, however, urban cultural regeneration policies have received a lot of criticism. Many authors and many studies have highlighted their numerous contradictions, limitations and perverse effects (Pratt, 2011; Scott, 2014, pp. 1–14; Zukin, 1989; 1995). Among other critical remarks it has been said, for example, that as “iconic” buildings and cultural mega-events are increasingly replicated in other parts of the world they tend to loose their appealing, which in turn makes them an increasingly unsustainable investment. On the other hand, employment in the creative industries uses to be characterized by very precarious working conditions, therefore defining a not so brilliant future for the creative city based on this kind of employment. Additionally, cultural workers and creative professionals tend to concentrate in particular cities and particular quarters, which produces tensions between centres and peripheries at different levels. On the other hand, creative city policies oriented to attract creative professionals often produce gentrification and contribute to the increasing inequalities within the cities. Moreover, the creative city model takes different forms of economic development, from networks of small businesses in cultural districts (Tremblay & Platti, 2013) to large-scale projects led by multinational companies, thus bringing also conflicts among antagonist interests. Finally, cultural commercialisation and instrumentalisation tend to produce cultural banalization, so eroding intrinsic cultural value.

Notwithstanding the harsh criticism emerged within the scientific world, these policies have been largely put in practice in most of the European and US cities. But after three decades of such political turn toward culture and especially after more than one decade of a turn to creativity, promises are mostly broken for the cultural sector: creative and cultural operators often do not recognise themselves in the policies proposed in their name, alternative culture is still marginalised in the initiatives taken according to these schemes and a large segment of creative labour is suffering a precarious and insecure situation. As Justin O'Connor has synthesized it: “Alongside the millennial promise of the creative economy have come higher levels of inequality and exclusion; cuts to art and culture budgets; cuts to arts education; persistent un-and under-employment, increased precarity and (self-) exploitation; greater global conglomeration coupled with an ability to cherry-pick local winners early; integrated material and logistic production chains and a new international division of cultural labour: all of this written under the aegis of an economic rational that increasingly excludes any values other than those set by ‘growth’ and ‘efficiency’” (O'Connor, 2016: 4). However, there are nuances. The field is neither uniform nor unilinear, as the author recognises. But on the whole the balance is rather negative, there is a clear feeling of frustration in the epistemic community of cultural analysts that O'Connor tries to represent in his article. This is a shared feeling accross the cultural sector nowadays and the basis for its possible revolt. Yet is this revolt really envisionable? To what extent can we expect the cultural sector engage in collective action against creative city policies?

2. The new conditions for artistic critique in the creative city

In principle, criticism and political resistance are rather common within the art sphere. However, recently they are also emerging within the larger realm of cultural industries (see, for instance Grodach & Silver, 2013 for numerous examples, or Kirchberg & Kagan, 2013). It is not only artists who are now involved in struggling against the neo-liberal city, but also exactly those people who neo-liberal urban politics are directed to: the so-called 'creative class', which is aware of the politics of exploitation of culture (Peck, 2005) and sometimes refuses the actions that are formulated in its name (Novy & Colomb, 2013). Moreover, the focus of the protest is increasingly directed towards programmes or development strategies in the city that instrumentally “use” culture, art and creativity. These kind of protests sometimes grow in scale and can be considered as urban social movements: starting from small-scale issues or very focused aims, they enlarge and comprise larger topics linked to more general urban politics, and look for support from other social movements in the city (Pradel & Martì-Costa, 2012).

How can we assess the potential of this contestation, its possible scope and orientation? In order to do this, it is important to take into account the changing historical conditions for artistic nonconformity. If art is typically considered as opposed to social order this is because historically modern art was constituted against XIX century bourgeois society, producing a characteristic critique to that capitalist social order. In France in the mid-nineteenth century, the rapid proletarianisation of the population gives rise to

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