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The contradictions of creative activism. Situated meanings and everyday practices in a Milan case-study

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A B S T R A C T

The growing literature on creative activism highlights a variety of tensions and ambiguities, including the contradictions that arise between activists' declared goals and the everyday practices that they use to pursue them. Far from suggesting that they could or should be removed, these contradictions are valorized in this paper, as they illuminate the situated meanings of creativity reproduced through everyday practices of creative activism. The argument is illustrated through a case-study of a cultural organization that led a local mobilization which, in spite of its significant efforts and resources, did not manage to move from single initiatives and instrumental coalitions to a more stable social movement devoted to the enhancement of bottom-up creativity and public space in Milan. Drawing on insights from movement studies and the pragmatist sociology of engagement regimes, the study establishes an original theoretical framework, illustrated with the analysis of three specific initiatives promoted by the observed mobilization. The main results show how different situated meanings of creativity set unequal conditions for the process of "commonizing cognition" required for the extension of single mobilization into larger urban movements.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary politics of economic exploitation of the creative city (Borén & Young, 2013; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2011) is accompanied by increasing discontent, criticism and contestation on the part of both artists and creative workers (Kirchberg & Kagan, 2013, p. 137). The growing attention directed towards these criticisms (Langegger, 2015; McLean, 2014) has indicated that ambiguities and negative effects that are often experienced by the supposed beneficiaries of creative interventions (Grigoleit, Hahn, & Brocchi, 2013), are not only a result of "neoliberal politics" (Jakob, 2012; Sevin, 2014). Instead, these ambiguities may also be reproduced by civil society initiatives that contest contemporary urban politics in favor of a different and more inclusive idea of the creative city (McLean, 2014). For example, the participatory approach adopted by many of these initiatives is in fact highly controversial (Jones, 2003) as it is often "ineffective in guaranteeing the ethical quality of interventions" (Sevin, 2014) and can even be responsible for "reinforcing" rather than challenging, already existing social and economic inequalities (Grigoleit et al., 2013; Jakob, 2012; Jones,

2003). An increasing and heterogeneous number of studies recognize that contemporary creative activism is rich both in potential and in contradictions (Grigoleit et al., 2013) as it spreads through ambiguous (McLean, 2014) and "usually fragmented struggles" (Harvey, 2012: 111).

This contradictory element of creative activism is the point of departure for this contribution. The study explores the situated meanings of creativity, where 'situated meanings' are understood as those meanings that are reproduced in everyday practices (De Certeau, 2001) of creative activism. It is suggested that these situated meanings are relevant conditions for the development of urban movements that work to coordinate a number of single-issue and politically ineffective struggles and initiatives. An ethnographic analysis of a case-study of creative activism is used to explore the sphere of for-profit and nonprofit initiatives that are proliferating in Italy (Citroni, 2015) and elsewhere (Sevin, 2014) in the context of the ever increasing "invitation to pro-activism that has accompanied the dismantling of social welfare provisions" (*ibidem*). The local mobilization that is the focus of the case study is part of those attempts to "creatively" use this invitation (Borén & Young, 2013). Those involved in the local mobilization attempted to develop a more inclusive conception of the creative city and to question its neo-liberal appropriation, while simultaneously contributing to its

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reproduction (McLean, 2014). As a result, the mobilization's initiatives appeared openly controversial and ambiguous (Grigoleit et al., 2013).

In the following section, the case-study is introduced, with a discussion of its relevance to this special issue on creative activism. In section two, the theoretical framework is established, borrowing from both recent insights of movement studies and pragmatist sociology of engagement regimes. In section three, this framework is illustrated through its application to three specific initiatives that were set up by the local mobilization. The analysis in this section is particularly concerned with the special issue's call to develop a "multifaceted comprehension of how creativity is imagined in different urban settings as key element to analyze political actions performed by cultural workers".[1] In particular, in the case study, the political action of the mobilization failed to develop into a larger movement of creative activists. The framework of analysis in this study attempts to account for this (non) outcome by looking at how creativity was imagined and practiced in the everyday settings in which the local mobilization unfolded. The concluding section will discuss the main findings of the study with reference to wider debates on creative activism and urban politics.

Methodologically, the observed local mobilization was studied through discourse analysis of 38 interviews, 19 press releases and 18 public interventions in press conferences, official video and newspaper articles. Besides, two years of ethnographic participant-observation in the everyday group life of the local mobilization was undertaken, which included participation in 34 public events, and 40 h of "shadowing" (Sclavi, 2005) the daily public life of the mobilization's leader.

2. Toward an urban movement of creative activism?

The local mobilization was led by a "cultural enterprise based in Milan", whose official mission was the "promotion of the public space and creativity in Milan".[2] This official aim was found on the mobilization's website together with the following statement: "we want more and more public space, we want difference, creativity, variety in public places [...] This is the reason why we set up places and organize events for public thinking, active criticizing and general commitment".[3] In organizational terms, the cultural enterprise at the center of the mobilization enjoyed a double legal identity: it began as a nonprofit association but then also became a limited company. The non-profit identity was used to access funds that public and private institutions reserve for third sector organizations and the corporate identity to manage commercial relationships and activities (Citroni, 2015).

Over time, the entrepreneurial component of the organization increased in significance, managing a growing number of for-profit activities, including a restaurant and an events center (ibidem). At the same time, the nonprofit component continued to be used for the most socially and politically oriented initiatives, which were generally single projects that were promoted and set up in conjunction with a variety of other groups in partnerships that were based around specific projects. Through such initiatives, the observed organization acted as a local mobilization, that is, as an "entrepreneur promoting collective actions to raise local problems and make them public by interacting with authorities and public policies and pursuing one or more shared goals" (Vitale, 2007, p. 10). Over the four years of research, the goal of enhancing public spaces and inclusive creativity in Milan was pursued through a variety of initiatives: "convivial events, collective protests, festivals, cultural and social projects in the fields of films, design, art and music[4]". Many of the observed mobilization's initiatives possessed an explicit artistic-performative character, while others were overtly political, such as strikes, or the 2006 candidacy for the Milan city council election.[5]

Despite its activism, the observed mobilization never stabilized and it did not succeed in developing into a social movement, understood as "a web-shaped stable coordination of subjects, characterized by a high level of identity investment" (ibidem). At best, the local mobilization promoted ephemeral coalitions, instrumentally tied to projects and short-term initiatives (Citroni, 2015), some examples of which are explored below. The struggle to develop into a social movement represents the first point of interest in the selected case-study, particularly in light of the relatively favorable conditions it should have enjoyed in this respect. These conditions included: a) a "political opportunity structure" characterized by the possibility of building a variety of alliances with other groups in Milan who also opposed the ruling right-wing local government; b) a thick web of personal contacts and relationships between the main members of the organization and local economic and cultural elites (Citroni, 2015); c) access to significant organizing resources thanks to the above-mentioned parallel economic enterprise, which resulted in significant media attention. These resources allowed the organization to grow as a successful economic enterprise but they did not help to sustain the local mobilization over time, nor did they contribute to its development into an urban social movement.

The second point of interest to be drawn from the selected case-study is the indirect strategy that it adopted to pursue its goals of inclusive creativity and the enhancement of public space. The mobilization generally did not openly fight specific urban policies that were adopted by the ruling right-wing local government. On the contrary, those involved in the local mobilization developed initiatives that were consistent with the "invitation to pro-activism and responsibilization" (Sevin, 2014) promoted by local institutional arrangements (Andreotti, 2006). These initiatives were rarely, and never entirely, financially dependent upon public institutions, but whenever possible, they did use institutional support to augment their credibility in the eyes of private funders, for example, by inviting public authorities to intervene at press conferences. However, on other occasions the observed mobilization pursued a different conception of the creative city to that adopted by the City Council, substituting the Council's emphasis on urban and economic development for a focus on bottom-up distribution of local resources through participatory processes (Citroni, 2015). Recent literature suggests that "neo-liberal cultural planning" functions by co-opting dissonant voices (Harvey, 2012) and that this makes the "critique of instrumentalization of culture and arts" both obsolete and ineffective (Sevin, 2014). Consistent with a number of other recently analyzed cases (Grigoleit et al., 2013; McLean, 2014), the local mobilization could overcome this pitfall by exploiting the instrumental use of culture and creative practices made by urban politics for its own ends. Examples of such a strategy is the use made by local mobilization of the political structure as a source of funding (Citroni, 2015) to subtly "make cracks in the neo-liberal creative city" (McLean, 2014), thus eroding this model from within. This erosion is similar to other cases of

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