



The contribution of cultural participation to urban well-being. A comparative study in Bolzano/Bozen and Siracusa, Italy



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ABSTRACT

What is the role of culture in contemporary urban life? Can culture function as an urban planning tool for individual and social well-being? Two elements are of special relevance in this regard: cultural vibrancy in terms of level of initiative in policies, use of facilities and activities, and individual and social propensities towards the participation in, and consumption of, cultural activities and goods. This paper takes the recent path of research on the impact of cultural participation on the social and economic sustainability of urban processes, with a specific focus on the individual subjective well-being dimension. Two Italian cities, one endowed with a high stock of cultural facilities, activities, and access (Bolzano/Bozen) and the other with a comparatively much lower stock in all respects (Siracusa), are examined. Comparative analysis suggests that the impact of culture on subjective well-being in a context of high cultural supply and substantial cultural participation is much more relevant with respect to low-endowment and low-participation cases, thus suggesting the possibility of a culture/well-being positive feedback dynamics leading to urban 'cultural poverty traps'. On the basis of these results, we draw some implications for cultural policy design in urban contexts.

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1. Introduction

Interest in the relationship between culture and urban development processes is growing from multiple disciplinary viewpoints, including, among others, urban planning, geography, economics, psychology, sociology, and medicine. Researchers from all such fields pay attention in various respects to the influence of culture – in terms of activities, events, facilities, and participation – as a transformational factor with important potential impacts on various dimensions of social and economic value including social cohesion, environmentally responsible behavior, orientation toward innovation, and individual and collective well-being. This kind of research calls for truly interdisciplinary approaches, and requires the development of proper tools to evaluate complex and possibly analytically elusive phenomena by means of suitable, well-designed indicators. In the absence of an appropriate analytical framework, it is likely that the value added of culture for people and communities is largely under-appreciated, and therefore

potentially beneficial policies and actions are not undertaken, with public resources being diverted from cultural budgets in favor of alternative uses.

The urban environment is a privileged context from the point of view of cultural activity. It often boasts major cultural facilities, activities and programs, attracts most of the best talent and caters for vast potential audiences with relatively large spending capacity. One could say that the urban environment and the cultural sphere are typically close counterparts – cultural landmarks greatly contribute to the definition of the very identity of the city, whereas the city itself provides especially favorable conditions for cultural sectors to thrive. But are all urban environments the same? Certainly not, no matter how one puts it – cities are extremely diverse in all kinds of ways. And then, what about culture? Provided that culture is indeed a key ingredient of what makes a city, in what circumstances is the culture-city link working at its best? In this paper, we try to address this difficult but fascinating issue with reference to the dimension of individual well-being. In what urban contexts, if any, does culture more significantly enhance one's well-being? Is it where cultural opportunities abound and many people take advantage of them, or on the contrary where they are relatively scarce and relatively few people are looking for them? Intuitively, both situations have their appeal in terms of individual well-being: in cities where culture is all around, there is a strong social incentive to access culture, there are many people around from whom to obtain inspiration and information, and there are plenty of possibilities to accommodate all

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kinds of individual tastes. Yet, where culture is scarce and these rare occasions could be savored much more deeply, there is less frustration over untapped opportunities, there is a social incentive to identify with a cool intellectual elite, there is a much closer acquaintance among members of the culture community, and so on. In the first case, if 'more is better' from the point of view of culturally-driven well-being, we should expect that differences in cultural opportunities between cities are amplified with time, so that different 'city leagues' in terms of cultural vibrancy and culture-related quality of life should emerge. On the contrary, if 'less is better', we should expect that all urban environments eventually converge towards the same 'equilibrium' level of cultural vibrancy and atmosphere.

Common sense suggests that cultural vibrancy is far from homogeneous across cities, even when considering subgroups with similar conditions in terms of demographic size, affluence, economic structure, etc. However, how far is such casual empiricism reflected in actual data? In order to check this, we consider two Italian cities, Bolzano/Bozen, in the northern, German-speaking Italian province, and Siracusa, in Italy's most southern region, Sicily. They are clearly characterized by different endowments in terms of cultural facilities, activity, and participation. Thanks to a project entitled 'Culture and Well Being Italy' undertaken in the winter of 2010, we have collected data at national level and in relation to the two aforementioned cities. We have been able to gather data in both contexts in terms of mapping several dimensions of the respective cultural spheres, as well as to undertake cross-sectional surveys concerning major determinants of individual subjective well-being. This allows us to respond to the principal research hypothesis which is how culture, and in particular cultural participation and cultural production, impact upon psychological well-being in different urban contexts, and also to answer the secondary research hypothesis, assessing the influence of culture in relation to other urban key factors known from the literature to affect subjective well-being.

The paper starts with a brief literature review of the developmental role of culture in urban environments, with specific reference to individual well-being. Subsequently, we present comparative profiles of the two urban case studies in terms of their main characteristics in the context of the paper's focus of interest. Next, we describe the methodology adopted and the structure of the survey. We then present our findings, measuring the differential impact of cultural activity on the individual subjective well-being of local residents, and relate them to differences in respective cultural endowments. Finally, we draw conclusions in the final discussion.

Results confirm our hypothesis and show that aggregate (city) levels of cultural endowments, production, and participation have a strong positive impact on how cultural activity at the individual level affects individual well-being, thus confirming the common-sense intuition that the welfare effects of culture are superior in culturally more vibrant urban environments and that therefore different cities, even if similar in many other dimensions, may display very different results in this respect. Hence, there is potential risk of 'cultural poverty traps' which call for the design of countervailing urban policies.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Urban areas and culture: new narratives

Although the cumulative effects of cultural facilities, activities, and participation on human environments are widely acknowledged, culture has been recognized only recently as an authentic form of capital (Throsby, 2001), and this significant progress in the scientific debate helps to better appreciate the specific ways in which culture generates social and economic value in specific situations. Research has focused upon concrete case studies on the relationship between urban development and the spatial agglomeration of various forms of tangible and intangible cultural assets (e.g., Currid, 2007; Potts, 2009; Roodhouse, 2010; Evans, 2015), its competitive specialization effects (see, e.g.,

Heley, Graham, & Watkin, 2012), and its social consequences (to name only a few, see Hutton, 2006; Markusen & Gadwa, 2008; Grodach, 2008). Besides the traditional 'hard' factors of urban development such as scale economies, spatial proximity, and natural resource endowments, it is in the light of the 'soft' factors such as quality of life, networks, and relationships that the transformational role of culture becomes most apparent. As many studies point out (see Scott, 2006; Ferilli, Sacco, & Tavano Blessi, 2012), culture is much more relevant today than in the past in terms of the organization and the functioning of contemporary post-industrial cities. In particular, one can single out at least five different value dimensions where culture can make a significant difference:

1. Symbolic value: Culture strongly contributes to the identification of the city as a unique environment with its own peculiarities, both from the point of view of citizens (sense of belonging and pride) and of external investors and tourists (vibrancy, dynamism and attractiveness), see, e.g., Hayes (2009); Smith and von Krogh Strand (2011);
2. Competitive value: Culture can be a source of competitive advantage on many grounds, from providing a stimulating environment that is favorable to innovative thinking and practice to enhancing quality of life and attractiveness for external skilled workers as well as providing a distinctive brand value to local products and services (see, e.g., Dziembowska-Kowalska & Funck, 2000; Servillo, Atkinson, & Russo, 2012);
3. Environmental value: Cultural awareness and participation may act as a catalyst for local urban renovation/regeneration processes, acting on both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the built and natural city environment (see, e.g., Van Aalst & van Melik, 2012; Evans, 2015);
4. Economic value: Cultural and creative production is a large meta-sector of post-industrial cities, which can in certain cases work as a main economic driver for the local economy (see, e.g., KEA European Affairs, 2006; Landry, 2006; Currid, 2007; KEA European Affairs, 2009);
5. Social value: Culture may provide a key contribution to the city's social assets and cohesion and to their social sustainability (see, e.g., Tavano Blessi, Tremblay, Sandri, & Pilati, 2012), as well as to the development of a sense of place (e.g., Sandler, 2007).

The accumulation of cultural capital can thus be regarded as beneficial on many levels at the same time, acting as a facilitator for further relevant goals while engaging citizens emotionally, thus contributing to fleshing out shared, compelling visions of local social development which could be otherwise difficult to advocate by invoking purely instrumental social and economic benefits (see Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2009; Prior & Tavano Blessi, 2012). Yet this means in turn that the instrumental aspect of cultural participation must be handled with great care in order for culture to perform its subtle role properly (see Belfiore, 2002). If culture is merely conceived and presented as a policy tool, it is unlikely that it will be embraced by citizens and considered a community resource and therefore will not be able to significantly alter the social meanings of place making, conservation, and belonging (see Belfiore & Bennett, 2010). Like social capital, culture needs an appropriate motivational base and value orientation context for it, to be fixed into valuable stock for individuals and communities, not only in terms of cultural capital but also of the indirect effects on the accumulation of other assets such as human and social capital. As pointed out by Scott (2010), in human capital terms, culture enables the acquisition of both technical capabilities (analytical thinking, know-how, and open-mindedness), and relational capabilities (connection, interaction, and networking), which are the bases for the emergence of the so-called cognitive economy (see Storper & Scott, 2009). Yet culture may also contribute to increasing the level of social capital by addressing a wide range of individual and social issues, such as marginalization, lack of social cohesion, and social empowerment (Sommer, 2014), by enhancing

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