



Building alternatives to the creative turn in Barcelona: The case of the socio-cultural centre Can Batlló



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ABSTRACT

Creative city policies have been critically assessed at length. Nevertheless, the bottom-up initiatives that go beyond and challenge the meaning and uses of creativity that underpin creative city policies, have received less attention. Thus, the aim of this paper is to study the nature of local Socially Innovative Initiatives (Moulaert; MacCallum; Mehmood & Hamdouch, 2013) developed in the socio-cultural field and their capacity to counterbalance the tendency towards a market rationality in urban cultural affairs. We examine this problem through a significant case study: the community-managed socio-cultural centre Can Batlló opened in 2011 in an old industrial neighbourhood of Barcelona. By analysing this case we propose to explore how and to what extent Socially Innovative Initiatives offer alternatives to creative city policies focusing on the production of socio-cultural services and innovation in governance and decision-making processes. We have collected data using qualitative methods that include observation, in-depth interviews and the study of documentary sources.

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1. Introduction

The role of culture and creativity (Florida, 2002a, 2002b, 2005a, 2005b; Landry & Bianchini, 1995) in post-Fordist cities has been critically assessed at length; with regards to economic growth and branding strategies (d'Ovidio, 2016; Scott, 2010, 2014; Vicari Haddock, 2010) and urban remake and changes in the socio-spatial dimension of cities (Bianchini, 1993; Evans & Shaw, 2004; Harvey, 2001; Pratt, 2010; García, 2004a; Zukin, 1989; 1995; Peck, 2005; Zukin & Braslow, 2011). Authors have criticized the rhetoric about the efficacy of culture to tackle social problems (Belfiore, 2002; Connolly, 2013; Pratt, 2010), the creative city's power to shape artistic practices (McLean, 2014), as well as the contradictory inclusion of local community and artists in the cultural development of cities (Comunian, 2010; Duxbury & Jeannotte, 2011; García, 2004b; Kagan & Hahn, 2011; Majoor, 2011; Novy & Colomb, 2013; Rius & Sánchez Belando, 2015). Scholars have also underscored the normative character, the contextual disembeddedness and the fuzziness of the notion of creativity within Florida's thesis, that underlies creative city policies (Borén & Young, 2013; d'Ovidio, 2016; Kirchberg & Kagan, 2013; Markusen, 2006; Pratt, 2010, 2011).

Nevertheless, the study of bottom-up experiences that broaden

this meaning of creativity is an incipient area of research (d'Ovidio & Pradel, 2013; García, Eizaguirre, & Pradel, 2015; Kagan & Hahn, 2011; Miles, 2013, p. 5; Novy & Colomb, 2013; Tremblay & Pilati, 2013; Moulaert, 2010; André, Henriques, & Malheiros, 2009). Thus, we focus here on the strategies that organised civil society implement in order to confront and create alternatives to the entrepreneurial dynamics that underpin the so-called creative city model. In this paper, we study the nature of local Socially Innovative Initiatives (SInI) developed in the socio-cultural field and their capacity to counterbalance and overcome the tendency towards market rationale in urban cultural affairs, which have accelerated in the context of welfare state cutbacks since 2008. We examine this problem through a significant case study: the community-managed socio-cultural centre Can Batlló (CB). We can consider CB as an emblematic case since it is leading the debate around community-driven SInI (Moulaert, 2010, p. 4–15) and becoming a model for social organisations, as well as for policy makers in and beyond Barcelona. By analysing this case we propose to explore how and to what extent SInI such as CB are contributing to build alternatives to the creative city policies, in particular, regarding innovation in governance and decision-making.

Like in other western cities, since the 80s, cultural policies in Barcelona have experienced a change in balance between social, political and economic concerns, as policy-makers have stressed the value of culture in the economic and physical regeneration of

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cities (Bianchini, 1993: 1, 9–15). In Barcelona, this shift took place alongside the urban metamorphosis and local development project initiated in 1979 (Balibrea, 2001; Degen & García, 2012; McNeill, 1999; Rodríguez Morató, 2008). This turn to market rationality in the understanding of culture has been condemned by many grassroots organizations and social movements due to three main questions (Andreu, 2014; Balibrea, 2001; Degen & García, 2012; Majoor, 2011; Marrero Guillamón, 2008; Martí-Costa & Cruz y Gallach, 2010; Sánchez Belando, Rius, & Zarlenga, 2012): Firstly, the exclusion of local communities from decision making on urban cultural affairs¹; secondly, the dominance of a reductionist vision of culture and creativity in the city and thirdly, the dynamics of commodification of urban space through culture.

The literature reviewed suggests that these questions can be identified in different contexts where creative city policies have been implemented. Therefore, counter actions that take the form of SI practices are taking place in Barcelona (García et al., 2015), as well as in other contexts. In different western cities social movements and the so called “creative class” are contesting creative policies (McLean, 2014; Novy & Colomb, 2013) and art activists are fostering alternative initiatives to the neoliberal articulation (Cossu & d'Ovidio, 2016, pp. 1–6) and the unsustainability of the creative city (Kirchberg & Kagan, 2013). These are reactions that connect with the claim for the right to the city (Lefebvre, [1968], 1969).

1.1. Framing social innovation (SI)

Classical sociologists referred to inventions and innovations regarding social change and technological evolution.² However, since the '30s Schumpeter's thesis of innovation has achieved a hegemonic position in the academic and the policy-making field. The emphasis on the figure of an entrepreneur in the post-Fordist economic discourse is an example (Oosterlynck, Kazepov, Novy, & Cools, 2013, p. 10). Even though Schumpeter's approach integrated a sociological vision to explain economic development (Hillier et al., 2009, p. 12), the focalization in the role of the entrepreneur as the central agent of economic development, represents a limit to the broadening of the role of entrepreneurs to other types of actors in the social, political and cultural spheres (Fontan, Klein, & Tremblay, 2013, p. 19).

Debate on innovation has been revitalized in the '70s with the contributions of Coleman (1970) and Chambon, David, and Deveyey (1982). Following Weber, Coleman, named inventions to new social forms or new uses of existing forms for new purposes (organizations as labour unions) that involved changes in social relations (Coleman, 1970, p. 163). Chambon et al. (1982) associate SI with social crisis contexts and distinguish between SI as a collective initiative addressed to a particular aim and SI as a form to take sides in a process of social change. They also define different aspects of SI. The first concerns SI as a locally bottom-up social initiative aimed to develop a non-standard solution to a social need. Second, SI involves social and power relations changes, whereby social participation is a key question. Third, SI is based on interdisciplinary practices and solidarity relations. Finally, SI implies a learning and empowerment process that leads to autonomy. These aspects are crucial to the economic livelihood, spread and continuity of SI and shape relations with state institutions (Chambon et al., 1982, pp. 11–34).

Previous works (Drewe, Klein, & Hulsbergen, 2008; Moulaert, 2010; Moulaert & Sekia, 2003; Andrew and Klein, 2010; Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, & Hamdouch, 2013) identify different approaches on SI within contemporary social sciences. We summarize these in order to expose the stance we take regarding SI.

There is a strand of literature on SI inspired by the Schumpeterian notion of entrepreneur. Within this scope we find management and business administration studies which define SI as a means for business strategy, competitiveness and organizational efficiency, that involves changes in human and institutional dimensions or in social capital in the profit and the non-profit sector. The work of the “Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society” fits with this line as well as the “Business and Society Programme” of Aspen Institute which combines management with social and environmental concerns. Also the line developed by the Young Foundation that proclaims SI as a way to meet socially recognised needs (Mulgan, Halkett, & Sanders, 2007) is in tune with this entrepreneurial vision. Even though this contribution recognises social aspects of SI, because of its theoretic roots, an economic, individualistic and stripped of context perspective on SI prevails (Defourny & Nyssens, 2013, p. 42). Unlike the management approach, arts and creativity studies represent a broader perspective since they are not restricted to organizational and economics concerns (Moulaert, 2009). In this field, Mumford has defined SI as the genesis and implementation of new ideas about social interaction and social organization working towards meeting common goals (Mumford, 2002) by examining macro and micro innovations of social, economic and political order.

We can say that in the last 20 years the vision for SI has taken an institutionalist turn. Mainly researchers concerned with social economy (Andrew & Klein, 2010; Fontan et al., 2013; Klein, Fontan, Harrison, & Lévesque, 2013; Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005) and urban planning (Moulaert et al., 2013) are involved due to this shift to a socio-historic, cultural and territorial embedded approach on SI. This approach has emerged as a multidisciplinary analytical tool that seeks to balance the influence of the economics (Andrew & Klein, 2010, p. 15) and the mainstream discourse of the New Urban Policy agenda in the '90s in the SI thinking (Moulaert, Martinelli, González, & Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 195). Influenced by the economic institutionalism of Karl Polanyi (Polanyi, [1944], 1957), the legacy of the regulation theory (Aglietta, [1976], 1979; Boyer, 1990; Jessop, 1990), and the seminal work of Chambon et al. (1982), this optic has developed a path-dependency and a non-market centered view of SI (Fontan et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2013). These lines led by Juan-Luis Klein (CRISES- Québec) and Frank Moulaert in SINGOCOM (2003–2005) and Katarsis (2006–2009) share research foci, such as social economy, social exclusion, local and community based development, and the role of civil society organizations in the governance and the provision of welfare services.

Within this approach, this paper understands SI as a socio-historic and territorial embedded process that involves three interlinked dimensions. Firstly, the content-production, which refers to the satisfaction of human needs that are not satisfied either by the market or the state. Secondly, the process dimension, which involves changes in social relations, especially with regards to governance, enabling the satisfaction of human needs but also increasing the level of social participation. Lastly, the empowerment dimension, which involves increasing socio-political potential and access to the resources needed to enhance rights to satisfy human needs and to facilitate participation (Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & González, 2005, p. 1976). SI refers to changes in agendas, agency, social relations, and institutions mobilised from below that lead to social inclusion in various spheres of society and at different spatial scales (Moulaert et al., 2005, 2013, p. 1978, p. 2).

¹ Since the '90s, the main features of the cultural democracy paradigm (Zimmer & Toepler, 1996) (i.e. social participation and community management) have been displaced from City Council's concerns. The rise of outsourcing and the reconfiguration of decentralized socio-cultural facilities (in Barcelona Civic Centers) under the influence of creative policies, illustrates this shift (Sánchez Belando, 2015).

² For a historical evolution of SI see: Fontan et al., 2013; Godin, 2012; Moulaert et al., 2013.

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