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The role of culture in urban contexts

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The role of culture in urban contexts*

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ABSTRACT

This short paper aims to analyse from an interdisciplinary perspective the role of culture, cultural institutions and cultural actors in the urban scenarios. The main goal is to underline that this type of analysis have to take in consideration several academic disciplines: in particular, the analysis will be done from the point of view of public art, urban sociology, urban geography and economics of culture in order to provide a comprehensive tretment of the subject.

KEYWORDS

Culture; Urban context; Urban geography; Interdisciplinary; Economics of culture;

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The role of culture in urban contexts

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1 THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN URBAN CONTEXTS

The role of culture in urban areas and of cultural institutions in the restoration of cities is analyzed in a growing number of books and scientific papers.

Examples like the city of Bilbao in Spain, which has enjoyed real success, have helped researchers to study this issue and to create several different analytical models based on specific scientific methods.

The paper presented here aims to examine the contribution that the following disciplines have provided, and still provide, to the study of local development in general and of the urban environment in particular. Specifically, it briefly investigates the contribution of some disciplines in urban contexts: public art, a tangible manifestation of the cultural expressions of a city implying a certain orientation of cultural policies at the urban level; urban sociology, critical in order to better understand the ways in which human interactions and relations, both individual and collective, shape the urban environment; geography, from which the analysis cannot be separated, to rigorously define the space-time context of reference; and local economy, fundamental and necessary to ensure that culture also determines the economic growth of the city.

These elements, taken and explored together, lay the foundations for interpreting culture as a possible local development strategy for urban contexts.

This short paper will take several academic disciplines into consideration, while also creating connections among them. How many different disciplines look at the same goals? What is their level of heterogeneity? Which are the convergence problems which may arise? Which kind of approaches? These are some of the questions which this research tries to answer.

2 PUBLIC ART IN URBAN CONTEXTS

In modern urban contexts, concepts like art and culture are very important for the development of contemporary cities. Indeed, they represent the core of the policies of the city and for the city itself (Salone, Crivello, 2013).

According to Atkinson and Easthope (2009), implementing policies aimed at attracting tourists and investments is essential, as is the goal of organizing or hosting cultural events. These factors can be used to reconvert and redesign cities or parts of them; this method is called the "Cultural Economy of Cities".

The intellectual and creative components, with their strong symbolic meaning, make culture a strategic resource, and its positive impact can also be seen in other sectors like tourism and the environment (Salone, Crivello, 2013).

If we accept that art is part of culture, it will also be true that the relationship between economy and art is connected to the increasing dematerialization of the economic system. Moreover, Scott (2000) defined culture as a typical urban product: urban cultural policies have begun to be credited with very diverse goals and benefits, encompassing immaterial and material effects on the external image of the city, its functional and physical fabric (Cuesta, 2004), and its econom-

ic base, including social cohesion and intercultural integration (Bridge, 2006; Stern and Seifert, 2007).

Hall (1996, 1998) was the first author who argued that human interactions and synergy are essential foundations for the creativity of individual places and, around the same time, sociologists and geographers began to study the cultural economy of cities (Lash and Urry, 1994; Molotch, 1996; Pratt, 1997; Scott, 1996).

Another Urban Policies method based on art and culture is urban regeneration, concerned in particular with how to reuse the decaying areas of cities (see Judd and Parkinson, 1990) through the creation of public spaces dedicated to hosting cultural events, like concerts and exhibitions, or museums. Cultural industries are often considered key factors in the transformation of the physical spaces of cities and they involve local stakeholders and communities in the processes of the local economy and in cultural development. Yet, it is a mistake to consider urban regeneration only from a physical point of view, because the modernization of cities and of their local contexts also has intangible components: fostering a sense of belonging through icons (Sklair, 2006) and the evolution of the idea that creating urban space by means of practices is more important than creating new spaces (Crawford, 1999).

An increasing number of cities have already drafted plans based on development processes for the valorization of their cultural heritage, in the context of a post-industrial economy (Mommas, 2004). In this regard, it is true that the urban context is similar to a box of cultural initiatives (Gibson, Stevenson, 2004), but it is also true that art and culture can create new ideas. This literature sees culture as a tool, which can be used by individuals to evaluate possible choices (see Landry, 2000; Scott, 2000; Sen, 2000; Florida, 2002).

It is important to underline that for economists the role of art and culture is to promote urban and local economic development (Segre, 2013) but, in a broader sense, culture is a key point for territorial empowerment processes and for the strengthening of urban identity (Salone, Rota, 2013).

3 URBAN SOCIOLOGY IN THE ERA OF COGNITIVE-CULTURAL ECONOMY

According to the traditional theory of urban sociology (see Tonnies, 1957), in cities and in the cultural clusters of cities, there is a sort of “atmosphere” driving people to be more creative. Human creativity is neither exhaustible nor fully capitalized (Santagata, 2007).

In the era of cognitive-cultural economy, the knowledge of the economy and of the growing globalization represents a unique factor: every urban area, or learning-region, has its own traditions and skills, which produce a particular local product (Santagata, 2002). And it is for this reason that the economic value of a particular local product is the sum of a tangible and an intangible component. This intangible factor includes both the “price” of the local manufacture and its overall benefits.

Around the world there are many examples of these products, such as fashion from Paris, the London theatres, music in Nashville, or the pottery made in Caltagirone, Italy.

The ordinary life of each community is made of individuals with their own skills. This daily routine is part of the production system of a specific area and/or a specific urban context.

The main cause, which determines today's social and urban change, is the rise of *individual consumption*. In fact, the modern consumer society tends to diversify among various products, and choices are based on quality rather than on price. This is why one kind of computer, one kind of chair, or one kind of resort are rarely the perfect substitute for any other computer, chair, or resort, respectively (Scott, 2010).

From this point of view, the urban social environment provides a milieu, which facilitates coexistence and socialization among workers: this is essential in order to maintain the characteristic advantages offered by the local production system (Scott, 2010). Drawing inspiration from the ideas of Storper and Manville (2006), we can say that the urban environment offers a specific subset of profits and costs, but there is also a relationship between individual expressions of creativity and the social *milieu*. This concept is at the basis of the inductive reasoning according

to which urbanization and the social contexts adapt in various ways to the habitus of creative acts in social practices, as written by Bourdieu (1980); this is the reason why the idea that creativity is included in concrete social contexts is acknowledged (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seitz, 2003).

Another key fact is that cities tend to build up where the economic life follows the rules of organic solidarity rather than mechanical solidarity (Durkheim, 1893). However, the trend of creativity within a specific urban context is not a linear process: peaks of creativity in a certain place, or lack thereof, are possible, and it is equally possible to have enduring lack of creativity in all cultural and creative sectors (Santagata, 2007).

Urban sociology cannot be discussed without introducing the concept of “amenities”, since “amenities drive urban growth”, as Clark stated in 2002. It is important to underline that the term “amenities” includes urban attractions such as parks, museums, art galleries, orchestras and signature buildings. The post-industrial economic context is where cognitive and cultural economy develops and where the informational city includes the city of leisure (Clark, 2002): these elements together act like “push and pull factors” for the transformation of these cities into “entertainment machines”.

Hence, we might wonder: is creativity an actual element of local production or it is just a personal one? In conclusion, we can mention this famous and provocative comment: “*we do not admire the Venus de Milo because it is beautiful; it is beautiful [i.e. an expression of creativity] because we admire it*” (Bastide, 1977; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

4 URBAN GEOGRAPHY OF CREATIVITY AND CULTURE

Research about innovation, development, culture, creativity and their trade-offs represents an important aspect of this literature about geography. Geography is considered a driving force in putting together industrial clusters, learning processes and economic growth (Antonelli, 2003). It is also an important element for economic development and growth.

The current international economic system is based on the relevance of the knowledge factors of immaterial elements linked to culture, taste and creativity: these components are the result of slow learning, interaction, intra-urban, local network processes and long-term investments in research and education (Wilkinson, 1999). High-technology, neo-artisanal manufacturing and cultural products industries are the elements of what is called the “new economy” (Scott, 2010): distinction is a consequence of the growth of consumer niche markets, which is at the basis of the concept illustrating how final outputs challenge each other in relation to their qualitative attributes and not only their economic costs.

Cities nowadays are places where there is a store of capital and labor; yet, many others factors can influence the urban context, like society, culture, environment and politics. The whole localized production and its labor market represent proto-urban forms around which other phenomena crystallize in various concrete ways, as Scott wrote in 2008. The key points in this literature are networks and social capitals (Cooke, 2002; Noteboom, 1999): the idea of network is linked to the social and spatial model.

Urban economy includes several elements like labor market (skilled and unskilled), social networks among citizens and companies, and institutions for the collective order (Scott, 2009).

Large cities and metropolises are often makers of creativity, as they produce many technological, social and economic innovations (Hall, 1998). As a result, the political and economic importance of territories and built-up urban areas is growing. So, these dynamics ought to be analyzed as if they were an effect (the “territory-effect”, Painter, 2010), not only as a stock of capital but also as the output/outcome of socio-technical activities. Ultimately, what happens is that different groups and activities tend to come together in different places (Gordon, McCann, 1999).

In 1979, Gouldner used the expression “new class” to identify an upper *employment stratum* in the urban context and, more specifically, in the field of labor. This “new class” is at the basis

of the new economy, relying on knowledge and intangible factors in the production system and especially in the “creative city”.

The “creative city” is not defined in the same way by all the authors, but it is recognized as a vision (Baycan, 2011) based on several factors, such as: qualified and flexible labor, high levels of environmental quality, and a dynamic cultural sector made up of artists, bohemians and gays (Florida, 2002). Said specific vision, pointing to a certain level of an urban society, stems from Gouldner’s concept of new class, and this has been called the “creative class” (Florida, 2002).

The two concepts of “creative city” and “creative class” are connected to each other and they need to be examined within a global perspective. The idea of integrating arts and culture into urban planning was first introduced by Yencen in 1988. Density, human interaction and cooperation are essential elements for the creativity of individual places (Hall, 1998) and distinctive features within the urban context of a modern city.

The relation between urban context, demography, creative class, creative city and anthropology generated an innovative concept for the whole economic system, called cognitive-cultural capitalism (Scott, 2012), where culture, creativity, urban planning, sociology and urban economy work together to achieve high levels of profit and explicit and tacit knowledge.

Many creative and innovative workers have extensive work experience in a large number of companies and cultural industries: the point is that the economy of the cities is a flowing system, connected to firm networks and flexible labor markets. Conflict and interchange are key factors to generate new ideas and innovations.

There is some disagreement between creative workers employed in different sectors and urban-cultural environment workers (Scott, 2009): they are both important factors for the sustainability of creative cities. Hence, it is necessary to draft programs for the promotion of the local economic development and of culture. Cities that have creative ambitions need to invest in high-quality urban environment and in local social life.

These are essential policy recommendations, since the presence of creative people alone is not enough. In order to put knowledge and learning processes into practice, creativity has to involve urban stakeholders within a long-term system for sustainability. Local cultural development initiatives do not work everywhere: there is no general formula, but there must be a close relationship with specific local resources (Salone, 2016).

Creativity cannot be simply moved into the city, but it must be developed over time, as stated by Scott in 2009.

However, growing worldwide attention is being paid to urban studies, to the importance of cities and to how urban contexts reflect them (in terms of development) in the urban environment. Urban regeneration, with its high and pop culture, is supported by appropriate urban policies and by initiatives focusing on place marketing.

5 CULTURAL AND CREATIVE ECONOMICS IN URBAN CONTEXTS

Nowadays, economy and culture coincide in many relevant ways; in fact, economic outputs and products are influenced by aesthetic and semiotic meaning, while culture is increasingly produced by profit-seeking companies (Scott, 2014): if investments are used to improve access to art and culture, then some benefits will be gained in the city (Scott, 1997; Vuyk, 2010).

To reduce the gap between economy and culture, culture should claim its features in a broader framework called “cultural capital”: cultural value may affect economic value if people are willing to pay more for things they value more highly in cultural terms (Throsby, 2001).

We are currently living in the cognitive-cultural economy era, which means that goods and services have an important role in transmission, without using aesthetic and semiotic signals (Scott, 2010): these products possess few distinctive and authentic qualitative features for a specific local context and they can be imitated but never replicated (Molotch, 1996).

According to the traditional economic theory, regular goods have diminishing marginal utility, while cultural and creative goods are those that influence demand and consumption: in

Törnqvist's opinion, it is the stock of knowledge and competencies in a particular place that promotes and produces new ideas and, therefore, new peculiar cultural goods at the local level.

The production of cultures, subcultures and trends is a characteristic of the urban environmental; global and creative cities nowadays influence taste, behavior and demand models on an international scale (Sassen, 2007): the trade-off between cultural routines and urban contexts is strong and path-dependent.

In the modern economy, culture is a sort of new driver of urban development (Salone, 2016), often seen as a part of the creativity process. This is why it would be interesting to analyze the trade-off between culture and creativity in modern cities, in both theoretical and policy terms. Cultural economy is considered a driving factor for the economic, social and environmental growth of many modern cities. Nonetheless, it is relevant to underline that not only do cultural and creative industries drive growth through the creation of value, but they are also key elements for the innovation systems of the entire economy (Oakley, 2009).

Cultural economy has a transactions-intensive nature and this is why the productive activities of the urban landscape tend to collect local clusters. Interactions among creative rules, territory and urban economy are very important in activities requiring a high level of knowledge: a stimulating urban environment is essential for the success of these activities, usually known as cultural or creative industries (Maskell, Malmberg, 2002).

There is a strong relationship among many aspects of the urban economy, since labor market, leisure and social life are connected to each other in cities where cultural economies and cultural policies are developed (Scott, 2010).

The dynamism and flexibility of the local labor markets in these contexts are built on infrastructures like schools and universities. Universities, in fact, are the local institutions which are becoming a key element for social innovation, to attract investments and highly skilled workers-researchers. The "entrepreneurial university" model, the opposite of Humboldt's vision, has turned universities into a main factor to promote the urban consumption of culture (Scamuzzi, 2016).

Talking about industrial performance, historical links, relationships and path dependencies are all factors which help to achieve success. Cultural and creative industries are naturally idiosyncratic, as explained by Bharucha in 2010, and creative industries have a dynamic economic value, since they contribute to the processes of urban economic growth and local development (Potts, Cunningham, 2008).

For all the above reasons, urban stakeholders are involved in the development of the cities' culture and creativity as key elements for the growth and renewal of the image of a city at the national and international level.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This brief analysis of what kind of role culture has in urban areas has brought some financial features of culture to the fore. In particular, some specific ideas characterize this analysis:

- as shown above, it is not possible to investigate cultural and urban phenomena without reflecting in a multidisciplinary way and, at the same time, linking disciplines to one another: a fundamental role is played by art and sociology, as well as urban geography and cultural economics;
- while a multidisciplinary approach can indeed be used, it is not possible to identify a single path in urban policy actions with a cultural base: any context is, in fact, unique and the likelihood of success of the actions undertaken depends on government models, governance and, perhaps above all, the willingness of all stakeholders involved to succeed;
- the role which culture plays in urban areas should be turned into a driver of sustainable local development. This local development will potentially also have geographical and institutional repercussions on levels above the local one.

It is, therefore, crucial to understand and remember that a thorough analysis of the role of culture in urban contexts must take on as multi-disciplinary an approach as possible, considering the four disciplines cited as the main drivers of the development of urban culture. Importantly, it must also be noted that the analysis presented here is intended as a theoretical set of guidelines: the specific space-time context should shape individual investigations, which ought to attach more or less weight to a discipline rather than another.

Finally, we must also bear in mind that culture, understood as a key element stretching across the traditional areas of interest of local and/or municipal governments, is characterized by a high degree of subjectivity. Therefore, we can define culture as an unconventional economic good which finds its greatest success in local urban areas.

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