Introduction to the special issue: between practices and policies. Rethinking urban regeneration in Southern European cities after the crisis

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In recent years, the policies of urban regeneration have been influenced by the economic crisis that emerged at the end of the first decade of the second millennium, and this has brought about a repositioning of city governance under the auspices of an austerity paradigm. In this context, spaces considered to be in a state of deprivation in terms of economic, social, cultural, or infrastructural resources have become the object of a series of measures aimed at improving the quality of life of their inhabitants, by facilitating, or organizing, local assets and civic participation.

This Special Issue explores new approaches to urban regeneration, and potentially give new meanings to the term itself, as it appears in the context of austerity urbanism. Spatial and functional transformations are increasingly being driven by interventions with a minimum physical effect, but

permeated with a major – supposed – symbolic scope. The proposed approach consists of focussing on urban policies that shape the so-called 'soft' intervention practices of urban regeneration and their ambiguities. In fact, even when urban regeneration consists of interventions limited in size or less tangible than 'hard' requalification of the built form of a city, it can have no less impact and be equally disruptive. A second element of ambiguity is connected to the fact that urban policies increasingly bring into question new processes of place-making, which turn to, or rely on, the activism and participation of local communities. Despite this, they often produce contradictory outputs: this is the case with public policies that, in regulating spontaneous initiatives, actually limit freedom and scope, and in re-qualifying abandoned spaces, stimulate new processes of de-territorialization or dispossession.

The need to rethink urban regeneration has taken place over the last decade (cf. Leary, McCarthy, 2013). On one side, new urban regeneration practices, policies or even meanings associated with the term are emerging. On the other, some basic assumptions continue to define the terms which entails a degree of continuity (Leary, 2013). For instance, policy-makers are increasingly seeking to introduce new models and actions to produce regeneration, but at the same time they try to pursue stability and continuity in their action, referring to success stories and 'best practices'. In parallel, a wide array of practices is performed by grassroots initiatives within this tension. The same can be said of the action of those who research urban regeneration, engaged in the attempt to understand and analyse change but also bringing it back to an epistemological and methodological synthesis. In this impasse, some scholars have suggested we understand urban regeneration with reference to the idea of 'tactical urbanism', a concept which has opened up a variety of positions concerning its transformative potential, ranging from those of its supporters (Oswalt, Overmeyer, and Misselwitz, 2013) to its critics who consider it just another expression of the neoliberal character of contemporary urban policies (Tonkiss, 2013; Mayer, 2013; Mould 2014). The point is that, in front of a concept that appears increasingly contested, considering the multiplicity of meanings that give shape to the heterogeneous geographies of urban regeneration, we cannot avoid but link it to the wider processes of postmodernisation, globalisation and neoliberalisation (Rossi, Vanolo, 2013).

We believe that considering urban regeneration as a set of practices can open the way for trying to account for this multiplicity and contingency as intrinsic properties of the urban (Amin and Thrift, 2001; Governa, 2017). This seems to us the best approach if we are to lift the veil and reveal the way(s) in which this term is often used in relation to some places in order to demarcate them as spaces in decline, problematic or otherwise, in which there is need for intervention and renewal, responding

to strategies inscribed in the competitive logics of urban attraction derived from the framework of neoliberalism.

Furthermore, this Special Issue explores the complex relationship these practices create between public policies and citizens, and investigates the ways in which this relationship is influenced by contextual aspects. In so doing, the aim of this Special Issue is to offer a Southern European perspective of the nexus between the withdrawal of the State from urban governance, and of the new forms of cooperation arising from civil society, thus presenting original research material, and innovative perspectives, for current debates in urban studies. By focusing on Southern European case studies the special issue aims, first of all, to shed light on practices and experiences which are often neglected in debates conducted in the English language. Moreover, based on the proposed case studies – focused on Greek, Spanish and Italian cities – the challenge of this special issue is to explore the common features and specificities of a Southern European perspective in urban regeneration practices in times of austerity, attempting to fill a gap in an otherwise overtly general definition. This handful of papers seem to us so different in methodological style and contents to allow for a thorough critical reading of the dominant paradigm in the analysis of urban regeneration experiences, while not aiming at offering an exhaustive survey of ideal types of spatial practices experienced in the austerity urbanism framework.

The paper presented by Balampanidis, Maloutas, Papatzani and Pettas outlines the peculiar processes of spatial transformation induced in a stressed urban economy by the spread of digital platforms for short-term rent real estate markets: the example of Athens is highly illuminating of an increasing entrepreneurialization of weak actors who find in these devices new sources of revenues to face the economic difficulties engendered by the austerity measures (loss of job, tax increase etc.). This process is accompanied by – and itself instigates – further socio-spatial inequalities, conveyed by ambiguous forms of urban regeneration.

A larger group of contributions focuses on three Italian cities that have been facing long-term austerity in public expenditures with strategies that, in several distinct ways, focus on the re-handling of (parts of) the urban imagery regarding 'margins'. In Coletti and Rabbiosi's paper, an original initiative of bottom-up urban branding in Rome is presented and thoroughly investigated. The analysis focuses on some popular neighbourhoods, where a civic network of activists has engaged a struggle to create an eco-museum on an area targeted by real estate stakeholders. The local movement's action eventually achieved its objectives, guaranteeing a public cultural use of the area, but many controversial aspects deserve to be questioned, as the paper does. Naples is at the core of Mudan Marelli's paper, which contains an in-depth ethnographic insight into the ways a stigmatized

community tried to take advantage of its stigmatisation, seeking to itself as the ideal target for external funding aiming at revitalizing local conditions for collective life. The case chosen is the one of Scampia, a well-known marginal district in Naples whose external image is dominated by negative aspects underscoring the deteriorated urban fabric and economic, social and spatial control exerted by organized crime, even though these aspects represent just a 'metonymy' of the complex social context. The Italian series is completed by Bonini Baraldi, Governa and Salone's work, conducted during various temporal phases and combining heterogeneous qualitative methods. The authors take into consideration the (post-) industrial periphery of Turin (North Western Italy) and its variegated spatial representations, described according to the different sensitivities of the various social groups living and working in stigmatized quarters. The outcomes of the fieldworks are compared with the urban regeneration policies that have targeted the areas since the end of the 1990s and reiterated the idea that these neighbourhoods are dominated by exclusion, poverty and segregation, disregarding the heterogeneity and multiplicity that can engender more effective public action.

Lastly, two cases of bottom-up regeneration experiences are presented in the paper of Pradel Miquel. On the one hand, the author reconstructs the rise of the austerity political regime in Spain and the trajectory of Barcelona's urban policies over the last decades. On the other, the paper describes Barcelona as a city where the activists' mobilization on urban rights has been encouraged by the anti-austerity approach followed by the local administration. Differently from other examples depicted in this issue, in the cases of Barceloneta and 22@district the collaboration between the local government of the city and social movements seems to have produced more consistent action, able to re-orientate the previous development plans towards more socially oriented and local welfare goals.

As our aim was to focus on urban regeneration through practices, and practices are by nature diverse and 'living entities', what we can learn of urban regeneration after the crisis in a South European perspective should emerge more from this grounded dimension than from the locational dimension intended in an abstract way. From this point of view, three main elements seem to emerge: the role of marginal areas as protagonists of urban regeneration, the role of citizens in 'shaping the city' and the role of urban imageries.

In the last two decades, some marginal areas have shifted to the centre of a debate on public economy to become either exploited or totally abandoned as urban government was becoming increasingly managerialised (Harvey, 1989; Le Galès, 1995; Schönig and Schipper, 2016).Those where private actors in partnership with public actors could see a return on investment emerged into the spotlight, while others have been confined to the shadows. The first kind of neighbourhoods is well represented in the story of 22@ in Barcelona, while an effective example of the second is the case of Scampia

(Naples). From this point of view, we can locate 'in between' the story of Casilino and Municipio V in Rome, Barriera di Milano in Turin or the Northern neighbourhoods of Athens. Despite the differences, all the authors stress that the cases we are looking at are much more diverse in their social composition as well as in their degree of peripherality (social, economic, cultural, and geometric) than how marginal areas are generally portrayed both in public discourse and public policies. In so doing, the papers of this collection highlight the diverse socio-spatial mix characterising what in short is called a periphery; a diversity that is reflected in the patterns that urban regeneration can take there.

This socio-spatial diversity is particularly relevant insofar as, while not exhausting itself in marginal areas, it connects with the role of citizens in making a place; a crucial element for rethinking urban regeneration as it emerges from this Special Issue. Citizens contribute to place-making through a kind of conscious tactical action through which they are explicitly addressing urban regeneration, showing awareness of the kind of impact they want to obtain, as in the case of Casilino, Rome. The social, cultural and economic diversity of the neighbourhood emerges as a crucial ingredient of this consciousness, which is based to some extent on the co-existence of very diverse needs and response capacities in the same district. Citizens may also be far less conscious of their urban regeneration footprint, as in the case of Scampia, Naples. As shown, in this context schools and civic networks are engaged in trying to gain a more general social benefit for themselves, for instance by obtaining more funding for the educational system. But in so doing they are simultaneously producing a serendipitous impact on urban regeneration. Even less conscious is the case of Athens, where Airbnb reactivated a wide range of professionals whose activity was hit hard by the crisis. By pursuing self-interested actions, home owners have stimulated a new commodity chain that produces outcomes, that while apparently operating at a small-scale in a 'soft manner', created disruptive forms of urban regeneration in numerous neighbourhoods of the Greek capital.

A third crucial element transversal to the papers in this Special Issue, concerns the role of urban imaginaries. Again, be it conscious or unconscious, the 're-appropriation' of urban imaginaries by citizens emerges as a very significant element of how urban regeneration should be re-thought. In a way, citizens have learned the lesson from place branding, that technique for developing a certain selective narrative of a place, that resonates with a chosen target group (Johansson, 2012), and has the potential to create the impetus for change within the framework of post-industrial transformations and neoliberalisation (Rossi and Vanolo 2012): somehow citizens now know how to play with it. Moving from the limit case of the 'commodification' of their own stigma, in order to obtain public funding in Scampia, to the more politicised action in Rome or, again, to the competing co-existence of different local imageries, it seems that no form of urban regeneration can now do without

accompanying city imaginaries, and that self-narratives produced by citizens (also emerging in an embodied, performative manner) play a crucial role as both engines and outcomes of citizen-led processes of urban regeneration.

We believe that the papers in this collection offer an interesting picture of different urban regeneration practices and policies in – at least some – Southern European cities after the crisis. However, we also believe that a Southern European perspective on urban regeneration needs to be fed with more 'food for thought', and that our papers both mirror and challenge the Anglo-driven 'small world' of international academia. Moving towards a more genuinely inter-cultural, if not postcolonial, academic stance appears as hard as ever, and this is shown also in this edited collection. Possibly, another limit of this collection is to fall into a sort of 'geographic narcissism' for which cities attract much more attention among scholars than other apparently less 'icononically urban' areas. We contend that moving away from cities which are very relevant in European present and past history is important to enlarge the picture of the specificities of urban regeneration after the crisis in its element of persistence and difference across places.

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