Resisting urban neoliberalism through social innovation: the case of Italian Centri Sociali

Resistencia al neoliberalismo urbano a través de la innovación social: el caso del Centri Sociali italiano

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Abstract

Centri sociali have been a common social, political, and spatial phenomenon in Italian cities since the 1970s. Since then, they emerged as active, youth-oriented places of left-wing and radical activism often operating at the margins of the urban fabric and in conflict with local institutions. In addition to political action, Centri Sociali play a social and cultural role in cities as spaces of leisure, social aggregation, and mutual support. This paper investigates how these groups locate themselves in an increasingly neoliberal urban environment by exploring their goals, the role they play in the wider communities, the issues they wish to address, and the strategies they mobilise. After presenting an overview of the concept and history of Italian Centri Sociali, the theoretical concept of urban neoliberalism is used to set the scene in which such groups are currently active and to explain the nature of the issues and challenges they aim to tackle. Further, the actions and strategies used by Centri Sociali are analysed through the lenses of Social Innovation Theory. This paper aims to understand how social innovation is used by Centri Sociali to create alternative urban spaces outside of neoliberal and capitalistic dynamics. It does so by using secondary data retrieved through literature review and through primary data collected via semi-structured interviews with 15 representatives from various Centri Sociali around Italy.

Keywords: Centri Sociali, social innovation, urban struggles, neoliberalism, grassroots organizations. JEL: Y80, Z13

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Resumen

Centri Sociali (Centros Sociales) han sido un fenómeno social, político, y espacial común en ciudades italianas desde los años 70s. Desde sus inicios, surgieron como lugares activos con inclinación de izquierda, orientados a las y los jóvenes, a través de una propuesta de activismo radical, a menudo operando en los márgenes de la fábrica urbana y en conflicto con instituciones locales. Además de su acción política, Los Centri Sociali juegan un rol social y cultural en ciudades como espacios de ocio, agregación social, y apoyo mutuo. Este artículo investiga cómo estos grupos se localizan en un ambiente urbano crecientemente neoliberal explorando sus objetivos, el rol que juegan en la comunidad ampliada, los temas que buscan abordar, y las estrategias que movilizan para estos fines. Después de presentar una visión general del concepto y la historia de los Centri Sociali italianos, el concepto teórico de neoliberalismo urbano es utilizado para delinear el contexto en el cual estos grupos se desarrollan actualmente y para explicar la naturaleza de los temas y desafíos que enfrentan. Luego, las acciones y estrategias de los Centri Sociali son analizadas desde la propuesta teórica de la innovación social. Este artículo intenta comprehender cómo la innovación social es utilizada por los Centri Sociali para crear espacios urbanos alternativos fuera de las dinámicas capitalista-neoliberales. Todo esto basado en datos secundarios provenientes de una revisión bibliográfica sobre el fenómeno y datos primarios recolectados en 15 entrevistas semiestructuradas con representantes de varios Cenri Sociales a lo largo de Italia.

Palabras clave: Centri Sociali, innovación social, luchas urbanas, neoliberalismo, organizaciones de base.

1. Understanding Italian Centri Sociali

In order to explore the role played by *Centri Sociali* (CS) within the Italian urban fabric and their relation to the so-called neoliberal city it is fundamental to understand the multi-faceted nature of such phenomena. However, before looking at the characteristics of contemporary CS it is worth contextualising these spaces in time by considering their origins and historical development. After briefly presenting their history, the current configurations of the phenomenon are explored by identifying common features and themes shared across CS in Italy. This section includes insights derived from literature review and the analysis of primary data.

1.1. A brief historical overview of Centri Sociali

Centri Sociali have a long tradition in Europe but especially in Italy. Here, the roots of CS can be traced back to the 19th century, when mutual aid organizations (e.g. *Case del Popolo[1]*) assembled the working class, acting as centres of political and social interaction during the rising of the socialist movement (Mudu, 2004; Piazza, 2012, 2018). However, modern CS will rise only in the 1970s, as a result of social and economic turmoil linked to the historical transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation. In those years, students and workers engage in massive political action all over the country. Countless and harsh protests become a response to profound socioeconomic transformations and to the emerging inability of traditional political parties to address contemporary social needs (Ruggiero, 2000). In a way, Italian CS are one of the many movements that originated from the social, political, and cultural shocks taking place in the 70s and 80s. In this re-configuration, far-left groups created the "Self-managed Social Centres" (i.e. Centri Sociali) taking political action outside the parliament and into the cities, focusing on "the microphysics of power over institutional conflict" (Mudu, 2004, pp.191).

The fast disappearance of public space in favour of privatization and the inability of unions and traditional left-wing parties to create new contexts for social and political action push the youth

to imagine alternative places of aggregation and activism. In this scenario of conflict and unmet social and spatial needs, contemporary CS started rising in Italian cities uniting activists and supporters looking for spaces where to cultivate their own idea of a society based on a set of shared values and beliefs. In this phase, CS had a strong antagonistic character acting in clear opposition to traditional institutions and concentrating their efforts on urban marginalisation and the challenges faced by women and the working-class youth (Dines, 1999; Mudu, 2012). Since then, CS have revolutionised the Italian political scene through the creation of non-hierarchical spaces dedicated to communal social, political, and cultural life. In the 90s the phenomenon became more popular, engaging with the "no global" movement[2] (Fonio, 2004) and becoming a mass culture phenomenon, especially among the youth. In the last decades, Italian CS have lost some of their popularity, currently living a moment of crisis due to a general loss of interest in political engagement. Despite this, they can still be found in all major Italian cities and are active parts of local and national political arenas.

When talking about the history of CS one must note how, since its beginning, this political phenomenon is characterised by distinctive geographic and spatial configurations. All CS have in fact strong local identities as they focus on creating and enabling change within the communities they inhabit. More precisely, they are "geared towards gaining control of existing spaces and devising new ones" (Mudu, 2004, pp. 198). Such spatial dimension is embedded in the way CS appropriate (e.g. through squatting) public or private empty spaces to transform them and to ultimately give them back to the community. In this sense, *Centri Sociali* have always been a strongly spatial phenomenon with strong ties to local geographies, acting as agents of change in the urban fabric. But what does this transformative element look like on the field? What are *Centri Sociali* today?

1.2. Centri Sociali: spaces of politics, culture, and aggregation

Due to their close linkages with the realities in which they emerge, CS can be very different from each other. It is however possible to identify some common elements that constitute the core of these movements and spaces (Mudu, 2004). Many share in fact a set of common practices and identities that enable the creation of a general profile (Genova, 2018, 2021; Pecorelli, 2015). Under the acronym CSOA (*Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito*) or CSA (*Centro Sociale Autogestito*) these movements are known for autonomously organising and managing events of various nature ranging from protests to conferences. Decision making takes the form of timely, open meetings characterised by horizontal governance and no hierarchical structures. Traditionally, CS are funded via the selling of food and drinks during the events and all those involved in the activities participate on a voluntary base, with no contract or salary.

Similarities can also be found in the topics around which most CS mobilise their political actions (Pecorelli, 2015). Recurrent themes include antifascism, antiracism, environmental issues, education, students' and workers' rights, feminism, etc. Alongside these general issues, they focus on more local problems relevant to the city in which they operate (Dines,1999; Berzano & Gallini, 2000); these can include the contestation of local policies, supporting low-income households, providing assistance to migrants, and much more. Political action takes the form of awareness campaigns, fundraising, demonstrations, and workshops. These are often organised in collaboration with other local actors that are politically close to the ideals of the so-called far left and leading to the creation of vast networks of movements stretching throughout the peninsula.

CS are extremely politicised spaces. However, they also act as an oasis of cultural expression and leisure. CS host concerts, theatre performances, movies and documentary screenings with the intent of providing free or cheap cultural events to neighbourhoods and urban communities. Similarly, they use their "freed spaces" to organise accessible activities for local communities with special

attention to kids and elders. Community-led gyms, music and art lessons, and community-building events (e.g. neighbourhood dinners and parties) are all initiatives organised by these groups with the intention of answering the unheard needs of disenfranchised urban communities, especially in peripherical urban areas affected by social and economic problems.

For activists and sympathisers, CS are centres of social aggregation (Genova, 2021). They are visited not only as centres of political action but also as key locations of social interactions among members of a community who share a specific idea of society. In this sense, CS are to be considered not only as political elements of the urban fabric, but also as social spaces where like-minded individuals spend their free time mixing leisure and activism, and as places of contestation but also of community building. Ultimately, these movements merge social and political activities with the intent of building and sustaining alternative spaces outside of the hegemonic capitalist system where to explore different ways of living and experiencing the city (Membretti, 2007; Pecorelli, 2015; Pusey, 2010).

2. Fighting the Neoliberal City

In the previous paragraphs, I explored the social and spatial configuration of Italian *Centri Sociali* and the role they play in the communities with whom they operate, particularly in the urban fabric. CS are for the vast majority urban phenomena: "the city is their field of action, and urban public space is often intended as a battleground" (Genova, 2021). The urban reality is the chosen space where to fight dominant and hegemonic economic and sociocultural dynamics. Here is where CS fight to *reclaim the city*, in opposition to capitalist and neoliberal processes and in favour of a societal vision based on solidarity and cooperation (Chatterton, 2002;2010). In the next section, we will explore the characteristics of this battleground by looking at how neoliberalism takes form in the urban landscape.

2.1. Challenges and configuration of urban neoliberalism

In the past decades, neoliberalism has been at the very centre of contemporary debates on cities and urban development. The roots of neoliberalism can be traced back to the 1980s, right at the end of the so-called "golden age of capitalism" and of the Keynesian economic model (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Rossi & Vanolo, 2015). Accompanied by the emergence of conservative American and British governments, neoliberalism pursued economic strategies based on free-market relations spreading fast globally, with consequences on the urban scale leading to strong dynamics of privatisation, commodification, and government entrepreneurialisation (Bodnar, 2015; Smith, 1996; Rossi & Vanolo, 2015). More precisely, urban neoliberalism represents "the translation of the logic of free-market capitalism into the urban domain of socio-spatial relations" (Rossi & Vanolo, 2015, p.2) leading to complex forms of restructuring aimed at facilitating economic development. In this scenario, cities were the protagonist of a variety of phenomena among which the most common consist in welfare dismantling, the reduction of health and educational services, and a decrease in the supply of public housing. The emphasis on economic growth at the expense of social justice fostered growing social and economic disparities all around the world, putting extra pressure on low-income neighbourhoods and fragile communities. Empirical evidence shows correlation between increasing urban inequalities and neoliberal processes (Aguirre et al., 2006). By reducing access to basic needs traditionally provided by the State, neoliberalism has highly increased the number of people living in situation of socioeconomic marginalisation (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Parenti, 2009).

If on one side neoliberalism pushes for restrictive fiscal policies and reduces public spending in welfare, on the other, it wishes to attract capital into the city. It does so by incentivising infrastructure projects (e.g. megaprojects) and through urban renewal. It favours the creation of new spaces for consumption and exerts strict control on deviant behaviours that could perturb the city's ability to attract capital. Neoliberal cities play the role of engines of economic growth

leading to a new global urbanism fighting to win private capital and neglecting those social policies intended for social equilibrium and integration that characterised the post-WWII urban landscape (Parenti, 2009; Smith, 2002). Therefore, the city becomes more and more inaccessible for high numbers of citizens while catering to the needs and preferences of the upper classes. The city is transformed to accommodate capital by often excluding the local communities, as well exemplified by gentrification processes (Bryson, 2013).

In the neoliberal city, the urban fabric adapts to the demands and rules of international flows of capital, putting citizens' welfare and needs in a subordinate position (Parenti, 2009; Rossi & Vanolo, 2015; Walks, 2006). As the role of state and local governments shrunk, alternative urban movements such as CS filled the spatial (i.e. abandoned factories and buildings), social (i.e. decreasing number of public spaces and welfare programs), and cultural (e.g. the deficiency of non-commodified educational and recreation opportunities) gaps left by the changing urban landscape. From there, such movements fight their battles against a city that is being taken away from the citizens in their effort of reclaiming the urban spaces for those who live and work in it.

3. Practising Social Innovation

Social innovation (SI) is a complex, multidimensional concept, inherently complicated to define. To use the words of Moulaert et al. (2013, pp.16), SI consists in "finding acceptable progressive solutions for a whole range of problems of exclusion, deprivation, alienation, lack of wellbeing, and also to those actions that contribute positively to significant human progress and development". Through SI, individuals and communities mobilise action in order to address a specific problematic and trigger positive change and satisfy unmet social, economic, and cultural needs. Consequently, SI has no fixed form, it is instead contextual and socio-spatially embedded in local issues, opportunities, and dynamics. In a way, SI represents a community's attempt to creatively find alternative solutions to an issue or to satisfy a need through direct action (Mehmood & Parra, 2013).

The OECD defines SI as "the design and implementation of new solutions that imply conceptual, process, product, or organisational change, which ultimately aim to improve the welfare and wellbeing of individuals and communities" (OECD, nd.). Three elements (Mehmood, & Parra, 2013; Moulaert et al., 2013) are particularly central to socially innovative action:

· It has the goal of addressing the unmet needs of a group or community.

· It employs participatory and alternative forms of governance.

· It produces the empowerment of those it wishes to support.

It is no surprise that such an instrument has increasingly attracted the attention of academics and activists as a way to make sense of and address the profound changes in increasingly neoliberal societies (Joy et al., 2019; Peck, 2013). In this context, SI has become a way for communities to oppose neoliberal dynamics of commodification, individualism, privatisation, and more. As the rules of the market become central to the disadvantage of the social component, SI is mobilised to fill those voids left by the State and to create occasions for community development and cooperative action. SI is often addressed by a variety of actors ranging from policymakers to activists as an important element in facing major contemporary societal challenges ranging from poverty and exclusion to food security and climate change adaptation (European Commission, 2013). Different conceptualisations and operationalizations of the concept have resulted in a variety of diverse initiatives. Once again, urban spaces have acted as incubators for this type of experiences, leading to many and diverse socially innovative initiatives.

3.1. Urban social innovation

Urban dynamics and social innovations have often engaged with each other in cities all over the world. In the urban context, SI tends to fall into three main categories: (1) spatial planning and community development; (2) governance systems; and (3) design and co-production of services (Ardill et al., 2018). For the sake of this study, we will focus on the first of these categories.

When it comes to spatial planning, socially innovative tools are used in a variety of ways and with many goals. The literature is rich in case studies where SI is used as a way to (re)build communities and to transform and reclaim urban spaces (Angelidou & Psaltoglou, 2017; Ardill et al., 2018; Gerometta, 2005; Nyseth & Hamdouch, 2019; Thompson, 2019). Whether by addressing the challenges of deprived neighbourhoods or empowering fragile urban communities, this phenomenon has a strong spatial dimension as it pursues positive change through direct interventions on the built environment and its social uses. By doing so, SI has become a driver of urban transformation both in Global North and in the South entering *de facto* in mainstream debates and policy discussions about urban development (Ardill et al., 2018). Urban SI practices include: community and guerrilla gardening, community organisations, citizen activist groups, social inclusion movements, alternative transport and mobility systems, to name a few.

4. Discussion: Centri Sociali as sources of Social Innovation

Within increasingly neoliberal urban spaces, Italian CS act as centres of socially innovative action. As a matter of fact, these realities employ a number of strategies that match the characteristics, goals, and modalities delineated by SI Theory. They do so in their attempt to fight dominant, capitalistic, and neoliberal dynamics while also creating alternative urban spaces. The subsequent paragraphs navigate such actions connecting them to the social innovation framework. This discussion is conducted by focusing on three main elements identified of Social Innovation by Mehmood and Parra (2013): goals, governance, and empowerment.

4.1. Goals

Centri Sociali – just as any other form of SI– wish to address some of the unmet needs of the communities in which they are active. It is no coincidence that most of them are in fact located in neighbourhoods historically characterised by high levels of social unrest, full of spatial and social voids. This is the case of peripheric and marginalised

city districts, often inhabited by disenfranchised communities and characterised by low-income households. Here, CS often act as providers of services that have historically been lacking in the area and that are now disappearing due to the implementation of the neoliberal policies previously described. The local character of CS and their embeddedness in these places lead them to strongly focus on local issues and on how to practically tackle them.

This is particularly evident in the many initiatives geared toward providing assistance to fellow city-dwellers that find themselves in a position of vulnerability and are otherwise disregarded and ignored by market-oriented urban policies and dynamics. For example, activists from CS are known to help people facing forced eviction by providing alternative housing opportunities or by directly stopping them from happening[3]. Similarly, CS offer legal counsel and support to the many communities of unregulated immigrants and asylum-seekers living in Italian cities, helping them navigate bureaucracy and providing practical aid.

CS' efforts to address situations of distress and unmet needs can have many forms, some of which are directly linked to the creation and transformation of urban space. As CS react to local challenges, they in fact transform the socio-spatial features of the places in which they are active. This is particularly clear when CS are seen as physical spaces that are taken and adapted by activists to serve as sources of change. Through such dynamics, abandoned and empty spaces are re-purposed to meet the needs of those peripheric or marginal communities that are otherwise ignored by the neoliberal city. In this way, space is claimed to serve the community, providing occasions for educational activities (e.g. courses and movie clubs), sport (e.g. community-led gyms), and leisure (e.g. musical events and performances) in urban areas where such experiences are either unavailable or commodified.

In some more extreme instances, the activists might even substitute the State by taking action to ensure safety and fight degradation in the community. This includes carrying out construction work and gardening in public areas of the neighbourhood, but also monitoring

and surveillance against city gangs, violent far-right groups, and drug dealers.

4.2. Governance

The socially innovative character of Centri Sociali is not only found in their wish to act as positive agents of change. How the actors behave and how they are organised expresses the socially innovative character of their governance systems. In return, this leads to a nuanced understanding of the functioning of such realities as sources of transformative dynamics in the urban landscape. Throughout the data collection process, three main points came out in regard to governance: self-management, horizontality, and bottom-up dynamics.

CS make of self-management a core aspect of their identity to the point where the term "*autogestione*" (self-management) is always present in the name of the groups[4]. In terms of governance this means a variety of things. In the more practical sense, it means that CS fully rely on self-financing for their activities, which are run through cooperative, informal models geared towards securing the survival of the initiative rather than making profit. It also means that the space is entirely managed by the community, and that the group is responsible for making sure that daily activity and events proceed smoothly. From cleaning to budgeting, the activists are responsible for every aspect of the life in the CS. The concept of *autogestione* also carries a strong oppositional character versus the outside world, characterised by those dynamics that CS oppose to. By declaring a section of urban land as self-managed the aim is to take it back from capitalism and neoliberalism and return it to the citizens.

Horizontality represents the will of CS to create spaces that do not reproduce hierarchical dynamics of power. Horizontality emerges because they are characterised by the lack of formal roles giving specific individuals particular influence or power over the groups. Thus, no chairmen or presidents can be found, and everyone's opinion is supposed to matter the same. The operationalisation of the notion of horizontality is exemplified by the weekly assemblies.

These meetings are always open to the public and can be accessed by everyone no matter of how engaged they might be with the group and its activities. Here the activists also make decisions. They do so by voting and by interpreting the idea of horizontality in a specific way. In fact, decisions are made only if they are unanimous and not following a logic by which the majority wins.

Finally, CS are and have always been bottom-up movements (Aureli & Mundu, 2017, Montagna, 2006; Mudu, 2012). As seen in the previous pages, these places are often the result of a community's wish to transform the socio-spatial dynamics in which it lives. They also are a reaction to the impossibility to do so via more traditional ways. Ultimately, CS are triggered by small groups initiating change in the context and places they live (Srinivas & Youngblood, 2018). Although these groups do interact among each other through informal, national, and international networks, all aspects related to building and sharing knowledge is taking place locally though the constant and casual exchange of expertise and skills. These factors – along with the horizontality and self-management argued above – characterise CS as typical bottom-up social movements.

4.3. Empowerment

SI is known as a tool for producing empowerment. The data collected suggests that CS play a role in the empowerment of local communities, with special attention to vulnerable communities such as elders, the youth, immigrants, and low-income households. This is achieved by creating opportunities in otherwise deprived communities which are not attended by the decreasing services of the neoliberal city. In this scenario, afterschool activities represent educational activities for children and became a support to working parents. Similarly, art and sports activities are used to keep the youth away from deviating in criminal activities or substance abuse. Elder citizens can on the other hand find a space to meet and spend some time in company. The integration of immigrants in such realities helps fight alienation and social segregation.

The creation of spaces (e.g. community gyms and libraries) and

activities is valuable for individuals as they can benefit from free or cheap services that would not otherwise be available in the area. It also adds value to the neighbourhood, giving it new life and turning it into more of a place where one might simply live, study, or work. In this sense, the role played by CS as spaces for sociality and aggregation for the wider neighbourhood/community is also relevant in regard to empowerment. In cities where public space and places dedicated to socialisation disappear or become commodified, CS provide alternatives to visions of the city that put the people at the centre. This can lead to community building and to create a sense of belonging and ownership within the urban landscape bringing back the social into the city. The social component of CS is here crucial as it facilitates the establishment of new social dynamics geared towards improving the life in the city.

5. Final considerations

This paper wished to move beyond the more typical representations of CS as purely political actors and rather explored how these spaces position themselves in changing urban scenarios as centres of urban social innovation. Understanding this might be helpful in learning how to harvest positive practices and models for better urban management and policymaking. CS are and have been for decades central figures in Italian cities. Their ability to address the issues of the urban fabric while changing with it make of CS a rich source of insights for those interested in understanding the dynamic nature of Italian cities.

In this essay, the action of CS has been linked to the SI theoretical framework. This was done by analysing the goals and governance style of such spaces, and by exploring their ability to produce empowerment. By looking at the spatial and social configuration of these realities it shed a light on the role of these spaces in triggering socially innovative change within the urban landscape. Through the re-appropriation of space, a CS wishes to create a place of communion where individuals who share values, political beliefs, and similar perspectives can get together and enable positive change.

In the meantime, they engage with those that do not share such views through advocacy and everyday initiatives, which are not limited to only those who are directly involved with the more political side of the phenomenon. Here, political action and leisure meet in a place that has been freed from capitalist, hierarchical dynamics in favour of an alternative vision based on cooperation and leading to social innovative actions and scenarios. By demonstrating the role of CS as example of SI, this paper reflected on the value of such spaces in increasingly neoliberal cities and on their contribution in the creation of new urban communities.

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Notas

[1] Italian variants of the French and Belgian *Maisons du Peuple.*

[2] The term refers to the heterogeneous set of movements and organisations born at the end of the 20th century. Brought together by a shared belief in the need for the creation of alternative socioeconomic systems, these realities condemn the social, economic, and environmntal effects of globalisation trends (Ayres, 2004). In the Italian context, the movement reunited a large number of organisations, ranging from the political parties to feminist and eviornmental groups. In the country, the movement became tragically famous in 2001 during the G8 meeting in Genoa, where no-global protestors were subject to tortures and violent actions at the hands of the Italian police.

[3] This is achieved by blocking law enforcement access to the houses, through squatting, sit-ins, and other demonstration strategies.

[4] In both the acronyms cited in pp. 3 CSOA and CSA the A stands for *autogestione* (self-management).