

The broken promises of the cultural urban policies: creative activism in Milano, Italy

Marianna d'Ovidio (Dept. of Sociology and Social Research. - University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy)

Alberto Cossu (Dept. of Sociology – University of Milan, Italy)

Corresponding author:

Marianna d'Ovidio, marianna.dovidio@unimib.it

Introduction

This paper explores activism among cultural operators in urban social movements focusing in particular on meanings and images of creativity.

Along the decline of the manufacturing-based production as the engine of urban development, culture and creativity have become a common answer for promoting urban economic and social growth; paradoxically urban governments have implemented neoliberal cultural policies oriented to use culture as an element for re-urbanisation and to promote the city in the global arena instead of promoting bottom-up individual creativity, creating the conditions for a more democratic and open culture, or supporting social innovation linked to culture.

Notwithstanding the harsh criticism emerged within the scientific world, these policies have been largely put in practice in most of the European and US cities. After ten years of such political turn towards culture, its promises are mostly broken: creative and cultural operators often do not recognise themselves in the policies proposed in their name, alternative and avant-garde culture is still emarginated, the production and promotion of culture is not more open than before and a large segment of creative labour is suffering a precarious and insecure situation.

1. Cultural policies and the neo-liberal city

Although the cultural politics have always been a key issue in the urban politics, from the 2000s the relevance in the public discourse increased dramatically, and the relevance in the public discourse had significantly increased in recent years.

During the 1990s and massively in the 2000s, within urban cultural policies, culture became a tool to implement innovative urban regeneration strategies. Culture was brought into the political arena in order to foster regeneration of depressed areas and city development programmes. Local authorities would use to their advantage the opportunities offered by vast and abandoned industrial sites located in cities, as they were seen as ideal venues for residential, commercial and cultural developments – also thanks to some new kinds of public-private partnerships that were taking shape. Such new districts promptly became very useful instruments to encourage international competition amongst cities. International tourism, the European Capital of Culture programme, and foreign investments, are all fine examples of the sort of competition that started in those years. Culture has increasingly been considered by policy makers as a cure-all remedy for any weak segment of city or community life. Urban regeneration strategies made ample use of culture and new city districts have been developed around contemporary culture 'temples', such as theatres, exhibition centres and museums (Vicari Haddock, 2004). Many US and European development programmes are centred on strategies supporting cultural cluster, creative neighbourhoods or districts, assuming the co-location or concentration of such productive activities or institutions benefits urban economy and society, inducing per se regeneration and revitalization effects. Increasingly, within the realm of urban policies, the term culture has been overlapped or accompanied with creativity, innovation and knowledge, to address to the immaterial and idea-based sphere. So policies for culture, creativity and innovation have been largely proposed and implemented, mainly thanks to the idea that these elements are positive per se, without questioning means and details of such policies.

Within this frame, culture became “a must” of the urban politics (Rossi & Vanolo, 2011) and it's not surprising that the ideology claimed by Florida had gained a large success, both in the US and in European urban policies. Florida's theory with its capacity of not-defining clearly any of the key concepts and yet of

proposing a “good-for-all” recipe has been welcomed by the urban governments as the response to the crisis of the beginning of the millennium. Put it extremely simply, the theory exhorts to implement a set of measures of beautification and amelioration of the urban quality of life as a tool for the international competition of city. Who could disagree with having a more beautiful city and yet a more competitive one? Moreover the creative class theory is coherent with the vision of the role of western cities in the global economy that was highly growth-centred and suggested to lever culture-led urban development processes (Ponzini & Rossi, 2010) and fits perfectly with the entrepreneurial approach of contemporary urban politics. Within the academic world Florida’s theories as well as all the class of theories assuming that the urban growth is driven by movements of people in search of consumer or lifestyle preferences (Florida, Glaeser, Clark above all) are strongly criticised: among all the critics¹, Storper and Scott (2009) claim that “a more effective line of explanation must relate urban growth directly to the economic geography of production and must explicitly deal with the complex recursive interactions between the location of firms and the movements of labour”. Using many empirical evidences and a linear and structured dialectic, they criticised such theories by both emphasising their conceptual weakness, and showing that job and production create prosperity. Amenities regard for sure an important aspect in the people life, but work and wages are more important. Therefore a series of policy recommendations derives and in particular they reject *boilerplate approaches* to the urban growth: each situation should be considered as unique, in respect with its historical, social, cultural and institutional frame.

1.1 Urban marketing

Among policies devoted to promote an urban image functional to the increasing international competition, city marketing aims at building a vision and imagery of the city in order to make it appealing for the global marketing, and for the attractiveness of the city.

Such kind of strategies have recently gained a large success in particular because of two overlapping themes: first the increasing importance of the marketing functions; secondly the increasing importance of immaterial and cultural elements. Here Florida theory of creative class blends with the rhetoric of “urban consuming”.

The image of city, as it is considered within this framework has not only to do with the visual elements of the place, while it concerns the whole sphere of meaning and idea of the city, from the symbols of the built environment (buildings, monuments, streets and squares), to the immaterial and cultural components of the urban social life (styles, food culture, habits, institutions), but also discourses and stereotypes about the city (Vanolo, 2008). In order to construct the “right” image of the city, city brand builders select ‘core values’ they wish to see associated with the city’s identity, articulate a vision for the future of the city and choose a logo to symbolise that identity. The decisions taken in the course of this process create a specific frame within which some urban policies achieve legitimacy while others become less relevant because lacking justification within the chosen frame (Vicari Haddock, 2010).

This can be address as the ideology of the image when policy makers tend to think (and the theories of Florida , for example, reproduce it perfectly) that a “good” image of the city is enough to attract positive elements for the economy. Thus, many of the policies that intend to build a marketable image of the city are based on a selective storytelling which seeks to emphasize certain aspects of the city by rejecting others

Consistent with the emerging of the urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989), city branding reaches its pick during the '90 and the beginning of 2000 with a strong use of “culture”, “creativity” and “art” as strong and common rhetorics: they are increasingly used instrumentally in order to build a city image able to present the city as appealing and “unique”. Cities tend to use the same language and same strategies in order to build a new image, with the paradoxical result of homogenising both cities and their branding: artistic and

¹ See Ponzini and Rossi for a complete and extensive review of the critics to Florida

creative neighbourhoods have been created, magnificent museums and down-towns were designs by “archistars” (Ponzini & Nastasi, 2011), waterfronts were redesigned and so on. In a global market where all cities want to be within the top-ten ones, all cities narrate their characteristics as coherent with the most accepted standards to such market, becoming more and more one the mirror of the other.

Therefore, every single cultural form that does not pertain to the promotional image of the city is generally ignored if not fight. Cultural policies tend to finance, sponsor and support cultural programmes able to attract a large public, with events and popular exhibition. In such a city, there is very few space for avant-garde, research or even antagonistic art scene!

The consequence of such rhetoric of the creative city, both interestingly and paradoxically, is the progressive homogenisation of narrative regimes of cities and the rejection of all the cultural forms that are not fitting the institutionalised image. The most visible result is the progressive sterilisation of all creative forms that are based on heterogeneity and diversity².

2. Reaction to the creative city

The relation between city growth and art itself has been called into question by many authors, in particular Zukin emphasised the exploitation of the art scene by economic forces in the neo-liberal city(1993, 1995).

Analysing the contemporary transformation of cities through the increasingly rise of immaterial economy, new patterns of consumption and gentrification, Zukin offered conceptual tools in order to look at the relation between urban transformation and culture. In her famous book, *Loft Living*, she showed the instrumental appropriation and exploitation of a cultural scene by real estate developers (1989), while in *Landscape of power*, on the commodification and ‘functionalisation’ of art, she emphasised the new role of culture in the urban landscape (1991). Arts, and culture in general, have been systematically used in order to revamp the urban environment and to promote neighbourhood development into new marketable places. Nevertheless, the promotion of urban growth through the use of culture is achieved with high social costs: conflicts among populations, displacement of artists and disadvantages people come together with increase value of real estate. Circuits of capital, thou, not only shape the urban landscape (as mentioned above), but they did it by interacting and exploiting the culture circuits (Zukin, 1995). Two parallel systems of production overlap in the symbolic economy: on the one side, the production of space that incorporates aesthetics and cultural meanings of buildings; on the other one, the production of symbols where cultural systems influence on how to consume that places (for instance about the people who are or feel allowed to occupy public spaces). In that sense she talked about “pacification through cappuccino”, meaning the cultural colonization of the public space by economic forces through forms of urban marketing: public space is increasingly shaped and appropriated by economic forces (commercial and corporate) on the basis of a “cultural war” between middle-class and “the others”, thus bringing to a gradual loss of meaning of public spaces. Since the use and consume of public spaces is increasingly generated by a particular commercial (hegemonic) culture she concluded asking whose culture and therefore whose city. The questions is (partially) answered in the ability of a place to acknowledge the individual worth despite all the opposite forces and to support authentic communities (Zukin, 2009).

Harvey recently recognised the complex relation between capital and the cultural or art sphere: he claims that “...the problem for capital is to find ways to co-opt, subsume, commodify and monetise such cultural differences just enough to be able to appropriate monopoly rents there from” (Harvey, 2012, p. 110). On the other hand, yet, he hypothesised that the more the neo-liberal cities exploit art and culture, the more people involved in art and culture themselves tend to oppose to such an instrumentalisation. “The widespread though usually fragmented struggles that exist between capitalistic appropriation and past and present cultural creativity can lead a segment of the community concerned with cultural matters to side with a politics opposed to multinational capitalism” (*ibid.*: 111)

² Surprisingly, one of the three pillar that Florida’s theory of creative class was exactly “tolerance”, but in its implementation the tolerance is often directed towards a domesticated and clear kind of diversity (consistent with a “nice” image of the city)

Criticisms and political resistance are rather common within the art sphere, however, they are recently emerging also within the larger realm of the cultural industries (see (Grodach & Silver, 2013) for a large extent of examples): not only artists are now involved in struggling the neo-liberal city, but also exactly those people who neo-liberal urban politics are directed to: the so-called 'creative class' is aware of the politics of exploitation of culture (Peck, 2005) and refuses most of the actions that are formulated in its name (Novy & Colomb, 2013). This kind of protests often extent a larger scale and they can be recognised as urban social movements: starting from small-scale issues or very focused aims, they tend to enlarge and comprise larger topics linked to the more general urban politics, and looking for support from other social movements in the city (Pradel & Martì-Costa, 2012). Inspired by the suggestion of Borèn and Young (2012) this paper aims to reflect on more multifaceted comprehension of how creativity is imagined in different urban settings, as a key element to analyse political actions performed by cultural workers as sources of counter-culture, creativity and social innovation in cities.

3. Alternative forces as cultural producers

Nevertheless, such cultural accumulation is not enough for a place to gain a creative atmosphere and some elements of "structural instability" seems to be needed. "An important element is the transformative dynamics of actual social transformations; [such breaks with tradition and dominant paradigms] are often led by groups presenting themselves as extraneous to the previous local history" (Bertacchini & Santagata, 2012, p. 21). Researches reveal that alternative, underground culture have a deep role in the creative sectors and that closed links are built between mainstream knowledge (re)production and underground creativity (Leslie & Rantisi, 2011; Niessen, 2009; Pruijt, 2004; Vivant, 2009). Vivant (2009) defines *off* culture starting from a semantic pattern that opposes it to the *in* one. This scheme is inspired by the description of major art festivals such as the theatre festival in Avignon.

"The *in* is organised and planned, while the *off* is spontaneous and opportunist; the *off* is free of commercial, academic or fashion constraints, so it can be a creative and innovative space; the *in* draws from the *off* new ideas and new talents; the *off* needs the *in* to build its legitimacy; and, little by little, the *off* becomes the real festival: the place to show and to be, the real engine of the festival that attracts more people and more artists until a new *off* of the *off* appears" (*ibid.*, 40).

Pruijt in his examination of squatting activities in Amsterdam recognises that "entrepreneurial squatters [...] created artists' workspaces and venues for cultural activities were seen by policymakers as valuable for the city, which led to connections between the squatter scenes and the local administration" (Pruijt, 2013), in fact the Municipality of Amsterdam invested more than 40 million euro in the 'Breeding Places Amsterdam' (BPA) project in 1999 (Pruijt, 2004; Uitermark, 2004) aimed at sustaining the local cultural production with space and workshop provision.

4. Aim and methodology

The paper will focus on political actions by cultural workers in Milan, Italy opposing to cultural urban policy performed by a group named M^AC^AO (from now on Macao). In May 2012, hundreds of cultural workers occupied an empty skyscraper in the centre of Milan; they have been evicted some days after the occupation and few weeks later they managed to occupy a former abattoir and moved there. They are still located there and they have started offering high-level artistic performances together with a number of conferences where they criticised the state of the cultural offer and production in Milan.

Through a qualitative analysis involving both in-depth interviews and documents analysis, this case study will be deeply explored, with the particular aim of understanding two main issues.

The first line of research is related to the specific political action and it questions if and to what extent their action can be read as a reaction towards the broken promise of the creative city, as presented above. Related questions are how cultural workers organise their interests and how do they use their creativity for social mobilisation; how different notions of "creativity" are imagined and mobilized by activists and how

such meanings of creativity differ from those mobilised and used by cultural urban policies at different scales (from small-scale projects, to the city level).

The second level has to do with the production of culture by Macao and therefore, how art and culture produced by Macao enter and influence the cultural milieu of the city; to what extent are culture and social innovation also products of the mobilisation; to what extent the political action performed by such activists is a cultural and creative product itself. Moreover, questions about co-optation are addressed, to understand Macao's degree of autonomy and freedom.

The following of the paper starts with a discussion about the cultural policies and strategies of the city of Milan, in order to place the Macao action, then a presentation and description of Macao follows and finally the analysis of the case study and a discussion complete the paper.

5. Milan cultural strategies

Milanese cultural policy is not exceptional within the neo-liberal cultural policy based on city-consumerism and branding. It focuses on large and mass-events, that should attract many people into town and not really aimed at promoting young or emerging artists, nor even looking at avant-garde production, although, in particular in the 50s and 60s the city hosted one of the largest European artistic community, with artists such as Manzoni or Fontana, or Burri representing the peak of the international art in that period. But the city of Milan has also been the fulcrum of the creative industry, with its design and fashion known all over the world; of course, fashion and design have been promoted, and still they are, in order to brand the city as luxurious and creative

Cultural policies have been criticised by being elitists, centrist, and by-event (Alfieri, 2009): supporting domesticated and mainstream proposal with the aim of producing large popular events. Just an example to explain this: "Uovo" [means egg] is a festival of performing arts which communicate and are interrelated with other examples of local (but not only) creativity, such as fashion, design, architecture. The shows are located not in the usual places devoted to performing arts, like theatres, but in vacant and abandon places, such as reconverted industries. When discussing with national representatives during a meeting about the EXPO some years ago, Berlin delegates were very happy to collaborate with Milanese cultural promoters and wanted to have a collaboration with Uovo. At the meeting the former major of Milan, proposing a collaboration with La Scala, famously and dramatically asked "what's Uovo?". Another example is that of the history of the so-called *centri sociali* (that can be understood as autonomous cultural squatted centres). In Italy such squatted places diffused around the end of the '70s, as expression of the radical left movements. In the 80s they have a great expansion, exactly in the period where, in Milan, the fashion industry, together with the luxurious image of Milan, have a large support by the politics. By the end of the '90s, such *centri sociali* became real breeding ground for young and productive talented workers being urban workshops of experimental creative professions in music, cinema, web, software, interaction design and so on. Such places were even very common touristic attractions for young people passing by Milan. All the cultural and creative production resulting from these places obviously opposed to the normalised branding of Milan, and often the cultural production is a tool through which perform a political action. Today, such places have been either evicted or normalised, because they were not able to adapt to the image of the city. Most of the young professional trained there have been found good jobs abroad (often being co-opted by those economic forces they fight against), pushing away a large part of the so called "creative class".

In general, the Milanese cultural system is often accused to be limited and that undervalue the local resources "almost everything in art is private, self-organised" (Fucking Good Art, 2013, p. 25). Many artists or commentators denounce the complete lack of institutional funds within the art sphere, that forces artists to respond to the market logic, therefore limiting experimentation and avant-garde (Agosti, 2011).

The city holds a very large and valuable artistic heritage, such as private galleries, exposition centres and independent associations, but cultural institutions are not able (or not interested) even in connecting such

units in a system. We must say that a former cultural Counsellor of the municipality of Milan planned such a system, but then the project was abandoned. Finally, the city has not been able even to organise a large museum of contemporary arts³ nor for fashion (D' Ovidio & Ponzini, 2014)

6. Macao, history and present situation

Macao was born during the winter between 2011 and 2012, as a part of “*Lavoratori dell’Arte*» (Art Workers), a group of artists, art critiques, curators, journalists and activists who had been politically active in Milan since the previous autumn. Macao defines itself as the «New Center for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan». In the first phase of its existence, it is an idea in the making who becomes visible in April 2012 with a Twitter profile, a YouTube channel and a Tumblr site⁴. It is only after the occupation of the tower in on May 2012, that Macao becomes a concrete space where citizens could experiment new modes of doing art, culture and research. Macao is a reality⁵ whose main constituency is composed by artists/art workers⁶ and, more broadly, by knowledge workers. Activists of Macao are not the “usual squatters”, nor the typical political activist. They are on average 34 years old, with a university degree, working with a precarious contract in the artistic or knowledge sector. Notwithstanding their presence in the labour market (being precarious job, often activists are involved in more than one activity), activist tend to devote most of their free-time to Macao: from an internal survey conducted by Macao⁷ itself it emerges that on average people devoted around 33 hours a week.

Macao develops its action in three main directions.

The first kind of action is aimed to *liberate* urban public spaces in Milan: according to Macao the urban policies about public space is strongly inspired by private interests to which they oppose a grassroots appropriation and co-creation by the citizenry. Secondly, such a struggle is materialized in both a discursive production and the staging of artistic performances targeting in particular *real estate speculation*. Finally, among their concerns, there is a need to rethink the *modes of production* in the cultural industry and the *life* conditions inevitably linked to it.

In order to contextualize Macao’s mobilization, it is necessary to take a step backward and to trace its genealogy. If we look at the past, we can consider Macao as a peculiar combination of distinct histories of Italian mobilization.

The first, more strictly political, derives from the wide field of the Italian radical left movement linked also to the experiences of the *centri sociali* as previously described. Such movement since the early 2000 was particularly active around the themes of job and precariousness, developing innovative political actions, combining an autonomist political culture with a highly creative and innovative repertoire of action (Mattoni 2012).

The second historical momentum for the Macao development and action is connected to mobilizations where artists were directly involved. The fundamental experience stems from the struggles against gentrification brought about in a former working class neighbourhood in Milan. That area, called Isola, was underwent a strong and harsh process of de-industrialization and gentrification. The artistic mobilisation was directed towards to fight and reveal the contradictions of capitalism to denounce the interests of

³ This is even more surprising in a Country, Italy, that is often accused to think about culture only in terms of museums, consumption and conservation

⁴ Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MacaoTwit>; Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/wmacao>; Tumblr: <http://wmacao.tumblr.com/>.

⁵ The term *reality*, in its intentional vagueness, also contains Macao’s reluctance to be represented by concepts as the one of *collective* that represents the legacy of a political culture of mobilization to be overcome.

⁶ This ambivalence is due to their necessity to overcome an image of the artist who, on the one hand, evokes a somehow reconciled image of an inspired individual detached from contemporary struggles and, on the other hand, as a social segment who produces value within the established order through the mediation of institutional art (cfr. Rosler 2010).

⁷ http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300_ore

speculators⁸ building a particular artistic narration called *fight-specific* involving many inhabitants. Many of the participant of such artistic movement are also part of the Macao group.

Finally, a third important connection in the history of Macao is the Italian very recent network of activists that squatted abandoned theatres and cultural places in order to both gave another (cultural) life to those spaces and denounce the precariousness of the cultural workers. These experiences are also connected through the Italian National Network of Occupied Theatres⁹ whose structuration begun after a large and very successful occupation in Rome on April 2011.

If it is possible to retrace some affinities among the “autonomous” tradition and Macao’s mobilization, we can find explicit connections who link Macao to San Precario and Isola Art Center and, above all, to the «National Network of Occupied Theaters»¹⁰.

7. Analysis

Conclusions

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⁸ On this, see the book edited by Isola Art Center (2013).

⁹ See the e-book curated by the blog [lavoroculturale.org](http://www.lavoroculturale.org/imprudenza/) <http://www.lavoroculturale.org/imprudenza/>

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