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Transformative education in the New Orleans participative planning: critical pragmatism for the rebuilding of the community after hurricane Katrina

Fiammetta Fanizza

Department of Humanistic Studies, University of Foggia (Italy)

Via Arpi 176, 71121 Foggia, Italy

fiammetta.fanizza@unifg.it

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Abstract

This article takes cue from the rebuilding of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans after the hurricane Katrina. The aim is to discuss the strength of a transformative education programme, focusing the attention on the importance of the taking care about each other.

The article assumed that planner's job is to help a community to have a vision of its own and of its future. In particular, it describes the work of over 150 students of three different faculties (Cornell-Columbia-Illinois 'practical partnership') into a comprehensive strategy for the rebuilding of New Orleans.

Instead to consider planning as a top-down process, the intention is to demonstrate that participative planning is founded on the evaluation of the inner feelings of a community. The idea is to consider planning an opportunity for the development of a common hope. For this reason, the proposal of transformative education can be assumed as social empowerment process, useful either for the arise of a new political awareness or for the growth of empathy toward government's choices.

Definitely, what New Orleans participative planning teaches is mainly referred to the im-

portance of hu-man and social sciences for planners. According to the transformative education approach, planning must be centred on the cultural identities because one of its goals is the enlargement of an aware citizenship and the improvement of the common good.

Key words: participative planning, social empowerment, multi-modal deliberative practice, collective intelligence, university civic engagement cultural roots

1. Introduction

According to the definition that K. Reardon and J. Forester (2016) propose in their recent essay, planning cannot be separated from participation because it consists essentially in an activity that allows each planner to help a community to develop a own specific vision. As social practice, planning becomes an extraordinary opportunity to identify the real needs of citizens, to discuss the role of a community and, at last, to rethink the relationship between planning and urban condition.

The idea of K. Reardon and J. Forester concerns a methodological proposal that considers the importance of the taking care about each other. Briefly, the proposal key factor turns around the spread of political awareness in public policies. They referee to a particular kind of awareness, strictly connected to the tools useful for organising a community. Especially after a disaster (as in the case of New Orleans after the hurricane Katrina in 2005) or when people must face difficulties, an effective political awareness can lead a transformative education programme.

2. The meaning and the range of action of critical pragmatism

To understand the function of a transformative education programme is useful to analyse the meaning and the range of action in critical pragmatism. Critical pragmatism regards what people can do for shaping the world around them. In few words, it can be considered as an inclusive and creative deliberative process to improve cities and neighborhoods (Scavi 2014). Therefore, it can be defined a deliberative planning practice when the technical debate arising from community inner feelings is able to grow the social empowerment (Dryzek 2010).

Far from any kind of generalisation, in critical pragmatism the contamination of social research with planning ones makes the point of view of social practices,

particularly interesting for planners. Supported by a permanent and open dialogue with the community, the critical pragmatism allows (Laws et al., 2015):

- to make everyone aware of the extent of the problem;

- to involve everyone in planning;

- to start a path to organise the life of the whole community.

In short, the strength of critical pragmatism depends on the qualities of democratic deliberations. So that the fundamental questions it answers are:

- how deliberations can involve appropriate expertise;

- how deliberations can keep values, interests and concerns;

- how deliberative process can shape commitments in activities (Forester 1999, 2016).

Because critical pragmatism refers to a deliberative design process, it will explore how deliberative committees portray and enact a democratic work (Nabatchi et al., 2012). The aim of this exploration is the creation of a collective intelligence system (Fishkin 2009).

Definitely, it is possible to define collective intelligence a procedure of mutual learning: it regards the way through which everybody looks around for new ideas. Since all the stakeholders (i.e. citizens, politicians, public institutions, non profit associations, enterprises, city planners etc.) are in a deliberative committee, collective intelligence does not ask what is the problem, but firstly ask what is the story (Innes, Booher , 2010).

While considering all the stakeholders, collective intelligence shapes the expectations of what is getting out from a public debate. This action of shaping gives style to the choices in the sense that public deliberations become a practical decision-making process (Kanra 2012). As a result, it implies that learning comes before the resolution of the problems.

Collective intelligence turns into transformative education even because debates and discussions must be generative and must take part in the reconstruction of the inner feelings of a community. Better to say, the meaning of the transformative education programme can be understood if all the structural and human elements are in a programmatic vision for giving sense to spaces and places (Forester 2013). In a sort of 'practical-aesthetic view', transformative education allows a larger process

of democratic deliberations (Strati 2014) through which citizens might ask for generative discussions.

3. The multi-modal deliberative practice and the significance of the urban condition

The view of the transformative education is opposite to what is generally assumed as planning: a top-down process in which planners make the choice. Even if planner's job means helping a community to achieve a vision into the reality, too often planners try to impose what they evaluate the best. Consequently, they consider participation as a listening activity of what people want, so called 'public hearing'. Usually planners collect social needs but very rarely they transform needs in commitments: because without commitments no results are sure, participation risks to be just a talk (Fanizza 2015).

Since discussing about the function of participation involves the role of civic engagement, one of the most important aspect in planning is to avoid frustration. As to say, in spatial design the solutions must seem not far from what citizens ask for. This is a very complex topic, strictly related to the significance of the urban condition. This one is influenced by planning, and in particular by the trend to consider cities as commodities (Fanizza 2013b).

Against the tendency to evaluate city only from an economic point of view, what people ask for is new models of living able to develop the different link between the urban environment and the condition of the citizenship (Wagenaar 2014). Such as in a modern urban dialectic, the interaction between cultural roots and historical memories make the difference in transformative education, especially because any team-work sets the planning as a storytelling (Diers 2004).

In order to find practical solutions, the transformative education tries to define the specific identities of a community: so that, starting from a pragmatic perspective, each project can become part of local policies. Because technical activity is conditioned by the ways trough which solutions to be adopted are selected, the transformative education aims to conform planning according to the relationship among citizens, urban policy and public space (Codeluppi 2007; Bottini 2010). Therefore, especially when trade is assumed as method to draw the urban space

(Boeri 2011), the innovative result of the connection among citizens, urban policies and public space can be accomplished by a multi-modal deliberative practice (participative planning).

Sociologically, in a transformative education programme citizens can exercise their urban rights to promote social behaviours and, at last, to look for a new kind of sociality (Fanizza 2013a). To do this, planning can adopt an inter-organisational approach for translating the variety of social identities and cultural signs into a code able to put in practice the concept of urbanism (Torres 2003). More than just an abstract goal, planning can select rules and criteria useful to develop empathy toward government's choices (Desideri, Ilardi, 1997) The strength of empathy is related to the urban fragmentation and in particular is influenced by the lack of communication in the public sphere (Fanizza 2008). It consists in a problem that involves either the quality of social organisation or the state of an inclusive welfare state. While a general distrust for social issues cut off people from what concerning the management of urban environmental, empathy toward government's choices faces a permanent competition among:

- urban areas;

- stakeholders categories;

- views, approaches and cultural intentions.

This competition slows down social integration processes and, in any case, it interferes negatively with social practices and behaviours (Amendola 1997).

For this reason, the tale of what happened in New Orleans in 2005 is very interesting (Susskind et al., 1999). The storytelling of the New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop offers the opportunity to test the transformative education for the rebuilding of a community. Overall, it puts in challenge the collective intelligence even because it deals with a lifelong learning programme.

4. Planning as a storytelling: the university practical partnership in the the New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop

The rebuilding of New Orleans after the hurricane Katrina is not simply a story of resistance and not only a particular case of resilience. It is quite a successful educational experience made thanks to the valuable work of over 150 students of

three faculties (Cornell-Columbia-Illinois) in 'practical partnership' with the residents of Ninth Ward, the New Orleans City Council and the New Orleans Planning Commission. Since October of 2005, under the banner of New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop at Cornell University, they worked to find a comprehensive strategy for the city. So in January of 2007 they published *The People's Plan* with the aim to help Ninth Ward residents in the rebuilding of their community.

The People's Plan plot was about:

- what kind of relationships might be required if community members want to organise themselves;

- what community members need to be able to act together and to talk to one another;

- what community members lack in order to maintain an organisation, to reconcile the differences and to discuss about strategies.

According to this view, a community development might bridge local knowledge and scientific expertise to spread in real time both practical judgment and hope for social change. What happened in New Orleans is a real challenge, made with the confrontations between community leaders and activists who might wish to partner seriously with university staff, student and faculties. They certainly did not always agree but their differences inspired four related fields of study:

- service learning;

- community planning;

- community organising and disaster recovering;

- community resilience.

This educational experience explicitly involved local citizen and even received input from displaced resident in the Katrina diaspora, via the selection of district planners to produce neighbourhood and district plans. The process was not always pretty, but it had its heart in the right place.

Under the supervision of Cornell University, a growing network of citizens representing poor and working-class families, activist organisations and university

scholars mobilised extraordinary human and financial resources to provide a successful multi-modal deliberative strategy[1].

The involvement of local resident in the planning process was something that the Cornell team strongly endorsed. Together with ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), the university teams encouraged people to offer suggestions and options. Better to say, they stimulated an open process of what could be invented for the rebirth of New Orleans. With the aim to recognise not only the interest of the residents of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, these teams lent their expertise and technical training to a community-driven process. So they collected concerns, hopes, senses of value, promises, fears, passions and biases to define a deliberative planning able to grow the social empowerment.

In contrast with many planners who started from their own expertise and added community participation as a necessary but secondary component of their proposal and practice, these teams allowed people to frame what they might debate (Rosenberg 2007). In particular they reduced the scope of dialogue with leaders and politicians because they drawn a very interesting scenario with ethnographic tools (deep interviews, photographs and reportages) and surveys (data collection). This scenario was able not only to contain the interferences of designers and planners but also to manage the deliberative meetings with any groups and categories of people. By the way, the teams were able to gather support from the political establishment: the City Council passed a unanimous resolution directing the city planner's staff to incorporate the main elements of *The People's plan* into their comprehensive plan. This important bit of public recognition was possible even because the teams produced a lot of required background documents (the Ninth's physical, economic and social needs) useful for the comprehensive recovery plan.

Of course the influence of New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop on the lives and education of students and faculty was really significant: students changed their view of empowerment planning thanks to this experience. On its own side, through the community planning students understood the connection between planning and politics.

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5. Negotiation versus conflict. The cultural roots and the perspective
of a lifelong learning service for planning

The matter of *The People's plan* is very fascinating because supports a participative process for the arise of a new political awareness centred on the feelings of belongings. The multi-modal deliberative strategy adopted by New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop brought together people who care about their community to focus the attention on the pursuing of democratic deliberations. Most of these expressed a new citizenship closely related to the need of public policies on social rebirth. Furthermore many democratic deliberations tried to educate citizens to have a different outlook on the world and on the future.

Making easier and direct the dialogue among public administrators, civil activists and citizens, the New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop fostered a space where it could not only discuss about solutions but where it could also enact, perform and explore new ways of being in a community. It was created a sort of deliberative container, an infrastructure in which it showed one another new possibilities of living together.

In light of this, two remarkable issues are still worth considering:

- the lifelong learning status;
- the cultural background.

Because each project integrates specifically the collective education of the residents of the Lower Nine Ward of New Orleans, the New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop explains what empowerment planning is and why it can be considered firstly a tool for the socialisation. Unlike any story of urban regeneration or renewal, planners did not work alone. In particular the interdependence among public administrators, civil activists and citizens transformed a practical agreement in the result of a negotiation on:

- what was important;
- what they knew;
- what they had to do.

In general, negotiation used the mediation to select options and opportunities. Very important, negotiation set up the cultural background and interpreted the complex of identities to understand what people was looking for.

6. Conclusion

From the sociological point of view, transformative education in New Orleans has been supported by a learning by doing approach. It leads to the improvement of a participative citizenship, either because has gone beyond the involvement of local leaders to consult as broad a cross-section of community stakeholders as possible, or because has been focused on the importance of social identity. Therefore, who told a story about the fear of black people or who presented the moment of dawning political consciousness have had the same goal: the investigation of the function of the public sphere (Bianchetti 2008).

What this experience teaches is the importance of the negotiation for the development of tools useful to understand how to organise the future. Especially when communities are structurally unable to deal with some specific aspects of urbanism, the negotiation can be important to find, distinguish and select political offers and, at last, to affirm new theoretical systems in reference with an epistemology of social dynamics.

When mistrust and scepticism contaminate public policies, negotiation can be considered as the more incisive way to stimulate civic knowledge and social achievements. While encouraging people to offer suggestions and options, negotiation reaches the local empowerment (Sclavi 2004). Overall, the negotiation tells an unconventional story of transformative education when any decision-making is supported and tutored by cultural roots (Bovone et al., 2002).

Cultural roots can create new urban geographies to confer significance to urbanism. Together with a substantial re-thinking of planning's social function, cultural roots can be essential for an over-structural and infrastructural filling of an urban area and to reduce any forms of urban discrimination (Low 2000). In few word, the cultural roots can ensure a proper use of public space if the replacement of the contents of politics pursues a new communicative code for selecting the government's choice. This selection can write new unconventional tales of transformative education if the government's choice is arranged like a 'lifelong learning service' (Burkhalter et al., 2002).

To conclude, one last consideration on the function of human and social sciences for planning. Their importance cannot be limited to research methods: their

theoretical contents can be assumed just as something conceptual. The story of the rebuilding of New Orleans tells how important human and social sciences are for the improvement of the common good. Human and social sciences can be the stage and not only the frame on which public policies can find the right way to be assumed, understood and shared.

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