

Can Social Innovation be the Answer? The Role of Citizen Action in the Face of Increasing Socio-Spatial Polarization

Ismael Blanco, Oriol Nello

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
(ismael.blanco@uab.cat; oriol.nello@uab.cat)

In recent years, literature has highlighted the importance of social practices of cooperation in the face of increasing social and spatial segregation, assuming that the intensity of social innovation is greater in the most vulnerable areas, where the effects of the crisis and the limits of public intervention are more evident. This paper critically reviews this assumption through a systematic analysis of the relationship between urban segregation and social innovation in different urban areas in Catalonia, showing how social innovation does not necessarily emerge in areas concentrating the most intense social needs, but in middle-income urban areas with a strong tradition of grassroots mobilisation. It points out the limits of social innovation in counteracting the cities' growing inequalities, as well as the need for public intervention oriented towards the enhancement of collective action capabilities in the most vulnerable urban areas

Keywords: social innovation; urban segregation; Catalonia

L'innovazione sociale può essere la risposta? Il ruolo dell'azione dei cittadini in un contesto di crescente polarizzazione sociale

Negli ultimi anni, la letteratura ha sottolineato l'importanza delle pratiche sociali di cooperazione in un contesto di crescente segregazione sociale e spaziale, assumendo che l'intensità dell'innovazione sociale è maggiore nelle aree urbane più vulnerabili dove gli effetti della crisi e i limiti dell'azione pubblica sono più evidenti. Questo articolo rivede criticamente questa assunzione attraverso un'analisi sistematica della relazione tra segregazione urbana e innovazione sociale in diverse aree della Catalogna, mostrando come l'innovazione sociale non emerga necessariamente dove si concentrano i bisogni sociali più significativi, ma in aree urbane dove i redditi sono medi con una forte tradizione di mobilitazione dal basso. Si evidenziano i limiti dell'innovazione sociale nel contrastare le crescenti disuguaglianze nelle città, così come il bisogno di un intervento pubblico orientato a innalzare le capacità di azione collettiva nelle aree urbane più vulnerabili

Parole chiave: innovazione sociale; segregazione urbana; Catalogna

Introduction

The burst of the housing bubble in 2008 signalled the beginning of a long and profound economic crisis with dramatic social consequences in Spain. Several studies have highlighted some of these consequences, such as the massive loss of jobs, a significant increase in different modalities of poverty (income, food, energy), housing exclusion and a sharp growth in income inequalities (see FOESSA, 2013). However, the spatial dimension of the crisis remains largely unexplored. This paper addresses this gap in the literature, coping with two set of questions directly related with the urban impacts of the crisis and with the social responses that emerge in urban areas.

The first set of questions has to do with the impacts of the crisis upon the socio-spatial configuration of cities, focusing our attention in the case of Catalonia (Spain). Which is the reflection of phenomena such as unemployment, poverty and housing exclusion on the urban space? How the social costs of the crisis are distributed across different types of urban areas? Which are the particular effects of the crisis in disadvantaged neighbourhoods? How social and spatial inequalities interact under these circumstances? We approach such type of questions through a systematic analysis of the dynamics of urban segregation in Catalonia in the period 2001-2012. Such analysis allows us to contextualise the impacts of the crisis in the frame of the residential transformations that took place in the country during the years of the housing bubble (García, 2010; Coq-Huelva, 2013). By analysing this type of question, the paper engages with the international debate on the spatial dimension of social inequality and injustice (Cheshire, 2007; Soja, 2010; Secchi, 2013). We show that the increase of social inequalities in Catalonia has gone hand in hand with a growing socio-spatial polarization of the population. Such process of polarization intensified in the years of the housing boom as a result of the combined effect of a sharp increase in housing prices and a rapid growth of immigration. The crisis has seriously aggravated the living conditions in the areas that specialized in the concentration of the population with fewer resources, and it has widened the gap between the poorest and the richest urban areas. The case of Catalonia allows us to state that social inequality dynamics are far from being neutral in spatial terms. This case also shows that 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2013) not only entails growing social inequality but also an increasing separation of different and unequal social groups across the urban space, threatening urban social cohesion levels reached in the past.