SOCIETY AND THE CITY

The Dark Sides of Social Innovation

Edited by
Guido Borelli and Maurizio Busacca

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Guido Borelli

BOHEMIAN BOURGEOIS AND ABSTRACT SPACE IN SOCIAL INNOVATION
Some Remarks from Italian Experiences

> Oh, an equal chance and an equal sale
> but equally, there's no equal pay.
> There's room on top – if you tow the line.
> And if you believe all this, you must be out of your mind.
> There's only room for those the same,
> those who play the leeches game.
> Don't get settled in this place:
> the lodger's terms are in disgrace.
>
> The Style Council,
> *The Lodgers (or She Was Only a Shopkeeper's Daughter)*, 1985.

1. *A "generic" paradigm for the social sciences?*

Periodically, in the world of social sciences, it is possible to find concepts that are able, over a more or less long period of time, to focus the attention not only of scholars and researchers, but also of policy makers, together with a wide range of professionals.

These are concepts that sometimes have a status of paradigmatic assumptions, i.e. – to use the terminology of Thomas Kuhn (1962) –, of universally recognized scientific achievements which, for a certain period, provide a model of problems and acceptable solutions to those who practice a certain field of research. It must be considered, however, that for the social sciences, the problem arises of the possible coexistence of several paradigms[1] within the same disciplinary field, which would make the

---

1 According to Robert W. Friedrichs (1970), author of *A Sociology of Sociology*, there are (at least) two conflicting paradigms in the social sciences: the position of the priest and that of the prophet. The priest is detached, elitist, objective, and considers the social order as it is. The prophet, on the other hand, is a moralist who condemns the world from the point of view of a better one that he wishes to inaugurate. While the priest is cold and scientific, claiming the authority of a

uniqueness of the paradigm itself less effective. In the end, for the social sciences what matters is the level and extent to which a specific paradigm is shared within a scientific community, eventually to the detriment of others. In the case of Social Innovation (SI), it would seem more appropriate, rather than paradigm, to speak of a preteorical concept whose character has proved capable of producing "images of the world" and "guiding visions". Therefore, it does not seem exaggerated to speak both of a triumphant entry of the SI in the field of social sciences, and of the correlative constitution of a new academic-professional undertaking for the distribution of resources and dominant positions. All of this is demonstrated not only by the vast and heterogeneous corpus of literature produced, but also by the consistent attention devoted to the EU policy planning that – starting from the great crisis of 2008 and focusing on principles such as sustainability, efficiency, inclusion, flexicurity, social protection, public-private partnership – has identified the IS as an effective concept within which many of the principles listed above can be traced and treated. This combination has favoured a sustained concentration of projects and operational declinations of the SI by a large number of Europroject professionals, skilled in combining the third mission vocations of the universities together with creative entrepreneurship from the galaxy of the various spin-off, fab lab and start-up to make proposals that – according to them – work and innovate and, in some cases, prove capable of producing economic resources for the implementation of the projects.

The overall effect of this concentration resulted in a process of mutual reinforcement between the components and generated the theoretical model of the triple helix (Etzkowitz, Leydesdorff, 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000), to describe the processes of interaction and interdependence between the three fundamental actors of the IS: universities and research centres, governments, and companies. This model then evolved, with the addition of civil society and the media as the fourth helix (quadruple helix, Carayannis, Campbell, 2009) to foster sustainable economic development in coevolution with the knowledge society. Subsequently, the helix became five (quintuple helix) to include innovation models in which the natural environments of society and the economy are also understood as drivers for knowledge production and innovation (Carayannis et. al., 2012).

---

position of valuable neutrality, the prophet is an activist, with a vision of man as a creative subject, capable of personal responsibility towards moral norms that transcend his time and place.

The progressive inclusion of theoretical and empirical devices for innovation, the plethora of subjects and professional and disciplinary skills involved, the multiplication of fields and levels of experimentation, have produced a considerable widening of the horizons of application of the SI, to the point that the term itself is now connoted as a *bon à tout faire* concept for social policies. As is typical of all concepts that travel on the momentum of the academic-professional market, at the same time a considerable literature[2] has flourished that has either posed the problem of typifying the vast application latitude of the SI[3] (Marques, Morgan, Richardson, 2018), or has been interested in reconstructing how this concept has traveled over time, going back to the dawn of the nineteenth century (Godin, 2012), or has devoted itself to distinguish between different continental approaches (i.e.: organizational-managerial the Anglo-American one; policy-making and advocacy oriented the Euro-Canadian one and, perhaps, also the Chinese one, see Busacca, 2019). What these studies and research have in common – even in their heterogeneity – consists in:

a) a generic agreement around the aims of the SI, pursued through a new social protagonism, which would be needed to counter the overwhelming power of neoliberal economic policies;
b) a generic idea of society to which widespread competences and attitudes are attributed such as to be able to face (and, hopefully, to solve) complex social problems through modalities and paths that are described just as generically (Busacca, 2019, p. 5);
c) an almost unlimited faith in the development and democratic potential of information and communication technologies. In this respect, (social) innovation is synonymous with "technological innovation" as a device for inclusion and value sharing;
d) as a consequence of the previous points, an uncritical attitude that provides the SI a "generically positive" role for the bottom-up production of policy agendas focused on inclusion and employment in a context of sharing and knowledge economy.

With these premises, the SI proves to be fully capable of creating its own object of research and application (performative character), and of

---

2   For a comprehensive account of the literature on SI, see Howaldt et al. (2014). See also Busacca (2019).
3   The three authors hypothesize that the lack of a clear definition of SI allows scholars, authors, politicians and professionals to project different meanings, thus ensuring its continuous attractiveness. See Busacca (2019, p. 4).

bringing back to its own schemes a multitude of social facts recurring in contemporary societies (functionalist character), and of presenting itself as a democratically desirable activity (normative character). It is astonishing, however, that within such a wide latitude of application, "the SI continues to be not analysed in itself and for itself, but as a solution (...and that it continues to be) treated as intrinsically positive (without posing) the problem of its motivations and objectives, which are assumed as given: solving new and acute social problems" (Busacca 2019, p. 45, emphasis added). In this regard, paraphrasing the famous policy analyst *mantra*, we could ask ourselves: "if the SI is the solution, what is the problem?". The response that generally tends to be offered is based on the recognition that the SI establishes itself as a bottom-up solution to new problems that have not yet found an adequate response in public and/or private organizations. In our opinion this does not seem a very convincing answer. It is also not convincing for Busacca (*ibid.*, p. 51, emphasis added) who goes close to hypothesizing a pertinent response, arguing that the IS: "has turned into a social policy strategy" and that "values and *ideologies* are the foundation of a strategy". The reference to ideology seems particularly appropriate: "ideology can be seen as the terrain on which (...) the collective subjects are defined by ideology, (the ideology) becomes the place of constitution of collective subjectivity. Ideology conditions choices and behaviours and presents itself *in the forms of everyday life*" (*ibid.*, pp. 51-52, emphasis added). It is difficult not to agree, especially when, a few lines later, Busacca even brings up Gramscian hegemony to suggest an interpretation useful to understand how the underlying ideology of SI practices could be formed. Unfortunately Busacca stops here and is satisfied to look within the hegemonic ideology only for the "second level" ideologies. What is missing in this case is the representation of an alternative ideology for the SI and a consequent antagonistic subjectivity of social innovators.

2. *Are we really all pluralist? An antagonistic paradigm for Social Innovation*

A good starting point to begin to reflect on a possible critical posture towards the SI could only arise from its intersections with the market economy and labour exploitation. Here there is no author who does not openly declare that this is an issue as important as neglected and, therefore, very slippery. There is no doubt that the most evocative strand of studies is that which lies at the crossroads between the important reorganization

of capitalist economies in recent decades (and, in particular, since the global recession of the end of last decade) and the emergence of new (and consequent) forms of social restructuring. The decennial work of Arnaldo Bagnasco (2008; 2016) on the transformation of the middle class in Italy is an effective account of how:

> the best results obtained by the most liberalist capitalism (...together with the) difficulty of systems with more concerted forms of regulation, (pushed) the regulatory systems in the direction of the market (...) It is therefore not simply a return of the market to explain the different returns, but rather a market regulation grafted onto traditions and institutional specificities (...) As far as continental Europe is concerned, it can be said that it is experiencing a greater dose of market, combining it with its traditions of political regulation. (Bagnasco, 2008, p. 32)

This transformation has taken place within a regulatory framework in which the market has played a particularly important role. This happened in at least two areas: the one commonly referred to as the welfare state and the one related to the regulation of economic policies. It is a shared opinion that in order to understand the changes that have occurred in recent decades in the forms of social stratification it is necessary to consider with the necessary attention the changes that have occurred in the organization of work. More specifically, it is necessary to consider the ways in which the advent of the network enterprise and the digital platforms has inaugurated specific forms of labour organization, where the exploitation of the most diverse skills has reverberated in the proliferation of new contractual forms subject to instability and sudden changes. On the one hand, the new working conditions require more professionalism and skills, but on the other hand, they are much less durable than the previous ones and may not result in predictable careers. Today, when we talk about platform capitalism, we refer indifferently both to techno-professionals able to move through networks to enhance social cooperation, and to precarious workers who receive a working poor salary and whose work cycles are marked by algorithms. What is original, in a new pyramid that – according to Standing (2014) – extends from the plutocratic élite to the *lumpenprecariat*, is that the difference between a techno-professional and a precarious is also based on forms of self-representation of subjectivity by the workers themselves and no longer exclusively on objective indicators regarding income or employment/unemployment rate but, especially for younger individuals (who, as we will see, are the core of the SI), for those who Barbera et

al. (2008, p. 149, *passim*), define as *new middle class strategies*. We will return to this point more extensively in the next paragraph.

Constrained in this economic, political and social contingency, SI finds a comfortable accommodation within a constellation of public policies formulated and implemented by informal groups that are activated to represent particular interests that neither representative democracies, nor government institutions, nor representatives of organized interests are able (or interested in) considering in their policy making. This image has a strong normative orientation that predetermines a broad and democratic consensus on SI practices and on the work of social innovators. In these terms, social innovators can legitimately be represented (and self-represented) as a "constituent ingredient of pressure groups", which concretely means that they operate in a pluralistic society. Starting from the needs of citizens, they strive to build political forms capable of countering or, at least mitigating, the influences of rampant liberalism or, as Bagnasco kindly writes (see above), capable of bringing the regulatory structures of society back into areas not totally subject to the logic of the market. What is truly innovative is that innovators "socially" pursue this objective using the same (technological) instruments and mechanisms (the free trade) that the market makes available to them. This fact is particularly evident if we observe that (almost) all literature – certainly the mainstream one – considers the SI within a free-market framework, in which social actors/innovators move as an equalized force, bargaining and exchanging preferences, reflecting exactly the dominant motives of capitalist markets[4] and their derivation from orthodox economic theories, from Adam Smith onwards[5]. According to Jessop et al. (2013, p. 111), SI practices, even when they move from "socialist" visions, are unable to free themselves from postures sympathetic to the market. These authors have correctly labelled this (narrow) SI vision as "compassionate liberalism", because it "favours social enterprise as a key agent for social change". In other words, SI

---

4   Even the more "softened" and "overhanging" ones. According to Barbera and
     Parisi (2019, pos. 170) "social innovation would draw the foundations for a
     'capitalism with a human face', where market and social needs find a new balance,
     the search for personal success is combined with the needs of the weakest and
     society re-appropriates its own space, its autonomous objectives and its processes
     of social reproduction. 'Adjectivated' capitalism (civic, sustainable, inclusive,
     green, etc.) constitutes the natural outcome of these representations".

5   In this respect, the European institutions are *plus royaliste que le roi*. The European,
     OECD and World Economic Forum programmes describe social innovation as an
     arena of potential development for market and profit-making activities (Fougère
     et. al. 2017, p. 833, cit. in Barbera, Parisi, 2019, pos. 261).

practices are fatally exposed to the tendency to reduce mutualism and self-management in the bedrock of dominant social relationships.

Given the question in these terms, it seems quite difficult that a critical (radical) approach to the IS can develop within the "classic" pluralist framework *à la* Robert Dahl (1971) adopted by the majority of social scholars. The founding father of pluralism and polyarchy since long time[6] delivered to us the strong and desirable idea that although the competitive capitalist economy represents the natural environment for the progress of democracy, nevertheless we must refuse to consider the state and public policies as mere devices subordinated to the logic of capital. Charles Lindblom (1965) had previously reinforced this concept by referring to the intelligence of democracy and arguing that the dispersion of decision-making power is a desirable condition for mature democracies because the interactions between market and society take place under conditions of mutual partisan adjustment and not through the exercise of the hegemony of the first sector.

However, if the mission of the SI is, as we have already reported: "the solution 'from below' to new problems that have not yet found an adequate response in public and/or private organizations", then – despite all the repeated and passionate calls for reciprocity, inclusion, sharing and deliberation, community welfare – we cannot fail to note that this is a constellation of practices inscribed within a social ideology that is based on the archetype of democratic-deliberative governing of society, but which ultimately suffers the supremacy of the market economy, with all its regulatory and technological devices, as the only space for existence and social interaction. At this point, if we think of solving large and structured social problems through the SI practices as they are so far proposed, i.e., without not only confronting the question of who and how has determined the basis of the value structure and social inequalities, but even using the same logic that such inequalities reproduce, then we might eventually be haunted by the doubt of fooling ourselves.

Radical criticisms of SI are possible only by putting into play an alternative theory of the political, i.e. hypothesizing possible forms of political organization alternative to the relations between state and market that operate at a world level and, consequently, at a local level. Without a clear representation of this theory, the anti-liberalism wandered by the

---

6   Judge et al. (1995, p. 13) argued that at the end of the 1960s, it was particularly clear that the pluralist approach was the preferred intellectual position of the establishment of the *American Political Science Association* (APSA) and that this position quickly spread across all Western democratic regimes.

supporters of the SI is at risk of being reduced to the rhetorical level of the idealization of the concepts of solidarity and sharing wandered, for example, by the sharing economy, while, on the substantial level, they reveal themselves for what they risk being: new forms of precariousness that open the doors to capillary exploitation and the formation of monopolistic molochs. An alternative theory of the politician inevitably leads us to question the uncritical acceptance of the pluralist ideology on which the SI draws its legitimacy. This does not mean rejecting *tout court* its theses because, following the reflections of Gregory McLennan (1989, pp. 17-18) pluralist arguments are able to offer us, more than other available theories do, a series of certainties. These are:

a) a convincing sociological representation of the competition between different interest groups;
b) an acceptable conception of the state as a political mechanism responsible for balancing social demands;
c) a desirable account of the functioning of democratic civic cultures through recognition of the value of political participation;
d) a sound empirical research methodology.

If, on the other hand, we adopt, as we will do from hereinafter, a Marxist approach to construct a critical position– implicitly and in general terms – towards the pluralist theories of society and – explicitly and focusing on some specific issues – towards the practices of SI, then some weaknesses of the pluralist approach emerge. These are:

a) a tendency to systematically disregard the notion of power, considering it not subject to strict definition, observation and measurement;
b) the reluctance to recognize that the exercise of power precedes – and does not follow – the process of innovation, to the point that any study carried out with the toolbox elaborated by SI scholars fails to capture and reveal the latency of power relations;
c) the underestimation of the extensive and penetrating forms of structural exercise of power that in complex societies act on the will and needs (not simply on the interests) of the recipients, producing an inclination to adherence, independent of material preconditions.

These three points dig a deep furrow that separates the bonhomie of SI practices and the latent and structural forms of power operating at the social level. First, the exercise of power can be practiced in such a way that

the conflict becomes latent and, for this reason, the existence of consensus around SI practices can in no way be considered a sufficient reason to exclude forms of exploitation of action and manipulation of consensus. Second, power can also be exercised in a more subtle form: that of shaping individuals' preferences so that there are neither obvious conflicts nor hidden conflicts around SI practices. Here the question arises of the structural conditioning imposed by capitalist economies and the state that not only suffocate the challenges at birth, but build socially and culturally structured cognitive cages with the aim of producing in individuals manipulated representations of the self and surreptitious interests, often contrary to the real ones.

Despite the obvious empirical difficulty of distinguishing between real and manipulated interests, it is difficult not to imagine that a false or artifact consensus may exist, conditioned by a dominant group and/or subjected to forms of cultural and ideological manipulation. A careful critical analysis helps us to reveal the logic and rhetoric behind these forms of manipulation. Pay attention, for example, to the idyllic (even a little bit crazy) declamations launched by the co-founder of *Wired* magazine, the futurologist Kevin Kelly (2017, pos. 2988, emphasis added), who skillfully mystifies Marx:

When the popular masses who hold the means of production work towards a common goal and publicly share their results, when they contribute to the work without asking for a salary and enjoy the fruits for free, it is not unreasonable to speak of "new socialism".

Kelly's "new socialism", however, in portraying other famous Marxian precognitions is very close to the dystopia imagined by Terry Gillam in the movie *Brazil* (1985). It is the case of the innate tendency of capitalism to create monopolies. Following Kelly, when the popular masses (who hold the means of production) share their work on a cloud innervated by the Artificial Intelligence, this will happen at a price:

the value of the network will increase faster as it grows in size. The bigger (will be) the network, the more attractive it will be for new users, who will make it even bigger, therefore more attractive and so on (...) A company, when it enters a similar virtuous circle, tends to grow so fast that it overwhelms the emerging competition. For this reason, in the future we are likely to be governed by an *oligarchy of two or three major, large, generalist, cloud-based business intelligences*. (*ibid.*, pos. 873-881, emphasis added)

Kelly also welcomes positively the temporal revolution implemented by capitalism, which is perpetually aimed, (here again the parody of another Marxian aphorism), at reducing the rotation time of capital to a "blink of an eye". The most up-to-date experience of the time, according to Kelly (*ibid*., pos. 2582, emphasis added):

> is that of the instant. The speed of the future will be that of electrons. We will be able to take breaks from these rhythms but it will remain our choice, because communication technology tends to move at the request of anything, a phenomenon that in turn *privileges access to property*.

At the end – and correctly – Kelly (*ibid*., pos. 1220) foresees the direction that the new system of relations between living and dead work is taking, which together qualify the new mode of production of the cloud economy:

> it's our own inventions that assign us the jobs we do: every successful little automation generates new occupations, which we would never have imagined if technology hadn't cued us.

Let's go back to the starting point of this paragraph: it is quite clear that whatever position we intend to support, it is essential to confront (and continuously update) ourselves with the social impacts generated by the organization of work. With the intention of bringing some empirical elements in favour of a critical SI theory, below I will try to isolate a couple of issues that I think are relevant. The first concerns the production of subjectivity of social innovators. The second has to do with the production of "abstract" space in the networks of the SI. For both issues I will try to highlight some controversial aspects that are outside the largely beaten conceptualizations of the SI and – proceeding by empirical inferences and methodological paths scarcely beaten by mainstream research – I will try to bring out some critical issues.

3. *Social innovators: a new élite or an emerging cognitariat?*

In their detailed research on the SI archipelago in Italy, Barbera and Parisi (2019, pos. 286), take into consideration that it may result as a possible manifestation of the New spirit of capitalism (Boltanski, Chiappello, 2005). Specifically, the SI could consist of an effective device that, in the hands of companies, would allow to subsume and exploit new business processes, drawing from even the most radical forms of capitalist

contestation. Following the historical evolution proposed by Boltanski and Chiappello (*ibid*.), one would say that the criticism of the hierarchical organization of work expressed during the student protests of 1968, together with the criticism of the alienation and fragmentation of work that resulted from it, represents an effective example of how capitalism is fully capable of bending any form of (social) innovation to its own advantage for the purposes of its own productive organization[7]. In this respect, the management of the human factor present in SI practices could legitimately be considered as an updated device aimed at regaining control of a living work that is intolerant of the order (previously) established in the enterprise.

This formidable capacity of the capitalist system is based on a subtle strategy of production and control of the subjectivity of social actors. This is a thesis particularly strongly supported by biopower theorists (Foucault, 2004) and refers to the expansion of capitalist modes of production and the ways in which the "life"can be entirely dominated by the devices that work towards its alienation. It is a concept developed in depth by Negri and Hardt (1995, p. 77, my translation) through the recognition that "the state and capital no longer govern through disciplinary mechanisms, but through control networks". For Negri and Hardt (*ibid*.), it is not only the control networks that become the object of attention, but above all the new modes of expression of living work and the circumstances through which capital has allocated and reorganized the production process outside the factory (Negri, 2008). According to this perspective, it is life in itself (language, affections, relational skills as specific characteristics of the individual) that is put to work in all its biometric, bioethical and biotechnological declinations (Negri, Hardt, 2000). These transformations have led to the concept of the multitude – a self-organized collective actor – appearing as an emerging class formation. The multitude is a multifaceted composition of living work where poorly qualified figures and professionals of innovation and creativity coexist. In the multitude the living work is realized through the exploitation of cooperation: cooperation not of individuals, but of their subjectivities: exploitation of the whole of subjectivities, of the networks that make up the whole and of the whole that includes the networks. On the one hand we find absence of rights, precariousness and political invisibility, on the other hand richness of social relations, cooperation and

---

7   To clarify the scope of these transformations, Antonio Gramsci in *I Quaderni del carcere* (1948, 15, II, 62) introduced the concept of passive revolution to highlight the ability of the "dominant" classes to change sign to the claims and points of view of the "dominated" to transform them into an integrated and compatible part of the new power relations defined after a phase of crisis.

renewal. From this perspective, then, who are the social innovators? What is the difference between a social innovator and a precarious worker?

To answer this question the works of Barbera and Parisi (2019) and Bandinelli (2015) are very useful. The research of Barbera and Parisi (2019) reports the results of a survey carried out via web in 2015 among 388 Italian social innovators[8]. Such a wide survey produced a very heterogeneous sample of respondents, active in equally heterogeneous fields: "all congruent with the experiences described: collaborative economy, active citizenship, common goods, cultural innovation, coworking, makers and digital artisans" (*ibid.*, pos. 1596). From this heterogeneity some recurrent and prevailing variables emerge:

a) the prevalence of social innovators located in medium and medium-large urban areas. The urban context seems particularly favourable to facilitate relations between the network of social innovators. Quoting Burroni and Trigilia (2010, p. 10, initial emphasis added), Barbera and Parisi (2019, pos. 1797), assume that "urban spaces do not count in themselves, but in that they enable spaces of informal interaction and relational organization". This consideration (which we do not agree with) is of particular interest and raises issues that will be taken up again in the next paragraph;

b) a very low average age. The median age of the sample analysed by Barbera and Parisi is 37 years, with a consistent percentage of millennials (which are the first "digital native generation" because it is consistently exposed to information and communication technologies;

c) a high level of schooling: 84% of the respondents have a university degree and 33.2% have a master's or a doctoral degree;

d) origin from families with a high cultural capital: 61% of the parents of social innovators have a degree and 58% of mothers have a degree. Barbera and Parisi (*ibid.*, pos. 2052) consider the family of origin to be a very important factor, especially in terms of social class: "wealthy classes seem to teach their children more often styles oriented towards self-attribution both for better and for worse";

---

8   The methodology used to identify the social innovators used by Barbera and Parisi (2019, pos. 1575) is the reputational one of the "snowflake": "identified two persons very well known and able to give a good impulse to the start of the survey (it was requested) to indicate two more persons to be included in the list". To the interviewees, Barbera and Parisi (*ibid.*, pos. 1582, emphasis added) asked "indicate people you know and who, like you, are active in the field of social innovation *with entrepreneurial, managerial or project roles*".

e) indicators of (self-)assessment of performance: they refer both to the impacts (outcomes) intended as effects generated by SI practices, and to the associated economic results (outputs). Barbera and Parisi write (*ibid*., pos. 2188): "he/she is an entrepreneur. For him/her the gain is a sign of the success of these social impact actions".

The coexistence of these indicators within a single generic subjectivity – that of the social innovator – gives a fairly new sociological profile. The aspect that most characterizes this profile is the contemporary lack of a well-defined professional identity (as imposed, instead, by industrial capitalism) and its combination with a plurality of narratives indispensable to give meaning to working life. This condition can be a source of anxiety, frustration and depression (Standing, 2014, p. 29), as well as openness, creativity and – indeed – innovation. We would be tempted to say that the SI is the result of an evolution in line with the intuitions for a long time expressed by Richard Sennett (1998) in *The Corrosion of Character*: something that has to do with the emergence of new social identities, more fluid and heterogeneous than the subdivision of humanity into categories related to social classes, typical of the past. Therefore, we could think that the SI represents one of the manifold by-product of the new way of regulation of the capitalist system[9], called *flexible accumulation* (Harvey, 1989b), which, starting from the Seventies of the last century, has progressively replaced the Fordist-Keynesian models of regulation.

These new social recombinations have been masterfully captured by Pierre Bourdieu (1983, ed. or. 1979) in his research on the distinction that, from a critical left-wing (but not radical) position, does not renounce to subdivide humanity into classes, but more simply reposition it within new classes and the relative restructuring of social relations. Despite the fact that more than forty years have passed since the publication of this research – which has now become a "classic" of social studies – it is surprising how much the sharpness of the French sociologist's gaze can be useful

---

9   Referring to a school of thought known as the school of regulation (Aglietta, 1976), one way of regulation consists of a series of measures capable of regulating the behaviour of all categories of individuals – capitalists, workers, state employees, financiers and all other political-economic agents – so that the processes of accumulation can continue to function and reproduce. In general, these measures materialize through norms, customs, laws, regulatory networks, and are the instruments through which a capitalist society is able to guarantee a certain level of coherence of individual behaviour with respect to the expectations of capital reproduction.

today to shed light on the social nature of social innovators. On the basis of the indicators proposed by Barbera and Parisi (2019), Bourdieu (1983, p. 141, *passim*) would have no doubt in pointing out social innovators in the category of the small bourgeoisie of the new type which, at the time of writing *The distinction*, he described in this way:

> craftsmen and tradesmen specializing in luxury, cultural or artistic items, managers of fashion "boutiques", retailers of 'famous maker' clothes, traders in exotic garments and jewels or rustic objects, record dealers, antique dealers, interior decorators, designers, photographers, restaurateurs, managers of trendy 'bistros', Provençal "potters", avant-garde booksellers, all those vendors of cultural goods and services seeking to prolong the fusion of leisure and work, militancy and dilettantism, that characterizes the student life-style, use their ambiguous occupations, in which success depends at least as much on the subtly casual distinction of the salesman as on the nature and quality of his wares, as a way of obtaining the best return on a cultural capital in which technical competence is less important than familiarity with the culture of the dominant class and a mastery of the signs and emblems of distinction and taste. Because this new type of culture-intensive craftsmanship and commerce enables profit to be drawn from the cultural heritage transmitted directly by the family, it is predisposed to serve as a refuge for those sons and daughters of the dominant class.

Subsequently, Alain Accardo (2020a, ed. or., 2003; 2020b) – a pupil of Bourdieu – clarified and updated the nature of these new social identities through the concept of the *petit-bourgeois gentilhomme*. Accardo argues that while in the race for the grabbing of industrial and financial capital, the great bourgeoisie has maintained its classical advantages, in terms of symbolic and cultural capital, it has been surpassed by the *petit-bourgeoisie*. Like Boltanski and Chiappello (2005), Accardo (2020b) also traces this transformation back to the 1968's protests and observes that this movement led the middle class (which spread through symbolic contagion to the urbanized popular classes): "to perceive itself as a monad incapable of attributing to itself another watchword, another ideal of life, compared to those proclaimed by the high priests of the *petit-bourgeois* selfishness of the first half of the 20th century". Along this analytical perspective, there is more than an analogy between the *petit-bourgeoisie* and the prevailing social composition of social innovators, reported by Barbera and Parisi (2019, pos. 2595) for whom: "the social origin of the interviewees is in the superior or intermediate groups of social stratification (...) many innovators come from cosmopolitan and resource-rich environments".

As sometimes happens, important sociological research (or parts of it) takes on a scope that goes beyond its academic scope and overflows, thanks mainly to popular media, fiction and movies[10], into everyday speech. It is in this way that social innovators find as many analogies with the *bobos* (*bohemian bourgeois*) described by *New York Times* journalist David Brooks (2000):

> after a lot of further reporting and reading, it became clear that what I was observing is a cultural consequence of the information age. In this era ideas and knowledge are at least as vital to economic success as natural resources and finance capital. The intangible world of information merges with the material world of money, and new phrases that combine the two, such as "intellectual capital" and "the culture industry," come into vogue. So the people who thrive in this period are the ones who can turn ideas and emotions into products. These are highly educated folk who have one foot in the bohemian world of creativity and another foot in the bourgeois realm of ambition and worldly success. The members of the new information age elite are bourgeois bohemians. Or, to take the first two letters of each word, they are Bobos.

Using what the author himself calls "a method that might best be described as comic sociology", Brooks (*ibid*.) indulgently describes a small bourgeoisie attracted by mysticism and new technologies, whose main ambition is the reconciled contradiction: "money and social conscience, critical spirit and hedonism, body cult and reckless sexuality, nonconformity and respectability, multiculturalism and mass consumption". It is about subjectivities that emerge with precision in Carolina Bandinelli's research (2015). Veronica of Milan, who "wants to make clothes that last over time, according to a 'philosophy' that is different from the dominant one in the fashion industry"; Johanna who lives in a minimalist style apartment in the most hipster district of London, next to a "shop that sells wholemeal bread loaves at 2.80 pounds each", wants "to create a line of clothes involving the community"; Alfredo who quit his job in a big bank where he earned well and invested all his savings "to found a social enterprise that promotes change in Italy", are – according to Bandinelli (*ibid*.) – the so-called changemakers:

> a new generation of well-educated men and women from middle-class families, graduates in disciplines ranging from economics to communication, from

---

10   Also through music: in 2006 French songwriter Renaud dedicated to them a song called *Les Bobos*. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZzR7-apnKA

engineering to design, who are convinced that business is the means through which to update their ethical and political values.

What is remarkable, in most of the biographies reported by Barbera and Parisi and Bandinelli, is the presence (or, better, the co-presence) of rebellious attitudes and social climbing, as if social innovators were able to produce their own subjectivity through a social ethos that combines the counterculture of the sixties and the yuppism of the eighties. These are people who, paraphrasing Brooks (2000): "grow aromatic plants with organic methods on their (polluted) balcony at home, do not fail to participate in university training courses to 'enrich their knowledge', go on holiday to a biodynamic farm (in Tuscany) and show off the look of Chiapas".

Beyond the complicated hypocrisies and the egotistical smugness of social innovators, the working ethic that characterizes them exudes *jouissance* because, although it is firmly linked to the production of surplus value (even in conditions of self-exploitation), it is self-absolving through ideal values and symbolic gratifications:

> If you are satisfied with subsistence profits, you radically change your professional perspective; if you accept less money for yourself and less margins for businesses, in exchange for social results, this combination is exciting. (interview with coworker, cit, in Barbera, Parisi, 2019, pos. 2800)

From the survey of Barbera and Parisi, over and above the symbolic gratifications, it is not possible to know exactly the salary level(s) of the social innovators. We do not know if we are dealing with a group of freelancers with working poor salaries or professional élites with profits comparable to those of a company manager, or – if the profit remains a variable of some importance, as in fact we do believe – we are dealing with a very varied set of cases.

In this regard, it is again Bourdieu's reading (1983, pp. 366-367) that reminds us what may be the conditions for the success of what the French sociologist calls a social bluff, which, to a certain extent, on the one hand is part of the distinction on the basis of which the new professions are legitimized and claimed, while on the other hand it is the result of the instrumentalization of action through subtle strategies that give shape to the preferences of individuals. The lifestyle of the small intellectual bourgeoisie contains a deliberate strategy to escape a destiny compatible with the premises contained in their school curricula, without however fully disposing of the position, the social capital and the sense of investment

possessed by the dominant classes. Those latter find in the small intellectual bourgeoisie a precious ally to consolidate their dominion, granting to this small but important fraction of the emerging class a relative legitimacy of their lifestyle, in order to exploit it economically to their own advantage[11]. Enzeberger (1976, pp. 162-164) effectively captured this prerogative:

> the frenetic productivity of the petty bourgeoisie, its capacity for renewal, should easily be explained by the fact that it has no other alternative. It is intelligent, talented, inventive because its survival depends on it. The holders of power do not need to be so: they let others invent, buy intelligence and attract the best talents in their sphere. The proletariat, instead, is deprived of any autonomous productivity. "You don't need to think!", already thundered I.W. Taylor, little bourgeois and father of rationalization, addressing the workers involved in production, and this, of course, does not only apply to the West. Thus, the fabulous talent of the petty bourgeoisie, like most of its qualities, is also explained *ex negativo* (… the petty bourgeoisie) incessantly struggles with the feeling of being superfluous.

The author of *Middle Class blues* effectively outlines a class that, being identified for what it is not: neither ruling class, nor exploited class, can only manifest itself "in negative". The German poet describes with his sarcastic style how capitalism is fully capable of thriving not only through oppression but also through individuals' adherence to the system that exploits them: offering hypothetical hopes of individual success. Having made this remark, an alternative hypothesis of the SI that we now feel the need should start from the observation that the "real" stake is the appropriation by each of us of our own subjectivity: this work of "socio-analysis" should aim at establishing what are the conditions to take back the organization of everyday life and to appropriate social life, putting an

---

11   Bourdieu (1984, p. 366) cites in this regard the case "of some veteran revolutionaries of May 1968 who have become industrial psychologists: to accept their ambiguous position and to accept themselves doing so, they are forced to invent the skilfully ambiguous discourses and practices that were, so to speak, inscribed in advance in the very definition of the position. Obliged to live out the contradiction between their messianic aspirations and the reality of their practice, to cultivate uncertainty as to their social identity in order to be able to accept it, and therefore condemned to a questioning of the world which masks an anxious self questioning, these 'intellectual lackeys' are predisposed to experience with particular intensity the existential mood of a whole intellectual generation, which, weary of desperately hoping for a collective hope, seeks in a narcissistic self-absorption the substitute for the hope of changing the social world or even of understanding it".

end to the gap between capitalist domination and the stagnation of social relations. This reflection would lead the path of the SI to the realization of a disalienated society, playful and overlord of its own subjectivity. From being the fly coachman of capitalism, the SI could be transformed into a concrete opening towards "the possible" in order to show the practical path to life-change, which remains the watchword, the purpose and the meaning of any transformation of society in a socialist key.

4. *The space in Social Innovation*

The conspicuous literature on SI has so far neglected (or considered very marginal) a key element: the space intended as space produced to support the integration of productive forces and to displace the social relations of production. Barbera and Parisi (see above), state it explicitly: "urban spaces do not count in themselves". Here, instead, we are more inclined to consider the perspective followed by Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 9) in *The Production of Space*. In that work, Lefebvre argued that "(discourses on space) implies an ideology designed to conceal that use, along with the conflicts intrinsic to the highly interested employment of a supposedly disinterested knowledge. This ideology carries no flag, and for those who accept the practice of which it is a pan it is indistinguishable from knowledge[12]". First of all, according to the French philosopher (*ibid*., p. 94):

> to picture space as a "frame" or container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient, and to imagine that this container has no other purpose than preserve what has been put in it – this is probably the initial error.

It is significant to note that Barbera and Parisi (2019, pos. 2461, *passim*), in their survey recognize (albeit with important exceptions) the prevalence of urban space as the generative/operational context of the most interesting SI experiences. However, in their reports the urban appears as a generic milieu, considered more on the basis of a series of factors that contribute to the appropriation of the advantages related to the proximity of the *centre*

---

12   Lefebvre (1991, p. 397) argues that: "the dominant discourse on space – describing what is seen by eyes affected by far more serious congenital defects than myopia or astigmatism – robs reality of meaning by dressing it in an ideological garb that does not appear as such, but instead gives the impression of being non-ideological (or else 'beyond ideology'). These vestments, to be more specific, are those of aesthetics and aestheticism, of rationality and arid rationalism".

of cultural values (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 362), as is the case of a more intense cultural offer and the stimuli provided by the attendance of groups also belonging to the dominant cultural élite. As far as we are concerned, if the SI is a framework that helps to generate (and generate its own in) a particular space, then we should immediately ask ourselves what form the production and control of this space has taken in relation to the capitalist processes that underlie the SI practices. Around this point, mainstream SI literature is really of little help. It would seem that the considerations of David Harvey (1989c, p. 3) remain valid once again:

> all too frequently, however, the study of urbanization becomes separated from that of social change and economic development, as if it can somehow be regarded either a side-show or as a passive side-product to more important and fundamental social changes. The successive revolutions in technology, space relations, social relations, consumer habits, lifestyles, and the like that have so characterised capitalist history can, it is sometimes suggested, be understood without any deep enquiry into the roots and nature of urban processes. True, this judgement is by and large made tacitly, by virtue of sin of omission rather than commission. But the antiurban bias in studies of macro-economic and macro-social change is rather too persistent for comfort. It is for this reason that it seems worthwhile to enquire what role the urban process might be playing in the quite radical restructuring going on in geographical distributions of human activity and in the political-economics dynamics of uneven geographical development in most recent times.

In practice, Harvey tells us to consider more carefully (or stop blinding ourselves) the processes of productive reconfiguration of urban space that can be traced back to the radical restructuring of production processes in recent years. If we agree to consider SI as a non-trivial part of the more complex socio-productive mosaic of the current capitalist society, then we cannot fail to reflect adequately on how the physical and social landscape of urbanization is fashioned according to precise criteria functional to the processes of value extraction. Although this is not a simple operation – because urban transformation processes are shaken by increasingly sudden and immaterial changes that undermine our descriptive capacities – some notations are possible. Starting from the abstract towards the concrete, here we can identify at least three.

4.1 *The generic space of Social Innovation*

The first notation has to do with what Harvey calls "the virtue of sins of omission rather than commission".

In this respect, the mainstream literature on SI relegates spatiality to the static dimension of existence (see below, par. 4.2) and reduces spatial transformations to a mirror that reflects only the dynamism of social interactions. This interpretation implicitly legitimises itself on the awareness (and indeed on the acquiescence) that the demands of capitalist accumulation have completely stripped the space of its vitality to replace it with a homogeneous and manipulated spatiality. To bring out an alternative point of view, we can begin by the reading of the works of the "mature" Marx (the first volume of *Das Kapital* and the *Grundrisse*) edited by Henri Lefebvre (1978). The French sociologist begins his reasoning in a very traditional way, considering capitalist development as a process of abstraction that absorbs concrete productive activity to transform it into abstract work. The decisive contribution he adds to this thesis lies in the recognition that space, as an essential support of the process of production of value, appropriates the historical dimension of human life in order to confine it in an *abstract space*, i.e. in the *homogeneous space of capitalist accumulation*.

The production of a spatial pattern conformed to the needs of capitalist accumulation certainly implies a series of spatial practices determined by it, but it also introduces forms of conflict for appropriation between groups struggling to appropriate these spaces. In a historical key, Lefebvre (1978, p. 76) takes up the class struggle between the politically victorious bourgeoisie that proved capable of "breaking" the aristocratic space of the Marais, in the centre of historic Paris, integrating it into material production, installing laboratories in sumptuous palaces, "degrading and animating this space in its own way, 'popularizing' it". (*ibid.*)

Identifying today the characteristic features of this abstract space is not difficult. They are generic spaces (see above, par. 1) as can be the various co-working, fab labs, spin-offs, business incubators, and as abstract and generic are all the spatial accounts in the mainstream SI literature. In this respect, the city of the SI finds itself quite at ease with the idea of a generic city cynically described twenty-five years ago by Rem Koolhaas (1995): a city reduced to "a reflection on today's needs and capabilities (...a city that) is equally interesting and devoid of interest in all its parts". It is therefore not surprising that the power of abstraction is concentrated in these spaces through their ability to reconfigure their value for use in forms more suited to the needs of commercial exchange. All that we can glimpse, in the poor spatial narratives concerning the SI at our disposal, concerns the overlap between the concrete space of everyday life and the abstract space of productive cooperation: these no longer constitute a dichotomy,

but a *space-time continuum* between abstract work and differentiated valorization of each space. They represent the two facets of the same space, are hierarchically linked and tend to present themselves as hardly separable from each other.

The banning of space in the scientific reflections on the IS ends up eluding – as both Lefebvre and Harvey (see above) point out in general terms – the "practical" characteristics of this same space to transform it into "a sort of absolute in the manner of philosophers" (Lefebvre, 1978, p. 109). It follows that – I take again from Lefebvre (*ibid*.) – in the a-spatiality characteristic of most scientific reflections, social innovators end up by coinciding with abstractions from their presence, from their bodies. What we miss, in this case, is a reflection that considers space as a constituent part of social morphology, not as a passive form destined to receive what is placed within it. In other words, we do not have reflections that help us to understand how, in the abstract space of the SI, the desires and the needs of the new small intellectual bourgeoisie (of which we assume here that the social innovators represent a characterizing fraction) are installed and arranged. To what extent can we consider these spaces as their "expression" and how much, instead, is a manipulated space assigned to them by superior strategies?

4.2 *Social Innovation, second and third circuit of capital*

The functioning of what we might call "the mother of all spatial manipulations" was effectively told to us almost forty years ago by Sharon Zukin (1982), in her in-depth study of New York lofts. According to Zukin, the urban redevelopment processes triggered by the settlements of the new emerging "culturally affluent" classes represent not only a creative stage and productive space of contemporary cities, but also a terrain subject to the interests of the major social, economic and political forces. In his research Zukin argued that the link between art and the preservation of urban spaces had produced revitalization strategies that introduced a new cultural strategy of accumulation: the *artistic mode of production* and suggested an important turning point in urban economic policy. However, far from being an answer to social or aesthetic problems, the artistic mode of production represented a further strategy of the urbanized capital to create a particular favourable investment climate: the reconquest of a disused portion of the city by the upper class and high real estate values. Involuntary protagonists of the artistic mode of production were the artists who, after World War II, had begun to move into the disused industrial spaces of the American metropolis,

contributing to the redevelopment of derelict parts of the city. Once the area was revitalized, the artists were replaced by the city bourgeoisie who considered the artists' bohemian lifestyle "very cool". In this way entire blocks of flats, which were a long-standing spatial and social problem, were transformed in the turn of a couple of decades into luxurious residences for the new emerging classes. This phenomenon, which has spread throughout the world, is considered today both as a model of urban regeneration through cultural activities and as a powerful generator of gentrification and could not find a more effective description than the aphorism attributed to Leo Castelli, the famous gallery owner who made American pop artists famous: "the art world is reconstructed by each generation according to a new model. Just ask a real estate agent" (Jones, 2007).

Now, reading the biographies of social innovators reported by Carolina Bandinelli (2015, pos. 548), one would be tempted to say that the world of SI has replaced that of the creative class (Florida, 2002), without however changing its underlying logic. Miranda, young architect:

> she founded her own small business, so small that she has only one employee: herself. She is involved in developing participatory design projects in suburbs and *non-lieux* of various kinds: a forgotten parking lot, a community room in a council house, the classroom where meetings are held for Alcoholics Anonymous, a sidewalk that runs between the barracks. "I didn't want people's fate to be determined by where they live. If you are born in a horrible working-class neighborhood, and you have horrible things around you, how can you be a constructive person? Positive?

Miranda lives and works in London, in Hoxton Square, Borough of Hackney, "one of the most hipsterized neighborhoods in London" (*ibid*.), she drinks "banana and kiwi juice, whose label swears to contain no preserves or additives of any kind" (*ibid*.) and is dressed in "a large, colorful sweater, tight jeans rolled just above the ankle and a pair of lace-up shoes" (*ibid*.). Miranda is part of that élite of social innovators who have ideally responded to the call launched on 4 November 2010 by then British Prime Minister, David Cameron, who publicly announced the project to transform the East End of London into a technological incubator capable of competing with Silicon Valley. In his speech, Cameron envisioned "a hub stretching from Shoreditch and Old Street to the Olympic Park" (Rayner, 2018), citing Richard Florida's thesis that young creatives would cluster in areas with a high quality of life and cultural vibrancy. Actually, commentators in the art world (*ibid*.) tend to date Hoxton's rebirth to before: to the "creative" period, when in 1993 the 22-year-old gallery

owner Joshua Compston staged his first *Fête Worse Worse Than Death*, a sort of country fair. At the inauguration of the Fête, the artist Damien Hirst, leader of the Young British Artists group, dressed as a clown, made the participants pay 1 pound to do a painting experiment and 50 cents to look at his penis, which had been painted in colour for the occasion. Before that, Hoxton and the Shoreditch area were – in the memories of 90-year-old jazz bassist Peter Ind, who opened the Bass Clef Club in Hoxton Square in 1984: "very bumpy: someone was killed around the corner, the parked cars were punctually looted. It reminded me of the various clubs in New York City when I lived there in the 1950s. Many were also very modest, if not rough" (*ibid*.). In 2016, Knight Frank Global Property reported that office rentals in Shoreditch had increased by 24% over the previous year, and by 2017 Shoreditch had become the most expensive technology district in the world, with average rentals of 64.60 pound (almost 80 euros) per square meter. This is higher than the Mid-Market District of San Francisco and almost double that of an equivalent area in Brooklyn. According to Labour newspaper *The Guardian* (*ibid*.), as early as the date of the 2012 Olympic Games, Hoxton no longer looked like an artistic and low-cost neighborhood, but an exclusive technological start-up. In 2014, music and events producer Elliott Jack, who has been in Hoxton Square since 2002, realized that the transformation of the neighborhood was putting pressure on his small office: "When I left Hoxton, it was filled with technology startups that were driving up rents exorbitantly. At one point, our landlord didn't renew our rent, he renovated the building, rented it out to technicians working for Facebook or start-ups in artificial intelligence and life sciences who paid twice as much rent as we did". (*ibid*.) According to Knight Frank Global Property, despite the possible impacts of Brexit, East London landlords can still expect their office revenues to increase by another 11.4% over the next three years.

Here's the data. At this point, if we were to have the desire to undertake an analysis that was not limited to appearances, we could then start from the consideration that "innovative neighbourhoods" certainly represent a stimulating stage and a productive space functional to the lifestyles of the emerging intellectual small bourgeoisie, dedicated to social innovation. However, all this should not distract us too much from the fact that, as we have already written, these same spaces represent a terrain subject to the interests of the hegemonic social, economic and political forces (Zukin, 1982). With all due attention, we can observe that it is through the study of the relationships that are built on this ground that we can understand how the underground conflict is articulated for the promotion, development and

control of urban space. Considered in this way, the presumed centrality of social innovators necessarily takes a back seat, just as it was for "the creatives" (Borelli, 2009). They acting as unaware puppets of urban competition, end up becoming surrogates of interests located far beyond their field of action.

Miranda lives and works in a space totally impregnated by the neoliberal and gentrificatory logic of capitalist accumulation, but "she approaches the problem of structural inequality in neoliberal society by acting in a certain (other) neighbourhood, in a certain (other) school, with a certain (other) group of people". (Bandinelli, 2015, pos. 567, text in brackets added). Following again Brooks' (2000) insights on the Bobo, Miranda "is the reconciled contradiction: money and social conscience, critical spirit and hedonism (...Miranda) combines the counterculture of the 1960s and the yuppism of the 1980s into a single social ethos".

If the new *innovative mode of production* appears to us to be well aligned with the artistic mode of production described by Zukin (1982), we note that both are indebted to Lefebvre (1991, pp. 335, emphasis original) who, through the previous definition of *urban moment* (Lefebvre, 2003) had well understood, almost fifty years ago, the characteristics of these modes of production:

> in the history of capitalism real property has played but a minor role (…) The situation of this branch, and of the whole economic sector in question, has now changed almost everywhere, though most of all in the major industrialized countries. Capitalism has taken possession of the land, and *mobilized* it to the point where this sector is fast becoming *central*. Why? Because it is a new sector – and hence whole economic sector in question, has now changed almost everywhere, though most of all in the major industrialized countries. Capital has thus ruled into the production of space in preference to the classical form of production – in preference to the production of means of production (machinery) and that of consumer goods.

In Lefebvre, the idea of a "second circuit of the capital", distinct from the one theorized by Marx, which through real estate constitutes a separate circuit, makes its way. Supporting the notion that real estate investments drive cities' growth policies in very specific ways, Lefebvre suggests that real estate investments are not (only) a particular case of space transformation – a derivative of the primary circuit – but a process of reproduction in which social activities not only affect interactions between individuals but also between spaces. Lefebvre understood that real estate activities represent a type of investment that competes with others in

investors' capital allocation decisions. He theorized in this way two aspects: first, that the real estate market is to all intents and purposes an integral part of the wider capital market and, second, that the real estate sector, unlike industrial and commercial activities, does not require the combination of factors of production in a structure. Subsequently, Harvey (1989a), better clarified this aspect, coming to recognize three distinct circuits of the capital. To the traditional circuit linked to production processes and the secondary circuit represented by real estate investments, Harvey added a third circuit consisting of investments in technological innovation and its infrastructures. The emergence of the second and third circuits of capital is justified, according to Hervey, by the capitalist system's need to find solutions to the chronic problem of overaccumulation produced by the first circuit. In short, the second and third circuits of capital represent feasible (albeit temporary) solutions to the problem of excessive accumulation of capital in relation to the possibility of its profitable reuse within the first circuit. In this way, just as the second circuit exploits the spatial distinction of emerging social innovators, the third circuit of capital – since it includes investments in technology and innovation, together with a wide range of social expenditures – it places some constraints on SI practices. It concerns, in this last circuit, of a sector that should be largely mediated by the state through policies for technological innovation and welfare. However, the growing consensus gathered around the forms of public-private partnerships and the privatization of public services in the name of greater efficiency, represents a fairly evident indicator of the tendency to delegate to the third circuit of capital (and therefore to market logic) services previously provided by the public sector. Following Bandinelli (2015), the transformation that guides the action of social innovators would be configured as a persuasive action that, instead of opposing the logic of the neoliberal economy, tries to redefine them by replacing their contents, but leaving their structure unchanged. Thus "the entrepreneurial and competitive economy is accepted, but only if it is diverted towards social objectives, and the translation of the social sphere into economic indicators is desirable, if such indicators serve to measure and give value to actions with a positive impact" (*ibid.*, pos. 599-605).

In essence, the new small intellectual bourgeoisie to which the social innovators belong is self-representing as prosperous but not greedy, able to meet the most traditionalist expectations without however appearing conformist and its motto would be: "business is not made to make money, but to do something you love: life should be an extended hobby". The desire to work in activities and in cool places as they themselves believe they are,

channels them into spatial choices whose final outcome are the predatory processes that the production of real estate income inexorably puts into action. Hoxton Square and Shoreditch are the perfect example of urban transformations sidereally distant from the ideal local communities that Jane Jacobs (1961) had in mind – made up of a dense fabric of interactions, stimulated by a spontaneous urban *pot-purri* made up of buildings, courtyards, streets, alleys and the social and economic activities that took place in these spaces. Rather, they seem, beyond superficial appearances, to be a middle way between technological parks and *Common Interest Development* (CID), in which the working/living and public spaces are planned down to the smallest detail and completely privatised. *The ground zero of gentrification*, to use the nice metaphor coined by Alex Rayner (2018).

4.3 *The coworking of General Intellect*

The third and final remark concerns the micro dimension of these transformations: the workplace. According to Antonio Negri's critical analysis (2018), today the metropolis relates to the multitude as the factory once did to the working class. This leads us to consider the lifestyles of social innovators in greater depth, carefully considering the transformations that in recent years have affected living labour, fixed capital and the workplace. Going deeper into the issues we have raised in the two previous paragraphs (see 4.1 and 4.2 above), we approach the "concrete" of the SI space and we are led to observe that a not negligible part of these relationships takes place within environments that indefinitely integrate work and daily life, productive work and leisure, work spaces and recreation spaces. Along this perspective the differences between home and workplace tend to become more nuanced: living and working intertwine in a new form of value production. If "living in the home" or "living in the workplace" have become concepts that no longer tend towards a clear Fordist separation or towards the four functions sanctified by the modern movement – working, living, moving and recreating – but towards the production of multifunctional spaces suitable for hosting lifestyles increasingly related to the production of value, then the concept of living becomes indeterminate and polysemic. Everything is "home". Negri writes (2018, pp. 142-143, emphasis original):

> when we consider habitation from a subjective point of view, with the advent of digitisation of society and computerisation of the city, it is possible to *work at home* in a situation where the architectonic elements and the networks of communication are inserted into the fabric of the house itself. And, if the city

has a thousand times, a thousand different temporalities that relate to patterns of work, this is not due simply to precariousness and mobility of workforce but to the material penetration of communication into habitations and to the fact that people become singularised in them. *General intellect lives somewhere; it has found a home.* But is a wretched abode (…) Analysing the shift that has taken people's houses become the "shell" of the new workplace means interrogating the forms of contemporary life – if it is true that production is now tied entirely to forms of life.

From this perspective, the working attitudes of social innovators produced the abstract space – no longer exclusively working or living, no longer totally private or collective – functional to a new idea of personal capitalism as well as alternative versions of cooperative capitalism. This tension highlights the production of work spaces (the various coworking, fab lab, spin-off, etc.) functional to the new mode of cognitive production, but reduces spatial relations to simple functions of the new forms of reticular and cognitive production in which daily life is an integral part of the production system.

The extraordinary growth of collective spaces for work activities characteristic of the last decade is the evidence of the trend towards the physical re-territorialization of "nomadic" work practices: paraphrasing Negri (*ibid*.), we could say that "the factory has moved into coworking". When coworking becomes the envelope of the new workplace, whose function is to encourage spatial practices between different subjects participating in a flow of work cooperation, this happens with important consequences affecting the way we work because "now people do not work on precise indications and serial determinations, but rather within an *environment of freedom*, a compound [*costituenza*] of living, a *dispositif* of autonomous projectivity" (*ibid*., p. 143, emphasis original). The autonomy to which Negri refers develops within an abstract cooperation that is profoundly different from the physical contiguity that existed in the factory: "the bosses could exert discipline over that physical contiguity; on abstract cooperation they cat at most exert *control*» (*ibid*. emphasis original). Today's metropolis of coworking is a model of urbanization radically different both from the regime of the big factory and from the subsequent district models: it is a reality in which the logics of accumulation and production of value are built around practices of productive cooperation of the workforce scattered throughout the territory. For these reasons, the community optimism of coworking does not seem to us sufficient to hide the hyper-competitive and socially fragmented nature of our historical

period. It is not all gold that glitters: this is how Rebekah Campbell (2014) describes her experience as a coworker in New York:

> it all appeared straightforward, and at first, the place felt like a utopia. Here we were, in the hub of the New York tech community, surrounded by funky people designing products that just might change the world. Everyone seemed ambitious and to be having a great time. The desks had been laid out in long rows facing each other with power points in the middle. The space had a quiet side (no talking) and a noisy side where groups could sit and converse. We decided to work on the quiet side and use a meeting room when we needed to talk (…) Part of the appeal of a co-working space lay in the hope of meeting entrepreneurial teams from which we could learn. But for the most part, our co-workers were wannabes with no real interest in building companies. They wanted the vibe of the scene more than its work. People wandered up to me and asked about Posse and whether they could partner with us — even when there was no rationale for doing so. Being in the same "community" extended an implicit invitation for anyone to interrupt our work, pitch an idea or ask advice. Many of the projects sounded harebrained or worse, but they gave their owners the chance to chase the start-up dream for a few months before returning to corporate life (…) There were more than 200 companies operating from our co-working space, and some of the more serious ones used the close community to their advantage. I knew of at least three other start-ups that were also building location-based shopping recommendation engines, and their team members were always inviting our team members to lunch. I wonder why. Other entrepreneurs watched us in the press and asked me for media contacts. My breaking point came when a competitor tried to entice one of our engineers with a more lucrative job offer. At that point, we moved out.

Campbell's experience helps us to understand that, beyond sharing rhetorics, the ethics of freelance workers is much more akin to the new intellectual *petit-bourgeoisie* than to the modern industrial working class: mobbing has replaced class struggle. Along this perspective, the space of coworking operates as a device subject to the "powerful biopolitical force of a system that, for social recognition, relies as much on passion and as much on coldness, in a context of limited syndication and politicization combined with very little self-reflexivity" (Gandini, 2015). Bauman (2018, pp. XXII-XXIII) grasped very well this attitude, typical of a social system increasingly unsuitable for linking individual improvement to the social one:

> each individual finds himself forced to seek or build individual solutions to the problems produced by society, and then to put them into practice, on the basis of his own intellect and individual resources. The goal is no longer a better society (there is no concrete hope of improving it), but the improvement of one's individual position within that society that is basically and surely impossible to

correct. Instead of common rewards for collective efforts at social reform, there
was only spoils left to be won at the expense of competitors.

What is missing is an in-depth reflection by those involved in the
apparent success of coworking – researchers, politicians, private investors,
coworkers themselves – who really are willing to undertake a critical
analysis of the so-called economy of sharing and to consider the internal
contradictions that rhetoric such as: "you will work and live in a network
of people like you" skilfully conceal. The impression is that behind the
community optimism of sharing rhetorics lies the naked reality of an
increasingly a fragmented society of rampant individualism; a socio-
economic world of growing loneliness, isolation and inequality. Something
very similar to what Sherry Turkle (2011) equates to: "being together
alone".

5. *Are social innovators the masters of their own subjectivity or are they the fly coachman of predatory capitalism?*

Actively dealing with SI should mean engaging in social transformation
processes dedicated to achieving a better society. Although the term
"better" is absolutely indeterminate and prey to the most varied subjective
interpretations, we can nevertheless agree that an activity to which it is
certainly worth committing ourselves is one that allows each of us to
fully realize our own subjectivity. One possible way to approximate this
objective is to imagine that the path to a better society should happen on
an individual level and through lifestyles and values that counteract the
alienation, exploitation and deadly monotony inflicted on us by neoliberal
capitalism. Now, if neither the state nor the free market are considered to
be able to operate effectively towards an objective of such vast magnitude,
then the project of achieving human happiness through the realization of a
society necessarily requires other forms of organization and other strategies
of action. Given the question in such general terms, the SI is part of these
forms and strategies.
So far the mainstream and the radical SI vision coincide quite well.
The paths diverge when we consider the practicable paths to "counteract
the alienation, exploitation and deadly monotony administered to us by
neoliberal capitalism". Mainstream theorists, as we have seen – albeit
among a thousand distinctions (see above, par. 1) – take a "reformist"
position towards capitalism: capitalism can be "socialized from within",

that is, adopting a capitalist approach to reform capitalism itself: a middle way between Margaret Thatcher's TINA and the strategies of "fight fire with fire". For radical criticism, this position is impracticable because the capitalist system puts in place (and continually renews) constraints – political, economic, legal, technological, social – which operate as devices to remove antagonistic pressures and/or to favour certain power groups. A radical practice of the SI cannot exist without counteracting this system.

These are irreconcilable positions that open up deep and numerous contradictions. A way suggested by Mao Tse-tung (2009, pp. 233-237 ed. or., 1937), according to which, in the study of any complex process that contains more than two contradictions, it is necessary to look for the main contradiction. Having determined this, it is then easier to deal with the problems. In the case of the SI the main contradiction may not be, as it would seem at first sight, the contradiction between the use value and the exchange value in social practices. If we take for true the individualistic and anti-systemic nature of SI, then the main contradiction in SI practices is the one identified by Gandini (2015, see above): the scarce self-reflexivity of social innovators. A possible anchorage point could be that of dealing more with the daily life of social innovators having in mind that dealing with their daily life means providing the basis for a real process of social innovation. However, the daily life of social innovators, as we have known it through the biographies we have read, is so absorbed, subjected and subordinated to economic imperatives that it succumbs under the laws of exchange. It is hardly surprising that such everyday life goes hand in hand with the proliferation of gentrified neighbourhoods, with the enormous success of the (false) ideology of sharing, with the search for the "extraordinary", with the (apparent) transgression of the rules.

The problem that could be evident to us in the contradiction between living in the neighborhood populated by bourgeois and creative hipsters and dealing with the "forgotten parking lot, a community room in a council house, the classroom where meetings are held for Alcoholics Anonymous, a sidewalk that runs between the barracks" (Bandinelli, 2015, see above) lends itself not to be reduced and trivialized to the manifestation of a compassionate subjectivity or, in the worst case, hypocritical.

It can also lend itself to representing an intense experience in one's daily life, to the point of offering the possibility of a critique of everyday life itself. All these experiences – the parking lot, the classroom of the Alcoholics Anonymous, the sidewalk that runs between the barracks – can represent moments related to strong feelings, break the commodified continuum of one's present and generate the premises for a different daily life. The task

of the SI we hope for is to give impetus to all those movements of users or citizens who have not yet found either an expression or a language of their own, and very often are locked within such narrow areas (social, spatial, cultural) that they miss the political significance of their actions. A radical approach to the SI leads us to consider that a society that intends to transform itself in the direction of socialism cannot coexist either with the restrictive power of capitalism that, erected above the whole society, imprisons and engulfs the spontaneity of social practices, or with the commodification of space that it builds to its own measure and utility. In Lefebvrian terms, we could conclude by saying that a project of IS corresponds to a total project of life or, otherwise, is nothing more than one of the multiple existential dimensions corrupted by hegemonic systems.

Bibliographical References

Accardo, A. (2020a), *Le petit bourgeois gentilhomme. Sur les prétentions hégémoniques des classes moyenne*s, Agone, Paris (ed. or, 2003)**.**

Accardo, A. (2020b), "Vie et mort du petit-bourgeois gentilhomme", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, janvier, p. 3.

Agamben, G. (1998), *Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City.

Aglietta, M. (1976), *Régulation et crises du capitalisme*, Odile Jacob, Paris.

Bagnasco, A. (ed.) (2008), *Ceto medio. Perché e come occuparsene*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Bagnasco, A. (2016), *La questione del ceto medio. Un racconto del cambiamento sociale*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Bandinelli, C. (2015), *Il miglior lavoro del modo*, Doppiozero, Milano, kindle edition.

Barbera, F., Negri, N., Zanetti, M. (2008), "Una questione generazionale? Ingresso nella vita adulta, crisi del ceto medio e cittadinanza sociale, in A. Bagnasco (ed.), *Ceto medio. Perché e come occuparsene*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 119-164.

Barbera, F., Parisi, T. (2019), *Innovatori sociali. La sindrome di Prometeo nell'Italia che cambia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, ed. kindle.

Bauman, Z. (2017), *Retrotopia*, Polity Press, London.

Boltanski, L., Chiappello, E. (2005), *The New Spirit of Capitalism,* Verso, London.

Borelli, G. (2009), "Urbanizzazione 'creativa' e modo artistico di produzione dello spazio. Due casi milanesi", *Sociologia Urbana e Rurale*, n. 90, pp. 49-88.

Bourdieu, P. (1984), *The Distinction.A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Busacca, M. (2019), *Innovazione sociale. Città, politiche e forme di ricostruzione del mercato*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano.

Campbell, R. (2014), "Why I Ditched My Co-Working Space", *New York Times*, 8 July.

Carayannis, E.G., Campbell, D.F.J. (2009) ''Mode 3' and 'Quadruple Helix': toward a 21st century fractal innovation ecosystem', *International Journal Technology Management*, vol. 46, nn. 3/4, pp. 201-234.

Carayannis, E.G., Barth, T.D.; Campbell, D.F.J (2012). "The Quintuple Helix innovation model: global warming as a challenge and driver for innovation", *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. vol. 1, n. 2.

Corbetta, P.G. (2015), *La ricerca sociale: metodologia e tecniche. I paradigmi di riferimento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, Vol. I.

Dahl, R.A. (1971), *Poliarchy, Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Enzensberger, H.M. (1976), "On the Irresistibility of the Petty Bourgeoisie", *Telos*, December 21, n. 30, pp. 161-166.

Etzkowitz, H., Leydesdorff, L. (1995), "The Triple Helix University-Industry-Government Relations: A Laboratory for Knowledge-Based Economic Development" *EASST Review*, n.14, pp. 14-19.

Etzkowitz, H., Leydesdorff, L. (1997), *Universities and the Global Knowledge Economy: A Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations*, Pinter, London.

Etzkowitz, H., Leydesdorff, L. (1998). "The Endless Transition: A 'Triple Helix' of University-Industry-Government Relations, Introduction to a Theme Issue" *Minerva*, n. 36, pp. 203-208.

Etzkowitz, H., Leydesdorff, L. (2000), "The Dynamics of Innovation: From National Systems and 'Mode 2' to a Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations", *Research Policy*, vol. 29, n.2, pp. 109-123.

Florida, R. (2002), *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York.

Foucault, M. (2004), *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France* 1978-79, Seuil, Paris .

Fougère, M., Segercrantz, B., Seek, H. (2017), "A Critical Reading of European Union's Social Innovation Policy Discourse: (Re)Legitimizing Neoliberalism, *Organizations*, vol. 24, n. 6., pp 819-843.

Friedrichs, R. W. (1970), *A Sociology of Sociology*, Free Press, New York.

Gandini, A. (2015), "The rise of coworking spaces: A literature review", *Ephemera. Theory & Politics in Organization*, vol. 15, n. 1, pp. 193-205.

Garnier, J.P. (2010), *Une violence éminemment contemporaine : essais sur la ville, la petite bourgeoisie intellectuelle et l'effacement des classes populaires*, Agone, Paris.

Godin B. (2012), "Social innovation: Utopias of Innovation from c.1830 to the Present", *Working Paper n. 11, Project on the Intellectual History of Innovation*, INRS, Montréal.

Gramsci, A. (1948-1951), *I quaderni del carcere*, Einaudi, Torino.

Harvey, D. (1989a), *The Urban Experienc*e, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Harvey, D. (1989b), *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Harvey, D. (1989c), "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism", Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography, vol. 71, n. 1, pp. 3-17.

Howaldt, J., Butzin, A., Domansky, D., Kaletka, C. (2014), "Theoretical Approaches to Social Innovation-A Critical Literature Review", A deliverabale of the *Project Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change*, Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle.

Jessop, B., Moulaert, F., Hulgård, L. Hamdouch, A. (2013), "Social Innovation Research: A New Stage inb Innovation Analysis?", in F. Moulaert, D. Mc Callum, A. Mehmood, A. Hamdouch (eds.), *The International Handbook of Social Innovation. Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*, Edward Elagar, Cheltenham.

Jones, A. (2007), *Leo Castelli. L'italiano che inventò l'arte in America*, Castelvecchi, Milano.

Judge, D., Stoker, G., Wolman, H. (eds.) (1995), *Theories of Urban Politics*, Sage, London.

Kelly, K. (2016), *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*, Viking Press, New York.

Kuhn, T. S. (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Lefebvre, H. (2003), *The Urban Revolution*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Lefebvre, H. (1991), *The Production of Space*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Lindblom, C.E. (1965), *The Intelligence of Democracy: Decision Making Through Mutual Adjustment*, Free Press, New York.

Mao Tse-tung (2009), *The Theory of the Permanent Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (ed. or. 1937).

Marques, P., Morgan, K., Richardson, R. (2018), "Social Innovation in Question: The Theoretical and Practical Implications of a Contested Concept", E*nvironment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 36, n. 3, pp. 496-512.

Mc Lennan, G. (1989), *Marxism, Pluralism, and Beyond*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Mc. Lennan, G. (1993), "The Evolution of Pluralist Theory", in M. Hill (ed.), *The Policy Process: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, pp. 59-68.

Negri, A. (2018), *From the Factory to the Metropolis*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Negri, A., Hardt, M. (1995), *Il lavoro di Dioniso*, manifestolibri, Roma.

Negri, A., Hardt, M. (2000), *Empire.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Rayner, A. (2018), "Gentrification's ground zero: The rise and fall of Hoxton Square", *The Guardian*, 14 March.

Sennett, R. (1998), *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W. W. Norton & Company, London and New York.

Standing, G. (2014), *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Turkle, S. (2011), *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Basic Books, London.

Vecchi, B. (2017), *Il capitalismo delle piattaforme*, manifestolibri, Roma.

Zukin, S. (1982), *Loft Living. Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Guido Borelli and Maurizio Busacca
INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO NEGRI

Paris, 7 February 2019 (reviewed by the author in April 2020)

GB: *What do you think about the great fortune that Social Innovation practices are having: are they new forms of production of the commonwealth and/or the latest ruse of capital in extracting value from everyday life?*

Social Innovation: typical use of new words to express command. In this regard, Foucault amused himself, took neologisms and showed how to use them to say things that power wanted to be said: order and obedience. Moreover, the way Social Innovation is said today is very old, it goes back to the past, it indicates the work of assistance and free social programming that once relied on the Churches – on nuns and friars. Again that same free work. Today it is done to the unemployed, more or less ideologically framed in various associative figures. I think, however, that this is something that only marginally qualifies the current production system and in particular the production and economic management of the commonwealth. I am afraid that behind the popularity that the term Social Innovation enjoys today, we end up forgetting its foundation: the world of finance lurking behind these little charities.

That being said, from my point of view, I would add that Social Innovation practices do not represent anything particularly new either: they are the classic neoliberal model of using capital and collective goods for underpaid and/or free and/or generally benevolent work (although I do not see all this benevolence). As for the idea that Social Innovation is the production of the commonwealth, I would say no: I would say rather, that it is the production of marginal goods or goods taken away from the capitalist extraction of value. In other words, these are marginal activities to be summarised indirectly in the process of accumulation. Some people speak of them as moments of "formal subsumption" of the social, which are

established in a regime of "real subsumption", as indexes of fragmentation, as refusals or elements of incompleteness within the latter. It's not a ruse – as you suggest. The word "ruse" – in its Hegelian resonances – struck me, however, because it might have seemed that these processes concealed an important passage for the construction of the commonwealth but, instead, this is not the case. You probably have in mind the "ruse" of capital because you consider it ready, as it is in fact, to subsume all forms of production of value, including socially produced ones. Actually, it is not that capital is ruse when it does these things: it simply does its job. The fact to consider is that we have moved to a regime of accumulation through extraction (or, if you like, "dispossession"): dispossession as exploitation operated on a high level of abstraction of work. These are forms of exploitation that coincide with forms of socialisation of work in which paid and unpaid activities – which more or less largely, more or less directly affect the action of exploitation – are today increasingly equalised through logistical systems: systems that include and unify and hierarchise production, reproduction and circulation services under the command of financial capital. So ruse, if there is one, is so widespread that it has become the very substance of command.

At this point, the term "ruse" – which is (as mentioned) a Hegelian term for which necessity is transformed into a game of reason and/or ephemeral randomness – can be used only if one agrees to consider the whole system as entirely articulated by ruses, which have become commonwealth, in the banal sense of the term.

GB: *We have the feeling that the label "Social Innovation" was created ad hoc, with the aim on the one hand to undermine the conflict by placing it within the multitude: in reality less cooperation is produced and an internal conflict is created through these groups themselves. On the other hand, this label legitimises to put to work a whole life, without any distinction between spaces and times.*

I totally agree. I've been thinking about these power techniques for a long time. And I am pleased because it seems to me that we all finally agree on the definition and implementation of the concepts of "formal subsumption" and "real subsumption". Just in this period, I had a couple of meetings with Étienne Balibar, with whom I discussed about the *gilet jaunes*. He too agrees that there are no longer any alternative spaces to the real, global, time and space subsumption of life—unless, indeed, this subsumption has

been broken by struggles. Once it is recognised that we are all subsumed under capital, the problem will be to understand the limit within which a break in the system, in the relation of capital, becomes significant. If capital is a relationship, which some call dialectical, others antagonistic (and I am for the latter definition), even if we do not see exactly what the breaking points and the sublimation points are within this relationship, I think that these must be there and that they can only be determined by the movements of struggle. This is where the great constructions of the commonwealth come from. Nowadays, the problem is to be able to conceive, to understand whether there is the possibility to build spaces, initiatives that can then turn into great avalanches of the commonwealth: within, obviously, the general condition of subsumption, in which all of us are immersed.

GB: *At some point along your path you started to bring attention to the city. Henri Lefebvre said that we could never think of changing society, unless we first change the space in which this society takes shape, because a capitalist space binds us to a capitalist logic. For Lefebvre, the city was understood as a place produced by capitalism.*

One of my last books in English, *From the Factory to the Metropolis*, is the resumption of things written since the 1970s about the city. I think it could be useful as a basis for further research in this area. Today, there are a few experiments in (so-called) liberated neighbourhoods everywhere. It is clear that a metropolitan neighbourhood can be very difficult to free, for example from smog (through the activity of its inhabitants), but of neighbourhoods where citizens can maintain a decent standard of living, out of the traffic that breaks everything, which are decentralised but served by adequate communication systems, where there are services of all kinds and small distribution guaranteed with a wide range of possibilities, green spaces and so on – of these neighbourhoods there are some; and I have to say that in some cases they represent very interesting experiences. I am thinking in particular of the case of the ZAD (zones à défendre): metropolitan towns or in agricultural areas, sometimes located in previously miserable places. It is in these places that it becomes possible to build communities governed by a "moral economy". This is a concept developed by Edward Thompson in his *The Making of the English Working Class*[1]. In that book,

---

1   Thompson's book is from 1963 and focusses in particular on how the English working class, which emerged through the degradation of the Industrial

Thompson recognises, in England at the dawn of the working class, a resistance to capitalist development, which may seem conservative: in fact, it is not. Rather, the moral economy represents a way of life that resists industrialisation and increasing urbanisation and is neither uprooted nor alienated. This generates a capacity for self-valorisation and the exercise of force that gradually becomes, in Thompson's narrative, worker opposition. It is extremely important in the face of capitalist innovation to recognise those use values attached to space and tradition that can be taken up in constructive terms: constructive of an alternative, always, or exercise of strength. It seems to me very important to insist on this point because, in a moment of catastrophe of the existing world and of great transition, even if we do not see on the horizon forces capable of breaking this situation, we perceive that the moral economy is a figure of resistance capable of defending us and alluding to the other. I perfectly realise that this means little from a political point of view: but it indicates something that is more than a potential, it is – to put it in Deleuzian terms – a virtuality. Seizing today the virtuality of the present allows us not to obscure hope. For Lefebvre, the metropolis was the privileged place of the struggle against capital.

GB: *According to David Harvey, in the cities operates a profound contradiction. On the one hand – long before the Occupy movement – cities had already become the central places of revolutionary politics: historically, the deepest currents of social and political change were emerging in cities. In this respect, cities are producers of innovative and, in some cases, utopian thoughts and projects. At the same time they are also the privileged centres of capital accumulation and the front line of struggle for those who control access to urban resources and for those who establish the quality and pace of daily life. In this second perspective, cities appear to us as islands surrounded by the capitalist sea that somehow incorporates them, marginalises them and keeps them in check.*

When I first met him, Harvey was absolutely against allowing that exploitation goes through extraction. Until ten years ago, he just didn't want to hear about it, then from Rebel Cities, he changed his perspective.

Revolution, was able to create a culture and political consciousness of great vitality. In 1971, Thompson further deepened the concept of moral economy in: "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century", published in the number 50 of *Past and Present* magazine (Interviewers' note).

I remember that he came to Passignano in 2014 at the *Euronomade Conference*: we had a long discussion and – even though he was already convinced about the extraction thesis – he played with us to make us say this pretending not to be so. On that occasion, there was a very important and very positive exchange because Harvey then abandoned the idea that extraction became predominant only in small islands of life and production and understood that at the basis of this passage there is an ontological virtuality, that it is general and should be commensurate with the transformation of the way of production. But I would like to add a second remark: Harvey promotes his conception of value and plus-value in terms of accumulation by dispossession. Now, in my opinion, this definition is vaguely inappropriate, and a bit too dramatic: it comes directly from Marx's chapters on primitive accumulation. Today the extractive practices adopted by financial capital do not have the ferocity they had at the time of primitive accumulation. It should also be pointed out that, placed in this way, the concept of dispossession can be confused, if one thinks that extraction is not simply of plus-value, but also of raw materials, natural goods and so on.

GB: *How can neoliberalism give up on innovation? After all, stability has always been the great spectre of growth: it is paradoxical that neoliberalism proposes stability, when it has made creative destruction its raison d'être.*

This is true, but one must think that neoliberalism is always crossed with ordoliberalism, which is fundamental for stability. In my opinion, today (and not only today, but also yesterday), continental ordoliberalism has proved more effective than Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism. We have to consider that behind the aggressiveness of world markets and globalisation, there are not simply Trump's follies and China's great growth; there is a civil and social instability that is profound, and that proclaims: "we have had enough!". Against the rhetoric of "we must adapt", there is a growing part of the population that says: "we have had enough!". The *gilet jaunes* are part of this protest; these days, when they connected with the *Confédération générale du travail,* there were over three hundred thousand. For France, three hundred thousand people in the square is a big thing. I don't find any of this in Social Innovation practices: all I see is, for the moment, an incitement to play on the margins. My knowledge of these social innovation experiments is fundamentally linked to marginal

and peripheral situations that I believe are only with great difficulties generative of commonwealth. Often the Social Innovation indicators are based on criteria that are exhausted in the mainstream economy. If, on the other hand, you start measuring things with different indicators, based on well-being for example, then the issue could change radically. These experiments could then reveal "ethical islands". To give an example, when I was young, there was the ethics of hitchhiking around the world. From the age of sixteen to twenty-five – it was the years after 1945 – for me, hitchhiking was a formidable school (certainly more than doing the Balilla). This is an example of marginal but innovative ethics because with hitchhiking you became European, you learned languages and all this on your own. Then there was the season of social centres. In Italy, it is known, social centres were initially places where people used to take drugs (and were allowed to do so). But then they developed into political centres: today, there are some that have become truly excellent political and cultural centres. These experiments are very useful to draw an ethical point of view of development, as they were boy-scouts a century ago. I remember that in '68/'69, at the birth of *Potere Operaio*, about ten scout clubs joined this new collective. It is still a question of moral economy.

MB: *The question of social centres is interesting: in the nineties, they were a sort of cultural enterprise ante litteram, but in fact the social centres of those years were something very similar to the one that then, in the early two thousand years, took the form of a cultural enterprise. Today, the most significant experiences of that period have evolved into real cultural centres, in different independent ways. Often, cultural literacy was made and this literacy (which was never full in social centres except in those that worked better), was entirely realised after the year 2000: from there, the first fundamentally horizontal cultural enterprises matured such that more than making culture constitute circles, that is, they put ideas into circulation. We can then observe that there are interesting elements – even biographical ones – of the people who attend and actively participate in these experiences of social innovation. To understand us: many of them have lived the experience of the Seattle and Genoa season and in many cases, when you talk to them through interviews or simple conversations, they bring back to those moments, which translate in terms of defeat, even a part of their subsequent experience. And so it is interesting to see how a sort of continuity is reconstructed in these experiences that defining politics is perhaps too much, but certainly ethical and moral.*

One must be very careful in using the term "defeat" with excessive ease, as if it were one of the inevitable effects that neoliberalism assigns to those who challenge it, as if it is only neoliberalism that wins. In my opinion, instead, the most important thing about stories of social innovation is that they are stories of real people who deposit and communicate experiences, that is the fact that they constitute an ontological background produced by these experiences. You can't talk in this case of defeat. There is a risk of turning every utopia into defeat, and above all, that model of sensitivity that has generated them. At this point I speak like an old man, but as one who has lived this experience. Thus, one cannot speak of defeat as far as the experience of the social centres in Italy is concerned, even if it is now over: it has been an experience that has greatly expanded the capacity for political literacy and has also produced and cultivated forms of life and joy. In the social centres one was educated in the pleasure of life, in communication, in discovering oneself in a maturity that was no longer that offered by the parishes or sections of the Communist Party of the past. There was a real anthropological transformation to which that experience led.

GB: *Has the experience of social centres indicated the possibility of a re-appropriation of daily life, the possibility of an alternative to the deadly alienation administered by neoliberalism?*

I guess so! In my opinion, firstly, it is worth using purely and harshly Marxist economic indicators to highlight the importance of social centres. They are an amount of labour force wrenched from accumulation: this is the construction of the commonwealth, which passes through the ability to put together concrete work and abstract work: in this case, concrete work subtracted from capital, and abstract work recovered from that upside-down accumulation, from that ontological deposit that the working class struggle has managed to subtract from capital: such as, for example, social education and welfare in general. In the neoliberal era, we witnessed one of the most frightening spectacles, which was the fierce attack on public assistance and welfare. On this ground, however, there was a defence: this cannot be defined as a defeat; on the contrary, this is the commonwealth. Despite everything, I remain optimistic, in the fight on this ground, neoliberalism is unlikely to win. Last night I went to a beautiful seminar where there was an old, retired professor who told us how social assistance in France was born. It was 1946 and a communist minister for the first time unified all services of assistance to workers and citizens, those concerning both retirement and

health care, and those concerning family care (which, in France, had always been used in provocative terms, because the family quota for the head of the family in the factory – family allowances – had always been used to avoid generalised wage increases. This programmatic device had been initiated by the reactionaries of the Third Republic, with salary being regarded as a demographic incentive – those in power believed that the defeat in the 1870-1871 war was due to the fact that France had few offspring. From that moment, the question of offspring was used to break any attempt to fight over wages: the rewards for the prolificness of families against any attempt to obtain general benefits). But in 1946, Welfare was unified in France too, with an operation that William Beveridge had simultaneously and laboriously done in England. From here, social security functions independently of any type of contributory correspondence: it is the man and not the worker at its centre. This is a true institution of the commonwealth. The process of attributing collective goods to human capital can be perfectly understood only to the extent that we can consider the possibility that from human capital, one can return to being human again. And consequently, we can exercise self-government. Today, there are very interesting cooperative attempts, especially when applied to the great productive spheres. In this regard, I am reminded of the Smart Cooperative experience in Brussels, which offers consulting services, management tools, shared spaces and a whole range of possibilities to develop a business project or an autonomous project, while maintaining real social protection. It is a joint venture that also functions as a trade union, rather than a purely productive cooperative.

MB: *Is the Smart Cooperative characterised as an instrument of guarantee for cultural workers exposed to great uncertainty about the times and methods of payment[2]?*

Yes, it is therefore an instrument of access to income and of maintenance, of defence and sometimes even of alternative. Smart does not want to organise these workers, who are normally more exploited than all other workers. The rejection of cooperation, understood in the old socialist sense, according to which only the large cooperative enterprise can represent the interests of the worker-members. I do not believe that cooperation can free

---

2   The Smart cooperative anticipates for its cultural worker-members the remuneration deriving from work services carried out towards clients identified by them and in this way, the cooperative plays a role of anticipation and guarantee for the benefit of uncertain and precarious incomes (Interviewers' note).

us from the capitalist constraint, unless cooperation is born and develops on very large spaces and from very large means: for example, having a bank. Put differently: that collaboration becomes an alternative model of what already exists, for example in the form of large capitalist platforms. In the past, there had been Trebor Scholz's attempt to theorise this passage[3] – as if there was a possibility of making capitalist platforms cooperative, without radically intervening in the form of ownership. It seems to me that, operating on this terrain, we find ourselves immersed in a situation in which there is little to do, if we want to move within the rules of the liberal, normative system, without touching / removing the great principles – the usual three damn affairs: property, patriarchy and sovereignty. It is these three principles that govern everything and in which we are stuck. Of course, by this, I do not mean that it is useless to try to occupy or transform "other" spaces. Of course...

MB: *To conclude on social innovation, one of the problems that we notice is that it is ending up in everything: from the macro dimension of virtual coins (which have a social dimension of a certain interest), to the former Asilo Filangieri in Naples, passing through the City of Milan that launches the initiative for the free custody of common spaces. These are also interesting experiences that, however, have nothing in common.*

This is an issue we dealt with more than 10 years ago, when we (myself and Michael Hardt) wrote *Commonwealth*. Then we did a lot of things also actively participating in various local experiences, including the *ex Asilo Filangieri*, at the same time as the *Teatro Valle occupato* in Rome, and we worked together with Stefano Rodotà. A part of those experiences, however, had a completely unexpected development, so much so that it came into conflict with other parties who developed an idea of common good anodyne, avoiding defining the political field. And then other contradictions emerged, such as, for example, the exclusive recovery of state property under the title of "common goods", a vision which risks being very reductive. It must be made clear that common goods are not things that are grabbed here and there and made available to people unknown; they must instead be built by communities of workers and/or citizens. The concept of the common good is a concept of democracy and only on the

---

3   Trebor Scholz, *Platform Cooperativism: Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy*, Rosa Luxembourg Print, New York-Berlin, 2016.

basis of an effective and real participatory democracy[4] can that concept be formulated. For the commonwealth, it is therefore necessary to find forms of democracy appropriate to its management and it must be established that it goes against private property and also against public management. It represents a democratic, basic re-appropriation of these goods. You have conquered common goods when you produce them or have commonly produced them. It is a question that sooner or later has to be verified, and on a large scale – in the cultural industry as in the production of goods: one has to start thinking politically, asking oneself, for example, how a capitalist platform (which is now a centralised way of production) is transformed into a common good. It is not simply an economic project, decentralised rather than centralised, cooperative rather than corporate – it is a project of political democracy, an expansive model of democracy. If this is not done, what social innovation is there?

MB: *However, the issue of income still remains one of the issues on which these experiences have developed a limited reflection.*

In my opinion, in experiences of this size, the question of self-income cannot work. There is instead a question that precedes all of them and that is that of "guaranteed income for all". It is only on this basis that these centres (social centres, cultural centres, etc.) will be able to establish moments of association and cooperation, from which profitable initiatives in the productive field can also start. As long as they are assemblies of the poor, however, there is nothing to be done! The fundamental condition is that of income. Without prior income, I do not know what the initiatives on common goods and social innovation in general will become and where they will arrive, even if they are important experiences that deposit and transform cities. Naples, for example, is now a different city in Italy, as are Barcelona or Madrid in Spain. What we have seen are experiences that are determining a lot in terms of urban transformations. But we cannot be satisfied with this!

---

4   Although the concept of participatory democracy should be used very sparingly, during the 1990s, it was widely used by no-global movements and gave rise to contradictory experiences.