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Social Innovation and Migration

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Entry Title: Social Innovation and Migration

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Abstract: Social innovation can assume a primary role in challenging marginality and exclusion connected to migration. By intervening in four interconnected dimensions - intercultural relations, social infrastructures, discourses and forms of participation – it can sustain and implement creative solutions that are advanced and developed by various actors in the form of collective action.

Keywords: social innovation, intercultural relations, discourses, social infrastructures, political participation

Body of the Text Entry:

Taking the concept's wide use to extremes, many scholars sustain that, nowadays, there is an “obsession” with social innovation (Harris, Alboury, 2009). For this very reason, social innovation still remains difficult to theorise to such an extent that some call it a “quasi-concept” (Jenson, Harrisson, 2013). As a consequence, any study that seeks to understand the relevance of social innovation on migration must start precisely from its problematisation and an outline of its conceptual framework. In other words, social innovation needs to refer to a clear epistemology. A concept of recent fame, first used by Schumpeter but of Weberian origin, social innovation deserves to be explored in greater depth by contemporary sociology, not so much because of the increasing attention it has received in recent decades - and which has put it in the spotlight of political debates and private company strategies - but above all because of its capacity to develop from below and to intervene in the modes of action of individuals and social groups (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013). These initiatives develop within an economic, social and political context of transition, in which the existing arrangements of social actors are being reconfigured, taking on new forms and acting on new horizons of dialogue but also conflict. It is precisely within these new configurations and renewed social arrangements that innovative actions in migration processes and practices take place.

What should be first highlighted is that social innovation represents a process of collective action and mobilisation (Klein, Moulaert, Laville, 2014). This process entails the direct participation of civil society resulting from instances driven by collective aspirations and from shared learning processes, which transform collective action into outright mobilisation for social change. Such change draws its power from collective processes (of learning and mobilisation) but needs to be recognised, over time, through enabling local and national policies which support the creative capacities of local communities.

Drawing from these conceptual premises, the understanding of the role played by social innovation in migration passes through main four categories, namely 1) discourses and cultural imaginaries; 2) intercultural relations; 3) social infrastructures and emplacement; 4) participatory and political practices. Through various tools, devices and processes, social innovation is potentially able to act on all four levels, which are inevitably interconnected.

From a symbolic/cultural point of view, social innovation can stimulate new frames on the migration phenomenon, counteracting the widespread stigmatisation and dehumanisation of migrants carried out by the mainstream media and political discourses (Musrò, 2017). This category concerns the discursive dimension of social innovation and in particular those preconditions that give shape, orient and justify social practices (Kemmis, 2009). Therefore, it refers to the ways in which narratives and representations developed around migration and mobility can change through processes of social innovation. By intervening in the narrative dimension, some initiatives are able to promote alternative perspectives on migration through artistic and media production. By recognising that narratives are instrumental in organising human cognition (Boland, Tenkasi, 1995), and that representations have a performative role (Brown, 2006), social innovation can intervene in the ways in which social practices

are perceived and represented. For example, many socially innovative projects from the grassroots have arisen in these last decades. These projects are directly created by migrants and asylum seekers to challenge conventional imaginaries on migration and promote empowerment in the sense of improving their power “over the discourse” (van Dijk, 1993). Such initiatives have contributed to presenting counterhegemonic imaginaries on migration through different cultural and communicative devices.

From a social and spatial point of view, moreover, social innovation can stimulate the creation of relational spaces capable of enhancing connections between people with different backgrounds. By supporting the creation of social capital, socially innovative practices enhance an intercultural-based perspective, expanding the possibilities of exchange and relationships. Moreover, they activate unconventional spaces of urban conviviality, based on the exchange of everyday practices and interaction, capable of lasting in the long term. Here, the concept of “social infrastructure” (Kleinenberg, 2018) can be useful to emphasise how specific spaces can facilitate forms of sociality. In short, social infrastructure refers to the networks of spaces, structures, institutions and groups that create opportunities for socialisation (Latham, Layton, 2019). Social infrastructures can lead to the amplification of connections within groups, as well as openness to cultural systems perceived as different by sustaining “socially inclusive spaces” (Blommaert, 2014), which are useful in facilitating trust and a sense of belonging to an open community.

Finally, from the perspective of participation, social innovation can support the creation of different spaces of expression for migrant people, who often cannot access traditional forms of political participation (Paltrinieri *et al.*, 2020). This type of participation passes through forms of recognition as legitimate citizens and devices for expressing migrants’ voices on an individual but also collective level.

All these levels are interconnected because, for example, social cannot sustain the creation of social capital without the configuration of social infrastructures that create relational spaces. At the same time, access to alternative forms of political participation supports, at least symbolically, different imaginaries of the migration phenomenon. Such interconnections underline the fundamental role played by civil society in stimulating, supporting and implementing emplacement and the inclusion of migrants and asylum seekers through various forms of social innovation.

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