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Crises redefined: towards new spaces for social innovation in inner areas?

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Crises Redefined

Towards new spaces for social innovation in inner areas?

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between the emergence of a “crisis society”, social innovation and community resilience in Italian inner areas. In particular, arguing that the concept of “crisis society” – as a further development of a “risk society” – can help to frame both the increasing of uncertainty and the possibility for social change, the paper outlines a theoretical reflection on how context of crisis can influence social arrangements and forms of solidarity. In particular, it proposes to adopt the analytical lenses of social innovation and community resilience to discuss the relation between crisis and processes of local dynamism and collective action. Drowning upon this theoretical framework, it identifies inner areas in Italy as an interesting field of research where to analyse how innovative initiatives and narratives can emerge in context of crisis, with a special focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. Without denying the negative consequences of this crisis in terms of social inequalities and vulnerabilities, this early research paper sheds light on how crisis can be redefined on a double level. Firstly, by opening new windows of opportunities for collective action and bottom-up forms of resilience. Secondly, by reframing inner areas, usually represented as vulnerable territories, as spaces where the creative capacity of local community can emerge, also contrasting Covid-19 negative impacts. Finally, the paper identifies further trajectories of investigation for empirical research.

Keywords: social innovation, crisis, Covid-19 pandemic, resilience, inner areas

1. Introduction: toward a “crisis society”?

The COVID-19 pandemic has launched new empirical and theoretical challenges for social research. As stated by the UNDP (2020: 4) ‘it is more than a health emergency, it is a systemic crisis that is already affecting economies and societies in unprecedented

ways [...] is a systemic human development crisis – affecting health, economic and broad social dimensions of development and potentially eroding gains accumulated over decades’. What is even more at stake it is the complex connections between the Covid-19 outbreak and other kinds of crises, such as those associated with the environment and the economy: ‘this systemic crisis hits a world dealing with unresolved tensions: between people and technology, between people and the planet and between the haves and the have-nots – all of which are shaping a new generation of inequalities’ (*Ivi*: 5).

From this point of view, we can state that what Beck (1992) called the “risk society” is now developing into a “crisis society”, on a global scale with incalculable risks where not only the negative effects, but also the conditions of crisis are becoming part of our daily lives.

The “global risk society” (Beck 1992) of the “reflexive” modernity is characterized by risks which are the results both of the technological and economic development, and the application of human knowledge. Such risks are global in terms of “intensity” and of quantitative increasing of events that influence a big mass of persons, as well as in terms of the logic of distribution of risks. They are conceived as social, cultural and biographical “uncertainties” (Beck 1992) which influence our ability in making decisions about the “conduct of life”, decisions that involve also global consequences and dangers (Yates 2016).

All of these aspects call into question two main issues of the “risk society”. The first one is the loss of “institutionalized control” combined with a questioning of the “expert” knowledge (Beck 1992; Giddens, 1994). The second one concerns the “systematic loss of trust” (Beck 2008: 136), and how an “active trust” (Giddens 1994) can be reaffirmed. A kind of trust that in a context of instability and uncertainty is “contingency- based” and implies a constantly active construction of a “reciprocal narrativity” (Giddens 1999: 254).

It is in this complex context briefly described that new forms of solidarity emerge, new forms of “we-orientation” based of reflexivity and self-organization in the area of “sub-politics” (Beck 2002).

As suggested by Jiří (2014: 72), ‘risk is usually associated with what may precede a crisis and influence its appearance’. Indeed, the roots of the concept “crisis” come from the Greek verb “krino”- ‘which meant to separate, to choose and to decide between two opposing choices, life and death, success and failure [...] The word “krisis” itself indicates a hazardous condition, a heavy decisive moment, a fundamental moment in which a crucial issue (concerning the result, subsequent existence or subsequent development) should be handled, a moment in which people feel uncertainty, confusion and difficulty’ (*Ivi*: 71).

Considering the “society crises”, Jiří states that we can distinguish between crises ‘limited in nature’, concerning ‘only individual areas of society or individual social subsystems (economy, politics, religion, culture, science), and ‘crises of a holistic and complex (national, public) nature’ (*Ivi*: 75). These last kinds of crises can be framed as crises “for themselves”: ‘a situation in which its manifestations become an integral part of human experience and self-perception’ (Jiří: 76).

Although among sociologists there is not a unanimous approach to the issue of crises, it is nowadays urgent to improve a reflection on it (Jiří, 2014). Without the ambition of an in-depth overview of this concept, in this contribution we want to introduce the term “crisis society” to underline that on one side we are nowadays facing an amplification of the key characteristics of the “risk society” – included the condition of uncertainty – and an increasing of “embeddedness” of such elements in our human conditions. On the other side, this concept aims to highlight the possibility of reimagination of how crucial issues and tensions – such as the ones mentioned before – can be addressed, thus looking also

at which kinds of “we orientation” are emerging from civil society in terms of solidarity and collective actions.

Moreover, as suggested by UNDP, history shows that crises have long-term effects on people’s human development that are often difficult to monitor and anticipate but that tend to be unequally distributed. COVID-19 is unlikely to be an exception’. One central aspect of the pandemic, in fact, is that it made explicit social inequalities for some individuals and social groups (e.g., asylum seekers, indigenous populations, migrant workers among others).

Following these considerations, the paper moves from two main questions: is it possible to identify an approach which looks at the concept of crisis in a more comprehensive way? How to overcome the emergency paradigm, while recognizing the role played by civil society actors in these dynamics?

To answer these questions, in this early research paper we propose to adopt two main analytical lenses: social innovation and community resilience. In the first section we discuss the relation between crisis and processes and practices of social innovation which place the collective dimension at the centre of social action (Giddens 1984). Indeed, some authors underline that social innovation emerges precisely within changing contexts and in particular in crisis contexts, where social arrangements falter and can take on new configurations (e.g. Lévesque 2005; Laville 2014).

In line with this perspective, in the second section we go deeper in a critical analysis of social innovation, in particular from the point of view of collective action, democratic solidarity and community resilience.

Finally, drawing upon this theoretical framework we propose inner areas in Italy as an interesting field of research², to be explored through the lens of social innovation and resilience in context of crisis. Indeed, as we have underlined, crises are unequally distributed, and inner areas are often characterized by various social, economic and environmental problems – such as depopulation, lack of jobs and poor infrastructure and services among others. However, as we will better discuss later on, our background desk research shows that the Covid-19 crisis has (also) positively impacted inner areas in Italy: firstly, by reframing such areas as attractive territories, in opposite to cities, suddenly feared because of higher possibilities to be exposed to the virus. Secondly, by promoting unconventional forms of social innovations. These preliminary reflections will lead to further empirical research, as explained in the non-conclusions section.

2. The relation between crises and social innovation

As stated in the previous section, what we could define the “crisis society” is characterized both by a tightening of the conditions of the “risk society” and the transformation of the condition of crisis as an “integral part” of human condition. This

² According to the National Strategy for Inner areas, which is the main institutional strategy adopted by Italian government to intervene in marginal areas, “inner areas” can be defined as ‘those areas significantly distant from the centres of supply of essential services (education, health, and mobility), rich in environmental and cultural resources with highly diversified natural aspects’. For further information, please visit: <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/lacoesione/le-politiche-di-coesione-in-italia-2014-2020/strategie-delle-politiche-di-coesione/strategia-nazionale-per-le-aree-interne/>, last access on 30/09/2020.

complexity implies the need for common solutions, considering fundamental the collaboration between social actors. Indeed, it is not a case that some scholars suggest that it is precisely from these contexts of crisis that social innovations can develop, as we will explain later in this section.

A concept of recent fame, used for the first time by Schumpeter but with Weberian origin, social innovation deserves to be deepened by contemporary sociology, not only for the increasing attention it has received in recent decades, but above all for its ability to develop from below and to intervene in the modes of action of individuals and social groups (Moulaert *et al.* 2013; Klein *et al.* 2016).

Back in the 1980s, Chambon, David and Devey (1982) were among the first to conceptualize social innovation as a process coming from civil society, moving away from the vision of Schumpeter (1935), who described social innovations as new combinations in economic systems. On the contrary, Chambon, David and Devey (1982: 29) suggested that ‘a distinction must be made between social innovation conceived as a particular practice, and social innovation as social change, and therefore called upon to be a model for action’. According to this perspective, social innovation would be closely linked to the social transformations that characterised the 20th century - including the transformations that affected households, relationship between urban and rural areas, and the expansion of the market economy - which would lead to the breaking down of social balance. Increasing individualism (Bauman 2001) and the intensification of social inequalities due to unsustainable models of development, would therefore lead to the definition of an initial type of social innovation, essentially linked to the introduction of welfare measures. Over time, however, the dissatisfaction generated by the creation of standardised solutions with little focus on the real needs of the population contributed to a new wave of social innovations, more focused on creativity, participation and

collaboration. Thus, socially innovative initiatives are conditioned by a context of crisis that is not only economic, but also social, political and administrative. It is not by chance that one of the first and internationally recognized research centres on social innovation took the name CRISES.³

The link between social innovation and crisis is based upon two main theoretical approaches. The first refers to the social movement perspective, which suggests that at the origins of social movements lies a change in the relationships between social classes and in social relations themselves, as well as learning processes aimed at improving individual and collective conditions (e.g. Touraine 1968; Offe 1985). As reported by Chambon, David and Devevey (1982), for example, the 1986 movement was fundamental to activate a certain type of reflexivity that lies at the basis of socially innovative actions.

The second approach refers to the theory of the “modes of regulation” (e.g. Lipietz 1979; Aglietta 1987). According to this perspective, social innovation would not only be conditioned by social movements, the expression of a certain cultural context of reference - in terms of shared values and perspectives for future action - but also by the economic context and macro-social regulations, such as the state, the market and institutions. In certain periods, particularly during periods of crisis, these regulations would be weakened, and become more flexible, leaving room for social innovation processes (Bouchard and Lévesque 2014). Of particular interest for the study of social innovation is the analysis of Lévesque (2005) and Laville (2014), which highlights how social innovation is often a response to the crisis of social arrangements manifested towards the

³ CRISES (Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales) is an institutional centre founded in 1986 that refers to the Faculty of Humanities (FSH) and the School of Management Sciences (ESG) of the University of Quebec at Montréal and mainly studies “social innovations and social transformations”. <https://crises.uqam.ca/>, last access on 16/07/2020.

end of the 20th century. Within this context, social innovation is shown to be a form of collective action initiated by civil society within a complex system of relations between the state and the market, whose synergies have changed since the 1970s.

3. Social innovations between collective action, community resilience and democratic solidarity in contexts of crisis

In the previous section, we briefly presented two interrelated theoretical perspectives which suggest that crises can be analysed as open windows of change. But what exactly do we mean by social innovations? And what are the modalities through which social actors develop innovative processes and practices in context of crisis?

According to Moulaert and MacCallum (2019: 11), ‘when we talk about SI, we make a plea to support innovation that improves society – in terms of equity, inclusion, and opportunity, among others – rather than only that which accelerates economic growth, productivity and market-rational behaviour. In addition, we claim that SI can act as a remedy to the negative social consequences – inequity, exclusion, marginalisation – of growth-oriented innovation’.

This definition belongs to a specific “emancipatory” approach to social innovation, defined as “Euro-Canadian” (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019), which frames social innovations as processes and practices that support more inclusive and sustainable societies, while challenging marginalization and exclusion. To sum up, social innovation can be defined as ‘a service, a product, a process, a way of acting that comes from below on a local basis and is spread collectively, in order to produce benefits for society and the territory where it is generated. Such actions arise from the need to respond to an emerging or not yet satisfied problem, and presupposes a shared cultural horizon, which is

expressed through the creative capacity of the subjects participating in it’ (Anonymus2019).

This particular conceptualization of social innovation is linked to what Laville (2014) defines “democratic solidarity”. While philanthropic solidarity is typically connected to a welfarist vision of the provision of social services in the satisfaction of unanswered needs, democratic solidarity is conceptualized as a source of democratisation of the economy and society (Laville, 2014). Democratic solidarity, therefore, proposes a vision of social innovation based on collective action, where unconventional forms of collaboration and participation are capable to disrupt neoliberal policies (Anonymus2016).

Klein (2014: 128) well explains ‘the structuring effect of local collective action’ through what he defines “local dynamism”. A dynamism that originates from local actions and entails the mobilisation of internal and external resources. This process is, therefore, a process where potential conflicts are addressed and negotiated, and results in what Klein calls “collective awareness”. In context of crisis, this local dynamism is even more important, as the relationship between social actors can change and new paths for solidarity and collective action can arise. In this perspective, social actors that promote social innovations become the bearers of *community resilience*.

The concept of resilience came to prominence in the 70s through the work of the ecologist Crawford Holling, who proposed a distinction between two different viewpoints of the behaviour of ecological systems. One is focused on the idea of *stability*, ‘which represents the ability of a system to return to an equilibrium state after a temporary disturbance’ (Holling 1973:14) and depends on the speed with which it returns to the initial condition, without a resulting change in the structure of the system. An alternative interpretation, on the contrary, is based on the idea of *resilience* as ‘a measure of the

ability of systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist' (Holling 1973: 17), and in terms of the ability of a system to change its own structure (Holling 2001). Following this view, in this contribution we consider resilience in terms of capacities for “change-oriented” adaptation that can emerge in conditions of crisis⁴.

The contributions to the definition of “resilience as a theory” (Norris *et al* 2008) are many and transdisciplinary (Landi 2012). Yet, here we want to focus on some key aspects that can help achieve a better understanding of how practices of social innovation can emerge in contexts of crisis, becoming collective actions of resilience. Thus, while resilience originates from “a set of adaptive capacities”, community resilience emerges from “a set of networked adaptive capacities” (Norris *et al.* 2008). In resilience communities, a fundamental role is played by social capital, strictly linked with the development of a “sense of community”, of a sense of place attachment and citizen participation. Citizens’ participation therefore can emerge when people are in the condition of assuming both power and shared responsibilities in engaging in public life at community level (Anonymus2020a; Anonymus2020b). Social capital is part of a broader set of resources defined as *community competence* (Chaskin 1999), which implies the development of shared rules, reciprocal responsibilities and forms of leadership which are able to sustain collective action and a “co-joint capability of action” (Sampson *et al.* 2005).

⁴ The concept of resilience is used as an analytical category also in the specific field of “disaster studies” (Mela, Mugnano, Olori 2016). However, in this contribution we decide to position the concept of resilience in its relationship with the frame of social innovation and with the concept of “crisis society”.

From this theoretical overview we can say that community resilience coincides with a collective capability to adapt to a new situation in the context of crisis, promoting “fairer environments”, where communities become leading players in possible change.

4. The Covid-19 crisis and its effects on inner areas in Italy: an explorative analysis

As explained in the introduction, from the perspective of a “crisis” society” – very tied to the increase of social inequalities, the amplification of conditions of the “risk society” and its embeddedness in the “human condition” – inner areas seem to be a relevant field of research, mainly because they are characterised by multiple intertwined vulnerabilities (e.g., lack of services and infrastructures, unemployment, depopulation, etc.). Since social innovations often develop to address unanswered problems and conditions of vulnerability, it is therefore useful to analyse the forms of solidarity, collective action and community resilience which are developing in inner areas during the Covid-19 pandemic. Drowning upon these assumptions we conducted a background desk analysis on the spread of social innovations in Italian inner areas during the Covid-19 crisis.⁵ In particular, we focused our research on three levels of analysis: a) narratives and representation of inner areas; b) socially innovative practices and projects that have been developed since the pandemic affected Italy; c) initiatives launched by public institutions.

⁵ This early stage of the research has been conducted from March to June 2020. The sources we used were newspaper articles, social media, blogs, institutional documents (at international, national, and regional level), reportages. Moreover, it was fundamental the participation in discussion groups, seminars, web meetings and conferences (21 in total) on the topic of Covid-19 and inner areas. Some examples are the seminar “L’Italia è bella dentro: storie di resilienza, innovazione e ritorno nelle aree interne” (Italy is beautiful inside: stories of resilience, innovation and migration towards inner areas) (June 2020), or “Riabitare i Piccoli Borghi” (Re-Inhabit Small Villages) (April 2020).

In this contribution, we want to briefly outline first primary insights concerning the first two levels of the research⁶.

Concerning the narratives and representations, the desk analysis revealed that the Covid-19 outbreak has brought to light new attention for Italian inner regions, also stimulating a growing debate and reflections on such areas. Indeed, they have achieved a renewed place in mediatic and political discourses: both mass and social media staged an imaginary polarization between the city - which had suddenly become demonized as a place of dense settlement and excessively compressed sociality - contrasting with an idyllic vision of rural areas, which had suddenly been relaunched as romantic, healthy, and safe places to live. In Italy, a turning point was represented by a newspaper article where the “archistar” Stefano Boeri, famous for the *Vertical Forest* project in Milan, suggested to consider small villages as crucial places for our future. This article led to further public discussions, such as the online event “Riabitare i Piccoli Borghi” (*Re-Inhabit Small Villages*), where academics, writers, civil society organizations, mayors and experts in local development, discussed the future of inner areas, while considering the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on shrinking regions. Similar debates are

⁶Although numerous initiatives were launched by local and national public institutions it is specifically through the development of bottom-up initiatives that the local communities from inner areas are showing different signs of active resilience. Moreover, since it is an early stage of research, we are still developing our research activities in order to have a complex scenario of social innovation, that can help to understand how “bottom-link” process of social innovation can occur, influencing also public institutions and policies. However, some examples can be named here: the call launched by the region Emilia-Romagna to sustain a total of 119 municipalities with 10 million euros, by helping those who intend to buy/renovate a real estate in the Apennines area, or the initiatives launched in the tourism sector, such as the idea to replace the “tourist tax” with the “tourist award”, promoted by the mayor of Valle dell’Angelo, in Campania Region.

supported by the “Dislivelli” Association, which dedicated its most recent publication to the topic of Covid-19 pandemic in Italian mountain areas.

As for the second level of analysis, many projects and socially innovative practices have been developed since the pandemic affected Italy. An example concerns the “Cooperativa di comunità di Biccari” (*Biccari community cooperative*), in Puglia Region, that has activated a voluntary service of home delivery for the elderly and lonely people. An experience that shows the importance of social capital and solidarity in inner regions, also confirmed by the fact that this exchange is not based on money but on mutual trust. Similar initiatives are being developed in a number of Italian villages, confirming that Covid-19 crisis has (also) opened spaces for solidarity, while taking into consideration the differences associated to specific local contexts. An interesting case is represented by Hotel Giardino in Breno, in the province of Brescia. The hotel, managed by the K-Pax cooperative, promotes social and economic integration of asylum seekers in the mountain area of Val Camonica, while supporting local welfare and sustainable tourism. During the peak of the pandemic, when tourists could no longer travel, the hotel has proved to be an important experience of support for local communities. Indeed, the cooperative decided to host the doctors and nurses who were working in the hospitals of Brescia, one of the most affected areas in Italy.

These kinds of initiatives represent an interesting field of practices - to be further analysed - since they reveal the possibility for collective actions based on solidarity dynamics, combined with alternative use of local resources.

5. Non-conclusions: new potential trajectories of research

To conclude, by unveiling the distortions of an unequal and unjust society, the Covid-19 crisis, together with other recent crises, is showing that new modalities of solidarity and

collective action are possible. In the case of inner areas, for example, we briefly cited some initiatives developed during the pandemic. Surely, this crisis can represent a reflexive node to improve our understanding of the mechanisms at the basis of territorial inequalities and exclusion, and at the same time, the processes of successful revitalization through inclusive and sustainable actions. Thus, although we recognize the serious negative impacts of these crises, our analysis seeks to shed some lights on the forms of creative resilience that can arise in contexts of crisis (Tommasi 2015).

If, however, social innovation is an element that can respond to emerging needs of a community and generate benefits for the community itself, there are many “socialwashing” initiatives that aim to use the rhetoric of social innovation to generate individual profit at the expense of collective welfare or to improve the corporate visibility and political credibility of institutions. In addition, social innovation is not always fair and equal for everyone. For example, some individuals and group may be excluded from the process of emancipation (Blokland, Savage, 2008). It follows that “social innovation is often seen as a set of tools to provide instant solutions to pressing problems” (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013: 4).

In this sense, we sustain that further research is needed not only to better understand the role that civil society can play in the “crisis society”, looking at how social innovation works in terms of “redistribution”, conceived as a process aimed at generating a fairer distribution of resources and wealth, and “recognition”, in terms of respect for individual and collective differences (Fraser, Honneth, 2004).

Referring to inner areas, for example, it would be interesting to further investigate the role of local communities in promoting new forms of collective action and solidarity, transforming weaknesses into opportunities. In this sense, our further investigation aims at shedding lights on the factors supporting the development of social innovations, the

conditions that facilitate resilient processes, the factors influencing participation and exclusion, as well as the emerging forms of collaboration and networking between institutions and civil society. Indeed, it is fundamental that such initiatives are combined with institutional interventions to limit the negative impacts derived from the unequal conditions in which people find themselves while facing these recent crises (Ahmed *et al.* 2020).

Acknowledgement

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