

# Participation, Neoliberalism and Depoliticisation of Public Action

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*The article argues that political elites – using participation as tools for depoliticisation strategies – seek to obtain the trust of the economic elite and, at the same time, to shield policy making from the unpopular consequences of neoliberal policies. In order to test this hypothesis a specific case of participatory processes, developed in Rome between 2014-2015 is considered.*

## ***1. Introduction: participation between neoliberalism and depoliticisation***

The starting point of the article is a seemingly simple question of how to explain the growing institutional offer of participation, as compared to its limited capacity to influence policy content. In other words, if the impact of participation on public choice is weak, or at least uncertain, why does participation continue to spread so rapidly in contemporary Western democracies? This analysis only takes into account top-down forms of participation that – unlike the participation processes that developed in the 1960s and 1970s – are barely characterised by ideological aims and are more oriented towards problem solving for specific policy issues.

In particular the new participatory practices are considered specific tools for wider political strategies to depoliticise public action, which is a new statecraft through which political actors try not only to hide the political character of policy making, but also sustain the process of neoliberalization. More precisely, political elites – using participation as tools for depoliticisation strategies – seek to obtain the trust of the economic elite and, at the same time, to shield policy making from the consequences of unpopular policies.

In order to test this hypothesis a specific case of participatory processes, developed in Rome between 2014-2015 is considered. The case study is relevant because the participatory practices were developed within a wider pro-

ject of urban regeneration framed by neoliberal values. In the second section of the article the relationships between participation and neoliberalism are analysed in theoretical terms, while in the third – using the concept of *réfèrentiel* – the main algorithms of participation are reconstructed and described. The fourth section is devoted to the case study and some concluding remarks close the article.

## 2. Participation and neoliberalism: an apparent unconventional marriage

Studies on participation tend to follow an ideal continuum, going from “supporters” to “critics” of new participatory practices. The different positions mainly refer to the role given to consensus and conflict in the construction of public choices (Beaumont and Nicholls 2008; Silver, Scott and Kazepov 2010). On the one hand, supporters of participation highlight the importance of inclusion and interaction aimed at a reasoned confrontation between the different positions, objectives and interests in order to get to – in a typically deliberative logic – consensual collective decisions. On the other hand, critics of participation emphasize not only the impossibility of eliminating conflict in social and political integration, but also the importance of the conflict itself in the decision-making processes. Each of these has built a *pantheon* with their own theoretical “heroes” (Habermas for consensualists, Foucault for conflictualists)<sup>1</sup>, affirming specific preferences in terms of democracy (deliberative and participatory democracy for the supporters and radical democracy for the critics)<sup>2</sup>.

Such a juxtaposition has generated antithetical but complementary processes of «idealization and stigmatization» of participatory practices (Blondiaux and Fourniau 2011: 15).

During the early part of the last twenty years, the trend of considering participatory practices as forms of very promising political and social action prevailed. The inclusion of «ordinary» citizens in public decision-making processes underlying participatory systems was often considered as a necessary and sufficient condition, both for the making of «better» public choices and the activation of citizens’ profitable empowerment dynamics. Furthermore,

<sup>1</sup> Chantal Mouffe (1995; 1996; 2000) is a further important theoretical reference point for conflictualists. Of course, it is only a model aimed at fixing very general conceptual coordinates of contemporary scientific discussion on participation.

<sup>2</sup> For an effective summary of the different kinds of democracy, please refer to: Purcell (2008); Silver, Scott and Kazepov (2010).

from this point of view, with a sort of social pedagogy and patronisingly political approach, participatory processes were often considered to be good opportunities for «citizenship education», as well as occasions for the promotion and development of active citizenship<sup>3</sup>. While also recognising this potential, we have to consider that the new participatory practices can produce opposite effects: inclusion or further forms of social exclusion; empowerment and responsabilization of civil society or a de-responsabilization of public actors, democratization and de-democratization of choices, forms of only procedural or substantial legitimation of public decisions; and a reduction or increase in social inequalities. In line with classical Laswellian theories, these results can be evaluated, case by case, only through empirical inquiries focusing on those who are involved, and in what, when and where they are participating (Silver, Scott and Kazepov 2010). However, the main trend has been to connect the causes of criticality to “how” participation takes place, or to the problems concerning the technical and operating structure of the participatory processes themselves. As a consequence, the solutions identified as remedies converge towards proposals aimed at a further improvement of the organizational and procedural design of participation itself.

In addition to these issues, essentially related to the procedural dimension of participation, it should be pointed out that participatory practices can fail and cause unexpected and unwanted effects, both to the political-institutional actors promoting them and to participants in civil society. These are counter-intuitive results that, in the main rhetoric of participation, tend not to be taken into consideration and, as detailed in the following pages, may be mainly connected to the need of a growing stabilization of moderate or roll-out neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002; Moini 2011a) during the 1990s. In other words, the imperative of participation and deliberation (Blondiaux e Sintomer 2002) can be also considered a consequence and, at the same time, an instrument of the neoliberalization imperative.

Only in the early 2000’s did the relationship between participation and neoliberalism become included in political and social research agendas. In this respect, it is possible to mention the following works, to name but a few: 1) research highlighting critical perspectives, both the movement from government centrality to local governance (Geddes 2005) and the centrality of public-

<sup>3</sup> The differences between these positions are partly due to the different degree of politicity of participatory practices. From this point of view, opinions vary from those who consider participation as an instrument for the modernization of public action management and, on the contrary, those who consider it a resource to fight social exclusion and inequalities and foster social emancipation. Between these opposing positions, we find those who consider participatory practices useful tools for the legitimation of public choices (Blondiaux and Fourniau 2001: 16).

private partnerships in the development of neoliberal policies (Geddes 2006; Davies 2007); 2) studies conducted into the different forms of urban neoliberalism (Jessop 2002); 3) analyses of local government restructuring processes in the regulation stage of post-Fordism (Painter and Goodwin 2000); 4) the reconstruction of the neoliberalization process in urban spaces associated with the rescaling of politics, policy and accumulation regimes (Brenner and Theodore 2002); 5) inquiries that have highlighted the impact of the neoliberalization of national policy agendas, on the structure and contents of urban governance (Fuller and Geddes 2008); 6) theoretical analyses that have queried the connection between neoliberalism and multilevel governance (Harmes 2007); 7) works emphasizing the possibility of manipulating community participation processes (Taylor 2007); 8) critiques of deliberation as an instrument for weakening social movements (Mayer 2006) or those concerning processes of «governance beyond the State» (Swyngedouw 2005)<sup>4</sup>; and 9) a critical analysis conducted through major development studies (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Leal 2007) revealing the oppressive objectives of «participatory development».

If, from a theoretical point of view, the development of critical analysis perspectives on new forms of participation involves the convergence of different research agendas, from a historical point of view such a process may be connected to the consequences (particularly to political rescaling dynamics) that globalization has brought about for cities and urban areas, making them key players in transnational competition. In other words, glurbanization (Jessop 1997; Macleod and Goodwin 1999; Jessop and Ling Sum 2000) has involved a growing entrepreneurialist approach by local governments, while the new systems of partnership and participation analysed by theorists of deliberative and participatory democracy have been increasingly considered as useful instruments to deal with this process and to redefine the role and forms of local government.

When this debate historicized and when the new forms of participation were placed in the neoliberal context, it became clear that, at least for theorists of radical democracy (Purcell 2008), the new instruments of inclusion were designed and activated to create a silenced margin (Beaumont and Nicholls 2008) towards neoliberal action strategies, or to increase consensus over its norms and values and, at the same time, silence dissenters. In a symposium published in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2010), V. Guarneros-Meda and M. Geddes framed the issue of participation within a wider «politics of local governance», consisting of complex forms of inter-

<sup>4</sup> This being only a partial list, to which should be added the development of theoretical analyses conducted not on specific issues, but on interpretational theories and categories such as, for example, Foucault's reflection on governmentality.

action between participatory practices, public-private partnerships, social movement actions and representative democracy (political parties and leadership), (Guarneros-Meda e Geddes 2010, p. 116). In turn, such politics have been historically included in the neoliberalization process defined by D. Harvey (2005) as a political project to re-create capital accumulation conditions.

Through a comparative analysis of participatory processes developed in Barcelona and Manchester between 1997 and 2003, as well as between 2004 and 2008, G. Blakeley (2010) highlighted in an article on this symposium that in both cases participatory practices determined neither a re-distribution of decision-making power (from political institutions to civil society) nor an empowerment of citizens. On the contrary, participation was a real “government technology” (Blakeley 2010: 138) through which not only the petitions, behaviour and language of civil society were de-radicalized, but, above all, there was an attempt to create a fictitious «city-wide unity» in which political and economic actors as well as citizens were rhetorically urged to consider themselves equipped with the same decision-making power, thus hiding the real and enduring «inequalities based on class, gender and race» (Blakeley 2010: 140).

### *3. The algorithms of participation and the depoliticisation of public action*

In order to better understand the historical and theoretical links between neoliberalism and participation and, above all, identify the operational structure on which this connection is based, it may be useful to apply an intermediate analytical generalization approach between micro- and macro-focused perspectives. In micro-focused perspectives, important and interesting case studies are developed, while on the other hand macro-focused ones develop theoretical reflections, for example, on the connection between neoliberalism and forms of democracy (Purcell 2008) or relationships between forms of decision-making rationality and power (Flyvberg 1998).

To attempt to integrate the two perspectives (micro- and macro-focused), and establish the main points of a possible critical theory of new forms of participation, the present article – using previous analysis (Moini 2011a; 2011b; 2012) – proposes to adopt a meso-level analytical approach intended to: i) identify the role and functions of participation in processes of neoliberalization of policies and politics, and ii) reveal the operational mechanisms through which these functions are enabled. The general idea is that participation became one of the main discursive resources used in the neoliberalization process of the ‘90s. Such an idea is developed from a perspective of interpretive

socio-politological analysis (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer 2003) based on a re-visitation of the theory of the *référentiel* formulated in France at the end of the '80s by Jobert and Muller (1987).

During the '60s, as part of the studies conducted at the *Centre de Recherche sur le Politique, l'Administration, la Ville et le Territoire* (CERAT) by the Institute of Political Studies of Grenoble University, a systematic analysis – particularly urged by Lucien Nizard – on the role of the state in France's economic development was started, with specific reference to the five-year planning procedure carried out by the *Commissariat Général du Plan*. In particular, when studying this institution, Pierre Muller and Bruno Jobert soon realized that, in addition to its main job of preparing national development plans, the Commissariat had major latent functions, the most important of which were the construction of representations of social and economic forms, the identification and expression of specific visions of the world, and the introduction of common regulations in the different policy sectors (Zittoun and Demongeot 2009: 396). To summarize these functions and indicate the importance of ideas and their possible hegemonic impact on state regulation processes, the concept of «*référentiel des politiques publiques*» was introduced.

The *référentiel* of a policy or, more generally speaking, of public action, consists of its cognitive and normative representation and involves the identification and definition of the role of the same action in more general forms of social and political organization (Jobert and Muller 1987). In other words, it includes those visions of the world underlying public action, consisting of values, norms, algorithms and images (Muller 2003). Values are metaphysical principles (Surel 2000) and representations of what was “good” or, on the contrary, “despicable”. On the other hand, norms are principles for action, orientation criteria for political and social behaviour, whilst algorithms describe causal relationships among events, justifying and legitimating the choice of different policy instruments. Finally, images express and spread values, norms and algorithms in an immediate way, even through symbolic representations (Zittoun and Demongeot 2009: 396). The *référentiel* as a whole has a global dimension, made up of the values and basic beliefs of a given society at a given historical moment in time, as well as a sectorial dimension, referring, on the contrary, to the rejection of these values and beliefs in specific public action arenas<sup>5</sup>.

The main characteristic of a *référentiel* not only consists of its capacity to combine apparently contradictory elements, (Jobert and Muller 1987; Faure

<sup>5</sup> More precisely, global *référentiel* «est constitué d'un ensemble de valeurs fondamentales qui constitué les croyances de base d'une société» (Muller 2003: 65), while the sectorial one «est conforme à la hiérarchie globale des normes existant dans le référentiel global» (Muller 2003: 68).

and Pollet and Warin 1995; Muller 2003), but also of representing, in an integrated manner, different but related and complementary phenomena.

I argue that participation, in the context of developed western democracies, during the 1990's became the main *référentiel* of public action, aimed at legitimising and reproducing the neoliberal paradigm of public action. However, how does the *référentiel* of participation work? In order to answer this question we have to consider what kind of algorithms the mediators<sup>6</sup> of the discourse on participation produce.

Considering contemporary narratives on participation, we find that participation mediators construct two main algorithms. The first one can be defined as the “technical” algorithm of participation that may be expressed as follows: “If participation is well organized and structured, then the quality of public decisions will be better”. The technicalization of participation refers to the formalization of participatory practices and implies rules, roles, routines and, above all, the presence of experts and practitioners in participation. The second algorithm can be defined as a “political” one and may be summarized as follows: “If participation is developed in the context of local democracies, then it will automatically produce more democratic decisions”. In other words, this algorithm establishes a direct link between the choices made at the local level and the democratization of the decision processes. While the first algorithm regards *how* participatory practices have to be carried out, the second one regards *where* participation has to be developed.

In order to understand this point, it is necessary to analyse the effects produced by these algorithms. Such effects may be identified, considering the results of recent research conducted on processes of urban revitalization, community development and innovation in the forms of urban governance that cannot here, for the sake of brevity, be analysed in-depth. For the same reasons I will not consider the main consequences of the political algorithm<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> In the theory of *référentiel* the mediators are political, economic and social subjects able to «transform an opaque socio-economic reality into a coherent policy action», capable of «producing a new socio-cultural project» (Jobert and Muller 1987: 71-72). From this point of view, their main role consists of changing and legitimating hierarchical systems of norms, often pre-existing to policies. In this way, they play an intellectual role, building hegemonic reference systems for public action (Idem: 73-75). Here we cannot develop an in-depth analysis of the mediators of participation but in very general terms we can say that the four main mediators may be identified as: i) institutions and transnational organizations, ii) local political and social actors, iii) scholars and iv) professionals and practitioners of participatory systems. Obviously, they interweave complex relationships between themselves.

<sup>7</sup> In brief the political algorithm promotes an apparent compensation for democratic deficits at a local level; a deflection of the conflict from economic to local or, better, proximity terri-

The technical algorithm reflects the «procedural tropism» (Mazeud 2009: 3) of contemporary participatory systems and shows an increasing control of public authorities over the organization and management of participatory systems (Blondiaux e Fourniau 2011: 19-20). In addition to these aspects, it may be useful to consider the growing professionalization of participatory processes or the use of specific technical knowledge (often of a sociological kind or derivation), that, just like other government technologies (Rose 1993), make the experts who apply them, powerful mediators between political authorities and the groups with whom they interact (Uitermark 2005: 146). Controlling large areas of decisional uncertainty, this mediation allows the exercise of a strong and powerful influence over the choices made. The professionalization of participation, strictly linked to the hegemonic primacy of the technical algorithm, makes it a real government technology (Blakeley 2010: 138).

This becomes much clearer when considering some of the results or, more generally, the possible consequences of the application of the technical algorithm.

The first concerns the de-politicization of the stakes involved, the second the de-potentialization of conflict, while the third may be connected to a growing co-reponsabilization of the social actors involved in participatory practices with respect to the choices made in the different action contexts.

Participatory systems seem to have an intrinsic de-politicizing characteristic (Mauzed 2009), in which the stakes are thematized and exclusively represented in technical terms, neglecting their political meaning. Technicalization of participation allows its «political decapitation» (Leal 2007: 539), its sterilization in terms of a capacity to transform the status quo, primarily in relation to power relationships. As a consequence, the decisions made will tend to be legitimized on the basis of their technical, rather than political, rationality.

This de-politicization, in turn, favours a weakening of the conflict. If issues and stakes are defined as technical issues, they will appear less glaringly evident in political and economic terms, and the conflict will tend to decrease. Furthermore, if technical instruments for the management of conflict are available, the forms of expression of the conflict itself tend to be normalized into technical grids. Translating the issues and any possible reasons for conflict, from the plan of political discourses to that of technical discourses (the operational setting and how to treat controversial issues), it is therefore possible to include rather than exclude, and consequently control, dissent (White 1996) and sterilize conflict.

Finally, these elements are connected to the third consequence of the technical algorithm, that is, a growth in the responsiveness of social actors with

torial issues; a separation of local democracy problems from the trans-national strategies of economic actors.



respect to the contents of public action. The technicalization of participation that formalizes, among other things, the rules through which citizens are involved, and entails the determination of the timings and modes of decision-making. The individuals involved in participatory processes perceive themselves to be responsible for respecting these rules, and therefore represent themselves as active subjects in decision-making.

Thus, not only does respect of these rules legitimize decisions, but it can also favour an uncritical acceptance of the limits imposed on the decision by those structuring the same participatory experience in a *top-down* logic. Particularly important is the consequence of depoliticisation. This concept, in one of the seminal articles on this issue (Burnham 1999), is considered as a part of a wider political process, starting from the 1990s, «designed to achieve the subordination of the labour to capitalist command» (Idem: 51-52). It is a political strategy that makes the political character of policy making less visible. More specifically depoliticisation of policy making permits political actors to be credible with regard to economic actors and, at the same time, to protect government action with regard to the unpopular consequences of the decision taken (Burnham 2001). The main advantages of this strategy mainly consist in the representation of decision-making and its stakes as technical and apolitical issues (Kettel 2008).

Recently the academic debate on depoliticisation has been updated by a «second wave» of studies on this topic, developed by starting with the idea that depoliticisation represents «the dominant model of statecraft in the twenty-first century» (Flinders and Wood 2014: 135). We are, using a succinct and purposeful expression coined by E. Rubin (2012), in an age of “hyperdepoliticisation”. In this second wave of studies, the topic of depoliticisation has been better and more directly framed within the historical context of the hegemony of the ideas, interests, and actors pertaining to neoliberalism (Fawcett and Marsh 2014), and also within the crisis of traditional forms of political representation and of the reinforcing of post-democratic decision making processes (Crouch 2003; Hay 2007; Norris 2011). In this context the «ecosystem of depoliticising trends» (Wood and Flinders 2014: 153) emerges and depoliticisation appears as a «new orthodoxy» (Marsh 2011).

Developing a previous theoretical proposal by C. Hay (2007), the most recent analysis of depoliticisation distinguishes it in multidimensional terms. Three main forms of depoliticisation are identified: i) a governmental depoliticisation that transfers the issues from the governmental arena towards non governmental bodies or technocratic structures; ii) a societal depoliticisation that favours a shifting of the issues from the public sphere towards the private sphere (individuals, families and/or communities); iii) a discursive depoliticisation that

transfers towards the realm of necessity (Wood and Flinders 2014: 165). In discursive depoliticisation the role of knowledge and expertise is crucial and contributes significantly to the transformation of political issues into technical ones.

Also as regards the case study analysed in this article, it seems very important to focus on the relationship between neoliberalism and depoliticisation. Usually it is defined as a sort of product of the neoliberal discourse, which emphasises and promotes mistrust towards politics (Hay 2007; Madra and Adaman 2014). Instead, I argue that depoliticisation is a strategic and useful resource in order to promote and strengthen market oriented forms of public action. In other words, neoliberalism is not the independent variable that explains depoliticisation processes, also because the latter exist in forms that are historically independent from neoliberalism. From this same perspective P. Fawcett and D. Marsh (2014) have doubts that depoliticisation is a new phenomena. Depoliticisation appears, on the contrary, as a specific political and discursive resource that neoliberal public action has been systematically using since the end of the last century. From this perspective it is a «political strategy» (Jessop 2014) that can assume and use several and different forms and instruments. It is important consider «what kind of vocabulary, lexicon, arguments» (De Leonardis 2013: 130) the processes of depoliticisation use. An initial form of depoliticisation appears particularly significant in which the political discourses refer to expertise, technical knowledge, science, and the objectivity of numbers. Using these kinds of discursive devices, public choices are defined as the result of «objective and trends and naturalised and consequently inescapable» (De Leonardis 2013: 131). A second important form of depoliticisation is that which refers to the prefiguration of desirable scenarios, imaginaries (Sum and Jessop 2013), collective seductions, which construct «a specific normative force, which indicates what and how aspire» (De Leonardis 2013: 132). The technical algorithm of participation can be considered as a specific type of the first form of depoliticisation, while the political one can be considered as a specific type of the second form of depoliticisation. How do these algorithms and forms of depoliticisation work? What are their main consequences?

#### 4. A case study in Rome<sup>8</sup>

In order to answer these questions I will reconstruct and analyse a participatory process activated, between 2014-2015, by a Local Authority District

<sup>8</sup> I wish to thank my colleague Barbara Pizzo for her kind and useful contribution to the reconstruction of the case study.

(hereinafter LAD) in Rome, lying within a central urban area where the redevelopment of a railway station led to a wider transformation and regeneration process. It is a main strategic intervention also interpreted as a main driver of metropolitan development. A major European bank (BNP Paribas) chose this location for its headquarters, which involves the construction of large buildings (still on-going). At the same time, high social marginalization is evident in the area, while a range of civil society organizations have been trying to interact with the LAD in order to get social and environmental benefits out of the redevelopment project. The analytical importance of this case resides in its capacity to mirror the relationships between different economic, political and social stakes and, consequently, between different actors and can also contribute to explaining what the role of the top-down participatory practices is in the context of neoliberalization processes. The project analysed can be considered a typical neoliberal flagship project for several reasons. Firstly the project is located within a main redevelopment area, where an old railway station (Tiburtina) was recently rebuilt in order to become the main station for high-speed trains. A principle aim was to increase Rome's connectivity with the other main cities in Italy and Europe. Increased connectivity between cities is a 'classical' topic for neoliberal political projects regarding urban development. Secondly, the project is located near one of 18 urban-metropolitan sub-centers, where advanced tertiary (both public and private), and research (University), together with commercial facilities, were planned. In other words, the project was conceived as a part of a polycentric urban economic and functional development, which is another typical feature of the neoliberalization of urban spaces. Thirdly, the rebuilding of the station was an occasion to improve and upgrade the land value of a large part of the surrounding area. In 2012 BNP Paribas, through BNL Real Estate Italy, acquired a site of 7,350 m<sup>2</sup> from the *Ferrovie dello Stato* - FS (National Railways)<sup>9</sup>. It was one of a number of plots of land, totalling 92 hectares, 2/3rds of which belonged to the FS Group, and 1/3rd to the Municipality of Rome. The sale and redevelopment of these plots would lead to a major planning and real estate operation, with impacts at different scales. The ability to attract international capital and directional functions is another feature of metropolization. Fourthly, the project for the new headquarters was financed by a valorisation

<sup>9</sup> *Ferrovie dello Stato* - FS is the Italian national railway company, formerly a state-owned company, which differentiated between its sectors according to its main activities (briefly: the mobility service, the infrastructures, and the management of their real estate properties – such as the stations). It was also becoming a Ltd company, opening up to private involvement, and deciding to increase the value of its real estate holding, in particular those parts which were defined as 'non-functional' (or non-functional anymore).

of the old BNP offices spread across the city<sup>10</sup>, generating a sort of systemic effect for the valorisation of land and buildings in the city. Lastly, but not least, the wider area in which the station is located is characterized both by a high level of social marginalization of different social groups – principally illegal migrants and homeless people who live around the station – and by the extensive degradation of its urban spaces and structures, that was a result of the social effects typical of neoliberal policies. The problems of social exclusion and of neighborhood decline are at the core of the initiatives and activities of many civil society associations and urban movements and also of the LAD.

The case analysed is interesting for an understanding of the actual role of participation processes in such development projects. Even though the Municipality did not involve the LAD in the decision-making process regarding the new headquarters, the latter decided to promote a participatory process in order to understand if and how the redevelopment of the Tiburtina area might have a positive impact to fight social and spatial degradation in the neighborhood. It consisted of a top-down participatory process aimed at collecting proposals, opinions and ideas about the regeneration of the surrounding areas. The team guiding the process<sup>11</sup> was inspired by the principle of deliberative practices: despite the fact, as we will see, that the process had only a partially deliberative outcome. Even though the LAD's aim was to try to carry out a sort of community development plan, the results were, as we will see, very poor.

Following the design phase – in which the team carried out several interviews with different political actors and representatives of some of the several civil society associations operating in the neighborhood – the participatory process was carried out through four main steps.

The first consisted of a very important public meeting, in which all the major interests were represented, and over a hundred citizens and a dozen civil society organizations took part. At this meeting the Chief Executive Officer of *Ferrovie dello Stato* – FS declared that the redevelopment of the old station and the construction of the new headquarters were «fundamental projects for the equilibrium of the city and they are part of a National project ... for these reasons we invested our economic and financial resources and we planned a

<sup>10</sup> The new headquarters concentrates in one place the offices that previously occupied 8 buildings in different parts of the city, so that a reduction of 30% of the real estate management costs and a major improvement as regards accessibility and mobility is expected. Financially, the operation cost BNP Paribas 300 million euros, but it planned a redevelopment and valorisation of the old buildings through a change of use to temporary accommodation and tourist facilities.

<sup>11</sup> The author of this article was one of the two experts that designed and managed the participatory process.

project of real estate development, also based on private investment». At the same meeting he indicated that the FS «were commercializing the new spaces of the new station». It is self-evident that the redevelopment of the old station is a fundamental building block in a wider metropolitan neoliberal accumulation strategy. The second step was a very structured public meeting in which four major regeneration projects for the area surrounding the headquarters were presented. They were proposed by the Municipality of Rome; the Planning Department at La Sapienza - University of Rome; and two different civil society associations. The main aim of the second meeting was to clarify and illustrate to the civil society organizations and the citizens involved in the participatory processes (more or less sixty people) the main contents of the regeneration projects. The third step was a meeting in which – using rules for public discussion decided upon by the participants themselves – the four projects were analysed considering their strengths and weakness. The main issues discussed were the consequences of the different projects presented in terms of: traffic and mobility; environmental and noise pollution; creation of cycle paths; infrastructure; social and physical decline; urban security; and green spaces. In the fourth and last step several aspects of the four projects were further analysed using the World Cafè participatory method. In particular the issues of social and physical decline and urban security were debated in depth.

The LAD, as stated by its former President, ‘was not involved in the decision-making, because BNP Paribas interacted directly only with the *Ferrovie dello Stato* and with the Municipality of Rome’. The LAD was hoping that at least a part of the urbanization fees charged could be used for some minor measures aimed at partially reducing the physical decline of the area. This process was interrupted by a political crisis (Autumn 2015) within the public administration.

Significantly, what turned out to be considered a priority consists merely of minor maintenance works. In the words of the former President of the LAD, “we wanted to renovate sidewalks, or to provide street amenities such as flowertubs, garbage cans, benches and so on...”. Even considering the importance of such enhanced public works and provisions, it is difficult to understand how they could reduce social exclusion and social deprivation. At the same time, the participatory process produced – as seen – an interesting reflection as well as proposals regarding several social and urban issues: traffic and urban mobility; air and noise pollution; construction of cycle paths; green spaces; and the renovation and reuse of abandoned buildings. However none of the various proposals resulting from the participatory process were translated into effective public action. The LAD was not able to produce any concrete measures out of these proposals, and the Municipality attitude lay far from

responding to the neighborhood's needs. As often happens participation remains just a rhetorical exercise.

While the LAD was never involved in the decision-making process, the participatory process was embedded in a sort of "policy niche", which is irrelevant compared to the strategic decisions over metropolitan development in Rome. Significantly, during the third meeting in the participatory process, a citizen came out saying sharply: "While we were arguing about benches and flowertubs, they were deciding about the redevelopment of Tiburtina Station and the construction of the new headquarters of BNP Paribas, nobody has involved us in that kind of decision".

The weakness of the public actor vis-a-vis the stronger economic actors also emerged as a tendency to bend to private interests (whose intervention is assumed as absolutely necessary and unavoidable), and as an inadequacy to drive the process in order to obtain more widespread advantages.

### 5. Concluding remarks

Looking at the distribution of advantages which derive from implementation of the construction of the new BPN headquarters it is possible to note that: i) the *Ferrovie dello Stato* obtained advantages in terms of real-estate valorisation of a large portion of the land it owned; BNP Paribas obtained advantages through reducing its operating costs by 30% and by valorising its real-estate holdings in other parts of the city through a change of use; ii) the Municipality of Rome acquired significant urbanization fee charges; iii) the social and physical decline of the surrounding areas, meaning at the neighborhood scale, remains unresolved.

Consequently, the case study shows that the participatory processes worked as a sort flanking mechanism that contributed to stabilizing and reproducing the neoliberalization of urban development. The political and economic issue at stake, that is the valorisation of the area surrounding the new station and headquarters by means of the real estate development project, was highly depoliticised within the participatory practices. Not only have the physical, social, and environmental problems of the neighbourhood been detached from the trans-scalar accumulation strategy based on the flagship project of urban redevelopment of the area, but this kind of project was also represented as a desirable scenario. Real estate development becomes a naturalised and inescapable trend without alternatives. The technical structuring of the participatory process greatly contributed to a deflection of conflict from political and economic stakes to technical ones (street amenities, public works and provi-

sions). While activation of the participatory process by the LAD apparently seems a powerful means aimed at improving local democracy, it really favours the opacity of post-democratic (Crouch 2003) decision making.

In brief, the case study analysed clearly shows how participatory practices in processes of urban regeneration really can be a «poisoned chalice» (Jones 2003), in which contemporary neoliberal processes of privatization and marketization of urban governance are legitimised and reproduced.

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