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Academics are back in town: The city-university relationship in the field of social innovation

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Abstract. The article deepens the city-university relationship from the perspective of social innovation initiatives. It introduces the critical dimension of the new political economy of cities into the triple helix analytical model to help understand the quality of interactions between the actors involved in those initiatives. To do so, the study investigates how the triple helix works in the field of social innovation: it adopts a comparative approach and reconstructs some urban initiatives promoted by university and other urban actors in the cities of Barcelona, Milan and Venice. This study highlights a new model of action that integrates those presented by rhetoric, i.e., university institutions as key actors in local development processes. The process of interaction between universities and cities is now seeing academics—and not just universities—at the forefront of the search for contexts to transform fields of research into spaces of social intervention and areas of political action, giving a transformative orientation to research. For many years, in fact, academics have cooled their heels in university departments, waiting for the social demand for expert knowledge to offer to the others actors (e.g., industry, government, and civil society); and they are now leaving those departments to participate in the social production of knowledge. On the one hand, this new relationship between university and city confirms the analysis of the influence of universities on the factors of context and agency, while on the other it contrasts with the narrative of the entrepreneurial and commercial university that has been assiduously built over the last twenty years, often by the academic world itself. Instead, a population of academics now arises, who exploit the strength of weak ties in university organization and the hitherto weak institutional orientation of universities towards social innovation initiatives, to guide the universities' third mission in the field of social and political action.

Keywords. Intellectual activism, new political economy of cities, social innovation, triple helix model, urban governance.

INTRODUCTION: THE LIMIT OF TRIPLE HELIX MODEL AND THE PROPOSAL FOR INTEGRATION WITH THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF 'THE NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE CITIES'

Since the production systems highlighted a new centrality of knowledge, the most accredited theoretical model for explaining the trajectories of local development is the triple helix (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz 1998; Etzkowitz 2012), according to which local development is the result of interactions between actors from the three institutional spheres of industry, university and local government.

Besides being substantially valid for over twenty years since its foundation, the strength of this model is that it can be adopted at different scales, from the national to the local one, and for different fields of innovation, from technological to social, although studies dedicated to the first type of innovation are prevalent. It lends itself to act as an analytical lens to understand the dynamics of local development.

The ability of triple helix model to identify the three main actors of local development - universities, enterprises and government institutions - has made this analytical model substantially not criticized and largely adopted in the field of policy making. When the model does not work, the problem is identified not in the model itself but in the fact that, in some countries, the three blades of the helix tend to work in isolation (Dzisah and Etzkowitz 2008).

The triple helix model is capable of explaining the relevance of interactions between local governments, universities and enterprises (profit, non-profit and low profit) for social innovation initiatives. The agents active in the three institutional spheres interact within networks of co-design and implementation of initiatives that favour the production and use of knowledge for the development of projects. In line with the innovation models of the knowledge society, the university is seen as an actor specialized in the production of knowledge and promoting its territorial concentration.

In addition to this ability to capture reality, the success of the triple helix is partly attributable to the importance of the models – in general and even more in epistemological terms – in the field of contemporary urban research, consistent with the Weberian heritage in the political economy of cities (Cremaschi and Le Galès 2018).

However, the triple helix model presents some limitations, which are related to what Gherardini (2015) explained: the triple helixes present multiple equilibriums, determined by the degree of activism of the actors of the three spheres, by the intensity of their connectivity and by their level of coordination. These findings highlight the variability in time of the equilibriums between institutional spheres and allows us to identify some limits of an excessive functionalism of the model:

- It is useful and effective to identify the actors who adhere to the three institutional spheres envisaged – university, industry and government – but it does not help us define the quality of their relations;
- It does not provide enough details about the generative mechanisms, the organisational dimension and the regulatory dimension, even though they are ini-

tatives that have origins and forms of implementation among them very different;¹ and

- It is not sensitive to the actors and the context, while it is more focused on the outcome of the action, that is, interested in grasping the outcome of the interaction processes between the actors more than the interactions themselves.

It is our opinion the absence of a critical dimension limits the explanatory potential of the model. We aim to give centrality to the study of the actors and the context, and consequently, we propose to take an orientation to the actor and analyse the practices of social innovation as forms of strong interaction (Dewey and Bentley 1960) during which actors form themselves as such through mutual adjustment (Lindblom 1959). Looking at interactions implies looking at actors not as agents with predefined role and functions but at their becoming an actor in the course of action (Crosta 2010).

With this objective, the perspective of the city as a regulatory group of the economy, which Borelli (2012) resumes from the work of Bagnasco and Le Galès, can offer a richer repertoire of instruments for interpreting what has been observed. Borelli highlights the importance of Arnaldo Bagnasco's work – who developed Weber's work “in the direction of a new research agenda to be used for European cities” (Borelli 2012: 42, our translation) and which laid the foundations for the subsequent conceptualization of the new political economy of cities (Bagnasco and Le Galès 2000; Le Galès 2017) – as elaboration of the Weberian model of cities such as local companies.

This perspective fills the limit of the triple helix model with a different perspective of observation, which allows us to detect the qualities of the actors of urban governance and the forms of interaction between them. What this perspective develops, in fact, is an attention to the interaction between the local and the other levels of regulation, to social groups rather than those who govern, to informality and to social networks (Le Galès 2018; Tosi and Vitale 2016).

Thus, this article aims to introduce the critical dimension into the triple helix model, to better understand the quality of interactions between actors. To do so, we decided to investigate how the triple helix works in the field of social innovation in three cities of Veneto, Lombardy and Catalonia: Venice, Milan and Barcelona.

¹ Some are generated by the willingness of university or department programs (such as Polisocial, Active Learning Labs, Experior, Desis Lab, Urbana), others by the willingness of research groups (Barri i Crisis del IGOP in Barcelona, Tiresia, the work policies of Ca' Foscari, Coltivando) or by the initiative of individuals or groups of teachers (Mapping San Siro, Mestre Morera) or from the proposal of actors outside the university (Lab Altobello, SALE Docks, CheFare, Metropolitan Laboratory of Public Knowledge, Sharitaly, Associació of the Poblenou).

The most economically competitive regions of Italy and Spain represent two privileged areas of study to develop this objective for two reasons. The first is that they represent two cases against the logic of the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz *et al.* 2000), an operational attitude required by universities to promote the production and circulation of knowledge. The study of adverse cases can help us to better understand the mechanisms of functioning (or non-functioning) of certain social processes (Portes 2000). The second reason concerns the peculiarities of the development models of the two countries, such as to question the presence of only two varieties of capitalism (Trigilia and Burroni 2009). Veneto, Lombardy and Catalonia are regions of Mediterranean Europe with rates of development and wealth indices comparable to those of the richest regions of Europe Continental. In light of this, it is possible to recognise the substantial impact of the local dimension on development. Last but not least, the third mission systems of Italy and Spain have many similarities (Gherardini 2015) that facilitate comparison.

Moreover, the urban dimension has been chosen because the cities represent an environment where the university's ability to act both on context and agency factors rises (Bagnasco 2004), according to three primary mechanisms: training of qualified human resources, production of knowledge transferable to businesses and entrepreneurial action of academics through spin-offs and spin-outs (Burroni and Trigilia 2010).

The research question developed in this article is relevant today because the international crisis that started in 2008, which is inserted in a deeper phase of transformation of local production systems (Andreotti *et al.* 2018), has led to the adoption of structural adjustment programmes that have resulted in the contraction of transfers of resources from the state to universities. This retrenchment came after another phase of contraction of expenditure in the previous season of neoliberal reforms between the 1970s and 1990s. It is, therefore, a matter of trying to focus on this potential contradiction that identifies the university as the central player in local development and, at the same time, reduces public investment.

THE CITY-UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIP FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Although the interactions between academics and local societies have always been intense and mutually contributed to the development of knowledge and technological innovations, the university has for a long time

been perceived as an ivory tower little integrated with society. The critique became stronger in the 1980s when advanced economies designed their competitive strategies based on a new centrality of knowledge in production systems. Since the 1980s, cultural and economic factors induced the scientific community to open up to external issues, creating the conditions for the contamination of Mertonian academic culture with a culture oriented towards the commercial exploitation of research results.

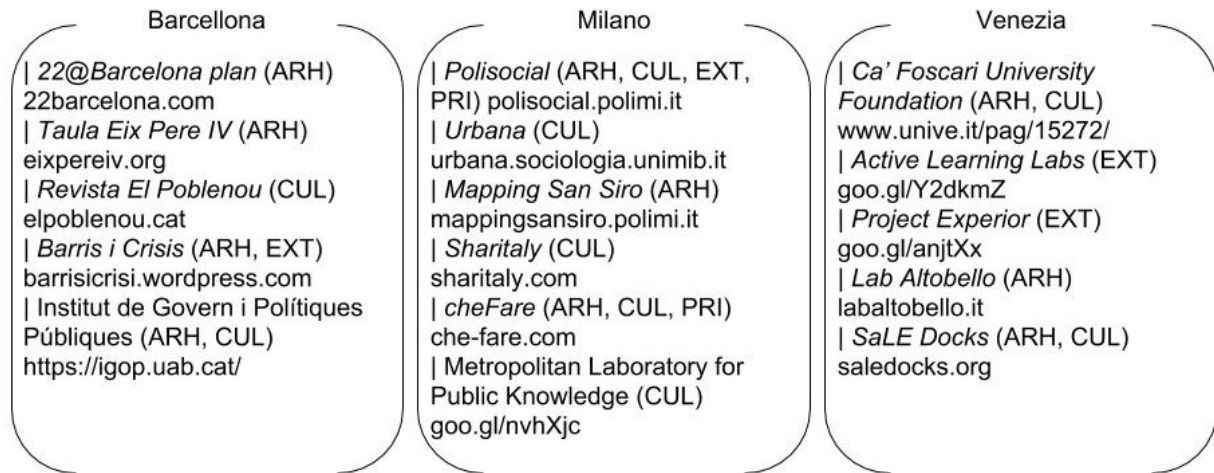
This new approach has been institutionalised in what is generally called the third mission of the university, that is universities' interactions with the socioeconomic environment in order to increase their contribution to local socioeconomic development (OECD 2007).

According to Laredo (2007), we can categorize the third mission elements in 8 dimensions: human resources, intellectual property, spin offs, contracts with industry, contracts with public bodies, participation in policy making, involvement in social and cultural life, public understanding of science. In the field of technological innovation, only some of the eight development areas of the third mission were used to generate indicators that were used to evaluate the penetration of this university approach to local development. As emerges from the works of Gherardini (2015) and Viesti (2016), the most widely used indicators of third mission penetration are monetary transfers from companies to universities, spin-offs and patents.

The change of the subject of the survey, from technological innovation to social innovation, requires a change in the indicators as well. In order to do it, this paper develops a suggestion from a recent article written by Donatiello and Ramella (2018). The authors proposed a much more complex set of activities and indicators to measure academic engagement and they distinguish between commissioned research, collaborative research, consulting and services. What they do is to observe not so much the type of activity but the type of relationship that is established between the actors involved in the activities. In this paper we do a similar operation and observe the type of relationships that are established between actors in the field of social innovation.

The case studies presented below – which are framed as social innovation practices that are configured as university's third mission initiatives (Laredo 2007; Molas-Gallart and Castro-Martínez 2007) – offer us a broad overview of initiatives (Figure 1). Although they have some differences, they have been classified according to four types:

- *Extension of didactics* – It includes didactic activities organised outside the traditional educational



EXT: Extension of didactics; ARH: Action research; PRI: Prizes; CUL: Cultural action of research

Fig. 1. Social innovation and universities' third mission tools.

contexts to communicate scientific discoveries to the public;

- *Action research* – These are activities characterized by the rejection of research neutrality and intentional forms of modification of the contexts in which it operates;
- *Prizes* – These are competitions and contests aimed at bringing out and choosing (reward) the best thematic practices;
- *Cultural action of research* – These include conferences, exhibitions, workshops and other public initiatives that aim to increase the access to research products.

This article attempts to deepen these cases from a perspective of social innovation, while to date they have been investigated mainly in the field of technological innovation.

Thus, we approach the topic of University Third Mission from the perspective of social innovation practices. Our hypothesis, in fact, is that the observation of social innovation initiatives is more effective in observing the quality of interactions between actors due to its markedly relational nature. Despite having a long history (Marques *et al.* 2018), it is within the framework of the crisis of the processes of recalibration of welfare systems that social innovation emerges as one of the pillars of public policies in Europe (Nicholls and Edmiston 2018). In spite this role, social innovation continues to be called an umbrella word (Pol and Ville 2009), a metaphor (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010), a rhetoric (Busacca 2013), a quasi-concept (Jenson 2015) or 'tofu' (Barbera and Parisi 2019). The vagueness of the term, however,

clashes with a growing volume of research and publications, which make social innovation an emerging field of innovation studies (van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016; Busacca 2019) and is consolidating around two strands of study very different in terms of disciplinary scope, perspectives and outcomes. The first is the managerialist approach of Anglo-American origin (Murray *et al.* 2010; Cajaiba-Santana 2014; Caroli *et al.* 2018); the second orientation, of a Euro-Canadian matrix, is rooted mainly in the studies of sociology (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010) and urban planning (Moulaert *et al.* 2013) and is based on an advocacy and policy making approach. What these two approaches have in common is the orientation to the results of the action. It means that they focus on the effects of social innovation on the organisational or territorial context without problematizing the actors, the action or the context itself, which are considered to be part of a coherent system, seen as conditions for determining the outcome of the action. Another element in common to the two approaches is the relevance attached to knowledge production processes concerning social innovation initiatives: knowledge is recognised as a factor in understanding the challenges to be addressed and designing the forms of treatment. This treatment of the issue produces a keen interest on the role of the university in the conception and conduct of social innovation practices (Benneworth and Cunha 2015; Moulaert *et al.* 2017; Chiesi and Costa 2017; Busacca 2018).

Benneworth and Cunha (2015), the authors who have inaugurated this strand of studies, start from the assumption that since the processes of social innovation come from a new knowledge, the university occupies a

privileged position as a provider of expert knowledge as well as technical and economic resources for the production of knowledge and experience in the ways of production and circulation of knowledge. According to the two authors, the academy plays at least three possible roles: i) direct producer of knowledge; ii) certifier of the quality of knowledge embedded in the solutions to the social problems addressed; and (iii) disseminator of knowledge. Their study, which is entirely attributable to triple helix model (Etzkowitz 2012) and entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz 2003), argues that social innovation processes stem from the new knowledge and that the university, precisely because a place par excellence – dedicated to the production and dissemination of knowledge – can play a key role. However, what is not entirely clear – and that this article seeks to address – is what kind of relationship is being established between universities as actors and urban contexts where their action is carried out. The research program of which this article gives the main results is based on the studies that, continuing the lines of research inaugurated by the scholars mentioned up to here, identify the relationship between universities, cities and firms as the process behind local development (Ranga and Etzkowitz 2015). This process is more effective when universities adopt an entrepreneurial attitude (Etzkowitz 2017) and develop effective third mission programmes (Pinheiro *et al.* 2015), expanding the number and the type of actors involved in local government. According to some authors, the situation is further enriched by the protagonism of organised and unorganised civil society, to give life to a five-helix (Iaione 2016).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The study adopts a comparative approach and reconstructs some urban initiatives promoted by university actors and other urban actors in the cities of Barcelona, Milan and Venice, which are configured as case studies (Sena 2016), in order to investigate the relationship between cities and universities from the perspective of social innovation. The cases were further explored through participant observation and interviews (Kawulich 2005; 2012). The continuous attendance in these practices was of great importance because it allowed us to have access to experiences, information and reflections that were fundamental to formulate the first hypotheses. We also participated in meetings, public meetings and events. The observation activities were supported by interviews with key actors – direct protagonists of the initiatives studied – and privileged witnesses – people operating in roles and positions that

gave them the opportunity to develop a qualified observation in relation to the phenomena under investigation for the purpose of deepening the study. Provided the exploratory nature of the interviews, it was decided to proceed through a thoughtful and interactive discussion of the interviews, as proposed by Halcomb and Davidson (2006), in which the aspects of the relationship with the recipients of the interviews prevails over their formal treatment. These actions were completed with the study of relevant scientific literature, gray literature and other documents produced by actors involved in social innovation practices studied.

Barcelona, Milan and Venice were chosen as paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg 2006) because of their great differences but also because they are embedded in comparable institutional contexts.

As pointed out by Gherardini (2015), Italian and Spanish universities have a secondary position in their economic system. In the two Countries there is a prevalence of micro enterprises and few big companies. The industrial sector is strongly unbalanced towards activities incorporating medium-low technology. Adults with a tertiary degree are below the average of OECD countries. Finally, there is a marked territorial disparity in R&D investment.

Barcelona, following the 2015 election results, is experiencing a season of profound and radical transformation in the orientation of its public policies, today increasingly oriented towards the construction of the model of the “*municipalismo del bien comùn*” (Blanco e Gomà 2016), but without renouncing its historical position in the international production chains of value. What Barcelona is expressing is an update of production systems, which is characterized by the centrality of knowledge as a factor of production and by the combination of creativity and new technologies as areas of innovation, towards emerging forms of collaborative economy and new mutualism.

Milan is a city that today has many faces (Pasqui 2017): it is a global city, a smart city, a creative city, and a city-region; it is a city that has managed to intercept some flows of the global capitalism and become an urban factory that produces goods and services with a high content of knowledge and creativity; it also managed to use the occasion of the 2015 Expo to generate and convey the story of a dynamic city, vital, contemporary and, in some ways, oriented to the future. The theme of social innovation played a crucial role in this transition, presenting the vision and project of a competitive city but equally attentive to social inclusion, to become the epicentre of an Italian way to social innovation.

Venice is a city that still tries to redefine its identity in modernity (Busacca *et al.* 2017). It goes through a very complex political, social and economic phase and represents itself at the peak of a crisis that has eroded the urban fabric of the historical and mainland city since the 1970s. The crisis in the industry of Porto Marghera and the current conversion projects, the uncontrolled expansion of the city on the mainland and the demands of autonomy, the immense increase in tourist flows and the consequent conversion of many economic activities, environmental problems, the dramatic depopulation of the city-island and the corruption of the city's political class: these are just some of the issues on the agenda urban area of the city of Venice.

Compared to what Le Galès and Vitale (2013) define 'governance modes', the three cities can be placed in a space bordered by two Cartesian axes, where one indicates the time and the second is the type of government characterizing the three cities. The period taken into account is the 1970s, i.e., the conditions for the affirmation of production systems based on the centrality of knowledge are created, and today.

Venice is characterized by a model of government of a programmatic type, in which the involvement of institutional actors prevails, and when the civil society is involved, this happens through the involvement of non-profit organisations as a policy-enforceable entity. This model presents the weak point of creating many unexpected effects that increase or create new problems (Borelli and Busacca 2018).

Milan is historically a collaborative and pluralist model, which is attentive to the involvement of informal actors and the inclusion of carriers of a variety of interests. This model can be defined as a collaborative one and is strongly unbalanced on the trigger phase of new urban actors, although it has some limitations of the implementation of co-designed policies (Pais *et al.* 2019).

Barcelona presents several ways of government, where after the fall of the fascist regime, the element of continuity is represented by vicinal associationism, that is, the involvement of citizens in associations of district that serve as a meeting point between representative democracy and participatory democracy. Except this continuity, however, we can trace a programmatic orientation up to the economic crisis of 2008 and a cooperative and oriented orientation towards the involvement of citizens since 2015 (Blanco and Gomà 2016).

The cases presented in the paper do not concern all the universities active in the three cities but a selection of them that present a clear and marked attention to social innovation that translate into formally dedicated programs. This does not mean that in the three cities

there are not also other universities that carry out third mission initiatives in social innovation projects, but this happens outside of institutionally codified programmes and can be traced back to the intentions of single researchers and professors.

BARCELONA

We have explored two cases rooted in the neighbourhoods of the city expressing strong urban contradictions in order to explore the 'new Barcelona model.'

The first case concerns the relationship between Associació de veïns i veïnes del Poblenou and some universities and centres of higher education – UOC Seu de Barcelona, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Bau Centro Universitario de Diseño, and Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia – in the urban regeneration process of Calle Pere IV, which was a crucial artery until the 1970s and gradually marginalized as a result of the absorption of the Poblenou area in the city centre and urban road transformations produced since the Olympic season. Despite the strong impetus given to the district from the 22 @ Barcelona plan (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz 2011), large sections of Calle Pere IV are still severely degraded.

In 2011, the Associació de veïns i veïnes del Poblenou launched a programme of work in the area considered essential to complete the transformation program of the Poblenou. The strategy is based on the active involvement of the local population and the relaunch of cultural, economic and civic activities along the street. The program involves, besides the Associació, some university institutions permanently established in the Poblenou and consequently differently organised groups of students and professors, groups of citizens who reside in the area and associations and cooperatives engaged in cultural and social fields. This program also has its own work table (Taula Eix Pere IV). The process – which sees a strong activism of the Associació de veïns i veïnes del Poblenou and some university groups – takes the form of action research, where socio-space action is intertwined with activities of studies and research on the area, whose problems are addressed and discussed in a collegial way by activating forms of social intelligence distributed in the different actors. In 2017, the first initiatives of this work were implemented: Grigri Pixel, an urban furniture project attended by citizens; Canya Viva, a self-construction collective in cannabis; and Biciclot, a cyclist cooperative that plans to inaugurate and manage the Hub de la Bicicleta. At this stage, the Eix Pere IV table becomes a platform for citizens' participation.

The second case overturns the perspective of the former and deals with a research-action process promoted by some academics of the Institut de Govern i Polítiques Públiques (IGOP) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) that actively involved the children of the school 'Mestre Morera,' located in the neighbourhood of Ciutat Meridiana. IGOP is a research centre that was founded in the 90s by a team of political analysis; in 2002, it became a centre of investigation, and in 2006, it was officially recognised as an institute of investigation of the UAB. The element that makes IGOP very special and interesting is the model of 'implicated research' that it has developed, transferring in the field and updating the reflections proposed on phronetic research by Flyvbjerg (2001). In their primary fields of research — public policies, urban governance, commons, Internet and social innovation — IGOP members seek to combine research and social transformation effectively to make them a widely recognised and influential actors in urban government, to express numerous members of municipal governments.

Barris i Crisis is the name of a research project funded by the Obra social La Caixa that the Catalan Institute of IGOP has started to investigate the effects of the economic crisis and the responses that the citizens in the neighbourhoods set up to cope with them. While studying the neighbourhood of Ciutat Meridiana, IGOP comes into contact with students of the 5th and 6th year of the Mestre Morera school, being impressed by the ability of children to recognise the signs of the crisis economic and social that affected their families. From that meeting was born the idea of experimenting with a research-action project that had direct involvement of those students, who become real social researchers, contributing themselves to increase the endowment of cultural capital in the neighbourhood.

MILAN

Milan was framed as a model of collaborative governance (Polizzi and Vitale 2017). Therefore, two cases were chosen to highlight this collaborative propensity. The first case concerns some initiatives promoted and managed by universities in Milan, while the second concerns CheFare, a well-known association that has been active on the themes of social innovation through a national prize and intense research and dissemination activities since 2012.

Politecnico di Milano and Bicocca are both active with specific programs and initiatives on social innovation. Polytechnic, with Polisocial, is the only Italian

university to have a dedicated university program for social innovation, and there are various forms of action within it. Field didactics aims to promote the interaction between the university's training activities and the requests that emerge from local territories and communities, through the promotion and development of projects' didactic. Students and teachers in close contact with urban actors face concrete city's problems by providing their skills. The Polisocial Award is a prize for research projects for social purposes of the Politecnico di Milano, with the aim of promoting the development and advancement of scientific, basic and applied research with high social impact. Alongside these structural and university actions, there are also several laboratories — groups of teachers and researchers — that promote specific initiatives, such as Mapping San Siro, Desis Lab projects and the actions of Tiresia. With less intensity and institutionalization, the other universities in Milan are also active. Bicocca is active with Urbana, a review of meetings open to the public promoted by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca, designed as an opportunity for consolidating the relationship between universities and the city for the dissemination of scientific research. Other important initiatives are as follows: Sharitaly, which is a leading event for the debate and exchange of practices on the economy of collaboration since 2013 and the Metropolitan Laboratory for Public Knowledge promoted by the Municipality of Milan and the Feltrinelli Foundation, which involved researchers from all over Italy.

CheFare was born in Milan as one of the most coveted prizes in Italy for cultural innovation projects with high social impact as an attempt to support the type of initiatives that struggle to find necessary funds in Italy. The project's ambition was to support and give voice to an emerging cultural sector immediately. Formally, today CheFare is an association for cultural transformation that investigates cultural changes and produces in-depth materials with research centres and universities. The contest was completed by a web portal containing insights, reports, stories and research, to which academics and professionals contribute in the fields of social and cultural innovation and that over the past few years has become a benchmark at the national level. More recently, numerous collaborations and technical partnerships with local authorities, associations, foundations and universities have also been added. The relationship with universities was born in traditional forms: Thanks to the award and the web portal, CheFare collects data produced by projects and cultural operators, which are offered to universities as open data to develop joint research projects, with the aim of fostering new initiatives.

VENICE

Three types of projects were chosen in Venice. The first typology concerns some training projects, which are aimed at workers of private companies, promoted by the social innovation area of the Ca' Foscari University Foundation with the funding of the Regional Operational Programme of the European Social Fund. These projects were conceived and conducted by an informal group of professors, researchers and hybrid figures – reflective practitioner (Schön 1983). These reflective operators were asked to use their direct experience to facilitate access to fields and objects of study and elaborate useful and usable knowledge through collective actions, in which different actors, for example, artists, entrepreneurs and scholars of management, use the projects as an opportunity to relate their knowledge and experiences, facilitating the conversation to introduce innovative forms of creativity development into the companies.

The second type of projects concerns two initiatives born within the Department of Management of Ca' Foscari University: Active Learning Labs (ALL) and Experior, both curated by teams of teachers with strong research interests on innovation and entrepreneurship. ALLs are innovative teaching laboratories that use Design Thinking, Lego Serious Play, Lean Start-up, Business Model Canvas and Theory of Change methodologies to produce ideas and solutions on social, organisational and economic problems, involving the following according to a specific format: students, divided into interdisciplinary groups for designing solutions; enterprises and institutions of the territory, which offer essential experience contributions to understand the issues at stake; a team of experts in innovative business modelling methodologies; and university teachers and researchers. Experior is an innovative didactic project of the Department of Management of Ca' Foscari University that aims to find solutions to key problems of Venice by involving young talents, businesses and local institutions and addressing the future of three sectors: manufacturing, tourism receptivity and cultural offerings. The peculiarity of these projects is that they have teaching oriented to dealing with some social issues with the aim of promoting social innovation by interacting with new urban actors.

The third type of projects consists of two autonomous civil society initiatives, which in the course of the action developed an ongoing relationship with the university and some of its members, producing a mutual exchange of information, knowledge, experience and networks of relations. The first is Lab Altobello, an

innovative coworking space and a space for children that aims to facilitate the reconciliation between life and work times for parents. It is managed by a social cooperative that has sought partnership with the academic world (Ca' Foscari and Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, IUAV) for a continuous innovation strategy, which requires easy access to information and skills of the highest level. For the two universities involved, the cooperative represents an object of study and a point of contact with the local welfare system for ongoing research. The second is S.a.L.E Dock, an independent cultural centre founded in 2007 by a group of activists with strong connections to the networks of the antagonistic political movements of the North East. The originality of the project is the strong connection between art, politics and city and the construction of a close relationship with some academics from Venetian and regional universities. A common feature of the two projects is that in their organisations operate researchers, both structured and non-structured, who combine theory and practice, experimenting with new models of cultural work organisation and production of local welfare.

WHY DO ACADEMICS PARTICIPATE IN SOCIAL INNOVATION INITIATIVES? PROFESSION, REPUTATION AND POWER

Once the new lens of observation has been adopted, the situation of general fragmentation of the phenomena highlighted by case studies, in terms of forms of trigger and implementation, helps us to trace the outlines of university institutions adhering to a theory of development based on the central role of knowledge in local development processes but neglecting the fundamental dimension of institutional capacitation and recognising themselves in the function of building social capital. Universities undertake these initiatives without having offices and administrative areas with specific expertise and without incorporating evaluation criteria into their strategic plans. The actors of the universities involved in the study recognise that the university frequently stands in the way of the full implementation of the initiatives. The reading of the strategic plans of the universities involved in the initiatives presented here shows, in fact, that the ability of universities to influence the promotion of social innovation is foreseen in the documents as a goal but is never traced back to forms of evaluation.

An aspect that emerges is that in some initiatives the university as an actor is left in the background in favour of university actors, individuals or groups who mobi-

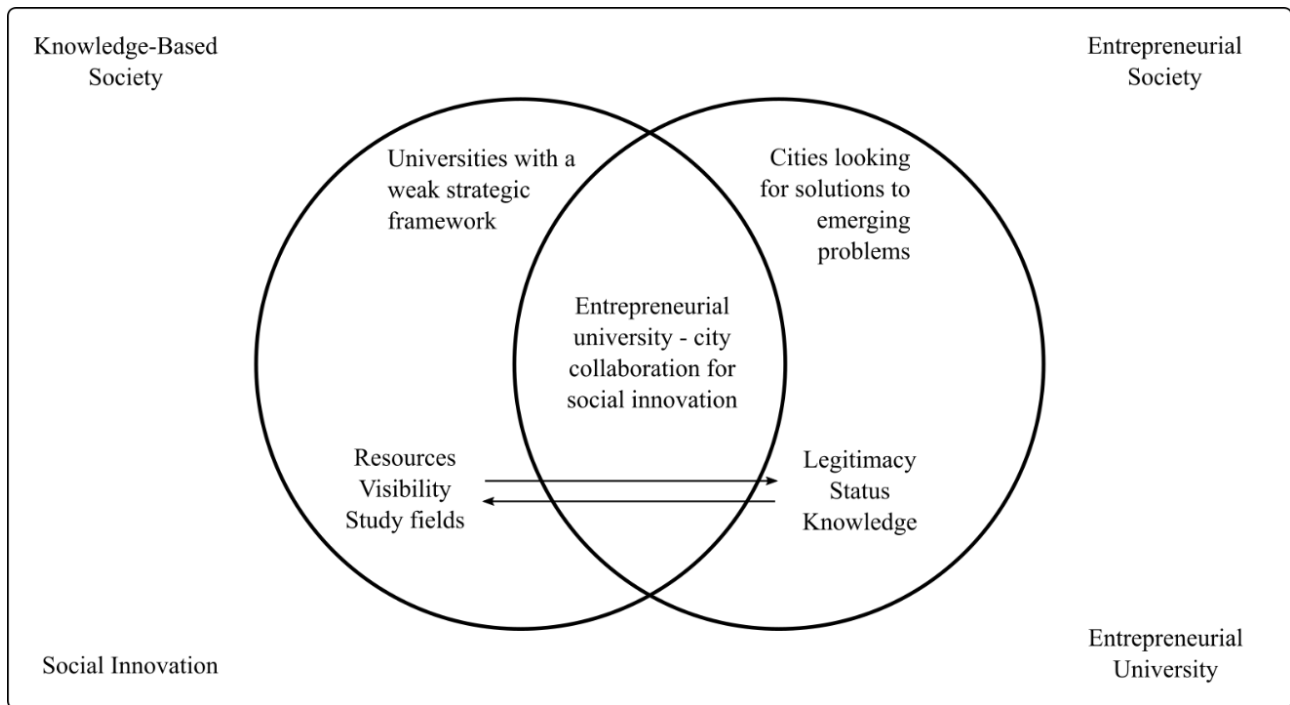


Fig. 2. University-city collaboration for social innovation.

lise themselves on their own initiative or are pushed by other urban actors. What is called into question, consequently, is the university-city relationship. In many of the cases, individuals or groups of academics, driven by research interests and/or civic or political passion, mobilise taking the university, as an institution, with them. The complex organisational dimension that the university mobilises – driven on the one hand by the weak ties of professors and researchers and on the other by the increasing bureaucratisation of the administrative apparatus – limits some attempts to participate in social innovation projects and initiatives. These obstacles are overcome thanks to the work, both regular and irregular, of academics.

For a few years, academics have remained in universities waiting for the demand for expert knowledge, to be dispensed to citizens. Today some of them have returned to the city to participate with citizens for the production of knowledge, which is an increasingly social and less technical action.

Such processes that shape the governance of social innovation practices has a multi-directional architecture (Figure 2): In a general context in which the concepts of knowledge-based society, social innovation, entrepreneurial university and entrepreneurial society

rise, universities operate within a strategic framework weakly oriented towards social innovation, which generically integrates the objectives of social innovation without defining precise evaluation criteria and awarding awards; urban actors are looking for solutions to emerging and wicked problems (work, social inclusion, health, ageing, education, environment, and so on); research centres or groups of researchers (seeking sense and affirmation in academic and/or political spheres) enter into relationship with urban actors who have the availability or ability to orient information and economic or financial resources. In this relation, urban actors gain legitimacy, authority and usable knowledge; university actors gain resources, visibility and direct access to data to build their research.

According to this scheme, academics more than universities get involved the initiatives mainly because they try to relate to what they want to understand, while configuring a process of cooperative learning. So, it is not just about reputation and power, but there are also a lot of professions.

By adopting this analytical framework, it is possible to reconstruct the space of the third mission as an area of overlap between the strategic (weak) framework of the university and the urban policy framework (with

low resources), in which the actors are moved by different instances that converge through processes of mutual adjustment.

Because the triple helix is very dependent on contextual factors, such as the dynamism of the local economy, but it is also significantly conditioned by the ability of universities and local and national governments to activate knowledge, governance models become fundamental to understand third mission forms in the field of social innovation.

The three cities have very different governance models (Busacca 2019). Milan presents a hybrid pluralism where the protagonists of the triple helix propeller and the philanthropic foundations build platform projects populated by a plurality of new actors. The Barcelona model produces pluralist deliberative arenas, in which different sectors of public administration, universities, foundations, companies and groups of citizens participate in initiatives on a parity basis. Venice presents a model of governance that can be ascribed to the forms of tempered bipolarism, a legacy of the welfare mix models produced in the field of new public management during the 1990s. These characteristics can be interpreted as premises for understanding the forms of application of the Third Mission in the field of social innovation. The Venetian model actualises the historical relationship between the university and the business sectors of the city, which is declined in commissioned research and consulting initiatives. The pluralist orientation of Milan favours a collaborative approach to research and the direct transfer of knowledge during the actions. Finally, the cooperative model of Barcelona favours action research initiatives in which the distinction between research and social actors tends to disappear.

These findings confirm what Viesti (2016) proposed: a factor that influences the transfer of knowledge is the dynamism of the context in which the urban actors are involved. Universities in dynamic contexts and animated by tensions of democratic innovation such as Barcelona, give a strong participatory impulse to social innovation initiatives. Universities in dynamic contexts and motivated by entrepreneurial forces such as Milan promote initiatives with a vocation for economic innovation. Universities in contexts that are subject to phases of static urban governance promote limited forms of knowledge transfer aimed at social innovation.

FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

Thanks to the analytical perspective adopted, it is possible to point out that decisions are not the result of

scientifically programmed action or static power relations, but of processes of mutual adjustment that are characterized by an incremental dynamic of muddling through (Lindblom 1979).

The processes of social innovation emerge from mutual adjustments – which can be collaborative, cooperative, competitive and conflicting and very often present a mix each – that take place inside and outside the boundaries of organisations. These interactions are configured as ritual interaction chains (Collins 2005), based on the continuous attempt of individuals to maximize their level of satisfaction. The success – or failure – of these initiatives is thus dependent not so much on individual decisions taken but on the ability of social actors to support a relational character in the processes of treatment of the problems. In this context, actors and their predisposition to the relationship with other actors become a central element in explaining the governance modes that characterize the social innovation initiatives.

One finding that emerges from the study is the marked pluralization of the actors of urban governance involved in social innovation initiatives: In addition to the three traditional actors of the triple helix (university, industry, government), there are other two (organised civil society and spontaneous civil society), which are specifications, respectively, of the enterprise (social, civil, non-profit) and politics (which is not only parties but also companies and movements). It is not possible to qualify the social enterprise as a peculiar form of actor. It is rather definable as a form of an enterprise whose objective is not to maximize profit but provide (social) value product. Numerous studies, in fact, testify to the gradual collapse of precise boundaries between forms of enterprise and the emergence of organisational hybrids (Venturi and Zandonai 2014) that combine missions, values and visions of companies that historically had been attributed to specific types of business (public, profit, and non-profit, among others) and that today qualify as institutional innovation that arises from the changes in place on the economic and social level. Similarly, it is not possible to identify unorganised civil society as a specific urban actor composed of various forms of urban protagonism (social innovators, city makers, digital craftsmen and so on), since this would involve recognising the ownership of political action to public institutions, while numerous studies have now acquired recognise the political role of the social action and actors. Policies to promote social innovation have long highlighted the need to mobilise society, not just making it organised, in the management of emerging social challenges, and society has responded to mobilising in forms, even unprecedented, of collaboration, mutualism

and cooperation. In this respect, cases reveal that social innovation initiatives trigger the social action of very different actors: children, teachers, students and citizens in Barcelona; associations, students, professionals and actors of the sharing economy in Milan; students, cultural associations and citizens in Venice.

The second finding that emerges is the great difficulty triple helix model encounters when trying to reconstruct the forms of interaction between the actors of urban governance. The triple helix, and even more specifically its development by Benneworth and Cunha (2015), tends to define ideal types of relationship between actors, according to interaction patterns that are substantially based on the collaboration. The university actor, for example, is qualified as “neutral” from the interests at stake and therefore by its very nature guarantor of the quality of decisions. In the initiatives studied here, the overlapping confusion and promiscuity among the actors at stake tend to make the boundaries of the courses of actions of each of them very permeable and even more complex to recognise the forms of rationality that distinguish them. Thus, rationality seems to be produced as a result of the action rather than as a starting orientation. In the presence of certain conditions – which are above i) research and willingness to interaction, ii) a common sense frame based on collaboration aimed at the search for innovation and iii) an open and pluralist way of governance of innovation building processes, which mobilises itself to involve institutional and informal actors – there is a real evolution of the actors involved in adopting adaptive behaviours that make them hybrid actors, simultaneously engaged in knowledge production, construction and implementation of public policies as well as implementation of initiatives. In these contexts, the processes of mutual adjustment operate in action at very complex levels, to determine the construction of a diffuse actoriality where the parties at stake tend to be fluid and change all the time. Urban actors and academics at an early stage of the relationship seek each other with complementary motives (research and action fields for university; knowledge and legitimacy for urban actors) but subsequently tend to weave their respective paths until they give life to urban practices of which they are both actors, where they play roles, styles and approaches in continuous adjustment reciprocal. In relation to this, Mestre Morera, *cheFare* and *S.a.L.E. Docks* cases are paradigmatic because they show a system of actors where schemes, roles and functions are the result of a process of adjustment between the actors and where the result is a system where the actors play different roles from those expected: the researchers become activists and the activists become researchers.

The third finding concerns the quality and typology of the interactions between urban actors. The analysis shows the prevalence of collaborative relationships, involving the various actors in bidirectional relationships. The presence of radically cooperative transformative relationships is manifested in fewer cases, in situations of strong sharing of a local development strategy and a common ethical tension and valour. What emerges from these forms of interaction is a solid social ability that requires rejecting engineered social projects and practicing complex social exchanges. This social ability is possessed in different ways and quantities by individuals participating in social processes, who qualify primarily for dialogic skills and levels of generosity, in the sense of selfless action. While it is true that the practices analysed mainly generate forms of knowledge commercialisation and new solutions to emerging problems in diminishing resource contexts, in some cases, there are very different conceptions, in which the level of criticism and reflexivity increases. In these cases, the commercial dimension of the action of urban and academics is reduced, and the dimension of collective action is strengthened; the emphasis on the utilitarian function of knowledge is reduced and emphasises that of the production of knowledge in action. In these situations, the processes are produced by a multitude of urban actors, who are confused by crossing the university/city border and producing innovative forms of urbanity as self-managed spaces, cultural programs, city assemblies, and public mobilisations. In these practices, urban actors, and therefore also academics, produce cognitive work expressing cooperation and an autonomous management of knowledge. Urban actors express a productive space and highlight their ability to design and implement production methods without flattening them on external control. Academics are the protagonist of actions that qualify them as phronetic researchers (Flyvbjerg 2001), that is, as researchers who address research as an opportunity and tool to understand and transform the reality and gather these experiences that do not live passively but have power over cooperation, work organisation and productive knowledge. Until now, such practices have been little investigated but are an object of great interest because they crack the traditional assumption according to which the entrepreneurial university produces commercialisation of research and highlight a potential emerging contradiction. For example, in the cases of *Mapping San Siro* in Milan, the transformation of *Calle Pere IV* in Barcelona and the projects of *Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari*, the convergence in terms of interests, visions and purposes of the actors involved has favoured a critical-reflective approach to the initiatives

and the transformation of the initiatives into opportunities for radical transformation of the context rather than for commercial exploitation of the research outputs.

CONCLUSIONS: FINDINGS AND NEW QUESTIONS

The study provides us some insights to answer the research question from which it arose. The research agenda built around the study of the political economy of the cities was perhaps too quickly internalized by subsequent research programmes, which focused on the concept of governance to capture the complex process of local government, losing sight of its original function of observing complexity. The perspective of the city as a regulatory group of the economy, on the other hand, can still be a valuable reference point for urban research dedicated to social innovation, because it allows deepening the quality of relations between local actors and, consequently, to reconstruct the underlying truth regimes of practices. It is an approach that helps us focus on the relationship between the different scales within which the space is produced, keeping in a single analytical framework the micro and macro levels of the mutual adjustment and helping us concentrate the attention of the analysis on the ways of conflict, relations between agents, forms of collaboration and cooperation and relational and cultural dimensions. Today, studies on social innovation have the limit of being inattentive to the actors and the context, oriented mainly to the outcomes of the action, but introducing the approach developed by the tradition of the Italian comparative political economy of the cities makes it possible to introduce the critical dimension to the triple helix model, introducing attention to the local as a relevant level of analysis in relation to other levels of regulation, the development of an implicated research approach and fostering sensitivity for comparison.

The second point is that the phenomena that characterise the process of interaction between universities and cities see, contrarily to a few years ago, universities – or better, academics – at the forefront of the search for contexts to transform, often in a hybrid way, into fields of research and spaces of social intervention and areas of political action, giving a transformative orientation to research. After that, for many years, academics have waited in university departments for the social demand for expert knowledge; they are now leaving those departments to participate in the social production of knowledge. This new relationship between university and city, on the one hand, confirms the analysis of the influence of universities on the factors of context and

agency, but on the other, it contrasts with a narrative of the university in decommissioning that has been built over the last twenty years, often by the academic world itself. Instead, we are faced with a population of academics who exploit the broad links of the weak institutional orientation of universities to guide the third mission in the field of social and political action.

However, new research questions are also emerging. The observation of case studies demonstrate that the university is expected to make an innovative contribution to urban development and, in numerous documents, explicit reference to research by the university of new ways to help the city or the territory or the local community. The report, in these terms, is predetermined: the university redistributes knowledge, skills, experiences and practices; the city provides observation fields, resources and key actors to expand the knowledge available. These initiatives emphasise the importance of the place very frequently; they do so systematically due to environment they have been able to codify, which has responded positively to their incursions, in which new courses of action have been created. Within these practices, the relationship between university and city is opportunistic, and the university earns funds and research fields while urban actors gain prestige and authority. When the university/city relationship is based on critical and thoughtful practices, a reverse relationship is produced, emphasising the importance of the local community in contributing to the creation of a university environment capable of intervention, and new hybrid forms of urbanity are produced, based on overlapping, collaboration and cooperation between urban actors and academics. The theme that emerges from this study is the downsizing of the strategic role of the university in social innovation practices, where it is diluted in the presence of a plurality of actors. Looking at the initiatives presented in this article, however, we note that the roles and functions of the university actors, rather than universities, are much more complex and articulated, allowing us to recognise them as urban actors who participate in urban governance and the social innovation initiatives. It arouses interest the type of actoriality produced by academic exponents who become real agents of change, who do not act simply as academics and put their work at the service of urban actors: they act as urban actors, making themselves promoters or active protagonists of initiatives, impressing a political orientation to their work. Even in this case, however, we must point out that this is not an absolute novelty because the university has always expressed prominent personalities in local political landscapes and forms of intellectual activism (Contu 2018). The novelty, if any-

thing, is in how these actors play their role: rather than offering ready-to-use knowledge or certifying the quality of initiatives, their action aims to act as a leavening factor for interactions between actors. Using their reputation and their in-depth knowledge over the topics covered, they become authoritative, credible and charismatic figures, who are able to act as a bridge to connect people and social networks not directly linked and facilitate the passage of information, thus acting as a knowledge broker (Burt 1992).

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