

Urban governance in the South of Europe: cultural identities and global dilemmas

The concept of governance has been evolving into one of the most important but also dubious concepts in urban politics. The enlightening perspectives of cooperation, participation and collective construction are accompanied by shadowed fears of public demission, oligarchic regimes and less local democracy. These lights and shadows and the dilemmas they bring along are particularly relevant when observing the cities of the south of Europe, whose socio-cultural specificities very much structure local political and policy materialisations. Joining urban Mediterranean socio-political and cultural perspectives — including when gaining cosmopolitanism, and thus reducing North-South dualisms — this paper proposes a systematisation of governance tendencies and directions for deeper analysis of the Mediterranean urban world.

Keywords: urban governance; Mediterranean cities; social capital; cultural capital.

Governança urbana na Europa do Sul: Identidades culturais e dilemas globais

O conceito de governança tem vindo a tornar-se num dos mais relevantes, mas também mais dúbios conceitos em política urbana. As perspectivas luminosas de cooperação, de participação e de construção colectiva são acompanhadas por receios sombrios de demissão pública, regimes oligárquicos e diminuição da democracia local. Estas luzes e sombras e os dilemas que trazem são particularmente relevantes quando se analisam as cidades do Sul da Europa, cujas especificidades socioculturais estruturam muitas das materializações políticas locais. Conjugando as especificidades culturais e sociopolíticas do mundo urbano mediterrânico — incluindo quando aumenta o seu cosmopolitismo e se reduzem dualismos Norte-Sul — este artigo propõe uma sistematização das actuais tendências de governança, bem como correspondentes direcções de aprofundamento analítico.

Palavras-chave: governança urbana; cidades mediterrânicas; capital social; capital cultural.

URBAN GOVERNANCE TODAY

European cities have been positioning themselves in recent decades at a crossroads of history. The changes and restructures occurring in their rhythms, densities, and landscapes, as well as in their broader to inner

* ICS, Universidade de Lisboa, Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9, 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal. e-mail: jseixas@ics.ul.pt

** Departament de Geografia, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, B9/1050 Edifici B - Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain. e-mail: abel.albet@uab.cat

cognitive and cultural dimensions, have led European urban territories and societies into new types of pressures and challenges. These pressures and challenges are found in their most varied sociopolitical urban contexts, marked simultaneously by parallel confrontations in important features — from the continuous pace to absolute time-space flexibility and modularity of the economic and socio-cultural chains; to the crisis of the welfare state, raising new types of social needs and demands.

These fascinating but also disruptive times, rising above the heritage that François Ascher called the Fordist-Keynesian-Corbuosian paradigm (1995) with the development of hyper-territories, meta-expressions, and increasingly complex functionalities of urban life, work, consumption, and mobility, are framing new types of fluxes and externalities that outstrip the capacities of the present political urban governments and institutional arrays.

At the same time, long-established socio-political structures and stakeholdings are also being reframed by these sorts of urban changes. What today seems widely recognised in most of the political, socio-cultural, and academic realms is that this historical mutative scenario demands, from cities and urban societies, an absolute need to reinterpret several of their own structures and attitudes toward urban politics, urban administration, and urban governance (Bagnasco and Le Galès, 2000; Jouve, 2004).

Multiple new urban-driven strategy policies were developed, many with promising (and realised) degrees of innovation and inclusion, others raising doubts about democratic procedures and cost-effective public deliverance. New types of urban projects and urban policies were consolidated; varied institutional structures were created; processes of administrative deconcentration and political decentralisation, some against the odds, were slowly raised; different arrays of principles and tools for urban strategy, urban planning, and even civic participation and civic rights, were proposed; more elaborated and influential forms of critical questioning upon urban socio-political regimes have been consolidated; political and instrumental improvements in social engagement and civic participation have been raised.

However, in spite of all these processes, the last two decades have also revealed certain blockades. Even for some of the seemingly most necessary political developments — such as the creation of metropolitan political authorities configuring stronger governance commitments at recognised scales of critical urban collective regulation and action; or the need for new public enforcement in face of deviation of resources and democratic procedures — many urban societies have been showing that the paces of their “real cities” are not being adequately followed by corresponding paces on the part of their “socio-political cities”.

This paradoxical scenario, having both wider opportunities for development and equity but also most challenging hurdles, seems to fully corre-

spond to what Henri Lefebvre introduced 40 years ago as the long period of disorientation with the (then) expected outcome of the urban revolution (1970). This shows clearly to be the case for the present urban world of Southern Europe.

An important feature of this socio-political paradox seems to lie on a conjunction of standstill with demission attitudes on the part of the State toward the city. On one hand, recent decades have witnessed the gradual evolution of post-fordist urban policies — and more recently even the reconfiguration itself of neoliberal urban policies — which tended to prioritise neo-schumpeterian perspectives and to promote the enforcement of entrepreneurship and competitiveness (Harvey, 2001; Jessop, 1994; Brenner, 2004). These perspectives were justified by expected provisions for the cities of higher levels of social, economic, and creative qualifications, in a world of permanent appeal to new challenges in the areas of competitiveness, and sometimes of its own social emancipation and inclusion. But also, and relevant to our themes under consideration here, these were proposals also developed through the expectation of the enhancement of urban societies with much stronger urban actor's activity, flexibility, and pro-active attitudes, thus catalysing governance networks and resulting in broader urban dynamics and socio-economic development.

On the other hand, however, severe criticism was raised about how it has been through these logics that structural changes have occurred in the political arenas and agendas, remodelling whole structures of urban politics and raising important questions regarding the potential deployment of main urban values such as equity, social justice, and even democracy. For the critics, several years of neo-liberal dismantlement or even disruption of governmental public institutions have diffused (or fragmented, as some say) established political strategies and territories of public domain, these losing their prime role in urban provision and even in urban strategy and planning, with perverse repercussions on social and collective results.

Urban politics comprehends a vast arena where coexist very different dimensions ranging from national strongholds to local political communities and to civic neighbourhood, from metropolitan strategic planning to human resources administration, from EU cohesion funding to real estate and swap finance. Within all these matters, the evolution of the forms of dialogue and conflict between different urban actors (between governmental and institutional organs themselves but obviously between these and the most varied actors of the civil society) remains a vast and triggering forum.

These are perspectives that follow the fields of the social sciences attentive to the city — which in truth should be mainly understood as a social construction — where emphasis is placed on the perceptions, identities, strategies and practices deployed in the actions of the multiple actors and

communities living within the city's extent. This correspondingly recognises that *socio-cultural capital*, and what the literature refers to as “systems of action”, in a city are not bound only to specific urban design or urban planning configurations, but also incorporate the support structures and daily energies that leverage the city's destinies. The French sociologist Alain Touraine (1984, p. 31) reflected about social life as a process, arguing for the necessary replacement of the “society” concept by a “social life” concept, much more centred on the actors' actions and interactions:

the essential is that the growing separation between the actor and the system might be substituted by its interdependency, by the idea of system of action [...] instead of describing the mechanisms of the social system, of its integration or disintegration, of its stability or change [...] we have to substitute the study of the social answers by the analysis of the mechanisms of auto-production of social life.

Through these scenarios filled with lights and shadows, an appreciation of the relational and processual concept of urban governance has been evolving. Let us therefore recall one of the most interesting definitions of governance (Bagnasco and Le Galès): “a process for the coordination of actors, of social groups and institutions in order to achieve collectively discussed and defined goals in a fragmented or even obscure environment” (*id.*, p. 26). It is as if each city, and within it each project, policy, or simple administrative process, should be seen as a collective construction whose success depends on the best or worst emergence of the interrelationship and co-responsibility networks, and the best or worst directions in the interconnection of its political, social and cultural forces, and the pressures and influences amongst the different actors on stage (Jouve, 2003; Pinson, 2009). These perspectives evidently have to be supported with the existence of a considerable degree of concrete rationality in governance management, thus implying the existence of dialogue and consensus-building structures across several scales: spaces, instruments, and mechanisms, both formal and informal, through which conflict and cooperation fluxes might be processed with considerable proximity and the formation of interdependencies and partnerships is materialised with sizeable doses of objectivity.

Sizeable doses of democracy, inclusion, and transparency are also called for, as the notion of urban governance, and its enduring and still quite appealing potential in the settings of urban politics, also carries important risks and mirror-side perspectives. This is so, firstly, because the simply utopian consideration of the city as a collective actor might bring (despite its virtues) obvious difficulties of consistency, often entailing concrete risks of reification — thereby amounting to nothing more than a constant

deconstructivism; and secondly, because these discourses might also be the way for the consolidation, in many cities, of oligarchic governance decision-making political communities, through partial consensus-building processes, and thus not necessarily contributing to collective objectives. The fact is that after more than two decades in the spotlight of many academic and political debates and proposals, governance retains, and has even expanded, its light and shadows.

POLITICAL DILEMMAS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CITIES OF THE SOUTH OF EUROPE

Some authors — though not that many — have been examining the differences and specificities of the South European cities, namely in face of the most recent urban major challenges (see Leontidou, 1990, 1993 and 2010; Nel.lo, 2001; Choriantopoulos, 2002; Borja, 2003; Domingues, 2006). Most of these authors consider that for many of these Southern cities and metropolises, there has been a distinctive path of urban development and restructuring, as well as distinctive modes of governance, at least throughout the major part of the 20th century. Amongst other geopolitical and cultural specificities, this caused not only quite specific urban production processes (strongly understood in major trends like the peri-urbanisation of vast Mediterranean urban and coastal areas), and also sharp reductions in most cities qualification and competitiveness (Choriantopoulos, 2002).

The differential focusing understood on these few scholarly and critical analyses upon most recent socio-political developments in Southern European cities, reinforce our view that the Mediterranean city *genius loci* still remains weakly analysed by academia, if not misled. Following Leontidou (1990, p. 2), “some of their everyday manifestations like informality, community life and socializing, song and football attendance, or mutual aid and illegal building, meet the indifference and scorn” of most of the academic and socio-political theorists, fed on Marx, Weber, and other major northern/Protestant social thinkers, and “are taken advantage of by the State” — this leading to a situation where “creativity and spontaneity thus oscillate on the verge between opposition and cooptation”.

Our present purpose here is to discuss and better understand corresponding differences, pluralities, and common features structuring urban governance in cities like Athens, Marseille, Palermo, Barcelona, and Lisbon. As a differential social, cultural and geopolitical territory, Southern Europe has its own urban governance specificities that deserve attention. These specificities rest on social and cultural pillars, often impacting several institutional and governmental structures and all their normative and regulatory edifications

(Seixas, 2008). As both a legal and non-legal product of the socio-cultural stances existing in each urban society, urban governance (and its networks, stakeholdings, projections, democratic and non-democratic expressions) is a dimension that clearly reflects the existing specificities of every region. It also convenes and expresses the heterogeneities and dilemmas projected from every city into its own future.

Besides the role of the local scale, the Nation-State still preserves a major role in defining each city's positioning and corresponding urban governance configurations and dynamics. This seems to be true even in such decentralised states as Spain, or in cities with a powerful economy like Paris or Milan. For many, "La République contre la ville" as expressed by François Ascher (1998), showed and still shows to be the major framework where the national, regional, and urban governance networks structure themselves. This is also the case even when, as still occurs in vast urban Mediterranean territories, the dominant role of the national governmental institutions proves to be distant and even dismissive regarding attentive forms of strategic urban planning and urban development policies, thereby arresting regulatory functions at the local level (Chorianopoulos, 2002), and introducing distortions and gaps in the confrontation between urban needs and each city's governance capacities (Seixas, 2006).

This generalised disruptive panorama developed different urban governance dynamics and embeddedness capabilities in different urban socio-cultural city configurations. Several cities have had difficulties in both their socio-cultural affirmation and their political representation at more effective influential scales. This has left fewer resources and capabilities for their local governments and societies toward their own city development. This seems to be the case for most of the Greek and Portuguese cities. Other cities, on the contrary, have not only managed to have direct or semi-direct political representation in important political arenas — such is the case of several French cities whose *maires* have been influential deputies on the Assemblée Nationale or even ministers in a long-established political tradition; or the case of some Spanish regional capitals, whose main leaders have had occasional political influence in Madrid. Some cities have also been able to develop local and regional networks of urban and socio-cultural governance, with corresponding results in their political and civic dynamics, and (obviously) with corresponding results in urban restructuring.

At the same time, due to their specific positioning in the local/regional to national confrontations, the capital cities of these South European Nation-States seem to reflect in a higher form these different mirrors and properties. Their political capabilities range from the regional-configured considerable autonomy of metropolitan Madrid (personifying in itself the double-face of Spanish politics and its constant tug of war between national and regional

levels) to the severe trapping paradoxes of Athens and Lisbon (these, on the contrary, resulting with very little local and regional autonomy and highly fragmented governance panoramas, facing strong and ever-present national powers) and to the constant internal and politico-elitist struggles over Paris' effective government, raising the governance stakeholdings in the city of light (for ages, the main urban and cultural light for many Mediterraneans) as probably the best demonstration of the political battles inherent to Southern European cities.

In order to best develop and deliver public policies, and to better obtain the support of resources and stakeholders, several Southern Europe cities have gone in search of new types of strategies, processes, structures, and for more efficient solutions to manage and deliver public policies and to channel the dizzying transformations experienced in the city and its citizenry. Urban policies have been increasingly faced with the challenge of their own redesign being conditioned by the introduction of inter-institutional needs for cooperation between several governmental levels, and by parallel needs of deeper coordination between multiple agents and interests. For at least the last two decades, the options have often been to apply more liberal models in the construction and management of urban policies and projects — even when public coordinated, as would be expected for most of the South European cities. On the other side, however, many other strategies and policies maintained and even reinforced a considerable public and institutional strategic control over urban projects, their developments, and results, even when including new governance forms and designs. Nonetheless, the tendency to follow one or the other political perspective seemed to depend more on the conjugation of the ambitions of each city's elites and main stakeholders — and the corresponding strategies and urban projects — with its own local and regional governance capacities and degrees of autonomy, than on supposedly more concrete ideological or partisan choices.

Presently, almost none of the main Mediterranean urban regions has a concrete metropolitan-scale government — with the relative exceptions of the Madrid Autonomous Community, designed to avoid an effective “Federal District” for the city; and the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, with a certain degree of autonomy but constantly conflicting with central authorities. Some metro-governments existed but were abolished (as in Barcelona), while others may be considered as failed proposals (as the Italian cases). These administrative scenarios lead to enormous political gaps and huge practical problems, especially in crucial dimensions such as urban planning, public and private transportation, energy, and environmental issues. There are, however, public and functional-oriented metropolitan governance arrangements, but all too often subject to considerable doses of political communitarianism and lack of integrated coordination. These difficulties

stem from all local levels and scales, resulting from inherited deficits or from present day internal competitiveness between the different cities and towns that configure each metropolitan region. And the case is that most of the political and functional resources and processes on the public administration apparels are driven to organically adapt to these intricate situations — configuring highly complex governance structures in a panorama that most of the time has no clear basis of collective strategy and public delivery objectives.

That is why even in cities with a reasonable degree of autonomy and with recognised urban thought and strategy (as has been the case of Barcelona) the governance models followed, most visibly when materialised in large-scale projects — like the 22@ economic district or the *Sagrera* high-speed railway station in the Catalonian main city, the recent major investments in Athens such as the Olympic infrastructures and the new airport, or the *Expo* and *Parque das Nações* major investments in Lisbon — faced severe criticism from many voices in their own urban societies (Albet, 2004).

Surely the perspective of the urban *project* has been proving to be a relevant catalyser for urban governance dynamics, evolving economic and social agents, framing clearer objectives both to collective action and to local government administration (Pinson, 2009), and when effectively local, also permitting some measure of civic participation and involvement. It has been through these projections that developing coalitions, political communities, and even pro-structural urban regimes of new types have been under rearrangement — their democratic culture and civic openness varying from quite plural forms to very closed, stratified and non-democratic choices. Local political agendas are, to a significant extent, today dominated by the logics of these project-driven regimes, often overshadowing other scales for political projection as well as local-type attentions, and leading the administrative frameworks to clearly prefer *new public management* attitudes to the detriment of *new public administration* actions (Mozzicafreddo, 2003), perceptively more complex to develop and surely much more delicate to negotiate in the present institutional, party political, and labour union contexts. In reference to one of the main questions proposed by the French literature on these fields — *Who Governs the City* (Joana, 2000) — although we do not consider that most of the urban regimes of major Southern European cities have evolved toward structured *glocalised competitive statist regimes* (as Brenner conceptualised for several urban regimes in the USA and Europe, 2004), we might consider that there is presently a considerable degree of power hypertrophy sustained through semi-closed political communities.

The cultural and symbolic identities that Mediterranean cities and their urban environments contain have become a crucial issue to attract new investments (related to tourism, creativity, heritage, knowledge, ICT, etc.)

in order to ensure a greater competitiveness. Urban marketing and branding have been introduced as a regular promotional feature, although as a result, rapid processes of standardisation of urban projects and products have contributed to a relative banalisation of urban culture itself (Harvey and Smith, 2005; Muñoz, 2008). These transformations brought by this new cultural economy are also slowly reaching the huge peripheral territories of the Mediterranean's sprawling cities — vast territories urbanised throughout the second half of the 20th century and that clearly changed the historical geographical configuration of concentrated and dense cities, and where real estate and retail/distribution — and big public investments themselves — seem to continue to fragment social, economic, and environmental resources in the name of enduring economic policies. And with the onset of the present severe economic crisis, tendencies might be for these coalitions and urban regimes to turn to more simplistic economic and symbolic competitiveness objectives, becoming more oligarchic and less participative, and leaving less space to the urban demands of large parts of the corresponding urban societies.

However, differential political and civic pro-activity can also be noticed in several directions. With the existence of a wide and otherwise consolidated normative and political-institutional structure of government, there can be seen several areas of policy and administrative innovation, strategic thinking, and even democratic improvement. These processes bring perspectives for some change, together with other types of pressures and incentives deriving from newer origins (from the demands of the city-system and the urban society itself), but also pressures from other levels of government, namely the European Union, through administrative decentralisation enforcement, stronger local responsibilities, and new legal and fiscal frameworks. Altogether, these imply new demands, new attitudes, and new positioning for urban governments.

THE EU FACTOR

Regarding new kinds of governance, Southern European cities as a whole have proceeded to adopt and adapt proposals from the North European world which seemed likely to provide creative and innovative solutions. On other occasions, “home-grown experiments” were carried out successfully and retained for their original and beneficial solutions. Amongst the suggestions hailing from “the other side of the Alps”, it is worth remarking upon the policies drawn from the EU — such as the URBAN initiative — which have managed to play a noteworthy role in the introduction of new concepts and practices in urban areas of Southern Europe. However, the EU's urban

policies have often failed to adjust to the social, cultural and financial idiosyncrasies of Southern European cities. The reverse also shows to be true: the singularities of Southern European urban policies have not always fit in with Northern European spatial priorities or with their neo-corporate intervention pattern, which is based on active policy integration of social and financial agents on a local level.

Overall, the innovations introduced by Southern European urban policies fall into two basic types. The first consists of new interactions between public institutions and key agents of civil society in an attempt to boost consensuses as well as social resources able to both formulate and implement urban policies: the key here must be found in the potential to produce public goods through social practices. On the other hand, there are all sorts of policies revolving around the interaction between public institutions and private businesses, the essential characteristic of which is the forging of partnerships between agents who share interests: novelty is rooted in the regulatory and administrative contexts that encapsulate these partnerships, therewith imposing both links and valuations.

One of the perhaps most direct consequences of the influence of the urban policies of the EU on new ways of city governance in Southern Europe is based on the spread of the competitiveness-cohesion dualism. This is why cities are considered as the driving force of economic growth, hubs for innovation, and key agents in the promotion and consolidation of international competition, as well as places in which various means of self-organisation are created as civic mechanisms devised to compensate for the deficiencies of markets and of the welfare state. This entails a sometimes exasperating duality that sways between the city understood as a hub for competitiveness (economic growth) and the city seen as a laboratory where new kinds of social cohesion and citizen welfare are fostered.

Those two concepts are usually deemed to be either mutually exclusive or symbiotic (cohesion in this case being a prerequisite to achieve competition). Many of the new types of governance thus speak of the need to boost competitiveness, meant exclusively in terms of structural transformation and urban economic growth, where the city is considered a collective agent who must capture resources that are scarce (such as economic investments, image, tourists, spectacular architecture) to secure an advantageous spot in the urban market.

On the contrary, as regards cohesion, it has essentially been seen as a formula intended to solve the many shortfalls and problems, legacy of the failures and dismantling of the welfare state (the privatisation and externalisation of public services, increasing elderly population and growing foreign immigration, the difficulty of securing housing, etc.) — and far from seeing it as a social and solidary construction of inclusion and citizenship.

One of the major consequences of the implementation of EU policies might therefore reside in the strengthening of the belief that there is a close and consequent correlation between cohesion and competitiveness. This has led to the consolidation of a discourse according to which the success of a competitive city almost necessarily entails the widespread prosperity of the population. A major proportion of the investments accompanying these European initiatives have often significantly altered some urban landscapes, but not always taken into account the importance of cohesion as a social and spatial justice factor.

From many of the new proposals on urban policy recently drawn up in many Southern European cities, obvious changes have emerged in terms of the objectives and structure of public activity regarding the governance of the city and territory. Undoubtedly, much of this change has its origins in EU policy enforcements. But a further and quite separate issue is whether the new discourses on urban governance have meant effective changes in urban governing practices and the ability of all these policies to effectively address urban issues. Until now, in the Southern European urban world, it seems that in these matters there are more intentions than successes: the problems and difficulties that hinder changes and, above all, the power of inertia and inefficiency (resisting innovation in all its shapes) are all factors characterising the reduced level of application of new, genuinely transforming means of governance.

The new governance has yet to move beyond the conjunction of excessive rhetorical levels and good intentions, too often becoming embroiled in simplistic, superficial, and manipulated debates regarding specific issues (such as security, immigration, etc.) and also beyond relatively closed political and bureaucratic communities often seeking pseudo-social approval for new policies and investments (such as airports, high-speed trains, major media events, etc.). It would therefore seem that for now (with some notable and praiseworthy exceptions), although new means of urban governance in Southern Europe show great potential in the realm of theory, these continue to present serious difficulties in terms of their actual implementation. As a result, criticism is occasionally voiced regarding several EU initiatives and, as a whole, the implementation guidelines of new models of governance which claim that these fail to reach beyond rhetorical attitudes, whilst no genuine, deep changes to urban policy are perceived.

So rather than just assessing the true parameters required to analyse the success and the effectiveness of the optimal urban governance, these ought to be based on the evaluation of the levels of appropriation and dispossession that the most different actors express. The reactions of citizens (which are always legitimate, though sometimes slightly lacking in structure, apparently incoherent, or even insolidary in kind), are a strong mirror of the intricate

fit between the interests of the administration and the civic expectations. Street demonstrations, associative life, and general civic mobilisation processes are keys in the process of shaping and consolidating the rights that pave the way toward qualitative citizenship and “the right to the city” for all.

REFLECTIONS UPON SOUTHERN URBAN GOVERNANCE

New urban dynamics and scenarios demand new urban policies — maybe even new urban politics. As stated at the beginning of this text, the diffusion and hyper-positioning of urban geographies and human daily realities is bringing a complete set of dilemmas and challenges to Southern European cities. Between socio-political reconfiguration tendencies and the risks of fragmentation of urban politics itself, governance and its capabilities of bringing together different and dispersed actors and aims surely opens new possibilities, but also new uncertainties. Are meridional urban societies quite aware of the pace of changes taking place, or do their cultural perceptions and socio-political structures remain at the side of contemporary risks and challenges? And are their respective structures and cultures of governance efficiently and democratically adapting to new realities and challenges, or do there exist significant imbalances causing limited and fragmented visions and political-administrative backwardness?

Surely, reinventing urban politics today means knowing how to better understand and construct collective action instruments, commitments and corresponding institutional management processes, able to better expand the human, cultural, and relational wealth, thus improving social and civic capitals and generating clearer responsibilities upon collective problems (Subirats, 2001). The perspective of cities as local societies (Bagnasco and Le Galès, 2000) mostly configured by informal and organic governance networks turns out to be highly relevant to the cities of the Mediterranean, springing from this perspective one of their most (if not *the* most) triggering paradox: it is in the balancing between the strength of its socio-cultural complexities, the deep fragmentalities inherent to its spatial and political projections, and the (more recent) development of democratic principles and civic demands, that is posed the potential to break with inertias and particularisms and to create interesting, innovative, and socially responsible proposals. As some researchers argue, the fractalities of contemporary urbanity might ultimately well prove to be one of the most interesting metaphorical bases for new sorts of urban socio-political challenges and opportunities (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 2003).

Vis-à-vis this complex background, still considerably opaque in the conceptualisation of its dynamics, it seems important to develop new types

of questionings and to open new conceptual and analytical perspectives — both in the interpretation of the new political attitudes in the cities, and on their own capabilities to conveniently shape and project them — questionings that (in the domains of the academic research) have been raised in recent years through several fields of analysis, namely: the place and scope of city politics; the political economy and its urban projections; the urban governance debates; the urban regime approaches; the social capital and the cultural capital in the cities; the actor's strategies and the socio-political systems.

Recognisably, the governance focusing in the urban politics realms has been establishing new mechanisms and institutional procedures that can be driven both top-down and bottom-up. More autonomous and empowering agents appear in face of the traditional political parties and political institutions, as do policies needing to be developed through constant negotiation between the diverse agents and through consensuses built by a State that, in itself, also becomes more polycentric. In many South European societies, where the power and the role of the State has been traditionally strong but not so democratic and even less participative-driven, governance becomes an undoubted opportunity for different forms of inclusion and for diverse ways of political and public management. State, leaving the hierarchical, unidirectional, and monopolistic structure of government, has a tendency to rethink “down” its capabilities of government, and becomes just one more agent in a system of government more and more based on plural networks.

The somewhat different paces addressed in cities like Barcelona and some French cities (notwithstanding some criticism of the relative variation of its outcomes) show nonetheless that urban governance networks can evolve through plural and democratic empowering manners, following effective pro-collective processes, objectives and public deliveries. Surely in these cities there exist specific characteristics that owe a great deal to considerable social capital directed toward urban and territorial self-development and autonomy (like the Catalanian case), or to strong political enforcements and complex stakeholding governance networks (mostly the case of France). But these are precisely cases whose frameworks and dynamics should be better analysed and interpreted in the light of urban governance's possible developments.

It would be obviously too naïve to draw strict and overall generalisations when it comes to a territory as large and diverse as is the one that spans from Lisbon to Istanbul, crossing varied political realities from local to national and inclusively European scales. Some major frameworks on a specific Southern city region — like, say, Rome, from its central State path-dependencies to specific configurations of its society's social and cultural capital — surely differ substantially from parallel frameworks for other meridional city regions like Barcelona, Marseille, and Thessaloniki. The consequences on each city of the tendencies above expressed depend consid-

erably on the potentialities, limitations, inner forces, and dilemmas underlying the socio-cultural, political, and administrative structures that exist in each city. This growing importance of the local and cultural spheres shows that it will very much depend on the urban socio-cultural capitals and stakeholding networks of each city and urban society, the resources of responsibility, and capability for the security and qualification of its own future. But following precisely this reasoning that puts culture as the most structural influential element for urban governance, one must at the same time give careful attention to the widest and most common cultural legacies affecting all these urban societies and territories — the Mediterranean culture.

Whatever the case may be, within the Southern European urban contexts here analysed several common features and respective interpretations and reflections stand out:

- a) In most of the Southern European cities, the secular limitation of local powers when working toward decisive negotiative and resourceful capacities is remarkable. In many Mediterranean countries the weaknesses of local administrations, coupled with chronic issues regarding fiscal and financial support of its existence, have by and large conditioned their autonomy and political competences in terms of drawing up their own policies and thus local empowerment. On a number of occasions, the considerable weight of the central administration has failed to show an increase of infrastructures, equipment, or services in the local scale, so that the Welfare State has often been poorly (or belatedly) expressed on the urban Mediterranean scales. This lesser importance given to Mediterranean cities compared with the higher local dynamism of Central and Northern Europe cities does not simply refer to the legacy of the industrial era (and consequently to the weaker economic and industrial growth displayed by many Southern cities), but has also been due to the spread of more organised and successful democratic processes and actors (including most influential forms of participation, cooperative activity, non-governmental activity) historically more inherent to the latter.
- b) Over the last 30 years, some of these meridional countries have initiated regional decentralisation processes of varying scopes, which have brought about — with debatable success — a greater focus on intermediate and local territorial scales. These decentralisation processes still have not quite hit the right expression on the local level and have sometimes even proven detrimental. For one thing, it remains extremely improbable to develop political structures with effective power and that might better approach present main challenges (namely in the metropolitan and the micro-local or even citizenry

scales). For another thing, cities still remain on the edges of the main developmental and political economy policies, despite their recognition as important developmental actors and the continuous rise of discourses considering the importance of higher local embeddedness. Nevertheless, on a few occasions some Southern European cities have stood out as references in urban socioeconomic and political development in order to become something of a “model” for other cities (like Barcelona, Bologna, or Toulouse).

- c) The considerable sprawl and socio-spatial fragmentation of the Mediterranean city — largely caused by meridional socio-political stakeholding structures and by the corresponding effects on the urban production models — seems to be, in the absence of effective metropolitan identity patterns, paradoxically fragmenting the traditional modes of urban governance and fomenting the loss of historical organic processes of local political stakeholding. This is an hypothesis not completely confirmed, though it is mostly based on the importance of the spatial and cultural bases for the configurations of meridional urban governance networks, from partisan to social and economic. But if confirmed, is this a tendency that might be exacerbating the political lags on administration, strategy, and policy formation or, on the contrary, might it be contributing to configure new governance structures based more on territorial perspectives, and more directed to effective urban delivery issues? It seems that (also) one very important political direction to follow in the face of these disruptive tendencies should be to create regional-metropolitan institutions and governments — for these meta-governance formations and its socio-political resources to better objectify a large-scale political space to effectively influence the evolution of the entire urban region — thus being the basis for new forms of metropolitan governance networks.
- d) As stated before, crucial doubts and uncertainties remain regarding local governance configurations and strategies — the idea and expression of governance not being by definition a guaranteed qualitative element in itself. This is strikingly true in urban societies like the Mediterranean ones, where social capital has always been complex and varied, but considerably fractal, highly personalised, or even populist, and not so much absolutely oriented to objective collective strategies or to effectively accountable democratic scenarios. Following discourses of strong catalysing projects, of cooperation and participation, and of flexibility and optimisation of urban policies, urban governance has often been understood in Meridional Europe as a way for urban governments to stimulate populist or oligarchic regimes, or

to discharge several of their responsibilities, often resulting in the disempowerment of strategic scales of action, in lower transparency, and weaker public control, in the avoidance of social objectives.

- e) Surely influenced by European directives, for the first time national strategies of countries like Greece and Portugal have objectively recognised cities as a main asset for development and sustainability, thus raising the political and symbolic importance of their own urban territories. This is a tendency already consolidating for some time in regionalised Spain and in the quite territorially politicised France — precisely the two countries where the differential paces are particularly noticeable in urban policy and governance realms. This point — as the previous ones, actually — highlights the relevance of the State and its perspectives of political and administrative reorientation and restructuring, as a main actor precisely to permit (or cut back) the reinforcement of democratic metropolitan and local governance.

- f) Finally, we should recognise the most important novelties occurring in other socio-cultural and civic dimensions in the Southern European urban territories. As Leontidou recently expressed (2010), there has been a notable cultural tendency in the Southern European civil societies, steadily observing the maturation of the cosmopolitanism of its inhabitants. These are transformations that can be understood through the widest social landscapes, from quite different life-styles to the most varied urban social movements and civic demands. For Leontidou, this is an evolution that deconstructs the traditional North-South divide (and several other dualisms), but that at the same time “broadens geographical imaginations in Europe” (Leontidou, 2010, p. 1197). These urban civic expressions are rapidly moving toward much more sophisticated forms and contents, their development being itself made through more organic-driven processes. Overall, it is a dynamic civic and cultural panorama that is certainly framing a new political culture and that will certainly have profound and long-term influences on the governance and political spheres of the Mediterranean cities.

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