

Introduction

Cities, civicness, and social capital. Problems, actors, and processes

Andrea M. Maccarini

It has become commonplace to maintain that “it takes a village to raise a child”¹, and even more so when it comes to those aspects of education which have more to do with civicness and civility than with academic success. In a sense, I’ve always thought this proverb is undoubtedly wise, but it also takes it for granted that the village will be a “good” village. Indeed, one might ask: *what kind of village* does it take, and where is it to be found? These questions are particularly poignant, since a semantic inversion seems to be characterizing the social representation of the “city” – at least in Europe. What was once regarded as the spearhead of civilization now is often conceived of as a frightening environment, a place where one would not want to live or raise one’s children.

On the other hand, interest for civicness and civil society has a longstanding tradition in sociology, where it often plays the double role of responding to the best hopes and to the most pessimistic interpretations of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. The concept of social capital, of its accumulation and loss, has served both lines of thought in many fields of theory and empirical research.

¹ This is believed to be an ancient African proverb. In relatively recent times, this sentence was made famous among the Western public by Hilary Clinton’s book of 1996 and by her subsequent electoral campaign of 2007. Since then it has been filtered through scholarly literature, taking on different meanings. With reference to school achievement see for example Palmer, Gasman (2008); Ainsworth (2002).

This situation makes it both scientifically and culturally interesting to bring these two edges of the sociological discourse together. For example: when we study young people and their civic attitudes, it seems more and more important to wonder what kinds of social capital they can count on, where they find it or build it, and what the local dimension – city, neighbourhood, local personal networks or associations of various kind – has to do with this.

This special issue of *IJSE* deals with the relationship between civicness and social capital, particularly as it shapes social life and forms on the local level.

This theoretical coordinates intersects a social problem which has recently got the headlines in the news in many European countries, particularly in Italy. Our cities seem to be more and more violent and less “civil” than they used to be. Few people hardly have any idea about who could change this situation, and how. Indeed, few seem to have a sound idea about what kind of “entity” a city is, how it works, and what makes it a “civil” or an “uncivil” place to be.

The present volume tries to deal with this set of interrelated problems, collecting essays from different European countries and adding an original approach to the American situation.

Broadly speaking, the idea is to explore actors, forms, and processes through which social capital and civic culture are currently being built, reproduced or consumed in (mainly, though not exclusively) European cities. Such actors may be businesses, third sector associations, various policy actors, corporate actors such as Universities, informal networks, religious groups, and families alike.

Furthermore, it is important to identify what are the main problems around which a discourse of civicness, civility, and social capital revolves.

In all these respects, the collected essays provide a very interesting overview. Taken together, though they were surely not meant to make up a systematic approach to the subject matter, they offer very important ways to read the current social and cultural situations, that can appeal to scholars as well as to policy makers.

There are different paths one can thread in reading through the various essays. Let me briefly highlight two of them. First, a clear message the authors convey – each in his or her own way – is that the time of bureaucracies is out. All attempts to produce social capital, and civic-

minded people, through the operations of local or national administrative units seem to end up with a practical failure, and to run serious risks of symbolic ambiguity.

Ade Kearns and Jon Bannister clarify the ambivalent character of the meanings currently attributed to the British concept of “tolerance”, which is often being used within a political rhetoric of “security vs. violence” that results in labelling particular groups, like young people and immigrants, simultaneously leaving in the shadow the processes of exclusion they suffer at the hands of adult and “well integrated” people.

Vincenzo Cicchelli shows a different side of the issue, presenting a refined analysis of the institutional arrangements and programs aiming to prompt youth participation to social and political life in France. Here public authorities want to be pro-active, and constitute social spheres of action that may serve as adequate seed-beds for civic mind-set and activities among the young. At the same time, they can hardly avoid the pitfalls of an instrumental use of these social domains in order to support one’s power and of making them into sheer tools for the accomplishment of system integration.

Fausta Scardigno works in an entirely different field, namely that of adolescents in Italy and their choices concerning leisure time, yet her contribution is quite valuable in showing the reflexive character of young people’s choices and their unpredictability on the ground of the “classic” discourse of (mainly family related) cultural capital. The active interplay between structural conditionings and reflexive agency constitutes the theoretical frame that is most likely to explain such choices.

From a different standpoint, Mick Carpenter and colleagues show how ineffective the institutional ways to “active policy” in the domain of labour and employability can be, and how community-based initiatives can trigger a positive deal that revives a former “ghost town” in the British midlands.

One may draw the conclusion that social, human and cultural capital can hardly be revived through any institutionally driven initiative, and that local contexts need other actors and processes to come into the picture if people are going to get, or get back to, a “civil” way to live together, to grow and develop, to build their personal and social identities in connection with the places they inhabit.

When we call for other actors and processes to come in, we do not think to any simple appeal to ancient local civic traditions. The role of all actors

looks embedded, and transformed, in long and complex chains of action, resulting in hybrid social forms.

This is the case when the University enters new forms of partnership and networking with school districts, thereby taking up a social mission of local development. Misa Labarile presents an interesting case study, referring to some American examples, that explains quite well how an ancient Western institution like the University can find a whole new role within new, inter-organizational networks on the local level.

In a similar vein, Andrea Maccarini and Riccardo Prandini provide a study of the way finance can produce civil society in an Italian city, by means of an organization which is realizing a particularly interesting mix between economic rationality and social responsibility. In this case, the networks and chains of action developing on the territory are also changing the nature of the so-called Third sector in the Italian society. Here too, symbols, organizational principles, styles of action are being linked in creative ways, producing new and multifaceted results.

Finally, a few words about the essay that appears first. Daniel J. Monti offers a fresh look at the way people live together in a supposedly diverse and potentially conflictual city like Boston. What is particularly interesting here is not just Monti's emphasis on the role of business in social integration, but his brilliant capacity to describe how social life finds its own way through all the problems with no apparent theoretical solution. Such a perspective is a healthy balance against the approaches that overestimate the virtues of planning and organization in all its forms.

The fact that "regular folks" in their everyday life find more mediations, ways and reasons to get along together than scholars or social planners and policy makers may envisage *a priori* may sound tremendously optimistic, particularly to European ears. However, such an optimism might a component of what European cities need to overcome their present lack of integration and concurrent obsession with security, provided that we do not overlook what Monti disguises in his narrative of Boston: that the capacity to integrate new comers and young people, as well as to regenerate social capital, implies a crucial factor. Such a factor could be indicated as the freedom to experience social responsibility on the part of both individuals and communities. And at the same time, the various groups and communities are challenged to take full responsibility for what identity they want to have, for what commitment they are able to show to the place they

live in, and for the way they can learn or not to respect others in everyday life.

Where this culture of autonomy and responsibility is not being institutionalised or reconstructed, the hope that life spontaneously produces the regeneration of social capital in the form of civic-minded citizens and groups will prove to be an exercise in self-deception. Like any other institutional arrangement that strikes the chords of social consensus without establishing true reciprocities among individuals and groups.

References

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- Ainsworth J.W. (2002). Why Does It Take a Village? The Mediation of Neighbourhood Effects on Educational Achievement. *Social Forces*, 81, 1: 117-152.