BOTTOM-LINKED GOVERNANCE AND SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

The concept of bottom-linked governance, stressing the interactive relations between political authorities and civil society actors, is helpful in understanding and guiding the genesis of more inclusive governance at the local level. Ultimately, it may become essential in transforming the socio-political system in Western democracies.

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INTRODUCTION

As research work on social innovation (SI), territorial development and socio-political transformation has matured, the concept of 'bottom-linked governance' has become central to the analysis of SI initiatives. When the Social Innovation Action Research Network [1] started working on the relationship between SI and local development, its members soon became aware that democratic governance played a significant role in building socially innovative communities at the local level. The analysis of these interactive dynamics led the members of the network to conceptualise *bottom-linked governance* as 'new forms of democratic governance collaboratively built between SI initiatives and activists, their scalarly dynamic networks and state institutions and agencies' [2, Ch.4]. That is, bottom-linked governance involves time-space-specific forms of governance partnership between actors having different scales of influence. As such, it contains the potential to transform social relations and political practices across these different scales.

In this short paper we cover three issues. Firstly, we explain the significance of bottom-linked governance in territorial SI trajectories. Next, we reflect on experiences of bottom-linked governance in Antwerp, South Bronx and Barcelona. We conclude the paper with some brief observations on the socio-political context in which bottom-linked governance works and, while trying to avoid political naïvity, why its transformational potential is so important.

SITUATING BOTTOM-LINKED GOVERNANCE IN TERRITORIAL SI TRAJECTORIES

In previous work on SI at the local and regional level, we stressed the importance of analysing local development as a time-space sensitive process whose dynamics are driven by interactions between structures, institutions, culture and discourse, and socially significant agency [3]. SI means new types of agencies, institutions and governance working towards three key achievements:

- Satisfaction of basic individual and collective needs, particularly those neglected by mainstream political and economic actors;
- Improved social relations;
- Empowerment and mobilization toward socio-political transformation (enhancing democracy locally and beyond).

These achievements cannot be disentangled, because neither needs satisfaction, nor collective agency nor political transformation is possible without improving social relations through, for instance, rebuilding transparent communication and decision-making systems, solidarity, cooperation and redistributing economic as well as political power. Given the importance of building cohesive relations to achieving more democratic governance, bottom-linked governance has a central position in this interaction. It is key to the relationship between social and political change, being intrinsically social and political at the same time.

The concept of bottom-linked governance was coined in the course of the EC Framework 5 Project SINGOCOM and further developed in the Framework 6 project KATARSIS [5, 6] [1 for an overview]. Empirical analysis of multi-level governance dynamics shows that successful development can rarely be

classified as either 'bottom-up' or 'top-down', but rather as both shaping and shaped by new, dynamic forms of conflict and cooperation across scales. These observations led to the development of the ideas of 'bottom-linked' SI and bottom-linked governance, i.e. new forms of cooperation between actors and institutions across territorial scales in which policy (broadly defined) and other development practices are not dictated from any one level of governance but transformed and institutionalised through interaction and cooperation itself. The concept is important as a complement or even an alternative to that of bottom-up governance, which as an ideal has a number of politically ineffective features: a guileless faith that self-governance by itself will have a significant democratisation impact on relationships with the state (or a stronger belief that there is no need for a state); and a somewhat blasé and unreflective conviction that the political system and state apparatus will uncritically adopt or integrate the bottom-up decision-making mechanisms which civil society groups set up, that the neoliberal autocracy can be overruled by the multiplication of bottom-up governance initiatives – the 'naivety of the participation movement', as it is often called.

Governance modes can be considered as institutional forms, modes of governing with typical agencies emerging from and reproduced through the operation of the political, economic and social world. The democratisation of society, with a long evolution from the Enlightenment to post-Fordist neoliberalism, has gone through cycles of more and less democratic control by 'the people'. Since the 1970s, with the rise of neoliberalism in the political system, a new type of elite advisors and decision-makers has taken over from Fordist socio-political relationships of machine politics and clientelism. With these 'new' agents, new forms of technocracy, cryptically labelled as 'New Public Management', have pervaded socio-political governance systems, removing participatory decision-making power from those parts of the population most affected by recurrent economic crises. Bottom-linked governance can be seen as a proliferating reaction to these new types of autocracy.

In sum, bottom-linked governance addresses the concern that many new socially innovative initiatives are highly necessary but that their governance, as well as that of the relevant re-democratising state institutions, should be developed interactively. The image we should have of this interaction, however, is not that of an easy-going sweet romance, but a trajectory of co-construction and confrontation moments in which protest and conflict, as well as analysis, co-learning and negotiation, all have a role, as does the re-institutionalisation of relationships between state and civil society. Bottom-linked governance is both a key outcome of SI and a *sine qua non* for its durability.

BOTTOM-LINKED GOVERNANCE EXPERIENCES

To stress the socio-political significance of bottom-linked governance, we refer to experiences of local development where SI cum bottom-linked governance have been relatively successful. A few of the most successful social innovations seem to be: bottom-linked governance practices observed in several neighbourhood and community development projects; the repoliticisation of civic life in Spanish cities; the construction of 'social regions'; the development of community supported agriculture systems; and the politicisation of some transition towns. From this perspective, the recognition of the agency of civil society in multi-scalar governance is important, yet should be considered with care so as to prevent civil society's organisations becoming co-opted or forcing them to "reduce their imaginative potential, to bridle their creativity or their subversive capacity" [6, p.216].

In this brief text, we consider three meaningful cases: the Neighbourhood Development Association BOM (Antwerp, 1990-2005; for more information and sources: [3]), South Bronx Unite (New York) and the political 'rise' of the anti-eviction movement in Barcelona [2].

NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION ANTWERP (BOM)

The Buurtontwikkelingsmaatschappij Antwerpen (BOM) or Neighbourhood Development Association in Antwerp was one of the most visible bottom-linked initiatives in a Western European bigger city as part of the so-called urban 'social' regeneration movement supported by the EU and many national states in the EU in the 1990s. BOM took on the main agency role in building a neighbourhood development strategy, and was one of the action research experiences which inspired the Social Innovation Action Research network in its definition of SI and bottom-linked governance. Starting from an emancipatory view of community-based neighbourhood development, it led the city to form a bottom-linked cooperative arrangement in which BOM and local government agencies took on complementary roles in the domains of planning, development of public space, creation of different initiatives in the labour and housing market, etc. BOM did not survive the new wave of neoliberal urban policy which prioritised real estate development and market-geared economic initiatives to so-called social economy and territorially based community initiatives. Yet many of BOM's initiatives were institutionalised into the city's or the region's housing and labour market policy.

SOUTH BRONX UNITE (NEW YORK, USA)

South Bronx Unite (SBU) is fundamentally a political project with its roots in the environmental justice movements of the 1980s and the civil rights and protest movements of the

1960s-70s, and influenced by the shifting political climate that gave rise to the Occupy movement. SBU is enabled by a strong existing assemblage of progressive organisations in the South Bronx, many of which are now active supporters (financially and/or politically) of SBU's work. Extreme economic and environmental vulnerability has shaped a strong sense of social purpose for a number of grass-roots movements and organisations working to resist perceived threats including, for instance, eviction of public housing tenants, displacement of traditional small businesses, gentrification, pollution, youth alienation, and more.

SBU is a fluid and somewhat anarchistic movement ('without a chief'), empowering motivated participants to act on their own beliefs. Yet its practice comes quite close to what we have identified as bottom-linked governance. In its current incarnation, SBU provides a network node for activism and concrete avenues for connecting political with practical action. Through its advocacy planning activities, it translates political claims into community-based, environmentally just development policy, and creates possibilities for the institutional realisation of the resultant plans.

ANTI-EVICTION MOVEMENT IN BARCELONA, SPAIN

Barcelona and its Metropolitan region are probably among the most prominent contemporary living laboratories showing how social and political worlds influence each other and how social movements can become not only co-creators but also catalysts of new styles of political leadership. In the resistance movements against fascism, the seeds of a strong and proactive social fabric were sown. Since the return to democracy in 1979 in Barcelona the trajectory of 'civil society action' has sought socially productive synergies with the local and regional governments, thus co-creating a new system of 'governance beyond the state'. Yet reforming the state has been among the main ambitions.

The return to democracy brought with it the election of leftist governments in most of the municipalities of the Barcelona metropolitan area. A grand project united civil society organisations and progressive political parties around an agenda of decentralisation of government, democratisation of planning and welfare institutions and a policy of redistribution of wealth. This socio-political front crumbled after 2010 when the socialist party became an actor in the austerity policy in Spain subsequent to the financial crisis of 2007. The Partido Popular took office in 2011, but the stiffest austerity measures were taken by the Catalan government of the nationalist Convergencia I Union in the period 2010-2017.

Crisis and policy led to severe poverty and homelessness. This new reality gave a new impetus to social mobilization and organization in the 15-M movement that exploded in the major Spanish cities, in which the Anti-Eviction Movement and other social movements and associations played a determinant role. It wasn't until 2011–2012 that these movements and associations translated themselves into a political force. Estimates say that between 6 and 9 million people living in Spain were involved in demonstrations, public fora, occupation of public spaces and squats; the 15-M movement also triggered similar movements abroad. In Barcelona the mobilisation was politically effective and led to creation of the political party *Barcelona en Comú*. The spokesperson of the Platform for Mortgage Affected People (PAH), Ada Colau, was elected Mayor of Barcelona in 2015 leading a minority government that took on board significant parts of the agendas of the 15-M movement concerning housing for all, municipalization of water supply, greater accessibility of public services and especially more effective participation of citizens in public governance. The Colau government was not an absolute success story and had to institutionalise more than the bottom-linked grassroots movements supporting it had wished. In May 2019, Barcelona en Comú lost the elections by an inch. A coalition with the Socialist Party was formed, with Ada Colau remaining mayor. The real challenges for the next governing period will be whether the housing and social policy claims which stirred the grassroots movements will be met; and whether the other party in the coalition (PSC) will revive the Pascual Maragall bottom-linked practice of the late 1980s early 1990s and reinforce the bottom-linked politics which Barcelona en Comú had put into practice.

SOCIAL-POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

We consider bottom-linked governance to be an essential element in the process of badly needed socio-political transformation. Especially across the Western world, where after WW II democracy had gradually but definitely put foot ashore, in recent decades people have increasingly become aware of their loss of grip on the socio-political process, especially at the supra-local level. As individuals many politicians are perceived to be acting in their personal interest rather than that of the public. As systems, political regimes at all scales have become impregnated by a market fundamentalism that has relegated the originally fundamental foci of democracy to the background. General interest and citizenship rights for all have become hollow or partitioned. For instance, in many countries liberal democratic governments have granted rights to minority groups, which is to be applauded; but because of the gradual infusion of market fundamentalism into the citizenship agenda citizenship rights have been diminished – liberal democracy has washed away some of the essential functions of the welfare state. The only policy recipe that remains intact for neoliberal governments is that privatization and market freedom will solve all problems. Socio-economic history since the 1970s has shown the failure of this recipe.

Flexibilization of the labour market was supposed to provide new job opportunities for the poor, but it has made them poorer instead. Bank crises caused by speculation and aggressive mortgage marketing were 'solved' by blocking credit to lower income classes and abandoning investment in social housing. Investment in the 'green economy' was to lead to lower ecological footprint, but instead has boosted electricity consumption and the cost of energy.

It is the tangible lives of real people that these failures of the economy, the political regime and the actual policy making hurt deeply. It is also at that local and experienced level that socio-political transformation starts. Local bottom-linked governance reveals the real needs, shows the failures in local political institutions and lays out the experiments of new inclusive politicization. Which does not mean that higher scales in the state apparatus would have a smaller role in the future, but rather points to how these state institutions should go through a process of renewed mediation between direct and representative democracy.

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