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Cultural creativity and local development:
the experience of the Socio-Cultural district of Selinunte

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We wish we could share with Clara, to whom the following brief remarks are dedicated, the emotion, often denied to scholars, of feeling the creators of a reality rather than its inevitably inaccurate interpreters. We are comforted by the thought that She would have shared with us her sharp remarks, being always generous of advice and ready to take the field to fight the most exciting challenges.

Abstract

The pivotal idea of the Socio-Cultural District of Selinunte was inspired by a concept we found as a gift in that inexhaustible source of ideas that Borges' texts (1995) still are. It might seem absurd to think of the biography of Michelangelo without any of his works… Yet, if we carefully think about it, we will realise that the endless series of acts composing the mosaic of a whole life is wide enough to allow us connecting a limited number of events among them. In addition, if we put those events in a diachronic sequence, they will take on the characteristics of a biography! That is Borges, up to here. If we select a different subject though, a territory for example, a consistent physiognomy could emerge in this case too, even if we leave aside the Temple 'C' of Selinunte or even the whole monument area of one of the

largest and most complex archaeological parks in the Mediterranean area. We live in an era of cultures and territories, with emerging subjects who want to gain the place and role in history that have been long denied to them. This is also an era of decline of absolute values and grand theories. All that given, regaining (rebuilding or even making up) one's identity is an inescapable strategic shift. Who will be in charge with the task of outlining the borders and contents of a community space? Who will be held responsible for drawing a face that is marked by the passing of time and made lively by our fresh contemporary energies? How can we avoid heritage becoming a burden rather than a challenge to think about the future?

20.1 Introduction

Over the past few years, territorial and entrepreneurial networks have been spreading and become a valuable opportunity of economic and social development for local communities. Such networks, organised in the form of districts, clusters or system areas, revolve around some pivotal assets of the Country, among which cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

An obvious consequence of such process is that the district model successfully experimented in the industrial sector was extended to the cultural one. However, the outright shift from the economic-productive dimension to the cultural one cannot be given for granted. Pier Luigi Sacco identified some differences: a) while in the case of industrial districts, manufacturing and consumption seldom occur in the same place, the spatial dimensions of those two types of activity coincide in cultural districts; b) the chain of activities performed in industrial districts are firmly oriented towards investment and innovation, while the same is not true for cultural chain of activities: here profits are only ensured by curbing costs at the expense of innovation and experimentation; c) unlike what happens with industrial districts, an excessively market-oriented policy could lead to lowering the quality within cultural districts, since an expansion of the demand is likely to turn their supply into a 'mass' product (2003).

Moreover, not all agglomerations networking within the same cultural sphere take on the characteristics of the district. A cultural district is commonly understood as the concentration of places and activities organised for the consumption of visual and performing arts in the same area. Unlike cultural districts though, where the focus is placed on consumption, pro-

duction is the distinctive feature of cultural clusters, at least according to the definition British literature gives of them. Spatial concentration here refers to 'culture-producing' subjects, which interconnect to increase information sharing and gather specialised services together, hence optimising them (Stern, Seifert, 2010).

Still, in most Italian cases of cultural districting, stakeholders have mainly focused on 'consumption' rather than 'production' of cultural supply. By doing so, large brackets of local population have been marginalised from the new economic-cultural circuits.

Moreover, quite frequently, the creation of cultural districts crucially depends upon the transfer of purposely allotted funding from public bodies or bank foundations. Using such resources to create new forms of districts can certainly be seen as an effective support to enhance cultural and economic development in those territories. However, for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon to be carried out, we need not to underestimate the motivations driving local stakeholders to create a cultural district when external funding is available. Indeed, in the light of results achieved, many Italian cultural districts set up thanks to funding from external entities failed to start sound and self-supporting processes of local development.

20.2 The Project of District in Selinunte

In the Socio-Cultural District[1] of Selinunte, local stakeholders spontaneously grouped together without any allocation of external financial resources.

The ten municipalities making up the District[2] agreed on contributing with an initial amount of money. It was used to guarantee support to the start-up stage of the new territorial entity, therefore showing their clear intention to launch the project notwithstanding the availability of any external funding. During the planning stage, 'production' was attached at least equal importance as 'consumption', and such a choice bears witness to the

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[1] The term 'social' is used in this case to underline the importance of integrating social engagement and cultural dimension.

[2] In addition to the ten municipalities falling within the District area (Gibellina, Santa Ninfa, Salaparuta, Poggioreale, Partanna, Montevago, Santa Margherita Belice, Sambuca di Sicilia, Menfi, and Campobello di Mazara), many local associations joined the District. They are active in the cultural and social fields, represent economic and tourism enterprises, and the Cultural Heritage Department of the University of Palermo.

different approach the Selinunte entity has adopted as opposed to many cultural districts operating across Italy.

As a matter of fact, the Socio-Cultural District of Selinunte relies on set-ting-up methodologies and goals, which are different from most of similar experiences in other parts of Italy. According to the vision of its territorial animators, the presence of some remarkable cultural heritage is not the only precondition to make an area into a district. In the view of those who worked to establish it, the Socio-Cultural district of Selinunte looks rather like an entity to be built (or a network to be tightened again, in case signs can be seen of any pre-existing elements) in an area where the driving forces to establish the district are firstly local stakeholders who are producing culture.

20.3 The ' Participatory Census'

The project of the Socio-Cultural District of Selinunte rests on some tenets which its promoters deemed to be crucial pre-requisites to be taken into account for its creation:

1) Cultural heritage includes not only tangible but also intangible assets existing in an area. By passing the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003, UNESCO has also recognised the importance and crucial role intangible heritage plays in the cultural life of social communities;

2) Cultural heritage must be recognised as such not only by tourists but also by residents. Each cultural asset proves pivotal to the one-to-one kind of relationship that makes both insiders and outsiders necessary to the process. If on the one hand tourists experience a piece of cultural heritage as a link between the place and its local community, on the other hand residents identify it as a symbol of their common identity (Caldo, 1994);

3) Hence, if the cultural heritage of a community bears witness to its belong-ing to a specific social group, it must be also seen as a 'dynamic' concept. It is not only the expression of a shared past memory, that has been set-tling across time, but also of the new projects communities devise to strengthen their common identity (or to build new ones, as it is the case for most of the experiences of territorial programming and local devel-opment that have been started over the past few years) and to guarantee their continuity for the future. In this respect, the fundamental feature of

this type of identity is what Giuseppe Dematteis defined as the 'organisation of the system', which is reflected in the sense of cohesion and continuity that is then projected onto the future (2001). This explains why it seems unusual that terms such as 'creativity' and 'innovation' are currently associated with the concept of cultural heritage. As a matter of fact, in the public opinion the word 'culture' often keeps evoking a certain aestheticizing vision of reality where not everybody have equal access to the same cultural functions and opportunities (see the difference between 'high and low culture', or between 'production and consumption').

With such remarks in the background, the promoters of the Socio-Cultural District of Selinunte deemed necessary that the resident population of the municipalities falling within the District territory had to be guaranteed the maximum possible degree of involvement during the process of establishing the new territorial entity. The inspiring model for the promoters was that of the 'participatory census' as outlined by Hugues de Varine, a former director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

According to de Varine (2005), local communities must identify by themselves what is the cultural heritage in their territory. He explained that it is crucial to listen to residents and ask them what they think the cultural heritage of their community is. To do so, they should be given as much information as possible about it, so that a basic body of assets can be identified and it can be later enriched with more in depth scientific, historic or administrative research papers.

The approach the French scholar suggested is obviously very close to the 'bottom-up' models of territorial growth which have inspired and supported local development processes across different European regions over the last few years. According to this view, cultural heritage is a resource for local communities insofar as they are given the opportunity to directly contribute to its management and enhancement at a local level.

Thanks to the 'participatory census', that is the independent and self-organised cataloguing of cultural assets the local community has recognised as such, local stakeholders, such as local governments representatives, territorial animators, associations and groups connected with cultural heritage, and creative young people work collectively to build a cultural project. The latter should also impact on an economic level since system actions implemented on the territory almost always end up triggering development processes, whether consciously or not.

During the creation process of the Socio-Cultural District of Selinunte, local work groups including mostly young people living in the municipalities of that area carried out the 'participatory census'. By entrusting local young people with the task of conducting the census of cultural assets, in its broader and more innovative meaning, the promoters of the District made a functional decision to the end of enhancing local cultural energies. By going beyond tradition, they should be able to make the local dimension shift to a global one and transform culture into an essentially relational concept. The meaning of a place is today more than ever defined through self-representation models that communities outline by carrying out an intense (and sometimes painful) comparison between itself and the 'other', almost like in a mirror game. By the word 'other' we can refer, for example, to transforming cities, virtual networks, or tourist flows.

To carry out a preliminary selection of the types of assets the 'participatory census' had to catalogue, the Register of Intangible Heritage (REI) of the Minister for Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity of the Sicily Region was taken as a point of reference. It lists all the assets that must be guaranteed safeguarding and promotion. The types of REI also used for the District census include:

a) Rituals, celebrations, and religious and pagan people's festivities, events in general that are felt as an expression of the culture of the territory;

b) Production techniques, raw materials employed, and the production processes that identify a specific product linked to the history and tradition of the community;

c) Artistic production such as literature, music, theatre, linguistic minorities, and other forms of communication conveying the feelings and essence of the community;

d) Spaces where cultural activities are carried out on a daily basis or randomly, which are a point of reference for the local population;

e) Local subjects and people who are carriers of traditional knowledge that is vital for the community, and are the sole holders of that knowledge.

The 'participatory census' was conducted by local groups also by means of interviews to the 'witnesses' of the territory. It was used not only to catalogue cultural assets with historical value, but it also covered those products that have only recently been embedded in the local cultural fabric, and that the local community recognises as particularly meaningful, being rep-

resentative of the territory. This group includes recently created events, which manage to gather the community and represent it, although they are not traditionally and historically rooted.

20.4 Conclusions

Nowadays, the cultural repertoires communities put in place have expanded especially at a local level to establish new symbolic models of affiliation and belonging. Such models are no longer based on 'traditional' paradigms that force the community to take on a passive (cultural consumption predominates over cultural production) and aestheticizing (identity as expression of the past) role. Communities, on the contrary, seem to be looking for a dimension that makes them the main actors on the cultural and economic scene and enhances their active functions through innovation and creativity (Cusimano, Giannone, 2006).

The experience of the Socio-Cultural District of Selinunte seems to be still following this direction by offering its local community a new route towards local development.

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Post Scriptum[3]

This is how I would have put it to Clara. «One day, a dearest friend of mine, the President of a cultural association located in Castelvetrano (Sicily), asked me if I was available to help him establish a partnership for a tourism district (Sicily Region had not yet defined at that time the organisation of its 'local tourism systems'). I replied with a *yea and nay*, closer to a no, since it was a too burdensome task. Yet I declared myself willing to help him launch a new idea for the territory, the cultural district. We would have been free from legally binding obligations and from any aspirations to manage necessary yet obtrusive financial resources. A few weeks later, I was invited to take the floor during a political-cultural meeting my friend had organised at the historical Teatro Selino of Castelvetrano, in the presence of senior members of Sicily Region political circles. I developed my discourse about a possible re-launch of the local economy and I concluded with some remarks, totally taken from Borges this time, about the *genius loci* and biographies of the territories, and a few other sensational sentences which excited some of the mayors in the hall. This was the idea, more or less: cultural heritage is a source of troubles if it is not translated into contemporaneity through a territorial know-how that must be embodied in the most vital and intellectual subjects living in the area. A too prestigious past can turn into an unbearable burden, a too vivid light that screens all the rest out. What if we pooled together intentions and works of all those who have planning competences…or if we asked ourselves whether the territory is capable of originating a totally contemporary identity…

The rest came over the following months: meetings, and meetings, with administration representatives and social groups, which, at least in that situation, tried hard not to be only the heirs but also independent and aware actors, at least until the District was set up and the research activity started… So, what do You think?»

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[3] By Girolamo Cusimano