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International Conference

Participatory local welfare, citizenship and third sector organizations. What is at stake?

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Call for Papers

STREAM 1

Top-down and bottom-up: aspects, relations and implications of emerging forms of regulated participation and grassroots mobilization

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One of the most significant phenomena of the last decades is the flourishing of participatory processes of a novel type. They do not belong to the institutional set up of representative democracy, yet they are meant to add to – and often be integrated in – the latter. Dialogue and inclusion, rather than conflict and contestation, is the reply to the crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness of traditional democracy that is being increasingly pleaded for.

The reference model of this vision of participation is the ‘deliberative forum’: a structured arena where different categories of people (‘lay’ citizens, experts, stakeholders, public administrators) meet to dialogically address a ‘problem’, more or less loosely defined as common. Such problems may range from major national issues, like the adoption of a currency or the handling of emerging technologies, to local policy questions, like urban traffic or the siting of industrial facilities. Professional skills have developed alongside, the ‘facilitator’ often being nowadays a full time job. The institutional status of these processes is variable, sometimes reaching full formal recognition, yet their actual impact on the political dynamics and the policy process – also considering the costs of their implementation in terms

of resources, time etc. – is unclear.

What is clear, on the other hand, is the distance of these approaches – the format, topic and realization of which is established and handled ‘from above’ – from bottom-up forms of participation, grounded on grassroots mobilizations. As for the latter, it has to be remarked that in this period social movements have undergone a profound transformation, with regard to their looser connection with political parties and institutional politics, their action repertoires and the way they seek to gather support from the public opinion, their internal structure and external networks of relationships, the material and immaterial resources employed, the scope and contents of contestation – which sometimes actually addresses ‘regulated’ forms of participation.

Finally, both phenomena – the development of top-down participatory devices and the transformation of bottom-up mobilizations – are framed by major structural changes, broadly connected with the spread of neoliberal ideas, programs and policies and often registered at scholarly level as the growing reach of ‘horizontal’, networked forms of governance.

Several questions arise, which can be grouped in three main categories:

1. To what extent and in what way do top-down participatory processes improve the quality of democracy, as regards both the institutional performance and the possibility of individual and collective actors to play a significant role in the policy process? What indicators can be found in this respect?
2. What are the relationships between top-down and bottom-up forms of participation? Do they play a complementary role, or are they in an inevitable tension? To what extent are deliberative forums and similar devices a means for overcoming dramatic social contrasts and decisional impasses, rather than being a means for covering usual power dynamics and policy negotiations with a layer of democratic legitimacy? To what extent do novel forms of mobilization represent effective replies to the challenges of current political issues, as related to economic globalization, technoscientific advancement and territorial and environmental change?
3. What are the relationships between the spread of participatory forums and devices, the emergence of ad-hoc mobilizations and the neoliberal transformation of the state and of governmental rationalities? Are novel forms of participatory democracy, with their plea for citizen engagement, empowerment, autonomy, responsibility, a way to counterbalance or – as some critics maintain – to support the neoliberal post-democratic drift, i.e. the hollowing out of democratic institutions and political conflict?

The stream invites contributions of theoretical and empirical character, addressing one or more of the questions above.