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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PARTICIPATION AND PRIVATISATION IN NEOLIBERAL POLICIES The Case of Italian 'Piani di Zona'

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ABSTRACT: Nowadays, participation is a core issue in the broad field of social sciences. In the specific context of social policy, citizen participation is viewed as a key element of local welfare systems, and particularly for the planning activities that are linked to it. The institutional documents which formalise these activities—'Piani di Zona' (PdZ, local 3-year social plan)—contain discourses that strongly emphasise the role of ordinary citizens and third sector organisations. Yet, despite the intentions proclaimed within the texts of the Plans, the type of participation effectively promoted by these documents seems restricted to certain organisations of civil society—well-structured interest groups—rather than to the general citizenry. So the texts of the PdZ do not describe in a clear and plausible manner the procedures by which the involvement of ordinary citizens should be made possible. This article aims to demonstrate that this discrepancy between the purposes declared within the PdZ and the means to be deployed is a catalyst for a process of *privatisation* of social policies. To this end, the article focuses on the PdZ as documents containing *discourses*, and analyses them through the lens of *critical discourse studies* (CDS).

KEYWORDS: Local welfare, Neoliberalism, Participation, Piani di Zona, Area Plans, Privatisation.

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1. Introduction

During the last twenty years, the word ‘participation’ has become a sort of *mantra* in the social sciences. Many articles and books feature this word, employing it in discourses on the political relevance and democratic potentiality of citizens’ engagement in public decision-making. A similar interest in participation can be observed in the field of social policies, where almost every institutional document or discourse refers to the necessity of involving common people in decisional processes.

In the context of social policy, citizen participation is viewed as a key element of local welfare systems, and more specifically for the planning activities that are linked to it. The institutional documents that formalise these activities—“Piani di Zona” (PdZ, or local 3-year social plan)—contain discourses that strongly emphasise the role of ordinary citizens and third sector organisations in the building of a local system of social policies.

Despite the intentions proclaimed within the texts of the Plans, the type of participation effectively promoted by these documents seems reserved to certain organisations of civil society—well-structured interest groups—rather than to the general citizenry. Indeed, the texts of the PdZ do not describe in a clear and plausible manner the procedures through which the involvement of ordinary citizens should be made possible. The Plans, therefore, show an evident discrepancy between the purposes declared within them and the means to be deployed to realise those purposes. It is intended to demonstrate that this discrepancy will be a catalyst for both a redefinition and a re-balancing of the relations between public institutions and private actors.

Given this premise, this article aims at demonstrating that the PdZ can promote a process of *privatisation* of social policies inasmuch as they emphasise the inclusionary dimension of *participation* but not provide for the means for involving the citizenry in such participation.

To this end, the article focuses on the PdZ as documents containing *discourses*. According to *Critical Discourse Studies* (CDS),¹ these are social constructs which produce meanings and link social facts, institutions and structures with that of language (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Discourses are actual ‘containers’ of *power* (Jäger 2001; van

¹ CDS are not a completely homogeneous field of research. Within them, there are three different approaches. The first, called ‘School of London’, is a socio-cultural approach referring to the works of Norman Fairclough. The second, called ‘School of Amsterdam’, follows a socio-cognitive perspective linked to the studies of Teun van Dijk. The third, called ‘School of Wien’, moves from Ruth Wodak’s researches. Despite their differences, these three approaches share the same interest in the relation between language and power and the intent to show the two-lane link between discourses and social structures and actions.

Dijk 1997), as they can modify the distribution of such power in a given social context by the artful use of language (Weiss and Wodak 2003).

Political discourses contained within PdZ have the *power* to establish the objectives of local communities and identify the tools necessary for their fulfilment. Therefore, these documents, regardless of the ways they are actually implemented, express the political views and ideas on participation that characterise the different local contexts.

This article, broadening the theoretical perspective of earlier research (Colombo and Gargiulo 2013), and taking cognisance of the discourses in the Italian PdZ on citizens' engagements, aims at both unveiling the ambiguities of participation as it is addressed within these discourses and analysing their potential effects on privatisation. These ambiguities and potential effects, we argue, become visible when local planning documents propose implementative strategies for participatory policies.

As these texts have a broad political breath, the article focuses mainly on the PdZ of large Italian cities,² analysing in all 12 planning documents.³ Specifically, the analysis of the texts follows a three step procedure. First, the parts of the documents concerning, the purposes of the PdZ and the means to be chosen to achieve them are delineated. Second, certain thematic nucleuses pertaining to the practices of citizens' engagement (identification of problems, discussion, decision, planning, monitoring, evaluation) are pinpointed within the text. Third, words and locutions particularly relevant to the thematic nucleuses are searched for within the planning documents (participation, citizens, users, empowerment, engagement, third sector, social capital, civil society, networks, private sector).

The article firstly addresses the issue of privatisation, stressing the different meanings of this concept and the role of privatisation processes within neoliberalism. Second, it analyses the ambiguities of participation, paying particular attention to the differences between past and current participatory experiences and policies. Finally, a critical analysis of the discourse contained within Italian PdZ is attempted, demonstrating that the manner in which participation is addressed in local planning documents makes room for indirect and implicit forms of privatisation.

² The former research was focused on 4 PdZ: Genova (2007-2009); Milano (2009-2011); Roma (2011-2015); Torino (2003-2006).

³ In addition to the Plans previously analysed, this article focuses also on the following documents: Bari (2014-2016); Bologna (2002-2003; 2005-2007); Cagliari (2012-2014); Lecce (2014-2016); Milano (2012-2014); Napoli (2010-2012; 2013-2015); Padova (2011-2015); Palermo (2010-2012); Trieste (2013-2015); Venezia (2011-2015). In the interests of consistency, we decided to exclude from the documents evaluated in this article the PdZ of medium and small cities as well as Plans of provinces and regions.

2. The many ways to privatisation

2.1 *The concept of privatisation*

Starting from the early 1980s, privatisation has become a distinguishing trait of global political, economic and social transformations. In fact, during the last thirty-five years the majority of states have ceded to private actors the greater part of their material wealth and government responsibilities.

In Italy, the process of privatisation started later than in other European countries. Since the onset of fascism in 1922, the Italian state had been an entrepreneurial state (Amoroso and Olsen 1978). The Italian Constitution recognised such an entrepreneurial role for the state: to promote the general welfare, public administration was entrusted with both regulatory and operational tasks in the area of economic development. Public enterprise was conceived as the main agent of growth and economic modernisation. Above all, it was a tool for implementation of social and labour policies. The extent of its role in public life was such that, by the early 1990s, besides playing a major role in many economic sectors, the Italian state directly controlled all logistical activities, supply networks (water, electricity, drainage system, gas, telephonic communications, highways, airports, etc.), almost the entire banking sector, and the majority of iron and steel, mechanic, chemical and plant design industries.

The year 1992 was an auspicious year for the Italian privatisation process. On board the yacht “*Britannia*”, the then treasury minister Mario Draghi managed an audit of Italy’s industrial sectors in the context of the proposed privatisation. The parts of national industry that were sold a little later were shown to a selected group of Italian and foreign investors. Giuliano Amato, the Prime Minister at that time, supervised the task of the dismantling of the banking and insurance public sectors and designed a legal framework suitable for this purpose. In fact, a substantial dismantling program was implemented during the following twenty years.⁴

Given this glance at the decline of the Italian public sector, it is now appropriate to stress the concept of privatisation. This concept can be simply defined as the transfer of state property—or a part thereof—to private actors.⁵ In this sense, activities such as bargaining between public administration and private actors for the supply of services,

⁴ Actually, certain relevant privatisations were already made in the 1980s and in the first two years of the 1990s.

⁵ If applied to a state that previously held huge assets and the monopoly of the supply of many services, the word “privatisation” can be replaced by the term “denationalisation”. For instance, this is the case of the states that in the past belonged to the Warsaw Pact.

outsourcing and contracting-out procedures (Salamon 2002) fall under the concept of privatisation, whereas private financing (through services trade or donations) of public agencies falls outside of the concept. It is suggested, therefore, that the use of the word 'marketization' is more suitable than 'privatisation' to describe the process of transfer of state assets to non-public entities.

However, marketization and privatisation are concepts that cannot be considered separately in reflecting upon state changes of the last decades. Under the influence of *New Public Management* theories, Italian public administrations have on the one hand relinquished part of their assets and on the other hand have adopted organisational criteria appropriate to facing the new competition with private actors (Warin 1997; Henman and Fenger 2006; Marston and McDonald 2006).

Thus, the notion of privatisation means not only a transfer of property from public to private actors but also the establishment of mechanisms designed to ensure private actors both to maintain a degree of accountability and preserve the principles and values that drive public administration to reconcile commercial purposes with overarching social needs.

If intended as a mere economic process, the notion of privatisation can be applied to different objects, for instance, lands or buildings, banks or factories (Savas 2005). In this sense, privatisation is simply an accounting issue, a tool to obtain a better profit and loss account. However, privatising—as previously stressed—also means reducing the role of the public sector and, at the same time, increasing the role of private actors in satisfying social needs. In this sense, privatisation is not only an economic concept, but also a philosophical and political notion (Whitfield 1983). In fact, it is not only services and public estates that may be privatised but also common spaces—for instance neighbourhoods, which, as a consequence, take the legal form of gated communities—and goods that are collectively owned such as the environment, seeds and human genes (Whitfield 2006).

These unusual types of privatisations are under-emphasised by the media, which prefer to focus on conspicuous kinds of public/private transfer than atypical and less visible manifestations of it. Yet, the latter are the subject of privatisation initiatives. The wide spread of contracts between local governments and services providers obfuscates the boundaries between the public, private and voluntary sectors. In fact, providers may be delivering their services to profit or non-profit organisations, to informal and voluntary groups of citizens, or even to individual members of the community (Whitfield 2012).

Adapting the taxonomy proposed by Savas (2000), it is possible to distinguish three different forms of privatisation, each of which can be equated to different practical strategies:⁶

- 1) Delegating: public institutions through a formal (legal)-act keep a certain degree of control and responsibility but entrust to the private sector certain defined functions:
 - Negotiating contracts for supply of goods and services;
 - Establishing markets or quasi-markets (Le Grand 1991) within which public and private actors compete with each other;
 - Negotiating exclusive contracts or concessions, where goods and services are produced by private companies within a public space and through (at least partially) public infrastructures;
 - Establishing Public-Private partnerships and companies, where the assets are a mixture of public and private funding;
 - Transferring subsidies, loans, and donations to private companies and institutions, and showing favourable fiscal treatment towards them;
 - Distributing vouchers and making direct assignments to individuals and families, who acquire services on private markets;
 - Establishing mandates by means of which private actors are commanded by public authorities to manage services at their expense.
- 2) Disposing: public institutions through a formal act cede to private actors their authority in certain fields that concern specific issues.
 - Deregulation— when a public monopoly ceases and private competitors enter the scene;
 - Sale—which can involve one or more buyers and concern specific groups (for instance, managers, employees or customers of a given service);
 - Free transfer—sometimes addressed to specific groups;
 - Liquidation—when a public company is permanently closed and its assets are sold separately.
- 3) Removal: privatisation does not take place through a formal act but is the consequence of the absence of direct state action.

⁶ For other attempts to build a typology of the forms of privatisation, see the following studies: Clarke 1999; Clarke and Newman 1997; Clarke, Gewirtz, Hughes, Humphrey, 2000.

- Failure—when services and goods provided by public sector are considered to be inadequate by users/consumers, who, as a consequence, resort to the private sector;
- Retreat—that is through the gradual withdrawal of a public service;
- Voluntary Action—when public institutions encourage people to assume responsibility for specific places or services;
- Omission to legislate for social needs.

In brief, the privatisation of state assets aims at achieving a number of aims: widening the national stock market; restoring public financial resources; facilitating the flows of foreign capital; and tearing down the clientelistic system and political influences within the management of private companies (Scognamiglio 2001).

Specifically with regard to local services, the processes of privatisation appear in two ways. As Clarke (2004) observes '[t]he first concerns a shift between *sectors*; the second, a shift between *spheres*' (32). In other words, privatisation

has involved the shift of activities, resources and the provision of goods and services from the public sector to the *private sector* (variously described as commercial, corporate, for profit)'... [but it has also]... been the shift of social responsibilities from the public sphere (where they formed part of the business of government) to the *private sphere* (where they become matters of individual, familial or household concern) (33).

The first type of privatisation aims to modernise certain sectors, reduce spending, bring in private capital, managerialise public administration, and introduce a competitive market. The second type of privatisation, on the other hand, defines targets apparently less close to the logic of the private sphere but nonetheless properly ascribable to it. Specifically, this type of privatisation hinges on neo-communitarian and empowerment rhetoric and emphasises the relevance of citizen participation.

2.2 Haziness of Neoliberalism, Clearness of Privatisations

Basically, liberalism is a doctrine about the limits of the political. A critique of the excess of government is central in the works of its founding fathers, such as Smith, Locke and Stuart Mill. However, the idea that the state should be reduced to a residual role in regulating economic processes is not actually shared by all the scholars and thinkers who have shaped the vast and rich history of liberal thought.

From a historical perspective, the process of economic deregulation has been a key theme in the period of “Victorian liberalism”, and found full political legitimation in the 1930s and 1940s. During these periods, a clear separation emerged between welfare liberalism as expounded by Keynes—concerned about the social consequences of market economy—and a liberalism strongly premised on the idea that only a free market would foster progress. Today, the second type of doctrine has prevailed over the first, to the extent that, in many societies, citizens are inured to the political and media mantras of privatisation (Harvey 2000; Stiglitz 2002).

Hayek’s political and economic philosophy is probably the leading example of a market-centred liberalism. His theory refused any state attempt to plan economic processes, affirming that only the system of prices, i.e. an anonymous process of coordination of society through markets, was capable of synchronising local and personal knowledge. According to Hayek, the function of the state was just to facilitate the existence of this spontaneous order, avoiding any external intrusion in the processes of production and allocation of goods and resources. Thus, every economic intervention by the state had necessarily to be considered illiberal and inefficient.

Later, Hayek’s idea—more broadly, the ideas of the so-called Austrian economic school—crossed the ocean, being borrowed by a group of economists of the University of Chicago. These scholars contributed to the development of the economic side of liberal theories. Their purpose was two-fold: putting the concept of the free market at the centre of economic thought; and making economics the main discipline among the social sciences. Milton Friedman, the most influential of these scholars, developed the so-called “monetarist” theory, which aimed at taking decisions about currency away from political power and delegitimising public expenditure.⁷

The main polemical target of these theories was the social and economic model which had prevailed after world war two, which was adhered to—albeit in different ways—by most western countries in the following decades. The ideological base of this model was Keynes’ work entitled *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. Welfare liberalism was premised on the idea that full occupation was the main goal of an economic system. In this way, the growth of production and the social integration of all the citizens would be possible. Furthermore, the ends of welfare liberalism had to be pursued by operation of an impressive system of social protection that was able to guarantee the reproduction of a healthy and motivated labour force. The state had to assume the responsibility for guaranteeing an adequate degree of invest-

⁷ For a discussion on Hayek’s and Friedman’s thought, see Colombo 2013, pp. 165-184. On the relations between liberal thought and neoliberalism, see Thorsen 2007. An historical introduction to neoliberalism can be found in Harvey 2005. On the origins of this term, see Dean 2014.

ments and consumption. To this end, regardless of the balance of its financial statements, it had to employ a generously progressive tax system and a demand-oriented economic policy, while, at the same time, directly controlling credit and currency.

The Keynesian model was challenged by the stagflation of the mid-1970s. Welfare liberalism appeared unable to contain the descending phase of the economic cycle, and was further accused of causing inflation. The crisis caused by capital accumulation was a turning point for free market doctrines of liberalism. After a while, these theories left behind the academic environment and were implemented in several national contexts: in Pinochet's Chile as well as in Australia (under Fraser), in the United Kingdom (under Thatcher), in New Zealand (under Mulroney) and in the US (under Reagan), spreading from these countries to other parts of the world.

Thus, history entered the age of neoliberalism. Since then, this word has been used to such an extent that it has become extremely vague and omnipresent. Thereupon, many scholars declare that neoliberalism is like the God of St. Thomas' Gospel: hidden in every little stick and crouched down under each stone. In fact, during recent years, a scientific literature on neoliberalism has proliferated.⁸

The concept of neoliberalism originated in economics but it is now used also in many other disciplinary fields, being applied to a panoply of subjects. This concept does not exist in a "pure" form, but varies according to different local and situated interpretations. Its "actual" meaning is not really clear: does the word "neoliberalism" indicate that the state is absorbed by the economic sphere or is it a new kind of state interventionism? Is neoliberalism an economic policy regime artificially created or the multi-form revanchism of ultra-rich people? Is it better symbolised by the benevolent face of Romano Prodi or by the broken hands of Victor Jara?

The term "neoliberalism" cannot be applied efficaciously and in an unambiguous way to a well-defined set of events or topics. Thus, there is the risk that phenomena really distinguishable and unconnected are all together labelled with this term, thereby concealing their diversity under a veil of illusory uniformity. In other words, the concept of neoliberalism easily becomes rhetorical and elusive, not so differently from other general concepts aimed at containing huge and complex systems of thoughts and practices, for instance, democracy, idealism, communism, Christianity, etc.

This article does not aspire to give a complete and exhaustive definition of "neoliberalism";⁹ nor does it purport to investigate either the gap between the theoretical

⁸ Examples of this literature are Barnett 2005; Castree 2006; Kipnis 2007, Clarke 2008; Mudge 2008; Boas, Gans-Morse 2009; Ferguson 2010; Hilgers 2011; Wacquant 2012; Collier 2012; Springer 2012; Jessop 2013; Peck 2012; Weller, Neill 2014; Davies 2014; Dean 2014; Venugopal 2015.

⁹ Such an attempt can be found in Moini 2015.

models proposed for it, or the concrete application of these models (such as the conflicting models between Hayek and Becker).

Rather, our goal is stressing how the processes of privatisation are a *condition sine qua non* for labelling a policy as neoliberal, regardless of the policy sector in which it is fulfilled. This does not mean that the role of the state is necessarily diminished; on the contrary, during the second wave of neoliberalisation processes the regulatory role of state power was increased (Steger and Roy 2010). As a consequence, rather, this means that a state which espouses neoliberalism now exercises regulatory oversight in a different way compared with the past, transferring public properties to private actors and commodifying services.

Since the end of the 1970s, reform of economic policies has moved from a simple assumption: if financially unsustainable, policies must incorporate cuts, so as to contain public debt and to free the market from interferences and obstacles.¹⁰ The public agencies that proliferated during the 'glorious thirties', rather than having been erased have been subsumed within market logics. Instead of dying, Keynesian state has been privatised.

3. Participation and Its Ambiguities

3.1 *The Meanings of Participation: Between Past Utopias and Present Failures*

Apparently, many western states¹¹ are explicitly trying to go beyond the narrow limits of political representation and party politics (Della Porta 2008). To this end, they are implementing a set of political technologies aimed at making democracy and democratic tools actually effective. Several areas of public policies are studded with participatory budgeting, *open space technologies*, forums, public juries and inquiries, round tables and consultations (Melo and Baiocchi 2006; Fischer 2009). This *democratic experimentalism* (Dorf and Sabel 1998) aspires to involve citizens and associations, by listening to their voices and using their abilities and knowledges within policy-making, planning and services implementation.

¹⁰ For a critique of the link between privatisation and reduction of public debt as a contemporary *topos* of the literature on economics and social sciences, see Streeck 2013 and Gallino 2015.

¹¹ This article is focused exclusively on the participatory policies of Western Countries. On the link between participation and processes of neoliberalisation in other parts of the world, see Martin 2005; Leal 2007; Geddes 2014.

The attempts to include the entire citizenry within political processes are part of the broader shift from *government* to *governance* (Rhodes 1997; Frederickson 2005; Blecher, Bronzini, Ciccarelli, d'Albergo 2010, Hendry, and Joerges 2009). . The latter is a practical science of management of continuing negotiations (Rose 1999), and is basically based on the idea that a wide number of actors must participate in political decisions as part of a dynamic of subsidiarity and cooperation. Therefore, governance implies the fragmentation of state sovereignty and the increasing necessity for coordinating sub-national and supra-national levels. Specifically, it replaces vertical commands from the centre to the periphery with auto-reflexive networks that work through reciprocal actions and feedbacks consensually regulated. In theory, the actors in these networks are placed at the same level.

The inclusive technologies necessitated by governance aim to activate and potentiate citizens, so as to emancipate them from the passive role of being mere targets of policies. Participatory tools are fundamental to the realisation of this purpose.

However, the concept of participation is polysemous (Bifulco 2008) and semantically ambiguous. Moreover, it encompasses a high quantity of different implementative strategies, strongly affected by the socio-political characteristics of the diverse local contexts (Guarneros-Meza and Geddes 2010). In fact, both actual emancipatory measures and strategies aimed at maintaining the *status quo* have been carried out under the flag of participation (Cornwall and Brock 2005). Nevertheless, a historical line that separates different uses of this word can be drawn.

From the first half of the 1970s to the end of the following decade, the claims for participation were part of a broader social protest aspiring to enlarge the spaces of social and individual autonomy through the demolition of the austere and alienating structures of (state-oriented as well as market-oriented) capitalism. In those days, the link between participation and the struggles against social inequalities was strong: "low participation and social inequity [were] so bound up with each other that a more equitable and humane society [required] a more participatory political system" (Macpherson 1977, 94).

Protests against other-direction and exploitation, patriarchy and homogenisation started from below, namely from factories and classrooms, and were conducted by new collective political subjects, usually badly organised and strongly ideologised. In order to re-appropriate their lives and their spaces, these subjects looked for conflict more than dialogue with political powers. This was the age of self-management (Rosanvallon 1976), aimed at revolutionising liberal democracy, to the point of making it participative at all its levels and structures. Mainstream political science labelled this attempt as a 'mere illusion' (Sartori 1993).

In the 1990s, participation definitely changed its meaning. Citizens' engagement started to follow a top-down logic, being encouraged by public institutions. Participatory practices were no longer loaded with universalistic values but were tools to improve the effectiveness of decisional processes.¹² One of the main goals of participation was to increase the legitimacy and efficiency of public policies (Holzinger 2001).

The idea of democracy suggested by this type of participation was incompatible with a conflictual view of society (Dahl and Soss 2014). From such a perspective, participatory arenas should be shaped by the communicative rationality theorised by Apel and Habermas (Beaumont and Nicholls 2008). This is a typical ethical ideal condition within which respect for rules and speakers would neutralise the negative effects of specious and egoistic individual purposes. The agonistic and irremediably plural nature of democracy (Mouffe 1999, 2000) is defused through a set of procedures and techniques apparently neutral but actually ambiguous (Holden 2011). Indeed, these procedures and techniques disarm the more critical positions and keep criticism outside participatory arenas.

The growing relevance of participation has diminished with the progressive technicalisation of participatory practices, which are controlled and facilitated by *ad hoc* expertise. This contributes to producing a shift in citizens' claims from desirable to possible (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan 2007). In other words, the technical rationality that invigorates contemporary participatory policies depoliticises issues about the organisation of society, especially those concerning income and power distribution (Mathur 2006; Eizaguirre, Pradel, Terrones, Martinez-Celorrio and García 2012; De Leonardis 2015), and at the same time displays indifference to issues of substantial equality.

Several empirical studies have shown that these policies have a weak impact both on citizens and public institutions (Bobbio 2007; Paci 2008), and are often restricted to ultra-marginal issues (d'Albergo and Moini 2007). Specifically, citizens' inclusion frequently takes place via paths that avoid a real sharing of political power (Bozeman 2002). Actual inclusive effects of participation are rare and few are durable (Bifulco 2015). The criteria that regulate access to participatory procedures are opaque, and, as a consequence, not all individuals and groups who have interests at stake have the resources and the will to participate. Likewise, not all the interests are considered legitimate by political institutions (Papadopoulos and Warin 2007). Paradoxically, being so-

¹² The analysis conducted here pertains exclusively to top-down participation promoted by central and local authorities. Obviously, this does not fill completely the semantic and practical field of participation. A multitude of initiatives promoted by groups of citizens, on social policies as well as other topics, are not considered in this article. These initiatives, often external or even opposed to neoliberal logic, show how the transformative bottom-up push did not exhaust itself in the 1990s but is still in evidence today.

cially included is a prerequisite to participation; so, several minority groups, who have a lower level of access to power and information, are denied the possibility to participate in public decisions (Silver, Scott and Kazepov 2010). Simultaneously, the strongest and most organised actors of economics and society are able to manipulate participatory arenas (Fung and Wright 2003). Moreover, the spaces and formal rules of participation are highly relevant (Bifulco and Centemeri 2007). When participation is well-structured and regulated, citizens are likely to be excluded from decisions, or alternatively to be included in a mere formal way (Mirabile 2005). When specific places of discussion are not provided and the incentives to participation are lacking or missing, auto-selective inclusion replaces an explicit and formal plan for participants' recruitment (Cataldi and Gargiulo 2011). As a consequence, huge and powerful stakeholders are over-represented (Regonini 2005).

3.2 Participatory Policies within Neoliberal Processes

The wide spread of participatory practices can be better understood if the rise of participation is placed within the broader framework of the crisis of welfare and changes to the capitalist accumulation regime. According to Moini, participation is a function (Moini 2011a), a *référentiel*¹³ (id. 2011b, 2012), of the process of neoliberalisation. It aims not to transform but rather to strengthen a certain configuration of political, economic and social structures. Its formalised procedures contribute to neutralise social conflicts around the distribution of resources and to de-politicise the issues at stake. The calls for an open discussion sugar-coats the impoverishment of the systems of social protection by cloaking it with the pretended sharing of decisions about public services. In fact, citizens' engagements aim to compensate for the social and economic costs of privatisation policies and reinforces the legitimation of such policies.

The abundant presence of the word 'participation' in political communication exemplifies an aspiration to produce social consensus. Top-down participatory practices are a fundamental discursive and material resource for obtaining cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1975), facilitating integration of the dominant classes while, at the same time, affirming their political legitimacy.

The large success of participation has to be considered in light of the evolution of neoliberal capitalism. The radical version of neoliberalism, represented by Reagan and Thatcher, which was aimed at dismantling existing political-economic arrangements,

¹³ On the origins of this concept, see Jobert, Muller 1987.

had collapsed because of its adverse consequences on social and economic integration. The disintegration of the 'wage system society' (Castel 1995, 2009) and the previous forms of social inclusion had confronted neoliberal policies with their negative externalities and had exposed political elites to a growing legitimisation deficit. Therefore, neoliberalism pragmatically and opportunistically transformed itself (Peck and Tickell 2007), mutating into a form of capitalism subject to regulatory oversight and concerned about its effects on the social fabric (Cerny 2008).

Participation has contributed to the urban territorialisation of neoliberalism. In recent years, urban contexts have gained an unprecedented political relevance (Le Galès 2011). Within a broader scenario, marked by the redefinition of competences between central and local governments, the new urban governance has promoted integration between public administrations and private capitals. The simultaneous presence of members of political institutions, economic actors, civil society organisations and private citizens makes the spaces of participatory policies the symbolic places of new forms of 'remote government' (Rose and Miller 1990; Nadesan 2008). Through it, the state delegates authority and regulatory responsibilities to several non-institutional actors, so ceding to them parts of its sovereignty (Dean 2002).

Within an urbanely territorialised neoliberalism, cities have become laboratories of models of local development based on the employment of all the human and social resources available in their territories. To encapsulate this development, Harvey (1989) used the expression 'urban entrepreneurship', meaning that cities act in competitive environments and their main purpose is attracting investments, flows of tourists and new residents.

During the long period of social and economic reorganisations following the Keynesian-Fordist era, neoliberalism, in different contexts, had taken diverse forms as neoliberal actors pursued different strategies to impose the logic of the market (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, 2011). Cities had become the 'arenas' (Brenner and Theodore 2002) of neoliberal strategies, playing a major role in reproducing neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002). Currently, they are an interface between global and local economies, internal demands for sustainability and welfare and external pushes towards international competitiveness (Jessop 2002).

Participatory policies work as tools of conflict resolution between these counterposed trends, and also shape and normalise subjectivities, making them adaptable to the new socio-economic and political contexts. When asked to participate in policies, individuals become more governable. Technologies of agency (Dean 1999) applied within places of participation subordinate the actual enjoyment of social rights to the duty to participate. Citizens' needs remain unsatisfied, having been translated by ex-

perts who convert participatory policies into sterile procedures for participation. Empowerment objectives turn into, on the one hand, techniques for management of marginalised groups, and, on the other hand, into processes through which responsibilities and obligations are unilaterally shifted from public institutions to individuals and families (Blakeley 2010).

4. The ambiguous link between participation and privatisation in Italy: local social planning within a neoliberal scenario

4.1 Changes in Italian welfare and the localisation of social policy: some critical issues

The link between participation and privatisation can be unveiled by examining in depth the reforms that the Italian welfare state has gone through in the last two decades.¹⁴ Law 328 of 2000 is the peak of this reformatory path. Although it is not in itself a neoliberal device, it has, however, introduced features into Italian social policies that have paved the way to privatisation.

First, law 328/2000 is a key step on the path to devolution and regionalisation of welfare,¹⁵ facilitating, in particular, the *localisation* of social policies. This process has undeniably brought the citizens closer to decisional centres, but has *de facto* weakened state power over welfare: central government is no longer the main decision maker, but is rather playing the (not so well-defined) role of guarantor of universalism with regard to the ownership of social rights and access to social services and benefits.

Besides the retreat of the state—legitimised in light of the need to conform to the logic of vertical subsidiarity—law 328/2000 facilitates the enlargement of the spaces reserved to public actors, this way adapting also to the logic of horizontal subsidiarity. Particularly, organisations in the third sector are recognised as legitimate actors; in this regard, they are not only suppliers of services, but also contributors within the plan-

¹⁴ This link has become even stronger in recent years. The ongoing reform of public administration (law 124 of 2015, called 'Madia reform') prescribes the strengthening of participatory policies within the organisation of local public services (at article 19).

¹⁵ This path started in 1977, when the President of the Republic's decree n. 616 (which implemented law n. 382 of 1975) was issued. This decree gave municipalities direct responsibilities for social policies and reduced the authority of the territorial offices of the central government. However, the process of devolution and regionalisation continued also after the issuing of law 328/2000. The reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution realised in 2001 entrusted the administrative regions with full regulatory authority in the field of social assistance (Gualdani 2004).

ning arenas and procedures. In other words, private actors are explicitly included in those planning processes from which strategic decisions in the field of welfare arise.

The enlargement of decisional responsibilities ideally conforms to a model of 'substantial' democracy. Nevertheless, such enlargement shows evident criticalities. Generally, the Italian third sector suffers uncertainty with respect to its role (Villa 2011), which turns into actual ambiguity in the case of local social planning. In this regard, the actors in the third sector, on the one hand, play an advocacy role, while, on the other hand, are material suppliers of services (De Ambrogio 2004), finding themselves in the position—at least potential—of conflict of interests.

Moreover, another problematic aspect of law 328/2000 is the possibility of an actual participation of simple citizens in decisional processes. Beyond the rhetoric that surrounds both this law and its implementation path, the inclusion of citizenry may not be taken for granted. Several studies have focused on participatory planning experiences (Bifulco 2010; Bifulco and Centemeri 2007; Cataldi and Gargiulo 2011; Polizzi 2008), showing that the role of private citizens is quite reduced. Hence, the third sector does not seem to be able to represent the requests and needs of the entire citizenry. Furthermore, the specific organisations that participate in decision-making do not have a mandate from the third sector as a whole: the aforementioned studies stress that not all non-profit organisations—only large, well-structured and socially capitalised companies—are actually included in the planning procedures.

Therefore, law 328/2000, even though it does not explicitly and completely conform to a neoliberal logic, *de facto* paves the way for practices and processes that are on the whole integral to this logic. The spaces within which such practices and processes take place become visible if one looks at PdZ, the main tool for planning social policies at the local level. Provided for by law 328/2000, PdZ are realised by municipalities positioned in territorial settings and involve other public institutions and public actors. These plans aim at devising the means for carrying out social interventions, defining strategic objectives and local welfare priorities, and selecting the ways to source the essential data and information.

4.2 Participation and Privatisation in the Italian PdZ: a soft form of neoliberalism

Within the PdZ herein analysed, the issue of participation is basically addressed in terms of *engagement* by the local population. However, the necessity for involving users and families often appears in two different, and, in theory, consequential, discursive regions, respectively related to *purposes* and to *means*. This implicates a tautology

between the former and the latter—get involved in order to get involved—that empties the notion of ‘engagement’ by depriving it of an actual meaning. The use of this notion, hence, is a sort of rhetoric tool to ‘remove’ social needs. If engagement is declared as desirable but not plausibly operationalised, a participation appeal to individuals and families becomes a mere call to responsibility for their own physical, psychical and socio-economic well-being. In other words, all the members of local communities are exhorted to participate and take on responsibilities for themselves while the state retreats.

Besides engagement, another two concepts play a major role within PdZ: *empowerment* and *social capital*. The first is a sort of frame symbolising a broader set of changes that concern the shift to a plural market of social services. This shift is depicted as a way to empower individual autonomy and users’ freedom of choice. The second puts *family* into the foreground by considering it the main producer of social capital. As such, family is not a mere ‘object’ of intervention but rather the active subject of social development policies. However, even in this case, PdZ fail to define specific citizens’ engagement strategies, employing the same arguments both in the discursive region of purposes and that of means. Tautology between the former and the latter appears again: the active role of individuals and families is an objective and, at the same time, a device for reaching that objective.

Generally, PdZ show an evident problem of *consistency* (van Dijk 2004): within them, different sentences in the same discourses are often disjointed and disconnected. In practical terms, it means that the parts of the texts which, according to their title, should disclose the operational tools for fulfilling the purposes of participation do not provide sufficient descriptions of the specified measures.

If discourses on local social planning fail in developing effective and concrete mechanisms for citizens’ engagement, they surely are useful for promoting a ‘decentralised’ and ‘plural’ welfare, within which all the phases of social policy processes are shared by a network of public and private actors. To this end, PdZ depict local communities as cohesive entities and blur the distinction between public institutions and extra-institutional subjects. Often, these documents resort to the discursive strategy called *positive self-presentation of us* (van Dijk 2004): one specific group—in this case, the local community—is ascribed a positive character, and this way it is represented as unitary and close.

This image of local societies facilitates a certain type of social intervention, close to the logic of the market and based on the multiplication and diversification of supply. PdZ counterpose the old and new configurations of local welfare, displaying the latter

in terms of improvement and renovation, especially with regard to the enlargement of participation.

The overriding of 'traditional' welfare, hence, implies the increasing of the number of actors involved in the elaboration and implementation of social policies. This is depicted as a positive thing in itself, which can produce beneficial effects on the outputs of interventions. Coherently with such approach, the idea of subsidiarity is put at the centre of local welfare.

However, this idea is quite ambiguous. In a context in which public and non-public actors are on the same plane, private third-sector organisations appear as guarantors of citizens' rights. Yet, within the frame drawn by PdZ, rights are dependent on duties, given that the expectations of public welfare are subordinate to the active role every individual is expected to play by offering to others and providing social services.

The counterposition between the old and new welfare configurations does not concern only the number and the type of the actors involved in local social policies but also the *form* of their relations. These are depicted as flexible, non-hierarchical and covering the entire territory due to their proximity to citizens' voices. The metaphor that captures this kind of form is the *network*. Within PdZ, this image works as a spatialisation of the ideas on which the documents rest and seems to have a metamorphic property: its virtues immediately translate into the efficacy of interventions. Specifically, network seems to be automatically an 'activation maker' affecting citizenry and the diverse actors who are part of local welfare.

Through the *predication strategy* (Wodak and Meyer 2009), the spatial metaphor of network acquires stereotyped positive qualities and directly legitimates the introduction of market elements within local welfare. Since the network is depicted as horizontal and its knots not parts of a hierarchy, the marketization of local welfare does not seem to provoke an income and territorial segmentation of the response to social needs. Likewise, the retreat of local public institutions to a mere role of coordination and supervision does not seem to be a failure to cover social demands. The network, therefore, beams its symbolic qualities on the entire new architecture of local welfare systems. In this way, it legitimates the opening towards private-social organisations and the increase of their responsibilities within all phases of the social policy process.

Hence, the analysis of PdZ, as conducted in this paper, allows us to highlight certain relevant aspects of the neoliberal link between participation and privatisation. The rhetorical use of participatory images and metaphors can hide, more or less intentionally, processes of retreat by public actors that—recalling Clarke's terminology (2004)—do not show the characteristics of a shift between sectors, but rather manifest those of a

shift between spheres. Responsibilities in the field of prevention and protection of social risks redound after all upon individuals more than public institutions.

Moreover, the processes of privatisation concealed by the emphasis on participation are extremely varied from one territory to another. This variety can entail a dangerous *fragmentation* of welfare in social categories and areas which, depending on income and territory, both quantitatively and qualitatively jeopardises social security. The effects of this fragmentation are quite risky as the 'selective' procedures governing participation promote the involvement of those third-sector organisations which enjoy wide social and political capital. As a consequence, the possibility that oligopolies hide themselves under the veil of participation becomes menacingly concrete.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the discourses contained within the PdZ of several Italian large cities allows us to better understand the link between participation and privatisation that characterises the neoliberal project. As we have illustrated, the processes of privatisation promoted and facilitated by local planning documents are mainly implicit and indirect. These processes, rather than comprising a direct shift of responsibilities and properties from public to private, hinge on an illusory idea of empowerment and participation. This idea, lacking any operational recommendation, translates into a retreat by local institutions, which leaves local citizens to their own devices.

This article, therefore, gives us relevant information about dimensions of neoliberalism that are often neglected in scientific debate, suggesting novel conclusions. For this reason, it fruitfully engages with literature on neoliberal policies within welfare states and public services, particularly, with those studies that show that not all social policy programmes can be privatised through the same tactics and with equal efficacy (Leys 2001). In fact, negative electoral feedbacks and social and political resistances can put the process of privatisation at risk. This imparts greater importance to participatory policies. As emerged from the article, as well as other enquiries, participation is often a part of obfuscation and compensation strategies (Pierson 2002) aimed at neutralising conflicts and protests.

These conclusions can also be extended to other fields of policy: the reforms of health care, urban governance, environmental policies and the organisation of social services. For instance, the programmes of urban requalification in Italy, which take place within a scenario of actual deregulation of urban planning, show how participation is useful to conceal the failure of public/private partnerships to fulfil their purpose

in defending public interest (Pizzo 2015), that is by bypassing bureaucratic paths in order to more swiftly achieve the purpose of privatising public spaces (Colombo and Porcu 2014).

In conclusion, the relation between participation and privatisation within neoliberal processes appears as mocking. Private citizens are asked to take part in the dynamics of the dismantling of the public realm that, *de facto*, damage and impoverish them. Paradoxically, this places the institutional and top-down participatory policies analysed in this study within contemporary post-democratic tendencies (Crouch 2003). In other words, participation exemplifies the 'perverse intersection' (Dagnino 2006) between ideas originally aimed at strengthening democratic practices and initiatives that, on the contrary, weaken social rights. This unveils the neo-communitarian side of neoliberalism: discourses expressed in distant contexts and for different purposes are re-articulated and absorbed within the dominant ideology.

The neoliberal project, hence, exhibits great metamorphic aptitudes and capacity for resilience in difficult situations and over time. This is manifested by the extent to which neoliberalism makes a rhetorical disguise through which, on the one hand, market is ascribed the ethical qualities of social justice, and on the other hand, the goal of mobilisation against privatisation is made more difficult.

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