

Marc Pares, Sonia M. Ospina & Joan Subirats 2017: *Social Innovation and Democratic Leadership. Communities and Social Change from Below*. Cheltenham. UK. Northampton. USA. Edward Elgar.

Social Innovation, a concept that can be traced back to the nineteenth century, has been increasingly used since the 1980s within urban and regional development scholarship to challenge the one side emphasis on technological or managerial change. There is an accumulated body of theoretical and empirical research with emphasis on the *social* element as well as on the political potential of social innovation. It is in this framework that *Social Innovation and Democratic Leadership. Communities and Social Change from Below* explores the innovative capacity of community leadership in New York and Barcelona in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash. The authors' aspiration in this book is to contribute to the scholarship on social innovation and community action by incorporating local *democratic leadership* as the main driver of innovation and as a source of social change. Democracy in this book is understood as inclusive and transformative. Leaders and community actors of social innovation *must* pursue radical democratic social practices in order to challenge the pre-existing hegemonic framework while proposing alternative imageries for their neighbourhoods. The authors' normative position advocates for egalitarian leadership practices that empower the have-nots. They maintain that democratic leadership reframes the discourse to produce social change.

The main thesis of the book is that neighbourhoods with greater civic capacity, "understood as the neighbourhood's ability to articulate governmental and non-governmental actors concerned with collective problems" (p 54) - such as lack of affordable housing or poor youth integration - produce more effective socially innovative responses at the community level with greater potential for scalability. The analysis is based on empirical research of eight cases: two in each of the two neighbourhoods of New York and likewise in the two urban areas of Barcelona. The first two sections of the book present the conceptual and analytical framework stressing the contextual negative features of the two cities during the Great Recession, such as poverty, housing evictions as well as the negative outcome of gentrification creating problems of housing affordability. The authors acknowledge that while the geographical and historical contexts of the two cities are highly dissimilar, this does not prevent a fruitful comparison given the salience of community organizations in pursuing collective actions of empowerment and struggles for improving services in neighbourhoods of the two cities. In both New York and in Barcelona the non-profit sector and community organizations have a strong tradition of organization that facilitates the comparison between the civic experiences.

In the book there is little that is new regarding the relevance of agency in empowering citizens and improving community services in cities. Place-based organizations characteristic of urban democratic practices have been richly portrayed in the urban-studies literature on cities in the USA and Europe. The contribution of the

book lies in its emphasis on the democratic relational leadership or “collective leadership” as the engine of social innovation. So, what is required to develop “collective leadership” in social-innovation experiences and how are we to identify it? “Collective leadership requires shared goals and interdependent actors who engage in discourses and practices that allow them to experience the results of their efforts as collective achievement” (p. 71). It also requires a collective purpose to produce social change. According to the authors the accumulation of practices of interactive leadership at the micro-level and the fostering of transformation, inclusiveness and empowerment deepens democracy. Scholars are urged to focus on how leadership is constructed through organizational practices and to look for the mechanisms by which the cognitive work of leaders produces common agreements. They should also be alert to how discourses are reframed through language and interactions that confront imaginaries that support the status quo. However, the authors point out the variability of civic capacity, which they relate to either resilience or vulnerability of neighbourhoods. It is hardly surprising that their list of variables that define resilient neighbourhoods portray implicitly upper and middle-class neighbourhoods. But the reader will wonder what value is added by using such categorization and by discussing the different uses of resilience in recent years as if the inclusion of more fashionable concepts will improve the sophistication of the analysis.

Chapters 5 to 8 use the eight case studies to test the conceptual framework. The neighbourhoods of these cases are *Bushwick* in Brooklyn and *South Bronx (Mott Haven and Melrose)* in New York and *Nou Barris Nord* and *Sants* in Barcelona. From the *Bushwick* cases we learn about Latino community groups that organize responses to gentrification by helping illegal migrants to organize collectively and defend their small business. They also train young people involved in community gardens among other collective activities. In such cases leadership is learned through practice with the help of professional organizers or active middle-class, young new-comers to the neighbourhood. Achievements are commercial rent controls and the empowering capacity created in the specific struggles. The *South Bronx* cases are somewhat different: one organization, created in the 1990s with a consolidated network of residents, churches and other organizations, has reframed the discourse at the same time that it sought pragmatic solutions to the housing problems of disadvantaged residents. The other case shows a horizontal network of activists and community-based organizations inspired by Occupy Wall Street, in which different actors cooperate for a common purpose in the area of housing. In Barcelona, *Nou Barris North (Torre Baró, Ciutat Meridiana and Vallbona)* are considered highly vulnerable neighbourhoods with high levels of unemployment and social exclusion. One community organization has traditional professionalized leadership whereas the other exhibits a horizontal community-built organization. Both organizations try to attract public funds to deal with the serious effects of the crisis. The authors see no innate civic capacity in this part of the city. In contrast to this, the two cases portrayed in *Sants*, a neighbourhood of mixed social class, are presented as examples of social innovation through civic engagement. One is a successful cooperative of anarchist origin. The other is the internationally

known horizontally organized Platform for Mortgage Affected People (PAH), which happens to have its central office in the neighbourhood although it is widely present in the city. In *Sans* the authors see civic capacity associated with a resilient neighbourhood.

The concluding chapter offers a good comparison of the eight cases underlining that social change in innovative community practices requires new forms of relationships between citizens and new ways to connect. The authors see middle class leadership as highly important for the empowerment of disadvantaged groups. This seems somewhat doubtful given the historical record of civic engagement demonstrated in cities all over the world with working-class leadership. The book does bring a refreshing analytical and empirical comparative reading of social innovation giving priority to agency over issues. What I find less convincing is the reductionist understanding of the complex concept of social change which seems to emerge when actors involved in civic engagement purposely desire it. The accounts of community action described in the book do not explain the extent to which social relations are transformed or life chances modified; neither do they show potential institutional transformation. There is no evidence, on the whole, that empowerment of socially excluded groups at the small scale of these case studies automatically produces social change in the two cities. The exception is the PAH movement, which was and is city and country wide and far transcended the neighbourhood level.

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