RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Lucia D'Ambrosi, Assistant Prof.
University of Macerata, Italy

Abstract

The modalities that active citizenship finds to act (in social, environmental, cultural contexts, etc.), developed in the last few years in Europe, with or without the institutional support, have represented an important resource for the growth and safeguard of common goods. The territory is the place where individual and community's needs and rights emerge and they can only be satisfied when citizens participate to public life adopting new modalities. However, active citizenship does not always acquire those features that make it formally recognized as an association with a specific role within the public area. Sometimes, it rather appears as an extemporary mobilization that fades away as soon as the strong call becomes weaker; sometimes, also, it happens to pursue different purposes related to specific pressing urges. This paper will analyze the various forms of active citizenship (from voluntary associations to civic organizations up to defining real collective mobilizations), examining its modalities of intervention and the level of involvement in public policies. Such forms of activism open interesting questions for a survey concerning the capability that citizens have in creating social capitals and in cooperating for the safeguard of the general interest.

Keywords: Civic participation, participatory democracy,common goods, public communication

Introduction

The great economical and social matters that characterize the current European scenery, such as the inefficient supply of public utility services, the jobs precariousness, outstanding new social problems, have weakened the role of local and central Institutions. The welfare state default and the consequent loss of confidence in political-institutional actions stimulates citizens, individually or associated, in taking care of public policies and playing an active role in the government choices.

Individuals are a precious resource not only for their legacy of knowledge and social capital but also for their capability to co-administer public policies through real actions on the territory. Listening to citizens and involving them into policies of readjustment and redevelopment of the territory is an opportunity that Institutions should consider in order to assure them more comfortable conditions. As Sen reminds us (1993), well being is not only given by services that the State supplies, but it also depends on the ability that individuals have to convert the satisfaction of real needs into a better quality of life[11]. In this sense, capabilities should be meant as a whole of relational resources that every person has at his disposal, altogether with the ability to use them and therefore employ them operatively. Such an approach becomes functional if it promotes an active role of the subject in a social context and it puts in evidence his actions for the overall development of the community (Sen 1993; Nussbaum 2002).

Therefore, it should be an active and engaged citizenship whose capabilities are mainly addressed to solve problems, create common grounds and act individually and collectively for the general interest.

Dalgren, with regard to this, talks about civic agency to identify a constructive and achieved citizenship, engaged in public contexts (2009). However, there should be a social and cultural context ready to receive such a civic agency in order to allow it to act and develop. In fact, it is not just a matter of promoting citizens' participation, but of planning a new model of democratization of the relationships between public authorities and citizens, within a system of governance. It should be a different typology of administration leading individuals to achieve consciously their potential and develop it for the benefit of the community.

In the last few years, in Europe, several experiences of active citizenship have been started. Many of these initiatives have gained wide spaces of intervention in various environments of civil contexts, till they appropriate competences and professionalisms which used to belong exclusively to public organizations, until ten years ago. And all this is based on personal initiatives, abnegation, a strong civic sense, attempting at a social transformation founded on the general interest. However, such initiatives are not always for the best of the community: in fact, they rather risk to follow a perspective of particularism and protestation while realizing projects and actions of public policies.

Therefore, we should wonder which interventions of civic activism could be considered as strictly active civicness. Which characteristics and

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11 Sen (1993, p.30) states that the expression capability "was picked to represent the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be – the various 'functionings' he or she can achieve".

main modalities does it show? Which are its main dynamics of participation developed in synergy with the Institutions?

Starting from such questions, this paper aims at considering the different forms of expressions of an active citizenship related to its participative peculiarities and to its level of cooperation/collaboration with Institutions and others stakeholders. The purpose is to draw a wide and complex mapping of its several ambits of intervention for the general interest.

Active citizenship, Institutions and civic capability

The concept of active citizenship could be included more generally in a context of civic engagement, that is those individual and collective actions aimed to identify and address issues of public concern (APA, 2012). Active citizens are people who have an important role within the community, where they promote a social cohesion and pursue a general interest. Their actions have as a purpose "to mobilize resources and to exercise powers for the protection of rights in the arena of public policies, to achieve the end of caring and developing common goods" (Moro, 1999, p.3.).

As a peculiarity, they have powers and responsibilities conferred by the government and by the community itself. More specifically, powers refer to the capability to influence the course of things and people's behaviours; responsibilities regard active and conscious involvement in assuming and exerting government policies.

As reminded by Hoskins (2009, p.5), "although active citizenship is specified on the individual level in terms of actions and values, the emphasis in this concept is not on the benefit to the individual but on what these individual actions and values contribute to the wider society in terms of ensuring the continuation of democracy, good governance and social cohesion".

There are three main features that active citizens have in common: safeguard of the rights to satisfy individual and community's needs for the general interest; empowerment meant as acquisition of competences through which people, organizations and communities can change their social and political environment; care of the common goods according to a shared management so that everybody can participate to decisions related to the use and fruition of such goods.

Common goods (commons) can be considered as Ostrom (2009, p. 30) defines them: "a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use". They are not, therefore, subdued to the property of the Institutions; in addition, they are safeguarded

by the community, through the application of laws and self-regulation sanctions useful to pledge their correct management (*Ibidem*).

Finally, goods should not be seen only for their material consistence, but also as elements related to social groups who produce or manage them. Thus, commons are, in Olstrom's opinion, systems of rules disciplining collective actions. What is put in common is not simply a good or a resource but a kind of social acting. This is why the preservation of a good implies an awareness in social interactions who are charged of its collective maintenance and management.

Institutional support becomes crucial in managing commons if such management aims at developing inclusive policies, promoting participation, defining tools of accountability. Inclusiveness concerns the capability that Institutions have to stimulate and encourage citizens into the different steps of the decisional process: setting the agenda, planning, deciding, implementing, evaluating. Participation can be defined as a process where citizens influence institutional policies in civil society, community and/or political life. Participation is "characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy" (Hoskins *et al.*, 2006, p.6); it appears with different ranges of autonomy, in sectorial public contexts, ruled by norms and provisions that bind its progress. Finally, accountability can be defined as the capability that Institutions have to give account to citizens of their work in a responsible and transparent way, by sharing decisions on public matters.

These three elements are strictly related one to the other. An inclusive process of policy making strengthens the government's accountability, increases the citizens' influence on decisions and builds civic capability (OECD, 2009). At the same time, it offers the community autonomous systems of problem solving, addressing citizens' actions towards more structured and organized forms of active citizenship.

Organized forms of active citizenship

Organized forms that active citizenship chooses can be grouped basically in four main types: voluntary associations[12], civic organizations, local groups and committees, movements of collective action. They have different juridical statuses and a more or less formal structure according to the level of roles, rules and functions that characterize them. The range goes from more complex participative processes which are socially recognized, where Institutions formally "give place" to active citizens (top-down), to

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[12] Here are included non-profit-making associations,legally recognized,whose purposes are services of public utility or of solidarity in different contexts (voluntary associations, foundations, social cooperative societies, organizationsfor international cooperation, etc).

cooperative experiences, up to initiatives promoted autonomously (bottom-up).

Such various forms of active citizenship move from a basic level of collaboration, whose aim is collecting information about Public Administration's governance and ratifying their consent on projects already approved, up to more complex levels, which range from consultation and listening to collaboration and active involvement. At the highest level we find the most important participative processes, managed autonomously and responsibly by the citizenship (see table 1). The benefits brought to the community by such associations are different as well; they mainly tend to mobilize civic society and to promote the citizen's voice.

Voluntary associations and international organizations of cooperation have a mainly formal non-profit profile and a high level of inward stability. Their actions reach, in a civic and social context, needy people and also encourage a better relationship between them and public services. Such subjects tend to a structured participative model, mainly top-down: they promote autonomously initiatives, previously agreed with the Institutions (for instance support or supply of new services), and they assume managerial responsibilities. Their main purpose is creating a net of civic and social solidarity, aiming at stimulating and strengthening the resources that reference individuals and associations have.

Civic organizations can be considered inclusive structured forms of active citizenship, for they are ruled by the highest level of formalized procedures. Participative modalities develop at a cooperative extent through collaborating relationships and active involvement with the Institutions. The members of such organizations are required to join planning tables and actuate public policies (for instance integrated policies, participated budget, area plans, program agreements), debating on topics of civic and social interest. Their main function is supporting the civic agency, that is "the capacity of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively on common problems across their differences of view" (Boyte, 2007, p.1).

Local groups and committees are associations solidly rooted in social contexts: they start from the bottom to pursue an initiative or a task of public interest through the citizen's voice[13]. Their organization is at a lower formal level, generally temporary, and has a participative approach based on consultation/listening, with particular reference to choices that Institutions are about to accomplish (for instance, through neighbourhoods committees).

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[13]Such a term is used to refer to the action done by local groups or committees: they help to make the citizens' voices heard and encourage people's active participation in the political process.

However, these occasions are not always a positive confrontation and they risk to become critical and protesting mobilizations, having particularistic and contrasting purposes, borderline with legality (for instance when these associations complain by blocking roads and railways, damaging users). Such a situation also includes urgent matters connected to the liveability of one's territory, environmental conditions; but these citizens' will does not always match with public interest and with other people's rights.

Table 1. Organizational forms of active citizenship

	Organizational structure	Direction of the participation	Level of involvement in public policies	Kind of participation	Benefits
Voluntary associations/ Organizations of international cooperation	Formal	Top down	Autonomy/ Responsibility	Structured participation	Social inclusion
Civic organizations	Formal	Bidirectional/Cooperative	Collaboration/ Active involvement	Inclusive participation	Civic agency
Local groups and committees	Not Formal	Bottom up	Consultation/ Listening	Critical and protesting participatio	Citizen's Voice
Movements of collective action	Not Formal	Bottom up	Information/ Communication	Open participation	Talkative Society

Movements of collective action are spontaneous mobilizations, with an informal organization, tending to promote and encourage a talkative society, mainly using the Net[14]. Their purpose is to sensitize public opinion about the management of sectorial policies, giving people the chance to participate and to express their point of view (for instance, through petitions or forum of discussion). Their involvement into public policies is quite low, for they basically aim at informing and communicating relationships that consolidate out of institutional offices and within social media areas. New technologies give a greater visibility to such mobilizations; they have a participative asset more open and available to receive any person potentially interested.

Either committees and movements of collective action can evolve into more structured participative forms and legally recognized. This happens when the cooperation with the Institutions moves towards a kind of inclusive participation which legitimates the role of active citizens and grants them new powers and responsibilities.

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[14] Dalgren (2002, p. 6) uses this definition in positive terms, affirming that "talk among citizens is seen as fundamental to – and an expression of- their partecipation". It is functionally vital for democracy.

Conclusion

The survey here exposed insisted on the different organizational forms of active citizenship: voluntary associations, civic organizations, local groups and committees, movements of collective action. Such participative expressions are characterized by the gratuity of their action for the social interest and the safeguard and protection of commons.

Some of these subjects do not necessarily adopt configurations of membership or organization, even though they are often characterized by the exertion of some forms of power and by the capability to influence institutional subjects and decisional processes. Such a power can be conferred legally or improperly given. In the first situation, the level of activism is determined according to a gradual scale that goes from the acquisition of information and request of transparency of the bureaucratic paths to consultation and full participation to deliberative processes up to the actuation of procedures and tools legally conferred to citizens by Public Administration.

In case of improper attribution, active citizenship may show a perverted management of the social participation, aiming at particularistic interests (like, for instance, the "NYMBY" effect, "Not In My Backyard") and choosing exasperated modalities of mobilization. Such citizens struggle through illegal ways that risk to violate other people's rights (blocking the roads and barring the railways); by so doing, they force the Institutions to have a fighting reaction. Such a risk becomes stronger when these actions have a strong connection with the territory and are influenced by the political geography of the institutional local government. According to ideological tendencies of active citizens, there can be either actions of cooperation or of frontal contraposition with the political referent of the institution.

Another important element concerns the capability that active citizens have to promote nets of relationships and to generate social capital. Putman (1993, p. 196) refers social capital "to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions". By developing and reinforcing social links, individuals can become bearers of social and political responsibilities, they cultivate "civic virtues" such as tolerance and solidarity, and they establish norms of trust and reciprocal support, offering their own capital and receiving a baggage of experiences (*Ibidem*).

The data of this survey do not allow to put in evidence which organizational forms are more functional to the production of social capital. Indeed interventions of active citizenship with a greater adherence on the territory are able to feed very strong moments of aggregation, which become solid and positive if there are well defined and inclusive organizational forms. On the contrary, groups and movements that lack of an outlined

structure and ownership tend to develop a strong inner cohesion with a tendency to exclusivity and conflict (D'Ambrosi, Massoli, 2012).

In such a scenery, important appears to be the role played by the action of communication meant as the capability to "interconnect and aggregate different subjects in the name of motions/requests and values perceived as common" (Morcellini, Mazza, 2008, p.11). That is not only to benefit the processes of social reassembling, but also for the development of a greater civic sense. Being active for the common good, in fact, is a choice that should derive from a sharing of relationships and processes of intervention in their various forms and dimensions. Communication seems fruitful in solving possible conflicts, as well as in strengthening reciprocal trust between Institutions and citizens.

We should wonder, then, how much communication influences the growth of social capital; which social relational and participative models are the most functional to the development of a civic culture and to the reinforcement of civic citizenship. These are the main questions the scientific debate nowadays tends to, to respond to the effective mobilization of social relationships that spur towards civic engagement and cooperation on common goods. There is an urge to read the creation and the development of social capital in the light of important relationships that contribute to build the "active" identity of an individual.

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