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Tommaso Vitale

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Olinda, Milan: social innovation between strategy and organisational learning

Tommaso Vitale

Introduction

Olinda is both a voluntary association and a social co-operative that was created with the aim of transforming a large, enclosed psychiatric hospital (PH) in the northern suburbs of Milan into a more open and therapeutic environment for patients as well as for ordinary citizens of the whole metropolitan area.¹

The history of *Olinda* can be divided into three stages. In the first, a group of trainers was able to develop practices of vocational training focusing not on patients' weaknesses but on their capabilities, in an effort to 'co-produce' mental health. In 1995 the group created the *Olinda Association* in order to mobilise more human resources for the vocational training of inpatients. In the second stage, starting in 1996, *Olinda* organised a big summer festival (with music, sports, theatre, etc.) which included many third sector groups and involved several different local authorities. During the first festival, thousands of ordinary citizens entered the hospital for the first time; the hospital space became a stimulus for collective action and part of the wall around the hospital grounds was symbolically removed. The festival legitimised *Olinda's* therapeutical innovations and enabled the first large debate about the continued existence of the psychiatric hospital, otherwise bound to be closed under a national law. In the third stage, *Olinda* started a social enterprise, in an effort to combine services for the city with services for mental health: multifarious activities were set up in the buildings of the former hospital – a restaurant, a carpenters' workshop, a bar and a hostel – which are still functioning, together with the annual summer festival.

Olinda used conflicts from both within and outside the organisation in order to advance public discourse and to raise visibility with regard to their decisions and actions. This case demonstrates (1) the role of outsiders in introducing new ideas, skills and social capital and, especially, how the bringing together of different types of people can generate new insights, developments, possibilities; (2) how much sociability and cultural productions/events really are a turning point in building a shared interest in innovative action; (3) the relevance of the effort to give legitimacy and dignity to those who were

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previously outcasts; and (4) the importance of involving the public administration and creating innovative institutional arrangements.

Olinda is the story of a reflexive organisation which does not run away from contradictions. It tries to transform its experimental practices in the mental health field into a broader social innovation, while at the same time fighting against social exclusion.

Innovation within the psychiatric hospital

To understand the main dynamics of innovation at the beginning of *Olinda's* story, it should be remembered that a PH is a place that renders its inmates powerless and increases their chronic dependence upon the institution (Goffman, 1961). It is also a place that gathers in those refused or abandoned by other social assistance institutions: those who are believed to be intractable, chronic cases, those with accumulated problems. The PH is an institutional device, which reproduces its self-justification by making itself indispensable. Against this backdrop, *Olinda's* path was not an easy one, due both to institutional difficulties connected to the deinstitutionalisation of the PH and to relationships with the surrounding neighbourhood.

The first innovations in the Milan PH coincided with the arrival of a psychiatrist from Rome with previous experience in vocational training for people with mental problems and involved in the network of the Italian renewal of psychiatric practices, the so-called 'deinstitutionalisation' movement. He brought his own skills, experiences and network relations. He had the legitimisation needed to propose innovative activities and his arrival simultaneously permitted (a) the constitution of a new team interested in the exploration of new therapeutic practices, notably linked to vocational training, and (b) the definition of the situation of the PH as problematic, thus opening a phase of observation and study on how change could be achieved within the institution. These two dynamics jointly produced a process of 'intéressement' (Callon, 1986), meaning that the actors defined each other's roles. The external leader and his first team, acting as innovating actors, contributed to the redefinition of the actors they tried to include in their policy network, as well as the intervention of those they wanted to exclude. An alliance was formed with some of the PH's doctors and social workers, some private entrepreneurs, a few university professors, as well as some people in the artistic business community. It was not a big network, but its boundaries were completely different from those of the traditional Milan advocacy coalition network involved in mental illness policies and services.

Olinda began empowering people in the circuit of social assistance, transforming them from passive beneficiaries into actors. *Olinda's* work within the walls of the former PH consisted of the transformation of services that 'respond to a need' into services as 'processes of capability building'. In addition, the production of such services adopted an approach of 'doing with' rather than 'doing for', in order to make possible the valorisation of the personal

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competence of the former inpatients. In this sense, rather than recognising needs, *Olinda* recognised rights and specifically a particular type of right: the right to exercise capabilities (Sen, 1992), namely, the capability of work and the capability of finding a voice (Dean *et al.*, 2005). For those deprived of the status of actors, stripped of subjectivity and a presence on the economic, political and even social scene, no organised agency existed; *Olinda* treated them as a resource to be supported.

Innovation without: involving outside interests

The main problem of the first phase was the perception of *Olinda* as a 'critical situation', namely a situation where people, while acting, had to justify the reasons, means and goals of their practices. In other words, *Olinda* practices were so innovative that they created problems of legitimisation.

Enhancing the degree of legitimation of a practice requires a justification, but the criteria for legitimating such innovative actions had not yet been established. Thus, *Olinda* had to cope with problems of coordination with the other actors in the PH, trying to set up evaluation criteria. It tried to do so by connecting its practices with the experiences made in Gorizia, Trieste and other PHs involved in the 'Basaglia movement' (Basaglia, 1987). But this quasi-legitimacy was weak and disputed – as in every innovation/exploration, which has not yet gained a high degree of acceptance. In the second phase, *Olinda* departed from the narrowness of therapeutic codes (and disputes), implementing a 'generalization process' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) – a process able to build a higher level of generality, thus widening publicity for its activities. This was indeed the main outcome of the Summer Festival organised by *Olinda* in 1996.

Few actors were involved in the first stage. Organising the festival was a test to mobilise, and in some way also represent, a larger population of actors. Because of the separateness of the PH and the narrowness of the former policy network, there was no common interest that could involve citizens in discussion about the PH. There were no social actions and transactions that could generate externalities and consequences for the population outside the PH. Without any perceived externality to create an interest and act as a mobilising force to exercise control over the action, no issue can emerge that may come to be regarded as a legitimate right (Coleman, 1987). It is a situation with no social capital, a system of 'each for himself', where no conditions exist for a collective action (ibid., 1987: 153).

In a situation with no spontaneous common interest, no moral shock (Jaspers, 1997), nor shared indignation to kickstart any action, *Olinda* launched a process of 'intéressement', (Callon, 1986), that is, a process of involving and combining interests in order to establish a durable relationship with new partners and establish common ground. Initially, the gratuitous character of the idea of realising a festival, without any instrumental reasons, attracted participants: a festival, nothing more than a festival. The informal and horizontal

character of the operational meetings was very important to the inclusion of all types of participants, and also to the enactment of innovative ideas.

The process of involving different interests was realised through practices of participation in which different actors learned to trust and work with one another and to act collectively for common ends (see the introduction to this volume by Moulaert *et al.*). Three main rules were established, with the aim of ensuring that everyone could propose activities for the festival, but had to find someone else to work with in partnership on the proposal: (1) 'never alone'; (2) 'never with the usual partners' (so that all initiatives were implemented through new partnerships); (3) 'be interactive' (not only co-production among the existing organisers, but also with future participants). These rules were chosen not only in accordance with *Olinda's* aims and values, but also for strategic reasons: they were incentives for the mobilisation of participants. More precisely, they were the only kinds of incentive that *Olinda* could offer to spur on a mobilisation.

In fact, because of the high level of difference in the political cultures of the participants, *Olinda* could not use norms and shared values –the typical incentives of clans and communities (Ouchi, 1980). Neither could it use an incentive system based on cost–benefit calculations or on the maximisation of actors' utility, because of its lack of resources. In this phase, *Olinda* was unable to provide even expressive benefits (prestige, sense of belonging, recognition, etc.) coming from its own internal organisation. Thus, the main mechanism supporting participation was the construction of partnerships, implementing a model based first on membership–building through trust and reciprocity and then on purposive benefits (Clark and Wilson, 1961: 129–30). We can talk of 'trust through tests of co-operation' – creating a system of interdependence among a variety of groups, organisations and individuals, without any sharing of a strong collective identity.

The collective actors involved were rather heterogeneous: there were big corporations and small NGOs, professionals and political groups, and also many individuals with no affiliation, with a good balance between old and young participants, and between women and men. We lack precise data on the socio-economic status of individual actors, but we can say that they belonged to different political cultures (Catholics, extreme left-wing, social-democrats and greens). This means that they had different grammars of engagement and very different evaluation criteria, both factors that most of the time prevent the coordination of collective action. The participation of professionals from cultural fields was very important as they played the role of brokers (Diani, 2003), linking previously unconnected social sites and opening up the network outside the narrow policy sector. We believe this individual participation was possible precisely because of 'tests of coordination' as we have called them, which provided not only trust resources but also paths for participation.

Within the larger network, there was also the legitimate membership of groups of compulsory psychiatric inpatients who were usually considered a threat to the social order. The festival offered opportunity for voices to be

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heard and deliberation to occur, the making of what Nancy Fraser (1997: 81) has termed 'counter-publics', defined as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs'. During the festival, the former inpatients in particular produced these counter-discourses through a combination of actions and discussions. It also provided a way to develop solidarity, political consciousness and organisational infrastructures, that is, not only social capital but also collective consciousness (Mayer, 2003: 119).

In the policy process, before the first festival, the deinstitutionalisation of the PH was a non-agenda item. In fact, it was cast in the traditional practice of secrecy and invisibility, in which the PH concealed its activities. In contrast, during the festival itself the PH was represented not as the symbolic core of social exclusion but as a place of resources, a potential cultural pole in the suburbs, a workshop full of projects designed with (and not for) the 'guests' of the PH, and for the whole town. All the cultural activities of the festival were effective means of conveying information about the PH to officials, supporting the urgency of its dismantling, and highlighting its perverse effects. With the festival *Olinda* established an open involvement context, by which the public as a whole, and not only people implicated in the former policy network of mental health services, was the potential target of the mobilisation effort. This process opened up the possibility of public debate on the quality of psychiatric services in Milan and reduced the space for opportunistic, routine action of the health authorities and their governing boards. By imagining an alternative use for the premises of the PH, by opening it as the venue for a festival and bringing in thousands of citizens, the real possibility arose of conceiving both the space and the care offered there from a different point of view, of 'dismantling' the mental hospital in order to create something else.

The fact that the space of the PH was accessible to the public was very important because this permitted its recognition as a stake, as a public good, as an object in need of regulation and governance. There were some conflicts with other NGOs: on the one hand, a radical anti-psychiatric movement contested *Olinda's* strategy as too moderate and as practising internal censorship in order to retain public support; on the other hand, two clubs affiliated to a large nationwide association (ACLI and ARCI), and traditionally working within the PH, fought against the innovations promoted by *Olinda*, notably even suggesting to local authorities the dangerousness of the festival for the patients. But the festival proved that it was not an egoistic mobilisation for the sole defence of particularistic interests (e.g. those of the professionals of the mental health sector).

The closing of the PH was finally obtained in 2000, 22 years after the Basaglia Law. This certainly did not occur just because of the mobilisation described earlier. In the mid 1990s there had been a broader nationwide process aimed at the rapid phasing out of the PH system. What was really important in the case of the *Olinda* festival was the introduction of a strong discontinuity into

the mainstream policy process. With thousands of people involved within the PH, things could not be taken for granted, and the overall normative foundation of the PH was challenged. This opened a stage of 'epistemic choice' (Ostrom and Ostrom, 2004: 133), where actors discussed criteria and vocabularies for analysing and assessing, and in this way discovered new possibilities. The festival provided the conditions for raising some controversies about shutting the PH and, most of all, about different projects for the use of the PH premises. This happened thanks also to the attention of local mass media, to the diffusion of a booklet advertising the festival, but also to the presence within the PH of thousands of people, who could walk, ask and talk with the inpatients and the workers of the PH itself. In particular, the presence of such quantities of people within the boundary of the PH obliged the entire policy network to produce justifications that were valid 'in all generality' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999) to support their policy programme for shutting the PH. Moreover, starting with the health authorities, every policy actor was asked to make a declaration about how to cope with people still living in the PH.

Before the above mobilisation, the PH was ignored and perceived just as a source of trouble in the neighbourhood. But the legitimisation of the claim permitted a larger public to assess the trouble as a complex problem and to 'concatenate' (link together) in a public grammar (a) issues of mental health with (b) issues of quality of life and public responsibilities of the administration. Thus, *Olinda* played a mediation role in the generalisation process (Boltanski, 1999) of the PH issue, producing a new advocacy coalition with very heterogeneous actors that pushed forward out of the impasse and the closeness of the former policy network.

The networking and the involvement of diverse interests were not able to change the existing solid basis of power relations or to gain strong control over the policy process, but they permitted the emergence of a public discourse, the recognition of a sense of possibility in dealing with mental health problems and legitimating new practices and claims. They permitted the definition of the PH as a visible issue, a public problem of general interest for the whole Milan metropolitan area.

Beyond strategies: contradictions and organisational learning in a social enterprise

Olinda used visibility as both an instrument and a strategy. This does not mean that *Olinda* was always a strategic collective actor, capable of long-term planning on how to reach its goals, and rationally calculating costs and benefits. During the third stage, *Olinda* started playing games of which it did not know the rules beforehand, exploring scattered opportunities in an adaptive way, playing just to learn the rules. In fact, *Olinda* was challenged by many political and moral contradictions and dilemmas in its practices, without having any criteria to assess and prioritise them (Boltanski, 2002). Thus, *Olinda* is still keeping up its activities in respect of its institutional mandate and the pursuit of its social

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goals – changing the PH culture, taking care of inpatients and enhancing their working skills – trying to translate fundamental dilemmas in pragmatic tensions and compromises. In our view it was precisely the capability of continuing to work on both poles of the contradiction that permitted the most important process of social innovation carried out by *Olinda* – the transformation of a specialist innovation into a broader social innovation. Thus, we will argue that what characterised *Olinda* in the third stage was its resilience and learning capability.

After the first festival, *Olinda* continued working to develop ways of integrating various interests and networks within collective strategies and a weak but long-term mobilisation. But the problem of building issues of general interest remained, given its anchorage in a specific policy sector. Thus, *Olinda* continued the strategy of combining specific interests and generalisation processes, not only organising a summer festival each year, following the path designed in the first one, but also combining economic and social objectives within it, that is, using the premises of the former PH as a site both for the production of specific services and as a public space for cultural events and socialising opportunities, with strong emphasis on strategic communication. On the one hand, the criteria for economic success were pursued with great attention to business management for economic consolidation and expansion; on the other hand, the criteria for social success were pursued with particular attention to the social quality of the care activities. This way, economic activities and market tests constituted a crucial base for the autonomy of mentally ill people.

Tensions as resources

These were good strategies, but although necessary, they were still insufficient to sustain social innovation (Bifulco and Vitale, 2006). Organisational factors, such as ‘reflexivity’ and resilience, learning and adaptation were also needed. Ultimately, we will argue that *Olinda* is an example of innovation achieved through conflict and challenge, which succeeded in transforming episodes of conflict (notably with the local authorities, with the neighbourhood and with other non-profit organisations) into opportunities for public debate and collective learning and – at the same time – for organisational learning and resilience.

A few examples will illustrate the point. *Olinda*’s initiatives had established a right to use the public space of the former PH. This had led to a social demand driven by youth and families with children to find places for self-expression and self-organisation in the former PH spaces. There was also a political dimension to this process, as the spaces of the former PH became a resource for collective action (Gieryn, 2000: 478–79), occasionally promoting initiatives with a political connotation (against war, for solidarity with immigrants, against certain national government policies, and the like). In the previous stage it was the expressive dimension, strictly linked to membership and involvement in the practical activities, which provided the reasons for participation; in this new

stage, we believe that normative incentives played a greater role. It was involvement in big issues (most of them defined in terms of the common good), which permitted partnerships with many different NGOs in Milan, and the mobilisation of people on more or less every value-based collective issue of contentious politics: the environment, world peace, third world development, anti-poverty, anti-racism, anti-GM/pro-organic food, pro animal rights, pro asylum seekers. It also supported different interest-based collective demonstrations, such as protest against the decline in quality of health services, initiatives to maintain the community character of the neighbourhood and to improve its quality of life, and other urban struggles. Recently, it also operated as a basis for improvements in alternative lifestyles and organisations (e.g. fair trade business and LETS schemes). However, alongside these occasional initiatives, *Olinda* continued to foster acknowledgement of the political and public nature of the work done in terms of social services and the issues dealt with by them. The culture of its organisation remains based on the opposition to traditional mental health services and on the effort to continue collaboration with mentally ill people (voice, no exit).

All of these features led *Olinda* to be almost constantly involved in organisational dilemmas. The multilevel action taken by *Olinda* was always marked by the constant tension between institutional co-operation and co-operation with left-wing grass-roots movements. This tension was used as an opportunity for learning and for broadening *Olinda's* options. On the other hand, over the past few years, relationships with the local council have become rarer, since the latter does not seem to value *Olinda's* work and criticises it for being excessively leftist. Certain indifference has also developed within the Milan Municipality, which has changed its social policies towards cancelling all projects involving public-private partnership and, in our specific case, limiting the occasions for exchange and co-operation with *Olinda*. This municipal pull-out significantly reduced the opportunity for *Olinda's* initiatives to contribute towards a public discourse.

The results of all these different kinds of conflicts and issues have created many dilemmas for *Olinda*. In analytical terms we could argue that in order to fight social exclusion, *Olinda* has attempted to create connections between opposites (de Leonardis, 2001), endeavouring to make practical connections between: a) the individual experience and subjectivity of those suffering exclusion (the specific nature of individual cases), on the one hand, and the shared quality of urban life, on the other; b) the need for help and assistance and for the provision of welfare, on the one hand, and the need for investment, both financial and in terms of creative energy, in the economic field of production, on the other; c) the specific nature of the neighbourhoods adjoining the psychiatric hospital and the resources distributed in the metropolitan area; (d) the consensus towards institutional projects (as condition for engagements in partnerships) and disagreement and conflict (disengagement as a condition for criticising, denunciations and other political activities); (e) the grammar of care and the grammar of mobilisation. What is really interesting is the way in which

Olinda during these years was able to translate these dilemmas into dialectic tensions and then to find compromises with some temporary arrangements.

Notably, *Olinda* managed to define some new conventions (devices/rules), to build up stable and predictable routines of commitment (in its voluntary activities but also in its spring and summer cultural events). These 'devices' are ties that bind production and care, grand mobilisations and daily activities. They are organisational choices, which show the learning capability of *Olinda*. The tensions between different practical constraints are at the same time precious resources for the resilience of this organisation. The pursuit of temporary compromises that allow tensions to be overcome is at the heart of its functioning, of its organisational learning and then of its strategic action.

Organisational choices

It is useful to dwell briefly on the main organisational choices that have sustained *Olinda's* 'reflexivity' and learning capabilities. First of all, *Olinda* has chosen to keep itself small and not to open branches in other cities. This small operational scale arose from the choice to set up and nourish the construction of the enterprise starting out from the individual operators and former users. Second, the organisation is characterised by extreme independence of management and decision-making in each service sector and, at the same time, by a strong sense of belonging and sharing of collective identity: the tension between belonging to *Olinda* as a whole and to a specific sector seems to generate learning and not fracture. Third, the presence of an 'association' alongside the co-operative represents: (a) a way of circulating ideas, sharing problems and successes and re-elaborating a shared identity and mission within the organisation itself; (b) a means of raising visibility and communicating with the different contexts where action is taken, as well as a tool for cultural exchange and attracting resources, within the broader environment; (c) a solution that makes it possible to keep the links between entrepreneurial objectives and social aims open and alive.

Another feature that characterises *Olinda* is the style of planning. *Olinda* is organised 'by projects'. The social responses to conditions of hardship are structured as projects to be implemented, rather than a formal structure for the provision of services. This style of planning (1) favours gradual processes, open to ongoing correction and modification and (2) attracts resources from outside the organisation, while creating arenas for involving and making the most of each contribution to the projects (both in financial terms and in terms of voluntary work).

What is clear in the *Olinda* case is the considerable circulation of cognitive resources and knowledge within the organisation. Crucial to the process is the strong emphasis on learning and on reflexivity, but also the ability to involve and combine human resources coming from spheres traditionally far removed from that of social assistance, that is, from the fashion, design, art and entertainment domains. Therefore, *Olinda* is a learning organisation, always

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giving particular attention to what is feasible, with a high degree of reflexivity: it learns from its strategies and from its contradictions, and is resilient not only due to the presence of a leader but also to internal institutional arrangements, notably the distinction between the association and the co-operative and the connections with the university and networks of similar organisations. During these years it has been able to recognise what could help manage the tensions and it is still learning how to combine better the rhythms of each worker with the market constraints.

Cultural activities for wider networking

The case of *Olinda* clearly shows the different meanings of social innovation in terms of changing social relations. *Olinda's* initiatives have legitimised new practices and claims, because they pushed forward the recognition of people with mental and social problems as active citizens. This happened thanks to the daily work with the disadvantaged, but also because of the continuous action geared to changing the public discourse, to defining new issues and to pushing forward inclusive solutions in the locality, in the media and in the political agenda of local administrations. Moreover, *Olinda* has been able to promote inter-organisational change, multiplying resources, inventing and implementing new modes of articulated co-operation between public health agencies and the non-profit sector. Over the years, *Olinda* has succeeded in activating, extending and coordinating a diverse set of people, exchanges, actions, communication and conflicts surrounding the production, the recognition and the use of the premises of a former PH as a public area, open to all citizens and accessible to, and by, them.

Olinda created opportunities for social innovation by the strategic choice of combining economic and social objectives. It set in motion processes of collective learning that have increased its social capital, tapping into the wealth of knowledge and practical experience of professionals outside the circuit of assistance and also making the most of contributions from a number of university teachers, as well as those from the artistic, design and fashion worlds. At the same time it has enacted, coordinated and put into circulation the hidden and non-conventional resources of the former PH, that is, the former inmates themselves who learned new skills and started using them in outside activities. It has created a more intense sociability, giving rise to joint projects and economic exchange, enacting spaces and networks of relationships at a metropolitan level first and then at a neighbourhood level. It has contributed to the opening of the former PH as a public urban park and created new connections between formerly separate actors, thanks to its capability in coordinating actors and institutions without ignoring the conflicts, compromises and contradictions.

All these are very relevant social innovations as they affect more than the actors directly involved; the positive externalities also favour social cohesion and changes in social relations beyond the organisation itself. On the other hand,

the processes are weak and reversible, as is often the case with social innovations. During the last year, *Olinda* has been trying to stabilise these innovations, establishing a number of conventions in full acknowledgement of its activities, with the formalisation of lease agreements, a partnership set up in order to obtain public social workers and resources, and the acceptance of new standards of psychiatric care. The latter, which is the real challenge for *Olinda*, is in our opinion the hardest, as it bears on the institutionalisation of a social innovation.

Note

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