Framing Subnational ‘Institutional Innovation’ and ‘Participatory Democracy’ in Italy: Some Findings on Current Structures, Procedures and Dynamics

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1 The Theoretical Frame of Reference

Innovation is crucial to the continuing success of any socio-economic organization and States are no exception. The word ‘innovation’ stems from the Latin word innovāre and is a combination of the prefix in- (that is into) and the verb novāre (from novus, ergo: to renew). The adjective ‘institutional’ derives from the noun ‘institution’ and the suffix ‘-al’, whereas ‘institution’ stems from the Latin word institūtiō. The noun derives from institutus, the past participle of instituere, which means to set, to put up, to establish. Considering the current usage of these terms, the noun ‘innovation’ includes both a dynamic and static dimension as it refers not only to the ‘action or the process of innovating’, but also to ‘new ideas, methods and inventions’. The adjective ‘institutional’ narrows the frame of reference, delimiting the application of the term ‘innovation’ for the purpose of our analysis to trends within subnational interactive governance.1 Here, we consider both reforms of institutions and the

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re-elaboration of established practices or customs in decision-making, bearing in mind the interests of concerned actors (and their relational networks). In other words, institutional innovation as a subject of analysis must take into account both the actors as well as institutionalized tools and procedures. Who attempts to ‘innovate’ the status quo ante by which rules? To what extent is this innovation of a participatory nature – considering the role of the institutional actors themselves (also in relation to the upper governmental level) and the status of the citizens’ position as the sovereign, having the last word?

‘Participation’, as understood in general sociology, is the “share of the individual in the process of social interaction” though this share varies in the individual’s orientation and expectations, being “conditioned socially, situationally, as well as by the personality factor.” The term nowadays carries a new (or better re-newed) evaluative-ideological tinge, vesting citizen(s) – either individually or collectively – with a ‘right to participation’. Such a right can imply participation in the elaboration of decision-making processes, in the execution of decisions, and in the supervision of public policies. The goal is to enhance territorial governance and make the performance of public administrations more effective while pursuing the common good in the interest of all societal segments. In general terms, ‘participation’ in its scientific usage and its adoption for political practices as well as discourses is ambiguous, leading to confusion about demands for and the value of participation.

Our analysis is not about ‘political participation’ in the classical sense, but about new (and perhaps innovative) forms of ‘formal-institutional’ and ‘socio-functional’

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3 K. Opalek, Ibid., at 256. In a perspicacious fashion, the author rightly pointed out that ‘participation’ is both a new problem, specific to the time and context it refers to, and an old and well-known one if considered in general terms.

4 No conceptual-terminological analysis of the term is undertaken for the purpose of the paper. The paper does not stipulate a definition of the various terms used. As a general rule, the paper adopts terminology with regard to analyzed structures, procedures and dynamics as commonly used at the respective government level and in official documents (terms are thus to be considered as self-explanatory), and as widely recognized in scholarship. Translations into English of the terms and citations were done by the authors.

5 Drawing on the differentiation made by M. Bayles, we define formal-institutional participation as procedure or process-oriented (referring to principles as transparency, information, inclusion and accountability, e.g. with regard to administrative acts) and socio-functional participation as result-oriented (referring to principles as co-decision-making, i.e. affecting decisions to be made substantively). M. Bayles, “Participation: An Overvalued, Impractical...