

The Debate in Urban Anthropology and the Development of the Empirical Investigation of Governance

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Abstract

The complexity of our ‘object’ of study, leading to the question ‘what is really the city?’ requires the use of different levels of analyses. At the same time, a way must be found to develop an explanatory model that brings together the knowledge thus produced. The study of governance in the city is necessarily part of any research aimed at investigating empirically the processes regulating the social life. The key implication is to address its impact; a task made particularly complex by the often difficult relationship between the implementation of governance and the interaction with a diversity of societal actors, for the ongoing dialectic between the formal and the informal in urban life. We often find that this dialectic produces ambiguity, unexpected results, gaps between planned objectives, and competition instead of cooperation among actors, pointing to the weakness of the rationalistic model of public action. Perhaps the most important lesson that we have learnt about government and governance is that the delusion that we feel when trying to understand urban policies results from our incapacity fully to grasp the complexity of human life.

Keywords

governance, production of knowledge, complexity, urban life

Who belongs to whom?

Almost by definition, the field of urban studies is interdisciplinary. Anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, and economists are often involved in joint research programmes. The complexity of the ‘object’ – what is really the city? – requires the use of different levels of analyses; at the same time, a way must be found to develop an explanatory model that brings together the knowledge thus produced. Of course, this is not a new issue in the scientific debate. The problem remains, however, of how each disciplinary specialism, in conjunction with the others, can contribute to a better understanding of the changes that occur in the cities,

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particularly in the face of globalization. In theory, this task could appear to be easy, for a new generation of scholars tends to be more open to the idea of crossing the borders between disciplines and of addressing a topic from different perspectives. In practice, there appear to be at least three main problems.

The first problem concerns the inner dogmatism that continues to characterize the single disciplines. The theoretical background and the methods to study the cities often determine different perceptions and images of what they are, could be, or could become. For example, the orthodox approach in economics depicts the city as a managerial or entrepreneurial actor; in the case of sociology, the city becomes a place of vulnerability, uncertainty, risk and so on; to anthropology, the city has been invisible for a long time, as this discipline was traditionally more interested in the community outside the city. How to bring together all these academic visions?

The second problem is linked to the first one. In order to escape from the complexity and from the distinction and differentiation of academic paradigms, a large number of scholars attempt a 'reification' of the city. As Harvey puts it, 'All too frequently the study of urbanization becomes separated from that of social change and economic development, as if it can somehow be regarded either as a side-show or as a passive side-product to more important and fundamental social changes. The successive revolutions in technology, space relations, social relations, consumer habits, lifestyles, and the like that have so characterized capitalist history can, it is sometimes suggested, be understood without any deep enquiry into the roots and nature of urban processes' (1989: 3). The social construction of the city could, instead, be analysed through the combination of the four basic processes – market, political exchange, reciprocity, organization – which mark the regulation of the institutional, economic, and social life. The forms of regulation allow us to explain spatial change and changes in the economic and trade exchanges, in the social structure, and in the process of urbanization.

Empirical research can help to avoid the conceptual determinism that often marks dogmatic and orthodox approaches to the city. Fieldwork helps to understand the social dynamics, logic, and strategies in the interactions among social actors. The empirical perspective means, of course, avoiding the reification of the object of research, as the urban process is seen as an active rather than passive aspect of political and economic development. However, the question of *how* to study the city, and urbanization more generally, remains. The conceptual difficulties are many. If we refuse a rigid approach, then we must address the questions, who decides what is relevant and why? It is not enough to say that in carrying out our fieldwork we can make a spatial delimitation of the object and of the subject of the research, which allows us a better control of hypothesis and outcomes. The instruments that we use in our investigation are one important aspect of how to study the city. There is a vast amount of literature arguing that we need to find a good combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, such as participant observation, case-studies, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires. It could be said that we need to observe the spatially specific social process in which a wide range of different actors with different objectives and agendas interact through *interlocking spatial practices*. As Harvey argues, '[i]n a class-bound society such as capitalism, these spatial practices acquire a definite class content, which is not to say that all spatial practices can be so interpreted. Indeed, as many researchers have shown, spatial practices can and do acquire gender, racial, and bureaucratic-administrative contents (to list just a sub-set of important possibilities). But under capitalism, it is the broad range of class practices connected to the circulation of capital, the reproduction of labour power and class relations and the need to control labour power that remains hegemonic. The difficulty is to find a way of proceeding that can deal specifically with the relation between process and object without itself falling victim to unnecessary reification' (Harvey, 1989: 5).

Nevertheless, I insist, if we can identify a specific configuration to study, why address these interlocking spatial practices? From a theoretical point of view, we need to do so in order to understand the modalities that regulate the social reproduction of the human life. Recently, an urban sociologist, Vicari Haddock, has tried to deal with this argument in a handbook titled *Urban Questions* (2013), where she examines the relevant literature and the way to approach the study of the city. She has identified immigration, poverty, governance, and housing as some of the main questions affecting daily life in the contemporary city. Artefacts – the built form, produced spaces, and resource systems – are important, since so many social processes become physically channelled, even led, by them.

In this line, I find stimulating Pardo and Prato's Introduction to *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory* (2012), a book that reconstructs the recent affirmation of urban anthropology and the difficulties encountered during the attendant process. The authors lay the foundation for a new paradigm. Pardo and Prato write: 'we trust [that] this volume makes a coherent whole that avoids abstract generalities, while engaging in theoretical debate that highlights the complexity, feasibility and importance of ethnographic research in contemporary urban settings against a disciplinary background marked by past misconstrued debate on methodology and field methods in this kind of research' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 3). They also stress that the volume addresses the need to understand urban dynamics empirically, sharing with Vicari Haddock this approach to the urban field. They argue that '[e]conomic relations, negotiations of urban space, the complexities of gender, identity and cultural diversity, the rural–urban relationship, the local–supra-local conundrum and the problematic of citizenship are challenging, and highly significant, comparative issues that, as anthropologists, we feel we have a theoretical interest and a professional duty to pursue' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 3).

As we see, scholars from three different disciplines, geography, sociology, and anthropology find common ground in the conviction that it could be fruitful to intertwine the spatial practices with the main problems caused by urbanization. In this sense, what we study in the city (or beyond) and why leads to the need to give political relevance to our research. This links to the third problem; specifically, the use that is made of the research findings. How may they be useful in the decision-making process? I would argue that we should be interested both in acquiring knowledge on the problems present in the city and in how they can be overcome. As Prato and Pardo suggest, '[i]t should be encouragement enough that, precisely because they are empirically-based and more often than not challenge established views, anthropological findings attract interest from other academic specialisms and most importantly from outside the academia. Moreover, that such interest increasingly applies to our research in urban areas ought to spell loudly the need to stay engaged – empirically and as best as possible holistically, regardless of lingering opposition, specious objections or obfuscating solipsism' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 20). This recommendation could indeed be extended to other disciplines.

In the following pages I argue that the concept of urban governance can contribute to analyse the relationship among the three problems that I have highlighted. The discussion builds towards a dynamic research framework on governance, beyond the rhetoric – again, the reification? – that has marred the use of this concept in the literature. From this perspective it appears necessary to pay more attention to the role of empirical investigation, because the interaction between the formal and informal institutions (political, economic, and social) which regulates the spatial practices transforms them continuously, through processes that can be described and analysed as ongoing reinterpretations. The point to underline is that the effects of this dialectic are often ambiguous, only observable in different domains and at different times. The alternative would be to subscribe to the static vision of the city and governance that continues to inform some urban studies.

Governance and spatial practices

If we tackle the study of the city through the lens of governance, the *interlocking spatial practices* appear, at first sight, as the place where the coordination among institutional actors – public and private – needs to aim for the production of local public goods. The implementation of governance generates collective action through the integration of the economic, social, and state spheres. The method to achieve this result lies in a negotiation of interests, where the state's interest is defined collectively in fragmented, uncertain environments (De Vivo, 2004 and 2006; Pardo & Prato, 2010). Thus, governance can contribute to the stability of society, but this depends also on the combination of various factors that intervene during the implementation of the governance process. We never could know *ex ante* what would emerge from the interaction of the various actors. The material and non-material resources available in the specific context of the action and their different capabilities may produce different regulation models. An empirical investigation is crucial in trying to explain this diversity. Before we discuss this issue in further detail, let us summarize the state of the debate on urban governance.

In the light of the progress made in the field of urban studies, the first aspect that needs attention is the strength of the cities in the processes of economic and international exchange. The debate on urban governance has contributed fruitfully to our understanding of the transformation of cities. Above all, in the European context, this debate has highlighted modes of governance (John, 2001; Jouve, 2005) and different explanatory models of transformation.

Over the last few years, the issue of governance has gained growing attention in the theoretical framework of urban studies, and sharp analytical differences have arisen. The governance debate was started in view of the limits of government. In the theoretical debate around the concept of governance, there is a sort of prescriptive way of using this word. Renate Mayntz's seminal work on the theory of governance (1999) outlines for the first time the conceptual model and the successive modifications of a theory of political governance. Her work has been followed by a large literature on this topic. As Mayntz wrote, the term 'governance', long equated with 'governing' – the processual aspect, that is, of government – was originally intended in the narrow sense of 'steering'. Recently, however, it has acquired different meanings, referring to non-hierarchical modes of coordination and basic forms of social order. Mayntz describes the successive paradigmatic shifts in the theory of governance, which has gradually extended its framework in order to adjust to the empirical challenges raised by the processes of Europeanization and globalization, and addresses an important issue in the development of theory in political science. Three main approaches can be identified. The first focuses on the changes that have occurred in the relationship between the national, regional, and local governments. The second addresses the increasing role played by the European Union in the policies and decision-making of the national states. The third studies the process of globalization (Le Galès, 2002; Robinson, 2007; Sassen, 2008). There is a strong interdependence among these three lines of analysis, pointing to the relevance of the changes in the spatial scale and in the impact that these changes have on economic processes.

The erosion, or transformation, of state intervention has often engendered a reorganization of the central and local political and administrative apparatuses (Cerase, 2006). In some cities, this reorganization has produced competition between such apparatuses. In others, it has generated cooperation, in an attempt to solve shared problems. A consequence of this process has been a shift from urban *managerialism* to urban *entrepreneurialism*, or, at the opposite end, the establishment of new forms of cooperation among institutional actors and of better integrated areas of political intervention (Harvey, 1989; Sassen, 2001).

The literature on urban governance (or urban regimes, or urban growth coalitions) has aimed at identifying ways to create a collective capacity to go beyond market and state failures (Stone,

1989; Logan & Molotch, 1987). Political scientists working on urban governance have rightly emphasized its capacity to change urban society, on the one hand, and to raise democratic and participatory awareness, on the other (Denter & Rose (eds), 2005). This has proved particularly relevant in the case of European cities that have historically been centres of articulation of trade, culture, and various forms of political autonomy. However, as Jessop suggested, beyond politicians' rhetoric of governance, there was no reason to believe that failures of governance would not be as spectacular as government failures (Jessop, 2003). In other words, the processes of governance and government are not linear, and they are always incomplete. Urban societies are governed over periods of time. The study of the limits and discontinuities of government and governance is of particular interest to urban scholars.

These limits are linked to the impact that the failures of government and governance have on the process of transformation of the city. With the affirmation of a neo-liberal model of regulation, the cuts in the national budgets have drastically reduced the policy options open to regional and local governments, and increasingly the resulting tensions have to be managed at the local level. For instance, local and regional governments have to learn how to face the reduction of the financial resources transferred to them from the centre, and most of the time they can do so only by imposing new local taxes or by increasing the existing ones. At the same time, they have to deal with the declining quality of public services, or find ways – including drawing on resources from the private sector – to finance activities and services aimed at improving the quality of urban life. In short, public bodies' scope for action has progressively moved to the periphery of the administrative spectrum.

Regional and local governments have experienced increasing responsibility in contrasting fragmentation and marginality in local societies (De Vivo & Sacco, 2008). So, as national governments lose their capacity to guide society, cities play a stronger role as 'collective actors'. However, this image of the city is often an illusion.

Urban people's aspirations and daily practices are affected by their experience of the urban environment, and their very scope for action can be limited or expanded accordingly. As we have seen, the capitalist model produces institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, political and administrative systems, and hierarchies of power that dominate daily practices and limit people's actions. However, given the dynamism of capitalism, we find that the urban space is always in transformation and that urban activities are constantly escaping the bounds of fixed forms. In such a chronically unstable, processual set-up, the cities that predominate are those that have improved their competitive performance through 'efficient' governance.

In the attempt to protect local interests, without of course forgetting their own, the urban political class transform themselves into public 'managers' of the city. They try to adjust by balancing economic and social demands, and policies aimed at economic development are combined with redistributive measures. Thus, they succeed in opening new opportunities for social mobility and for the well-being of the citizens, at the same time improving their own image. Of course, this brief outline of the new developments in urban studies does not do justice to the different contributions offered by a great number of scholars (Jouve, 2005; Sassen, 2008; Borraz & Le Galès, 2010; Pardo & Prato, 2012). There are, nevertheless, common points in the literature which need to be emphasized here.

Attention has been largely paid to the fact that cities are represented and perceived as the places where there are the most relevant social and economic infrastructures for global competition. During the Fordism period, and under the influence of Keynesian policies, economic development was entrusted to the ability of the cities to provide adequate conditions for competitiveness, such as logistic space, structures for services, human resources and so on. For a long time urban policies have failed to attract much attention, due also to the influence of a prevailing neo-liberal political approach. Today things have changed and one main reason for the renewed attention to the role of the cities in the international relations of exchange is the expansion of the financial and telecommunication

sectors and of the media; that is, sectors in which innovation technology is key and must be continuously updated. The process of spatial reorganization of the economy has contributed to the development of the so-called global cities: New York, London, Paris, and Tokyo are characterized by a strong capacity to attract financial investment and human resources (Sassen, 2001).

These capital cities have reshaped their urban geography, at the same time becoming connected with each other through complex political, cultural, and economic exchanges. Other large cities in underdeveloped countries are striving to do likewise. Alongside the establishment of international links, each of these cities has developed a 'specific competence' in the economic field, leading to a kind of development based on specific sectors, such as manufacturing, culture, fashion and so on. The network that the most relevant cities of the world have built among themselves as a result of the transaction of financial and human capital and of the exchange of products and services provides a frame of reference for their position in the international division of production, labour, and culture (Sassen, 1991; 2001; Mariotto, 2007). Of course, this network is also a product of capitalistic development, which needs equipped spaces in order to expand.

The political and administrative urban class have managed to produce an effective mix of political reforms and economic measures. On the one hand, they have actively pursued external financial investment; on the other hand, they have offered incentives to the development of human resources and technology. The best-performing global cities have succeeded in implementing urban policies aimed at encouraging economic growth, while attracting private investment for the promotion of public programmes aimed at the renewal of the urban infrastructures. Thus, they have managed both to modernize urban infrastructures and to protect urban spaces from decay. In this situation, urban policies lose their effectiveness because they face a double challenge. On the one hand, they have to address the need to keep the city at the forefront of an increasingly globalized and competitive economy. On the other hand, they have to deal with the consequences of the previous lag and put an end to it (De Vivo, 2013).

Empirical investigation shows that the process of implementation of the main principles which support good and efficient governance – free market, democratic representation, and the rule of law – is usually imperfect (De Vivo, 2006; 2013; Pardo & Prato, 2010). Among other things, this implies that there is room for private interests to hide behind the public interest, and that formal institutions backed by the state can be interpreted, used, selected, combined, and produced in ways that deviate from the professed procedures or that fill perceived gaps. The complexity and imperfection of democratic government create these spaces of informality, where both private and public interests can be pursued through informal institutions that can be described as meta-rules: rules that apply, select, enforce, and break formal rules. It also creates places for formal institutions to die, though it is precisely their formality that creates possibilities for them to be revived at a later time (Rose-Ackerman, 1999).

How, then, can the city break away from this situation and how can urban policies contribute to stimulate economic development, combat social marginality, and facilitate the participation of citizens in public decisions? I will try to deal with these questions in the following pages. As is well known, many groups and individuals spend considerable time and energy avoiding being governed, leading to the well-known problematic of the 'ungovernability' of societies (Mayntz, 1993). In urban terms, as Borraz and Le Galès (2010) observe, this question is particularly interesting. The authors ask a number of questions, such as: Which part, sector, group of the city is really governed? Which is weakly governed? Which is left out? Which is escaping government? Not always can a precise and complete answer be given. Focusing the empirical research on specific subjects and contexts of action can, however, be a good start.

It is well-known that the rise of urban government historically originates from the fight against illegal activities, slums, mobile populations, diseases, and a will to address rejected, poor

neighbourhoods. Today, the practice of governance would have to take into account the illegal side of the city; that is, both the various invisible activities – from undocumented immigrants to gangs controlling drug trafficking and private developers financing illegally political activities – and the positive changes that marginalized urban groups could bring about; one example is immigrants' entrepreneurship.

There is a large body of empirical evidence on the dialectical relationship between formality and informality (Pardo, 1996: ch. 2, 2012a; Spyridakis, 2010; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2014). In development studies, policy studies, environmental studies, urban anthropology, economics, and other fields, discussions often revolve around the positive and negative sides of formality and informality. One of the most important efforts made by governments and official institutions (World Bank, European Union) to create social capital in less developed countries or in underdeveloped areas of developed countries consists in specific territorial or urban programmes aimed at implementing participatory governance. The basic idea is to devolve political and administrative responsibilities to the periphery of the national systems, entrusting local actors with the task of addressing and implementing the development of the place where they live. The strengthening of the relationship of trust between public institutions, economic actors, and civil society is the principal aim of this new trend in territorial and urban policies. The shift from a top-down – state-centred – to a bottom-up model of development policies is based on the principles of autonomy, responsibility, and control in public action.

The push to implement negotiated policies rests on the 'belief' that in order to coordinate social life it is sufficient to pass laws that prescribe actions and behaviours. This stresses the importance of studying the practice of governance. In a context dominated by uncertainty, ambiguity in the interpretation of the rules, and a plurality of actors that co-determine decisions, the emergence of new forms of local governance ends up being conditioned by the actors that are driving the process of change (McGuire, 2011). The modalities of interaction and interdependence among stakeholders located in specific networks can indeed lead, as we have seen, to the emergence of opportunistic, as opposed to inclusive, coalitions (Bobbio, 2006; Pardo & Prato, 2012), drawing our attention back to the question, 'Who governs when nobody governs?' Empirical research has shed light on the role played in some cases by corrupt elite networks, by illegal organizations, or by a combination of the two.

With the reduction of the weight of the state, forms of control become weaker and boundaries between the public and private sectors become more subtle, linking to the progressive construction of local networks. The degree of complexity of public policies increases, while the ability of the State to devise organizational rules and answers to common problems diminishes (Bevir, 2011). The study of processes of transformation of the State has produced several lines of analysis of models of governance, showing how the variety of institutional structures generated by the experiments on governance can lead to different outcomes also in terms of implementing similar public policies (Burrioni, Crouch, & Keune, 2005; Capano & Lippi, 2010).

Much of the empirical work on informal planning, urbanization, and spatial development has been done outside the realm of 'official' planning, shedding light on often seemingly unruly processes of spatial organization and development in the developing world (Parry, 2012) and beyond. Scholars who have studied transition processes have illuminated the actual role of planning in ex-socialist countries (Prato 2010).

As Van Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld (2014: 667) have argued, '[w]ithin planning, several scholars have highlighted the limits of planning and planning ideologies in the non-western world. Ananya Roy analysed with much acuity the development of cities in India (Roy, 2009), highlighting informality as a form of urbanization that both enables and disables development. Berrisford and others unveiled the potential and limitations of legal reforms to tackle planning issues in Africa,

elucidating not only the context-specific limits of formal institutions, but also the cost and instability associated with institutional transformation (Berrisford, 2011; Benjaminsen and Sjaastad, 2008; Watson, 2002). Mapping and preparatory studies for planning reform can already prove de-stabilizing and planning itself cannot be seen as a neutral, expert-driven enterprise embodying and furthering the common good (Throgmorton, 1996; Benjaminsen and Sjaastad, 2008).⁷ Therefore it will be useful to look more in detail at the role of informality in the process of governance.

Governance between formality and informality

I began this discussion with an outline of three main problems which, I believe, are relevant in the debate on urban governance and in the empirical investigation of this issue. Here, I will try to bring these arguments together to explore if and how they are connected.

The starting assumption is that the concept of ‘governance’ – however defined; formal, that is, or informal (Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2014) – is an innovation that complicates considerably the decision-making process in any public policy area. The innovation lies mainly in the fact that governance implies the cooperation of a plurality of actors – both public and private – at different ‘levels’ and in different ‘spheres’ in the fulfilment of institutional tasks and the accomplishment of the common good, as well as of their own interest. However, such cooperation is not easily achieved. We need to understand in detail the roles that connect the different levels and spheres in the governance process. I suggest that our empirical study should begin with the assumptions that: (1) the agents who are in a boundary position can best play those roles; (2) the quality of governance depends mainly on the performance of these ‘boundary’ agents and on the ways in which they deal with possible complications. More explicitly, when faced with a specific policy objective, the quality of governance would appear to depend on these agents’ overall ability to link the different levels or spheres in the emerging governance mechanisms. In as much as they are able to do so, they are identified as key actors for the accomplishment and implementation of the policy objective. Theoretically, the mainstream literature has often tried to provide answers to such questions as ‘who’ are the actors who make public policy, ‘who’ plays a key role in influencing the decision-making processes and the implementation of the laws, and ‘how much’ their action is relevant in seeking solutions to collective problems. Therefore, the analysis of the outcomes of specific policies is related to the strategies that the actors involved perform in relation to their interests and motivations. I argue, however, that other aspects need also to be explored. In particular, we need to understand how these strategies, interests, and motivations relate to the context in which the actors operate, and how the latter interpret the rules – formal and informal – that govern their field of action. This analytical perspective, which focuses on the role of the actors involved, also requires that we take into account the profound changes that have occurred in public administration; in particular, we should consider the transition from a centralized form of coordination of the public intervention to hybrid and complex organizational forms. The redefinition of public action in favour of forms of governance marked by greater flexibility, unpredictability, and uncertainty can increase the margins of action of the administrative actors, who will use both personal resources and the relational resources over which they have control (Pardo & Prato, 2010). In such a scenario, the ensuing institutional dynamics generate new forms of self-centred administrative activity (Cooper & Brady, 1981; De Vivo, 2004; Doig & Hardgrove, 1987; Sinclair, 1999). This new kind of action, and the attendant regulation, complicate the connection mechanisms between the different levels of government, both public and private, placing the emphasis on ‘who’ becomes the creator of processes of integration and, above all, on ‘what’ this implies for other actors involved (Bifulco & De Leonardis, 2006; De Vivo, 2006; 2013; Le Galès, 2011; Mayntz, 1999).

One way to study empirically the dynamics that I have outlined above would be for the researcher to look at the cooperation/reciprocity regulation beyond the ‘enchanted’ view of governance

through traditional regulation. This approach, which is underdeveloped, leads to a reconsideration of relations of patronage. In defining patronage, Eisenstadt and Roniger argued that ‘the complex social arrangements known as patron-client relations denote, in their fullest expression, a distinct mode of regulating crucial aspects of institutional order: the structuring of the flow of resources, exchange and power relations and their legitimation in society’ (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984: 209). In line with this description of patronage, many scholars have often defined corruption as a system of exchange whereby public officials obtain financial resources in exchange for favourable decisions. There is a long tradition of research – particularly in sociology, anthropology, and political sciences – that examine patronage and corruption as one type of social or political regulation and focus on bureaucracy or on factions in urban political machines. In order to address these questions, we should consider that the ‘informal’ governance based on personal relations is a precursor of the ‘formal’ governance models and that the latter became dominant rather late in the history of economic development in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Informal governance can thus be conducive to, as well as restraining, economic development. In examining the interplay between the mechanisms of informal and formal governance we should therefore pay attention to whether the goals pursued respectively by formal and informal kinds of governance are largely convergent or divergent. This interplay is characterized by deliberate changes in the system, which in turn will result in a recombination of the elements typical of formal and informal governance. Such a reconfiguration will depend, among other things, on the underlying configuration of power and interest. The enhancement of governance thus requires a very broad set of simultaneous movements and activities. It would have to include, but need not be limited to, economic growth and diversification; the reinforcement of accountability in the relations between a middle class and the state; steps to encourage the development of a merit-based civil service; and an independent media that would guarantee the transparency of public affairs.

The empirical investigation of the process of implementation and of the attendant dynamics, carried out through significant case-studies, brings out the relevant role played by individual actors or groups. What remains to be seen is *how* and *if* the interests of the community are legitimately preserved. While it is true that the idea of governance highlights the need for transparency in the process of reaching consensus in public decisions, it is equally likely that the ability of those who lead the process of change becomes crucial in solving disputes that might arise between different interests. Here, the relationship between management and governance emerges as one of the most delicate aspects of the process of transformation of public administration. It brings about locally-produced institutional reconfigurations that increase the problematic of the mediation between individual (self-centred) and general (social) interests. Of course, one would expect neutrality and transparency of public action. However, whoever exercises administrative power often uses his/her discretion and thus their decision becomes crucial in cases of contrasts and of conflicts of interest. Against this scenario, I agree with Pardo when he aptly argues that ‘however imperfect the democratic model of government may be [...], key principles are not negotiable. One such principle is that the legislative process must not obey selective interests; equally critical are the principles that the power to rule needs authority for the relationship between citizenship and governance to work and that the establishment of authority *depends* on the achievement and recognition of legitimacy at the grassroots. The crucial condition is that authority must be based, and be seen to be based, on fair, responsible and accountable exercise of power’ (2012b: 65).

Following Pardo’s argument, I would suggest that the study of governance in an urban context must necessarily be part of a broader research that investigates empirically the nature and the mechanisms that regulate social life. This approach requires a good degree of patience, both from the researchers and the practitioners, because in-depth knowledge and analysis cannot be hurried. It is sometimes very difficult to make an accurate assessment of the new configurations that arise from the implementation of urban governance, including the specific combination of formal and

informal aspects of governance and their ongoing dialectic. We often find that this dialectic produces ambiguity, unexpected results, and gaps among the planned objectives, as well as competition instead of cooperation among actors. In other words, there is a risk that it might produce the same 'inefficiency' generated by the 'rationalistic' model of public action which the new model of urban governance aimed at overcoming. Perhaps the most important lesson that we have learnt so far about government and governance is that the mistakes that we make and the disappointment that we feel when we try to understand urban policies are the result of underestimating the complexity of human life and processes.

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