

When the community gets professionalized: observing political rituals of community development corporations in Boston

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Community development corporations (CDCs) are small and somehow not so well known non for profit organizations. However they have shown in cities and suburban areas of the United States how to build capacities, expertise and local knowledge into recognized practices and a regulated labor system through the professionalization of the third sector. These organizations specialized in the development of neighborhoods through the provision of affordable housing, public services and community programs have gained power in central inner cities. They have progressively positioning themselves as an essential collaborator to the public administration in the field of affordable housing to face social inequalities, family fragmentation or employment fragility. This cooperative action covers various activities beyond housing for “communities” such as environmental education, workforce development, microcredit, leadership training and neighborhood organizing.

CDCs started from a social movement, also known as community development movement, in the late 1960s when non for profit organizations such as CDCs claimed social rights within the radical “black power”. This action was materialized by providing housing services and develop multiple activities within poor neighborhoods. Their mission in the representation of residents from the community within their boards was initially used for the decision making process and the construction of a collective participatory coalition. This so-called “neighborhood power” became a local voice against the public administration during a period of top down orientations and policies illustrated by massive urban clearance and renewal. Today’s political context of the nonprofit sector, such as the case of CDCs, relates to city power and public administration in a much less confrontational way by organizing empowered rituals and deconstructing political duality. The constituted “professional territory” of CDCs is now composed of employees “imported” from various practices (management, finance, social work). Highly attracted to the values and social relations of the community work environment these CDC workers make their choice either as a professional engagement or a search for conviviality. In this process, boards of directors of CDCs are for instance more structured by professionals acting for solidarity but living outside of the served community instead of being empowered residents. CDCs could therefore be identified today as hybrid organizations mixing professionals and amateurs, altruist engagement and mercantile initiative.

Our contribution would like to illustrate situations of these professional politics through rituals taking place in the city. To claim their identity or rights, CDCs organize such events inside and outside their neighborhoods of action. The observation of few rituals will explain this displacement of political values from spatial representations: inviting public officials in the neighborhood, grouping “participants” into a corporate convention center to foster “community unity” or organizing an action of lobbying in a “sacred” place of power. Here the political voice is maintained and renewed through spatial interactions and representations. This paradox of a living and ongoing professionalization based on self-built rituals

and search for norms questions the community project itself and its limits of development to integrate change and uncertainty.

We will base our argument on an ethnographic fieldwork realized among the CDCs of the city of Boston completed by more than seventy interviews. We will show how this injunction for participation by this new context of community development transforms the rhetoric of community through spatial and discursive rituals and constructs new political frontiers for this structuring “professional territory”. We will argue that this conquest of “community” to “other” urban spaces is not only the effect of professionalization for consensual and collaborative political relations but also the result of competition with other social groups by perpetuating domination and distinction. Finally we will demonstrate how mixing sacred and transcendental actions elaborates therefore political tensions useful for the construction of community.

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