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Politicising city branding: Some comments on Andrea Lucarelli's 'Place branding as urban policy'

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1682084   since   2018-11-23T16:14:00Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1016/j.cities.2018.06.004

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23 November 2024

1. Branding as an urban policy

Andrea Lucarelli's paper, in this special issue of Cities, offers a meaningful speculation on branding, one that may contribute to develop critical debates and critical understandings of the politics of city branding.

It is well known that debates on this topic to be characterised by a sort of conceptual divide: on the one hand, specialised articles and books seem to reproduce technical languages and empirical, depoliticised knowledge about the practices of urban branding; on the other hand, critical urban studies tend to consider branding as a typical (and conceptually rather banal) example of neoliberal urban policy driven by market logics, ultimately implying boosterism and entrepreneurialism. According to this latter view, the practices of urban branding are generally considered to be in opposition with progressive thinking about urban policy.

Lucarelli's paper challenges these conventional understandings of city branding by developing a theoretical approach grounded in sophisticated philosophical views of the political, particularly by evoking influential and evocative concepts developed by philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Jacques Ranciére and Chantal Mouffe. By mobilising the ideas of biopolitical apparatus, ecology, exception and the impolitical, Lucarelli suggests to look at city branding as a "processual hybrid policy (…) in which for example the public and the private, economics and politics, and the market and the polis are blurred and co-emerge (i.e. as a process) in a relational and interactive manner" (Lucarelli, 2017, p. 1). With this purpose in mind, the article proposes six provocative tenets which challenges orthodox conceptualisations of urban branding, inviting scholars to look at branding beyond the already much emphasised relationship between branding and neoliberalism. In particular, there is a need to look into the politics involved in place branding processes.

In this short commentary, I would like to raise some brief critical comments at the margins of Lucarelli's article, and then propose an alternative route to highlight the importance of politicising brands.

2. The boundaries of branding as an urban policy

Lucarelli mobilises the case of Stockholm in order to develop his arguments. In particular, the article displays an interesting counter-campaign image, concerning a grassroots movement that basically reclaims the right to the city. The image is presented and discussed in order to argue that branding is a complex political field involving much more than the institutions governing the city. In this sense, branding is understood as a hybrid phenomenon.

The argument is solid, but I think there are some meaningful implications concerning the boundaries of terms and concepts. To put it shortly: does branding include the forces, discourses and practices actually opposing what is generally intended as branding? (cf. Maiello & Pasquinelli, 2015; see also Vallaster, von Wallpach, & Zenker, 2017, in this special issue). This is not just a trivial academic question about definitions and

terminologies: it underlies the conceptual ambiguities at the basis of branding discourses (see Boisen, 2017, in this special issue). If we assume a strictly policy-oriented perspective, it is reasonable to consider branding as the mere promotional activity enacted by city managers and/or specialised agencies. Branding is understood as a development strategy, which clear connections with neoliberalism and urban entrepreneurialism. I would be confident to say that this is the main understanding of branding proposed in critical urban studies (see, for example, the classic work of Evans, 2003).

I agree with Lucarelli when he claims that branding is 'hybrid', and that brands are produced, shaped and reproduced by a number of very different actors, discourses and events characterised by several rationales and perspectives. However, by assuming a too-wide understanding of branding, one that includes both the hegemonic and the anti-hegemonic (as I think Lucarelli implicitly does), branding becomes something else, a phenomenon whose boundaries may be difficult to grasp and to define in theoretical terms. What is the ultimate difference between a place brand and a place image? What is the difference between a place brand and what human geographers call 'sense of place'? And what about the politics of branding and the politics of urban representation? It is not a coincidence that most arguments proposed by Lucarelli may be mobilised in relation to very different spheres of urban politics. Ultimately, in my view, Lucarelli's arguments are reflections on the nature of the political in cities.

Although I just stressed some ambiguities with terms and meanings, I do not think we really need to develop a tight and univocal definition of branding. Speculating on different meanings and understandings of words is ultimately a way to fuel ideas and debates, and Lucarelli's call for the mobilisation of deeper and more sophisticated theoretical frameworks is definitely stimulating, as it gives new breath to debates.

Still, I think that we have to be explicit about the kind of understanding of brands and branding we assume in our analysis. For example, it is quite common in the literature to propose that city branding is not just 'selling' the city (to quote the famous work of Ward, 1998; Short & Kim, 1998), which means that it is more than plain image promotion, or the quest for attracting investments, tourists or skilled workforce. Scholars suggest that branding may aim at infusing trust, creating a strong local identity (a goal which is surely problematic, as 'strong identity' goes hand in hand with conservative and monolithic conceptualisations of place belonging), improving the city's reputation, increasing the local budget, etc. (cf. Ashworth, Kavaratzis, & Warnaby, 2015). But aren't these things generic local development goals, rather than specific objectives of branding policies?

In this framework, having been trained as critical urban geographer, I tend to think that branding has still powerful connections with urban neoliberalism, and that urban neoliberalism is a fundamental perspective for interpreting and analysing branding (cf. Vanolo, 2017): after all, policy makers and scholars tend to consider branding as a market-oriented discipline. Even the concept of 'brand' has a clear market-oriented identity: it arguably comes from business studies, and the term is often mobilised in relation with other business-related terms, such as brand-management and brand-equity. Most of the 'urban branding' consultants, practitioners and experts I have met in my life were basically proposing (or selling?) market-oriented ideas, strategies and plans for developing attractive images for 'competing' in a supposedly global urban marketplace (i.e. for attracting particular types of investments, tourists, events, etc.). I also have to say that, in many cities, branding activities are outsourced to external companies with technical knowledge of branding. The ultimate goal of an external branding company is to realise and to deliver to the client, i.e. to the city government, a good and satisfying product. Arguably, the company designing the promotional campaign for a city is barely interested in the long-term consequences of the branding process, or in the feelings of the inhabitants of a city. A city manager may have a slightly longer-term perspective, perhaps relative to electoral periods: for a policy maker, the ultimate goal may be to make citizens happy about the branding campaign, in order to be elected again. Practitioners develop specific images, strategies and discourses, and sometimes they even evoke 'social' and 'progressive' ideas of justice and sustainability (cf.

Hassena & Giovanardi, 2017, in this special issue). However, I have the strong impression that this is often the outcome of a 'new spirit' of (urban) capitalism, which seems to superficially incorporate these values just to make brands attractive, or to develop what Harvey (2001) calls 'collective symbolic capital' (cf. Colomb, 2012). It is not rare to observe a sort of Disneyfication of social goals, and it may be surely interesting to reflect on this issue through the lens of the 'impolitical', as suggested in the article.

Putting it differently, I surely agree with Lucarelli on the need to expand our critical analysis beyond conventional critiques to neoliberalism, but still I think that there is much neoliberalism, utilitarianism and boosterism at play: branding is essentially a pro-growth strategy.

3. Politicising city branding

Irene Pittatore, an Italian artist with a strong interest in urban issues, presented a work called 'Public Anagrams' in November 2016. As shown in Figure 1, the project is based on the manipulation and subversion of mainstream slogans describing well-known urban development paradigms and strategies, such as 'creative cities', 'smart cities' or 'urban regeneration'. By mixing up letters and turning upside-down the slogans, the artist aims at raising critical awareness of the hidden outcomes of urban development strategies.

Figure 1 - *Extract from 'Public Anagrams', by Irene Pittatore.*
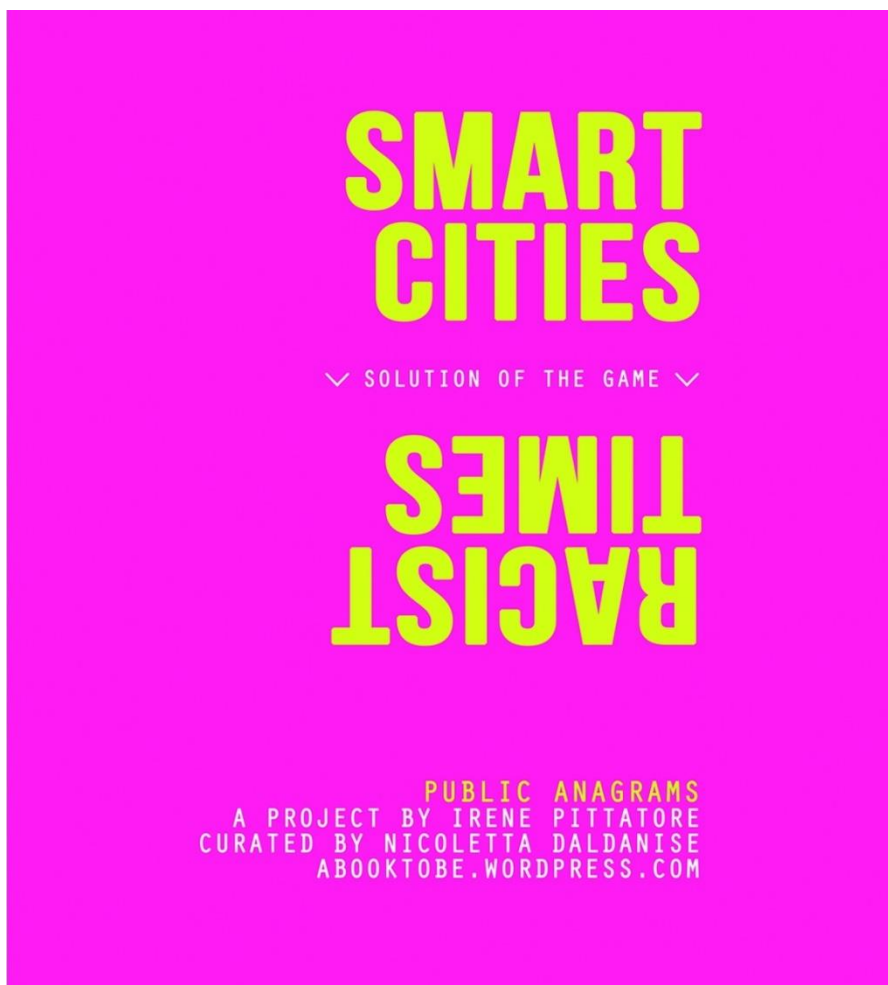
Source: courtesy of Irene Pittatore, 2017; http://irenepittatore.it (last accessed 19 September 2017).

This project talks very much about city branding. Mottos such as 'smart city' are at the same time powerful slogans nurturing branding campaigns and brands, evoking imaginaries and visions of good and attractive cities. At first sight, the flipped letters in Fig. 1 seem to mirror the catchy slogan 'smart city', but it is easy to notice that the letters have a different order, and hence a different message is provocatively displayed, in this case, 'racist times'. Pittatore's anagrams reveal the ghostly dark side of popular and optimistic urban slogans. It is an artistic and political call to politicise branding.

If branding is not a neutral and technical practice, but rather a political field, as clearly argued by Lucarelli, residents should have a voice about the branding of the cities in which they live, because it implies a reconceptualization of their city, for example by forging urban identities, images of the city and dreams about urban life, which surely will have an impact on their life (cf. Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). We all know that representations are performative, and brands are social constructions forged by a variegated ecology of subjects (to quote Lucarelli's idea) which live, experience and talk about the city: they produce symbols, ways of thinking subjective and collective identities, ways of defining problems and priorities, and peculiar forms of visibility and invisibility. Brands hence influence our daily life, our social relations, the construction of our identities, our sensation of being 'in place' or 'out of place' in the city. In this sense, residents, including marginal subjects commonly living outside the frames of optimistic promotional representations of the city, should have a voice. In my view, the ultimate rationale of a call to politicise the brand, as the one proposed by Lucarelli, is the idea of supporting the collective agency of the inhabitants of the city with regard to urban images and imaginaries. Issues of information, communication and participation are crucial here (cf. Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2017, in this special issue), but city residents need to be aware of the intimate affective, cognitive and symbolic connections they have with the places where they live and shape the politics of their everyday life. Critical analysis of the politics of branding and critical theoretical frameworks as the one proposed by Lucarelli may surely contribute to thinking through how making urban branding a more collective and democratic endeavour.

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